

SEEING WITH BOTH EYES

EPHRAIM LUNTSHITZ AND
THE POLISH-JEWISH
RENAISSANCE

Leonard Levin

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Seeing with Both Eyes

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Seeing with Both Eyes

Ephraim Luntshitz and the Polish-Jewish Renaissance

by

Leonard S. Levin



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R. Johanan ben Dahabai says in the name of R. Juda b. Bathyra: Whoever is blind in one of his eyes is exempt from appearing, as it says: 'All your males shall be seen'—in the manner that one sees, so shall one come to be seen. Just as it is normal to see with both eyes, so one should come to appear with both eyes.

For physical seeing is when a man sees the things as they are written and the practices as they are performed visibly through the sense of sight. But inner vision is the seeing of the heart and intellect... Thus whoever is not complete in both kinds of seeing—the physical and the intellectual—is called blind in one eye, to wit, the intellectual.

Thus you should inquire and inspect up to the point that your intellect is capable of reaching, according to the blessing of the Lord your God who has give you intelligence and understanding—

—*Gleanings of Ephraim Part II, Sermon 3*

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ENGLISH AND HEBREW TITLES OF PRIMARY WORKS

The philosophical and homiletic works of 16th-century Jewish thinkers have been known hitherto only to a very small audience, comprised of “learners” in the traditional Jewish mode and a handful of specialist scholars. Both these groups are quite happy to refer to the titles of these works in the Hebrew original. I apologize for the annoyance I will occasion by referring to these works by English titles of my own devising. The general reader will hopefully find the discussion more accessible for this innovation. For the convenience of both sets of readers, I here provide the correspondence between the Hebrew and English titles of works to which I make reference, arranged by author.

Alshekh, Moses (Safed, dates?) *Torah of Moses* (= *Torat Moshe*), 1593, a kabbalistic commentary on the Torah.

Arama, Isaac (Spain, c. 1420–1494) *Binding of Isaac* (= *Akedat Yitzhak*, published 1522), a philosophical commentary on the Torah.

Ashkenazi, Eliezer (Levant and Poland, 1513–1586) *Deeds of the Lord* (= *Ma’asei Ha-Shem*, 1583), a philosophical commentary on the narratives of the Torah.

Hayyat, Judah (Spain, c. 1450–c. 1510) *Offering of Judah* (= *Minhat Yehudah*), a commentary on the anonymous earlier kabbalistic treatise *The Divine Hierarchy*.

— *The Divine Hierarchy* (*Ma’arekhet Elohut*), composed 13th–14th century, published with *Offering of Judah* Ferrara and Mantua, 1558.

Horowitz, Abraham (Prague and Poland, c. 1545–1615) *The Lovingkindness of Abraham* (= *Hesed Avraham*, 1577), a commentary on Moses Maimonides’s *Eight Chapters*.

Horowitz, Isaiah (Prague, Poland and Israel, ~1565–1630) *Two Tablets of the Covenant* (= *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit*, published 1649), a kabbalistic treatise in the form of commentary on Torah and rabbinic works.

— Isserles, Moses (Poland, ~1525–1572)

Law of the Sacred Offering (= *Torat ha-Olah*, 1570), an allegorical treatise on the laws of the sacrifices, including their philosophical interpretation. The title alludes to Leviticus 6:1. The olah mentioned there is technically the “burnt offering” of the Tabernacle and Temple sacrificial ritual, but has an allusive connotation to “ascent” to matters of higher intellectual and spiritual, especially divine, import.

- Jaffé, Mordecai (Poland and Prague, ~1535–1612) *The Royal Garment* (= *Levush Malkhut*), a halakhic *summa* on the plan of the *Shulhan Arukh*, including treatises on philosophy, astronomy and kabbalah.
- Judah Loew of Prague (“Maharal,” ~1520–1609) *The Lion’s Whelp* (= *Gur Aryeh*, 1578), a supercommentary on Rashi’s Torah commentary, rich in citation of rabbinic sources.
- *The Prodigies of the Lord* (= *Gevurot Ha-Shem*, 1582), a treatise on the narrative of the Exodus and themes and laws of Passover.
- *The Way of Life* (= *Derekh ha-Hayyim*, 1589), a commentary on *Ethics of the Fathers*.
- *Eternal Paths* (= *Netivot Olam*, 1595), an ethical treatise structured on the six “pillars” of *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:2 and 1:18, and various virtues.
- *Splendor of Israel* (= *Tif’eret Yisrael*, 1600), a treatise on the Torah and revelation, for the holiday of Shavuot.
- *Triumph [or Eternity] of Israel* (= *Netzah Yisrael*, 1600), a treatise on Jewish history and exile, for the fast of Tisha B’Av.
- Luntshitz, Ephraim Solomon (Poland, ~1550–1619) *City of Heroes* (= *Ir Gibborim*, 1580), a collection of sermons arranged according to the weekly readings of the Torah.
- *Gleanings of Ephraim* (= *Olelot Ephraim*, 1590), a collection of sermons for the holidays and celebratory occasions.
- *Precious Ornament* (= *Keli Yekar*, 1602), a commentary on the Torah. Both this work and the Lips of Knowledge allude in their titles to Proverbs 20:15—“Gold is plentiful, jewels abundant, but wise speech [literally: *lips of knowledge*] is a precious ornament.”
- Lips of Knowledge (= *Sifetei Da’at*, 1610), a commentary on the Torah.
- Six Pillars* (= *Ammudei Shesh*, 1617), a moralistic treatise. The title is a play on Song of Songs 5:15 “His legs are like marble pillars,” punning on the two meanings of *shesh* “marble” or “six.” The “six pillars” are the same virtues mentioned in *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:2 and 1:18 which had been the basis for Maharal’s *Eternal Paths*.
- Luria, Solomon (Poland, ~1510–1574) *Sea of Solomon* (= *Yam shel Shelomo*, published 1616), a commentary on tractates of the Talmud. (The title is a play on the *yam* or “tank” constructed for Solomon’s Temple, referred to in I Kings 7:23–26, and the colloquial reference to the Talmud as a “sea” so vast that a lifetime of learning cannot completely navigate it.)
- Saba, Abraham (Spain, ?—~1508) *Bundle of Myrrh* (= *Tzeror ha-Mor*, published 1522), a commentary on the Torah with kabbalistic interpretations.

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

BT	Babylonian Talmud
<i>City</i>	<i>City of Heroes (Ir Gibborim)</i> (by Ephraim Luntshitz, 1580).
<i>Deeds</i>	<i>Deeds of the Lord (Ma'asei Ha-Shem)</i> (by Eliezer Ashkenazi, 1583).
<i>Guide</i>	<i>Guide of the Perplexed</i> (Maimonides).
EJ	Encyclopedia Judaica.
<i>Gleanings</i>	<i>Gleanings of Ephraim (Olelot Ephraim)</i> (by Ephraim Luntshitz, 1590).
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion.</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review.</i>
MGWJ	<i>Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums.</i>
NJV	“New Jewish Version”: <i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures</i> , Jewish Publication Society, 1985.
<i>Offering</i>	<i>Law of the Sacred Offering (Torat Ha-Olah)</i> (by Moses Isserles, 1570).
<i>Ornament</i>	<i>Precious Ornament (Keli Yekar)</i> (by Ephraim Luntshitz, 1602).
PRE	<i>Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer.</i>
<i>Prodigies</i>	<i>Prodigies of the Lord (Gevurot Ha-Shem)</i> (by Maharal, 1582).
PT	Palestinian Talmud.
<i>Sea</i>	<i>Sea of Solomon (Yam Shel Shelomo)</i> (by Solomon Luria, posthumous, published 1616–35).
YS	<i>Yalkut Shim'oni</i> (medieval anthology of midrash).

TIME-LINE OF 16TH-CENTURY EAST-EUROPEAN JEWISH

INTRODUCTION

This work studies the intellectual development of Rabbi Ephraim Luntshitz (c. 1550–1619) in the context of the philosophical revival in east-European Jewry of the late sixteenth century. Both the individual and his world are unknown to most people, and barely known even to scholars.¹ A paradox of unknowability opens up here, for neither can be properly understood without the other. Therefore both must be tackled together. The individual case sheds light on the general picture and vice versa. As the rabbis said: “A general rule and a specific instance—the general rule can only be understood in terms of the specific instance.”²

This dual method is necessary for another reason. In order to trace the growth of Ephraim’s intellectual world, we must be able to unpack the significance of certain allusions in his writings. “Did you not know—have you not heard—what happened to the sages of philosophy, who sank in the mighty waters . . . ?”³ Yes, but what if we have not heard the story he is referring to? The meaning of such a riddle is not apparent to today’s reader, who probably has no idea that he is referring to Maharal’s polemical attack on Gersonides and his controversy with Eliezer Ashkenazi. (What attack? What controversy?) We cannot appreciate the significance of Ephraim’s ironical reference (or that he is being ironical) without knowing the story of that encounter, which is a new experience to most readers, and which even seasoned scholars can well afford to view in a fresh light. It is therefore necessary to set the stage, to lay the groundwork, in short to recreate the whole

¹ Yeshiva students have long been familiar with R. Ephraim’s Torah commentary *Keli Yekar* (colloquially pronounced *Kli Yo’ker*) and may be annoyed with my referring to it here as *The Precious Ornament* for easier communication to the general reader. (See the table “English and Hebrew Titles of Primary Works” for the correspondences of titles used here.) The Hebrew scholar will be familiar with Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson’s earlier study *הגות והנהגה (Learning and Leadership: The Social Outlook of Polish Jewry in the Late Middle Ages*, Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1959) and the recent researches of Jacob Elbaum *פתיחות והסתגרות (Openness and Insularity: Late Sixteenth Century Jewish Literature in Poland and Ashkenaz*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1990).

² A common saying in the rabbinic literature: *Mekhilta Bo* §15 and elsewhere.

³ *Gleanings* preface (discussed in Chapter 5), 1590.

intellectual world which is the backdrop for understanding what Ephraim Luntshitz has to say. Detective work is required to establish the facts that give significance to the texts to be analyzed. This requires telling—if not the whole story of 16th-century Jewish thought (which will require many more monographs such as this to fill in even a modest approximation of a full picture), at least those pieces which will illuminate R. Ephraim's intellectual journey.

In speaking of “the intellectual formation of Ephraim Luntshitz,” I refer to both stories—his own personal development, and the marshalling of the intellectual forces in Polish Jewry that would shape his thought through his immediate teachers and mentors. Coincidentally, both processes started about 1550.⁴ That is the approximate date of his birth, as far as we can tell. It is also about the time that young Moses Isserles encountered philosophy and started teaching it to his students Mordecai Jaffe and Abraham Horowitz. As we shall see, all three of these thinkers played important roles in Ephraim's intellectual growth. Ephraim alluded to all three in his writings—in each case, characteristically, without mentioning their names.

Isserles and his students comprised the first “wave” of philosophical learning in late-Renaissance Polish Jewry. A second “wave” occurred with the arrival of Eliezer Ashkenazi from Italy to Poland in 1576. The writings of R. Judah Loew (Maharal) of Prague show a marked increase in philosophical-mystical content from 1580 on, in counterpoint to the philosophical-rationalist ideas of his arch-rival Eliezer Ashkenazi. Ephraim's allusion to Ashkenazi and Maharal in the preface to *Gleanings of Ephraim* (1590) is thus one more instance of a general increase in philosophical awareness in East-European Jewish culture in the late 16th century. The allusions to Jaffe, and Horowitz in Ephraim's works reflected practical connections—Ephraim was then a partner with Jaffe in the leadership of the Council of the Four Lands, and he lived in Lvov, where R. Abraham Horowitz served as judge.

⁴ EJ (s.v. “Ephraim Solomon ben Aaron of Luntshitz,” VI, 814) gives his birthdate as 1550. Benjamin Zeilingold speculates it may have been around 1540–45. **הבן יקר לי**. אפרים: פרקי תולדות ומבוא לספרי רבנו שלמה אפרים לונטשיץ זצ”ל—*“Is Not Ephraim A Precious Child to Me?”—A Biographical Introduction to the Works of Rabbi Solomon Ephraim Luntshitz* (Hebrew), Union City NJ, 1987, p. 1, note 2). The uncertainty is but one example of the paucity of evidence we have concerning the facts of his life.

The trends we observe here are part of the eclectic combination of philosophy and kabbalah which prevailed in Renaissance thought throughout Europe. This is a familiar story which has been explored especially by scholars of Italian Renaissance Jewry.⁵ Given that everyone in this period combined philosophy and kabbalah to some extent, we are entitled to inquire of the unique emphasis and style of a particular thinker. Is the philosopher with a dash of kabbalah to be equated with the kabbalist with an overlay of philosophy? On this issue, I draw some distinctions which some scholars may find overly fussy. In portraying the non-rational side of Ephraim's thought, I call it "mystical but not kabbalistic." He thus differed, in my opinion, from Isserles, Jaffe, and Maharal who clearly raised the flag of positive kabbalistic identification in their work in various ways.⁶ By contrast, while Ephraim occasionally borrowed tidbits from kabbalistic sources, he studiously avoided its central doctrines and kept the Zohar at arm's length. This independence of spirit may have been in emulation of his teacher Solomon Luria, who throughout his career resisted the canonization of the just-published *Shulhan Arukh*.

The philosophical revival was but a short-lived interval, while the tide of kabbalah prevailed in the next generation. R. Isaiah Horowitz, the son of R. Ephraim's older colleague R. Abraham Horowitz, was also a younger colleague of R. Ephraim in Prague in the first decades of the 17th century. The younger Horowitz's *Two Tablets of the Covenant* would eventually be the monumental expression of the spirit of the next age. The *Precious Ornament* would be relegated to the back shelves, to be reprinted again during the 18th- and 19th-century Jewish Enlightenment. However, its rationalistic tinge is so muted that it would not be apparent to many later readers, some of whom claim to find in it a Hasidic flavor. Indeed, R. Ephraim's personal combination of intellectual flavors is the key to appreciating his works. Morsels of moralistic wisdom simmered in a broth of traditional rabbinic exegesis,

⁵ See especially Hava Tirosch-Rothschild, "Jewish Philosophy on the Eve of Modernity" in Frank & Leaman, eds. *History of Jewish Philosophy*, Routledge 1997; David Ruderman, ed. *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, NYU Press 1992; Isadore Twersky, "Talmudists, Philosophers, Kabbalists: The Quest for Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century" in Cooperman, ed. *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, Harvard University Press 1983.

⁶ To be sure, calling Ephraim a philosopher is an overstatement. He remained primarily a preacher, who used philosophical jargon to rhetorical effect and (especially in his middle period) identified himself as belonging to the pro-philosophical party.

seasoned with a few tablespoons of philosophy, a soupçon of kabbalah, a little gematria for spice, and a dash of “pilpul.”⁷ That is Ephraim’s formula. When he got it right, it gave intellectual pleasure to generations of connoisseurs.

⁷ Literally “pepper,” *pilpul* refers to the convoluted style of Talmudic argument fashionable in 16th-century Poland. In the *Six Pillars* (1617), R. Ephraim would condemn the abuse of such intellectual pyrotechnics (similar in their way to the scholastic subtleties of the gentile universities) while admitting, “I myself taught the dialectical method, nevertheless I hope to God that my pilpul was close to the plain sense and close to truth.”

CHAPTER ONE

CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE: POLISH JEWISH THOUGHT IN THE AGE OF THE LATE RENAISSANCE

Renaissance? Humanism?

Everyone loves a renaissance. Petrarch called his age the “Renaissance of learning,” and thereby laid down a historical periodization which has been accepted ever since. But the name “Renaissance” was too good to be patented. In 1927 Charles Homer Haskins gave us the “Renaissance of the 12th Century,” and there has been proliferation of this nomenclature ever since. It is now accepted to apply the term to the 16th-century flourishing of learning in Northern Europe (including Poland), and to speak of a 16th-century Polish-Jewish renaissance.

I cannot resist speaking of “humanism” as well, especially after encountering the following passage from Ephraim Luntshitz’s *Precious Ornament*:

The sixth day—The letter *hei* [“the,” with numerical value 5] is added in mention of the sixth day, to indicate that God set a condition with the world, that all would be contingent on Israel’s acceptance of the five books of the Torah.... The reason for this is that the higher and lower realms of creation are opposites, and they cannot survive together unless there is some mediating entity which combines and integrates the two opposite parts. This is the human being, who has a material part and also a spiritual part from God on high, and the survival of his spiritual part depends on receiving the Torah.... Thus, if Israel had not received the Torah, there would be no mediator to integrate the two opposing elements, and the world would of necessity have to be turned back into chaos.¹

This exaltation of humanity, to the point of granting us the cosmic task of holding heaven and earth together in one cosmos, is a characteristic Renaissance motif. Earlier Jewish thought sometimes put humanity

¹ *Ornament* on Genesis 1:31.

on a pedestal, but without the cosmic hierarchical implications.² But a hundred years before Ephraim, the Italian Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino had declared (in Nauert's paraphrase) that "human beings, having both body and soul, had power in both realms; and humankind, as the point of connection that guaranteed the unity of creation, was especially dear to God."³ There is no way that Ephraim, not knowing Latin, could have read Ficino.⁴ The idea was evidently "in the air" in the truest sense—so fitting an expression of the reigning assumptions of the age, that words like these were on everyone's lips. Why, then, should we not come out forthrightly and say that Ephraim was a humanist?

The problem with such a simple conclusion (as every student of the period quickly finds out) is that "humanism" connoted a great many things, most of which were beyond the purview of Jewish society. It included first and foremost the cultivation of "the classics"—fine literature (of every kind, from bawdy and romantic to more spiritual forms) in Greek and Latin, including the purification of one's own Latin writing style from medievalisms. Some Ashkenazic Jewish writers in the period (including Ephraim) were fine stylists in Hebrew, but they never took up Latin, nor did they write on secular topics for fun, nor did they make of literary style a point of programmatic principle. "Real" humanists were also drawn from their study of classical literature to use classical myths as literary figures in their own writings; we find this in Judah Abravanel's *Dialogue of Love*, and in Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, but not in the Jewish writers of Northern Europe, who besides being ignorant of them, would probably have considered such references as bordering on idolatry. "Real" humanism also included cultivation of the oratorical skills for the purpose of training a class of political leaders. One could make a case that the ruling class of Polish Jewry

² "What is man that You have been mindful...that You have made him little less than divine..." (Psalms 8:5–6) "Man [being placed in the center of the universe and endowed with reason] must unquestionably have been the intended purpose of creation." (Saadia Gaon, *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* Chapter 4, opening.)

³ Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, p. 64.

⁴ Alan Cooper has suggested to me that Isaac Adarbi's *Words of Peace* (*Divrei Shalom*, Venice, 1586) may be a plausible missing link. (See Appendix, pages 346–50.) It is likely that Ephraim read Adarbi, to stay current with the homiletic productions of his contemporaries. But he could also have encountered the idea in casual conversation.

tailored their educational institutions toward their leadership role,⁵ but in a very different way. Talmudic dialectic has a lot more in common with scholasticism than with Ciceronian rhetoric. Finally, the humanistic ideal, both in Italy and even more in Northern Europe, downplayed the Aristotelian curriculum of the Middle Ages in favor of literary and religious studies conducted in a spirit of piety, to cultivate righteous living. There is plenty of cultivation of righteous living in Ephraim's sermons, but unfortunately for the analogy, the philosophic tendency of Polish Jewry was to embrace Aristotelianism at precisely the same time that Christian humanists were abandoning it.

There is a folk tale of a poor Jew who wanted to experience the delicacy of blintzes. His wife was willing to cooperate, but when she heard of all the expensive ingredients (eggs, butter, cream, and sugar) that were required, she asked how they could possibly afford such a venture. Finally he persuaded her to make them with the poor ingredients that they had in the house—flour and water, with a little oil. Whether the poor man was disappointed with these “blintzes,” or whether his enthusiasm at the very notion of “eating blintzes” carried over to make it a delicious experience, I will leave to the reader's imagination.

The participants in the Polish-Jewish Renaissance were far better off than the comparison with poor man's blintzes would indicate. Still, there is something odd in trying to have a renaissance without princes and artists, or humanism without such a basic ingredient as an autonomous secular literature. Nevertheless, I think it is not far-fetched to suggest that this is what some of the 16th-century North-European Jewish thinkers were attempting to do, at least in fits and starts. They could observe the externals of the life around them, though barriers of language and station kept them from penetrating to the inner core. Though lacking the pagan classical sources, they still had enough experience of divergent world-views to arrive at the cognitive dissonance that produces on the one hand glimpses of a “perennial philosophy” and on the other hand moments of skeptical irony and wit of the Erasmian variety. To say that the flourishing of religious literature and interest in philosophy of the period had elements of mimicking the gentile Renaissance, is an interpretation that not everyone will necessarily

⁵ See for instance H. H. Ben-Sasson, *הגות והנהגה* (*Learning and Leadership*, Bialik Institute, 1959), which systematically studies the educational and political ideals of Polish Jewry's ruling class.

go along with. All must confess that if there was mimicry, it fell short of its goal, and what Jewish culture produced was very different from the gentile model. If it was a failure as imitation, it might still have been a success by its own innate standards. Polish Jewry succeeded in developing its own cultural identity and outlook in a world that the Renaissance had created—a world in which philosophy was peaking and science awakening, in which religions were metamorphosing and people seeking eternal verities amid change. The result, though differing from its models, was a happy one to its protagonists. If there is more similarity in the final product than can be explained by direct influences (frustrated by the language barrier), these structural-historical factors may help to explain the rest.

The words “Renaissance” and “humanism” are flawed vessels, and cannot bear the weight of analysis of the phenomena of 16th-century North-European Jewish culture, which have a character all their own. We shall resort to them only sparingly from here on, where they are particularly apt, though the question of how blintz-like are the poor man’s blintzes will still poke its head up intermittently. *Il faut imaginer le pauvre blintz-mangeur heureux.*⁶

Reformation? Counter-Reformation?

Among the cultural currents influencing 16th-century Ashkenazic thinkers, we must include the many varieties of Reformation thought that had already made inroads in Bohemia, Moravia, and Poland. The Hussite movement of the early 15th century had already sounded many of the Reformation themes a century before Luther, and had ingrained them into the emerging Czech national identity on its deepest level, to emerge again in the defenestration of 1618 which inaugurated the Thirty Years’ War. With the rise of the Reformation, all the stripes of Protestantism including the most radical—Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, and Arian (Socinian)—found a ready reception in central and eastern Europe. However, Prague was also the imperial capital of the Holy Roman Empire and as such bore the brunt of the Catholic

⁶ Apology to Albert Camus (“The Myth of Sysiphus,” conclusion: “One must imagine Sysiphus happy.”). By the evidence of Sholom Aleichem and Chagall, the “happy pauper” in East-European Jewish life was more than a figment of the imagination.

counter-offensive. In addition to being a magnet for Europe's greatest literary and scientific talents, the imperial court also had to set an example of religious correctness. The checkered fortune of the Prague Jewish community in this period (and in Poland after 1600) reflects the wave of the counter-Reformation, for the Protestants were also perceived as Judaizers. The Jesuits who were invited into Bohemia from the 1560s onward (and Poland after 1588) carried such Spanish traditions as anti-Jewish animus and compulsory conversionary sermons. All these tendencies played a role in the background of the Jewish thought of this period, though explicit references are rare and we must often fill in the blanks with our historical imagination. Interpreters of Maharal have seen his forthright Jewish nationalism and his educational theories as responding to influences from Moravian Calvinism. I shall argue that Ephraim Luntshitz's reading the debate over Manicheism into the stories of Jethro and Pharaoh may have been an oblique comment on contemporary Polish Arianism, with its unitarian doctrines. The turn to a more Biblical rather than Aristotelian doctrine of divine involvement in human history may reflect Renaissance historiography as well as Reformation Biblicism. At this distance—and without more documentary evidence of actual Jewish-Christian exchanges⁷—many of these connections must remain speculative.

Opportunities and Barriers

In order to ground our interpretations and speculations on the bedrock of the best objectively-intended reconstructions of “reality,” it is important for us to clarify what opportunities were structurally present for Jews to be influenced by the cultural currents around them, and what barriers made such influence difficult or improbable.

Was there a direct link between the general “Polish Renaissance” and the Polish-Jewish Renaissance? Not likely. Harold Segel has chronicled the rise of humanism as a literary movement in Poland from 1470 to 1543. The story ends in 1543 with the death of the poet Clemens Ianicius and

⁷ Simon Dubnow cited Jacob of Belzhytz and Isaac Troki as participants in Jewish-Protestant dialogue of this period. (*History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, I, 136–7.) However, the former wrote in Polish, and the latter's *חזקת אמונה* (“*Defense of the Faith*”) was published only in 1681 by the German scholar Wagenseil. See also H. H. Ben-Sasson's studies on the Jewish-Reformation connection in Note 16 below.

the astronomer Copernicus.⁸ However, the Polish-Jewish Renaissance does not start until the beginning of Moses Isserles's tenure in Cracow in 1549. Thus there is no chronological overlap between the two. There is also very little overlap between their preoccupations—the one centered on the revival of Latin letters and poetry (much of the latter erotic), the latter on philosophy. The short answer is therefore “no.” However, it may be argued that the cultural tone of the circles of the Polish nobility for the next century may have carried an afterglow of the humanist era, an international European phenomenon that is reflected in literature from Castiglione's *The Courtier* to Shakespeare's comedies. Whether this stylistic influence is apparent in any of the writings of Jewish writers of this period is a subjective issue, which I leave to the reader to decide.

Were northern-European Jews literate in the languages and literatures of their contemporaries? Mostly not. This question breaks down into a number of sub-questions as follows:

Did Ashkenazic Jews know the Latin alphabet? Rarely. Chone Shmeruk has shown how the rise of early modern Yiddish literature was predicated on Jews' inability to read popular courtly romances in the vernacular. A whole genre of Yiddish literature arose as an imitation of the surrounding gentile literature, to provide to Jews an experience which their gentile neighbors enjoyed but which they could not have, except in translation, because of the linguistic barrier. Shmeruk documents how even in the 16th–17th century a Jewish lawyer representing Jews in gentile courts had to rely on a gentile secretary because of his own ignorance of the Latin alphabet.⁹ However, there were exceptions. Dubnow tells of a religious polemical work written in Polish by a Jew in 1581, and Joseph Davis thinks it likely that R. Yom Tov Lipmann Heller read Josephus in a German translation.¹⁰

Did Ashkenazic Jews know Latin? Even more rarely. The reason that the University of Padua looms large as a center of Jewish exposure to general culture (especially medical studies) in this period is that it was practically unique for admitting students of dissenting religious

⁸ Harold B. Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland: The Rise of Humanism, 1470–1543*, Cornell 1989, p. 250.

⁹ Chone Shmeruk, *ספרות יידיש: פרקים לתולדותיה* (*Chapters in the History of Yiddish Literature*), Tel Aviv University, 1978, pp. 24–39.

¹⁰ Dubnow, *loc cit.*; Joseph Davis, “Ashkenazic Rationalism and Midrashic Natural History: Responses to the New Science in the Works of Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1578–1654),” *Science in Context* 10:4, 1997, p. 609.

background.¹¹ Some Ashkenazic students went to Padua to study medicine, but their exceptional status contrasts with the normal inclusion of Latin in the education of well-bred Italian Jews. It is significant that Ashkenazic students had to go to Italy for these studies. Though the University of Prague found a home in 1366 in a house belonging to a Jew, and Catholics as well as Protestants were welcome there in the 16th century, Jews were not permitted as students in law and the humanities there until the mid-19th century. Thus this center of learning, so prominent during the Rudolfine Renaissance, was off-limits to Jews.¹² Ashkenazic authorities also discouraged Jews from studying at the universities.¹³

Was gentile literature translated into Hebrew? Sometimes. Ephraim Kupfer has shown that some of the texts of medieval philosophic literature, including Averroes, were being peddled in Hebrew in Poland-Lithuania in the 15th century.¹⁴ However, there is no evidence of a direct link between this phenomenon and the Polish-Jewish Renaissance, which rested mostly on the Maimonidean works printed in the 16th century. On the other hand, Otto Kulka has pointed out that Calvin's catechism was available in Hebrew translation in Moravia at the time that Maharal was developing his educational and national theories which have been described as resembling those of Calvin and Comenius.¹⁵ The Polish-Jewish astronomers had access to astronomical treatises which were written in Hebrew. David Gans, who was head and shoulders above

¹¹ "In nearly all universities except Padua teachers and students were required to accept the official religion." (Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Part VII: The Age of Reason Begins*, Simon & Schuster 1961, p. 583.) David Ruderman also stresses the uniqueness of Padua's medical school as a center where Jews from all across the European continent gathered, studied, and interacted. (See "The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice, With Special Reference to Jewish Graduates of Padua's Medical School," in Ruderman, ed. *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, NYU Press, pp. 519–553.) To be sure, Delacrut studied at the University of Bologna—also within the Italian cultural milieu. Though some Ashkenazic students studied at Padua and returned to Poland as physicians, their cultural status was not as high as physicians in Mediterranean Jewry. (See David E. Fishman, "Rabbi Moshe Isserles and the Study of Science Among Polish Rabbis," *Science In Context* 10:4, 1997, p. 573.) Thus they may have formed part of the audience which Jaffe, Horowitz, and Luntshitz had to cater to, but they did not have a direct primary impact on Ashkenazic intellectual creativity.

¹² Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold*, Hill & Wang 1997, pp. 82–84, 186, 208.

¹³ David E. Fishman, *op. cit.*, pp. 573–74.

¹⁴ See my discussion of Kupfer's thesis at the end of Chapter 2 (last note).

¹⁵ Otto D. Kulka, "Comenius and Maharal: The Historical Background of the Parallels in their Teachings," *Judaica Bohemiae* 27:1, 1991, p. 20.

his contemporaries in knowledge of both astronomy and history, wrote works in Hebrew which in effect became primary sources of outside learning to those who followed him.

Were Jews knowledgeable in the vernacular of their contemporaries? Yes, very much so, especially orally. Jewish life was economically integrated with that of the general populations of Germany, Poland-Lithuania, Bohemia-Moravia, and the surrounding lands. It can be assumed that in their dealings with gentiles, Jews spoke not only of the prices of commodities and land rents, but of more general issues, including the religious ferments of the times. Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson has chronicled the disputations of Jews and Christians of this period, as well as the literary record of the internal Jewish assessment of the events and movements of the Reformation as they unfolded.¹⁶ The regular communication of religious issues between Jews and Christians through oral discourse during this period is clearly documented through these researches. While the university and the written-or-printed word might have been the preferred vehicles of communication of philosophical matters (and only among a learned elite), religious issues were out in the open for everyone of all backgrounds.

How much did information from these sources influence the thought and writings of Ashkenazic Jews in this period? This is the \$64,000 question which is the crux of the historian's interpretation. Answering it is complicated by the subjects' decision to write in traditional genres, addressing ostensibly questions of Biblical interpretation and religious law which were the latest layer in a millenia-old literature. All the considerations raised by Leo Strauss in the controversy of the interpretation of Maimonides apply here.¹⁷ If a Jewish thinker spoke favorably of Christian contemporary thought, he exposed himself to danger from the Jewish side; if unfavorably, from the Christian side. If he expressed himself on these topics indirectly, then what he intended to say (or whether he intended to address contemporary realities at all) becomes a matter of speculation. Addressing matters of philosophy were "safe" by comparison (though not entirely). This is fortunate for the purpose of the current study,

¹⁶ H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, 1970; "Jewish-Christian Disputation in the Setting of Humanism and Reformation in the German Empire," *Harvard Theological Review*, 1966; "Jews and Christian Sectarians: Existential Similarity and Dialectical Tensions in Sixteenth-Century Moravia and Poland-Lithuania," *Viator*, 1973.

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, University of Chicago, 1952.

where our primary interest is focused on the transmission of philosophical ideas. We shall be tempted occasionally, however, to address larger cultural issues, including religious. The speculative status of our interpretations on these matters is conceded in advance.

Circles of Influence

Regardless how truly “Renaissance” or “humanist” character the Polish-Jewish thinkers were in the last analysis, we can say more descriptively that certain of them stood closer in the “intellectual food chain” to primary sources of general Renaissance culture than others. Eliezer Ashkenazi was privileged, among the thinkers discussed in this work, by spending the first sixty years of his life in the Mediterranean world, in such places as Salonika, Egypt, and Venice, where philosophy was common coin. Moses Isserles was fortunate to grow up in Cracow, the capital city of Poland, which was the center of intellectual activity and cosmopolitan society in a provincial country, and to belong to a family which had entree to the court and contact with Spanish and Italian Jews. Thus both Ashkenazi and Isserles had “primary” exposure to Renaissance culture. So did Mattathias Delacrut and David Gans.¹⁸ Isserles’s pupils Mordecai Jaffe and Abraham Horowitz had at first only the teaching of their master in matters of philosophy, a “secondary” contact. Maharal, though famous for the works he wrote in Prague toward the end of his career, spent much of the middle part of his career (through 1573) in Nikolsburg, Moravia. He very likely received Reformation influences here of a Calvinist sort (whether from the Hebrew version of Calvin’s catechism or from oral discussions), but these did not apparently include philosophy. We will argue that it was not until his encounter with Eliezer Ashkenazi around 1580

¹⁸ Delacrut (an astronomer who taught kabbalah and possibly astronomy to Mordecai Jaffe and possibly Moses Isserles) studied at the University of Bologna in 1550. David Fishman argues plausibly that his name indicates that he was of French or Provençal origin. (*op. cit.*, pp. 575–6). Gans’s direct access to the astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler is well known. He wrote Hebrew treatises not only on astronomy and world history, but on mathematics and geography as well, though the latter were not published. See Andre Neher, *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the 16th Century: David Gans (1541–1613) and his times*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; also Noah J. Efron, “Irenism and Natural Philosophy in Rudolfine Prague: The Case of David Gans,” in *Science in Context* 10:4 (1997), pp. 627–650.

that he began to address philosophical issues in a sophisticated manner. Ephraim Luntshitz, who was a disciple of the anti-philosophical Solomon Luria, was likewise innocent of philosophical knowledge in his early writings, but we will show how from the 1580s onward he alludes to his successive encounters with Ashkenazi, Isserles, Jaffe, and Horowitz. His contact with higher Renaissance intellectual culture was thus secondary or tertiary. By seeing how these thinkers passed from a state of philosophical ignorance to philosophical awareness, we see how the sphere of philosophical awareness gradually spread through the leaders of east-European Jewry through the latter half of the 16th century.

As people change through their lives, so do places. Though Italy was the primary site of the Renaissance in the 15th and early 16th centuries, by the time of Jaffe's sojourn there in the 1560s, it had experienced reaction and its Jewish culture was turning inward. As for Prague, after the temporary expulsion of its Jews in 1561 it would become famous as a center of the general cultural renaissance under the cosmopolitan Emperor Rudolph II. It was also home to Maharal's "klaus." The two may not have had much to do with each other at first, but in the long run their proximity bore fruit, especially from the mid-1580s onward when Maharal was writing his later books and his "student," the polymath scientist and historiographer David Gans, was rubbing shoulders with the leading astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler. R. Ephraim Luntshitz would be part of that scene in his later years, from his arrival in 1604 until his death in 1619. It is tempting for those of us who visit the Prague cemetery and see their graves together there, to think that all of their works were of a piece and were developed in a common milieu, in the cultural aura of the Holy Roman imperial court and the university, and the savants who flocked to both.

Though there is some truth in that picture, the reality is more complex. It is more likely that Prague (like Paris and New York in later centuries) drew some (especially David Gans) who wished to learn in that milieu, but others (Maharal, Luntshitz, Jaffe, Isaiah Horowitz) who had already made their reputations elsewhere, but whose concentration in that center enriched others as well as themselves. In point of fact, all of Ephraim's best and most popular works (especially *Gleanings of Ephraim and Precious Ornament*) were written in Poland, in the years when he was an itinerant preacher based in Horowitz's community of Lvov; the Prague works (*Lips of Knowledge, Six Pillars*) are hardly known

beyond their titles, and perhaps rightly so.¹⁹ It was symbolically fitting that Ephraim would eventually write the *haskamah* (rabbinic imprimatur) to David Gans's astronomical work *Shield of David (Magen David)*, published in 1612, but this was the cherry on the cake of his intellectual career.²⁰

It is a tribute to the vitality of 16th-century east-European Jewish culture that learning took place not only in the royal capitals, but was dispersed throughout the territory, and came back to the capitals from the provinces. Nikolsburg, Ostrow, Brisk, Posen, Grodno, Lvov, Lublin and Gniezno were among the places where the creative thinkers of this period studied and taught. The fairs of the "Council of the Four Lands" in Lublin provided them with an opportunity to exchange their latest ideas. It was a polycentered intellectual culture.

We must also resist the temptation to think that place of residence automatically results in cultural influence. One may be in a place but not of that place, like the Hasidic enclaves in modern cities who had precious little to do with culturally radical movements such as beat poetry and Abstract Expressionism in New York of the 1950s. From reading his Torah commentary *The Lion's Whelp* (1578), one gets the impression that Maharal, though living in Prague since 1573, was in such a cloistered setting. His commendation of secular learning in the *Eternal Paths* (1595) breathes another cultural atmosphere entirely.²¹ Similarly, the halakhic writings of R. Meir Katzenellenbogen (the Maharam) of Padua give the impression that one could live in the Ashkenazic colonies of Italy

¹⁹ There are some vivid flashes of insight in *Lips of Knowledge* (for instance, § 254 with its extended symbolism on the purgative power of Torah that may have been a rebuttal to Christian polemics on original sin), but they are hard to find amid the picayune hair-splitting based on motifs developed in his earlier works. The moralistic genre of *Six Pillars* is derivative and platitudinous in the main body, but this work comes to life at the end where he addresses current social realities and measures them against the traditional virtues.

²⁰ Neher, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

²¹ Maharal's commendation of secular learning in this one passage has been cited probably more than anything else in his work: "...Scientific study is not forbidden, for such study is like a ladder on which to ascend to the wisdom of Torah... The astral and planetary cycles in the heavens are considered the work of the Lord, and the heavens are considered the product of His hands, as it says, 'When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers...' (Psalms 8:4) This is because from the heavens a person is able to recognize the dignity of the Maker who make them, and the greatness of His power and His wisdom, when one considers their procession and their order. Therefore one is obligated to know and recognize one's Creator." Nevertheless, a close reading will show that even in this later work he is careful to put gentile wisdom consistently on a lower level than Jewish traditional study.

Cracow.²⁴ Isserles probably came into possession of Maimonides's *Guide* shortly after its 1551 Venice printing, and taught its philosophy to his students, among whom were Mordecai Jaffe and Abraham Horowitz. However, the influence from these sources was slow in trickling down. To be sure, there was the famous debate over Maimonideanism between Horowitz and R. Aaron of Posen (who according to one view was Ephraim Luntshitz's father) in 1559. But Jaffe spent the 1560's in Italy. Horowitz's publication of Maimonides's *Eight Chapters* with his commentary in 1577 provided an easy primer for the novice; Isserles's more erudite and esoteric *Law of the Sacred Offering* (completed 1564, published 1570) was slower in finding an audience.

The second wave of philosophical influence in this period starts with Eliezer Ashkenazi's arrival in Poland from Cremona in 1576. His crowning lifetime achievement, the *Deeds of the Lord* (published 1583), shows him as a master of philosophical commentary on the Bible in the vein of Gersonides and Abravanel. However, it is likely that he also goaded Maharal into enriching his primary rabbinic and kabbalistic mode of discourse with more sustained treatment of philosophical issues. The two men were opposites in personality and outlook: the one rational and universalistic in approach, the other anti-rational and basing his outlook on the metaphysical uniqueness of Israel. Maharal's first work *Lion's Whelp* (1578), though published after four years of living in Prague, breathes a provincial outlook; it is mostly rabbinic in its explicit sources, with some influences of Nahmanides and Arama. Maharal's first explicit philosophical statements are found in the prefaces to the *Prodigies of the Lord*, published around the age of 60 within a year of Eliezer's *Deeds of the Lord* and showing from his discussion of miracles that he had already debated these problems with Eliezer.

Ephraim Luntshitz came to maturity at just the right time to pick up the influence of the "second wave" and express it in his works. He alluded in the preface of his second book *Gleanings of Ephraim* to the debate between Eliezer and Maharal. He also started at the same time to express allegiance to the positions of Isserles, Jaffe, and Horowitz. As a popular preacher, his pro-philosophical stance is more a matter of style than substance, of positions summarized in catch-phrases

²⁴ Among the influential outsiders of this period one must count Mattathias Delacrut, an astronomer and Jaffe's teacher in Kabbalah, who according to David Fishman was probably of French or Provençal origin and studied at the University of Bologna in 1550. (Fishman, *op. cit.*, p. 575 f.)

rather than arguments developed at length (“rumors of philosophy” rather than philosophy as such). Nevertheless by the turn of the 17th century, with Jaffe, Horowitz and Luntshitz all numbered among Polish Jewry’s leadership, we may say with some confidence that philosophy had received the certificate of legitimacy, and was established as a part of the accepted Polish-Jewish curriculum for a generation until it was overshadowed by kabbalah. Maharal had also broadened and mellowed after a slow start, and his later works (written during the period of his mentorship of the historian, astronomer, and polymath David Gans) endorse secular studies and show a wider acquaintance with general knowledge. From the 1580s to 1620 Prague (home to such scientific giants as Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler) would be a magnet for many Jews who combined Jewish erudition with fluency in general studies—Maharal, Gans, Jaffe, Luntshitz, R. Yom Tov Lipmann-Heller, Isaiah Horowitz, and Joseph b. Jacob Halevi. Prague reaped the harvest that had been sown in Poland. But Jewish culture had established its center of gravity in the east. Indeed, later scholars would also make Prague a stopping-point on their broader life itineraries. Isaiah Horowitz would spend many years in Prague but would write his *Two Tablets of the Covenant* only later, after emigrating to Israel. Heller, after studying in Prague under Maharal, would find his way back to Poland via Vienna. Ephraim would endorse both Maharal’s pedagogical principles and Heller’s Mishnah commentary *Tosefot Yom Tov* in his final work *Six Pillars*.

Significance of the Polish-Jewish Renaissance

William J. Bouwsma has written, in his book *The Waning of the Renaissance (1550–1640)*, that the traditional liberal view of history has tended to see the Renaissance as a major step forward in a unidirectional movement of progress toward modernity. His own researches, however, led him to the view that the doubts and anxieties besetting thinkers toward the end of this period led to an inwardness and decline in confidence, a waning rather than a climax of the period of the Renaissance itself. The students who have preceded me in studying this period (particularly Joseph Davis) have similarly noted that Ashkenazic rationalism petered out after 1620 as kabbalah became the dominant paradigm. I am in agreement with Alan Cooper’s suggestion that if Ephraim represents

the influence of the Reformation on Jewish thought, Isaiah Horowitz shows the stamp of the counter-Reformation.

However, despite these short-term setbacks, the long view shows that the Renaissance, for better and worse, has made its stamp on the modern world down to our day. The explosion of artistic and literary creativity which started with Giotto and Petrarch has continued unabated to the present day. The seeds of science which were planted in the Renaissance started yielding fruit with Galileo and Kepler, and laid the foundations for the crucial role which science has for our world-view on all sides of the present debates. And the question of humanism—what role does humanity play as a source of value, in itself or in relation to God and the cosmos?²—is as urgent today as it ever was.

So, too, has the philosophical fashion of Ashkenazic Jewry from 1550 to 1620 proved a harbinger of modern Jewish thought. Moses Mendelssohn picked up the issue of the relevance of the Maimonidean paradigm for modernity pretty much where the thinkers of the Polish Renaissance had left it. Isserles's central thesis, that "philosophy and kabbalah express the same wisdom in different languages," might not elicit general agreement, but a debate on its significance and validity could well crystallize many of the issues motivating contemporary Jewish thinkers. Jaffé's ideal curriculum, covering all subjects from natural science to theology, is a recommendation which many Jewish educators today feel they are following in spirit. And the problem of the intellectuality of religious faith (what is the right balance of intellectual searching versus fideistic acceptance of tradition in a well-rounded religious faith?)—which motivated Samuel Ibn Tibbon's preface to Maimonides's *Eight Chapters*, annotated by Abraham Horowitz, and pops up again and again in the sermons and commentaries of Ephraim Luntshitz—is still of central importance to many religious seekers today.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRST WAVE (1550–1580): ISSERLES, JAFFE, AND HOROWITZ

The Isserles School

The “first wave” of 16th-century Polish-Jewish philosophical learning may also be called the “Isserles school.” Between his installation as Rabbi of Cracow in 1549 and his death in 1572, Moses Isserles numbered among his students many future luminaries who would contribute to the spread of philosophical learning. Most notable among these were Mordecai Jaffe, Abraham Horowitz, David Gans, and Menahem David Ticktin. The works of these individuals demonstrate the awakening of serious new interest and appreciation of philosophy in a cultural milieu where this had been, if not altogether unknown, decidedly on the back burner.

I say not altogether unknown, because Ashkenazic Jewish rationalism has a prehistory (1350–1550) which centers on the episode of philosophic learning of the Prague circle of R. Yom Tov Lipmann Muelhausen. The scholars who have researched this matter¹ debate whether the Muelhausen circle was a true precursor and significant contributing cause to the later 16th-century flowering, or a casual, isolated episode independent of the later developments. I see the two episodes, two centuries apart, as separate and distinct. Each was the after-effect of larger movements generated from Mediterranean culture. In the 1350s, it was newcomers from Provençal Jewry (itself in crisis)

¹ See Excursus at the end of this chapter for an extended discussion of the Kupfer thesis and the Muelhausen circle. Ephraim Kupfer and Lawrence Kaplan stress continuity of the 14th-century and 16th-century flowerings. Ben-Sasson saw them as independent. Joseph Davis’s view is intermediate, but closer to Ben-Sasson’s. See especially Ephraim Kupfer, *op. cit.*, and Joseph M. Davis, *R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller, Joseph b. Isaac Ha-Levi, and Rationalism in Ashkenazic Jewish Culture 1550–1650* (dissertation), Harvard, 1990. I am in basic agreement with Davis’s thesis: “The one-sentence generalization on the relation of medieval Ashkenazic Jews to medieval Jewish philosophy... is that it was foreign to them.... The two-sentence generalization is that this is more true of certain periods in Ashkenazic culture than of others, and that it is not precisely true of any period after the first decades of the twelfth century.” (Davis, p. 8)

and Italy who brought their philosophical interests with them to Central Europe. In the 1550s it was Jewish refugees from the debacle of Iberian Jewry from one side, and the spread of Italian Renaissance humanism to the centers of Poland and the Holy Roman Empire—coupled with the 1551 printing of the *Guide*—that provided the intellectual opportunity which young Moses Isserles seized. In the 1570s, it was another wanderer from Mediterranean lands—the sexagenarian Eliezer Ashkenazi—who gave the Polish-Jewish renaissance a second wind by involving Maharal and Ephraim Luntshitz in philosophical debates. In all these instances, northern European Jewry had but slight momentum of philosophical interest on its own (due to weak institutional foundations),² but was receptive to the repeated intellectual stimulation from Mediterranean sources. (For an extended discussion of this issue, see the excursus at the end of this chapter.)

Moses Isserles and the Maimonidean Revival

The chronology of Moses Isserles's life and that of the Maimonidean revival in central Europe are so intertwined, that it is worth taking a close look at the two.

Moses Isserles was born in Cracow, some time between 1525 and 1530. He studied first at home, then in Lublin with R. Shalom Shakhna, who was the leading rabbi of Poland. His marriage to Shakhna's daughter was a union of two of the most prestigious families in Poland. He returned to Cracow in 1549, already (though in his 20's) a leading teacher and halakhic authority. The students he taught in Cracow in the next twenty-two years included many of the leaders of the Jewish-Polish philosophic renaissance, as we have observed.

Mordecai Jaffe was born around 1535 in Prague, and studied under Solomon Luria and Isserles before returning to Prague in 1553 as head of the yeshivah. In the introduction to his magnum opus *The Royal Garment* (*Levush Malkhut*), Jaffe would remark that his commentary on

² It is a truism that throughout this period, philosophical studies were an extracurricular indulgence for Polish Jewish centers of learning, as opposed to Talmudic studies which had the place of honor in the curriculum. By contrast, regular curricular study of philosophy was the norm in Spanish and Italian Jewries. See Joseph Delmedigo's extremely negative observations on the state of secular studies in Polish Jewry around 1620 below, Chapter 4, Note 1.

Maimonides's *Guide* offered those interpretations he had learned from his teachers when he was young. We may infer from this account that Jaffe studied Maimonides's *Guide* with Moses Isserles in Cracow some time between 1549 and 1553—either from the 1551 Venice printed edition, or from an earlier copy.

We would do well to picture for ourselves the collaboration of these two geniuses of Polish Jewry—the teacher in his twenties, the student in his teens—as they plunged together into the labyrinths of a work which would be for them the intellectual equivalent of the gentile Renaissance that was happening all around them. This is a fine example of what Thomas Kuhn referred to as a “paradigm shift” initiated by a younger generation of scholars, coming to an intellectual discipline fresh of preconceptions and seeing it in a different light than their elders.³ Jonah Ben-Sasson has set the scene, drawing on Meir Balaban's cultural studies:

Isserles's education in the written word broadened—at least with respect to scholastic and Renaissance philosophy—as the result of acquaintance with Italian Jews and their culture. R. Israel Isserles, father of R. Moses Isserles, was counted among those admitted to the royal court, and there he met educated Jews from the West, especially from Italy, such as the court physicians. Moses Isserles himself had connections with this group, and even had discussions with Solomon Calahorra⁴ from Spain, who was a physician in the Polish royal court. Isserles was also connected by marriage to the famous Wohl family of Italy. [Balaban] says explicitly that “the connection with Italian Jews in Cracow...draws him to the Renaissance.”⁵

Let us describe the Italian connection in more detail. Isserles was in correspondence with R. Meir Katzenellenbogen (1473–1565),

³ “Any new interpretation of nature, whether a discovery or a theory, emerges first in the mind of one or a few individuals...they are men so young or so new to the crisis-ridden field that practice has committed them less deeply than most of their contemporaries to the world view and rules determined by the old paradigm.” Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edition, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 144.

⁴ *Encyclopedia Judaica* (V, 36) lists Israel Samuel ben Solomon Calahorra (?1560–1640), Polish talmudist of Cracow, evidently the son of Solomon Calahorra.

⁵ Jonah Ben-Sasson, *משנתו העיונית של הרמ"א* (*The Philosophical System of R. Moses Isserles*), Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 8, citing M. Balaban, “Umyslowosc i moralnosc zydostwa polskiego XVI w.” (“Education and Morality in 16th Century Polish Jewry”), *Kultura Staropolska*, Krakow 1932, pp. 14, 16.

the “Maharam of Padua,” the spiritual and halakhic head of the Ashkenazic colony in the intellectual center where Jews from all over Europe—including Prague and Poland—went to learn medicine and philosophy. Katzenellenbogen was a juridical authority but no philosopher. He was born in Prague and studied also under R. Shalom Shakhna. One of the subjects of the correspondence involved the publication of the works of Maimonides. Katzenellenbogen authorized a certain edition of Maimonides’s Code and condemned another as a pirate edition. He called on his young colleague Isserles to support the ban.

Isserles, then, was the young scion of one aristocratic Polish-Jewish family, married into another, and conducting legal-rabbinic correspondence with the ranking Ashkenazic rabbi in Italy. He lived in the capital city of Poland, which had just reached its political and cultural high-point, imbibing the learning of the general Renaissance, and had not yet started on its decline.⁶ Like Polish Jews generally, Isserles was presumably ignorant of the language of gentile learning (Latin), but he was uniquely positioned to be in close relations with Jews of Spanish and Italian origin, who were steeped in the universal culture of the Renaissance. They could not communicate to him those aspects of the culture which were dependent on other languages, gentile philosophy and belles lettres, except by hearsay. They could, however, point him to the nearest equivalents to which he could have ready access—the syntheses of Jewish and general wisdom that had already been forged on Jewish intellectual turf, by the great philosophers Maimonides, Gersonides, and Albo, and the philosophically knowledgeable Torah commentaries of the recent Iberian masters, especially Isaac Arama’s *Binding of Isaac*. They could also introduce him to the Zohar, that Jewish classic which had made such a stir in Italy that leading Christian thinkers had hired Jewish teachers to open its doors to them. And along with the Zohar

⁶ Edward Fram notes: “During the reign of Zygmunt II Augustus (r. 1548–1572), a patron of Renaissance humanism, philosophy enjoyed popularity in educated circles of Polish society. At the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, philosophy was not only popular but quite necessary; only those who studied philosophy could pursue medical, theological, and legal studies. The high esteem in which Polish society held philosophy was not lost on supporters of Jewish philosophic study.” Fram, Edward, *Jewish Law and Social and Economic Realities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth century Poland*, Columbia, 1991 (dissertation), p. 133. However, as we have noted, Jews could not study at the university or read Latin. It was only natural, therefore, for them to turn to the nearest available equivalent, namely the Maimonidean legacy.

came the secondary literature—Gikatilla, Recanati, and the anonymous *Divine Hierarchy* (*Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, published in 1558).

The Isserles-Luria Correspondence

The moment of eruption of philosophy into 16th-century Polish-Jewish culture is documented in the Isserles-Luria correspondence, which has been included in the standard editions of Isserles's *Responsa*. The story of the dispute between the young pro-philosophical Moses Isserles and his older anti-philosophical cousin Solomon Luria has been told so often, it would seem there is little more to say on it. Yet all previous accounts have neglected certain nuances of the exchange which I feel are essential for a proper understanding of its significance. (I invite the reader to check my interpretation against the letters themselves.)⁷

- a. Whereas the dating of this exchange is left up in the air by most accounts, it is evident from the opening of Letter 5 that it took place in the early years of Isserles's Cracow tenure, i.e. around 1550.
- b. Whereas the citation of Aristotle is assumed by many accounts to be in a halakhic connection, careful reading shows that it occurred in the midst of playful personal banter with no legal significance.⁸
- c. Whereas the exchange is often read as the confrontation of two equal authorities, I see the novice Isserles proving his mettle against the older Luria, who plays the various roles of mentor, ideological opponent, and sparring partner.
- d. Whereas the issue between Luria and Isserles is generally construed narrowly as the permissibility of studying Aristotle, I see broader cultural issues at stake. Luria objects to Isserles's playful banter, which signals a possible deviation in idiom from sacred Jewish study to secular Renaissance cultural discourse.

⁷ See abridged translations of these letters in the Appendix, pp. 223–30.

⁸ Asher Siev points this out in his Note 12 to Responsum 5 (Siev, *Responsa of R. Moses Isserles* [Hebrew], Feldheim, Jerusalem 1970, p. 19).

The three preserved letters (§5–7 in Isserles's *Responsa*) are a fragment of a longer ongoing exchange. Isserles's modesty and deference indicate that he had only recently been installed as rabbi of Cracow:

The letter of my excellent lord and teacher has reached me. It is more precious than pearls, covered with sapphires. I rejoice and exult in it, seeing that the Lord has fulfilled my heart's desires. For all my life I yearned for the table of rabbis, to gaze at their flasks and draw from their waters, and now the Lord has graced me with the table which is before my lord, which I enjoy as one who enjoys the radiance of the Shekhina. As my lord's words are more difficult than the previous, I cannot refute them point by point but only raise doubts about them, perhaps as the limits of the understander and the profundity of the subject keep me from understanding them fully...

It is the barely-arrived youth, not the mature polymath, who speaks here. The reference, "and now the Lord has graced me with the table..." refers to his installation at Cracow as a recent event.

The primary subject-matter of the exchange derives from the study of the Talmudic Tractate *Hullin*, especially the technicalities of various imperfections in the lungs of cattle, some of which render the animal unfit for eating. It is apparent that from very early on both correspondents were exploiting this recondite material for rhetorical flights and personal witticisms, using anatomical terms as metaphors for the personal characteristics of the disputants. Evidently Luria said there was a *tinra*⁹ ("tubercle"), i.e. an imperfection, in Isserles's reasoning. Isserles counter-argued that if a tubercle is hard as stone (as per Rashi), then it has no moisture of Torah, i.e. is totally devoid of insight. Isserles would prefer that his slip be termed a *bu'a*, i.e., a sac of liquid, a different lung-imperfection with the rhetorical advantage that clear water indicates metaphorically that its bearer, though imperfect, at least has Torah in him. Furthermore, even if it is a tubercle and hard as stone, did not Moses extract water from the rock?

Luria's response (cited by Isserles) was friendly but critical, challenging Isserles to improve his argument: "If you are Moses the teacher, where is your wisdom? Not only do your words contradict the Geonim,

⁹ I have used "tubercle" as the translation of *tinra* throughout. This is not necessarily totally accurate, as "tubercle" generally means a small lump, and the evidence of Talmud *Hullin* 48b shows that *tinra* is a larger lump in contrast to *kandi* which are smaller. Nevertheless, I have found no more convenient alternative, and it makes little difference for the rhetorical point of the subsequent discussion.

they contradict themselves!" They contradict the Geonim because a tinra is considered kosher (maybe so, but this was irrelevant to Isserles's rhetorical point, or he chose to disregard it so he could proceed gloriously onward in his pilpulic rhapsody). They contradict themselves, because Isserles was trying to defend himself using simultaneously the metaphors of tubercle and liquid-sac, without making a clear choice between them.

All this sets the stage for Isserles's response in the first extant letter of the correspondence. Isserles first seeks to prove that even though a tubercle is described as "hard as stone," it really is not devoid of moisture, since it was the aftermath of a purulent infection. Nevertheless, the aftermath of pus is a less fit metaphor for Torah than a sac of clear water, so he would find the latter description more flattering. But even if he were stuck with being compared to a tubercle, and even if the tubercle were truly stone and not merely subjectively "hard as stone" to the touch, one could still argue that it contained moisture:

But I will say the truth to my dear sir: Aristotle has written the following about rock-formation: "The vapors in the earth are of two kinds. The one is moist, from the moist nature of the water; and one is dry from the nature of fire. Two species of rocks are generated from them. The one is mined as impure rocks proceeding from the earth, such as arsenic...all these are from the smoking type of vapor. But from the moist vapor come two species. The one of them can be melted down, like copper, silver, and gold; the other can be hammered into shape, like iron." We find a corroborating verse: "A land whose stones are iron," i.e. even though its origin is from a moist substance, of the same moist nature as water, nevertheless we find that iron is harder than stone. So why may I not call something hard as a rock (Rashi's term), even though its origin is from pus which is formed from the combined nature of water and stone-like earth? Therefore I see no contradiction in my words in this respect.

Thus he invokes Aristotle's scientific authority to prove that the hard-as-rock in his imperfect reasoning may still contain the moisture of Torah. That is the whole point of the argument.

Luria's response to Isserles's letter was violently and globally negative. Though the Aristotle citation takes up a small fraction of Isserles's argument and is surrounded by a preponderance of traditional rabbinic citations, Luria complains:

You have surrounded me with collected wisdom, mostly foreign, in strange vessels, while the home-bred hangs isolated! The Torah girds itself with sackcloth and laments with her maidens, for those pregnant

with sons and daughters are despised and rejected, as was the case with Ada and Zillah¹⁰ in the first generations. You look to the wisdom of the uncircumcised Aristotle at every turn. As I ponder your letter, I see smoke coming from your nostrils like a hearth, and from your anger you give a response that is out of bounds.... I am familiar with their wisdom as you are, but I stay far away from them, for even concerning their fine words the rabbis applied the verse “Keep away from the opening of her house” (Proverbs 5:5)... I cannot express my whole meaning in a letter, only in love and affection face to face.

Is the one quotation from Aristotle enough to justify this outburst? It seems rather that Luria is responding to the whole tone of Isserles’s letter, even the playful use he makes of traditional authorities. Isserles’s letter is not primarily intended as halakhic argument, though it dips into that genre occasionally. It is most akin to love-banter, imitating gentile Renaissance models, of which Isserles could see live examples in the behavior of the frequenters of the royal court of Cracow, and of which he may have heard of literary examples through his Jewish acquaintances who came from Spain and Italy. The tone of witty repartee, using learning lightly to score interpersonal points, is cousin to the discourse of Castiglione’s *The Courtier* and Shakespeare’s comedies.¹¹ It partook of the culture of the capital city Cracow, where religious and secular ideas intermingled, and where the leaders of Poland interacted with foreigners in a cosmopolitan idiom. It contrasted with the more traditional culture of the Polish hinterlands, Ostrog and Brisk, where Luria served and taught. The importation of Talmudic discourse of the anatomy of lung disease into this mock-romantic framework gives

¹⁰ The image of Ada and Zillah is especially poignant, expressing the fear that Isserles was hanging on to Jewish tradition out of dutiful compliance, while his true heart was being seduced to the greater glamor of a foreign culture. This is an allusion to Rashi’s comment on Genesis 4:19: “‘Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Addah and the name of the other was Zillah.’—thus was the custom of the generation of the Flood. They would take one wife for procreation and another for sexual pleasure. To the sexual partner the husband would give a cup of purgatives so she should be barren and dress herself as a bride and feed him dainties, whereas her co-wife would be despised and mourn like a widow.” The implication is that by choosing the beguiling pleasantries of Renaissance culture, Isserles is treating the tradition of Torah—which is the only truly fruitful one of the two—as a hateful second-best.

¹¹ We must also mention on the Jewish side Judah Abravanel’s *Dialogues of Love*, and the earlier love-poetry of the Spanish Golden Age, of which Isserles was probably unaware.

Isserles's letter a slightly ludicrous air which Shakespeare or Rabelais¹² would have appreciated, but which Luria found inappropriate in a young rabbinic scholar. There was clearly something about Isserles's entire letter that irritated Luria, which he could not quite put his finger on. Perhaps it was partly the notorious "pilpul of vanity," the sustained subversion of Talmudic learning to prove the author's cleverness—common enough among the yeshiva youths but looked down on by serious Talmudists. This was bad enough in itself, and perhaps Luria did not have the perspective to see the pilpul of yeshiva youths as a Jewish transformation of the Renaissance fashion of learned banter. But the Aristotle quotation was something he could put his finger on. It crossed a line. It could be put in a halakhic pigeonhole of "forbidden." It was the capstone of Isserles's argument, and it confirmed at the same time what was vaguely disturbing in the whole letter—the subordination of Torah to worldly interests, the reversal of roles of the true wife and the handmaid.

Isserles saw things differently. He was at home in both his Jewish learning and his worldly setting, and saw no contradiction or competition between the two spheres. It came to him as a shock that the synthesis which came so easily to him struck his provincial older cousin (whom he addressed deferentially throughout, as befitting his age, learning, and reputation) as foreign and un-Jewish. No doubt Luria's sharp response, coming from an established elder authority, led Isserles to trim his sails. While citing Maimonides in defense of his right to pursue secular wisdom, Isserles retreats and says he does so only from kosher sources, and in his spare time:

If I cited some words of Aristotle, heaven and earth will testify of me that I never in my life studied his works themselves, but only in the Guide where I labored and found, and books of nature such as *The Gate of Heaven* which our sages wrote. It is from them that I wrote what I wrote about Aristotle's teachings. Why should I not? Did not Maimonides write in the *Guide* (II, 22) that whatever doctrines Aristotle arrived at pertaining to the sublunar realm, are true? He also wrote that all his doctrines are in agreement with rabbinic teaching, except for some doctrines concerning God, angels, and the celestial spheres, in which alone he strayed from the way of truth....In any case, as heaven is my witness, I never engaged in these pursuits except on Sabbath, holidays, and semi-holidays, when

¹² A comparison with the blend of erudition and parody in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) is also in order.

other people go for a walk, but on weekdays I engage to the best of my poor abilities in Mishnah, Talmud, codes, and their commentators. A scholar can make up his own mind about such things.¹³

In the future, Isserles would take care to be more sensitive to his audience and more reserved (to the point of labyrinthine obscurity) in expressing himself on controversial subjects. However, his fundamental stance remained pro-philosophical. Moreover, in asserting his personal independence, Isserles was cultivating a virtue which Luria himself espoused and practiced.¹⁴

Isserles's Conservative Maimonideanism

Isserles continued to take an interest in philosophical matters after the exchange with Luria, but we can well believe his disclaimer that he pursued it only in the spare time left from his principal halakhic endeavors. Even when he did write about philosophy, he was never so forthright as to devote an entire work explicitly to the subject. He camouflaged it in the nooks and crannies of works devoted ostensibly to other subjects. His early philosophical work *The Price of Wine* is a commentary on Esther. And his philosophical masterpiece *Law of the Sacred Offering* is an allegorical interpretation of the laws of the Temple and the sacrifices, as symbolizing the physical universe and the truths of philosophy.¹⁵

Twice in *Law of the Sacred Offering* Isserles pauses from his allegorizing to allow some straightforward discussion of the principles which underlie his midrashic interpretations. In Part II, Chapter 2, he states four propositions, taken ostensibly from the *Guide of the Perplexed*,

¹³ Letter 7.

¹⁴ Luria's encouragement of his student's assertiveness even in disagreement is evident from such passages as the following: "Didn't I point out to you the path you could take in defending your position? I know that the gates of argument are never closed; especially in the last generations you never see someone decisively win an argument, especially against a stout-hearted opponent such as yourself, with the heart of a lion to tear down or build up; but that is what came to my mind at the time... (As for what you objected, citing the Semag)—By the Temple service and the faith, if I was not looking up in the Semag the day after you wrote, and thinking, this wise guy is going to use this very text against me!"

¹⁵ See Contents and large extracts from II, 2 and III, 3–4 of *Law of the Sacred Offering* in Appendix, pp. 237–85.

which play a part in the whole structure of his allegorical interpretation of the sacrifices. They are:

1. The creation of the world.
2. The question of the world's annihilation, argued pro and con.
3. The analogy that God is to the universe as the soul is to the body.
4. The atomic hypothesis, held by the early-medieval thinkers of the Arabic Kalam (the allegorical basis for the granular meal-offering).

In Part III, Chapter 4 Isserles mounts his famous discussion of philosophy and kabbalah, in which he quotes Moses Botarel that “the wisdom of the kabbalah is the wisdom of philosophy, only they speak in two languages.” In the course of that discussion, he cites the *Zohar*, the *Book of Formation*, Recanati's commentary to the Torah, the anonymous Divine Hierarchy with Judah Hayyat's commentary *Offering of Judah*, and an anonymous commentary on Song of Songs. He identifies the Sefirot with the divine attributes and interprets both as “attributes of divine action” in the sense that Maimonides employed that term in the *Guide* I, 52.

Given that Isserles cites both philosophy and kabbalah as authoritative, what is their relative rank for him? In principle, he assigns higher rank to kabbalah than to philosophy. Philosophy is of human origin, fallible, and limited in its application to the realms of existence lower than the divine essence. Kabbalah is in principle of divine origin, and conveys the highest divine truths. However, in practice it works the other way, for two reasons. First, the chain of kabbalah—of transmission of divine truth—has been interrupted, and hence we have no true “kabbalah” in the proper sense (*mekubbal mipi mekubbal*—“from master to disciple”), only rumors, pretensions to the truth and books to which we do not possess the key of authoritative understanding.¹⁶ Second,

¹⁶ See for instance the opening to *Law of the Sacred Offering* III, 4: “For this generation has declined so far through its sins that I have never in my life seen a master kabbalist, who knows this matter clearly from the genuine tradition. Indeed, many of the common people rush to learn about kabbalah because it is enticing, especially as to the authors of recent generations who revealed its secrets explicitly in their books, and even more so in this age when kabbalistic books like the *Zohar*, Recanati, and *Gates of Light* have been printed, so that every reader can look into them, and everything is explicit to those who take a peek. Never mind that their words cannot be understood properly

insofar as Isserles attempt to provide a defensible reading of the kabbalistic works he cites, he does so by interpreting them consistently with philosophical premises, in much the same way as Maimonides interprets the Bible without anthropomorphism. Thus Isserles retains the language of kabbalah while reading into it the *substance* of philosophy. From a substantive standpoint, philosophy emerges the dominant partner in this outwardly amicable union.

However, it is not radical but conservative Maimonideanism that Isserles adopts as his philosophical position from the outset. Maimonides is the first-ranking authority in philosophical matters, but he holds that rank by virtue of his success in giving the definitive philosophical defense of the outstanding principles of the Jewish tradition as articulated in the Bible and the Talmud. Thus, just as the outstanding halakhist Rabbi Akiva was supreme as long as he debated another individual but was overruled by the consensus of his colleagues, so Maimonides's authority is to be tempered and overruled when he takes a position at odds with the consensus of the Jewish tradition. More often, where it is possible to offer different interpretations of Maimonides's doctrine, Isserles chooses an interpretation which can be supported and elaborated from other sources within the Jewish mainstream, especially the Bible and the Talmudic aggadah.

A striking example of this procedure can be seen in Isserles's approach to the issue of creation. Isserles's First Proposition in II, 2 culls all the chief Maimonidean arguments in favor of the creation doctrine: that it is a primary doctrine of the Torah; that it offers more direct and compelling support for the proposition of God's existence than the doctrine of the world's eternity; and that the doctrine of the world's eternity stands in contradiction to the central Torah doctrines of miracles, providence and reward (*unless one interprets these figuratively*).¹⁷

by one who has not received the tradition from a master kabbalist! Not only do those with book-learning look into them, but even ordinary householders who don't know their right hand from their left, who are in the dark when it comes to explaining the weekly Torah portion with Rashi, are jumping on the bandwagon to learn kabbalah. The end result is that this generation, orphaned in sin, is in such decline that a coin clattering in a jug makes the biggest noise—whoever knows a little bit shows off and preaches in public, but someday will have to give an accounting. Indeed, ignorance is their saving grace. How blithely unaware is the naked ignoramus of the nature of the impossible! Nothing poses any difficulty to them.”

¹⁷ The ink spilled on this escape-clause, which keeps open the possibility that Maimonides agreed with Aristotle on the eternity of the world, is considerable. Significantly, Isserles proceeds as if the possibility had never occurred to him.

He conveniently omits what Maimonides has to say on the opposite side of the ledger (in the very same chapter I, 71 from which he quotes, and elsewhere): that the creation-doctrine is not susceptible of rational demonstration; that Maimonides faulted the Kalam for adopting assumptions that were favorable to their preferred conclusions but not rationally founded; that though the demonstration of God from the eternity-hypothesis is more arduous than the alternative, it is preferable because the resulting conclusion is more reliably established. In effect, Isserles chooses the easier intellectual path of the Kalam, while ignoring Maimonides's criticism of them—and then presents this position as the essential Maimonidean doctrine. Maimonides implicitly endorsed this exoteric reading of his doctrine for the masses of ordinary Jews, by equating the creation doctrine with “the view of the Torah”; but true philosophy, for him, had to plumb deeper depths.

Miracles present a second potentially major issue which would later provide the occasion for Maharal to develop his anti-philosophic stance. Isserles tries to avoid and belittle this issue. He does not devote a separate heading to it in II, 2 but discusses it under the Second Proposition (the world's annihilation). He expresses amazement that Maimonides cites Ecclesiastes “There is nothing new under the sun” to rule out future revisions in the natural order, for God “has everything in His hand to do with as He wills, for He changes them and annihilates them as per His capacity.” He then cites (apparently with approval) R. Jonathan's midrash “God set stipulations with the sea that it should divide, etc.” which reconciles the occurrence of miracles with the consistency of the divine will. It seems that Isserles wants to have the best of both worlds. He would like to defend the unchanging divine will, for this is a standard feature of the Maimonidean-philosophic conception of God and redounds to the divine glory. On the other hand, he would like to preserve God's unlimited freedom of action, for this is a central feature of the Biblical God essential for God's involvement in world history. It is a standard feature of Isserles's conservative Maimonidean approach that he assumes (without too much critical examination) that Maimonides has reconciled the biblical and philosophical God-concepts in all important respects. The Eliezer-Maharal controversy (which owed much to Gersonides's critique of Maimonides) would show how much was left unresolved here.

The question of the future annihilation of the world shows the limits of Isserles's adherence to Maimonides. Maimonides holds that the earth, once created, continues to exist eternally, but he allows that it

is permitted to hold that the earth will be annihilated and recreated. Isserles prefers to follow the mainstream of the rabbinic tradition against Maimonides's lone view. There is no major article of faith at stake here, but it is important for Isserles's symbolism of the sacrifices, for the sacrificial animal that is born and perishes symbolizes the "world of generation and destruction," in which not only individuals, but the world itself undergoes a cycle of coming-into-being and perishing.

Isserles puts his heart and soul into the analogy of "God : Universe :: Soul : Man" in the Third Proposition of II, 2. This analogy had its classic statement in the Talmud's comment on Psalms 103:1: "Bless the Lord, O my soul."¹⁸ It was developed at length by Maimonides in Guide I, 72, a passage from which Isserles quotes six entire paragraphs verbatim. It is also central to the symbolic structure of kabbalah, a circumstance to which Isserles has considerable recourse in this passage. In fact, he devotes a large portion of this section to a paraphrase of a kabbalistic commentary on Song of Songs 5:11–16, in which the physical depiction of the Beloved (understood as God) is decoded, phrase by phrase, to refer to the parts of the physical world, thus confirming that the world is God's body.¹⁹ Though Spinoza may have appreciated it, this seems to fly in the face of Maimonides's caveat, that the analogy of God and the soul breaks down at the point where the human soul is truly embodied in the human body ("a faculty subsisting in a body and is not separable from it"),²⁰ but God merely governs the cosmic body, and is strictly speaking without body. Yet Isserles feels no embarrassment at this, and proclaims triumphantly at the climax of his exposition: "These matters are very precious in my eyes, and they should be pleasant to every sage, for in this way all vestiges of corporeality are removed from the Lord, may He be blessed and exalted over all blessing and praise. For He has no body or end or beginning, and He is the Cause of all Causes, the Origin of all." Clearly, he saw the

¹⁸ BT *Berakhot* 10a: "Just as the Holy and Blessed One fills the whole world, so the soul fills the body. Just as the Holy and Blessed One sees but is not seen, so the soul sees but is not seen. Just as the Holy and Blessed One sustains the whole world, so the soul sustains the whole body. Just as the Holy and Blessed One is pure, so the soul is pure. Just as the Holy and Blessed One abides in the innermost precincts, so the soul abides in the innermost precincts. Let the soul which has these five qualities come and praise God who has these five qualities."

¹⁹ See Appendix, pp. 259–63, and my discussion in Chapter 7 below, "Primary Process and the Ineffable," pp. 200–03.

²⁰ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 72, transl. Pines, Vol. I, p. 192.

philosophical and kabbalistic treatments of this idea as complementary, not contradictory.

Isserles's Symbiosis of Philosophy and Kabbalah

As we have seen, Isserles considers the sacrifices symbolic of creation and annihilation of the physical world. It is a peculiar feature of the Torah passages detailing the sacrifices, that only the name YHWH is used to refer to God. In III, 3 Isserles connects this with a midrashic idea developed by Maimonides, that in the beginning and end of the world-cycle, when there is only God, the name YHWH is sufficient, but for the duration of world-history, when the relations between God and the world are many and varied, the other names come into play to describe God in terms of the various divine actions toward the world. This is parallel both to the kabbalistic account of the generation of the sefirot at the time of creation, and the kabbalistic notion that the sacrifice is termed קרבן (from the Hebrew root קרב—"near") to denote the drawing-together of the divine powers into unity which is achieved by that action. Isserles seizes on the parallelism of philosophical and kabbalistic ideas on this very issue to discuss the relation of philosophy to kabbalah in general.

The issue had no doubt been preoccupying him for some time. Luria had recommended the *Divine Hierarchy* to Isserles in their earlier correspondence. The Ferrara edition of that work with Judah Hayyat's commentary was published in 1558. (Isserles may also have been familiar with the *Divine Hierarchy* from the circumstance that his student and colleague Mordecai Jaffe's kabbalah teacher Mattathias Delacrut was writing a commentary on it.) Isserles completed his *Law of the Divine Offering* in 1564. Not surprisingly, Isserles devotes a major part of III, 4 to discussing the ideas in the *Divine Hierarchy* and Hayyat's commentary.

Throughout the discussion, Isserles is concerned to preserve what he considers the core Maimonidean doctrines concerning God—divine unity, and the simplicity and unchanging nature of the divine essence. Certain interpretations of the doctrines of the sefirot are consistent with these requirements, but others are not. Isserles condemns two opposite but equally pernicious doctrines that violate the Maimonidean criteria of theological correctness. The one splinters the Godhead into multiple entities, while the other preserves divine unity while understanding that

unity as composite.²¹ The former has declared that the sefirot are real and separate entities, fully divine, which amounts to polytheism. The latter also declares that the sefirot are real, but that they are parts of the divine essence, hence the divinity is composite. The way to avoid both of these errors is to understand the sefirot as names rather than as distinct realities. These names turn out to denote “non-additive” attributes²²—i.e., attributes whose predication adds nothing real to the divine essence. These are what Maimonides called the attributes of divine action. Thus, every statement made in kabbalah about the sefirot must be decoded into a philosophic statement about the attributes of divine action, to give it a signification that does not offend against theological correctness.

Philosophy emerges clearly dominant in the thought-content of this synthesis. All the kabbalistic concepts must be interpreted in a way which passes the Maimonidean tests of philosophical-theological correctness. Why, then, have the kabbalah at all? It offers a passion which philosophy cannot inspire. Isserles’s ecstatic rhapsody on the Song of Songs and his tragic meditations on God’s involvement in the failures of the generation of the Flood transcend philosophical discourse.²³ Both the philosophical-rational and the Biblical-kabbalistic outlooks are a part of Isserles’s outlook. In these lengthy discussions, he seeks to integrate the two. The attempt at integration, as well as its rough spots, are typical of the Maimonidean enterprise.

Isserles’s Final Position and Its Significance

Though Isserles’s affirmation of Maimonides’s philosophy was hedged by the few qualifications we have mentioned, it was as significant in its time and place as Maimonides’s own original statement. Each affirmed reason (understood philosophically) as a criterion of truth for most purposes equal to the Torah tradition. As philosophical reason

²¹ This is the probable understanding of קיצוץ “cutting” (as in “Aḥer cut the shoots,” B’T *Hagigah* 14b–15a, where Elisha ben Avuyah [“Aḥer”] is purported to have seen Metatron enthroned and concluded “there are two powers”) and פירוד “divergence” (as in Genesis 2:10: “from there [the Edenic stream] diverges and becomes four branches”).

²² תוארים בלתי נוספים.

²³ For the former, see end of Chapter 7 “Primary Process and the Ineffable.” For the latter, see Chapter 6, “Limits of Rational Explanation.”

(correctly understood) was wholly true, and the Torah tradition (correctly understood) was also wholly true, each had to be understood in a sense consistent with the other. But as the appearance and verbal formulation of truth presented by each was significantly different from the other, understanding each in a way to accord with the other opened wide new vistas of interpretive challenges. The ultimate expression of this irenic approach is to be found in the Renaissance doctrine of the “perennial philosophy”:²⁴ that all the great thought-systems of history have sought to express the same truths in different ways. Isserles expressed this view in words which he borrowed from Moses Botarel: “The wisdom of the kabbalah is the wisdom of philosophy, only they speak in two languages.”²⁵ This doctrine predisposed its adherents to an open attitude in confronting outside cultural traditions. It was a viewpoint especially appropriate in an age of cosmopolitanism and religious differences. It also gave unprecedented discretion to the individual thinker, who when presented with two seemingly contradictory statements from the two bodies of truth, could choose which had to yield to the other through creative interpretation. Ephraim Luntshitz would call this “seeing with both eyes.” It was to this program of intellectual openness and balance that he would subscribe in 1590 in the *Gleanings of Ephraim*, enigmatically alluding to the title of Isserles’s work as he did so.

Mordecai Jaffe’s Intellectual Program

The career of Mordecai Jaffe is instructive in many ways for our understanding of the intellectual and cultural milieu of east-European Jewry in the 16th century. As a student of Moses Isserles and an elder colleague of Ephraim Luntshitz, he spans the entire period we are considering. Geographically he was one of the more peripatetic of the scholars in our study, spending extensive periods of his life in Prague, Italy, and the cities of Poland (Grodno, Posen). And intellectually he

²⁴ The term “perennial philosophy” is found in the title of Augustinus Steuchius’s work, *De philosophia perenni sive veterum philosophorum cum theologia christiana consensu libri X* (1540). However, the ideal of a common truth found in all the major philosophies and religions was shared by many of the Renaissance thinkers and expressed, for instance, in the eagerness of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola to learn kabbalah. (*Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, s.v. “Perennial Philosophy,” III, 457–463.)

²⁵ *Offering*, III, 4 (Appendix, p. 280).

was one of the broadest in his interests, composing works on halakhah, philosophy, astronomy and kabbalah.

Though born in Prague, Jaffe spent his student years in Poland. This illustrates our observation that Prague and Poland were part of the same Jewish cultural orbit. In Poland, Jaffe studied Talmud under Isserles and Luria, philosophy with Isserles, and kabbalah with Mattathias Delacrut. If David Fishman is correct in his view that Delacrut came to Poland from France or Provence, then this is another example of the fertilization of Ashkenazic Jewish thought from Mediterranean sources that characterizes the period.²⁶

Though Jaffe's commuting between Prague and points east was quite typical, his extended stay in Italy (from about 1561–71) was unusual for Ashkenazic scholars. As we have said, there is no direct evidence to indicate to what extent Jaffe made use of the cultural opportunities of Italy to deepen his knowledge of philosophy and kabbalah. However, the major attention given to these subjects in the *Royal Garment* suggests it may have been substantial.

Once back in Poland, Jaffe was a leader of the Polish-Jewish community and played a leading role in the Council of the Four Lands. His path and Ephraim's must have crossed frequently, both in Ephraim's preaching tours and in the annual meetings of the Council at the Lublin fairs.

The major work on which Jaffe worked for most of his career is the *Royal Garment*. The larger portion of this composite work consists of a legal code, following the arrangement of the *Shulḥan Arukh*. But Jaffe decided to extend the rubric to include in it the other intellectual projects which had started as digressions from his legal opus: a supercommentary on Rashi's commentary on the Torah; a collection of sermons; a short commentary on Maimonides's Guide; a commentary to Abraham bar Hiyya's astronomical treatise *The Shape of the Earth*; and a supercommentary on Recanati's commentary to the Torah. When he was done, Jaffe had somewhat followed the example of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* (though without achieving the literary unity of that work) by combining philosophy and law. The intellectual breadth of Jaffe's work can certainly be considered Maimonidean, as well as his suggestion in the preface that all the extra-halakhic studies

²⁶ Fishman, *op. cit.*, p. 575 f.

are unified in purpose as part of a grand progression of ascending knowledge, leading ultimately to knowledge of God:

I have divided this garment [i.e., the philosophical-astronomical-mystical sequence] into three parts, all of which can serve as cloaks for the rabbis. I have arranged them in the following order: the first part is my commentary on the Guide; the second, my commentary on the *Laws of the Sanctification of the New Moon*, and the third part, my commentary on Recanati. For all the students of the “angels of God” who desire to enter in the *Pardes* (Orchard) and to ascend on the rungs of that ladder which is set erect upon the ground but whose head reaches the heavens knows that he must start at the very bottom, in the lowly condition in which he finds himself and rise up to the heights of the uppermost rung over which God is standing erect. And it is stated, “And behold the angels of God were ascending and descending.” First they ascend to understand all that which exists from the bottom to the top and afterwards they descend to bring down the [Divine] overflow to the world. And the order of study that I have set forth corresponds precisely to the order of the rungs of the ladder, i.e., the levels of reality from bottom up.

First one studies the speculative sciences dealing with nature, which encompass all of the sciences of this our lowly [sub-lunar] world, all of which are treated in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Afterwards one ascends and studies the science of astronomy which deals with the intermediate world, i.e., the world of the celestial spheres which contain all of the stars with the sun at their head as a king leading his troops, the moon as his deputy and the rest of the stars as his hosts. And after that he will ascend even higher on the rungs of the ladder and will enter into the Orchard of Wisdom onto the road that leads straight away unto the house of the Lord [Beth-El], i.e., he will study the science of kabbalah. Then he will merit attaining the apprehension of the First Cause, may He be blessed, who stands over them to maintain their existence and to guard them. And this suffices and understand this.²⁷

Ephraim Luntshitz would show how deeply he agreed with this manifesto by citing it repeatedly in his own works in places of honor, most notably in the opening to Genesis in the *Precious Ornament*. We can also gauge the closeness of their relationship from the fact that Ephraim was evidently aware of this passage before Jaffe published it. Though the *Royal Garment* was not published until 1590, Ephraim made use of this image in his third sermon of *Gleanings of Ephraim* Part II,

²⁷ Jaffe, *Royal Garment*, Introduction. (Translation by Lawrence Kaplan from *Rationalism and Rabbinic Culture in Sixteenth Century Eastern Europe: Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe's Levush Pinat* Yikrat, Harvard 1975 [dissertation], pp. 397–399.)

published the same year. Evidently Jaffe shared his work with Ephraim in manuscript before its publication.

Abraham Horowitz: Ethics and Intellectual Salvation

The third member of the “Cracow school” of Polish-Jewish philosophy also straddled the worlds of philosophy and mysticism. R. Abraham Horowitz grew up on Prague and studied with Moses Isserles in Cracow in the 1550s. Around 1559 he wrote a polemic ridiculing the enemies of philosophy in the Jewish leadership; its targets have been identified by modern scholars as R. Aaron of Posen and R. Joseph Ashkenazi.²⁸ A possible connection has been advanced between Abraham Horowitz and R. Ephraim Luntshitz based on this circumstance. If, as R. Benjamin Zeilingold maintained, the R. Aaron who fathered Ephraim Luntshitz and the R. Aaron of Posen of the 1559 Maimonidean controversy were the same individual, then Abraham Horowitz as a teenager wrote a diatribe against the father of Ephraim Luntshitz, then aged nine.²⁹ In any case, Horowitz took his Maimonidean stance in that affair under the influence of the philosophical training which he had gained as a student of Moses Isserles. Ephraim would not have any positive encounters with Maimonidean philosophy for at least another twenty years.

A second connection between these two personalities is their common residence in the city of Lvov. R. Abraham Horowitz served as rabbi in Lvov, where he was elected “*dayyan*” (communal judge) in 1595. Ephraim Luntshitz announced Lvov as his place of residence in 1580 in the preface to *City of Heroes*, and may have lived there for twenty-five years, until he moved to Prague.

A third connection between the two is literary influence. Two themes in Ephraim’s works are taken from Horowitz’s work: the doctrine of the golden mean, and the ideal of the intellectual path to God as distinct from traditional acceptance. Though these were common coin in the philosophical discourse of the period, Horowitz’s book *Lovingkindness of Abraham* (Hesed Avraham) was the vehicle through which these ideas were introduced simply and elegantly to Ashkenazic Jewry.

²⁸ See P. Bloch, “*Der Streit um den Moreh des Maimonides in Posen*,” MGWJ 47 (1903) pp. 153–169, 263–279, 346–347, discussed in Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 130–133.

²⁹ Zeilingold, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

It is to this work, Horowitz's principal philosophical contribution, that we now turn. It is a slender work in which he is more editor and expositor than original thinker, but it played a significant role in the philosophical education of Polish Jewry. It was first published in 1577 in Lublin. It was the first North-European edition of Maimonides's *Eight Chapters*, the ethical-philosophical introduction to Mishnah *Avot*, with introduction by Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Horowitz's commentary *Lovingkindness of Abraham* was ancillary to the Maimonidean text.

The work was republished in 1602 with significant modifications in the commentary. Ben-Sasson comments:

You find an example of the imprint of rationalistic thought which is set aside and negated within a single generation in the thought of a single individual, in R. Abraham Horowitz. This sage spoke out sharply and even crudely in his youth against R. Aaron, the head of the court in Posen, who he said proclaimed in 5319 (1559) his belief in demons, his opposition to Maimonides's works, the need to be sparing in study of the Bible, the prohibition of learning extraneous sciences, and being guided exclusively by the Talmud in matters of outlook. In opposition to the prohibition of extraneous sciences, R. Abraham proclaimed: "As for what the donkey said, that one may only study the Talmud, this truly contradicts what the Torah says, 'You shall observe and do [this teaching], for it is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the nations.' This means that even though we be expert in all the secrets of the Talmud, we will not be regarded as wise in the eyes of the nations. On the contrary, all the arguments of the Talmud, its interpretations and its ways are a laughingstock in the eyes of the nations, if we do not learn more than this, so that we may know also to explain the arguments and interpretations of the Talmud in a way that they shall be deemed proper in the eyes of the nations—reason will attest to this." Horowitz also used reason in his youth to interpret the *Eight Chapters* of Maimonides. But all that enthusiasm for the testimony of reason, all the high estimation of the need to prove things 'in a way that they shall be deemed proper in the eyes of the nations'—all this was set aside by him in his old age, and he composed another commentary on the same *Eight Chapters* in which he clarifies and retracts that "the former *uproots* [because of its extreme rationalistic tendency], but the second is *the true root*."³⁰

³⁰ H. H. Ben-Sasson, *Learning and Leadership* (Hebrew), Bialik Institute, 1959, p. 14. The play of words on the last line is: הראשון עוקר והאחרון עיקר—i.e., the first version is heretical, but the final version gives the "root" (the truth) of the matter.

Horowitz is so sincere in his 1602 recantation that he fools even Ben-Sasson into thinking he had abandoned the rationalist creed entirely in his old age. The truth is more subtle. In fact, by comparing what he changed from the 1577 to the 1602 edition of *Lovingkindness of Abraham*, we will be able to gauge the extreme edge of Polish-Jewish rationalism (which Horowitz indeed recanted), as well as its mainstream expression, which he never abandoned.

The most significant feature of the 1577 publication is the first appearance in Poland of Maimonides's *Eight Chapters* itself, which is Maimonides's primer, in Aristotelian vein, of basic concepts of psychology and ethics. The principal doctrines of this treatise are the nature of the soul and its faculties (nutritive, perceptive, imaginative, emotional, intellectual), the nature of moral virtue as the golden mean, perfection of the virtues as the moral analogue of physical healing, and the affirmation of free will as doing what is within one's power given one's physiological constitution. Much of this is the common wisdom which was passing from the philosopher's sanctum into popular parlance at this time, particularly through its association with medical education (whose necessity even the anti-philosophers in Jewish thought grudgingly admitted). Horowitz's commentary on this section is little more than a pedagogic aide, helping the beginning student to understand the text. He notes in his introduction that he is writing for

...that class of youths who are not experienced in walking the ways of philosophy, for the pride and glory of youths is in Mishnah and Gemara, in pilpul and argument, not in large ambitious subjects, philosophical proofs or propositions. For them I have stuck in my head and endangered my soul to make a short commentary in clear style, easy not hard....

The public will be in my debt because from now on the youth will not have to hear the *Eight Chapters* from his teacher between the semesters as has been the case in recent years, but he will see with his own eyes that my commentary will be sufficient to serve his needs.

Evidently the gist of the *Eight Chapters* had already been communicated in oral teaching, and Horowitz's commentary made it available to ordinary students in Poland for the first time, satisfying a felt need. This fits with the popularity of its topics.

The second significant component is Samuel Ibn Tibbon's introduction, which is an intellectual manifesto in its own right. Horowitz's commentary to the introduction constitutes an intellectual manifesto as well. It is here that the significant change occurs from the 1577 to the

1602 edition. We cite the common and divergent passages, to document the elements of Horowitz's philosophical that remained constant (1 thru 4), and those (5–6) that he retracted in the course of time:³¹

- (1) Knowledge of God is the highest-ranking good:
 ... Through the intellectual virtues the student will attain to knowledge of his Creator, as the same sage said concerning wisdom, "If you seek it as you do silver and search for it as for treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God." (Proverbs 2:4–5)
- (2) Knowledge of God through demonstration is superior to belief in God from tradition:
 "Then you will understand..." indicates understanding the proof of the Torah's doctrines, which constitute the fear of the Lord. They were merely accepted on trust prior to the pursuit of wisdom, but through wisdom one will know their truth and what is desired from them. I am speaking of the existence of God, i.e., that one will know the existence of God by demonstration, not just by tradition as they were prior to his pursuing wisdom. And the knowledge of God is doubtless the end-goal of human existence...
- (3) Knowledge of the external sciences is both good in itself, and good as a means to achieving demonstrative knowledge of God:
 [In Jeremiah 9:23 "But only in this should one glory: in understanding and knowing Me"] ... The prophet refers to "understanding" and "knowing Me" as to two different things... The word "understanding" (הַשְׂכִּיל) stands alone and does not refer to "Me." Its meaning is that one should understand whatever is possible to understand and to know, in all existent beings that are the product of causation, knowledge of existence through its cause insofar as is possible, or knowledge of existence alone where one cannot know more than this. In other words, one should acquire whatever one can of wisdom, and through this one will know Me. The notion of arriving from one's intellect and wisdom of created beings to knowing Him—i.e., knowing His existence and knowing what should affirm or deny or negate of Him by way of belief—is identical with the notion of "then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God" as I explained it above.
- (4) Attaining the moral virtues is a prerequisite to attaining the intellectual virtues.

The great Master Rabbi Moses son of Rabbi Maimon... wrote expansively on this treatise since it was of a precious topic, as it speaks of human attributes, some laudable and upright, others lowly

³¹ The following excerpts are: (1) to (4) from Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Introduction, (5) and (6) from Abraham Horowitz's commentary (with the 1577—only portions in brackets).

and perverse, of which the better ones clear the way (1) and pave the highway to the intellectual virtues, as the sage [king Solomon] said, “Listen to advice and accept discipline in order that you may be wise in the end.”

- (5) Indeed, the moral virtues are to be valued *primarily* as a means to attaining the intellectual virtues, which are the true purpose of life.

For a person does not come to attain the intellectual virtues unless he has already forsaken despicable deeds and chosen good deeds. As the philosopher said: “In a place where deeds do not go properly, contemplation will not be perfect.” [1577 edition adds: **And as he himself said in the book *Ruah Hen* (*Spirit of Grace*), Chapter 3, that the practical reason is like a ladder from which to ascend to the rungs of contemplation, etc.]**

- (6) Indeed, immortality itself is reserved only for the intellectually perfect, who in immortality cleave to the Active Intellect.

R. Samuel says that the word **הַשְׂכָּל** (“understanding”) means that one should comprehend with one’s intellect the nature of every existent being which are produced through causation, such as the heavens, and the super-heavens, and the array of the spheres, their processions and their number; the earth and all that is on it; the four elements and everything that is in them; how the entire world was created, the arrangement of its various parts, and its end-goal; [1577 edition adds: **what is the soul, and whether the soul of man is immortal, and by virtue of what will man merit eternal existence, whether through contemplation or through deeds, and to what will the soul cleave after death, whether to the Active Intellect or to the blessed God**].³²

The emendations which Horowitz made in his 1602 edition show clearly the line he wished to draw between how much of the intellectualist faith he retained, and what he discarded. In 1577, he espoused all six of these principles. In 1602, he did not retreat from the first four, but he implicitly recanted the last two. In his youth, the zealotry of intellectualism led him to embrace the elitism expressed in Maimonides’s castle parable of *Guide* III, 51, in which only the philosophers get to see the presence of the king, while those who are ritually observant but philosophically unenlightened are left outside. In his maturity, he came to adopt the wisdom of the mainstream Jewish tradition, which values ritual observance and moral behavior of the common person who is always accepted by God for doing what is in his power to accomplish.

³² Even R. Ephraim speaks of “union with the Active Intellect” in *Ornament* on Genesis 23:1.

However, this did not lead him to disown or devalue wisdom in the broadest sense, including study of the natural world and finding knowledge of God through that path. This balanced outlook, which Horowitz arrived at in his mature years, was very close to that which Ephraim Luntshitz would adopt in his middle and later writings.

Summary

The three thinkers discussed here followed one unified path. Moses Isserles has been called the “Maimonides of Poland” because of his dominant role as halakhic systematizer and philosophical guide. His *Law of the Sacred Offering* contained the single most impressive attempt at philosophical systematization to come out of the Jewish-Polish Renaissance. The obscurities of its presentation, cloaked in an allegorical commentary on the sacrifices, were an ingenious adaptation to an environment unfriendly to philosophy (here, the lessons he learned from the exchange with Luria left their mark). Unfortunately, they discouraged all but a few from unraveling its secrets.

Jaffe and Horowitz aimed their works at the student rather than the accomplished scholar. Each presented a simple manifesto declaring the value and efficacy of philosophical study, coupled with an accessible commentary on a classic philosophical work of the great master, Maimonides. These helped shape the curriculum of Polish Jewry for the next generation. All three—the works of Isserles, as well as of his students—would eventually make a visible impress on the intellectual development of Ephraim Luntshitz.

Excursus: Did the 16th Century Philosophical Renaissance Build on the Legacy of the 14th Century Muelhausen Circle?

As discussed earlier in this chapter, both Lawrence Kaplan and Joseph Davis have asserted the continuity of 16th-century Polish-Jewish rationalism with the previous study of philosophy in Ashkenazic Jewry dating from the 14th-century school of R. Yom Tov Lipmann Muelhausen. While there are elements of similarity and even occasional references within the 16th-century thinkers to these historical precedents, I regard them as essentially separate movements with independent historical momentum.

The evidence which Davis brings of the continued signs of knowledge of philosophy in the intervening period, though not negligible, are nevertheless rather fragmentary, to wit:

- Menahem ben Meir Zioni, though criticizing philosophy from a kabbalistic perspective, quoted Maimonides's *Guide* in his Torah commentary, around 1400, and criticized demonology in his work *Ẓefunei Ẓioni* ("Secrets of Ẓioni").
- His grandson R. Seligman ha-Levi Zion of Bing wrote notes in a copy of the philosophical work *Ruah Ḥen* ("Spirit of Grace") around 1450.
- The *Derashot* (*Homilies of*) *Maharash* (late 14th century) attributes to R. Shalom ben Isaac of Neustadt the view that miracles were preordained to occur naturally, and that the author of this view was Aristotle(!).
- A commentary on Maimonides's 13 principles, fusing philosophical and kabbalistic perspectives, was authored around 1349 by a certain Simeon ben Samuel, and published in Freiburg in 1560 (and in Lublin 1599).
- A certain Moses ben Isaac Zart of Lichtenfels signed a sworn statement of faith in 1467, affirming agreement with "most" of the teachings of Maimonides's *Guide*, but "fleeing" from those matters contradicting the tradition of the rabbis. The same statement was copied and signed by three other individuals in 1530, 1541, and 1547.
- In the early 16th century, R. Naftali Treves cited Albo's discussions of divine unity and incorporeality at the start of his kabbalistic treatise.

- In the late 15th century, Moses of Kiev possessed and studied a Hebrew translation of al-Ghazzali's *Kavanot ha-Pilosofim* ("Meanings of the Philosophers").
- At the turn of the 16th century, R. Johanan Luria refers to "union with the Active Intellect" as a religious goal in his sermons.
- In 1546, Josel of Rosheim completed his *Sefer Ha-miknah* ("Book of Acquisition"), an annotated compilation of texts from Abraham Bibago.

Ephraim Kupfer has shown that even radical philosophical texts were being peddled in eastern Poland in this period:

We find the influence of the masters of the Prague school in the dissemination of philosophical thought in the 15th century not only among the thinkers of Germany who received their education in the yeshivot of Bohemia and Austria, but also in the countries of Poland and Lithuania. In the second half of the 15th century, the scholar and scribe Yeruham Fischel ben Solomon wandered among the established Jewish communities of these lands, and in his knapsack were writings and philosophical works from the library of R. Menahem bar Jacob Shalem and other scholars. In 1465–67 he stayed in the community of Sandomierz, where he copied out the book *Mar'ot Elohim* ("Visions of God") of R. Enoch Al-Konstantin with the notes and glosses of R. Menahem bar Jacob Shalem, as well as the philosophical work of R. Menahem bar Jacob Shalem, and the explanation of the secrets of the Torah in R. Abraham ibn Ezra's commentary by R. Joseph Kaspi. At the end of 5227 (summer 1467) he stayed in Jaroslaw, where he copied out the following: a portion of Part 3 of Aristotle's *De Anima* with the commentary of Averroes, the tenth chapter of *Sha'ar Ha-Shamayim* ("Gate of Heaven") of Solomon ben Gershon, the chapter on "the Intellect, the Knower, and the Known" by Alfarabi with notes by R. Menahem bar Jacob Shalem, and the book *Kavvanot Ha-Pilosofim* ("Meanings of the Philosophers") of Al-Ghazzali with notes by R. Menahem bar Jacob Shalem. Twenty-five years later we find him in Hrubieszów, copying out...Moses Narboni's commentary on Maimonides's *Guide to the Perplexed*, with notes by R. Menahem bar Jacob Shalem. We may assume that in the intervening years many more copies of such works issued from his pen, but they were lost. One thing is clear, that the copying of philosophical works in the above-mentioned towns is evidence of their demand on the part of Jewish scholars who lived there. It is in the light of all this that we should understand the full import of R. Moses Isserles's words to R. Solomon Luria on the reception of Aristotle's philosophy in 16th-century Poland: "[The students who 'pray Aristotle's prayer'] have it as an inheritance from their fathers, who were drawn to the philosophers and followed their ways."³³

³³ Kupfer, *op. cit.*, pp. 130–32.

The students referred to in Isserles's responsum to Luria were radical Aristotelians of the mid-16th century, presumably (by Kupfer's plausible reconstruction) deriving their doctrine from the texts of the 14th-century philosophical radicals Narboni and Kaspi, annotated by Shalem and peddled in the 15th century by Yeruham Fischel ben Solomon. However, there is still a gap of a century between these sources and Isserles's work, and little thematic continuity. During that intervening century, the major authorities—R. Jacob Weil, R. Jacob Moellin, and R. Israel Isserlein—seem to ignore philosophy completely. Most importantly, except for one reference to Muelhausen's *Sefer ha-Nitzahon* (“*Book of Victory*”), Moses Isserles seems to display no acquaintance with the prior philosophical background either in his correspondence with Luria or in *Law of the Sacred Offering*. His acquaintance with philosophy can more readily be explained by the publication of the *Guide* in 1551, and/or his personal acquaintance with Jews from Mediterranean lands for whom philosophy was a part of their regular education and culture.

CHAPTER THREE

YOUNG EPHRAIM: EPHRAIM'S EARLY OUTLOOK AS EXPRESSED IN *CITY OF HEROES*

*“One wise man prevailed over a city of warriors, and brought down
its mighty stronghold.” (Proverbs 21:22)*

Ephraim's Beginnings

Ephraim ben Aaron, *ish Luntshitz* (“man of Luntshitz = Leczyca”), was born somewhere in Poland in 1550, about the same time that Moses Isserles was discovering the allurements of Maimonides and Aristotle in the capital city of Cracow. We do not know much about his early life. A modern conjecture by R. Benjamin Zeilingold identifies his father with the Aaron of Posen who spoke against Maimonides’s *Guide* in Posen in 1559, provoking Abraham Horowitz’s pro-Maimonidean pamphlet.¹ According to this view, the lad Ephraim of nine years might have heard his father denounce the dangers of Maimonideanism. It is unlikely that he read Horowitz’s rebuttal at the time. We can only wonder what effect the incident (if it occurred) had on him then and in later years. The anti-philosophical attitude of his father would have been a factor in his later intellectual formation, but not necessarily a determining one. There have been many cases where father and son shared similar preoccupations but differing views.² Ephraim’s brother

¹ R. Benjamin Zeilingold cites R. Naphtali Cohen’s *Otzar Ha-Gedolim*, and argues for this identification, among other reasons, because Ephraim signs himself “son of my lord and father the Gaon the great Rabbi Aaron,” indicating that his father was of national prominence. Evaluation of this evidence would require further research. (R. Benjamin Zeilingold, *הבן יקיר לי אפרים: פרקי תולדות ומבוא לספרי רבנו שלמה*, “*Is Not Ephraim A Precious Child to Me?*”—*A Biographical Introduction to the Works of Rabbi Solomon Ephraim Luntshitz* (Hebrew), Adath Israel Community Services Bureau, St. Paul, MN, printed Union City, NJ, 1987, pp. 1–2.)

² For a case parallel to our own, we may recall that the late-medieval anti-Maimonidean kabbalist Shem Tov Ibn Shem Tov (c. 1380–c. 1441) had a son, Joseph Ibn Shem Tov (c. 1400–1460) who was moderately pro-Maimonidean. The grandson, Shem Tov ben Joseph ben Shem Tov (15th century), wrote the standard “Shem Tov” commentary on the *Guide*.

Moses Luntshitz served as rabbi of Grodno from 1560 to 1600. His sister (according to this view) married the anti-philosophical Joseph Ashkenazi, target of Horowitz's 1559 polemical pamphlet.³

The Influence of Solomon Luria

We proceed from conjecture to documented facts. Ephraim acknowledged Solomon Luria as his primary teacher.⁴ Luria no doubt kept philosophy out of his curriculum and taught Ephraim to regard the rabbinic traditions—as embodied in the Talmud and midrashim—as the sole proper domain of Jewish learning and discourse. Though Luria was opposed to philosophy, we see from his prefaces to *Sea of Solomon*⁵ that he was sophisticated in his appreciation of the Jewish tradition as a historically developing entity, in which each layer of the tradition adds its own piece and enlarges on the teachings of the previous, increasing controversy as it does so. Luria recognized Maimonides's greatness as a halakhic authority, while deploring his omission of his sources, thereby violating the canons of traditional etiquette and good scholarship. Luria's critical awareness of the variability of transmitted texts was in the mainstream of Renaissance practice (as pioneered by Valla), and found important expression in his textual glosses to the printed edition of the Talmud.⁶ Luria's complaint against Maimonides as philosopher was that he followed the ways of Abraham Ibn Ezra in interpreting the Torah contrary to its rabbinically-accepted sense, whether in halakhic detail or matters of general outlook:

...R. Abraham Ibn Ezra...was not an expert in the Talmud, and most of his thought-structure and commentary follows the way of astronomy and the natural sciences, and acceptance of outside wisdom. He railed

³ R. Benjamin Zeilinggold, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–3.

⁴ *City*, Portion *Metzora* (Vol. II, p. 50. Page citations of this work follow the modern Hebrew "Tiferet Hatorah" edition).

⁵ See especially his preface to Tractate *Hullin*, where he declares forthrightly that the multiplicity of legal views proliferated at each stage—Moses, Hillel, the Mishnah, the Talmud, the tosafists, etc.

⁶ The literary historian Israel Zinberg remarked: "[Luria] was one of the first, perhaps indeed the first, to create the critical, scientific method of investigating the text of the Talmud and its commentaries." (Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, Hebrew Union College/Ktav 1975, VI, 40).

in several places against the words of the sages of the Torah and the Talmud. He misrepresented Torahitic teachings as rabbinic, and rabbinic teachings as Torahitic. He declared forbidden things to be permitted, and permitted things as forbidden or uncertified. He has an established reputation, for he was a great sage, and one does not refute the lion, for one does not follow his Torah commentary to prohibit or permit, to obligate or exempt. Indeed, he wrote in many places against the halakhah, even against the sages of the Mishnah and against the Amoraim of the Talmud innumerable times. Truly I heard it said of him that he would boast of this, and would say in public that it is his objective not to be partial, but to interpret the text as far as his reason will take him. “Were it not for tradition” (thus he hinted in several places in his commentary to the Torah)—“were it not for tradition, I would say thus and such.” His words were not right in my opinion, and I believe he has already been held to account for them, for he has given aid and comfort to heretics, Sadducees, and freethinkers. I am the man who has seen my people’s affliction! Even though Maimonides praised him, I would have held my peace, for he followed him somewhat in the ways of philosophy and literary style, as well as the view that by that wisdom one might attain perfection and the soul’s immortality. Would that such an ascent were really an ascent, and nothing more!⁷

What did Ephraim learn from his teacher Luria? Certainly not dogmatism. Luria was often opinionated but rarely dogmatic. He considered the whole field of Torah study as rife with controversy,⁸ and according to this view it is every Torah-scholar’s right to enter into the fray and argue whatever position he will according to the rules of the game. Luria considered Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to have violated the rules of the game, but he opposed them with argument, not with excommunication. Luria honored Ibn Ezra as a “lion” and Maimonides as a “king,” even if they were wrong in his view.⁹ Luria practiced honor to his intellectual opponents together with fearless assertiveness in advancing his own views. Ephraim would emulate him in both respects.

Luria subscribed to a different kind of rational tradition than the philosopher’s. His mental outlook was thoroughly shaped by the Talmud. In that outlook, reason played a subsidiary role but a powerful one. It could not propound truths on its own, but it could generate novel interpretations and applications of the accepted authoritative

⁷ YSS, Introduction to Tractate *Hullin*.

⁸ “The Torah became not two Torahs, but 613 Torahs, from all the disagreements.” (*ibid.*)

⁹ Luria’s treatment of Isserles as an honorable opponent exemplifies the same spirit. (See previous chapter.)

texts. There is a direct intellectual line of descent from Luria to the 18th–19th century Brisk tradition and the ideal depicted in R. Joseph Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*. The Ashkenazic Talmudic tradition was not philosophic as such, since it did not recognize reason as a wholly autonomous source of truth except in certain restricted instances.¹⁰ But time and again, students raised in the Talmudic milieu would consider the adoption of philosophy to be a natural next step and application of the discipline of reason which they had already internalized. Whether that Talmudic discipline of reason was perhaps the legacy of a late-ancient Judaization of Hellenic values by the rabbis, I leave to my colleagues in Talmudic studies to explore.

A Conventionally Drawn Line

Whether the Talmudic tradition itself contains a germ of philosophy or not, it is certain that the standard Ashkenazic rabbinic curriculum in the 16th century had incorporated certain traces of philosophical influences without recognizing them as such. In 1580, both Ephraim Luntshitz and Maharal identified themselves politically as “anti-philosophical”—i.e., they were resistant to the foreign “philosophical” ideas represented by Eliezer Ashkenazi. They drew a line between rabbinic literature which was “kosher” on one side, and philosophical ideas and writings which were “traif” on the other side. Of course all the midrashim and most of the standard Biblical commentaries were “kosher.” One could raise questions about Abraham Ibn Ezra, as we see from the above-cited excerpt from Luria. But Nahmanides, Bahya, and Arama were indisputably kosher. It did not occur to either the Ephraim of *City of Heroes* or to the Maharal of *The Lion's Whelp* that part of the appeal of these authors might be their mediating philosophical ideas under the cloak of traditional exegesis (and generally with corroboration through

¹⁰ Nevertheless, when human reason was the basis of the law, it was fully authoritative. “Thus you see that Biblical texts and logical reasoning are of equal weight, since things which originate in human reason by logical inference are as authoritative as those derived from by a Biblical source by the exegetical methods of the rabbis.” (Zvi Hirsch Chajes, *The Student's Guide Through the Talmud*, tr. Jacob Shachter, London: East and West Library, 1952, p. 29.) “My rules shall you observe,” (Lev. 18:4) i.e., such commandments which, if they were not written [in Scripture], logic would dictate that they be written (דין הוא שייכתבו), and these are they: [the laws concerning] idolatry, sexual immorality, bloodshed, robbery and blasphemy.” (BT Yoma 67b)

traditional exegetical and midrashic techniques). Nor would they have recognized in the midrash that God used the Torah as a blueprint for creating the world (which they both cited) a Jewish adaptation of Plato's theory of creation from eternal Ideas in the *Timaeus*.¹¹

The debate was over those thinkers who cultivated philosophy as an autonomous pursuit and independent source of truth, touching on theological topics such as God's nature and attributes. The paradigmatic cases of such thinkers were Aristotle and Maimonides of the *Book of Knowledge and the Guide*. As of 1580, Ephraim and Maharal were both opposed to those tendencies. They both thought they were expressing a purely rabbinic outlook in their Torah commentaries. This self-perception was substantially correct. Yet we shall see that within the spectrum of a "purely rabbinic outlook" there lurked considerable diversity in possible approaches. The difference between these two thinkers, at this early stage of their thought, would prefigure their disagreement in the next decade over the question of philosophy itself.

"Why Start With Creation?"

Ashkenazic Torah commentaries of the 16th century generally started with the author's personal interpretation of the opening Rashi citing the Palestinian Amora Rabbi Isaac:

Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have started with Exodus 12, "This month shall be the first of months to you," since that was the first commandment that Israel was commanded. Why, then, did it start, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"? Because "the power of his works he told to his people, to give them the inheritance of nations" (Psalms 111:6)—in case the nations of the world say to Israel: "You are robbers, for you took by force the land of the Seven Nations," Israel would answer: "The whole earth is God's, for he created it and gave it to whomever it seemed right to him. It pleased Him to give this land to the Seven Nations; afterwards, it pleased Him to take it from them and give it to us."

The prevalence of this opening in the commentators of this period is almost iconic. It raises a number of important issues which bear mention:

¹¹ Both Maharal and Ephraim refer to this motif in their commentaries to the creation-narrative in Genesis. See Appendix, pages 312, 354–56.

1. By the 16th century, Rashi is considered canonical not just in Ashkenazic Torah commentary (as Ibn Ezra was among Sephardim), but in Ashkenazic culture as such. “*Humash* with Rashi” was the staple of primary education, an intimate part of every educated Jew’s personal experience. It was even illegal in some Polish communities for a schoolteacher to teach the Torah contrary to Rashi’s interpretation.¹² A whole literary genre developed of supercommentaries on Rashi’s Torah commentary, of which Maharal’s *Lion’s Whelp* and Jaffe’s *Garment of Light* (a section of the *Royal Garment*) were examples.¹³ The fact that a writer would choose to comment on the conglomerate of “Torah, Midrash and Rashi” is typical of the late rabbinic mentality in the narrative realm, in the same way that the canonization of the *Shulḥan Arukh* (and its predecessor the *Four Rows*, a.k.a. the *Arba’ah Turim* or simply the *Tur*) defined that mind-set on the legal side. It is symptomatic of this pattern that Ephraim cites Rashi no less than 500 times in the *Precious Ornament* alone. (However, Ephraim took the liberty to differ explicitly with Rashi on more than one occasion. Not everyone did.)
2. This statement by R. Isaac is highly significant for its identification of the genre of the Torah. The modern apologues who protest that “Law” is a mistranslation of “Torah” are likely to be embarrassed by R. Isaac’s question (and by Maharal’s etymological support of it in the *Lion’s Whelp*). R. Isaac asks, in effect: “Given that the Torah is a law-book (as everyone knows), what is the point of all these narratives?” As R. Isaac was a master of rabbinic narrative lore himself, there is at least a chance that his question was meant part-ironically. But the Ashkenazic masters, from Rashi onward, took him at his word. The popularity of R. Isaac’s question in the Ashkenazic tradition reveals much of the

¹² The records of the society of schoolteachers of Cracow from this period stated: “It is forbidden for any teacher to teach *Humash* with any other [Yiddish] explanation than *Be’er Moshe*, which is in our spoken language, so that the lad may learn the meaning correctly. And if the student is capable of understanding Rashi’s commentary, he shall not learn [teach] any other commentary than Rashi’s, which is the correct interpretation according to the plain sense of Scripture and according to the truth.” (Elbaum, *פתחות והסתגרות* p. 84, citing S. Assaf, *תולדות החינוך בישראל* (*Sources for the History of Jewish Education*), Tel Aviv 1925–1943, IV, 101.)

¹³ Jacob Elbaum cites no fewer than 22 commentaries from the period that may be regarded as supercommentaries on Rashi in the strict or extended sense. (Elbaum, *op. cit.*, Appendix, pp. 385–87.)

Ashkenazic culture's self-concept. The ideal pursuit in that culture was the study of Talmud, especially its legal dialectics. The ideal type was the *talmid ḥakham*, legal scholar and authority.

3. R. Isaac's answer is also embarrassing in its particularism, especially to the modern Jew for whom Judaism is synonymous with ethical monotheism and universalism. The exception which R. Isaac admits in the "Torah = Law" identity is instructive: Israel needs the narrative portion of Genesis to establish its title to the Land of Israel. The God who created the universe has the right to give this land to whomever He wishes.
4. The alternatives which R. Isaac apparently dismisses are as significant as those which he endorses. Indeed, each position he takes is one alternative in a dichotomous debate which runs like a red thread through the Jewish tradition:
 - a. Are not *halakhah* and *aggadah*—law and lore—two sides of the coin in the Jewish tradition? If the entire first book of the Torah is narrative, one could argue that this asserts the primacy of narrative at the outset! Perhaps law requires the narrative of its own genesis for its legitimation.¹⁴
 - b. Are not particularism and universalism also two sides of the same coin? If Israel is the peculiar people chosen by the universal God, perhaps the relation of the part to the whole is the problem of its existence. Maybe Genesis begins with the universal perspective not merely as a ruse for legitimating Israel's particular claims, but because the quest for the universal vision is an essential part of Israel's particular identity.

Indeed, it is on precisely these issues that Maharal (around 60 years old) and Ephraim (around 30) differentiate themselves in their first published literary efforts.

¹⁴ This is one of the central points in Robert Cover's seminal essay, "Nomos and Narrative" in *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover* (edited by Minow, Ryan, Sarat), University of Michigan Press, 1993.

*In Defense of Israel's Specialness: Maharal on Genesis*¹⁵

Maharal affirms the primacy of law and of Israel's particularity. He also conjoins them by the ingenious argument: Are not most of the laws dependent for their performance on the *land*? If so, legitimating Israel's title to the land is not a separate agenda, but is integral to performance of the laws.

Maharal's frequent citation of Nahmanides shows that he regards him as a chief intellectual mentor. Indeed, Nahmanides in the corresponding passage offers a proof-text which also links the two topics: "He gave them the lands of nations; they inherited the wealth of peoples, that they might keep His laws and observe His teachings." (Psalms 105:44–45) There are many affinities in intellectual outlook between Maharal and Nahmanides. Each emphasized the unrestricted power of God to work miracles, as against the Maimonidean insistence on natural law. Each emphasized the special spiritual relationship between God and Israel.

Another influence that Maharal may have experienced at this stage is the *Binding of Isaac* of Isaac Arama. Certainly within a few years Maharal would show a similarity to Arama in his use and interpretation of rabbinic lore.¹⁶ However, Arama would not have been a good guide to induct Maharal into the ways of philosophy, for his sophisticated anti-philosophical polemic requires that one already be well-versed in philosophy to follow his arguments.

Maharal's anti-philosophic sentiment which is evident already at this stage goes beyond Nahmanides and Arama in its implications. Nahmanides at least shows a lively interest in how the world came into being, invoking the themes of the neo-Platonic scheme of emergence of a universe of pluralities from a simple point. Furthermore, the

¹⁵ For the full text of which this is a paraphrase, see the excerpt from *The Lion's Whelp* in the Appendix, pp. 310–13.

¹⁶ This is supported by Gottesdiener's comment: "Thus you find that Maharal in his preface to *The Prodigies of the Lord* arranges his books to correspond to the plan of the *Binding of Isaac*. But there is not merely correspondence of outlines and plan here, but in the books of Maharal, and especially in the *Prodigies*, there are many matters of discussion and shared rabbinic texts that prove the influence. What is clear and accepted by all who study the Maharal's works and are familiar with the *Binding of Isaac*, as to the details, needs only broader research, for which this is not the place, and then it will be apparent how correct and on-target my observations are." Abraham Gottesdiener, *המהר"ל מפראג: חייו, תקופתו ותורתו* (*The Maharal of Prague, His Life, His Period, and His Teaching*), Jerusalem 1976, p. 34.

commentaries of the conservative tradition (which included Nahmanides, Arama, and Abravanel)¹⁷ were in agreement that affirmation of creation *ex nihilo* laid a theoretical basis for belief in miracles, which was crucial to Israel's religious faith. This at least indicated an interest in some general theoretical affirmation—though leaning more toward the Bible than toward philosophy in its content—as the basis for the specifics of Jewish belief. Maharal would indeed develop such a general position on miracles in his next work, *Prodigies of the Lord*, and on secular learning in *Eternal Paths*. But for now, he radically favors the specifics of Biblical narrative over any general theoretical orientation:

...The creation of the world is no evidence for the miracles which the Holy One performed. It should be the other way around, that the miracles which He performed should serve as evidence for the creation of the world. For we have seen the miracles with our own eyes, but we have not seen the creation of the world with our own eyes, so how would the creation be evidence for the miracles? Thus the verse tells us explicitly: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt," (Exodus 20:1) but it does not say, "I am He who created heavens and earth."

Maharal's argument here is a clear echo of that most memorable passage in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*,¹⁸ where the rabbi defends the particular affirmation of the God of historical experience over the theoretical God of the philosophers and of creation. The *Kuzari* was published several times during the Renaissance, and its arguments were no doubt familiar to many. The fact that Maharal uses the arguments without crediting their source indicates to me that he may have obtained them secondhand, not through direct study.¹⁹

Browsing through *The Lion's Whelp* will show that the passage we have selected is rare in its expressing any philosophical-theoretical interest at all, even negatively. For the most part, this work (like much of Maharal's work in general) is a tour-de-force of aggadic commentary,

¹⁷ See Isaac Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought 1250–1650*, Mouton, The Hague, 1967; Alfredo Borodowski, *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy, and Evil: The Tension Between Medieval Philosophy and Biblical Commentary*, Peter Lang Publishing, 2003.

¹⁸ Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* I, 11–25.

¹⁹ We find in Elijah Mizrahi's commentary *ad loc.*: "His question is not a question, for if belief in the pre-eternity of the world causes the Torah to fall, then belief in the Torah will cause the belief in the pre-eternity to fall." This is the substance of Maharal's objection. But the verbiage is from Halevi.

showing encyclopedic mastery of rabbinic sources but minimal interest in philosophy. The philosophic element in Maharal's writings would start increasing with *Prodigies of the Lord* and would reach its climax in his later works.

Nevertheless, we can attempt something of an intellectual profile of Maharal (from a philosophic standpoint, which admittedly does less than justice to his other accomplishments) at this stage in his development. He lived intellectually within the confines of "rabbinic tradition," inclusive of its medieval continuations. His most significant quasi-philosophical mentors were Nahmanides and Arama. Maharal may very well have been well-versed in kabbalah early on. His account of his dispute with Eliezer Ashkenazi in *The Way of Life* (*Derekh Hayyim*) suggests that Maharal's criticisms of Eliezer were based on his prior kabbalistic outlook imbibed from various sources which he mentions there.²⁰ He probably had some contact with the kind of philosophical ideas and vocabulary that educated people tossed off in casual conversation. However, he had probably not read any books properly of a philosophical genre (certainly not the Guide, and we are not sure about the Kuzari). He could wield a few arguments, but he had no sustained expertise in the field.

Around this time there circulated in manuscript a work which Maharal would probably have read before writing his prefaces to *Prodigies of the Lord* in 1582. The "Ten Questions" of Eliezer Eilburg²¹ was a polemic expressing radical philosophically-based skepticism. It was written in 1575 and was addressed to three Moravian rabbis. It would be one factor arousing Maharal, if not from his dogmatism, at least from his philosophical apathy. In *The Lion's Whelp* we do not yet see the effects of this provocation. Maharal is content in his Klaus. Philosophy is not yet in evidence.

The Purpose of Creation

Reading Ephraim Luntshitz's first book *City of Heroes* shows us that in 1580 he knew as little philosophy as Maharal or less. His favorite

²⁰ This excerpt is supplied here in the Appendix, pp. 334–36.

²¹ Discussed in Joseph Davis, "The *Ten Questions* of Eliezer Eilburg and the Problem of Jewish Unbelief in the 16th Century," JQR 91, 2001, pp. 293–336.

semi-philosophical commentator at this point was the Spanish kabbalist Bahya ben Asher. He shows casual knowledge of a few philosophical ideas and buzzwords—"commands of reason," knowledge of God's "essence" versus "ways." Most of the sermons in *City of Heroes* have not even this much, but show him in his lifelong role of preacher and moralist, drawing on the rabbinic lore. It is the first sermon, though, on Genesis (*Bereshit*), which is most relevant to our current inquiry. Does this piece cross the barrier and become philosophy? I say—almost but not quite. We can see in retrospect why he would make that move very soon, but he has not made it yet.

Ephraim states his thesis in the opening paragraphs:

Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have started with Exodus 12...

It is known that in the case of any proper work to be accomplished or any project to be achieved, the essential point is the end-goal of the project. Therefore anyone who is wise should be clear-sighted and consider from the start of the project what will be the end result. Therefore the end-goal is called "beginning," for thought precedes deed, as the rabbis said, "the end of accomplishment, first in thought." Similarly, when the Master of Secrets came to create His world, He engraved the world before him and saw under what condition it could endure and what end-result it would arrive at. Thus He would sketch out in His thought whether it could endure if it were to operate in accordance with a different condition, and saw it could not endure. This is the meaning of the saying, "He would build worlds and destroy them"—all in thought—until He sketched out in His wisdom the condition that all existent things in the world would be generated from Him (may His name be blessed) and all would return to Him, and thus it was revealed that He is First and Last.

Now go and learn what is the end-goal in the creation of the world... The end-goal of all the created beings is the human, created last, and all the implements which were created in the six days of creation were only created for mankind, as Rabbenu Bahya elaborated... And the end-goal of mankind is that they observe God's commandment, as it says, "The end of the matter, all having been heard: Fear God and keep His commandments, for that is all of man[']s purpose[.]" (Ecclesiastes 12:13) And the end-goal of fulfilling the commandments is the spiritual reward of the world to come...

The rest of the sermon elaborates these points and shows how they are supported by other aggadic passages and by the details of the creation narrative itself. Some of the supports are clear and direct. Others are far-fetched (as in the passage: *Reshit* (*primus*) = *Hallah* = man, *reshit* = tithes = Torah, *reshit* = first fruits = world-to-come).

What are we to make of this? First of all, Ephraim has reduced the entire Jewish outlook (as he sees it) to one simple formula. God created the world for the sake of humanity, so that they may observe God's commandments and earn their reward in the world-to-come. The formula is not original but borrowed from Bahya.²² It also agrees with Eliezer Ashkenazi's account of the purpose of creation.²³ In the broadest sense of the term, he has expressed a "philosophy of life." He has articulated the "idea" underlying the Biblical narrative. If everyone is capable of articulating one idea or writing one poem, he has done it. But one poem does not make a poet, nor one idea a philosopher. Characteristically, every stage of Ephraim's thesis is amply illustrated by standard rabbinic quotations. Ephraim is neither more nor less philosophical than the rabbinic aggadah in its more reflective moments.

What of the genre question? Ephraim ignores R. Isaac's challenge. As preacher, Ephraim is an aggadist by calling; the world is aggadah to him. It is only natural that he warms easily and naturally to the narrative mode of Genesis. In effect, he bypasses R. Isaac's question and proceeds to address the other famous opening Rashi: "For the sake of *reshit* (*primus*) the world was created, and *reshit* = Torah, *reshit* = Israel." In the end, Ephraim does finally return to R. Isaac's question, and by a dialectical *tour de force* he stands R. Isaac's point on its head. Properly interpreted, R. Isaac only meant to affirm Ephraim's thesis. "This month shall be to *you*" means that the world and everything in it (including "this month") was created for mankind.

What of the content of Ephraim's leading idea? It is as universal as Maharal's is particularistic. There is a fateful choice to make in interpreting creation—did God create the world for the sake of Israel, or for the sake of all humanity? Can a non-Jew say, "For me the world was created"? In the simplest reading of the two pieces, they give opposite answers. For Maharal, Israel is the culmination and end-goal of creation; for Ephraim the oft-repeated answer is *ha-adam*, humanity-at-large. A more nuanced reading shows that the two positions are not entirely antithetical. Each accepts the rabbinic principle that *adam* refers to Israel, and that the purpose of humanity for which the universe was created is fulfilled preeminently in Israel. However, the emphasis is different. One may say that the rabbinic belief, that Israel is the paradigmatic case of

²² See Bahya's Torah commentary, preface to Genesis and proem to *Tazria*'.

²³ See especially *Deeds* I, 13 and III, 1.

human perfection, is a necessary, quasi-metaphysical truth for Maharal but a contingent historical truth for Ephraim. Conversely, for a non-Jew to achieve the highest perfection is for Maharal a barely-possible exception, while for Ephraim it is a commonplace occurrence. The logical class of “the righteous of the gentiles” has very few members for Maharal, but is well-populated for Ephraim.

The stand on the universal-particularistic issue will have important bearing on how easy or difficult it will be for each thinker to make the transition to philosophy. To accept philosophy not merely as a technical discipline but as a component of a world-outlook, one must accept that there is an intellectual path to God that is open in principle to Jew and non-Jew alike (including gentile philosophers). This can be given concrete Jewish definition through the terms of “righteous gentile” and “righteous proselyte,” but this implies affirmation of the universalistic tendencies in the Jewish outlook—the tendencies represented by Ruth, Rabbi Joshua, and Maimonides, rather than Ezra, Rabbi Eliezer, and Halevi. It is not impossible to arrive at the philosophical position from the particularistic standpoint, but it is harder.

Environmental Influences? A Conjecture

Why did Maharal and Ephraim take such different paths? There are a number of factors that may have had bearing on the outcome.

First, there is the generational difference. In his study of intellectual revolutions, Thomas Kuhn has noted that generation is an important factor. An older generation grows up with a certain “paradigm” and is reluctant to give it up. Change often comes with youth.²⁴ The Maimonidean revival in 16th century Polish Jewry started with Moses Isserles and his disciples. Maharal was Isserles’s contemporary or slightly older; but received his education in a purely rabbinic paradigm. By the time he became aware of the philosophic movements around him, he was set in his ways. Ephraim was a generation younger. He may have looked to his elder peers Jaffe and Horowitz as role models; in any case, they confirmed him in the acceptability of the new way.

Second, there is an important geographical difference. Regardless what may have motivated Maharal’s conservatism originally, it certainly

²⁴ See above, Chapter 2, p. 22, n. 3.

fit the lands he lived in. Prague was the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Though open to Protestants, it was ruled by one of the first-ranking Catholic monarchs of Europe. Jews could not forget that they had been expelled briefly from Prague in 1561; this was reason for them to be defensive and cautious. But even the Protestant Reformation in Bohemia-Moravia had a distinctive cast. It has been suggested that Maharal's particular doctrine of Jewish particularism may have been modeled on that of the Calvinist Bohemian Brethren.²⁵ If so, Calvinist exclusivity abetted Jewish exclusivity. If "chosen people" was to be a leading theological concept, the environment was not ripe for universalism. If the Calvinists asserted that they were God's elect, there was little place for Jews unless they put forward the counter-claim that it was rather they who were God's elect.

Poland was different. In the high tide of the Reformation, it was the most liberal and tolerant nation in Europe, open to every stripe of Protestant and Catholic and to Jews as well. Moreover, it was the only country in Europe where the radical Protestants (called variously Arians, Socinians, or Unitarians) manifested a legitimate presence as a cohesive group. The years of Faustus Socinus's leadership of the Minor Reformed Church (1579–1604) coincide happily with the period of Ephraim Luntshitz's literary activity in Poland, before he was installed in Prague. Socinus was born and educated in Italy, and though he was not the epitome of the humanist, other leaders of the Arian movement had been. The doctrine of the Socinians was liberal on every count; they were pacific, disposed to social justice, and stressed works over faith as the key to earning immortality.²⁶ Ephraim could very well have seen in them the "righteous gentiles" and (because of their unitarian theology) harbingers of the day when all would acknowledge the oneness of God in the full sense. That Ephraim seems at times to project humanity-at-large and not just Israel as the manifestation of the divine purpose, may reflect the unique environment that was the product of native Polish tolerance, radical Reform, and the afterglow of Renaissance humanism. It is plausible to suppose that Ephraim was aware of these developments in Polish Christendom of his day. But as he makes no reference to them, this explanation must remain at the

²⁵ Otto Kulka, "Comenius and Maharal: The Historical Background of the Parallels in their Teachings," *Judaica Bohemiae*, 27:1, 1991, pp. 20–21.

²⁶ Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents*, Harvard 1946, Chapters 19–32.

level of conjecture (as Kulka admits is the case with the parallel view regarding Maharal).

Finally, there is simply personal difference. Each individual takes influences from his environment, but each of us is also irreducibly unique and will manifest that uniqueness under different and varying conditions. Each of the figures in this story had his own unique individuality, expressed in the totality of his life and his works. When we invoke this factor (and at some point we must), it is tautological: each unique individual is who he is. In effect, we have reached the end of explanation.

Eliezer Ashkenazi Makes an Entrance

We cannot rule out the possibility that already in 1580 Ephraim Luntshitz was already influenced somewhat by his first encounters with R. Eliezer Ashkenazi, who migrated to Poland in 1576. There is evidence in the second preface of *City of Heroes* that it was around the completion of this work that this peripatetic sexagenarian from the Levant was starting to make an impression on him.

It is a charming but exasperating feature of intellectual discourse in the place and period we are studying, that writers hardly ever mention their contemporaries, whether living or dead, by name. This requires some detective work on our part, to figure out who and what the author is referring to, and what point he wants to make.

The two prefaces to *City of Heroes* say the same thing slightly differently; they are two drafts of the same message. In each of them, Ephraim complains about other preachers, his contemporaries, who distort the meaning of rabbinic parables when they cite them in their sermons. There is a significant difference, however, between the two, which is relevant to our inquiry. In the earlier preface, the preachers' distortions are motivated by sheer love of novelty and crowd-pleasing. There is no specific intellectual agenda implied, and no trace of philosophic ideology. In the second preface, however, Ephraim describes preachers whose innovative interpretations derive from a philosophic position. His own attitude toward them is ambivalent. On the one hand, they are among those who "give a heap of wheat to the simple-minded," who "wander in order to know whom their soul loves," members of "the guild of preachers, seekers of the Lord." On the other hand, they "erred in judgment, violating the natural sense of the

texts, for their discourse follows the philosophical fashion which is the standard among the nations.” Ephraim’s final stance toward the rival preachers in the first preface is one of general rejection. In the second, it is one of careful selection: “I did not delight in these, rather I have held fast... to the plain sense of the sayings... and I have quickly summarized the novel interpretation, deriving it from the original saying or scripture in brief.”

Does Ephraim’s description of the philosophic-minded preacher in the second preface point to Eliezer Ashkenazi? The reference to those who “wander... and seek and scout after wisdom,” possibly alludes to Eliezer’s peripatetic career among Mediterranean and European Jewries. The “stammering speech and a strange tongue” may refer to Eliezer’s difficulty in having to deliver a sermon in Yiddish. The closest to a calling-card in this passage is the phrase “to bring forth precious issue from refuse,” a phrase Eliezer used repeatedly²⁷ to describe God’s procedure in creating the noble race of humanity from lowly matter (but which Ephraim characteristically uses in a different sense).

Taken together, I think these references do indeed point to Eliezer Ashkenazi. Ephraim is friendly but reserved toward him. He appreciates the enrichment which Eliezer’s philosophical exegesis provides to his listeners, but he thinks Eliezer goes too far in stretching the meaning of the traditional texts from their accepted meaning. Ephraim seems to confess that he went so far as to cite Eliezer’s views occasionally in his sermons, but he was not quite ready to make philosophy a part of his own inner being.

Can we detect Eliezer’s influence in Ephraim’s Bereshit sermon? Before meeting Eliezer, Ephraim had already developed his own view of God, world, and man, nurtured by his teacher Solomon Luria and the curriculum of Jewish sources (mostly biblical and rabbinic) on which he had been raised. He had picked up some philosophical terminology (such as the crucial term *takhlit* = telos) from authors like Bahya, who had already assimilated this to the traditional Jewish outlook. This world-view did not change much over the years, and was already very close to that which we find in the main portion of *City of Heroes*, written before he met Eliezer Ashkenazi. It is likely, however, that the encounter with Eliezer helped Ephraim toward formulating his outlook

²⁷ See for instance *Deeds* III, 1 (Appendix, page 308, Note 1.).

in the concise, formulaic terms we find in the Genesis sermon. Ephraim experienced no conversion at this point, only clarification. He was far from accepting everything that Eliezer had to offer intellectually (as his partial criticism in the Second Preface indicates). What he took from Eliezer, he accepted judiciously and selectively, because it agreed with the conclusions he had already arrived at on his own.

Ephraim's Outlook in 1580

We are fortunate that Ephraim published *City of Heroes* when he did, because it allows us to see substantially what his world-outlook was before he encountered philosophy. That initial standpoint of Ephraim's thought was fundamentally rabbinic, and within that mode based on the "Ishmaelian" prototype (in the sense that Heschel contrasted the "Ishmaelian" and "Akivan" outlooks in *Torah from Heaven*). Not that Ephraim was entirely rational in the views he selected. There was always a bit of precious nonsense in his outlook, such as his acceptance of the fortune-telling aspects of the four compass-points.²⁸ He always loved word-play and gematria. There were also genuine mystical concepts of the highest value, such as *devekut*, (spiritual attachment to God) which formed a part of his vocabulary and thought-structure throughout his life.²⁹ But his notion of God was fundamentally transcendent and had no trace of magic. It was heresy on the part of the Israelites in the wilderness to think that God has need of the light of the sanctuary-lamps, or the nutrition of the sacrifices.³⁰ The mention of the binding of Isaac at Rosh Hashanah is not to induce God to mercy, but to induce Jews to repentance.³¹ Ephraim speaks often and passionately about wisdom as a prime virtue and ultimate goal.³² These are all selections Ephraim made of value-concepts within the rabbinic corpus, before his encounter with philosophy. They predisposed him to the response he would make, before the encounter took place.

²⁸ North indicates wealth, east = children, south = longevity, and west = wisdom. (*City*, Vayetzei, Jerusalem Tiferet Hatorah 1996 edition Vol. I, p. 77.)

²⁹ See for instance *City*, *Noah*, I, 22ff.

³⁰ *City*, *Beha'alotekha* II, 134. Heschel identifies this view as "Ishmaelian" in *Heavenly Torah*, Continuum, 1997, pp. 86, 89.

³¹ *City*, *Nitzavim* II, 280.

³² *City*, *Noah* I, 22; *Vayehi* I, 126f.; *Beshalah* I, 179; *Tzav* II, 16.

Though there is a slight admixture of philosophical influences in *City of Heroes*, we can mostly regard it as a near-pristine expression of Ephraim's outlook when it had been formed almost exclusively from biblical and rabbinic sources. That outlook was serious yet spiced with playfulness, at once intellectual and passionate, suffused with ethical purpose. He was thoroughly imbued with the drama of Israel's salvation, yet he saw it set in a universal frame, the drama of all humankind. Law was the nuts-and-bolts of Israel's prescription for salvation, but lore—with all due respect to R. Isaac's dictum—provided the overall outlook for understanding what the drama was about in a larger sense. God had set the world up on a rational plan, and had given human beings the gift of reason to understand it and play their proper part in it. However, the human being is composed of intellect and matter, so the struggle between the elements had to play itself out. The end was ultimately hopeful, but it was up to people to achieve it, and it was up to the right kind of preacher—Ephraim—to motivate those people to make the right choice.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEBATE BETWEEN ELIEZER AND MAHARAL

Status Quo in the 1570s

Before examining the debate between Eliezer Ashkenazi and Maharal, it would be good to review the status of philosophy among North European Jewry in the 1570s. Not much was happening in the first half of the decade. In 1570, Isserles published his *Law of the Sacred Offering*, cloaking his meditations on philosophy and mysticism in an arcane labyrinth of allegory. It produced scarcely a ripple at the time. Maharal, in his 50's, was still serving in Nikolsburg, possibly disputing with the Bohemian Brethren on which was truly God's Chosen People, but learning their pedagogical methods and working on *The Lion's Whelp*, his erudite supercommentary on Rashi on the Torah. When published in 1578, it would show scarcely any evidence that its author had yet made any acquaintance with philosophical ideas. In 1572, Isserles died. About the same time, Mordecai Jaffe returned from his ten-year Italian sojourn and was installed in Grodno. His scholarly focus must have been primarily on legal matters, to adapt to his new environment (where he stayed for the next 20 years), and to make progress on his monumental code, the *Royal Garment*. In 1573, Maharal moved to Prague and started his klaus. It may have been about that time that he started the long series of aggadic monographs, starting with *Prodigies of the Lord*, that would eventually (after a shift in his own thought) become the vehicle for expressing his own personal synthesis of ideas. He would incorporate more references to philosophy and natural science the further he progressed on this series of works. In 1574, Solomon Luria died, never having changed from the anti-philosophic stance he expressed in his letter to his cousin Moses Isserles some twenty years earlier. Luria's student, the young Ephraim Luntshitz, was developing his skills as a peripatetic preacher in the Polish hinterlands, his head suffused with traditional midrash and moralistic lore, which he would crystallize into the *City of Heroes* in 1580—still (at least prior to Eliezer Ashkenazi's arrival) as innocent of philosophy as his master Luria and his older colleague Maharal.

In the second half of the decade, two lights were lit. In 1577, Abraham Horowitz published *Lovingkindness of Abraham*, his commentary on Maimonides's *Eight Chapters*, the introduction to Maimonides's commentary on *Ethics of the Fathers*. This work had great popularity and became a staple in the Polish-Jewish curriculum. From this time on, the basic conceptual framework of Aristotelian psychology, mediated by Maimonides, became common coin in general learned discourse, as we can see from the frequent references in later Maharal and Ephraim to the orders of being (mineral, vegetative, animal, human) and their corresponding faculties (nutritive, sensitive, and rational). These were so taken for granted as part of common parlance, that it was not necessary to give attribution to their source, or call them into question as too "philosophical."

Also, in 1576 Eliezer Ashkenazi moved from Cremona, Italy to Posen, Poland. Having spent the first six decades of his life in Mediterranean lands (Salonika, Egypt, Cyprus, Venice, and Cremona, with a brief sojourn in Prague in the 1560s), he may have found it challenging to adapt linguistically, culturally, and intellectually to Yiddish-speaking, Talmud-immersed Polish Jewry. (To be sure, the name Ashkenazi signals that his family had roots in that milieu.) He also had a reputation as a leading Talmudist. Yet his frequent moves (from Posen to Cracow to Gniezno within a decade) may have been symptomatic of adjustment difficulties. Having spent his maturity in lands where poetry and philosophy were part of the cultural furniture, he returned in his old age to the land of his fathers, which was a backwater by comparison.¹ The manuscripts of the old peddlers and the more recent extracurricular ventures of Isserles's students had reached few people. If Eliezer wanted to have conversations about philosophy with his new neighbors, he would have to teach it to them first. In time, his acknowledged influence among the next generation of Polish exegetes would be considerable, as Jacob Elbaum documents.² But his unacknowledged influence adds further to this record. We shall argue that one of his students was none other than his peer and colleague, Maharal, by now of Prague.

¹ A half-century later, Joseph Delmedigo was to make the same move from Italy to Poland. He recorded his culture-shock in these words: "Pitch blackness covers the earth, and the ignorance is fearful. . . . Of secular wisdoms they have no concept whatsoever." (Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, HUC/Ktav 1974, IV, 157.)

² Elbaum, *Openness and Insularity*, p. 47 note 60, p. 87 note 16. Elbaum lists nearly a dozen authors who profited from Eliezer Ashkenazi's interest. But he mentions neither Maharal nor Ephraim Luntshitz, who should now be added to this list.

Revising the Account of the Eliezer-Maharal Relationship

It has long been common knowledge that Maharal and Eliezer Ashkenazi were intellectual opponents. Scholars have generally followed the following chronology of their controversy (influenced by Maharal's own account in *Way of Life* 5:6):³

1. Maharal published his *Prodigies of the Lord* in 1582, propounding his views on miracles and divine knowledge.
2. Eliezer published his *Deeds of the Lord* in 1583, dissenting from Maharal's views on these subjects. He also criticized Maharal orally.
3. Maharal responded to Eliezer's critique in 1589 in his *The Way of Life*.⁴

A close reading of the prefaces of Maharal's work, in comparison with Eliezer's, will give us several grounds for calling this narrative into question. Maharal in 1582 was not only propounding his own views, but was attacking several opponents. Who? Probably Eliezer Ashkenazi, among others. Though Eliezer's *Deeds of the Lord* was not yet published, there is plenty of precedent for oral exchange of ideas between scholars with similar interests in a small cultural world.

The *Deeds of the Lord*, which Eliezer published in 1583, was clearly a major work on which he had labored for years, though he had completed it but recently.⁵ The views which he expressed in it had been worked out in a lifetime, and were not the fruit of a momentary response to Maharal's just-published book.

Of the two scholars, it was Eliezer who had a much stronger background in philosophy. Though probably versed in kabbalah by now, Maharal was far from expert in philosophic literature, as we shall see. I shall argue that a close reading of the successive drafts of the Preface to *Prodigies of the Lord* shows a strong influence working behind

³ See Appendix, pp. 335–36.

⁴ Maharal, *Way of Life*, 5:6. See André Neher, *Le Puits de l'Exil*, Editions Albin Michel 1966, pp. 129–143; Byron Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent*, pp. 58–62, both of whom base their narrative by taking Maharal's account at face value.

⁵ Alan Cooper has determined that Eliezer's *Deeds of the Lord* was completed in manuscript by 1580, though it would not be published until 1583. (See Alan Cooper, "An Extraordinary Sixteenth-Century Biblical Commentary: Eliezer Ashkenazi on the Song of Moses," *Frank Talmage Memorial Volume I*, p. 131.)

the scenes. The characteristics of that influence, when analyzed, will point to Eliezer Ashkenazi as Maharal's philosophical mentor, as well as his opponent. Taken together, these key works of the two thinkers tell the following story:

1. They help us understand how Maharal could have developed from a philosophical novice to one of the most accomplished thinkers of his age, after a late start.
2. They serve as a marvelous example of how in the Renaissance the medieval model of philosophical thinking, based on the Aristotelian physical-scientific model, became transformed by taking historical (especially Biblical) narrative seriously.⁶
3. They are the indispensable key for deciphering the riddle which Ephraim would pose in the *Gleanings of Ephraim* eight years later, describing his own path to philosophy.

Mediating Bible and Philosophy

Though Maharal published his *Prodigies of the Lord* a year before Eliezer's *Deeds of the Lord*, it is almost certain that Maharal wrote the Second Preface to the *Prodigies* in direct response to Eliezer's manuscript work (or to Eliezer's oral expression of the same ideas). To understand Maharal's response, we must first acquaint ourselves with Eliezer's own intellectual project.

Deeds of the Lord is an episodic commentary on the narratives of the Torah.⁷ The chief goal of Eliezer's book is to understand the biblical story from the standpoint of a theological rationalist. From that standpoint, the philosophers—especially Maimonides and Gersonides—are basically right about what God is, and the Bible is fundamentally right about what God *does*. The commentator needs to integrate these two perspectives. This project assumes, like medieval religious philosophy in general, that the philosophers and the Bible are in fundamental

⁶ In this respect, a comparison might be drawn with Luther and Erasmus's dialogue on free will, with Eliezer Ashkenazi (like Erasmus) upholding the modified medieval philosophical position, while Maharal (like Luther) argued for a more biblical outlook.

⁷ The Hebrew title 'מעשי ה' may in fact mean either "Deeds of the Lord" or "Narratives of the Lord."

agreement about most essential religious truths. Philosophically speaking, the most interesting parts of the book are those where the assumed agreement is elusive, and one must make a choice which of the two truths to assert as primary. In some of these cases, Eliezer disagrees with his medieval mentors, cutting back on rigid philosophical dogmas and letting the spirit of the biblical narrative shine forth more brightly. In other cases, he gives voice to the new scientific spirit, pushing the vision of unified laws of physical nature as far as he can, consistent with the letter of the biblical narrative. Maharal's chief complaint against Eliezer will be that he did not go fully with the chaotic, spontaneous flow of the Bible, and hewed too much to rationalist tendencies, either medieval or modern. Eliezer would have responded that he was trying to achieve the just balance, combining the best elements of the biblical and philosophical outlooks.

Eliezer's creed, in a nutshell, is this: God created the world as a theater in which the human creature could freely work out his/her destiny toward perfection and immortality. This single, grand conception explains everything. Within that scheme, everything operates by one of three principles: divine action (miracle), natural law, and human choice.⁸

Simplest is best. God likes to act in broad, comprehensive patterns rather than through a lot of little, isolated actions. Thus, we see in Eliezer's commentary to Genesis⁹ that Eliezer regards the real creative act of God as occurring in a single instant, and the bulk of the creation narrative spells out how primordial matter, once brought into being through this act, worked out the immanent logic of its necessary development in a series of processes taking six days. This explanation reduces the need for divine intervention in the world. It leads us closer to the modern scientific vision of the world as an automaton, requiring only one initial kick from the Creator-God to get it started. It is, to be sure, a step away from the Biblical view of God getting His hands into the morass of messy detail, and toward the philosophic view of divinity as clean perfection. But this does not bother Eliezer, probably because in the domain of inanimate nature he thought the

⁸ Though Eliezer also speaks of "chance" (מקרה), this need not be an ontological category (as in the Epicurean or modern quantum-physics sense). It is more likely that he means this in the Aristotelian sense, of the random conjunction of different series of events within an overall framework of natural causality.

⁹ *Deeds* I, 2 (Appendix pp. 291–93).

philosophers were basically right. It is in the realm of human choice that he moved most decisively toward the biblical view of will, choice, and human autonomy.

Along the same lines as Eliezer's doctrine of instant creation, is his acceptance of the Maimonidean view of pre-programmed miracles. At the start of Part III, in setting the scene for the Exodus, he cites the rabbinic saying, "God set a condition with the sea from creation, that it would split when the Israelites came through." According to the Maimonidean interpretation that Eliezer accepted, this meant that the splitting of the sea was predetermined to occur at a particular time coinciding with the arrival of the Israelites at that place during the Exodus.

Eliezer registers one major disagreement with Maimonides early on in his work, on the issue of the anthropocentric character of creation. Maimonides had said famously¹⁰ that it is folly for man to think himself the central purpose of God's creation. Eliezer embraced Maimonides's "folly" as one of his central articles of faith. God really *did* create the world for the purpose of human destiny, for the emergence of the perfect soul. Eliezer devotes much of Chapter 13 in Part I to refuting Maimonides on this point, and repeats the point in many other places. On this issue, Eliezer arguably has most of the Biblical narrative on his side—with some notable exceptions, such as the books of Ecclesiastes and Job.¹¹

The other major philosophic issue where Eliezer thought fidelity to the biblical outlook required breaking with the medieval consensus, was the issue of divine foreknowledge. To this issue, Eliezer devoted Chapter 21 of Part II.¹² This is an issue which in its classic medieval formulation presupposed the accepted medieval-Aristotelian view on a number of other issues: the understanding of the divine unity, the identification of divine knowledge with divine essence, and the simple (non-plural) and unchanging nature of both the divine essence and the divine knowledge. All this discussion assumed something even more fundamental: the capacity of human reason to discourse intelligibly about the divine attributes (though the limits of that capacity

¹⁰ *Guide* III, 13.

¹¹ This is said with reference to the modern interpretation of Job, but not the rabbinic interpretation (for the rabbis interpreted the book in light of their own theodicy).

¹² See Appendix, pp. 294–306.

were variously construed by the major philosophers, such as Saadia, Maimonides and Gersonides).¹³

Eliezer's position on this complex of issues is reminiscent of Gersonides, but with a difference. Like most exponents of the medieval philosophical tradition, he affirmed the traditional notion of the divine unity as connoting absolute simplicity and non-compositeness, and the identification of divine knowledge with divine essence. He even accepted the inability of the divine to receive new knowledge—a point which seems seriously to contradict his thesis. Indeed, in accepting these standard medieval premises, Eliezer would prove too much the philosopher for Maharal. These would be the very grounds on which Maharal would attack Eliezer.

As for divine foreknowledge itself, Eliezer held (like Gersonides) that it did not exist, except in rare cases.¹⁴ This was a corollary of his primary creed, and arguably in agreement with the Biblical outlook. Eliezer believed that that God created the world as a theater for the free working-out of human destiny. But if human destiny worked itself out freely, the outcome was indeterminate. If it was indeterminate, then it could not be known in advance, even by God.

Eliezer's strong affirmation of human freedom seems to be inspired by a close reading of the Bible. Both human freedom and divine foreknowledge play a part in the Biblical narrative, but (by Eliezer's reading and mine) freedom is primary. God gives freedom to humans, and God occasionally foresees the use they will make of that freedom, or projects the broad historical trajectory within which that freedom will operate. Yet this foresight also has its limitations and loopholes. Prophets predict doom for sin, but people can repent and change the outcome.

How, then, did the standard medieval view arise, one in which divine foreknowledge is absolute, and human freedom must exist in precarious paradoxical tension with it? The medieval argument was simple,

¹³ On the breakdown of views on the divine attributes among medieval Jewish thinkers, see Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Harvard, 1976, Chapter 2: "Attributes"; *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy*, Harvard, 1979, Chapter 1 "Attributes and Trinity" and 2 "The Semantic Aspect of the Problem of Attributes"; and *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion, Volume 2*, Harvard, 1977, Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 (dealing with Maimonides, Gersonides, and Crescas respectively).

¹⁴ "... Whatever is a perfection by its nature is found in God... But as for knowledge of hidden matters and knowledge of the future, etc.—who ever gave man knowledge to think that knowledge of the future is a perfection?" (*Deeds* II, 21; Appendix p. 299.)

and proceeded from the postulates of God's unity and immutability to which we have alluded:

1. God is "one" in an absolute sense: God is not composed of different parts or possessed of multiple attributes, but is simple and indivisible in His essence.
2. God is unchanging.
3. God's knowledge is not a separate, changeable part or faculty of God, but is one with God's essence and likewise unchangeable.
4. God knows all the particulars of this world, past, present and future.
5. Therefore, God must have prior knowledge of all future events. They are known in God's eternal, unchanging knowledge that is part of God's essence. God knows in advance everything that will occur in the created world, and nothing can happen to contradict this knowledge.

An intellectual-historical perspective will show that far from being identical with the Biblical position, the standard medieval theology was profoundly influenced by a third factor—ancient Greek philosophy, which itself bore the imprints of several major thinkers and movements, notably Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Plotinus.¹⁵ Indeed, we may consider the standard medieval doctrine of divine knowledge—that God knows all the particulars of the created world in one simple knowledge that never changes—as a synthesis of opposing Hebrew and Greek ideas that pulled in opposite directions.¹⁶ The Bible contributed

¹⁵ This agrees with Charles Hartshorne on the fundamental difference of the Biblical, Greek, and medieval outlooks. See Hartshorne and Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, Humanity Books, 2000, especially the Introduction.

¹⁶ There is a substantial body of literature on the different formulations of the classic medieval position on divine foreknowledge. See especially Tamar Rudavsky, ed. *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985. In the opening essay of that work, Calvin Normore credits Augustine's predestination doctrine with the emergence of the classic "compatibilist" view (God foreknows all, yet we are free) in the Latin West. (p. 9) This, however, leaves open the question of the genesis of similar views in the Islamic-Jewish tradition. Already in the Kalamic period the dual affirmations of universal divine foreknowledge and human freedom, together with their compatibility, were taken for granted by many thinkers. (See Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, Chapter 8, "Predestination and Free Will"; Saadia Gaon, *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, Chapter 4: "On Obedience and Disobedience, Compulsion and Justice.") How much had this view developed in the rabbinic period? The rabbis were apparently greatly influenced by Stoic predestinarian ideas but made an exception in the case of

the idea of God's omniscience, but only in a rough, non-absolute sense, and was focused especially on God's awareness of all events occurring *in the present*, with knowledge of future events a secondary consideration. God foresees events occasionally in the Bible, but not universally or in a systematic way. Aristotelian philosophy contributed the notion of the unchangeableness of God's knowledge—but the Aristotelian philosopher's God knew only universal truths, which do not change anyway. The Aristotelian God was ignorant of contingent terrestrial events; they were beneath him. The issues of foreknowledge and predestination were preoccupations of the Stoics, while the absolute unity of the divine being was largely a legacy of Plotinus. Only by combining the Biblical notion of God's universal knowledge of all terrestrial events in the present with all these other ideas from the Greek tradition, did the medievals arrive at the paradox of a God who knows all future contingent acts that His creatures freely choose, in a knowledge that is one and simple, eternal and unchanging, without impinging on the freedom of their choice.

Maimonides perceived the possible contradiction between divine foresight and human freedom, and took radical measures to avoid it. One of those was his doctrine of homonymity: the word knows in "God knows" and "man knows" means two different things. Therefore, we can affirm as true "God knows which future contingent event of two alternatives will occur; He knows it as contingent but certain to happen, without depriving either it or the alternative from its contingent / possible status," without ourselves knowing precisely what this means.¹⁷ Indeed, we don't know what the nature of God's knowledge is. This (together with the doctrine of negative attributes) involved Maimonides in a fundamental tension on the issue of whether we can know God rationally. On the one hand, one of the chief glories of human reason—and perhaps its ultimate purpose—is to come to the rational knowledge of God, by proving God's existence, unity, etc. On the other hand, we can never know God's *essence*, and can never make positive statements about God's *attributes*. Thus Maimonides was to

the paradigmatic moral decision. See Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Harvard 1987, Chapter 11: "On Providence."

¹⁷ This is Maimonides's "exoteric" position on divine knowledge. This is how Maimonides was understood by Gersonides, Ashkenazi, and Maharal, and is therefore relevant and sufficient background for the current discussion. On Maimonides's "esoteric" position on divine knowledge, see Alfred Ivry's essay in Rudavsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 143–159.

provide aid and comfort later on, both for those who affirmed reason's capacity to know God, and to those who denied it.¹⁸

Gersonides criticized Maimonides both on divine foreknowledge of man's acts, and on man's knowledge of God. If we don't know what *knows* means in "God knows," what are we talking about? We can only talk about "knowledge" as something with certain definable characteristics. For instance, if A knows P, and P is false, that is not knowledge, no matter whether the purported knower is God or man. And if the truth of P depends on man's free choice, that choice can confound the putative knower, whether divine or human. Hence, foreknowledge and choice are simply incompatible.¹⁹ We find all these Gersonidean arguments repeated in Eliezer's *Deeds of the Lord* in Chapter 21 of Part II.

There is still, however, a residue of philosophical aloofness in Gersonides which falls short of the divine-human dynamic of the Bible, and it was this deficiency that led Eliezer to adopt a position subtly different from Gersonides's. The deficiency may be defined thus. Gersonides's God knows man as the astrologers do: that the general astral influences will tend to have such-and-such an effect on the actions of man. But man is free to act contrary to those influences. At the point that man acts freely, man's reality changes. But God's knowledge does not change to keep pace. God's knowledge and man's reality are now out of step. God does not know the real, freely-acting man. Maybe the Active Intellect does—but what comfort is that?²⁰ The biblical God would never be guilty of this ignorance of the concrete, individual, freely-acting man for whose sake God created the world! Nor would Eliezer's God.

Given the disjunction between what a person would-have-done and what one actually-did, Gersonides had God's knowledge take the path of what he would-have-done, or what universal man generally does.

¹⁸ Maimonides, *Guide*, III, 19–20 on divine knowledge; I, 50–59 on divine attributes.

¹⁹ See Gersonides, *The Wars of the Lord*, Book Three, Chapters 2–3 (Seymour Feldman's English translation, II, 102–115 and his excellent synopsis of Book Three, II, 75–85); Tamar Rudavsky, "Divine Omniscience, Contingency and Prophecy in Gersonides" in Rudavsky, ed. *op. cit.*, pp. 161–181.

²⁰ On how Gersonides brings in the Active Intellect to fill in for the aloof Deity in governing the world, see Charles Touhati, *La Pensée Philosophique et Théologique du Gersonide*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973, Part IV, Chapter 3: "L'Intellect Agent, Régent du monde sublunaire."

That is simply the wrong path to choose, according to Eliezer. It is far more important for God to know what a person actually does in his concrete actuality (a typically Renaissance preference?). Then won't God be overburdened by the knowledge of too many cumbersome and irrelevant details? To counter this danger, Eliezer's God operates with a need-to-know restriction. God only knows what is necessary for fulfilling God's purpose; the rest is beneath His dignity.²¹ This God even shares some of the medieval Aristotelian God's distaste for spiders and flies, representing those messy particulars that have no bearing on the main problem—human destiny. Not what a person might-have-done, but what one actually does, is germane to reward and punishment, and ultimately to the soul's perfection and immortality.

The Tell-Tale Prefaces

Maharal published *Prodigies of the Lord* in 1582. As Byron Sherwin has pointed out,²² he was well advanced in writing it by 1578, for he refers to it often in *The Lion's Whelp* published that year, especially in the commentary on Exodus. The bulk of the work, like *The Lion's Whelp*, is exegetical and homiletical in character, taking the form of a synthetic discussion of the narrative of the Exodus and text of the Haggadah, exploring many detailed issues based on the rabbinic Midrash on the Exodus narrative. A few philosophical issues are discussed, mostly toward the end of the work and in the first two prefaces.

It is evident that Maharal composed most of the *Prodigies of the Lord* in the same vein as *The Lion's Whelp*—i.e., remaining within the world of rabbinic discourse and adding his voice to the long tradition of discussion of matters of lore that are rooted in the Talmud and midrash, based ultimately on the Bible, an intramural discussion with no trace of philosophical inquiry—but that toward the end of this enterprise some issues of philosophical import occurred to him, and he discussed

²¹ "Having demonstrated that every condescension mentioned of God is for the reason of paying attention to lowly things, and knowing that God pays attention to them solely for that exalted purpose of bringing about that perfect individual who shall achieve his soul's immortality, it is therefore not fitting that condescension be ascribed to God, except insofar as is necessary for that exalted purpose, namely bringing about the perfect soul." (*Deeds* II, 21)

²² Byron Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent: The Life and Works of Judah Loew of Prague*, Littman/AUP 1982, p. 190.

these in the later sections of the book, and in the first two prefaces, which were added late in the book's composition. Indeed, we notice not only a progression from the bulk of the *Prodigies of the Lord* to the two prefaces, but even a sharper progression from the first preface to the second.²³

The first preface is Maharal's first philosophical essay in print. It is at once a philosophical reflection on the limits of human knowledge, and a quasi-halakhic comment on what kinds of inquiry are permissible (with reference to Mishnah *Hagigah*'s pronouncement "One may not discourse on the forbidden relations with three, on the Creation with two, or on the Chariot with one..."). He ties it in with the theme of the present work at the end, saying that inquiry into God's miracles is in the area of the permitted. However, the motivation for this discussion seems to lie rather in the implicit condemnation of those in his current circle of knowledge—unnamed for the present—who were engaging in different kinds of inquiry which Maharal considered religiously illicit and intellectually untenable.

The argument of the first preface is incisive and cogent in some respects, and weak in others. At its most original and incisive, it argues that human knowledge is necessarily limited by the sources of knowledge and the nature of the cognitive faculty:

Since a person's apperception relates to the person inasmuch as it is his apperception, it follows necessarily that the known object cannot be totally other from the knowing individual, for if it was completely different from him, then it could not be a candidate for human knowledge. For given that human apperception relates to its object, if the object were totally other from the human, the human would have no way of knowing it.²⁴

However, Maharal chooses to illustrate this notion through an example which is extremely implausible by any reasonable assumption. He argues

²³ The third preface, unlike the first two, is unremarkable—quite a normal preface for a book of this kind. In it he not only discusses the book's theme and title—basing both on the familiar verse, *לך ה' הגדולה והגבורה והתפארת והנצח וההוד*—"Yours, Lord, are greatness, might, splendor, triumph, and majesty" (I Chronicles 29:11), on which the kabbalists based the enumeration of the *sefirot*—but also projects a series of six books filling out the scheme of the *sefirot* and the holidays. Of the projected six books, only three were ultimately completed—*Prodigies of the Lord*, *Splendor of Israel* (*Tif'eret Yisrael*), and *Triumph [or Eternity] of Israel* (*Netzah Yisrael*). It is not demonstrable or of major moment whether the third preface was written first or last in the order of composition.

²⁴ *Prodigies* (modern Hebrew edition) p. 2 (Appendix p. 314).

that the lack of mention of the World to Come in the Bible, but its discussion as a topic in rabbinic literature, is due to the difference in cognitive mode between prophecy and “wisdom”.²⁵

...The matters of Torah are according to the prophet’s comprehension. Such things are beyond the purview of embodied man and not part of his reality. As they are immaterial in their essence and not present to him, so the knowledge of them is quite remote from man and “other” to him, and such a thing, separate from human existence, does not enter into the purview of the prophet’s comprehension. One difference between wisdom and prophecy is that the Sage apprehends through his reason, and therefore is able to apprehend matters that are quite hidden and mysterious. But the prophet is called “visionary” or “seer,” for seeing is a direct perception of what is immediately outside oneself. Thus each prophet must have contact with the object of his prophecy; he has contact with those things and knows them through his prophecy.²⁶

The problem Maharal raises, why the “World to Come” is not mentioned in the Bible, is indeed puzzling. But the solution he offers poses more difficulties than the original problem. According to the traditional supernatural account of prophecy, God could miraculously enlighten the prophet and reveal to him things far beyond his ordinary comprehension. It is indeed modern of Maharal to attribute to the prophet a limitation of understanding connected with his natural limitations of reason. However, if Maharal had read this idea in its original context, namely Maimonides’s *Guide*, he would have read beside it Maimonides’s view that the prophet had to be fully developed in his intellectual faculty and a master of philosophy, not merely gifted with the faculty of imagination. This would undercut Maharal’s claim that only the sage, not the prophet, had the proper faculty to conceive of the World to Come. Maharal might have maintained his position of prophetic non-intellectuality in the face of Maimonides’s opposition (as did Abravanel), but in that case he ought at least to have cited Maimonides’s view in order to refute it. His failure to do even this much is presumptive evidence that Maharal had not read the *Guide* prior to 1582.

Indeed, even granting all Maharal’s assumptions, the entire thesis is implausible. An ordinary Jew, raised on the doctrines of the rabbis,

²⁵ *Hokhmah* in this context must mean rabbinic wisdom, not philosophy, given Maharal’s negative judgment of philosophy. Still, a philosopher might use the same line of reasoning to ask: Cannot philosophy provide a kind of knowledge which the Bible does not, due to its disciplined and abstract rational methodology?

²⁶ *Prodigies*, *loc. cit.* (Appendix pp. 314–15).

may not have a vivid, first-hand impression of the World to Come, but he knows of it in concept, as something wonderfully beyond his current experience, unlike anything he has known, but still very real, to be anticipated, in another realm, promised by God as the reward for one's good deeds. Is there anything in such a description that is so complicated, philosophically advanced, or incomprehensible as to be beyond the intellectual capacity of a prophet to understand, if communicated in those terms by God? One hopes not. As it stands, this argument is simply embarrassing. It shows Maharal, in his first philosophical attempt, as displaying the typical mistakes of the neophyte. He has, to be sure, some good original insights. But he has not thought through all angles of a problem. He is unversed in the literature of the subject. He is not prepared to answer objections that would occur to one from a reasonable familiarity of such problems and how they have been discussed by the standard authorities.

Maharal's Second Preface already shows great progress over the first in all these respects. First of all, the general thesis of this preface is clearly germane to the book's topic: it is a general defense of the supernatural interpretation of miracles. Second, he has delineated several views opposing his own: that God cannot change the order of nature, that He can but chooses not to, and that not God but the Active Intellect is the author of miracles. Third, he has clearly done his homework and mastered the literature of at least one of these theories—namely, Gersonides's *Wars of the Lord*, Part VI, Chapters 9–10—and speaks point by point to the issues raised there. However, it cannot be sheer coincidence that a certain neighbor of his, Eliezer Ashkenazi, who was a learned scholar in these philosophical matters, was about to publish his *Deeds of the Lord*, in which he has addressed himself to these very same issues and texts in Gersonides. Nor is it very likely coincidence that Maharal works the name of Eliezer's work into one of his rhetorical flights: "Thus when these philosophizing men theorized from their own opinion and their own mind about the *deeds of the Lord*, there were some who went out on a completely strange way..."²⁷ In short, we have ample indications here of a literary and intellectual influence. As the *Deeds of the Lord* did not appear in print until the year after *Prodigies of the Lord*, it is likely that Maharal exchanged views orally

²⁷ *Prodigies* Hebrew, p. 6 (Appendix p. 319). There are two more similar allusions in the same passage.

with Eliezer. He may even have read parts of his manuscript. It is even possible that the interaction was two-way, and that Eliezer's reaction to Maharal's views may have influenced the final redacted version of *Deeds of the Lord*. But the evidence is overwhelming that Maharal got the best philosophical lessons he had yet had between the writing of the First Preface and the Second Preface, and that he got them from Eliezer Ashkenazi. The encounter would not change his basic outlook, but it would provide him with the conceptual and textual equipment to articulate that outlook in a way that would command attention and respect. In short, it made him into a philosopher.

Maharal Contra Eliezer

Here, then, is the lineup of views on which Maharal argued against Eliezer, who in turn represented a standpoint with one foot in the medieval synthesis and one foot in the Renaissance world-view:

The Knowability of God. This is perhaps the most fundamental issue of all. Is the enterprise of theology feasible? As we saw, Maimonides gave aid and comfort to both positions. His *via negationis*, the doctrine of negative attributes, seemed to close off hope, yet his proofs for God's existence were a not-negligible entry on the positive side of the ledger. Eliezer followed Gersonides in rushing in where Maimonides feared to tread:

But it is certainly valid to infer God's ways from our own ways, even though they are very unequal and different, inasmuch as the Torah has said, "You shall know the Lord." (Hosea 2:22)²⁸ In that case, it is clear that God must have given us the knowledge whereby we may know this. Even if our knowledge is not on the same level as God's knowledge, is it not our knowledge that tells us they are unequal?²⁹

Of course, knowing God's "ways" could be seen as a lesser kind of knowledge, God's "back" as opposed to God's "face" (in the medieval

²⁸ Actually, Eliezer claims that the Torah says, "You shall know the Lord your God." This phrase is not found as such in the entire Bible. Moreover, the phrase, "You shall know the Lord" is found in the Prophets, not in the first five books. However, Eliezer may have in mind Deuteronomy 4:39: "Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other." No wonder Maharal complains (of the "some of the faithful" whose opinion has something to recommend it): "They have even garbled their textual sources" (*af ki bilbelu hakketuvim*) (*Prodigies* p. 6).

²⁹ *Deeds* II, 21, p. 100c (Appendix, pp. 295–96).

unpacking of the metaphor of what God revealed to and concealed from Moses in Exodus 33–34). Still, Eliezer is more sanguine than Maimonides, in construing this to mean that human beings can speak knowledgeably about the characteristics of God's knowledge (leaving aside for now the question, whether this is a part of God's ways, God's attributes, or God's essence).

Eliezer would concede that there is an inner sanctum of knowledge of God's *essence* which is inaccessible to anyone but God. Yet between God's *ways* and God's *essence* there is a third topic of inquiry, namely God's *existence*. Here, too, the rationalist school affirmed that human reason is equal to the task of attaining this knowledge on its own power:

You will see that Ritba (R. Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili), in his commentary to Maimonides's *Book of Knowledge*, wrote that the philosophers advanced solid proofs for God's existence, unity, and incorporeality, whereas for the fourth principle—namely, the world's creation—they were of divided opinions and could not demonstrate it philosophically, therefore we should accept it from tradition. He wrote that the proofs for the first three principles are very lengthy and require many steps. He cited a few proofs on whose grounds it is plausible to believe in the world's creation and the other assertions pertaining to God. I do not think it is merely a matter of belief that we make these affirmations concerning God. You know that belief is not identical to knowledge. It is a misuse of language to say, "I believe that the [celestial] sphere rotates," since it is visibly the case. Similarly, the term "belief" does not to apply to anything that can be proved. Whoever says, "I believe that God exists" will not be counted among the astute, but he should say, "I know that God exists." Similarly, Maimonides wrote that it is the foundation of foundations to know, not to believe, that there is a God. Also the Torah does not say "You shall believe in the Lord your God," but "you shall know the Lord your God."³⁰

Eliezer bases his whole subsequent argument on the knowability of God through reason. "Just as it has been rationally demonstrated that God is the First Cause of all existent things, so it is also rationally demonstrated that whatever is a perfection and not impossible can be predicated of God."³¹ Eliezer will then go on to argue (plausibly but not demonstrably, to take a friendly but not gullible view of it) that the kind of knowledge he wants to attribute to God is a perfection, and what he wishes to deny God is an imperfection or impossible. Thus, his

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100d–101a (Appendix, pp. 297–98). On the questionability of the last quote, see Note 28 above [second note previous to this].

³¹ *Deeds loc. cit.*

assertion that God is knowable through reason is a central foundation of his whole approach to the problems he discusses.

Maharal starts just as decisively by drawing the limits of the knowledge we can have of God. The First Introduction to *Prodigies of the Lord* provides the key statement of this position in his works of this period. He starts with the text, “The glory of God is a hidden matter, but the glory of kings is a matter to be searched.” (Proverbs 25:2) This clearly implies a distinction between areas of inquiry which are accessible to human reason, and areas which are off-limits. They are off-limits not simply by fiat, but by the nature of human knowledge, which can know only those things to which it has some ontological kinship.³² Our reason fits us for knowing things in the world of which we are a part. As God is totally other from the world which God has created, so we are totally incapable of knowing Him through our reason.

Maharal also interprets Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1 as referring to three topics with differing degrees of knowability. God is least knowable, being totally other from created entities, so knowledge of the Chariot (i.e., of divine matters) is the most restricted, and forbidden to teach even to one student, unless he knows the topic already. The work of creation is somewhat more knowable, referring to the bridge between the transcendent God and the creatures of the familiar world, and can be taught to one student but not to two. The topic of the forbidden liaisons is more knowable still, referring to the relations that created entities have to each other, and therefore to the hierarchical order of the created world and its constituent members.

What is the point of declaring our impotence of dealing intellectually with divine matters? The point becomes clear in the Second Introduction:

But lately we have to deal with the intrepid philo-sophists,³³ who probe God with their minds and deign to theorize about hidden mysteries, and even about everyday common reality they have so many opinions, so that there is no end of different views and theories about the nature

³² André Neher argued (I think correctly) that Maharal here anticipates a key feature of Kant’s epistemology. (*Le puits de l’exil*, p. 120.)

³³ Hebrew: אנשי חקרי לב. Maharal piggybacks on Deborah’s original pun חקקי לב / חקרי לב which derided the Reubenites for the shortfall between their intrepid pretensions and their cowardly performance. (Judges 5:15–16) Maharal adds the additional association with חקירה, one of the medieval synonyms for philosophy, implying that those who engage in philosophical inquiry are cowardly traitors to God’s cause just as the Reubenites were.

of the human mind and soul. But there is no spirit or substance in any of it, for what can mere physical man know, even if God should give him knowledge and wisdom? His knowledge and wisdom are mingled with the material, encased by and bound to matter, so how can he know immaterial entities? And if man cannot make contact with immaterial entities, then he is incapable of judging their nature and activity, unless the hand of the Lord has wrought this, by communicating His ways to Moses and later to the prophets, knowledge which the Sages received from them, and communicated the hidden mysteries to us through their midrashim and sayings. Thus when these philosophizing men theorized from their own opinion and their own mind about the *Lord's deeds*, there were some who went out on a completely strange way, and it would not be fitting to mention them or their words, were it not for what our rabbis said, "Learn diligently so that you may refute the heretic."³⁴

Maharal is scoring a polemical point which is as old as the debate between religion and philosophy.³⁵ If philosophy is capable of knowing divine truth, then religious claims must be trimmed, reinterpreted, and cut back where they conflict with the demonstrations of reason. But if philosophical pretensions to knowledge are discredited, the hand of tradition is strengthened accordingly. The time had not yet arrived where the skeptical sword could be seen to cut both ways, undercutting its own advocate's position as well as the opponent's.³⁶

Maharal does not clearly define the scope of his declaration of ignorance of God through reason. He is free to use it wherever he pleases, and he does so rather globally, to reject any reason-based argument of his opponents, whether concerning God's nature, knowledge, or miracles. Naturally he does not see where his own speculations might be subject to the same criticism he levels against his opponents. It is noteworthy, however, that in a later work he directs his attack at the cornerstone of medieval theological rationalism, the very proof for

³⁴ *Prodigies* p. 6. The last quote is from Mishnah Avot 2:14. Maharal is conflating the first two sayings of Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh, thus drawing the interpretation that they are two parts of one thought, i.e. that one should "be diligent in learning Torah" for the purpose of "knowing what to respond to the Epicurean."

³⁵ Judah Halevi and the anti-Maimonideans voiced this point in medieval Jewish thought. Richard Popkin has shown how the Renaissance saw a flourishing of skeptical arguments in the service of religious traditionalists, reinforced by the rediscovery of the classical skeptical schools of Sextus Empiricus and the Platonic Academy. See Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, Humanities and Harpers, 1964, especially Chapter 4 (on Veron, et al.).

³⁶ That would come in the late 17th and 18th centuries, with Pierre Bayle and Voltaire. See Popkin, *op. cit.*, Chapter 10.

God's existence.³⁷ It is not clear whether Ephraim Luntshitz would have known this argument of Maharal's at the time when he alluded to the view that the philosophers "failed dismally in the matter of God's existence."³⁸ But he might have inferred it from Maharal's wholesale attack on the theological rationalist position.

God's Knowledge. We have already seen how first Gersonides, then Eliezer, retreated from divine omniscience in order to accommodate human freedom while avoiding the paradox of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. Both Gersonides and Eliezer worked within the traditional medieval assumptions that: (1) God's knowledge is identical with God's essence; (2) God's essence has no plurality, therefore God's knowledge has no plurality; (3) God's essence does not change, therefore God's knowledge does not change. Maharal did not come from a philosophical background, so he had no investment in this entire set of assumptions. When he looked at the problem with a fresh eye, learning philosophy at a mature age with his outlook nourished on the Bible and Talmud, he saw a way out of the dilemma which had eluded his predecessors. Why not say that God's knowledge is an *act* of God, rather than identical with God's *essence*? God's acts have none of the restrictions of God's essence.³⁹ They can be plural. They can occur discretely, historically, responding to changing conditions.

For God—whom the rabbis called the Blessed Holiness, not the Blessed Intellect⁴⁰—His essence is unknowable, except that He is separate from any material thing, body, or created being. That is what is implied in the epithet, "the Holy and Blessed One," for "holy" means "separate." He is utmost simplicity. By being utterly simple, nothing is separate from

³⁷ *Splendor of Israel* (Hebrew *Tiferet Yisrael* pp. 50–51, cited in Sherwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 56–57). Perhaps Maharal did not even understand the logic of Maimonides's proof in *Guide* II, 1. He condemned the proof because it used the premise of the world's eternity in a hypothetical mode. He apparently did not appreciate that this was but one phase of a more comprehensive argument, which entertained the alternatives that the world is either created or eternal, and proved that whichever of these were assumed, one could still prove the existence of God. (*Guide*, I, 71)

³⁸ Preface to *Gleanings*, Appendix p. 361.

³⁹ In *Way of Life* 5:6 Maharal would claim that this understanding of God's knowledge was common to the kabbalistic authors with whom he was familiar. That it is implicit in the kabbalistic outlook (or some streams within that outlook), is probably true. But it may have been Maharal's innovation, standing at the intersection of the kabbalistic and philosophic traditions, to give this view philosophic formulation. (See Appendix, p. 336.)

⁴⁰ Maharal lampoons the philosophers, who he suggests ought to replace the time-honored epithet *הוא הקדוש ברוך הוא* with *השכל ברוך הוא*.

Him. For whatever has a boundary and is individualized by it, is thereby separated from what is not within its boundary. But He, being simple, has no boundary, so nothing is separate from Him, thus He knows all and is all-powerful. As He is without boundary, so all proceeds from Him, as will be shown. If He did not know all, or all did not proceed from Him, this would have to be because He was bounded as a specific entity, but that cannot be, because He cannot be delimited;⁴¹ that much is clear. God knows everything by His wisdom and motivates all by His power, for there is no distinction between the intellectual act by which He apprehends things and His actions by which He causes things, for the divine apprehension is also an action and is expressed by an active verb, e.g. “God knew,” which is similar to “God spoke”. . . . But the truth is as we said above, that one must not identify God’s knowledge with His essence. . . . When we say that His knowledge is not His essence, this removes the difficulty that a change in His knowledge would entail a change in His existence, for that knowledge is not His essence, but He is described as all-knowing. . . . Therefore what [Gersonides] claims, that [God’s performing miracles] would involve a change in His will, this is not a change in Him, just as a succession of different divine actions does not involve any change in Him.⁴²

In retrospect, the debate over God’s knowledge stems from the decision to take physical science or history as the model of knowledge in general. The Greek assertion that God’s knowledge is simple and unchanging, is intelligible in conjunction with the definition of God as Prime Mover (or first scientific principle of existence). It is a mission-statement of science at its inception, that science seeks to uncover the unchanging principles of existence, which explain how all existence coheres as a unity. Predictability is a consequence of the first two conditions. Without unitary coherence, without unchanging continuity, without predictability,⁴³ science would not be science. And the scientist’s ideal of the divine knowledge embodies all these traits.

But history presents a different model. History, even if it aspires occasionally to nomothetic clarity, is based fundamentally on an idiographic methodology. It describes the unique, the infinitely variable, the

⁴¹ מוגבל = “bounded, delimited, defined” (see גבול = *finis*, limit, boundary). Maharal plays here on the etymologically related notions of “define, bound, limit.” He interprets God’s indefinability as implying that God’s being is not delimited from other beings, hence God is in direct contact with everything and knows all beings in their changes and modifications. This panentheistic notion is rooted in the kabbalistic tradition.

⁴² *Prodigies* p. 9.

⁴³ Quantum physics has brought about a major qualification in this desideratum of the scientific enterprise.

unpredictable, the open-ended. The Bible gives us the first extended glimpse into a fundamentally historical view of reality, just as Greek philosophy starts the scientific quest.⁴⁴ If the scientist describes the unchanging patterns of reality, so the historian describes the unique acts of free actors. Divine knowledge as unchanging pattern, informing reality, is appropriate to a scientist-God. Divine knowledge as discrete acts, comprising the totality of existence but defying any universal categorizing, is appropriate to a historian-God. Maharal here follows the intellectual example of Judah Halevi, who preferred “I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt” to “In the beginning God created heavens and earth.” Even his commentary on Genesis 1:1 follows Rabbi Isaac in digressing from the cosmological agenda to the historical.

The Renaissance saw great strides forward both in laying the foundations for modern science (which would become consolidated in the 17th century with Galileo, Kepler, and Newton) and in the awakening self-awareness of man as a historical actor. Eliezer and Maharal responded in different ways to this dual challenge. Eliezer sought to preserve the medieval notion of God as Supreme Reason and basis of the rational structure of reality, while separating out human action as a realm in which uniformity and predictability did not apply. Maharal (like Scotus, Ockham, and the Protestants) de-emphasized the rational aspect of God and promoted will and freedom to prime ontological status.⁴⁵ He permitted and even encouraged study of the sciences, but on a secular basis. He cut short the pretensions of rational inquiry where it treaded on the domain of religious knowledge.

Cosmic Order Versus Miracles. The question of miracles was another of those intellectual knots that involved variously the questions of natural law, Biblical literalism, and divine foreknowledge. It was also an issue on which Gersonides, Eliezer, and Maharal held three very different positions. It is possible that Eliezer communicated his misgivings concerning Gersonides’s view to Maharal and coached him to write

⁴⁴ See Frank E. Manuel, *Shapes of Philosophical History*, Stanford 1965; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Princeton, 1953, Chapter 1; Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, Norton, NY 1960. The debate between the nomothetic and idiographic models of historiography amounts to a debate, whether history should measure its ideal by that of the natural sciences, or by its own innate intuitions of the nature of human reality.

⁴⁵ For the details of these developments in late scholastic philosophy as expressed in ethical philosophy, see Bonnie Kent, *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century*, Catholic University of America Press, 1995.

his critique of Gersonides in the Second Preface—only the critique turned out very differently from Eliezer's intention, and portrayed his own position in a negative light as well.

As we have seen, Eliezer was a strong proponent of an unchanging natural order. He even interpreted the creation narrative as the natural unfolding of a series of events predetermined by the structure of primordial matter from the first instant of creation. The daily rotation of the spheres during the six days of creation distributed the various elements naturally across the whole surface of the earth, a process whose very clockwork was more marvelous than if the Creator had been intervening constantly:

It is reasonable to suppose that all the creative actions of hylic matter were disseminated throughout the world by the rotation of the diurnal sphere. The case is similar to a cook who wishes to season a casserole. Intending for the spice to be spread evenly throughout the dish, he adds the seasoning at one spot and then stirs the ingredients thoroughly, then adds the next seasoning [and stirs, etc.]. So, too, was the action of the hylic matter by the decree of the Creator, spreading each new creation throughout the world in the course of a day. But God's action in making the hylic matter took place in a single instant and a single moment...

...If we were to assume that God created each particular *ex nihilo*, then we attribute to Him only the power to make something out of nothing. It adds nothing to one's glory if He can make one thing out of nothing, or a thousand things out of nothing. But our assumption adds greatly to God's glory, by saying that God had the power to make hylic matter out of nothing, and to invest it with the potential to take on any form and divest itself of those forms to take on others. By our assumption, hylic matter was able to take on the form of earth, and to invest the earth with the potential to bring forth living creatures. This testifies to the greater glory and greater perfection of God.⁴⁶

This vision of a seamless natural order testifying to the glory of the divine intelligence that designed it, has implications for Eliezer's view of miracles also. When he cites the dictum, "God made a condition with the sea, that it should split," it is evident that he understood it in the strict sense, that the time and place of the event were preordained and not left up to later discretion. Eliezer draws an analogy with the many diverse tasks that a goldsmith performs when making a goblet—burning wood, extinguishing the fire to make charcoal, heating the gold to soften it, then cooling it to harden it, etc. These diverse tasks are all

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; Appendix p. 292.

part of a unified process conceived as one—the making of a goblet. Similarly, all the diverse events that God orchestrated for the Israelite people were part of a single process, whose purpose is to inspire faith and help human beings earn their immortality.⁴⁷

Eliezer thought it perfectly consistent with his view of God's creative purpose to consider God the agent of miracles. While remaining true to the Biblical description, this did not contradict the philosophical principle of God's immutability, for the miracles were an integral part of God's single overall plan for human destiny. Eliezer was critical of Gersonides, who had assigned the miracles to the agency of the Active Intellect, a lesser being which in Gersonides's thought assumes an especially prominent role as governor of the world in accord with God's ultimate intentions.

Though Gersonides's decision in this regard seemed to slight God's dignity, he had good reasons to separate the historical phenomenon of miracles from the unchanging domain of God. Since Gersonides was a strong proponent of human freedom, the details of history were unpredictable in his view, and he perceived the consequences of this fact more clearly than Eliezer. Even if an Exodus was inevitable, its circumstances and timing were not. But if the miracles were assumed (as per the Biblical account) to be the direct effect of God's will, then either one of two consequences must ensue: (1) The miracle, programmed to occur at such-and-such a time in accordance with the immutable divine will, might possibly occur at an inappropriate time, because the unforeseen consequence of human action would cause the miracle and its intended human context to be out of sync with one another; or (2) God's will must be changeable, to respond spontaneously to human actions as they are performed by their human actors. Gersonides explicitly rejects the first alternative as absurd, and concludes that the miracles can be successfully preordained only if "there are no genuine possibilities in nature."⁴⁸ He also finds the second unacceptable, for he holds (in agreement with the standard medieval position) that the divine will is immutable. Therefore he assigns miracles not to God, but to the Active Intellect.

Maharal takes a third position entirely. In the bulk of the Second Preface, he considers the views of three opponents, to whom he addresses his arguments.

⁴⁷ *Deeds* III, 1; Appendix p. 308.

⁴⁸ See Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord*, Book VI, Chapter 10, JPS edition III, 479.

1. Unlike a certain radical thinker,⁴⁹ Maharal embraces miracles, and is not bothered that they seem to contradict the natural order. There is a supernal causality in addition to natural causality. To be sure, it is only in the history of Israel that the supernal causality is manifest. But the evidence of the Bible is clear on the matter, and only a sophist would deny it.
2. Maharal accepts Gersonides's point that an unchanging will cannot account for miracles that are part of the flux of history. But Maharal again breaks here with the entire medieval philosophical tradition by affirming that God's will can change. The divine will, like the divine knowledge, is an act of God, not the divine essence. Therefore a change in the divine will, like a change in the divine knowledge, can occur without imputing change to God's essence. For these reasons, Maharal agrees with Eliezer against Gersonides, that God is to be regarded as the author of miracles, not the Active Intellect.
3. Maharal dissents from Eliezer, without naming him, on how to understand the rabbinic dictum, "God set a condition with the sea, that it should split." By Maharal's understanding, the condition was open-ended: God reserved the right to call on the sea to split (and on the sun to stand still, and similarly with the rest of nature) whenever He might choose to do so. Maharal's expansive view of supernatural agency thus follows Halevi and Nahmanides rather than the Maimonidean tradition that Eliezer represents. At the same time, he holds a view of history as open-ended and expressing the perpetual unfolding of the divine response to human initiative:

What the rabbis said, "God set a condition with the sea that it should divide, etc.," this means that it was consistent with the order of existence that it *could* happen later, not that it was part of the order of existence that it *must* happen. Still, it is possible to alter the order from the side of the recipient, who can turn evil into good through mercy,⁵⁰ and good into evil through sin. If the Egyptians had repented, they would have overridden the predestined order. There is thus no difficulty here, for that which is pre-arranged can be altered through repentance and mercy, and

⁴⁹ The first opponent, though unnamed, seems to be Eliezer Eilburg. See Joseph Davis, "The *Ten Questions* of Eliezer Eilburg and the Problem of Jewish Unbelief in the 16th Century," *JQR* 91:3–4 (2001), pp. 293–336.

⁵⁰ "Mercy"—Hebrew רחמים (which in rabbinic Hebrew also means prayer). Either prayer or meritorious acts can result in a positive alteration in the divine decree regarding the subsequent course of events.

one should not object that this would constitute a change in the divine knowledge and the divine will, for this has been the way of God from all time, that mercy always annuls the decree. That which has been arranged by God from creation is one thing, and that which is arranged by Him through mercy is another. The one proceeds from order, and the other from mercy, but mercy has its own order.⁵¹

Conclusions

The debate between Eliezer Ashkenazi and Maharal is replete with meaning on many levels. If we regard the medieval debate between philosophy and kabbalah as a struggle over the relative weights to be assigned the Hellenic and Hebraic traditions in Jewish thought, then we may regard Eliezer as representing the Hellenic pole and Maharal the Hebraic pole within this context. However, the philosophic discourse was itself a novelty in northern-European Jewish thought. On one level, Maharal defends the naïve Biblical-rabbinic outlook that does not yet know philosophy, to protect it from pagan contamination. On another level, he gives sophisticated arguments that are partly derived from contemporary kabbalistic writers to whom he alludes occasionally, and are partly the intellectual instruments of the philosophers turned against themselves. The Zoharic kabbalah was itself a reaction against Maimonidean Aristotelianism, ostensibly in the name of a purer Biblical faith, but (whether innocently or knowingly) permeated with neo-Platonic elements, a Hellenic distillation that was perhaps more compatible with the supernatural dimension of Biblical thought than Aristotelian naturalism. Yet another motif in the discussion was the revival of Biblical narrative as possessing an autonomous dynamic; in this respect, both Eliezer and Maharal argue for Biblical historic consciousness against the philosophic perspective of unchanging eternity.

It is unlikely that Ephraim Luntshitz picked up consciously on all the historic implications of the discussion, though he was amazingly alive to some of the specific issues they presented. Coming from the school of Solomon Luria, he probably saw the issue in simpler terms, as a replay of the classic Maimonidean debate: Is Maimonidean philosophy compatible with Talmudic Judaism? The Eliezer-Maharal exchange introduced him to this world of controversy and helped him to come to his own position, which he would soon express publicly.

⁵¹ *Prodigies* p. 11, Appendix p. 328.

CHAPTER FIVE

EPHRAIM DISCOVERS PHILOSOPHY

(*GLEANINGS OF EPHRAIM*—1590)

הלא טוב עוללות אפרים מבציר אביעזר?

Are not Ephraim's gleanings better than Abiezer's vintage? (Judges 8:2)

Unriddling Another Preface

In 1590, Ephraim published his second book, *Gleanings of Ephraim*, a collection of sermons for Jewish holidays and life-cycle events (weddings, circumcisions, and a funeral). Like most such books of the period, it begins with a preface in a florid, allusive style, midway between prose and poetry. In that elegant medium, the author coyly alludes to events and preoccupations in his recent life in passages such as:

And this is the teaching of the gift-offering¹
which was brought to us from our sister Wisdom, the sister of Pleasantness,
and the name of her brother is: *He Will Be Brought As A Gift*
to the reverence which shall rise upon the head of those who revere the
Lord,
who have a name and hand upon the throne of Yah,
to sit on the seat of God in the heart of the sea of wisdom
in which the righteous enjoys safety everlasting,
not singed even when they walk in the midst of fire
nor shall rivers drown them
even when they come like a straitened stream
they shall not cause straitening to Ephraim.

(stanza skipped)

And this is the teaching of what arises on his mind²
saying, why are we sitting here many days

¹ Allusion to Leviticus 6:7: וזאת תורת המנחה—“And this is the *torah* (law/teaching) of the *minhah* (gift or meal offering).”

² וזאת תורת העולה על רוחו—alluding to Leviticus 6:2, the law of the burnt-offering which “goes up” in smoke. Ephraim stretches *olah* to the more general sense of “rise up, come to mind.” *Torat Ha-Olah* is the Hebrew title of Isserles’ work, *The Law of the Sacred Offering*.

while our brethren the house of Israel, are they not feeding in a land not theirs?

We remember the care through which we have passed amidst other cares—

This is many days we have cared about our redemption and our soul's liberation...

Ve-zot torat ha-olah... ("This is the teaching of what [a]rises") This punning reference (coupled with the "gift of wisdom" in the previous stanza) is as close as Ephraim will get to telling his readers: "I have just been reading Isserles's *Law of the Sacred Offering*, and have discovered from it the profound truths of Maimonidean philosophy." (The substantive evidence for this interpretation is found elsewhere in the book, especially in the first four sermons of Part II, as we shall see.) Ephraim is only slightly more open and communicative later in the preface, when he says:

Did you not know—have you not heard³—what happened to the sages of philosophy, who sank in the mighty waters and brought up a potsherd in their hand, failing dismally in the matter of God's existence? If that is the case, then by this plea every thinking person may exempt himself from treasure-hunting amid the deep dark depths of secret mysteries!

However, our rabbis have already refuted this view by saying, "The work is not yours to complete, but you are not free to desist from it." For every industrious thinking person is obligated to search in every hole and cranny, as far as his intellect can reach, and that is sufficient, and the rest he can leave to another. Indeed, if inquiry is based on the conjecture of reason alone, there may happen to the inquirer what happened to others, so that if one comes and builds a tower with its top in the heavens, and sets its foundations on the conjecture of his reason, suddenly there comes another man after him and topples it from its pedestal, knocking down wall and tower and all. "When the foundation is destroyed, what has the righteous accomplished?" (Psalm. 11:3) ["Unless the Lord builds a house,] its builders labor in vain on it." (Psalm. 127:1) For who knows if the first opinion was correct, or the second?

In that case, the only good thing is for a person to rely on true tradition, and to inquire, where are the scriptural sources and traditions which will testify and tell the reliable testimony of the Lord concerning God's existence and all the principles of doctrine of our Torah, and of all the

³ There is a colloqually newsy, headline-hawking quality to this passage. The value of the novel has had its attraction in every age, but it has become increasingly prominent since the Renaissance. Before the advent of periodical journals, preachers were often the bearers of important news.

desired deeds which a person shall do and live by them to eternal life, and “the way of life, a rebuke of discipline,” (Proverbs 6:23), to awaken the sleeping from the slumber of the time, and those who forget the truth in the vanities of the world, which is alone the intent of this work.

We have provided the key to understanding this riddle in our previous chapter. The first paragraph paraphrases Maharal’s indictment of the presumptuous philosopher who thinks he can storm heaven with his cobwebs of reason and prove God’s existence or discourse on God’s essence. In the second paragraph, Ephraim reacts to this dire reproach by staking out his own position, which mediates between Maharal and Eliezer. Reason provides not a panacea but a useful tool with its limitations, and the prudent will work with it the best he can. The one who “builds a tower with top in the heavens” until another topples it, is Gersonides, of whom Maharal wrote that “on that assumption [that the Active Intellect governs all] he has built his silver tower.”⁴ “Who knows if the first opinion was correct, or the second” confesses Ephraim’s perplexity—he does not consider Gersonides reliable after Maharal’s critique, but he is not about to jump on Maharal’s bandwagon either. In the third paragraph, Ephraim resolves to be guided by tradition in his selection from the arguments of reason. Where reason and tradition are in agreement, one may surely rely on them.

Thus does Ephraim discreetly express in this preface how he encountered the philosophical currents around him. His fuller response is found scattered in the remainder of the book.⁵

Core Sample: A Sermon for Sukkot

Though the debate over philosophy is the foreground of our interest here, it occupied a minor place in the concerns of the traditional Jews of Central Europe during this period. I shall try to convey a sense of this proportion by focusing here on a typical example of Ephraim’s sermonic art.

⁴ Maharal, *Prodigies*, Second Preface p. 9; Appendix p. 324.

⁵ Jacob Elbaum used this book as his major source in depicting Ephraim’s philosophical outlook in his study *Openness and Insularity*. We will be looking at some of the same materials in more detail, drawing more closely the connections between these texts and their background, which will hopefully add another dimension to their understanding.

The bulk of *Gleanings of Ephraim* is a collection of sermons, originally delivered in Yiddish, but rewritten into Hebrew for publication and edited to provide overall continuity. The lengthy Part II is devoted to holiday sermons—mostly for Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost), and Sukkot (Tabernacles) in that order. The finest sermons are *tours de force* of ingenuity, combining multiple texts and themes, subtly discussing artificial problems of seeming inconsistencies in the Talmudic style, while simultaneously imparting moral messages.

Sermon 22 of Part II is one of his finest examples.⁶ Ephraim starts with a midrashic parable of a king who visited a province that owed taxes. At three stages of his journey, the king met with delegations from the province and forgave a third of the taxes at each station. Similarly, God forgives the sins of Israel in stages at the three festivals of Rosh Hashanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Atonement), and Sukkot (Tabernacles).

But the atoning function of Sukkot is just a lead into his central theme. The sukkah (tabernacle)—a fragile hut with a porous roof—is symbolic of the protection of God. This protection must be understood metaphorically, for a porous roof lets the physical rain in! The notion of a tabernacle as protection is alluded to in Isaiah 4:6, which is immediately followed by the parable of the vineyard. What is the connection? God makes a tabernacle in the vineyard for the laborers who watch over the fruit of the tree of life (symbolizing Torah or the covenant of Judaism). Indeed, there are two tabernacles and two vineyards, an earthly and a heavenly, as Ephraim elaborates in a parable of his own invention:

A king sent his devoted and loyal servants to a distant land, indicating that they would be ordered to cultivate it and guard it. They were charged not to live off its produce during the time that they were working it, but the fruit of that vineyard would be put in storage for their eventual benefit, for it is very long-lasting, as opposed to other fruit which grows up in the morning and withers by the evening, and is not put to storage because it is readily available but does not keep well. Now since they were commanded not to live off that vineyard, the king had to provide them for their sustenance small vineyards which stood around the large vineyard beloved of the king. From these vineyards they could take fruit to eat; however these fruits could not be kept in storage, for they would not keep with the passing of time, nor would they survive the transpor-

⁶ A full translation of this sermon is provided in the Appendix, pp. 376–87.

tation back home. The foolish workers were seduced by the immediate benefit of the small vineyards, which could be enjoyed at once and were necessary for their immediate survival, which was not the case with the large and spacious vineyard, the benefit of whose fruit can only be appreciated after a long time. Now as they were blind (though blessed with eyes) and shortsighted, they withdrew from the larger project, and this for two reasons. The first reason is what we already said, that the benefit of the small vineyards was tangible and evident, so they cultivated them regularly, sensing that their home lay there, while they worked on the large vineyard only sporadically, as the benefit was remote to them. The second reason is that as they grew apart from each other, the team fragmented and their cooperative project disintegrated, like that other project of the Tower of Babel, which fell apart because the players could not work together; therefore they chose to work on their own individual tiny vineyards, each by himself. When the king saw how the project fell apart for these two reasons, he decided to mend the breach through the following two injunctions:

(1) They should dwell only occasionally in the tabernacles of the small vineyards, but dwell regularly in the large vineyard. By this means, they should come to recognize that that is where their true home lies, while the cultivation of the small vineyards is of secondary importance.

(2) They should always band together. By this means, they will succeed in their purpose, and assist each other in performing the work of the king as he commanded.⁷

In the remainder of the sermon, Ephraim unpacks the significance of this parable. The basis of his idea is the Talmudic injunction that during the festival of Sukkot a person should make the fragile tabernacle his primary habitation, and his sturdy house a secondary abode. Ephraim's moral is that our life on earth is but a temporary dwelling, and our permanent abode is with God. We ought to make God's work the primary end and our material subsistence a means to that end. In the course of things, we lose the proper perspective and confuse the primary with the secondary, the temporal with the eternal. The reversal of the festival of Sukkot—living in a temporary hut as if it were our primary dwelling—should help us set things right again.

Similarly, Ephraim uses the rabbinic symbolism of the four species of the lulav—the palm, myrtle, willow, and citron—to point an equally apt moral. Just as the four species have different characteristics but are bound together in performance of the ritual, so do all the members of

⁷ *Gleanings* II, 22, Vol. I p. 202; Appendix pp. 377–78.

the Israelite community have complementary virtues for whose sake they must work together in a common effort to realize God's purpose.

So far, Ephraim is working in the traditional rabbinic mode, using parable and symbol, sanctified by tradition, to teach moral values. However, he goes a small step beyond the traditional perspective by raising his use of the parable form to self-consciousness. In this connection, he cites Maimonides's philosophical analysis of figurative language as providing the theory for his practice:

This inquiry is based on the principle that it is the way of the scriptures to express the notion of protection in terms of "shade" or "roof," for it is the way of those who speak in parables to take something from familiar life as a figure for what is hidden, to mete out to man's ear what it is capable of hearing. In the same way, we find verses which attribute to the Holy and Blessed One corporeal organs, such as "the eyes of the Lord," "the hand of the Lord," and the like, all of which is to express the matter in a style for the masses, as Maimonides explained in [the *Guide*,] Part I. In this respect, we find scriptures which express God's salvation metaphorically as rain, as it says, "and He will come to us like the rain" (Hosea 6:3), since the benefit and need of rain is well recognized, as the lives of all beings are dependent on rain, so they are dependent also on the utterance of the Omnipresent Blessed One, for if the Holy One were to remove His protection and abandon them to chance occurrences, they would quickly perish; but you who hold fast to the Lord are all alive today, (Deuteronomy 4:4) standing and enduring. Therefore they described the Holy and Blessed One as a protecting shadow, as it says, "The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your shade [upon your right hand]." (Psalm 121:5) For whoever comes in under the shade of His roof to take shelter under His wings is saved from rain, from downpour and from scorching heat—all of which are symbols for chance events which befall one from the astral configuration above, as it says: "A tabernacle (*sukkah*) will serve for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain." (Isaiah 4:6) For there is no escaping these, unless it please God to let him save his soul by coming in to take shelter in the shadow of the Almighty. Therefore the ancients saw fit to compare the covering of the *sukkah* to the shade of the Almighty.⁸

The Maimonidean analysis of image and metaphor belongs not to the ideational content of his sermon, but to his methodology and practice. The essential truth of his cited texts is ultimate and unchanging; the linguistic vehicle is a human product which is individual and

⁸ Appendix pp. 376–377.

open-ended. This very circumstance empowers Ephraim to join in the age-old enterprise of creating new images and forms of expression for eternal truths. If the prophets could employ the image of the vineyard for expressing the divine-human project, Ephraim can extend it and stipulate two vineyards, one for short-term subsistence and another for eternal reward. If the Talmudic rabbis could invent parables to elucidate God's ways, so can the rabbis of Poland. Ephraim will have no part of the medieval doctrine of generational decline. If the prophets were as men, we are not as asses by comparison, but men as well.⁹ Ephraim was not shy about asserting his own significance, and his coining a new parable to illuminate old parables is one example of it.

Sermon 22 is characteristic of the outlook expressed throughout the *Gleanings of Ephraim*. Even its specific imagery recurs elsewhere in the book. The start of the Introduction uses the images of the vineyard and the Four Species:

Are not these the *Gleanings of Ephraim* which he has gleaned and harvested in the harvest of Abiezer and in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts, whose fruit He has entrusted to the guardians—the fruit of His tree to Whom splendor and majesty belong, and branches of palms which mutate and ascend, producing a root below and the fruit of the Tree of Life above...

His preference of eternal for temporal goods is a major theme throughout Ephraim's works. This is announced prominently to Part I, which is devoted to elaboration of the Talmudic parable of King Monobaz:

It is related of King Monobaz that he dissipated all his own hoards and the hoards of his fathers in years of scarcity. His brothers and his father's household came in a deputation to him and said to him, "Your father saved money and added to the treasures of his fathers, and you are squandering them." He replied: "My fathers stored up below and

⁹ The assertion of the rights of the present as against the past is one of the key distinguishing features of the Renaissance and of modernity. It is not an all-or-nothing proposition, however, particularly among those exponents of the tradition whom we are studying here, who had to balance and adjudicate the claims of the old and the new. If this interpretation seems far-fetched in the case of Ephraim, there is much corroborative evidence in his habit of mild boasting, such as: "Other commentators went out to gather and found not [but here is the correct interpretation];" "this is a precious interpretation"; etc. (See the Introduction to *Precious Ornament*, where he explains his habit of using the latter phrase as a signal of the originality of his interpretation, Appendix p. 398.)

I am storing above, as it says, ‘Truth springs out of the earth and justice¹⁰ looks down from heaven.’ (Psalms 85:12) My fathers stored in a place which can be tampered with, but I have stored in a place which cannot be tampered with, as it says, ‘Righteousness and justice are the base of His throne.’ (Psalms 97:2) My fathers stored something which produces no fruits, but I have stored something which produces fruits, as it is written, ‘Hail the just man, for he shall fare well; he shall eat the fruit of his works.’ (Isaiah 3:10) My fathers gathered treasures of money, but I have gathered treasures of souls, as it is written, ‘[The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life;] a wise man acquires souls.’ (Proverbs 11:30) My fathers gathered for others and I have gathered for myself, as it says, ‘It will be to your merit.’ (Deuteronomy 24:13) My fathers gathered for this world, but I have gathered for the World to Come, as it says, ‘Your righteousness shall march before you, etc.’ (Isaiah 58:8)”¹¹

Sermon 22 is also characteristic of the *Gleanings* with respect to a casual reference Ephraim makes in this sermon to the 15th-century Spanish preacher Isaac Arama.¹² Here again this sermon shows itself a microcosm of the book. Arama (who displayed his philosophical erudition even as he argued against the positions of the philosophers) is one of the most-cited authors throughout the *Gleanings of Ephraim*. For the most part, the references are as trivial as this one, yielding no profound philosophical ideas but only casual interpretations. However, in the aggregate they show that Ephraim read Arama widely in the years he was composing these sermons. Ephraim notes in his introduction:

The second part [of this work] speaks of the mysteries and wonders alluded to in the set-times of the Lord: Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Shabbat, Hanukkah, and Purim. For I have not seen any author who sticks his head into the exposition of the details and general purposes of every matter performed on these sacred days, except for a little bit that I saw in the *Binding of Isaac* on the portions [of the festival calendar in Leviticus]....¹³

¹⁰ Each verse cited contains a reference to the keyword *tzedek* (justice), *tzaddik* (just man), or *tzedakah* (righteousness, merit), all related by implication to the common term *tzedakah* in the sense of almsgiving.

¹¹ The selection is from BT *Bava Batra* 11a. Ephraim devotes all of Part I to an extended homiletical commentary on this parable, as a kind of thematic prologue to the remainder of the book.

¹² “This [reference] should be understood in the sense explained in the *Binding of Isaac*, that all temporal possessions are symbolized by the sun.” (*Gleanings* II, 22, Appendix p. 378 (see note 32).) The references to Arama’s *Binding of Isaac* in *Gleanings of Ephraim* are pervasive and range throughout the length and breadth of Arama’s work. Ephraim’s later works cite Arama regularly but less frequently.

¹³ *Gleanings*, Introduction, Vol. I, p. 22 [Hebrew edition].

Arama is not a philosophical model for Ephraim; his anti-Maimonidean polemic, reacting to Averroistic excesses and the catastrophe of 1391, did not appeal to the new philosophical enthusiast in the Talmudic hinterlands of Poland. What Ephraim admired and learned from is the polished sermonizer with a wealth of sources before him and centuries of literary tradition behind him, who can artfully blend Biblical, Talmudic, midrashic, philosophical and mystical sources in a rhetorical progression centered on a common theme. Ephraim had served his apprenticeship in this genre in *City of Heroes* with the 13th-century kabbalistic exegete Baḥya ben Asher as his master; in *Gleanings of Ephraim*, Arama was the dominant influence; in *Precious Ornament*, his chief interlocutor would be the urbane, conservative Maimonidean Issac Abravanel. Through them, the Talmudic-educated Ephraim repeatedly broadened his literary culture and stylistic models from immersion in the Spanish masters. Though their outlooks differed, each of them in his own way integrated the recourse to philosophical and mystical sources in an exegetical-homiletical discourse which was rooted in the midrashic tradition.

Philosophical Manifesto

Though philosophy plays but a minor role in most of the *Gleanings of Ephraim*, the first four chapters of Part II (and also the first chapter of Part III) are exceptional. It is here that he unpacks the philosophical agenda to which he alluded cryptically in the Preface. In fact, it is almost as if these chapters form a third introduction to the book as a whole. In the Preface, Ephraim gives a poetic preamble to introduce the themes of the book symbolically. In Part I, he declares the core of his religious outlook (the notion that this world is a vestibule in which to prepare for the World to Come), which would remain constant throughout all his intellectual development. And in Part II, chapters 1–4, he pays his respects to the new intellectual currents which have shaped his thinking in recent years, highlighting the new elements in his current position.¹⁴

¹⁴ A generous selection from Sermons II, 1–4 is provided in the Appendix, pp. 362–76.

Ephraim starts in Sermon 1 by adopting Maimonides's *Guide* I, 72 as his primary philosophical text. His choice of this text is most significant. It was the text from which Isserles quoted more extensively than any other in his Four Propositions in *Law of the Sacred Offering* Part II. It is arguably the closest that a conservative Maimonidean can come to finding a proof for God in the *Guide* without resorting to the "objectionable" proof in *Guide* II, 1 (objectionable because it is too abstruse, and because it resorts to the heretical Aristotelian assumption of the eternity of the world). Though Maimonides does not present it as a proof for God, it is possible to read it as such, particularly the passage:

In the same way there exists in being something that rules it as a whole and puts into motion its first principal part granting it the power of putting into motion, in virtue of which this part governs the things that are other than itself. And if one supposed that this thing had passed into nothingness, it would have to be supposed that the existence of this sphere as a whole, that of its principal and that of its subordinate parts, had also passed into nothingness. For it is in virtue of this thing that the existence of the sphere and of every part of it endures. This thing is the Deity, may its name be exalted.¹⁵

The inference could be phrased somewhat more sharply: The non-existence of God would entail the non-existence of the world, which depends on God for its existence. But the world exists. Therefore, God exists.

Another interpretation (close to the use Isserles makes of this passage) is that it is not an argument for God's *existence*, but an intuitive leap into understanding God's *nature*. The explicit burden of this entire chapter in the *Guide* is after all to explore the analogy: *God is to the world as the soul is to man*. By examining this analogy, we come to understand the relation which God has to the world, on the analogy of what a soul does for its owner: it provides its pattern of organization; it gives it life; it enables it to exist and be active. Thus we come to knowledge of God *a posteriori*, by studying the works of creation (the path to knowledge of God set out in the interpretation of Jacob's Ladder which Ephraim would borrow from Mordecai Jaffe).

Though Ephraim has the key to the question of knowledge of God in his hand at this point, he passes it by. He uses the passage instead for a moral lesson: just as the parts of the universe must work together

¹⁵ *Guide*, I, 72, Pines, Vol. I, p. 191.

harmoniously in order for it to exist “as a single individual who is composed of many parts,” so ought we to cooperate and work harmoniously together, pursuing peace as the condition of our social existence.

There is a simultaneous advance and retreat in this move. It is the first time Ephraim has quoted Maimonides at all. He not only mentions him, but cites him as an authority, with the honorific appellation “the Master-Guide” (*ha-rav ha-moreh*). He approvingly cites one of the most crucial passages in the *Guide* for the question of human knowledge of God, the passage which Isserles had raised to such centrality in his own work. But it is almost as if by going this far, Ephraim has risked too much. To cite this passage in authoritative support of the position that we can achieve knowledge of God (even if only through God’s works), would confront Maharal directly on a point of controversy. That Ephraim is aware of this implication, we may infer from the allusion to the Maharal-Eliezer dispute in his Preface. Maharal was already installed in Prague and revered as one of the great authorities in the Ashkenazic world. He was also Ephraim’s senior by several decades. So Ephraim retreats. Having asserted his right to quote Maimonides as authority, he wishes to show he is doing it in a “safe” way. He is only exploiting the use of this passage for its moral teaching, namely that it teaches us the importance of harmonious cooperation and peace.

In passing, Ephraim also enunciates a philosophical point which was relatively uncontroversial: that man occupies a middle position in the hierarchy of creation, combining the characteristics of the upper and lower realms. This is a point which was central for Ephraim at all times, and which would lay the foundations for one of his finest rhetorical points in the *Precious Ornament* on Deuteronomy 32:1.¹⁶

Sermon 2: Devekut, Rationality, and the Reason for Sacrifices

In Sermon 2, Ephraim manages to score two more points for Maimonides while showing off his philosophical erudition. Again the main purpose of his sermon is moralistic, to stress how the purpose of life, according to the Torah, is to observe mitzvot in order to earn eternal felicity. However, he is able to weave his thematic web broadly

¹⁶ This is the same point we cited at the beginning of Chapter 1 of this work, from his comment on Genesis 1:31.

enough to include several ideas with philosophical connections. He starts off by announcing the many and varied themes he will develop:

If it is accepted as true that one who is commanded and does a mitzvah is greater than one who is not commanded but does it, and slander is counted as transgressing three categories of sin, and the satisfaction of one hour in the next world is greater than all of this world, then it will be easy to explain the reason why the Torah would have fittingly begun ‘This month shall be first,’ and why the quote ‘He declared the power of His deeds’ is an answer to this, and why *Shabbat Haggadol* coincides with the Torah readings of *Metzora*’ or *Aharei Mot* in leap years.¹⁷

The overarching religious idea which gives context and unity to this grab-bag of themes is the felicity of the soul in the afterlife, as he elaborates:

We must start from the principle that it is not too wonderful or remote to consider that the end-goal of the perfected person is to cleave to God, for this is the whole purpose of man who aspires to this rank, that his soul should cleave to the First Cause, blessed be He, in the eternal world, when he eats in this world of the Torahitic tree of knowledge, which by eating he will live forever by reason of that cleaving, as it says, “You who cleave to the Lord your God are all alive today.” (Deuteronomy 4:4) For the Holy and Blessed One is called the Fountain of Life.... However, no being aspires to this cleaving except the human being who is created in the image of God and inwardly resembles Him in being able to understand and reason. This is the reason for the cleaving of the knower with the Known.¹⁸

Is this ideal Maimonidean? Yes, but not exclusively so. It is characteristic of Ephraim in passages like this that he expresses his central religious ideas in terminology that was originally coined by philosophers, then adopted by mystics, and has ended up in the public domain. Such is the fate of the notion of *devekut*—“attachment” or “cleaving” to God in the hereafter. Whose concept of *devekut* do we have here? It is totally imprecise, and anyone can understand it in his own way. Calling God the First Cause is a little more philosophical, but still not unambiguously so. (Maharal would also call God “the Cause of Causes” [*illat ha-illot*].) However, Ephraim reinforces the philosophical sense at the end, where he says that reason and understanding is the image of God within humanity consists of reason and understanding, “and this is the

¹⁷ Appendix, p. 364.

¹⁸ Appendix, p. 364 [*ibid.*].

reason for the cleaving of the knower with the Known.” The interpretation of the divine image as equating to man’s rational nature is from Maimonides *Guide* I, 1. Ephraim’s conclusion that “this is the reason for the cleaving of the knower with the Known” is a clear allusion to the philosophical formula that in God, the knowledge, the Knower, and the Known are all one.¹⁹ This is a decidedly intellectualist conception of God, and one with which Maharal had specifically taken issue in his preface to the *Prodigies of the Lord*, which Ephraim had read. It was precisely this intellectualist conception of God which Maharal had derided when he said that the Jewish term for God is the “Blessed Holiness” and not the “Blessed Intellect.” Ephraim acknowledges Maharal’s warning in his preface, and goes blithely on here to embrace the Maimonidean rationalism against which Maharal had warned. He may even be echoing Horowitz’s daring challenge to speculation in the 1577 first edition of *Lovingkindness of Abraham*:

R. Samuel [Ibn Tibbon] says that the word השכל [“understanding” in Jeremiah 9:23] means that one should comprehend with his intellect the nature of every existent being which is produced through causation, such as the heavens, and the super-heavens, and the array of the spheres, their processions and their number; the earth and all that is on it; the four elements and everything that is in them; how the entire world was created, the arrangement of its various parts, and its end-goal; what is the soul, and whether the soul of man is immortal, and by virtue of what will man merit eternal existence, whether through contemplation or through deeds, and to what will the soul cleave after death, whether to the Active Intellect or to the blessed God.

To be sure, Ephraim’s answers to Horowitz’s questions are mostly on the conservative side. It is clearly through deeds that man will merit immortality, and it is most likely to God, not the Active Intellect, that the soul will cleave after death. But the intellectual nature of the human soul, and the common intellectual nature with God which is the basis for that cleaving, put Ephraim at least in the moderate Maimonidean camp.

Ephraim is able to exploit another philosophical cliché when he speaks of the “rational soul” which distinguishes man from the beasts. This is a key part of the basic philosophical psychology which is articulated in Chapter 1 of Maimonides’s *Eight Chapters* (published thanks to

¹⁹ See Maimonides *Guide* I, 68 and Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* XII, 7.

Horowitz) and was rapidly passing into popular parlance in the Renaissance world. Ephraim characteristically integrates it thematically into his discourse in multiple ways. For one thing, he weaves together the philosophical theme of “rational soul” with the rabbinic moral theme of “evil tongue” (defamatory speech), and he is able to do so because in Hebrew (as in Greek) one of the terms for “rational” is “speaking” (*logikos*, *medabber*). Speaking is the outward aspect of that of which thinking is the inner aspect. Ephraim has a profound grasp of this conceptual relationship. He is able to provide evidence for it on several levels. He reaches into the Targum on Genesis 2:7 which translates נפש חיה (“living soul”) as רוח ממללא (“speaking soul”). He also finds texts in Psalms and Proverbs which support this parallelism:

This advantage [of man over the beasts] comes to man from the aspect of the tongue, for the superiority of man is none other than the rational soul, which is called the “speaking soul,” as it says, “The man became a living soul,” which Onkelos translates, “a speaking soul.” In that case, speech is the superiority which man possesses over all the animals, for external speech is the messenger of the internal soliloquy of the heart, for the heart forges the thought and its messenger the tongue goes out and speaks what is in the person’s heart, as it says, “My heart is astir with gracious words; I speak my poem to a king; my tongue is the pen of an expert scribe.” (Psalms 45:2) From here it is clearly evident that the tongue is the pen of the heart.

Once it is granted that the tongue holds the essential superiority of man over all the other animals, it follows that the tongue requires extra guarding more than the other organs, and similarly the heart which is the source of the interior soliloquy, as it says, “More than all that you guard, guard your heart, for it is the source of life,” (Proverbs 4:23) and: “Who is the man who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech.” (Psalm 34:13–14) We do not find “guarding” spoken of any of the other organs, just of the heart and the tongue...²⁰

Later in the same sermon, Ephraim elaborates on the rabbinic principle of the superiority of commandedness (“greater is one who is commanded and performs than one who is uncommanded”) and invokes it in support of the controversial Maimonidean interpretation of the Biblical sacrifices. According to Maimonides (in Guide III, 32), the sacrifices were instituted for the ancient Israelites to wean them from idolatry. As they were already so habituated to offering sacrifices (which

²⁰ Appendix pp. 364–65.

they did so to pagan idols), it would have been hopeless (except by way of miracle contravening human free-will) to try to force them to give up this deeply-entrenched customary behavior. Instead, God commanded them to change their religious allegiance from idols to the true God, but to modify the manner of worship only gradually, by eliminating images and curtailing abominable excesses. Thus, sacrifices were not valued as an end in themselves, but only as a means to an end (“secondary intention” as opposed to “primary intention,” in the medieval terms of the debate). This Maimonidean position was roundly condemned by many of the medievals, especially Nahmanides, who enthusiastically affirmed the sacrificial service as embodying positive value in itself. Even Gersonides affirmed the intrinsic value of the sacrificial worship, and devoted extended passages of his commentary on the latter chapters of Exodus and the beginning of Leviticus to philosophical and allegorical understanding of specific aspects of the ritual. As we have seen, Isserles’s *Law of the Sacred Offering* is on its most basic and literal level an inquiry into the symbolic meaning of the laws of sacrificial worship.

Ephraim does not wade very deep into these waters of controversy. He adopts as his straw man Isaac Arama, who in his commentary on Leviticus had summarized the anti-Maimonidean position and added his stamp of approval to the critique. It is here that Ephraim intercedes in defense of Maimonides. Ephraim explores the division of rabbinic opinion between those who hold that the commanded worshipper is worthier than the uncommanded, and those who hold the reverse. The sacrifices of Abel and Noah were interpreted by both camps to support their respective positions. Abel’s and Noah’s sacrifices differed from Israel’s in that they were uncommanded (for better or worse, depending on one’s position). This meshes with Maimonides’s “wean from idolatry” thesis as follows—as there was no idolatry in the days of Abel and Noah, there was no need to uproot it, and that is why they were not commanded in matters of sacrifice. By the time of the Israelites, there was idolatry, and therefore God commanded them to offer sacrifices, to keep them in their accustomed practice while weaning them from the idolatrous object of that practice.

However, the anti-Maimonideans argued that the institution of sacrificial ritual had intrinsic, not just instrumental-pedagogic value. Witness the sacrifices of Abel and Noah! Since there was no idolatry then, uprooting idolatry could not have been a reason for their offering sacrifices. Therefore sacrifice has intrinsic value as a means of worshipping God.

Ephraim turns this argument on its head. The issue, he says, is not sacrifice as such, but *commanded* sacrifice. All the midrashim which compare the sacrifices of Abel and Noah with the Israelites emphasize that the former were uncommanded, the latter commanded. Why did not God command sacrifice in the times of Abel and Noah? Because there was no idolatry then. Clearly, then, Maimonides was right, and sacrifice is *commanded* only when there is idolatry. Clearly, then, weaning the people from idolatry was the reason for commanding it.

It is hard to pigeonhole Ephraim's position here, beyond the fact of his scoring a point for Maimonides against a formidable array of opponents. His method is apparently quite conservative: arguing from an array of rabbinic texts and taking their evidence where it will lead. He is very much the student here of his master R. Solomon Luria, the maverick Talmudist who recognized no other authority than the Talmud and stood by the positions it yielded for him even when they went against the common wisdom. Ephraim does not use any philosophical argument here, even though his deployment of rabbinic evidence supports a pro-philosophical conclusion. Did he think about the possible radical implications of this conclusion—that the sacrifices might not be legislated for all time, that the prayers of traditional Jews for a rebuilt Temple and for the restoration of the sacrifices might be for naught? On this he is silent. This would probably not cross the listener's mind. The rhetorical effect of the argument is: R. Ephraim is no radical, but Maimonides has come out vindicated. Maimonides is kosher. This is very much in the spirit of Isserles's defense of Maimonides in *Law of the Sacred Offering*.

Sermon 3: Seeing with Both Eyes

In Sermon 3, Ephraim's philosophical agenda coincides for the first time with the sermon's central theme. Ephraim takes as his text the tradition recorded in Talmud *Hagigah* that one who is blind in one eye is free from the commandment of רִאִיָּה—"seeing" or "being seen" at the Temple at the three annual pilgrimage festivals. Technically, the law applies to being physically present at the Temple during the festivals. Ephraim generalizes to the larger sense of "seeing," i.e., being face-to-face in relationship with God. The two-eyed person is understood symbolically as the person who is gifted with both ordinary compre-

hension, to understand the outer aspect of the laws, and with special insight, to understand its hidden meanings:

The first principle, which should be evident to all the discerning, is that we are the people of the Lord who believe with a perfect faith that this is the Torah which the Lord bestowed on his people. . . . Theirs is the right of the firstborn, to take a double portion by possessing two worlds, as the law of the firstborn prescribes. For the attainment of this purpose He bestowed on them this one Torah which has two portions, in that each mitzvah has both an evident and a hidden meaning.

The evident meaning is to privilege them for its sake with all the necessities of this world which are evident to the sense of sight. This refers to all the common mitzvot such as eating unleavened bread, removing leaven, performance of the rituals of *sukkah*, *lulav*, *tefillin*, *mezuzah*, etc. The hidden meaning is to privilege them with the hidden eternal world. This is the divine inquiry: to enter into the divine mysteries which are alluded to in each mitzvah in the Torah.²¹

Developing this “second sight” to perceive the mysteries of the common mitzvot will require a kind of enlightenment, which is described figuratively by Jacob’s ladder. Here Ephraim quotes Jaffé’s interpretation of Jacob’s ladder as a fourfold cognitive ascent in the introduction to the *Royal Garment*:

It was for the sake of the mysteries of the Torah that the angels sought to receive it, for by means of those mysteries the enlightened can ascend the ladder of levels equivalent to “Sinai,” (סלם [ladder] = סיני [Sinai] = 130), for it was on Sinai that the secrets of Torah were transmitted. It is like a ladder and a paved road—it is called the way of sanctity—to elevate the inquirer from level to level and from inquiry to inquiry until he comes to attain and to see the radiant splendor and glory of the blessed God’s Shekhinah. For intellectual comprehension ascends from level to level in the mystery of the vision of the ladder which Jacob saw, in accordance with the rabbinic midrash which said that the ladder had four levels.

This is because every investigator needs to understand first the essence of the natural beings in the lowest world. From there he will ascend to the next higher level, namely the comprehension of the beings in the middle world of the celestial bodies, and from there to the comprehension of the beings in the highest world, namely the angels. From there he will ascend to the comprehension of God’s existence from the aspect of His deeds and actions. These are the four levels that were in the ladder, according to the mystery of the verse, “And behold there was a ladder set on the

²¹ Appendix, p. 367.

earth”—this is the lowest world—“and its head reached heaven”—this is the middle world—“and the angels of God”—this is the highest world—“and behold the Lord was standing upon it”—this is the comprehension of God’s existence.²²

Ephraim recognizes that the majority of people will have difficulty following such an arduous intellectual path. However, they should not give up hope, for God has provided more than one path to reach Him—

To arrive at the secrets corresponding to all these levels, the discerning inquirer is aided by the detailed practices performed on the three festivals of the Lord, the holy convocations, and by the other mitzvot in the Torah. But not many are able to attain these secrets because of the intellectual limitations of the inquirer and the profundity of the subject, and they only take these things in their basic sense. Therefore the divine wisdom has seen fit to set special occasions for Israel, three times during the year, to guide the footsteps of those poor in wisdom and understanding along upright paths, the ways of the Lord, and to teach them knowledge and sage counsel in His holy place which is better suited than other places to attaining wisdom (“for from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem”), until their path be well-paved toward the Lord to ascend the mountain of the Lord and stand in His holy place, and to come to the realization of the existence of God and see the splendor of the presence of the supreme King from the particular works.

However, the intellectual elite who are capable of plumbing the deeper secrets of God’s mysteries are duty-bound to do so as much as they are able—

It says, “They shall not appear before Me empty-handed,” (Exodus 34:20) in the sense of “It is not an empty word for you,” which the rabbis interpreted, “If it is empty, the fault is with you,” i.e. because of your limited comprehension, but no mitzvah has any aspect which is empty, without significance, but is replete with the deep dark depths of secret mysteries. Therefore it says, “They shall not appear before Me empty-handed,” that you should not think that this pilgrimage ascent is an empty matter without significance, but when you enter into the courtyards of inquiry and investigation, even if you cannot comprehend everything in its deepest truth with full clarity, nevertheless you are not free to desist from it, but whatever it is in your power to do, do it, as it says, “each according to the gift of his hand, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you.” (Deuteronomy 16:17) Thus you should inquire and inspect up to the point that your intellect

²² Appendix pp. 367–68.

is capable of reaching, according to the blessing of the Lord your God who has give you intelligence and understanding...²³

Three phrases in this last paragraph echo the Preface, where Ephraim alluded to the debate over philosophy. The first is the description of the subject matter as “replete with the deep dark depths of secret mysteries.” The second is the citation of Rabbi Tarfon’s dictum, “The work is not yours to complete, but you are not free to desist from it.” The third is the resolution that each person should inquire “up to the point that one’s intellect is capable of reaching,” and be satisfied with that attainment. Ephraim thus equates the inquiry into the deeper meaning of the mitzvot of the festivals with the metaphysical quest he discussed earlier. The reader of the book will note further that the entire Second Part of the *Gleanings of Ephraim*—the longest part, comprising approximately half the book—is occupied with this very task of elucidating the hidden meaning of the laws of the festivals. Ephraim has thus cast himself in the role of this inquirer after hidden meaning of the laws of the festivals, through whose knowledge the student attains the status of being “two-eyed” and thus subject to the obligation of “seeing” God. The connection between understanding these hidden meanings and gaining entry into the World to Come is elucidated in Sermon 22, where the hidden meaning of *sukkah* and *lulav* turns out to be precisely their symbolic reference to the superiority of the Next World over this one.

Ephraim repeatedly uses a phrase, חקירה ודרישה,²⁴ which confirms this identification of the metaphysical and homiletical quests. This phrase, deriving from Deuteronomy 13:15, is a common idiom derived from the standard legal terminology denoting the court’s duty to cross-examine witnesses to get at the truth. However, Ephraim seems to be using it in this context for one of his frequent *doubles entendres*. The word חקירה is one of the common synonyms for philosophy, while דרישה is an accepted synonym for midrash, i.e., traditional rabbinic-style homiletic interpretation which plays with the text in order to find multiple meanings, often of a moralistic kind. By pairing these two, Ephraim is very likely suggesting that the old-style rabbinic learning

²³ Appendix p. 369.

²⁴ “Therefore it is said, ‘all your males,’ specifying the males because they are the strong and mighty ones to stand in the palace of inquiry and investigation” (המה גבורי) (כח לעמוד בהיכל החקירה והדרישה). (Appendix p. 368)

which he learned from his master R. Solomon Luria, and the new-style learning of the philosophers which first R. Eliezer Ashkenazi then his colleagues R. Mordecai Jaffe and R. Abraham Horowitz taught him to find in Maimonides's *Guide*, are mutually compatible and arrive at the same result by different roads. The candid reader may complain that Ephraim has made his task too easy, and deluded himself that he can go on using the old-style midrashic interpretation while pretending that it has magically acquired philosophic dimensions and uncovered new truths. Indeed, the actual philosophical substance of Ephraim's intellectual explorations is rather modest and not very original. But as a pronouncement in the debate over philosophy in 16th-century eastern Europe, Ephraim's words have striking force. By highlighting forcefully the similarities of the old and new ways, Ephraim has given philosophical study—at least of the Maimonidean corpus—as strong a certification of kosher status as was possible.

The appearance of the “Jacob's Ladder” image in almost the exact terms that Mordecai Jaffe used it, is important as evidence of the relationship between the two men at this time. Both the *Gleanings of Ephraim* and the first volume of Jaffe's *Royal Garment* were published in 1590. It is unlikely that Ephraim would have had time to purchase the first volume of Jaffe's newly published work, read and digest the passage in question, and insert it into the place where it now exists in the *Gleanings*, and still have the manuscript ready for publication the same year. Ephraim had probably been familiar with Jaffe's use of the image for some time, and adopted it in his own discourse because it expressed better than anything else the intellectual ideal he wanted to advocate. Jaffe had been back in Poland since the early 1570s, when Ephraim was just starting his career as itinerant preacher in Poland. Both Jaffe and Ephraim became more active over the years in the Council of the Four Lands. It is likely that Ephraim preached at times in Jaffe's community. No doubt Jaffe shared with Ephraim the basic outline of the intellectual project he had been working on for most of his life. As Ephraim became more interested in philosophical issues, Jaffe no doubt revealed to Ephraim his master-plan, and the use he had made of the Jacob's Ladder image to symbolize the relation of the parts of his curriculum to the larger goal. Ephraim was impressed enough to borrow the image here, and to reuse it twice in *Precious Ornament*, in the beginning of his commentary on Genesis, and in the Jacob narrative itself. In all these uses, it seems evident that Ephraim in his own mind—and in the minds

of his most knowledgeable listeners—was wholeheartedly endorsing the well-rounded intellectual curriculum of philosophy, science, mysticism and Torah which Jaffe's work represented.

The Festivals and the Golden Mean

Sermon 4 completes the introductory series of Part II in almost anticlimactic fashion. Ephraim has already stated his major principles: the affirmation that some knowledge of God is possible, that the human being is a rational animal seeking relation to a rational God, and that communion with God comes through ascending the ladder of knowledge while plumbing the depths of meaning of the mitzvot. He would like now to start on the enterprise of actually applying principles of reason to the mitzvot and elucidating specific hidden meanings. In the remainder of the book he will do this on a level of fine detail, examining the laws and traditions of each festival in turn. Here, he seeks to find a meaning in the configuration of the festival calendar as a whole. In his view, the three pilgrimage festivals form a trilogy with an overall progression which can be seen on various levels:

It is well known that the human lifetime is divided into three periods: ascent, maturity, and decline. The three festivals of the year were arranged accordingly: Passover, in the spring, is a paradigm of the time when a person emerges into the world, as the midrash says on the verse, "Or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another...?" (Deuteronomy 4:34)—like a calf plucked from its mother's womb. Thus the days of Passover are like the days of youth, in the beginning of the warm season which are a symbol of this world, for it is a time of preparation for the world to come, just as one prepares in the summer for the winter, as it says, "He who lays in stores during the summer is a capable son." (Proverbs 10:5)

The festival of Shavuot corresponds to the years of maturity, for it is nearly at the peak of the warm months, the time of the first fruits. It is that time that the body is fully built on its foundation, its clusters are ripe with promise of grapes to make foaming wine fully mixed of Torah and wisdom.

The festival of Sukkot is at the end of summer, an allusion to the days of decline and the end of one's lifetime. This is indicated by the bullocks of the festival, which diminish each day just as the bodily powers diminish in this period of life. It is called Festival of Ingathering, for it is close to the time when a person is gathered from the world, when he gathers

from his grain and wine whatever the trap of his mind can bring up from Torah and good deeds to bring as provisions to his eternal home.²⁵

In accordance with these three times, we find that every action and deed has three aspects:

(1) There are things which a person does solely for the sake of the body. This is found for the most part in the years of ascendancy, the days of youth, corresponding to which the holiday of Passover was established. Therefore the offering associated with Passover is a sheaf of barley, which is animal fodder, as we see from the offering of the adulteress ("she performed an animal act, therefore her sacrifice comes from animal fodder," 18 i.e., barley). So it is with a man in the days of his youth: all his yearning and desire is to nourish his material, animal soul; therefore his sacrifice is animal fodder, i.e. barley.

(2) The second way is at the opposite extreme: when a person does all his actions for the sake of the spirit. This is found in people at the time of decline, i.e. old age: the closer one comes to the gates of death, the more one perceives the deficiency bound up with the desires of this world, for their end is vanity. Therefore a person despises them in old age, and acts solely for the sake of the soul. For this occasion comes the Festival of Ingathering, when a person leaves his regular dwelling for a modest temporary shelter, and seeks no luxuries for this period. For this purpose comes also in this holiday the water libation, for it is at this time that a person pours out his soul and his blood to the Lord, as it says, "Pour out your heart like water [in the presence of the Lord]!" (Lamentations 2:19) The elderly always indulge in many supplications, as it says, "I pour out my speech before the Lord, [I lay my trouble before Him]." (Psalm 142:3) It is near to the time of death which is compared to a water libation, as it says, "We must all die; we are like water that is poured out on the ground." (II Samuel 14:14)

(3) The third way is the golden mean between the two extremes, and that is when one acts equally for the needs of body and soul. This is found when a person is in the years of maturity, when body and soul are equally important to him, and the powers of each are equal. For this occasion comes the holiday of Shavuot, and its offering is two loaves of bread, corresponding to the sustenance of body and soul which share equally.²⁶

Ephraim shows off his erudition once more by a quotation from Maimonides's *Guide* III, 8. The quotation spoils the symmetry, for it expresses Maimonides's ascetic disparagement of the senses and preference for intellectual and spiritual concerns, a preference for the mood of Sukkot over Shavuot. It would have been more fitting to give the philosophical source for the ideal of the golden mean itself, which is

²⁵ Appendix pp. 372–73.

²⁶ Appendix p. 373.

Chapter Four of Maimonides's *Eight Chapters*, published in Poland in 1577 thanks to the commentary of his neighbor and colleague Abraham Horowitz. As usual, Ephraim refrains from giving direct credit to any of his contemporaries. Perhaps it was to be considered an honor to these gentlemen that their works were so well-known that they did not need to be mentioned. In the case of Horowitz, this would indeed be the case, for the *Eight Chapters* was already a popular subject of extracurricular study on an oral basis before he provided it in written form, and his work met a felt need. The evidence of intellectual affiliation is certainly slimmer with such a common-coin concept as "golden mean" than with the elaborate interpretation of Jacob's Ladder which shows up in both Jaffe's and Luntshitz's works. Nevertheless, I think there is a reasonable chance that in dedicating Chapter 4 to showing (albeit with a little confusion mid-argument) how the festival calendar exemplifies the golden mean, Ephraim was subtly announcing an intellectual alliance with another of Isserles's surviving philosophical disciples. From now on, the disciples of Isserles and those of Eliezer Ashkenazi would make common cause in favoring the inclusion of some philosophy in the curriculum. Even Maharal, after his negative first statement, would eventually meet them part way.

Other Philosophical Statements in the Gleanings

For the sake of filling out the picture, it is worthwhile to record some other positions Ephraim took in later chapters of this book.

In *Gleanings* II, 16 and III, 1, Ephraim takes issue with Maimonides on the issue of whether humankind is the supreme purpose of creation. Maimonides denial of anthropocentrism in *Guide* III, 13 was one of his most unpopular stands. Ephraim had endorsed anthropomorphism in the opening Genesis sermon of *City of Heroes*, when he had not read anything more philosophical than the Torah commentary of Baḥya ben Asher (but had possibly made the acquaintance of Eliezer Ashkenazi). Moreover, Eliezer Ashkenazi devoted an entire chapter of his work²⁷ to defending the human-centered view of creation against Maimonides. Ephraim has good warrant to qualify his allegiance to Maimonides in the same way as Isserles did in *Law of the Sacred Offering*, that though

²⁷ *Deeds*, I, 13.

Maimonides may be the greatest of the philosophers and generally authoritative, he is still fallible, and like Rabbi Akiva is to be overruled when the majority of the sages oppose him. Though Ephraim had defended Maimonides in Sermon 2 on the instrumental purpose of sacrifices, here he sides with the majority:

This inquiry is based on the principle that the purpose of all beings is humankind. To this view, all the sages of the Torah agreed, except for Maimonides, who in the *Guide* III, 12 denied this purposiveness, and derided all those who say that man is the purpose of existence. Even though the said master had a great name in Israel, nevertheless all his wisdom did not prevail for him against those who differed with him, who overwhelmed and wiped out his chief arguments, and crushed and overturned his weak utterances, since he spoke against his own self. For he found succor for the higher Intelligences from philosophical argument which says that their hand is the mightier; but for man he found no help against them from the verse, "You have made him little less than God." (Psalm 5:6) And many more verses establish the faithful testimony of the Lord that the whole world was only created to be man's entourage.²⁸

Appropriately, the lead-text of Sermon II, 16 is the revelation of the Torah to Israel over the protests of the angels. The other place where Ephraim comes to man's defense is Sermon III, 1, which begins the section of wedding-sermons. One of the seven wedding blessings, *Yotzer ha-Adam*, celebrates God's creation of humankind. A little anthropocentrism is fitting on such occasions.

One holy day Ephraim did not include in the regular festival calendar, namely the Sabbath. To this he devotes a series of chapters at the end of Part II. In Sermons II, 39–42, he defines the three principles which the Sabbath symbolizes in his view, at once an echoing of Albo and an anticipation of Rosenzweig: the creation of the world, the revelation of Torah, and the prefiguring of the Perfect Sabbath of the World to Come. Of these, his discussion of the first is relevant to some of the central issues we have raised earlier:

This inquiry is based on the demonstrations which have come in the books of the sages concerning God's existence and concerning His creation of His world. All the books are filled as the sea with water of proofs, each different from the next, such as in the *Guide* and Gersonides's [*Wars of the Lord*] and [Albo's] *Ikkarim* [*Principles*] and the *Duties of the Heart* and innumerable others besides these, so that the length of one of the cur-

²⁸ *Gleanings* II, 16, Vol. 1, p. 169.

tains [of the Tabernacle] falls short of listing all the proofs which have come to verify these assertions. Mind and reflection cannot contain them. Therefore I have seen fit to mention them in brief. For this belief has already been established in the midst of these people of the Lord by tradition, and we have no need of all these proofs, inasmuch as they are all founded on conjecture and are mostly subject to error, as is known from their ways. Therefore it is only good for man to be of the believers and not of the seekers of proofs of God's existence.²⁹

We are back at the dilemma of the preface, but this time the emphasis is on the side of caution, not of enterprise. He sides here with Maharal, not with Eliezer. He is not willing, when pressed to the wall, to follow Samuel Ibn Tibbon in preferring the rationally-validated knowledge of God to tradition-based belief. He recognizes that if one commits oneself fully to the path of reason, it must be a fair game in which the chips could fall either way.³⁰ He is not ready to stake this much on the frail and fallible faculty of the human intellect. He is willing to give reason a contributing role. It is better to see with the two eyes of intellect and faith than with only one eye. But if he must choose one or the other, tradition is preferable.

²⁹ *Gleanings*, II, 40.

³⁰ The faith which Ephraim articulates here is one which can be supported by reason and evidence in favor, but which cannot be falsified by adverse arguments (to which the believer would respond by drawing on his reserves of emotional commitment). The authentically Jewish character of such a position is given a sophisticated defense by Emil Fackenheim in his essay, "Elijah and the Empiricists," in *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, Basic Books, 1973. I believe he is right.

CHAPTER SIX

THE QUEST OF REASON: THE OUTLOOK OF THE *PRECIOUS ORNAMENT* (PART 1)

יש זהב ורב פנינים וכלי יקר שפתי דעת:
הבן יקיר לי אפרים?

Gold is plentiful, jewels abundant; but wise speech is a precious ornament.
(Proverbs 20:15)¹

Is not Ephraim a dear son to me? (Jeremiah 31:20)

The Place of The Precious Ornament in Ephraim's Oeuvre

We are now in a position to analyze the theological outlook expressed in the most popular work of Ephraim Luntshitz, the *Keli Yekar* or *Precious Ornament*. There is (to say it in Ephraim's Aristotelianese) an accidental and an essential reason for that popularity. The accidental reason is that it has had numerous reprints,² and has also been included in many editions of the standard rabbinic Bible or Torah with commentaries (the *Mikra'ot Gedolot*).³ The essential reason is that it is the first and most complete expression of Ephraim's mature view, after his encounter with philosophy and assimilation of its insights into his basically aggadic outlook, which by its scope addresses the whole range of topics laid out in the Torah, the foundational statement of Jewish outlook: creation, God, world, human history, revelation, ethics, providence, and the divine-human relationship.

Though Ephraim's first work *City of Heroes* covered all the portions of the Torah, it was a sermon-collection, usually with one sermon per portion,⁴ covering at most one or a few topics per portion with

¹ Note how both book-titles *Keli Yekar* and *Siftei Da'at* are based on this verse.

² Lublin 1602, Prague 1608, Amsterdam 1709, 1754, 1762, 1767, Zolkiew 1799, Lwow 1864, 1877, 1894, 1907. These dates are consistent with the hypothesis that the moderate rationalism of this work appealed especially to Jewish communities that were in the throes of internal "Enlightenment" movements.

³ תנ"ך מקראות גדולות קהילות משה, Amsterdam 1724–7, Warsaw 1874; Torah with commentaries including *Keli Yekar*, Lvov 1861 and more recent editions.

⁴ The section on *Bereshit* (of which we have drawn only on the first part in our translated example) is heterogeneous and may contain reworkings of a few sermons, but this is exceptional.

many digressions. The *Gleanings of Ephraim* was also a slightly reworked sermon-collection, arranged primarily around the holiday calendar and life-cycle events, especially weddings and circumcisions. *The Precious Ornament* is a text-based commentary in the “tosafistic”⁵ style, with sermonic-style digressions. The more interesting comments are the longer ones, which generally focus on a contradiction or other problem raised by juxtaposing elements of the scriptural text, Rashi’s commentary, and other commentaries, and offering Ephraim’s solution of this problem based on a novel suggestion he propounds. These are interspersed with shorter explanatory comments. In the course of twenty or so comments per portion, he manages to discuss a majority of the significant topics of each portion, and to provide a more or less continuous interpretation of the running narrative, while also introducing his own agenda. There are places where we can hear the voice of the preacher behind the printed page, but the sermonic originals have generally been reworked to suit this more academic medium.

The outlook of *The Precious Ornament* is a deepening and elaboration of that which Ephraim expressed in the preface and opening sermons of *Gleanings of Ephraim*. Here as in the earlier work, a Maimonidean-Isserlesian moderate rationalism gives focus to Ephraim’s basic aggadic outlook, but a subordinate theme of a vaguely mystical character is also noticeable. We shall look at the more rationalistic-intellectualistic tendencies in this chapter, and at the quasi-mystical⁶ tendencies in the following chapter.

⁵ The thought-style of northern-European rabbinic discourse from the 13th century onward is heavily shaped by the “Tosafot” commentaries on the Talmud, which may be regarded as the Jewish analogue of the scholastics of the same period, though working in a legal rather than a philosophical domain of study. Their characteristic method was to create problems by juxtaposing remote issues from different contexts and to explore their implicit contradictions and possible reconciliations. The “pilpul” method of east-European Talmudic study from the 16th century onward is based on the tosafistic method but pursues it to even greater and sometimes absurd lengths. In *Six Pillars*, “Pillar of the Torah,” Ephraim criticizes this method but confesses to having used it himself. See Bettan, *Studies in Jewish Preaching*, pp. 295–298, as well as the Appendix to the present work, “Pilpul of the Four Sons,” pp. 412–22 and “Ephraim Luntshitz on Pilpul: A Historical Note and Two Texts,” pp. 429–30.

⁶ Kabbalistic scholars prefer using the term “kabbalistic” rather than “mystical” wherever appropriate. Ephraim is problematic because (at least through this period) he is drawn to the religious themes of the kabbalistic commentators but resists adopting the Zoharic system. See my discussion of these issues at the start of the next chapter.

Climbing Jacob's Ladder

We find the intellectual manifesto of *The Precious Ornament* in its multiple comments to Genesis 1:1, especially the second, which I shall paraphrase here:

Why does the Torah start with the Hebrew word-order *In-the-beginning created God*? Why not start simply “God . . .,” giving God the first place of honor? This is first of all a mark of God’s humility, that even though He is supreme, He alludes to His creatures before mentioning Himself. But it also gives us a clue to the Torah’s path of knowledge to God, for whatever is mentioned before the name “God” in this opening verse is a ground for our arriving at the knowledge of God.

It is in this sense that we should interpret Rashi’s comment on the word ראשית (“beginning”). He points out that this word is used to mean Torah (as in Proverbs 8:22: “the Lord created me [Wisdom] at the beginning of His course”) and Israel (as in Jeremiah 2:3: “Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His harvest”). But whereas Rashi understood *be-reshit* as “for the sake of *reshit*” and understood the verse to mean that the world was created *for the purpose* of Israel and Torah (an interpretation that Ephraim adopted in *City of Heroes*), Ephraim here draws the lesson that the Torah’s opening word alludes to *two avenues for coming to the knowledge of God*, namely the written Torah and the oral traditions of the people of Israel.

Similarly, the second word of the verse *bara* (“created”) has an equivalent purpose, to inform us that there is a third path to knowledge of God, namely by inference from the works of creation, that there is a Creator. This is the way alluded to by Jacob’s Ladder:

(1) “And there was a ladder standing on the earth”—this is the comprehension of the lower world; (2) “and its top reached the heavens”—this is the middle world; (3) “and the angels of God went up and down on it”—this is the higher world; (4) “and the Lord was standing on it”—now he has fully achieved the knowledge of God’s existence.⁷

By ascending stepwise from one level of knowledge to another, one arrives at the summit, which is knowledge of God.

However, these three paths of knowledge are for different classes of inquirers: “Not many are wise enough to come to the secret of the

⁷ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, transl. Friedlaender, Dover, 1956, p. 7 (Introduction to Part I).

knowledge of God" by the third path. By implication, it is for a select few—sages, philosophers, and angels. Ephraim here avails himself of the Talmudic dictum that Israel mentions God's name after the two words *shema' yisrael* ("Hear Israel, the Lord...") whereas the angels mention it only after three words *kadosh kadosh kadosh* ("Holy, holy, holy, the Lord..."). Ephraim finds in this saying an allusion to the thesis he has just propounded. The first formula alludes to the two avenues for ordinary people to come to know God: "Hear" alludes to Torah, and "Israel" to the oral traditions of the people Israel. The heavenly formula (for angels and philosophers) is more arduous; the thrice-repeated "holy" alludes to the comprehensive curriculum of physics, astronomy, and kabbalah through which one comes, via complete knowledge of the three worlds, to knowledge of God.

We are familiar with this argument from Sermon 3 in the *Gleanings*. The philosophers have arrived at a valid path of knowledge of God. This path is not for everyone, but those select few who are capable of it should pursue it to the extent of their ability. The philosophical path is supplementary to the more basic paths of Torah-study and tradition. Ephraim has also alluded once more by literary borrowing to Mordecai Jaffe's curriculum of the *Royal Garment*: philosophy, astronomy, and mysticism as steps to knowledge of God.

The rationalistic interpretation of Jacob's Ladder which Ephraim borrowed from Jaffe had its roots in Maimonides's *Guide* as interpreted by the medievals. Maimonides referred to Jacob's ladder twice in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the Introduction, he discussed the verse describing the ladder as an example of the use of prophetic imagery, and said:

The word *ladder* refers to one idea; *set upon the earth* to another; and *the top of it reaching heaven* to a third idea; *angels of God* to a fourth; *ascending* to a fifth; *descending* to a sixth; and *the Lord stood above it* to a seventh idea.

Maimonides was silent as to what these seven ideas actually were, leaving it to the commentators to fill in that he was referring to the terrestrial, celestial and angelic realms. Later, in Chapter 15 of Part 1, Maimonides interpreted the key word *nitzav* ("standing") in the passage as meaning "everlasting forever." His subsequent remarks in this chapter are a clear invitation to later thinkers, from Ibn Tibbon to Jaffe, to see Jacob's Ladder as a paradigm of the philosophic quest:

Whenever this term is applied to God it must be understood in this sense, as: "And behold, the Lord stood upon it," i.e., appeared as eternal and

everlasting, “upon it,” namely, upon the ladder, the upper end of which reached to heaven, while the lower end touched the earth. All may climb up this ladder who wish to do so, and they must ultimately attain to a knowledge of Him who is above the summit of the ladder, because He remains upon it permanently. . . . “Angels of God” who were going up represent the prophets. . . . How suggestive, too, is the expression “ascending and descending on it!” The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as [the acquisition of knowledge] precedes the application of this knowledge for the training and instruction of mankind.⁸

Alexander Altmann⁹ has studied in detail the two different basic lines of interpretation of Jacob’s Ladder’s “ascent to God” in the medieval thought-world. The earlier interpretations (including some involving Mohammed’s night journey) focused on a mystical ascent to union with God. The later Maimonidean interpretation stressed an intellectual process of achieving knowledge of God through mastery of philosophy. In his commentary on Genesis 1, Ephraim stresses the intellectual ascent. We shall see a more mystical emphasis in his discussion of the ladder in the actual Jacob episode, which we defer to Chapter 7.

Intellectual Seekers after God’s Truth

The quest for the intellectual knowledge of God is one of the leitmotifs of Ephraim’s commentary on the Biblical narrative in the *Precious Ornament*. At every stage, some principal character in the story is turning toward God or struggling with Him. Ephraim interprets many of these encounters as intellectual in nature, even where there is but slim evidence in the Biblical text for such an interpretation.

The intellectual issue is raised with the creation of the first human being: “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7) Ephraim agrees with Rashi and Arama that this refers to the intellectual soul, but goes on to emphasize its developmental nature:

...The “breath of life” (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים) is the immortal intellectual soul. Go and learn—who is He Who breathes this breath into man? You must

⁸ *Guide* I, 15 (Friedlaender pp. 25–26).

⁹ Alexander Altmann, “The Ladder of Ascension,” in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, Ithaca, 1969.

infer that this is man's portion from God above. Scripture tells us that even though God breathed the spirit of intellect into the human being, nevertheless the human started his existence as a mere *נפש חיה*, a "living being" like other living beings. "For man is born a wild ass." (Job 11:12) The perfection of humans depends on diligence and perseverance, on choosing the right, when the eyes of his intellect are opened when he comes of age. But when he starts to exist, even though the breath of living spirit has been breathed into him, this spirit is not yet actual but only potential; and if he does not gird his loins to go out with the vanguard to fight God's battles, he remains in his animal condition and is to be compared to an animal. But when an ox or sheep or goat is born, it is created on that day with all its perfections, and requires no further perfection from then on. The text reveals this to us so that human beings should not be misled into thinking that they can come to their perfection without effort and toil, that it was already formed in them at the time of their formation, and that they can rely on it to their advantage. It is not so! Rather, everything is dependent on the work of our hands; we can always replace nature with reason, and reason with nature. Therefore it is not said of the human being, "God saw that it was good," because at the time of his creation it was not yet evident what was his goodness, and what was his excellence.¹⁰

Thus humanity's end-goal is intellectual perfection, but this is achieved not at the start of human existence, nor inevitably, but only as the fruit of much hard work.

Abraham's intellectual discovery of God from the rising of the sun is already proverbial in the midrash and in Maimonides. In this connection, Ephraim employs an interpretative trope which he borrows from Arama, that any mention of "day" or "morning" in this connection may refer to this inferential path to knowledge of God:

[...Abraham was sitting at the entrance of the tent] *at the heat of the day* (Genesis 18:1)—.... We find that judgment is generally executed upon the wicked in the morning, as it says: "Each *morning* I will destroy all the wicked of the land." (Psalms 101:8) It says similarly of the people of Sodom: "*As the sun rose upon the earth* and Lot entered Zoar, the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulphurous fire...." (Genesis 19:23–24) The reason (as we have learned) is that Abraham came to understand the existence of God from observing the movement of the sun. That is how Arama interprets the verse: "You shall know *this day*, and reflect in your heart that the Lord is God" (Deuteronomy 4:39)—when you reflect on the daily cycle of the celestial motion, you will recognize that the Lord is God. The rabbi interpreted that this is the goodly pearl which

¹⁰ *Ornament* on Genesis 2:7.

hung around Abraham's neck, i.e., he proclaimed God's existence from his throat; and when he died, he hung this knowledge on the sphere of the sun, as it says: "Morning, and the Lord will make known" (Numbers 16:5) his existence to every creature....

That is why the revelation of God to Abraham is described in the terms: "The Lord appeared to Abraham, and he was sitting at the entrance of his tent *at the heat of the day*"—i.e., he was reflecting on the procession of the sun, which warms the day, and as a result of this reflection, God was revealed to him. But the Sodomites, who did not know the Lord, were judged at sunrise.¹¹

So far, Ephraim is following well-trodden (though not universally familiar) paths. We will be a little surprised, however, to see the novel intellectualist twist that he gives to the familiar story of Rebekah's oracle:

The children struggled (ויתרוצצו) in her womb (Genesis 25:22)—From רוץ (to run). When she passed the door of the academy of Shem and Eber, Jacob struggled to get out, and Esau prevented him; when she passed the door of an idolatrous temple, Esau struggled to get out, and Jacob prevented him. She did not know that that is what happened, but she thought she had one embryo in her womb which sought to get out to go both to the academy and to the idolatrous temple. In that case, God forbid, perhaps there are two supreme powers! "‘Therefore,’ she said, ‘why do I live?’” For I am just as other women, who serve idolatry, and in what respect am I better than they, if in fact there are two supreme powers? “And she went to seek out the Lord,” i.e., *to inquire concerning the very existence of the Lord, what is the truth of the matter.*¹²

The first part of this interpretation is familiar from the midrash, cited by Rashi. The conclusion is Ephraim's novel reading into Rebekah's existential despair a quest for philosophical-theological enlightenment. Rebekah already subscribed to belief in the one God, after the manner described by Samuel Ibn Tibbon as acceptance on trust and by tradition.¹³ This naive belief was being challenged now by her physical-spiritual ordeal. The concerted motions of the fetus in two contrary directions indicated to her that maybe there is more than one divine power in the world! In that case, why suffer the stigma of religious nonconformity for a doctrine that may not be true? Rote declaration of belief (such as Maimonides criticized in *Guide* I, 50) was no longer

¹¹ *Ornament* on Genesis 18:1 s. v. *kehōm ha-yom*.

¹² *Ornament* on Genesis 25:22.

¹³ Ibn Tibbon, Introduction to Maimonides's *Eight Chapters*, discussed above in connection with Abraham Horowitz, Chapter 2.

enough. She needed full intellectual understanding and certainty to see her through this personal crisis. She achieved it with the help of the oracle:

The Lord answered her, "Two nations are in your womb"—It is the opposite of what you thought, for there is only one supreme power, but there are two children in your womb; one will serve the Lord, and the other will serve idolatry. But the Lord is forever one, and He has no peer.¹⁴

Thus Rebekah enters the ranks of the philosophical searchers for true knowledge of God. Another place where Ephraim interjects the intellectualist motif in the face of commonly prevailing modes of interpretation is in the story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel. Here Ephraim takes as his starting-point the assumption (found in the midrash and the Zohar) that Jacob's adversary was Samael. Ephraim etymologizes the name Samael from the root סמא (to blind), and infers that it was Samael's objective to throw dust in Jacob's intellectual eye (> ויאבק אבק) to bring him to denial of God. As with Abraham, however, the rising of the dawn reminds Jacob of the intellectual proof that there is a God.¹⁵ Samael did, however, succeed in crippling Jacob somewhat in his thigh-sinew, which is to be understood in two ways: (1) When Jacob places too much value on wealth, the finer points of Torah's wisdom elude him; (2) the more abstruse matters of esoteric wisdom (matters that are "as tough as sinews") hold in them the dangers of heresy and apostasy, as illustrated by the story of the four who entered Paradise. As for the name Israel, Ephraim understands it in the sense of "he who sees God" (ישר-אל), cognate with (אשורנו).¹⁶ Samael sought to blind Jacob, but Jacob emerged with his intellectual vision intact.¹⁷ The imagery of this passage recalls the expression of Sermon 3 in *Gleanings*

¹⁴ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:23.

¹⁵ "The rise of the dawn prevented Jacob from denial of God, for when he saw it he recognized the truth that the world has a Creator and Guide. Thus Arama commented on the verse, 'Know *this day*, and reflect in your heart that the Lord is God'—by knowing the daily course of the sun, the enlightened person can reason that the Lord is God... It was in this connection that the rabbis said, 'Were it not for the disc of the sun which proclaims the existence of God, people would listen to the voice of Rome which denies His existence.'" (*Ornament* on Genesis 32:25)

¹⁶ See Numbers 23:9, 24:17, Hosea 14:9. This etymology was familiar to Philo but not common in the rabbinic literature, which raises the interesting question whether Ephraim had learned of Philo's interpretation through hearsay from the researches of Azariah dei Rossi, who rediscovered Philo for Jewish thought in the 16th century.

¹⁷ *Ornament* on Genesis 32:25, 32:29, 32:33.

of Ephraim: “he who is blind in one of his eyes is exempt from seeing [God in the Temple on pilgrimage festivals].”¹⁸

When we pass from the patriarchal cycle to the Exodus narrative, the general objective of intellectual knowledge of God is maintained, but its focus changes. Instead of creation and the sunrise furnishing the principal evidence for knowledge of God, it is the mighty deeds which surround the Exodus which provide this basis. To be sure, Moses’s theological imagination is still stimulated in a way similar to Abraham’s:

It was necessary to inform us that he was a shepherd, for most of the prophets came to prophecy through shepherding, for prophecy requires solitude and contemplation of the heavens, God’s handiwork, as it says: “When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers.” (Psalms 8:4) Thus all his thoughts are of God, until the spirit of God is bestirred on him from heaven, which is not found as frequently in sitting at home or engagement in other occupations, but mostly in the shepherd, who sits alone most of the time.¹⁹

There is of course the revelation by God to Moses of the Tetragrammaton. This does not strictly qualify as part of the “quest of the intellect,” for Ephraim’s view of prophecy is not strictly Maimonidean and includes an element of the mystical and the miraculous.²⁰ It is nevertheless relevant to point out that Ephraim gives an intellectualist twist to the interpretation of the divine name *Ehyeh* (“I Am”). While he acknowledges that others interpret it in a sense of “being present” with Israel in their troubles, he prefers an understanding of the name as referring to God’s eternal being, encompassing past present and future, and being the same at all times. This shows clearly the influence of the Maimonidean-Aristotelian emphasis of God’s unchanging essence, and Maimonides’s interpretation of this name along the same lines.²¹

In the second account of the revelation of the Tetragrammaton at the beginning of the pericope *Va’era* (Exodus 6), Ephraim comes up with four alternate explanations for why that name was revealed at this time:

¹⁸ See above, Chapter 5, “Seeing With Both Eyes.” There, too, the Hebrew root **נמס** suggests the name of the demon Samael.

¹⁹ *Ornament* on Exodus 3:1.

²⁰ See for instance *Ornament* on Leviticus 1:1, where Ephraim says that Moses and Balaam both were privileged with prophecy beyond what their preparation entitled them to.

²¹ See *Guide* I, 63.

1. God revealed Himself to the patriarchs by the name *Shaddai* ("Almighty") which according to rabbinic interpretation signifies God's setting a limit (as to the chaos of primeval waters, or to present human suffering), but did not reveal Himself to them by the name YHWH which signifies unqualified mercy or redemption, which would be expressed in the events about to take place.
2. God was rebuking Moses for his impatience concerning the redemption, which showed Moses's insufficient faith in the divine constancy indicated by the name YHWH.
3. God decided this was the moment to make known, not just to Israel but to all humankind, the full implications of His relation to the world as creator:

The third method is that God wanted to make known to the world that He created His world from nothing, for there were no signs yet abroad in the world which proved the creation, therefore God had to perform all these signs, so that people would believe in retrospect that the Lord created his world *ex nihilo*. Thus it is written: "By this you shall know that I am the Lord." (Exodus 7:17) And Jethro said: "Now I know that the Lord is God." (Exodus 18:11) Many of the commentators have discussed the question, how were the miracles of Egypt evidence of the creation of the world. Therefore it says: "I appeared to the patriarchs as *El Shaddai*," which name signifies that God said to this world "Enough!" This proves that God formed the world, but not that he created it *ex nihilo*. The latter is indicated by: "My name YHWH I did not make known to them," for that name, derived from the verb *to be*, signifies that God causes everything to be, and that all beings are grounded in him. This proves the creation, which implies that no being has existence except through him.

4. This text comes to prove the resurrection. Ephraim has difficulty with the standard interpretation (that God promised to give the land of Canaan to the patriarchs, which implies they are first to be resurrected), for like Maimonides he holds that spiritual immortality, not physical resurrection, is the ultimate eschatological solution. He falls back on a hybrid solution, which relies on (a) the Talmudic argument that a God who created man in the first place can *a fortiori* bring him back to life after death, and (b) the revelation of the Tetragrammaton in this passage as confirmation that God brings everything into being *ex nihilo*.²²

²² *Ornament* on Exodus 6:3.

Of these four explanations, the third follows most clearly the Maimonidean rationalist paradigm, and anticipates Ephraim's interpretation of the plagues which we will now examine.

In his most systematic comment on the theological meaning of the Exodus narrative, Ephraim (in a rare display of intellectual humility) adopts wholesale, with acknowledgment, an interpretation of Isaac Abravanel to which he adds only detailed embellishment:

Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 7:17)—This language is used in the first plague of the first series דצ"ח, and similarly in the first plague of the second series עד"ש scripture says, "so that you may know that I the Lord am in the midst of the land" (8:18), and similarly in the first plague of the third series באה"ב scripture says, "in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world." (9:14) R. Isaac Abravanel's interest was also aroused by this, and he commented that Pharaoh contested three propositions: (1) He denied the Lord and said He is not: "I do not know the Lord" (5:2), therefore scripture says concerning the first plague, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord." (2) He contended further that even if you grant that a God exists, still, He does not exercise providence in the terrestrial realm; therefore scripture says, "that I the Lord am in the midst of the land." (3) He challenged the omnipotence of God, saying that He is not able to change the natural order at all; therefore scripture says, "that there is none like Me in all the world"—i.e., He can act however He wishes.²³

Ephraim adopts this framework in its entirety. His one major embellishment is to demonstrate in excruciating detail that every one of the plagues in each series exemplifies the proposition which Abravanel proposes as the theme for that series. For all his nit-picking, Ephraim demonstrates here, as elsewhere, that he is fundamentally in agreement with Abravanel in orientation, accepting Maimonides's philosophical and interpretative method as correct in its fundamentals, while retreating from its more radical assertions. Our main point here, though, is that Ephraim's interpretation of the Exodus (even if it is totally borrowed from Abravanel) follows the "intellectual quest" paradigm: the purpose of Biblical history is to bring humankind, by way of experience, to knowledge of God which can be expressed propositionally and demonstrated intellectually. The role of the Exodus and its accompanying miracles was to bring both Israel and humankind generally to knowledge

²³ *Ornament* on Exodus 7:17.

of God's existence, God's providence, and God's total mastery (through creation *ex nihilo*) of nature.

We conclude this section with one more example. Jethro (in Ephraim's interpretation, and arguably even from the plain sense of the Biblical text) is one of the heroes and success-stories of theological rationalism. He examined the evidence of the events of the Exodus and drew the appropriate conclusion: "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods." (Exodus 18:11) Ephraim elaborates on Jethro's intellectual conversion:

...At that time there were many among the peoples of the earth who had fallen into the error of Mani, who contended that there are two deities, one who rules over the good and the other over the evil. By their foolish opinion, both are weak, for the governor of evil is clever in evildoing but has no capacity for good. It is obvious that one ought not enter under his wings and accept him as a god, for what fool will turn this way? As for the governor of the good, he has no power to do harm even to the enemies of his faithful ones. In that case, it is vain to serve him, for the same occurrence will happen to the one who serves him as to the one who does not serve him. Therefore it is not fitting to accept him as god. To accept both would also be difficult, for they contradict each other—whom the first curses, the second blesses.

Therefore when Jethro first heard what God did for Moses and for Israel, he had heard only the good things, for God performed all manner of good things for Moses and for Israel. Even though Jethro had heard of the splitting of the Red Sea and the war of Amalek, he had heard only that the sea split for Israel and they walked on dry land, but he had not yet heard of the drowning of Pharaoh and his host. Similarly, concerning the war of Amalek he heard that they had come to wreak harm on Israel, and that they were saved from them. Therefore Jethro must have understood that "the Lord brought Israel out from Egypt" (18:1), i.e., he had only heard of the good things, namely the Exodus from Egypt, and he supposed that this god is only the governor over good things but not evil. Thus he was not satisfied to receive Him as God, for he thought perhaps there is another God greater still, who rules over good and evil equally, and Jethro came only to return his daughter to her husband. But after "Moses recounted to his father-in-law *everything* that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians" (18:8)—i.e., all the evils and the plagues which the Lord had inflicted in Egypt and at the Red Sea—then he saw fit to declare that this God indeed rules over good and evil equally. "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods," and it is proper to receive Him as God and to enter under His wings.²⁴

²⁴ *Ornament* on Exodus 18:1.

We shall discuss the possible significance of Ephraim's speculations on ancient Manicheism at the end of this chapter. For now, it is sufficient to glean from these remarks that Ephraim held up Jethro as a model of one who weighed all the evidence on the question of God's existence, and who came to the right conclusion for right and convincing reasons. Jethro's case is complementary to Rebekah's. Rebekah already held the right views, but only on faith and without intellectual foundation. When experience put her faith to the test, she was resolute enough to make inquiry and gain evidence that would bolster the correct beliefs she already held. Jethro was a gentile outside the covenant, an upright man of the best intentions, who simply did not have enough evidence to arrive at the correct beliefs until events came to his aid. Eventually, both Rebekah and Jethro came by different paths to the same result: correct beliefs, grounded in correct reasoning. This is the ideal which, though few attain it, is the highest form of religious conviction to which humankind can aspire. Ephraim's intellectual seekers live out the ideal which Jacob's Ladder represents.

Attributes of God: Divine Image

Ephraim does not engage frequently in discussion of the divine attributes, but what he says is enough to confirm his conservative Maimonidean orientation.

Ephraim first addresses this issue, like Maimonides in *Guide* I,1, from the standpoint of humankind being created in the divine image. Maimonides's initial answer declared that mankind was created with reason, reflecting the divine reason.²⁵ Ephraim echoes this thought in his comment on Genesis 2:7, which we saw earlier: the "breath of life" which God breathes into man is the intellectual soul, "man's portion from God above." But this simple solution is questionable in two respects. Maimonides will later question it, on the ground that "reason" in the sense that human beings know it (and what other sense is there?) can be predicated of God only homonymically or metaphorically.²⁶ It is also questionable from the context of the Bible itself. The Bible

²⁵ *Guide* I, 1. To be sure, Maimonides hesitates to affirm this correspondence forthrightly, for fear of affirming positive knowledge of the divine essence.

²⁶ *Guide* I, 57.

scarcely knows of the notion “reason” as philosophy was to conceive it. The word שכל and its derivatives, used in medieval discussions of both divine and human reason, is peripheral to the Biblical lexicon, while the more common word-family חכם / חכמה generally denotes human rather than divine wisdom (with the crucial exception of two key texts in Proverbs and Job).²⁷ Thus, while the understanding of rationality as the key component of the divine image was indispensable for medieval thought, it does not work well as an interpretation of the Bible’s plain sense of this concept.²⁸ We can therefore appreciate Ephraim’s sensitivity to the nuances of Biblical thought when he takes another approach in his commentary on Genesis 1:26:

As for the “image” and “likeness”: even though it says: “What form can you compare to him?” and: “To whom can you liken me?” (Isaiah 40:18,25)—nevertheless, we find that God appears to his prophets in their imagination in the likeness of a man; indeed, at Mount Sinai he appeared as an elderly sage sitting in a yeshiva, and at the Red Sea he appeared as a mighty hero. In Ezekiel’s vision, we find explicitly: “Upon the throne there was the semblance of a human form.” (Ezekiel 1:26) God was at any rate accustomed to show himself in all these likenesses, and it is possibly to these that the words “in our image, after our likeness” refer—even though in truth God has no likeness, and “the glory of God is a hidden matter” (Proverbs 25:2).²⁹

Ephraim is sensitive here both to the Biblical context and to Maimonidean criteria of theological correctness, and manages to achieve a plausible reconciliation. There is no doubt a connection, in the world of Biblical imagery, between the trope of divine image and the prophetic vision of God appearing in the form of a man. Maimonides has already

²⁷ The apotheosis of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 and Job 28 would provide a crucial bridge between the Biblical and philosophical world-views from Philo onward, especially if one identified חכמה = *logos* = Reason. But the narrative and prophetic portions of the Bible did not share this outlook. The terms קדוש and צדיק are appropriate and customary descriptions of God in the Biblical vocabulary, as the terms חכם and משכיל are not.

²⁸ The closest we can probably come to the core of the Biblical concept of divine image, without resorting to corporeal notions, is יודעי טוב ורע “knowing good and evil.” Both God and humans in the Bible possess moral personality, the power and understanding to favor good over evil. (The term צדיק applies essentially to God, and to man at his best.) This is very different from theoretical reason, as Maimonides makes clear in *Guide* I, 2 by arguing for the other (medieval-intellectualist) alternative. Ephraim’s comment on Genesis 5:1, interpreting “divine image” as connected with human free will (which is to all intents and purposes identical with what we propose here), will be discussed in the next section.

²⁹ *Ornament* on Genesis 1:26.

pointed the way toward neutralizing the implicit anthropomorphism of such passages by treating the vision as merely symbolic. But one may ask—symbolic of what? What is the reality of God behind the appearance? To this, Ephraim answers, we do not know—“the glory of God is a hidden matter.” These are the very words which Maharal used in his First Preface of *Prodigies of the Lord* to indicate the limits of human knowledge of the divine.

Ephraim discusses the notion of divine image also in his comment on the Sixth Commandment (“Do not kill”) whose significance is traditionally interpreted by its standing parallel to the first commandment (“I am the Lord your God”):

Setting “do not kill” parallel to “I am the Lord your God” implies that whoever sheds blood is as if he diminished the divine image and likeness, as scripture says, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in His image did God make man.” (Genesis 9:6) There is no need to specify this except for the case of one who says to another, “Please kill me,” and releases him from responsibility. His blood should nevertheless be shed, for one has no power to forfeit his own life, since there resides in him a portion of God above, and who can relinquish what belongs to God? The same reasoning applies to the suicide.

The meaning of the divine image and likeness is that it is God’s way to appear in the likeness and image of a human being, even though there is doubtless no reality to the image or likeness, as it is written, “To whom, then, can you liken Me? To whom can I be compared?—says the Holy One.” And: “What form can you compare to Him?” (Isaiah 40:25,18) Nevertheless, when God appears, He shows the appearance of a human being to mankind. It is on account of the significance of the human being that God appears in this likeness. Thus [Ezekiel] says, “Upon the throne was the semblance of a human form” (Ezekiel 1:26)—not a human form, but the *semblance* of a human form. It is similarly the case with God’s appearance as a hero at the Sea and as an elder on Mount Sinai. Therefore it is proper to act respectfully toward that likeness of God. The murderer diminishes the divine likeness because he brings it about that the Holy and Blessed One will no longer wish to appear in this likeness, since it is despised by mankind. Seeing a murdered person is an example of “an impaled body is an affront to God.” (Deuteronomy 21:23)³⁰

The moralist in Ephraim has shifted the emphasis here from the metaphysics of divine attributes to the moral difference they make in human life. Max Kadushin would have seized on this kind of reasoning as an

³⁰ *Ornament* on Exodus 20:13.

example of what he called a “value-concept.”³¹ At the same time, the notion of “divine image” has slid from an essential attribute of man to a contingent circumstance. Man does not necessarily have in his makeup any essential component that links him to the divine. God chooses to reveal Himself in human form in order to make a symbolic statement of the significance of humankind. If it so pleased God, He could reveal himself in some other form instead. This mutability of the “divine image” is unsatisfactory, in that it belies the centrality and universality of this concept in the Jewish thought-world. It probably did not bother Ephraim. At bottom, he was less concerned with metaphysics than with morals. At any rate, Ephraim’s interpretation of “divine image” in terms of man’s free will and moral personality (which we will see in the next section) will surpass the one we have just discussed in its power and consistency.

Attributes of God: Simplicity, Immutability, Knowledge/Human Free Will

In several places, Ephraim shows his acquaintance with several of the other philosophical doctrines of the divine attributes and their standard arguments. Maimonides had argued in *Guide* I, 53 that the unity and simplicity of the divine essence is compatible with different and opposite effects proceeding from God’s actions. He gave the analogy of fire, which softens some things and hardens others, blackens some things and bleaches others, yet nevertheless keeps the same essence. Ephraim (citing Arama) adapts the same analogy at the start of pericope *Re’eh* (Deuteronomy 11):

See, this day I set before you blessing and curse (Deuteronomy 11:26). . . . Another interpretation: By the word **היום** (“this day”) scripture alludes to the diurnal sphere, and juxtaposes this to the blessing and curse, to tell you that just as the sun, which is one entity, produces opposite effects, melting wax while congealing the egg, blackening the launderer’s face while bleaching the laundry, but all these different effects are not brought about because of the sun but because of the recipients, so too the blessings and the curses all come from God but do not necessitate any change in Him (as scripture says, “I am the Lord—I have not changed” [Malachi 3:6]), but the changes come about because of the recipients, and “weal and woe do not issue from the mouth of the Most High (?)” (Lamentations 3:38),

³¹ Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, 3rd edition, Bloch, 1972, *passim*.

as we find in the midrash which Arama cites in this portion, though I have decided to peg it on the word **היום**.³²

Divine immutability (as affirmed in this passage) leads also in medieval thought to the affirmation of divine foreknowledge, for if God's knowledge is part of God's essence and cannot change, then God must know everything in advance. This doctrine raised problems, however, for such Biblical narratives as the binding of Isaac, where the text first says that God "tested" Abraham, and in the end concludes that God said, "*Now* I know that you fear God." (Genesis 22:12) Did an omniscient God not know the outcome before the event? And if God knew everything beforehand, then what was the point of the test? Thus the exegesis of Genesis 22 became one of the classical places for discussion of the problem of divine foreknowledge and free will. We saw in Chapter 4 how Eliezer Ashkenazi (following Gersonides) used his commentary on this story as an occasion for a major philosophical statement on this and related issues. As we saw then, both Eliezer and Maharal rejected the doctrine of universal divine foreknowledge, and strongly affirmed free will. This was a rejection of the Maimonidean compatibilist accommodation which jointly affirmed both divine foreknowledge and free will. Though Ephraim ended up agreeing with Eliezer Ashkenazi on many issues (including Eliezer's dissent from Maimonides on man as purpose of creation), here Ephraim seems to have sided with the grand master over the more recent disciple.³³ He ends with mention of Maimonides's accommodation, while admitting the near-intractability of the problem:

Now I know that you are a god-fearing man (Genesis 22:12)—The word now does not always exclude "previously." For we find: "And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the Lord your God..." (Deuteronomy 10:12) Did he then not require reverence previously? Rather, it is as if he had said: "Behold, O Israel..." Similarly, "now I know" is like "behold I know."

Some say: "I know" is like: "I have made known," for the purpose of this test was to raise a banner and show the peoples the splendor of his deeds. The verb **נסה** ("to test") is thus understood as connected with **נס** ("banner"). Outward tribulation is good when it comes from hidden love.

³² *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 11:26. The analogy to the varying effects of the sun is found in the *Guide* I, 53.

³³ But see the doubt I raise on this view, in the footnote at the end of the next section, "Limits of Rational Explanation."

When the love is great and hidden, God sends him outward tribulation, and when he receives it out of love, then God's love for him is disclosed and visible to all.

As for the question of God's knowing everything before it happens, but man remaining free to choose, many have been confused in this matter, and most of the searchers went out to gather and did not find a way sufficient for resolving this riddle, for the propositions appear contradictory, and it is elusive and deep down, who can discover it? In this connection, Maimonides interpreted the saying: "Everything is foreseen, yet free will is given" to mean: even though everything is foreseen and known before God, still free will is given to human beings, and they remain free to choose.³⁴

Except for the apparently-approving citation of Maimonides in the Binding of Isaac narrative, there is no further evidence that Ephraim subscribed to a comprehensive doctrine of divine foreknowledge. On the other hand, Ephraim is consistent throughout his works in strongly affirming free will and linking this with moral exhortation to his listeners to exercise their free will on the side of good. It is characteristic in this connection that he takes Psalm 139, which is one of the strongest Biblical proof-texts for universal divine foreknowledge, and paradoxically (after a pessimistic first interpretation venting his moralistic spleen) turns it in his second interpretation into a rousing endorsement of free will:

This is the book of the generations of Adam (Genesis 5:1)—Ramban says that this refers to the whole Torah, for it all deals with the history of humanity. Rabbenu Bahya said that "the book"—i.e., wisdom—is the essential progeny of humanity. To me it seems that "the book" refers to the rest of the verse: "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God," i.e., when Adam was created, he was perfect in formation, with all human virtues, and devoid of any blemish or deficiency. As an artisan writes on parchment all the things which he needs to make his masterpiece, so God wrote down all the qualities with which he endowed the human being, until in sum total they constituted the divine image, in order to teach the following generations what damage they wrought on themselves through their sins, for all the succeeding generations were a continuous decline from the original perfection, as it is said: "Your eyes saw my unformed mass, for they were all recorded in your book; in due time they were formed, to the very last one of them." (Psalms 139:16) The rabbis applied this verse to the creation of Adam, and so I will

³⁴ *Ornament* on Genesis 22:12. Ephraim must have liked the interpretation of nes as "raise a banner," for he cited it approvingly also in connection with the "trial" of the Israelites in the desert. (*Ornament* on Deuteronomy 8:1.)

explicate it after their manner: “Your eyes saw my unformed mass”—which appeared good in God’s eyes; “they were all recorded in your book”—this is the book of the generations of Adam, on which were written all human virtues, which are summed up by the text in the phrase: “in the image of God he created him.” But: “in due time they were formed,” **ולא אחד מהם** [I render:] “and not a single one of them,” i.e., there will come a time when those generations which are born will possess not a single one of those virtues, for they will have declined so far from that original perfection. Therefore, “How dear to me are your friends, O God” (139:17)—those who are friends of God, being in the image of God, are very dear in my eyes, because they aren’t to be found.

Another interpretation: All these scriptures speak of human free will, for everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven. All the deeds of man are called “generations,” and they are considered as generated from God, for everything proceeds from Him: wisdom, wealth, strength, longevity, except that: “This is the book” meaning the good deeds which have their source in this book, which are “the generations of humanity—” for they belong to human beings, and God has no portion in them. For God entrusted all the moral actions of human beings to their charge, and “it is not the Lord who has done all this.” (Deuteronomy 32:27) The human being was made a free agent “when God created man, making him in the likeness of God.” Just as God is sovereign author of his own actions, so the human being is sovereign author of his own actions, and in this respect the human being is in the image of God. Thus: “Your eyes saw my unformed mass, and they were all recorded in your book.” The rabbis interpreted this: the unformed drop is brought before God, and it is proclaimed whether this fetus, when born, will be wise or foolish, weak or strong, rich or poor; but whether righteous or wicked, is not proclaimed, for everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven.³⁵ “Your eyes saw my unformed mass,” (Psalm 139:16) for before the fetus is formed, God foresaw what would be in store for this person who is still only a drop, “and they were all recorded in your book”—all the details of this one’s life are written in a book, whether he will be strong or weak, etc. and even **ימים יוצרו**, which according to this interpretation should be rendered: “the days they will be formed,” i.e., they determine how many days he will live. But: **ולא אחד מהם**—“but one of them—not,” i.e., in this book one of the attributes is missing, for it has not been proclaimed whether he will be righteous or wicked, therefore in the book that they write it is not written what will be the moral character and deeds of this child. So: “How dear are your friends, O God” (139:17)—that they were created in the image of God, sovereign authors of their own actions!³⁶

³⁵ BT Niddah 16b.

³⁶ *Ornament* on Genesis 5:1.

This ringing proclamation of free will contrasts with the weak endorsement of Maimonides on divine foreknowledge. Ephraim is almost triumphant in proclaiming that God withholds from determining certain events, because it is so important to give human beings real responsibility for their actions. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that Ephraim did not take the doctrine of divine immutability seriously. He discovers a novel problem in the rabbinic story that related how God first determined to create the world on the basis of justice, then changed His mind and made justice-with-mercy the dual foundation of the world:

But "God is not a man to change his mind"! (Numbers 23:19) What was He thinking beforehand? Rather, truly the heavens and all their spiritual host are able to survive by the principle of justice more than the terrestrial whose element is earth. Therefore the one is juxtaposed to the former, and the other is juxtaposed to the latter. For above [in Chapter 1] scripture mentions the divine name *Elohim* which is juxtaposed to "the heavens" (with the particle *et* superadding the heavenly host), for they were created with just the attribute of justice. But here [in Chapter 2] scripture combines it with the name of mercy [i.e. the Tetragrammaton] which is juxtaposed to "the earth," for this combination was necessary for the inhabitants of the earth.³⁷

Thus Ephraim shades the rabbinic story to mean that God *planned from the outset* to create the heavens on the basis of justice, and the earth on the basis of combined justice-and-mercy. The plan was never changed, only its different steps, as they unfolded in time, specified different requirements to suit the different realms.

Ephraim is further alert to the fact that Balaam's statement, that God does not change His mind, is in apparent contradiction³⁸ to other Biblical statements that God did change His mind at certain times. Indeed, Balaam may have thought that God *does* change His mind, from consideration of the Golden Calf story! Ephraim develops a whole line of argument based on this hypothesis:

³⁷ Ornament on Genesis 2:4 s.v. *beyom asot adonai elohim eretz ve-shamayim*.

³⁸ The critical historian might say here more simply, "in contradiction." The fault-lines of traditional texts and world-views in the Bible stimulate traditional exegetes to invent harmonizing midrash, while they provoke critical historians to posit diverse literary documents. According to the historical-critical view, the question "Does God change His mind in response to changes in human conduct?" is one of the issues on which the Biblical and the medieval religious-philosophical outlooks differ most profoundly. Here, Ephraim defends the medieval view.

He took up his theme, and said:... God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind (Numbers 23:18–19)—He brought evidence regarding his error from what scripture says in the episode of the Golden Calf: “The Lord renounced the punishment He had said³⁹ to bring upon His people.” (Exodus 32:14) But can one speak of renunciation in connection with God? Indeed, God is not man to change His mind! Rather, it never occurred to God to annihilate them, for they had not sinned against Him. But the mixed multitude were the principal actors in that episode, by resorting to charm and divination, and the Lord was concerned that the Israelites might follow after them, so He threatened them with annihilation, for it is often the case that one will threaten something that one would not actually do in the event. Therefore scripture says, “the punishment He had *said* to bring,” not “*sought* to bring,” but merely said by way of threat, not intended to be carried out. This applies specifically to “His people.” But as for the mixed multitude, God renounced nothing in their regard, but “those who forsake the Lord shall be wiped out” by the punishments spelled out in *Kī Tissa*, as Rashi explained: “They were condemned to three types of execution, etc.” It appears from our perspective that God renounced this. But from God’s perspective, He knows that this was His plan from the beginning.⁴⁰

This harmonizing explanation, though ingenious, has obvious weaknesses. It stumbles over the very problem which Maharal posed against Eliezer Ashkenazi concerning miracles. The immutability of the divine plan in this case depends on minimizing free will among the participants. It assumes that the “mixed multitude” will persist in their obduracy to the point of meriting their punishment, and that the Israelites will be at least faithful enough to God to merit being preserved. But what if human beings (whose free will Ephraim so strongly affirmed in Genesis 5:1) actualized their potential for perversity (which Ephraim also affirmed so eloquently and truly in the prior paragraph of the same comment) to the hilt? It is not out of the realm of possibility that both the Israelites and the mixed multitude should fully repent, or that both should fully rebel, or that the Israelites should rebel and the mixed multitude repent. In all these cases, Ephraim’s ingenious theory would be falsified by experience. He has not solved the contradiction between human freedom and the immutable will of a providential God, but only papered it over.

³⁹ Hebrew דָּבַר (lit. “spoke”), NJV: “planned.” Ephraim’s interpretation hinges on the literal sense.

⁴⁰ *Ornament* on Numbers 23:18.

In the Golden Calf episode, Ephraim has stretched the Biblical account and suggested that what appears as a change of plan on God's part was really a carrying out of the original plan, that everything happened as it was ordained originally. But there are limits to this kind of explanation, as Ephraim admits when he approaches the Flood narrative. The key word **וַיִּנָּחֵם** ("And [God] repented/regretted/changed His mind"), which is a link between the Golden Calf and Balaam narratives, occurs there as well. This episode raises issues that are weighty enough to merit a separate section.

Limits of Rational Explanation

Ephraim writes on the last paragraph of the pericope Bereshit (Genesis 6):

And the Lord regretted that he had made man on earth (בְּאֶרֶץ)—Read: "with [the collaboration of] the earth," as I commented in the name of Ramban on the verse "Let us make man—I and the earth," for the earth contributed thick, gross material. As for "the Lord regretted" and "his heart was saddened": the meaning of this is elusive and deep, deep down; who can discover it? All the investigators have tried to answer it at length: this one says one thing, and that one says another, and all are as prophesying. There are many such matters in the Torah, which are sealed mysteries, to all of which my heart says, etc.—not to go on at length with these exegetical exercises, for the human mind fails to comprehend it, for all these uncertainties arise for us because we try to grasp the divine knowledge in terms of our knowledge. But Scripture tells us the opposite: "My thoughts are not your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8) So how can we arrive at God's thoughts, which are not known to us, when we haven't the means to grasp them?⁴¹

What puzzled Ephraim so? The words of the Biblical text are not so very difficult in themselves. God created the world for it to be good, and it turned out worse than God expected, to the point that God regretted that He had made man. This is perfectly clear and self-consistent. It is only puzzling if one approaches the Biblical text with preconceptions from outside, such as that God cannot produce anything evil, or that God cannot experience pain, or that God cannot change His mind. To put the matter plainly, the portrait of God in Genesis is consistent in

⁴¹ *Ornament* on Genesis 6:6.

itself, but it is inconsistent with notions of divine perfection that developed to some extent in rabbinic Judaism, and more radically in medieval philosophy, with its hybrid Greek and Biblical origins. The tension between the Biblical God who changes His mind and the unchanging God of medieval philosophy was what motivated Ephraim's inventive comment on Balaam and the Golden Calf that we just examined. He would no doubt have liked to reconcile the puzzle of God changing His mind at the time of the Flood in the same way, but the contradictions are too sharp there. There can be no scapegoat like the "mixed multitude" to bear the brunt of God's retribution while preserving God's original beneficent purpose for the remainder of humanity, for the whole human race (except for Noah and his family) were deserving of destruction. The party in which God had invested His hopes, and the party which let him down, are one and the same. Moreover, the God of Genesis 6 seems too entangled with the imperfections of His creatures to claim the title of perfection for Himself. He has failed miserably. He has proved deficient as Creator, deficient as planner, deficient as pedagogue, and He is openly lamenting His failure. The most intractable problem of religion—how evil can issue from the Good—is in the open, and there is no hiding from it.

Ephraim speaks of "other investigators" who have tried to resolve the problems of this passage without success. Who are they? We know his bookshelf well enough to name some names. Let us start with Maimonides. Maimonides refers to our passage in two contexts. In *Guide* I, 47–48 he discusses verbs of perception, including the verb *to see* as in "The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth." (Genesis 6:5) He points out that in most of these contexts Targum Onkelos renders the active verb in the passive—e.g., "It was seen before the Lord"—and connotes simply knowledge, thus freeing one of the suspicion that sensual perception is attributed to God. In I, 29 he deals with the forms of the verb **עצב**, which can mean sadness, anger, or provocation. He interprets **אל לבו ויתעצב** as meaning either "God was angry in His heart [i.e. privately]" or "man provoked God's heart." Thus Maimonides avoided an interpretation of **עצב** that implied any sadness or disappointment on God's part.

But "sadness" is the easier of the two conundrums of this passage. How did Maimonides deal with the verb **וַיִּנָּחֵם** ("He regretted")? He simply ignored it, by not dealing with it either here or anywhere else. The only references in the *Guide* to the Biblical uses of **נחם** are in a different sense of "comfort." They occur in II, 29 on the passage "for

the Lord has *comforted* Zion, *comforted* all her ruins" [Isaiah 51:3]) and III, 23 (where Job's friends offer him consolation). This avoidance is understandable but suspicious. Maimonides made the immutability of God a cornerstone of his philosophy. He dealt in excruciating length with those passages of the Bible that might be construed as attributing to God corporeality, physical location, perception, or emotion. Yet he overlooked those passages that explicitly ascribe to God changing of mind or course in response to the unforeseen consequences of human free will. The possibility that his whole project of reconciling the Biblical and philosophical God-concepts might founder on this point, did not seem to occur to him.⁴² God does not change His mind. Then surely we must deal with this Biblical text figuratively—but how? The master did not offer any suggestions. The Guide draws a blank on this crucial question.

Rashi avoids the problem by construing the sentence in a radically different sense: "God was comforted (וַיִּנְחֵם in another sense) that He had made man *in the earth*, for had He made man in the heavens, he would have provoked [the heavenly hosts] to rebel." In a less fantastic vein, Rashi suggests that וַיִּנְחֵם simply connotes that God shifted His *modus operandi* from mercy to justice.

Abravanel says that God regretted that He had made man *with the earth*, i.e. that He had encumbered the pure intellectual soul with the corruption of matter. Here Abravanel proves to be the source of Ephraim's first idea, only Ephraim modified it slightly to say that the earth had the choice to contribute fine matter or gross matter to the creation of man, but erred by choosing the latter. Abravanel then goes on to defend the use of the term נחם altogether, and offers the kind of thoughtful neo-Aristotelian explanation that Maimonides might have come up with if he had been forced to address it:

The text permits using the term נחמה of God in a way so as to avoid attributing to Him either change of knowledge or lack of prior knowledge. For when a man does something and it does not turn out as he had thought, he defends himself by way of ignorance.... But God, before whom everything is revealed and known before it comes to pass, would have known how man would turn out, and therefore did not excuse

⁴² It is also possible that Maimonides's awareness of the irreconcilability of such contradictions as this motivated him to abandon a comprehensive philosophical commentary on the Bible in favor of the more laconic *Guide*. (See Maimonides *Guide*, Introduction, I, 9–10.)

Himself by the circumstance of new knowledge or ignorance of what would be, but performed an about-face (הנחמות).⁴³ What this about-face amounts to can be appreciated in true terms as how something appears by our estimation, not by God's estimation. It is like what happens when a man plants a fruit tree and works hard to grow it, then afterwards cuts down its branches in order to take from it two or three splints which he then grafts onto its stock or the stock of another tree. It is doubtless the case that when he does this, his intentions and knowledge do not change from what they were at the beginning, but his deeds change, for until then he was exerting effort and labor to grow that tree, but now he cuts it down and destroys it. The observers will think that he is upset and regrets his previous action, but that is not so, for this is what he intended from the beginning.

The moral of Abravanel's parable (which Arama uses also, at greater length) is that God knew all along what would become of the generation of the Flood, and went ahead with that whole phase of history in order that from the discarded failures of the early generations there would be salvaged a few individuals worth preserving and starting over. We may conjecture that Ephraim did not like this interpretation because it took too deterministic a reading of the story, and it did not place enough emphasis on the human exercise of free will which led to the outcome. It also suppressed the tragic element of the story that is so palpable in Genesis.

One does find that tragic element in the classic rabbinic parable of the architect and the agent:

And He was sad to His heart—R. Berekhiah said: It is like a king who built a palace by the hand of an architect. He saw it and it displeased him. At whom should he be angry, if not the architect? Thus: *He was sad at His heart*. R. Assi said: It is like a king who did business through an agent, and lost. At whom should he be angry, if not the agent? Thus: *He was sad at His heart*.⁴⁴

It seems the “architect” and “agent” in the parable are stand-ins for the human generations prior to the flood. God started a venture with mankind as his partner. The venture failed because the partner did not perform up to expectations. But there was also a kabbalistic reading

⁴³ Abravanel here clarifies his understanding of the notion expressed by NHM through an example. I have translated it as “about-face” in an attempt to find as neutral a term as possible that fits the context.

⁴⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* 27:4.

of this parable, which Isserles presents in *Law of the Sacred Offering*, with which Ephraim was probably familiar:

Know that Maimonides already wrote in *Guide* I, 29 that the expression in the Torah, “God was sad unto His heart” (Genesis 6:6) means that God was angry with them because of their evil action. In Chapter 39 he wrote that “heart” as applied to God means the will. He also explained in Chapter 36 the meaning of “kindling of wrath” and “anger” as applied to God. Therefore it seems that this is the very meaning of the rabbinic midrash using the parable of the architect, which goes as follows: “*God was sad unto his heart*—Like a king who had a palace built by an architect. He saw it and it displeased him. At whom should he be angry, if not the architect?” They spoke further in parable of a king who did business through an agent, and lost—at whom should he be angry, if not the agent? Here the architect and agent represent the general administration by which the Holy and Blessed One administers His world. That is the “heart” which is identical with the divine will, as was shown. They said that it is against this that God issues complaint, indicating that the Holy and Blessed One cares about those who say that His works are not equitable. It is at this that He is angry, i.e. on their account, which should be clear. I am amazed at the *Offering of Judah*, that he has not attended to the words of the sage author of the *Divine Hierarchy* in his interpretation of these midrashim. For truly the rabbis who authored this midrash spoke in the manner of the Torah, using human language to speak to the ear what it is capable of hearing. Even though he brought many supports from the Zohar and the *Tikkunim*, that corruption and spoliation are found in the sefirot of the structure, we can only think that the Zohar also spoke in human language, to impart to human beings that degree of understanding which is permitted to them. For there is as it were some defect and spoliation in the honor of heaven brought about by human sins, inasmuch as they cause it to be the case that God cannot act as He wills in His world, and God’s name is profaned in His world, which is against the divine will. That is the meaning of “defect and spoliation” which accrues to God from His works. Maimonides wrote in *Guide* I, 46: “You will find that in the whole of the Talmud and in all the Midrashim the sages keep to the external sense of the dicta of the prophets. This is so because of their knowledge that this matter is safe from confusion and that with regard to it no error is to be feared in any respect; all the dicta have to be considered as parables, [and as a guidance conducting the mind toward one being.]”

It is also possible that all the kabbalists’ words are true, and that these and those are equally the words of the living God. For it is clear in the Zohar on the pericopes of *Bereshit* and *Terumah* that there are two orders of being. Therefore it would appear that in the lower order (that of “creation [בריאה]”) there is spoliation and defect, for there is found the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, and the potencies are crystallized to the point they achieve substance, as is explained in the pericope *Behar*.

But in the upper order are found only potencies and divine attributes, and there is found no spoliation or separation or defect, God forbid, only the emanated potencies which are the divine essence, varying in accord with human actions. And in the Cause of Causes there is no alteration. Thus we can say that with respect to the lower order they said the sefirot have boundary and measure, as it says in the passage of *The Faithful Shepherd (Ra'aya Mehemna)* which I cited at the beginning of this chapter. In this manner we can explain all the dicta which contradict each other on this topic. This will be clear to every thinking reader.

It is also possible to say that the sages understood "God was sad at His heart" refers to some separate entity, such as the Intelligences or the angels, through whom God works His will in the lower world. Indeed, the Active Intellect, which is called Governor of the World, is called Architect, Agent, and Humbled Wetnurse, inasmuch as the effluence from exalted God is withheld from it on account of Israel's sins, nevertheless with respect to God there is no defect, spoliation, or separation, God forbid!

The wise will gain more wisdom from this whole topic, to establish firmly the unity of the One, the Only, may He be exalted to all eternity without change, for Whose honor I have written all this, and may He in His great mercy grant atonement for all my sins and errors in His teaching, for the love and desire of which I have written this, and to confer benefit by recounting my slight and meager comprehension of the mysteries of its wisdom.⁴⁵

It is my own belief that when Ephraim said that the other commentators on Genesis 6:6 were כמתנבאים ("as prophesying," or better yet "fantasizing") in their explanations, he had in mind above all Isserles's comment from which I have just quoted at (I hope pardonable) length. Whether or not my specific hunch is correct, it is definitely the case that (at least in the *Precious Ornament*) Ephraim never openly adopts the kind of kabbalistic orientation that Isserles entertained in *Law of the Sacred Offering* 3:4. His kind of speculation that I dub "quasi-mystical" in the next chapter was of another sort; it did not involve sefirot or different levels of divine being which could be divided up into those which incur "defect and spoliation" and those which do not, in the way that Isserles has conveniently arranged things in this passage. In short, while Ephraim felt acutely the problems of evil and divine regret and pondered in vain for a solution, he felt that Isserles's kabbalistic speculations on the matter did not solve these problems and only introduced worse problems, such as multiplicity in the Godhead. Put another way, the cognitive dissonance between the Biblical (and aggadic) assertions about God's actions and the philosophers' assertions

⁴⁵ See Appendix, pp. 283–285.

about God's essence could not be fully resolved, and seemed intractable in such a case as this, but Ephraim only felt comfortable continuing to work for a solution within these frames of discourse with which he was familiar and in which he felt at home. If some problems were without solution in that context, this insolubility was itself a familiar part of the intellectual landscape. Ecclesiastes had said that certain problems were "deep, deep down, who can discover [their solution]"?⁴⁶ Maimonides had similarly said, both in his negative theology and in his remarks on divine foreknowledge, that God's ways are not ours and cannot be understood by us. Though Ephraim endorsed R. Tarfon's injunction to exert ourselves in the task and not exempt ourselves from it, he also accepted the first half of the injunction that the task is not ours to complete. At such points, admission of ignorance is piety.

The Natural Order, Astrology, and Providence

From Aristotle onward, one of the main preoccupations with the intellectual quest was to understand the order of the natural world in which we live. With Maimonidean philosophy came the additional agenda to show that the Bible and philosophy were in agreement in their description of the natural world and its principle of order. In communities such as Poland, where philosophical studies were still making headway, there was the additional objective, to legitimate philosophy by underlining the areas of agreement between it and the traditionally accepted sources of truth. Thus it is not surprising to find in Ephraim's works, as in philosophically-oriented commentaries generally, interpretation of the Biblical narrative in terms of accepted philosophical-scientific categories.

A typical issue in this area arose in connection with the Biblical account of the rainbow. According to Genesis, God set His rainbow in the cloud after the Flood as a sign that He would no longer destroy the world. But already in the Middle Ages the commentators, from Saadia on, were aware that the rainbow is a particular case of the general rule that light is refracted by water under appropriate conditions,

⁴⁶ This phrase occurs with some regularity in Ephraim's work. Its occurrence in the discussion of the paradox of divine foreknowledge (quoted above, *Ornament* on Genesis 22:12) may even call into question our assessment that Ephraim concurred with Maimonides's resolution of the problem. Indeed, that passage can be read as listing views that have been offered on the problem, without fully endorsing any of them.

and therefore falls under the general natural order that was in place from the creation on.⁴⁷ The problem was then to explain, why prior to the Flood the rainbow was *not* seen. Ibn Ezra and Kimhi suggested that God strengthened the rays of the sun after the Flood, to make the rainbow more obvious. Abravanel (following R. Nissim) suggested that the mist which watered the land in Edenic times also hid the rainbow from view, indeed, the mists were so heavy as to be a contributory cause of the Flood. Ephraim accepts this last explanation, but adds another problem:

All these interpretations are difficult to reconcile with the rabbinic statement, that in the days of R. Simeon bar Yochai and R. Joshua ben Levi the rainbow was not seen. In that case, it would seem that in their time the air returned to its original condition, and after their death it returned to being thin and clear as before. But it is difficult for our reason to accept that the air would change its nature several times.

The best explanation I can find... is that the rabbinic statement, that in the days of these saintly men the rainbow was not seen, does not mean that there was no rainbow at all, but surely there was a rainbow, and it was not seen because people did not search it out or try to find it, therefore it was not seen. But a generation that feared retribution... cast their eyes on the sign of the rainbow, and looked for it to assure themselves that the mists had not changed, on account of their sin, to their condition as of before the flood... But those saints R. Simeon bar Yochai and R. Joshua ben Levi offered such protection to their generation, that all people relied on their power of merit to protect them, so that they did not have to look for the rainbow, because they were certain that the covenant which God made with all flesh would not be abrogated.⁴⁸

It is characteristic of Ephraim's position that he does not altogether rule out a change in the order of nature (after all, demonstrating the possibility of such a change was the whole point of the third series of plagues). Rather, he would like to minimize miracles and changes of nature's rules as much as possible. The moralizing explanation is also characteristic: we should not look to a change in the rules of nature, but to a change in human attitudes and conduct.

The regularity of natural order starts with creation, and we try to explain as much as possible within that framework. Even if the world should revert to chaos because of human sin, that could conceivably fall within the framework:

⁴⁷ See Saadia, Ibn Ezra, Kimhi, Nahmanides and Sforno on Genesis 9:13.

⁴⁸ *Ornament* on Genesis 9:13.

But the earth was chaos and void (Genesis 1:2)—what it was, it was! What need do we have to know this? Perhaps because from the six days of creation onward, God does not make any alteration in the created order he has established. God foresaw that because of the deeds of the wicked, the world would revert to chaos and void, as during the generation of the Flood. Similarly, in connection with the destruction of the Temple, it is written: “I saw the earth, and it was chaos.” (Jeremiah 4:23) Therefore the verse tells us that if it should happen at any time that the world reverts to chaos as a result of the deeds of the wicked, this should not be regarded as an alteration of the created order, but the world is merely reverting to its original state, because it is its nature to be chaos and void and darkness. Indeed, by the deeds of the righteous, God made it the reverse of its natural state, and created the light for the righteous; and by the destruction of those good deeds, the world reverts to its original state. This should not be regarded as an alteration in the created order. For God set a condition with all the works of creation, and therefore he shrank the original light and hid it away for the righteous. For God is not a man, that he should change his mind. Therefore, if the wicked walk in darkness, because of the destructiveness of their deeds, this should not be regarded as an alteration in the created order.⁴⁹

That Ephraim downplays the miraculous but does not rule it out altogether, is clear from a number of examples. The Torah says that Abraham defeated the four kings of Mesopotamia with a band of 318 men. Rashi, following the midrash, says that his only assistant was in fact his servant Eliezer, whose name in gematria has the value 318. Ephraim dissents (in the polite, harmonizing way of saying that of course Rashi did not *really* mean what he said literally):

Abram mustered his retainers [... numbering three hundred eighteen] (Genesis 14:14)—Rashi interprets this as Eliezer alone, for the name אליעזר has the value 318. But is it the way of the text to refer to a person by the numerical equivalent of his name? And how will you interpret: “as for the share of the men who went with me,” (14:24) if only Eliezer went? The best explanation I can find is that even Rashi would admit that Abram took 318 real people, for one is obligated to accomplish as much as one can through natural means, and where nature falls short, the miracle makes up the difference. But it is still hard to explain why Abram took precisely 318 men, and what the text is trying to tell us by this. It means that the forces he faced were so strong that there was no natural way possible to defeat them, and in any case he only went to battle with the assurance that God would be his helper. As a sign of this, he took the number of men corresponding to the value of the name אליעזר, which

⁴⁹ *Ornament* on Genesis 1:2.

means: “My God is a helper.” This signified that “Eliezer” alone was there, i.e., that the victory could not have been accomplished by mere human effort, but only by the help of God.⁵⁰

Thus, God helps those who help themselves, but the divine aid is real, not just symbolic or rhetorical. The most striking example of this is with that great prototype of the Puritan ethic, Jacob himself, in his rise from rags to riches:

I am unworthy of all the kindness (Genesis 32:11)—...surely [God’s] promise [to Jacob: “I will be with you” (Genesis 31:3)] did not mean simply protecting him from evil...but also bestowing good upon him... The formulation of doing-good could have been worded, “I will deal bountifully to you,” but is instead worded *with you*, to indicate that in the matter of receiving beneficence, the master should be present with him in his enterprise, for one should do by way of nature whatever he has in his power to do, and the Holy and Blessed One will complete it by his hand, and will add abundance of blessing as we said above (on 32:6: “I have [literally] but one ox and ass, etc.)....

It was concerning this promise that Jacob said... “I am unworthy (קטנות—‘I am too small’) of all the kindness.” For Jacob was indeed too small and powerless to attribute all his wealth and possessions to his own strength and ability, but surely it was divine kindness working every day that had helped him acquire all this hoard. The evidence he cites: “With my staff alone I crossed this Jordan”—I was empty-handed of all, for I had nothing but my staff, “and now I have become two camps.” *Now*—Jacob admitted that it seemed to him as if he acquired all this hoard in the twinkling of an eye, for he had worked fourteen years for Laban’s two daughters and six years for his flocks. When Laban said to him, “Name the wages due from me and I will pay you,” he acquired in a short time such great wealth and possessions as would be impossible to attain in such a short time in the natural way, were it not that the hand of the Lord accomplished all this.... Had he already possessed flocks and cattle when he first crossed the Jordan, I might say that his possessions increased naturally. But given that he first crossed the Jordan with only his staff, when could all this fortune have been made from nothing? Surely all this was from the Lord.⁵¹

God does not work in a vacuum. There is generally not a sharp distinction between natural event and supernatural intervention; the latter comes as an assist to the former, so that it would be very difficult in a concrete situation to say where the one left off and the other took

⁵⁰ *Ornament* on Genesis 14:14.

⁵¹ *Ornament* on Genesis 32:11.

over. God and man are partners in a world in which the natural order predominates but is not all-determining.

Occasionally there is such a break in the natural way of things. Ephraim asks in one of his customary hair-splitting moods: Why did God have to promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:19 "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son," when He had already said to him "I will give you a son by her" three verses earlier? The difference is that *bearing* a son is not always the same as *having* a son; there is also the possibility of adoption, which would be far likelier in a ninety-year-old woman:

We find the term "son" used without birth, as in the case of Moses our Master: "And he became a son to [Pharaoh's daughter]." (Exodus 2:10) Thus Abraham thought, when God promised him, "I will give you a son by her," without mentioning birth, surely His intention was that Sarah should take in a foundling from the marketplace and raise it on her knees, and it would appear as if it was his son and hers in actuality. Why should the Holy and Blessed One change the natural order, in a case where it was possible to construe His words in agreement with nature? Thus Abraham asked in amazement, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"⁵²

Abraham's question was based on the way of the natural order, which is the way we rightly expect the world and even God to operate most of the time. The fact that God departed from the natural order in this case is testimony to the extraordinary nature of this event.

Astrology was part of that order for Ephraim (though he mentioned it only occasionally), as it was for nearly all his contemporaries. It is not Ephraim's way, however, to cite sources external to the Jewish tradition, whether ancient or contemporary. He prefers to allude to contemporary interests by finding relevant ancient sources that address them. Thus he finds enough material on astrology in the Talmud and his fellow-commentators to lay the basis for his own thesis:

See, there is evil before your faces (Exodus 10:10)—For our rabbis said: "If one is born under Mars, he will grow up to shed blood. What is his remedy? Let him be a butcher or a surgeon."⁵³ The reason is that the Holy and Blessed One does not wholly override the astral configuration, but this is what the Lord will do for those that fear Him and have regard for Him: When the astral configuration indicates any bad thing, then the Holy and Blessed One modifies it to something similar, in a way that the one

⁵² *Ornament* on Genesis 17:19.

⁵³ Paraphrase of BT Shabbat 156a.

who observes His command will not experience any evil on that account, nevertheless the tenor of the astral prediction is preserved....

Thus in the period of the Exodus, Pharaoh's astrologers saw that the planet Mars, which is called "evil,"⁵⁴ was rising against them, signifying bloodshed, and it could only be turned to good by circumcision or sacrifice. Both would be good, for there was a doubt whether this planet signified actual slaughter or merely wounding would be sufficient. In light of this doubt, both would be indicated. Therefore the Lord entrusted two mitzvot to the Israelites, the blood of the Paschal lamb and the blood of circumcision, for He wanted to redeem them from the tenor of the astral prediction and to modify it to good purpose.⁵⁵

If one grants for purposes of argument that the astral-terrestrial influences postulated by astrology could be taken by Ephraim's contemporaries in good faith as part of the natural order, it would follow that God would have to be bound by them to the same extent as He is bound by the natural order in general. To be sure, He could override the natural order entirely in either its astral or non-astral aspect, but doing so would be disruptive and would negate the benefits deriving from that order. It was preferable for thinkers like Ephraim to posit that God manipulated the order subtly for His purpose (not unlike the way people who believed in astrology work the details of their lives around their horoscopes)—fulfilling the outer letter of the prediction while turning it to good effect where possible. Indeed, this interweaving of the divine plan with the astral pattern could be taken as a paradigm of how God works providentially through the natural world without negating the natural order.

Death has both natural and providential causes, as we see from the discussion of Sarah's death:

Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron (Genesis 23:2)—In the *Yalkut*⁵⁶ they infer that the place had four names: Eshkol, Mamrei, Kiryat Arba, and Hebron. I would like to give a convincing reason for these four names.

⁵⁴ This interpretation is not found in the rabbinic midrashim, but became prevalent in the Middle Ages. Rashi cites an anonymous aggadah that he heard, and calls the star simply "Evil." Bahya identifies it with Mars, and associates it with Esau/Edom. Gersonides identifies the pronouncement with the Manichean doctrine that "Good" and "Evil" are the powers which alternate in ascendancy. Ephraim was to adopt all these views in some form or another, as we see in his treatment of Manicheanism and demonology.

⁵⁵ *Ornament* on Exodus 10:10.

⁵⁶ *Yalkut Shim'oni*, a medieval compilation of aggadic lore arranged in the order of the Biblical narrative as a commentary on the Biblical text.

Since this place was set aside for a burial site, it is called by four names which indicate four ways in which death can occur. There is one kind of death in which a man dies for his sin. . . . There is another kind of death where one dies for the sin of another. . . . There is a third kind, in which a person leaves the world from natural death, by separation of the four elements. . . . Finally, there is "death by a kiss," which is the death of the righteous, and which is called *hibbur* ("attachment"), because the mind and soul ascend and become attached to the Active Intellect. . . .

The four names correspond to the four ways of death as follows: "Mamrei" designates the one who died for his sin, and is related to *mamrim* ("you were *rebellious* against the Lord" [Deuteronomy 9:24]) and from *zaken mamreh* (the "rebellious elder"). "Eshkol" designates the one who dies for the sin of others, who are then bereaved of him, for he who buries his children is called *shakhul*, as in: "Why should I be bereaved (*eshakel*) of both of you in a single day?" (Genesis 27:45). . . . "Kiryat Arba" means "the city of four," and refers to the natural death from the separation of the four elements, for the human being is a small town and a city of four. "Hebron" designates death by a kiss, which is called *hibbur* ("attachment").⁵⁷

It would be an exaggeration and misrepresentation to say that Ephraim was a "naturalist" in his outlook. The fact is, he went along with the doctrine of natural order up to a point, where it suited him to do so. He seemed at times to have an exceedingly elastic or impressionistic sense of what constituted the "natural order":

In the way of nature there is no rescue from the peril of the enemy except in one of the following two ways, or both together: (1) From the providence of the blessed God, who rescues all who cleave to Him, so that even if they are not naturally strong, nevertheless when they fulfill "Love the Lord your God" which brings about unity with the blessed God, then He rescues all who cleave to Him; (2) From the side of nature, when they fulfill "Love your neighbor as yourself," then the one helps the other; even if they are sinners and the Lord turns away from them, nevertheless they have some hope by way of nature, if the astral configuration does not oppose them.⁵⁸

It may be just clumsy syntax here, but Ephraim seems to lump both divine providence and neighborly assistance as different aspects of "natural" defenses against mortal peril. In addition to this elastic sense of what counted as "natural," Ephraim apparently had no compunctions about subscribing to utterly fantastic notions on occasion:

⁵⁷ *Ornament* on Genesis 23:2.

⁵⁸ *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 1:1 on the phrase "between Paran and Tofel."

And may they be teeming multitudes (וידגו) in the midst of the earth (Genesis 48:16)—Why not simply “on the earth”? It is proper to interpret in the way that the rabbis said, that the Egyptians ploughed over them, but a miracle was performed for them and they were swallowed into the earth... thus they were fruitful and multiplied literally in the midst of the earth... Thus they were concealed in the earth like fish (דגים) which are concealed in the water, and by virtue of that fact they became numerous as fish, for the evil eye had no power over them. Thus scripture says, “The earth was filled with them.” (Exodus 1:7)

He removed the swarms (Exodus 8:27)—Rashi explains: “They did not die as the frogs had died, for had they died, the Egyptians would have had the benefit of their skins.”⁵⁹ One ought not to object: Why did the frogs die and not leave, as the swarms and locusts did? Nor should one answer, “in order that the land might stink,” for in that case why didn’t the locusts die as well? The answer to all this is that the Holy and Blessed One wanted to teach that whoever offers himself in martyrdom will be saved. Therefore the frogs which did not go into the ovens died, and only those which entered the ovens remained alive, as it is written, “The frogs died in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields,” (8:9) but not those in the ovens [mentioned in 7:28], for they had offered themselves for the Sanctification of the Name. From here, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah⁶⁰ learned to offer themselves for the Sanctification of the Name.⁶¹

Apparently, the natural philosopher has turned credulous here—or is he pulling our leg? Is he forgetting that only human beings have an “intellectual soul,” which is prerequisite for the intentionality which underlies an action such as Sanctification of the Name? Or is he just indulging in a crowd-pleasing anecdote from the Talmud or midrash? He had enough of the skeptic in him to deflate fantastic tales, or give them a rational turn, as in the following:

The dove came back to him toward evening (Genesis 8:11)—.... As for what Rashi explained⁶² (“The dove said, Let my food be bitter as the olive, etc.”), this does not mean she spoke these words with her mouth, for the dove has never had the power of speech, but rather we understand this from the fact that the dove brought back an olive leaf—a very bitter

⁵⁹ The “swarms” are variously interpreted as insects (as in NJV: “swarms of insects”) or wild beasts. If they were wild beasts, the Egyptians would have been left with valuable fur pelts, which would have been inconsistent with the purpose of the plague.

⁶⁰ See Daniel 3:19–29 and *Exodus Rabbah* 10:2.

⁶¹ *Ornament* on Exodus 8:27.

⁶² Rashi: “*And an olive branch was טרף in its mouth*—טרף means ‘plucked.’ But a midrash understands it as ‘food,’ and interprets the phrase ‘in its mouth’ as follows: The dove said, ‘Let my food be bitter as the olive and from God, rather than sweet as honey and from mortals.’”

food—for its meal. Didn't the dove know that it had a daily meal waiting for it on Noah's table? But surely it chose this bitter food because it was from God, not from human mortals.⁶³

They hated him even more for his talk about his dreams (Genesis 37:8)—...Some say: "For his talk"—for all dreams follow the mouth,⁶⁴ i.e., from whatever the person was saying before he slept, that is the kind of thing that will come to him in a dream. "For dreams come with much brooding, and foolish utterance comes with much speech." (Ecclesiastes 5:2) For the vanities which the fool utters cause him many dreams of vanity. Therefore the brothers thought that inasmuch as Joseph, prior to sleeping, was speaking or thinking that he was fit to rule, therefore this dream came to him. Thus they hated him for his words, whether of the mouth or of the heart.⁶⁵

And they stood under the mountain (Exodus 19:17)—From here our rabbis learned that God overturned the mountain over them like a funnel, saying, "If you do not receive the Torah, here will be your graves." And R. Aha b. Jacob said: "From here one may raise a grave objection against the Torah, for Israel can say, 'We were forced.'" But the meaning is not that God wished to force them, for in that case why did He not force the other nations to whom he offered the Torah?... Rather, surely for their good He held the mountain over their heads, as if to say, "See how all the time that you do not receive the Torah, you are as if dead, both in your lifetimes and after you die. You have no permanence, but there shall be your graves.... But by means of the Torah, your lives shall truly be life, both in this world and in the next."⁶⁶

There is no easy answer to the question, how much did Ephraim "believe" of the theoretical views and the stories and interpretations about which he discoursed. At a minimum, I think it is overwhelmingly probable that he did not believe all the views which he entertained or cited. He voiced some views because he really believed them, others as serious hypotheses worthy of consideration, and still others for the mere intellectual exercise of doing so. It is clear in his more "pilpulistic" passages (such as his commentary on the Four Sons texts in Exodus 12–13)⁶⁷ that he was capable, at least some of the time, of raising

⁶³ *Ornament* on Genesis 8:11.

⁶⁴ This proverb from Talmud *Berakhot* originally meant that when one wakes from a dream, the oracular meaning of the dream can be manipulated by the verbal interpretation one sets on it, so it is better to give a favorable interpretation even of an ostensibly unfavorable dream. Ephraim here cites a more modern and rationalistic interpretation: that the content of the dream is a reflection of what one was talking about the night before.

⁶⁵ *Ornament* on Genesis 37:8.

⁶⁶ *Ornament* on Exodus 19:17.

⁶⁷ See Appendix, pp. 412–22.

diverse, mutually-exclusive hypotheses, expending much mental energy even on some fairly trivial questions. He could keep contradictory views in his mind with equanimity. What, then, did he think of the many aggadic and midrashic views which were the bread-and-butter of his preaching and commentaries, and which were sanctified by their inclusion in the canon of received tradition? In a very telling passage in the best “humanistic” vein, he writes (after discussing the various interpretations of Abraham’s bargaining with God from 50 down to 10 righteous as the price for redeeming Sodom):

We find many opinions among the commentators, seeking to resolve these difficulties, as well as fanciful interpretations of these numbers. So my heart has inspired me to follow in their footpaths, to flesh out hints that appeal to the mind in order to explain all the variations of language that occur in these requests, for it is not a useless endeavor. Even if I seem to have erred, I do not fall short of what R. Isaac Abravanel of blessed memory said. He also developed far-fetched explanations, and concluded his words: “There may be other interpretations, and these are only by way of verbal suggestion and homily, for the homiletical matter does not permit more than this.”⁶⁸

Moral Psychology

The macrocosmic issues of natural order and providence recur in the microcosm, which is humankind. The involuntary determining factors of human behavior arise from biological makeup. These incline but do not absolutely compel humans to act in a particular way. Within this determinative framework, there is room for human beings to work on their character traits and shape their destiny. In this area, Ephraim is heir to the Aristotelian moral psychology which Maimonides had adapted to a Jewish framework in *Eight Chapters*, published with Abraham Horowitz’s commentary in 1577.

The patriarchal narratives provide a wealth of concrete examples for developing this conceptual framework. The cluster of issues first comes up in the story of the betrothal of Rebekah. Common wisdom has it that Abraham sent his servant to his kinfolk in Aram, because a family that had produced monotheists was likely to produce more. Ephraim

⁶⁸ *Ornament* on Genesis 18:28.

questions this logic. Inheritance of traits holds for temperamental traits, but intellectual beliefs should be wholly the product of education—

[I will make you swear... that] you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell (Genesis 24:3)—But don't we already know that he dwells among them? But it comes to answer an objection. One might suppose that Abraham commanded that Isaac should not marry among the daughters of the Canaanites lest he learn from their practices, as the Torah elsewhere commands.... But how will he gain in that case by marrying of the daughters of Bethuel and Laban? They are as idolatrous as the Canaanites! Therefore he said "among whom I dwell," and "on no account must you take my son back there." Obviously if my son marries one of the daughters of the Canaanites, since I dwell among them, it is likely that he will settle among them and then one may well worry that he will learn from their practices. Similarly, if he marries one of the daughters of Laban and Bethuel and dwells among them, one may worry that he will learn from their practices. But if he marries from there and settles here, then both worries are set to rest: he won't learn from Laban and Bethuel because he won't be living with them; and he won't learn from the Canaanites because he has no family connection with them; on the contrary, they will hold a grudge against him because he didn't intermarry with them.

But there is another worry, namely that the nature of the parents is perpetuated in the children. This applies only to those sins which are caused by one's material nature, such as gluttony, licentiousness, stinginess, jealousy, and all other such vices which are contingent on one's material disposition. These plagues are disseminated from parents to their children and their descendants. But idolatry is something contingent on a person's intellect, and is not passed down from parents to children. For there are three partners in creation of a person. The matter comes from the parent, and so all the deeds of the parents which are contingent on matter, the children will inherit. But belief is contingent on a person's intellect, and it is the Holy and Blessed One who gives him soul and intellect, so why should this be passed down from parents to children? Therefore Abraham avoided the Canaanites who were steeped in licentiousness and certain other vices contingent on material disposition excepting idolatry, but he did not avoid Laban and Bethuel whose only deficiency was their idolatry.⁶⁹

The personalities of Hagar and Ishmael are interesting cases to consider in this connection, since they vacillate back and forth between vice and virtue. Abraham banished them partly on the grounds of Sarah's suspicion that Ishmael, in addition to engaging in idolatry, would not

⁶⁹ *Ornament* on Genesis 24:3.

be able to overcome the licentious tendencies that he inherited from his Egyptian mother. In fact, mother and son were both guilty at the time that Abraham banished them, but they both repented later.⁷⁰ Ishmael learned from Abraham's good deeds even though he did not inherit his good nature. Ephraim discourses on these distinctions:

These are the generations of Isaac son of Abraham (Genesis 25:19)—[...there is a difference in connotation between “son” and “generation”...]

There is similarly a difference between teaching someone and physically begetting him. The one who acquires the nature of his teacher does so accidentally and not essentially, and the accident varies with its recipient. But one who acquires the nature of his physical parent does so essentially, and it will not vary in respect of its natural character, although by much effort, perseverance and habit one may override it through second nature; but the nature acquired from a teacher can be changed easily. Therefore Moses said, “Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them?” (Numbers 11:12) meaning: Even though they are my students, and students are called children, still I did not parent them physically. What, then, am I to do if their deeds vacillate from good to bad?...

Therefore Ishmael is only called “son” [but not “generation”] of Abraham, for he did not receive his nature, except insofar as Abraham instructed him from his good deeds. But this was accidental to him and it changed, inasmuch as he eventually went out to bad society.⁷¹

Isaac, however, is called “generation” (תולדה) to Abraham (as in אברהם הוליד את יצחק) because he inherited Abraham's good nature. Ephraim goes on to record the speculation that Isaac could not have fathered a good and an evil son (Jacob and Esau) except that he was really the son of Abimelech and not of Abraham. This is refuted by the rabbinic tradition that Isaac bore facial resemblance to Abraham. From whom, then, did Esau inherit his bad traits? From Rebekah's extended family, from Bethuel and Laban.⁷²

However, by far the most interesting character from the standpoint of Ephraim's moral psychological theory is Esau. As antipode to Jacob-Israel, Esau is the magnet for everything negative in the Jewish world-view, whether Biblical, rabbinic, or medieval. Ephraim analyzes him from every conceivable aspect: moral heredity, astral configuration,

⁷⁰ *Ornament* on Genesis 21:10, 25:1, 25:8.

⁷¹ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:19.

⁷² *Ibid.* Ephraim's version of Bethuel's and Laban's character is inconsistent with what he said in his comment on Genesis 24:3, quoted earlier. However, he may be following his own opinion in the earlier passage, and prevailing rabbinic tradition here.

and angelology. Everything correlates with everything else. Redness ties in with his natural color, with red lentils, with the red planet Mars (in Hebrew, **מאדים**), and with the red hills of the land of Edom. Hairiness ties in with the country Seir, with scapegoat and goat-demon, and with the hair-coats which religious hermits (whom Ephraim considers hypocrites) wore in the 16th century:

The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over (Genesis 25:25)—This was a sign that he would take in his father through deception, like those hypocrites (**צבעונים**, literally “the dyed ones”) who give the appearance of humility. The prophet Zechariah speaks of this practice: “In that day, every ‘prophet’ will be ashamed of the ‘visions’ he had when he ‘prophesied.’ They will no longer wear a hairy mantle to deceive, but will declare: ‘I am not a prophet, I am a tiller of the soil; you see, I was plied with the red stuff from my youth on.’” (Zechariah 13:4–5) Thus it was the custom in those days for the humble to wear a hairy mantle, and perhaps it was also the custom in Isaac’s day. Thus Esau was born like a hairy mantle, as a sign that he should be dedicated as a Nazirite to God’s service from the womb on, and that he should appear as belonging to the humble.

This was also a sign that he should be a patron of whores, for coarse body hair can signify this, as Maimonides wrote in *The Laws of Dispositions* (*Hilkhot De’ot*).⁷³

Ephraim interprets the name Esau by analogy with the verb **עשה**, indicating that the development of his hair was done and complete at birth, for the rulers of this world rely for their dominance on physical faculties which exist from birth. By contrast, Jacob’s supremacy is in the world to come, which rests on intellectual and spiritual faculties which take a lifetime to develop.⁷⁴ However, Esau did not receive the epithet “Edom” (“red”) at birth, because it was only later, in the episode of the lentils, that his unusual appetite for anything red confirmed this essential nature of his character:

Therefore his name was called Edom (red) (Genesis 25:30)—But they did not call him Edom when he was born, although it says: “The first one emerged red,” for this was not such a novelty, as some infants are born red because their blood has not yet been absorbed (as in the case cited by R. Nathan), but eventually they return to their normal state. Thus those present at Esau’s birth thought that his red appearance was accidental, and not revealing of his nature. But when he said, “Give me some of that red, red stuff to gulp down,” this presents a problem—why did he

⁷³ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:25.

⁷⁴ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:25–26.

not say, “some of those lentils”? Surely this revealed that he craved them not because they were lentils, but because they were red, and this showed that his nature was to be attracted to red things because of the predominance of the red element in himself, i.e., he was attracted to things that were compatible with his own nature, to wit, all red things. Only then was his name called Edom (“the red one”), because it was known then that his nature was red, and that he stood under the planet Mars and was a shedder of blood.⁷⁵

Here we have a confluence of all levels of being—the linguistic, the visual, the physiological, the astrological and the moral. Esau’s nickname Edom connotes red. His appearance is red. His physiology is no doubt determined by an excess of blood in the balance of his humors. He craves red things. He is born under the red planet Mars. His moral disposition inclines him to shed the red life-substance, the blood of others. As we see elsewhere, his patron angel is Samael. And the name of his land, Seir, is a homonym of the goat-demon, which is linked with the scapegoat of Yom Kippur. He is the most complete example of the tendency of thought which saw a typological correspondence of all things in earth and heaven, conflating Aristotelian essentialism with medieval astrological, medical, and alchemical theories.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, in this portrait he is also too much the villain to be truly human. As antipode of Jacob, he partakes of the demonic. Ephraim has a good word to say about almost all other sinners—Cain, the tower-builders of Babel, Ishmael, Nadab and Abihu. But here, Ephraim is heir to the rabbinic tradition to go above and beyond the call of duty in heaping calumny on Esau. Esau’s “hunting,” which is innocent enough in the Bible, is turned by the rabbis into hunting betrothed virgins in the field.⁷⁷ The game he brought home to his father was stolen.⁷⁸ In the rabbis’ interpretation, the five verbs that conclude the lentil story (“he ate, he drank, he got up, he went, he despised the birthright”) are indicative of his committing the five sins of adultery, murder, idolatry, denial of the resurrection, and denial of

⁷⁵ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:30.

⁷⁶ This typological thought-pattern, common to European thought of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, was expressed particularly in astrology and alchemy. We will see later that the psychiatrist Silvano Arieti considered such patterns (which he called “primary groups”) a feature of advanced primary-process thinking.

⁷⁷ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:27.

⁷⁸ *Ornament* on Genesis 27:3.

God.⁷⁹ As mythical symbol of Israel's Other, Esau has taken on the negative characteristics of all Israel's historical adversaries, from pagan Rome to medieval Christendom and beyond. However, the picture is not entirely negative:

When the children struggled in [Rebekah's] womb, one seeking to go out towards the academy and the other seeking to go out towards the idolatrous temple, she felt sure that one would be righteous and the other wicked. Therefore she said: "Why do I live? I am just as Hagar. How am I better than her, and to what purpose did I pray?" She "went to seek the Lord" to ask: What help was my prayer? "And the Lord said to her: Two nations are in your womb"—these are R. Judah the Prince and Antoninus. Her prayer helped, for from Esau also emanated proper progeny, such as Antoninus and other righteous converts.⁸⁰

Women Have Intellect, Too

Rationalism and feminism do not necessarily go hand in hand in the Jewish tradition. The greatest rationalist was also one of the greatest misogynists. In *Guide* III, 8 Maimonides famously interpreted the passage of the "faithless wife" in Proverbs as a simile for matter which constantly exchanges one form for another. He developed an extended rhetorical analogy: form-is-to-matter as intellect-is-to-desire as man-is-to-woman. Though this does not explicitly say that men participate in the intellectual quest and women do not, it certainly carries a strong innuendo to that effect.

Ephraim committed a similar misogynistic innuendo in *Gleanings of Ephraim*. In Sermon II, 3 he was using the command of the pilgrimage appearance in the Temple as a metaphor for the intellectual quest for knowledge of God. Just as a man with one eye is exempt from pilgrimage appearance, so a person with only traditional learning and not philosophical wisdom is barred from the highest knowledge of God. It so happens that the law of the pilgrimage obligates males but not females to appear. Ephraim is ready to interpret this law as well to his rhetorical purpose:

Therefore it is said, "all your males," specifying the males because they are the strong and mighty ones to stand in the palace of inquiry and

⁷⁹ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:34.

⁸⁰ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:23.

investigation. Not so the simple-minded, whose heart is too foggy to understand, and like women their mind is too weak for understanding the mysteries that underlie the mitzvot, so they only take the matters in their basic sense.⁸¹

An apologete might excuse this statement as metaphor in the same way as the example from Maimonides: just as women are physically weaker and therefore exempt from physical appearance at pilgrimage, so the unphilosophical laity who are intellectually weaker will not be able to achieve the metaphorical equivalent of pilgrimage, namely the higher knowledge of God. But even though the intellectual inferiority is not explicitly stated according to this reason, it is still strongly implied. The passage also cries out to be taken literally because it reminds the reader of the famous rabbinic saying “women are weak-minded,” which (in both its possible senses of “women are intellectually inferior” and “women are weak-willed and easy to seduce”) has real implications in Jewish law. Assuming that R. Ephraim may actually have preached this sermon in a synagogue in Poland in one of his guest appearances, most congregants probably would have heard the simple sense, and drawn their own conclusions. And if Ephraim’s hostess for that Shabbat was present in the gallery and heard the sermon, he may have borne the brunt of her sense of injustice and outrage over the dinner table—something that Maimonides (who confined his philosophy to writing for an esoteric circle) never had to confront.

There is some corroborating support for our supposing that a scenario such as this may actually have taken place, for there is a dramatic shift in the treatment of women from this passage in the *Gleanings* to the *Precious Ornament*. Many passages in the later work might have elicited a warm smile and compliment in the subsequent dinner conversation from the same women who would have winced at the earlier reference.

It all starts with Eve. The first reference, to be sure, is one that Ephraim ought not to have shared with his synagogue audience (though he tries to give it a positive spin at the end):

And he closed up the flesh at that spot - The Midrash says that there is no letter ט"מ in the Torah prior to the creation of the woman, because Satan was created with her. But we must give a reason: why the letter *samekh*, rather than *tet* or *nun*? Because the name of the letter ט"מ has a meaning of “supporting,” signifying that with respect to woman, man

⁸¹ *Gleanings* II, 3.

needs God to support him so that he does not fall into her trap, as it is said: "A wise wife is from the Lord." (Proverbs 19:14) God also support him so that he does not fall into the hands of his own evil inclination, as the rabbis said: "If God did not help man against the evil inclination, he could not overcome it."⁸²

This is the old Adam in Ephraim, so to speak. But once he turns to the character of Eve as a person rather than as a type, he comes to her defense. Any half-learned Jew in Ephraim's audience who had once studied *Humash* with Rashi would know what Rashi said on the Eden story:

[God addressed the serpent:] "You only intended that Adam would die when he ate first, so that you would marry Eve. You only came to speak to Eve first, because women are easily seduced and know how to entice their husbands. Therefore I will put enmity [between you and the woman]."⁸³

Now Rashi is by far the most-cited post-Biblical authority in the *Precious Ornament*, with over 500 references. Often Ephraim will follow Rashi's view as authoritative and base his own speculations on it. Often, too, he will finesse it, noting a real or imaginary contradiction between it and some other datum, and proceeding tosafrist-style to a reconciliation. This, however, is one place where Ephraim takes a position diametrically opposed to Rashi's, and to his own view in the *Gleanings*:

Now Adam saw fit by light of his reason to make a fence around the law, and to forbid his wife also to touch the tree, so she would not come to eat it. But Eve thought that everything he told her was commanded by God, and it was this misunderstanding of hers that gave the serpent the opening to mislead her. By this interpretation, *we do not have to agree with Rashi*, who commented that the serpent went not to Adam but to Eve, because women are weak-minded and easily seduced. Even without Rashi's view, there is no difficulty, for the serpent wanted to prove from the case of touching that there was no danger in eating. But this argument would not have worked with Adam, because he knew that God had not forbidden touching the tree, for he added that prohibition himself.

We may offer another possibility, that Eve was uncertain whether (1) the serpent's intention was for their good, that they should be like gods, knowing good and evil, or (2) the serpent wanted Adam to die from eating the fruit, so that he could marry Eve, therefore the serpent spoke to Eve, assuming that women are weak-minded and easily seduced, and also

⁸² *Ornament* on Genesis 2:21.

⁸³ Rashi on Genesis 3:15.

assuming that she would give the fruit to her husband first. Eve therefore decided to test the serpent, and added the prohibition of touching the tree herself, so that the whole argument would be about touching the tree, and it would not be logical to have Adam touch the tree before her (contrary to the case with eating). Thus, when the serpent pushed Eve against the tree, Eve reasoned: “Now I know that the serpent is right, for if it was his intention that Adam die, why did he push me against the tree? What benefit would he have from my death? Rather, it is as he says: by eating the fruit, we will be as gods.” Therefore she gave credence to his words.⁸⁴

Ephraim suggests two possible interpretations here, each reflecting favorably on Eve’s intelligence and moral integrity. By the first suggested interpretation, Eve suffered not from any lack of intelligence or will-power, but from the patriarchal over-protectiveness of her husband. Instead of sharing information and responsibility fully with her, he made arbitrary enactments that were meant for her benefit but turned out disastrous in the long run. Adam’s extension of the letter of the law also illustrates the danger of excessive *humrot* (legal stringencies), a moral which is drawn from this story by some ancient and modern authorities.⁸⁵ The serpent picked on Eve not because she was stupid or lacked will-power, but because she was ill-informed, and he could lead her by correct logical steps from her well-intentioned but faulty premises to even more disastrous conclusions.

By Ephraim’s second interpretation, Eve was indeed the originator of the “touching” prohibition, but she came up with it to devise a test of the other prevalent rabbinic premise which Rashi has cited. To test whether the serpent’s purpose was to kill off Adam and marry Eve, she would tell the serpent that touching the tree was also forbidden. In that case, she knew touching the tree was harmless—but did the serpent know it? If the serpent thought that her touching the tree would merit death, and he nevertheless allowed her to touch it, then the “romantic triangle” hypothesis would be discredited. The thought that the serpent wanted *both* Adam and Eve to die, did not occur to her. Thus she did not think of all the possible alternatives. This shows that her reason—like human reason generally—was imperfect. But the sophistication of her test still goes far to discredit the prejudice that women’s *reason* is

⁸⁴ *Ornament* on Genesis 3:1.

⁸⁵ “Rabbi Hiyya taught: ‘Do not make the buffer greater than the core, lest it collapse and lopp off the plants.’” He then goes on to cite this story as an object lesson. (*Genesis Rabbah* 19:3, cited in A. J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 722)

inferior to men's. As for the other view that women are weak-willed (and thus "irrational" inasmuch as even when they know the right thing to do, they cannot follow through and do it because their will is driven by their desire rather than by their reason)—this view is also discredited by both of Ephraim's versions of the story. Eve's will conformed to her reason at every step; however, her reason had arrived at erroneous conclusions, brought about in the first case by misinformation, and in the second case by her failure to conceive all the possibilities of the situation. She erred, but not by any weakness specific to women.

When we turn to the matriarchs, we find that Ephraim's view of them is even more positive. While Rashi is content to mention once the midrashic view that Abraham was inferior to Sarah in prophecy, Ephraim mentions it three times.⁸⁶ Indeed, on the first mention he contrasts it with Abraham's political dominance:

[Terah took his son Abram his grandson Lot the son of Haran,] and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram (Genesis 11:31)...he was called "Abram" meaning "father of [A]ram" or "Abraham" meaning "father of many nations," and she was also called Sarai indicating sovereignty (שררה); nevertheless, in respect of sovereignty surely Abraham was the principal player and Sarah was subordinate to him...But with respect to the holy spirit, our rabbis said that Abraham was inferior to Sarah in prophecy. Therefore she was called Iscah which indicates that she was anointed (סוכה) of the holy spirit that was upon her...⁸⁷

In discussing the episode of the three angels, Ephraim offers a touching comparison of the respective virtues of Abraham and Sarah. Like the midrash, he interprets the angels' question "Where is your wife [/ husband]?" and the response "In the tent" to allude differentially to the masculine and feminine virtues they embody—hospitality and modesty. The literary symmetries within this passage seem to be expressive of an ideal of wedded bliss based on reciprocity and almost equality (for Sarah's "modesty" must still relegate her to a subordinate role):

The rabbis said that the dots over the letters **איו** indicate that the angels also asked Sarah **איו**—"Where is he?" Those who interpret these markings pointed out that the words **אליה** ("[the angel said] to him: 'Where is she?'" have the identical letters as **אליה** ("to her: 'Where is he?'"). But this is problematic, for how would the angel ask Sarah "Where is he?" since Abraham was waiting on them! It is therefore my opinion that both

⁸⁶ Ornament on Genesis 11:31 (once) and on 25:1 (twice).

⁸⁷ Ornament on Genesis 11:31.

questions, “Where is she?” and “Where is he?” ask not about their spatial whereabouts, but about their level of spiritual attainment, with respect to the good deeds for whose merit they would both merit a son, for she merited a son by her modesty, and he by his *tzedakah* and hospitality... In that case, the plain sense of the text combines both matters, for the plain sense says: “They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’”—what is the spiritual attainment by which she will merit to have a son? He replied: “Here in the tent”—by virtue of her modesty. The midrashic interpretation says: “They said to her, ‘Where is your husband?’ She replied: ‘Here in the tent’—i.e., he is always setting up lodging-tents for guests, so it is fitting that by virtue of his *tzedakah* he should merit to have a son, as it says: “They will be satiated with children, and will leave their surplus to their offspring; I will behold your face by *tzedakah*.”⁸⁸

There is one sour note in this episode that deserves comment. From the difference between the “choice flour” which Abraham requested, and the “ordinary flour” which Sarah prepared, the rabbis deduced that women are stingier to guests than men, and Ephraim endorses this opinion.⁸⁹ Lot’s wife likewise comes under criticism for withholding charity.⁹⁰ There may be a sociological basis to this observation. In a society where men managed the large business transactions and women had to budget the household expenses by counting pennies, it could well have been the case that men were more likely to be lavish in bestowing hospitality and entertainment. Nevertheless, Ephraim is able to balance the picture by citing the competing example of the Shunamite woman who was rewarded for hosting Elisha by being granted a son—who is pointedly called her son and not her husband’s, for she was the generous one in that family.⁹¹

We have already seen how Ephraim regards Rebekah so highly that he attributes to her the intellectual independence to search after the truth of the existence of God to reassure herself in her existential predicament. One feature of that story indicates Isaac’s dominance (or religious primacy) in their relationship: the fact that Isaac prays on behalf of his wife for God to cure her barrenness. Ephraim cites a Talmudic view to indicate that this is no indication of any personal or gender superiority on Isaac’s part, but only more fortunate family connections:

⁸⁸ *Ornament* on Genesis 18:9.

⁸⁹ BT Bava Metzi’a 87a; *Ornament* on Genesis 18:6.

⁹⁰ *Ornament* on Genesis 19:17, citing *Genesis Rabbah* 50:4 and BT *Ketubot* 66b.

⁹¹ *Ornament* on Genesis 18:6.

Abraham begot Isaac (Genesis 25:19)—The verb “begat” (הוליד) has a causative form.... Why does it occur here? It is to indicate that Abraham was the cause of Isaac’s being able to have children and offspring, for it says: “Isaac pleaded with the Lord because she was barren... and the Lord responded to *his* plea,” i.e., not to hers, “for the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person is not equivalent [to the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a wicked person.]”⁹² According to this, it was because Isaac was the son of a righteous person—namely Abraham—Abraham’s merit counted for him in that God heard his prayer.⁹³

We can mention briefly other evidences of Ephraim’s treatment of women, which generally ranges from evenhanded to favorable. Not only Sarah, but all the matriarchs spoke with prophetic inspiration, as evidenced by the prophetic character of the names which Leah and Rachel gave to their children.⁹⁴ In the magicians’ interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream, they said the cows and the corn both referred to Pharaoh’s daughters, who were referred to by two characteristics: their fertility (from the similarity of פֶּר [cow] and פֵּרִי [fruit]), and their positive moral influence on their husbands (a wife satisfies her husband like bread, so he will not go astray after other women).⁹⁵ When the Israelites received the manna in the wilderness (which has the property of facilitating intellectual enlightenment), the women were most enthusiastic about it, because by landing preferentially on the tents of those who were virtuous in their marital conduct, it certified their own virtue.⁹⁶ Though the Moabites were indeed guilty for seducing the Israelites at Ba’al Peor, we should blame the Moabite men rather than the women, for the women were forced to obey their male kinfolk.⁹⁷

Ephraim’s positive valuation of women is no doubt influenced by the general honor given to women in Renaissance culture, a phenomenon which was an outgrowth of the medieval chivalric tradition.⁹⁸

⁹² BT Yevamot 64a.

⁹³ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:19.

⁹⁴ *Ornament* on Genesis 29:33–34.

⁹⁵ *Ornament* on Genesis 41:8.

⁹⁶ *Ornament* on Exodus 16:15.

⁹⁷ *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 23:5.

⁹⁸ Much of the medieval chivalric literary valorization of women was no doubt romantic propaganda that contrasted with women’s lowly actual status. (See Sidney Painter, *French Chivalry*, Cornell 1940, Chapter 4, “Courtly Love.”) But by the Renaissance, these ideals had been translated at least to some degree into reality. Jacob Burkhardt’s claim that in the Renaissance “women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men” is no doubt somewhat exaggerated. (Burkhardt, *The Civilization of*

The tendency toward improvement of women's status in Europe had already by this period resulted in a marked contrast with their condition in the non-Christian Near East, as noted by an Ottoman diplomat visiting in Vienna in 1665.⁹⁹ The rabbinic tradition within which Ephraim stood represented the common millennial-old Near Eastern pattern. Ephraim's revision of the traditional stereotypes is an indication of sixteenth-century European Jewish society's responsiveness to its larger cultural environment. Jewish women were not to be held in less honor than the ladies of gentile society, and they saw to it that their menfolk got the message to treat them properly.

I close this topic with mention of another of those pregnant passages which raises the basic questions of interpretation of gender identity in a way that can be provocative either of controversy or thoughtful reflection:

You go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then you [אתָ] tell us everything... (Deuteronomy 5:24)—... The word אַתָּה [2nd person feminine pronoun]—as if he is talking to a female—requires explanation. What Rashi says—“You have weakened my strength like that of a woman! [I have suffered so much pain on your account; you have weakened my hand; for I see that you are not pious enough to want to approach God out of love. Would it not be better for you to learn from the mouth of the Almighty, rather than from me?]”—is not sufficient, for does not God respond “They did well to speak thus”? Furthermore, why is the first pronoun (*ve-attah*) in the male gender? And why is the verb יֹאמַר (indicating gentle speech) followed by וְאֵת תְּדַבֵּר (indicating tough talk)?

The explanation for all this is that in proportion as the power of matter is weakened, so is the power of the intellect increased. The wisdom of the elders is proof of this. Therefore Moses was able to hear the voice of the Lord and not be aroused by it, for his material strength had already weakened like that of a female by his abstaining from marital relations and other practices of abstinence.... “You can receive the gentle speech of the Shekhinah even if your material strength is that of a male, and you are not weak as a female; however... you can also receive even tough talk, since your material strength is weakened like a female.” For Moses's

the Renaissance in Italy, Harper & Row 1975 p. 389) But the achievements in education (among the nobility) and the general tone of social interaction, as seen from the literature of the period, marks a great advance over previous realities.

⁹⁹ “In this country I saw an extraordinary spectacle. Whenever the emperor meets a woman in the street, if he is riding, he brings his horse to a standstill and lets her pass. If the Emperor is on foot and meets a woman, he stands in a posture of politeness. The woman greets the emperor, who then takes his hat off his head to show respect for the woman...” Travel journal of Evliya Çelebi, quoted in Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Oxford, 2002, p. 65.

face was like the sun shining on every side; therefore the matter in him was purified.

On the negative side, there is the harping insistence of “female = weak.” Though true in a relative and statistical way, this is one of those generalizations that have the danger of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies and cause more harm and misunderstanding than the light they shed. Also, the body-mind dualism and praise of asceticism are boilerplate Platonism in rabbinic garb.

Having acknowledged that, we must nevertheless pay respect to some of the other implications of this passage. The most amazingly positive aspect of it is that it praises Moses as being androgynous. Like Teiresias among the Greeks, the supreme prophet of Israel had to acquire feminine characteristics in order to reach the highest stage of enlightenment. This is on the one hand a realization that the deepest human characteristics—including the intellectual ones—are beyond gender. It is also a reminder of the complexity of the gender role models at the heart of the Jewish tradition.¹⁰⁰

There is probably an element of projection here as well. The Precious Ornament was written after Ephraim’s recovery from severe illness, during which his name was changed to Solomon Ephraim to give him spiritually a new lease on life. His experience of physical weakening to the vanishing point, and the resurgence of intellectual energy after that crisis, may be expressed in this passage.

Universal and Particular

Rationality aspires to universality. The rational concept of “humankind” by its nature embraces all human beings without exception. Yet Judaism, like most religions, privileges the members of the chosen faith. The sages of Israel exhibit diverse tendencies. Some, like Isaiah, Maimonides, and Hermann Cohen, stressed the universal. Others, like Ezra, Judah Halevi, and Maharal, stressed the particularity of Israel. Ephraim was neither an extreme universalist nor a thoroughgoing particularist;

¹⁰⁰ The question of Jewish ideal gender types is an opening to fields beyond the scope of this study. Having opened the door a crack, I will refer the interested reader to Daniel Boyarin’s book, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* for further exploration.

he held on to the tension between the two. In the next chapter, we shall see in the Omphalos myth some of his more particularist views. Here we shall focus on some of the more universal aspects of his thought.

Throughout his works of different periods, Ephraim stresses אדם as a key-word and central concept. אדם as a common noun is humankind generally; as a proper noun, it denotes Adam in his first splendor of creation; it is also used to speak of collective Israel as the representative of humanity that comes closest to fulfilling the human ideal of serving God. Humanity is metaphysically central in what general Western thought calls the Great Chain of Being. Only mankind combines physical and spiritual elements, and thus holds the cosmos together, a theme he articulates in his commentary at the beginning of Genesis and the end of Deuteronomy:

The reason why the existence of heaven and earth is conditional on Torah is the following. The supernal and terrestrial realms are opposites, which require a mediating term to join them. Such is the human being, composed of matter and form. This composition is achieved through the Torah, for without the Torah man is like a beast and has no portion in the supernal. Thus whoever engages in Torah brings peace between the heavenly and earthly families, so that they should not oppose each other, by virtue of the mediating term which combines them.¹⁰¹

However, Torah is a universal humanistic ideal only if it is available to all humanity. Thus, Ephraim places special emphasis on the rabbinic account of God offering the Torah to all the peoples of the world. He goes further, and explains the difference between the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of the Ten Commandments on this basis. Exodus presents the Ten Commandments as they were offered to all the nations of the world, and as they are still applicable to them. The modifications in Deuteronomy indicate the adaptation of the commandments to the special needs of Israel. Thus, the Ten Commandments present the universal law of God to all humankind.¹⁰² By contrast, the dietary laws are an example of those laws which are specific only to Israel. There is, however, an invidious aspect to that distinction: the effect of the dietary laws is to reduce the natural impulses to cruelty and thus to spiritualize those who observe them and prepare them for the world-

¹⁰¹ *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 32:1; see also on Genesis 1:31.

¹⁰² *Ornament* on Exodus 20:8.

to-come. By implication, the nations of the world are by and large not privileged to that destiny.¹⁰³

Perhaps by analogy with Maimonides's theory of Sabeanism as the prevalent religious error of the gentiles, Ephraim has come up with his own theory that the gentiles who do not see the true way are especially prone to Manicheanism.¹⁰⁴ Pharaoh of the Joseph story was a Manichean.¹⁰⁵ Rebekah and Jethro were tempted by the Manichean theory, as we have seen.¹⁰⁶ In his commentary on the Shema, Ephraim gives a capsule view of the history of this error, and its elimination in Messianic times:

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One (Deuteronomy 6:4)—Rashi explained that He is now our God but not the God of the nations; but in the future, the Lord will be One, [i.e., the other nations will also acknowledge Him as God]. This is to be explained along the lines of R. Aha b. Hanina who said: "It is written: 'On that day the Lord shall be One'—does this imply that today He is not One? But there is this difference between this world and the world-to-come, that in this world one says for good tidings, 'Blessed is He Who does good,' and for evil tidings one says, 'Blessed is the righteous judge.' But in the world-to-come one will always say, 'Blessed is He Who does good.'"¹⁰⁷

Thus in this world, since one sees opposite events, some good and some bad, some people fell into heresy and said that there are two powers, for one cause cannot produce opposite effects, as we discussed on Genesis, "There was evening and there was morning *one day*." But in the world-to-come, when all troubles will be forgotten, all will praise God with the words "Blessed is He Who does good," and they will no longer see the play of opposites. Therefore the Lord will be proclaimed One in the mouth of all, and His Name will be One. For the alternation of names from Judgment to Mercy causes them this error. Therefore we say "the Lord [name of Mercy] is our God [name of Judgment]"—it is Israel who especially attribute these two names to one God, but in the future "the Lord is One"—all will use only the name of Mercy.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ *Ornament* on Leviticus 11:1.

¹⁰⁴ It is significant in this connection that Ephraim does not consider Deuteronomy 4:19 (which describes God allotting the sun, moon, and stars to the other nations of the world) as referring to idolatrous worship of the gentiles, but only to their fates being determined by astrological influences.

¹⁰⁵ *Ornament* on Genesis 41:1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ornament* on Genesis 25:22, Exodus 18:1.

¹⁰⁷ See BT Pesahim 50a.

¹⁰⁸ *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 6:4.

It is characteristic of Ephraim's tone of presentation in this passage and the other passages dealing with Manicheanism, that he does not consider the gentiles perverse or wicked for adopting this view. It is a mistaken view which arises naturally from certain observations about the state of the world. This reasonableness to the opponent is an attitude that is consonant with a fundamentally rational outlook that leans significantly in the universalistic direction.

The ultimate destiny of humanity is thus to recover their original unity, through an intellectual illumination that will reveal the truth to them. With that, the unity of God will be achieved as well.

A Conjecture: Was Ephraim Influenced by the Polish Reformation?

The puzzle of Ephraim's Manichean preoccupation may be illuminated if we consider that he was possibly speaking in coded terms to address certain developments of the Polish Reformation, particularly the rise of unitarian doctrines (called Socinianism). It is noteworthy that the Minor Reformed Church in Poland had evolved through the 16th century into a haven of progressive doctrinal tendencies, which came to a climax under the leadership of Faustus Socinus (born and educated in Italy) from 1579 to 1604.¹⁰⁹ These were the very years during which Ephraim Luntshitz published his works from *City of Heroes* (1580) through the *Precious Ornament* (1602).

We are frustrated again at the failure of Ephraim to make explicit reference to his contemporary interlocutors. Dubnow and Ben Sasson have established that there were disputations between Jews and Christians of the Reformation period, and that Jews commented explicitly on the theological developments around them.¹¹⁰ Otto Kulka has studied the possible influence of Maharal by the Bohemian Brothers and has judged the evidence in this connection as suggestive but not conclusive.¹¹¹ In the absence of any explicit references by Ephraim to

¹⁰⁹ Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents*, Harvard, 1946, Chapters 19–44; especially Chapter 30: "The Minor Church under the Leadership of Socinus, 1579–1604."

¹¹⁰ Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, JPS 1916, pp. 136–138; H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes" (1970), "Jews and Christian Sectarials: Existential Similarity and Dialectical Tensions in Sixteenth-Century Moravia and Poland-Lithuania" (1973).

¹¹¹ "We may thus conclude that we have found a possible link of communication

the Christian theological developments of this period, we must follow Kulka's example in pointing out the evidence and refraining from a definitive assertion.

Alan Cooper has pointed out that there are places in Ephraim's exegesis where he comes very close to affirming a doctrine of original sin. To be more precise, Ephraim has typically mined the rabbinic sources for a concept that comes close to this idea. In some places, he speaks of **זוהמת הנחש**, "the pollution of the serpent." Elsewhere the term is actually **החטא הקדום**.¹¹² Ephraim finds the effects of this sin operative in various forms of ritual impurity, particularly menstrual impurity and the impurity of the dead body. It is due to this taint of impurity from primordial sin that a woman undergoes a double period of purification for delivering a baby girl.¹¹³ Most interestingly, Ephraim develops the rabbinic notion that by receiving the Torah at Sinai, Israel was cleansed of the pollution of the serpent—a cleansing which was spoiled by the sin of the Golden Calf, but which is made effective again whenever Jews engage in study of Torah.¹¹⁴ It is easy to appreciate how this idea was probably used by the ancient rabbis to counter the Pauline claim (as in Romans 5) that the original sin could only be atoned by the self-sacrifice of Christ. Ephraim's invocation and development of the idea is an indication that he was aware of the prevalence of this idea in Christian discourse during the Reformation; hence, though he made no overt reference to contemporary Christian thought, he responded to it indirectly.

Against that background, Ephraim's repeated references to Manicheanism are possibly fraught with contemporary significance. "Manicheanism" is then a coded word for "Trinitarianism," the dominant theological outlook of European gentiles. A correspondence may be suggested between Jethro, the gentile priest who through speculation on the action of God in the world is led to affirm the radical unity of God, and Socinus, leader of the Minor Reformed Church in Poland who forthrightly affirmed a unitarian theology. The Manichean outlook

between Calvin and the MaHaRaL, but this does not necessarily prove a direct influence." Kulka, "Comenius and Maharal: The Historical Background of the Parallels in their Teachings," *Judaica Bohemiae* 27:1, Prague 1991, p. 21.

¹¹² The term is **זוהמת הנחש** in *Lips of Knowledge* on Hukkat § 254, and **החטא הקדום** in *Ornament* on Leviticus 12:2. The latter phrase is found in Baḥya ben Asher's commentary on Leviticus 12:8.

¹¹³ *Ornament* on Leviticus 12:2 (a passage pointed out to me by Alan Cooper).

¹¹⁴ *Lips of Knowledge* on Hukkat, § 254 (see Appendix, pp. 425–28).

of Pharaoh may have been understood by Ephraim's listeners as an oblique reference to the successive kings of Poland who upheld the Catholic position and the Trinitarian doctrine. And Ephraim's gloss on the Shema, that "on that day the Lord shall be One and His Name One," may have voiced a hope that the Socinians might be the leading edge of the development of Christian thought in a new age that would lead all to the ultimate clarification that the Jewish understanding of "God is one" is correct and worthy of adoption by the entire enlightened gentile world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RETURN TO ORIGINS: THE OUTLOOK OF THE *PRECIOUS ORNAMENT* (PART 2)

Mysticism: Questions of Method (Ephraim's and Ours)

Was Ephraim a mystic? The question comes up about ever so many thinkers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance—Crescas, Abravanel, and Maharal, for example. It becomes a problematic question for those thinkers who do not neatly fit a clear-cut paradigm of rationalist or kabbalist. What are some of those criteria?

A thinker of our period is a rationalist if he:

- Accepts Maimonides (or Jewish Aristotelianism as represented by other thinkers such as Ibn Tibbon, Gersonides, Narboni, etc.) as generally authoritative in philosophical matters.
- Accepts a naturalist paradigm of miracles and prophecy all or most of the time.
- Liberally reinterprets the Bible and aggadah to reconcile them with philosophy or science.
- Rejects views, doctrines, or arguments that violate logic or common sense.
- Accepts some form of universalist, rational-ethical doctrine of human purpose and destiny.

A thinker is a kabbalist (and perforce a mystic) if he:

- Accepts the Zohar and its derivative literature as a primary form of discourse.
- Accepts the Sefirot as a conceptual framework for discussion.

A thinker is a mystic (but not necessarily a kabbalist) if he

- Accepts experience of union with the divine or vision of the Shekhinah as a primary religious objective in this life.
- Has a developed theory of how the divine effluence (שפע) reaches

the created world through non-rational, arbitrary and specific channels.

- Has extensive recourse to non-rational doctrines and paralogical intellectual methods in shaping his outlook.

It will be my thesis in this chapter that Ephraim of Luntshitz, while he eschewed specifically kabbalistic doctrines and intellectual methods, complemented his moderate rationalism by espousing doctrines and intellectual methods which are “mystical but not kabbalistic” by the above criteria. He sought to achieve the same religious ends as the kabbalists by other means, while adopting from them doctrines and methods which could be taken out of their systematic context and supported independently from the rabbinic tradition alone.

In so doing, he was following in the aggadic realm a procedure analogous to that of his master R. Solomon Luria in the halakhic realm. It was Luria who, on the publication of the *Shulhan Arukh*, criticized it as an intellectual disaster for adopting a subset of the body of halakhic opinion as standard while foreclosing alternative options and diverting students from study of the Talmud. Luria held that the Talmud, rather than any later code, should ever be the primary source of halakhic guidance. Ephraim seems to have adopted a similar method in matters of religious outlook. Such questions are always open for discussion, never finally decided. Maimonides may have persuaded us that he was right on the majority of issues, but he was hardly infallible. The kabbalists may have been right about certain things, but Ephraim probably saw the *Zohar* as a premature systematization of mystical thought, analogous to the *Shulhan Arukh*. If one is to engage in mystical speculation at all, one should be guided not by the late systematizers, but by the early wisdom. One should discuss these topics directly from the Talmud.

Ephraim’s scattered references to the *Zohar* indicate a disposition to keep it at arm’s length. In the majority of places where he does cite the *Zohar*, he does so to borrow a commonplace scriptural interpretation with no clear mystical significance. In his rare reference to the ten sefirot (which he notes are equal in number and therefore parallel to the ten commandments), he makes sure to credit this teaching to the *Book of Formation* (*Sefer Yetzirah*) rather than to the *Zohar*.¹ In the same context comes his lone mention of the *tzinorot*, the channels through

¹ *Ornament* on Exodus 20:1.

which the divine effluence is disseminated to the world.² In another context, he goes out of his way to stress that his explanation, though similar in result to that of the Zohar, is closer to the plain meaning.³ In the introduction to the *Precious Ornament*, amid a general condemnation of the foibles of the common people, he sneaks in an allusion which sounds a note (familiar from Isserles and elsewhere) of complaint at the ignoramuses who parade their scant knowledge of kabbalah with much fanfare:

They tear down, but do not build!
 The breach springs up before them;
 The wall collapses before its builders.
 My spirit presses tight in my belly,
 My heart quakes within me
 Like a coin jangling in a jug⁴
 A bell and a pomegranate⁵—
 I cannot hold it in!
 My word lies on my tongue like a burning sore, saying:
 How long will you judge unjustly,
 Turning light into darkness and darkness into light?
 Will you gouge out these men's eyes, by denying the obvious?

Though Ephraim does not explicitly mention kabbalists here, the coded references in this context were a wink to the initiated letting him know where they stood in his estimate, at least in their excesses. Yet though he would not subscribe systematically to kabbalah, he groped in his own way to address, in common with them, the overarching themes of the sacred and the numinous which fell through the cracks of the rationalist worldview.

² *Ornament* on Exodus 20:2.

³ *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 21:18.

⁴ כַּאֲסֵתְרָא בְּלִינָא קִישׁ קִישׁ קְרִיא (Talmud *Baba Metzia* 85b), a proverbial idiom used in Isserles's *Law of the Sacred Offering* III, 4 and elsewhere in disparagement of those who ignorantly parade their superficial knowledge of kabbalah.

⁵ פֶּעֶמֶן וְרִמֹּן ("Bell and Pomegranate") is the title of a commentary on Samuel Gallico's *Asis Rimmonim* ("Liquor of Pomegranates," which was a digest of Moses Cordovero's kabbalistic compendium *Pardes Rimmonim* "Orchard of Pomegranates") authored by R. Mordecai b. Jacob of Prague, which was later included in the 1623 Mantua edition of the latter work, and which Ephraim could have seen in manuscript or heard about.

Ephraim's Omphalos Myth

Some time between 1590 and 1602,⁶ Ephraim put together several elements from various sources (mostly rabbinic) and wove them together into his own personal synthetic myth of creation and redemption. Here is a distillation of that synthesis, combined from about a dozen passages in *The Precious Ornament*.⁷

* * *

When God began to create heaven and earth, He started from a single point as source and expanded from there. Heaven and earth originated together from a common axis, and they have remained joined there ever since. The heavenly side of that coordinate is the location of the Heavenly Temple. The corresponding point on earth is called Foundation Stone for its role in the creation of the earth. Though heaven and earth were each created with a single hand of God—heaven with the right hand, earth with the left—the Temple-complex which joins them was created with both hands, as the midrash deduces from Exodus 15:17: “The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your *hands* (plural) established.”

When it came time for the creation of Adam, God gathered dust from all corners of the earth to that one central point, and created Adam there. Adam was then transported to Eden, where Eve was created from a side of his body. After their sin, Adam was transported back to the original source point⁸ and he offered there a sacrifice as atonement for his own sin and for the earth, which had contributed to his sin by providing gross matter at his creation. The offering was a unicorn, a one-horned-ox.⁹ The single horn signified that Adam was

⁶ Ephraim's interest in the “navel of the earth” theme could have been stimulated by R. Moses Alshekh's commentary on Genesis, which was published in 1597 (see especially Alshekh's commentary on Genesis 3:23). However, not all the elements of his synthesis occur in Ibn Gabbai. The “sin of the earth” motif is adapted from Abravanel.

⁷ The sources for this synthetic view are: For the “omphalos” motif, *Ornament* on Genesis 3:23, 12:1, 12:7, 13:17, 22:2, 22:13, 28:11–12, 33:19, 35:15; Exodus 15:17, 26:1; Deuteronomy 3:25, 12:4–5. For the “sin of the earth” and “primal sin,” see *Ornament* on Genesis 1:11, 2:9, 3:23, 8:21, 33:10; Exodus 3:11; Leviticus 1:2, 12:2, 18:25; Numbers 24:1; and Deuteronomy 29:21. For the unicorn motif, see *Ornament* on Genesis 3:23, 4:3, 22:13, and Leviticus 1:2.

⁸ This is deduced midrashically from the concluding phrase of Genesis 3:23: “So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil *from which he was taken*.”

⁹ The unicorn motif was popular in the Renaissance, as David Ruderman discusses. (Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science*, Harvard 1988, Chapter 4: “Unicorns, Great

alone in the world; its horn pointed upward, indicating that Adam's sin was against God alone.

When God first called Abraham to His service, He did so with the words **לך לך** (literally: "Go to your[self]"), to signify that Abraham was to return to his own point of origin, namely the point of origin of all humankind. At that point—and only at that point—one can achieve a spiritual enlightenment through seeing the Shekhinah, by being at the meeting-point of earth and heaven opposite the Heavenly Temple. It is from that spot that the divine effluence is disseminated to all the world. The summit of Abraham's religious experience, in the Binding of Isaac, was on that spot, and the introduction of that episode by the identical formula **לך לך** has the same significance of "return to your essence."

Jacob's vision of the ladder was at the same spot, and thus it has a mystical as well as an intellectual significance. The difference between Jerusalem and Bethel is not significant; some say they fused and became one, while others say the ladder had its foot at Hebron, its middle over Jerusalem, and its top over Bethel. Jacob not only saw the ladder there on his way to Mesopotamia; he also returned there and built an altar after his twenty-year sojourn with Laban. From the fact that God ascended from Jacob at that spot, we learn that the patriarchs are God's chariot.

The meeting of earth and heaven was accomplished in the Tabernacle, which was the prototype for the Temple. The symbolism of its dimensions and furnishings is replete with the significances we have already mentioned. For instance, the curtain was spread between the Holy of Holies, abode of the Shekhinah, and the Tent of Meeting, furnished in symbolic reference to human perfection achieved through the five gates of wisdom. The ten curtains of the Tabernacle were spread in two arrays of five each, reminding us of the Talmudic doctrine that the divine soul resembles the human soul in five ways. Just as the Tabernacle is the unique meeting-point of celestial and terrestrial, so

Beasts, and the Marvelous Variety of Nature.") However, here too Ephraim deviates from the mainstream by being as rabbinic as possible in his sources. Though the common Renaissance Hebrew word for unicorn was **ראם**, Ephraim relied on the aggadot of a **פר מקרין מפריס**. (See *Genesis Rabbah* 34:9, *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 1:28, *Midrash on Psalms* 39:3 and 92:6; *Midrash of Rabbi Eliezer* § 20; BT *Shabbat* 28b, *Avodah Zarah* 8a, and *Hullin* 60a.) The rabbis commented on Psalm 69:32: 'And it shall please the Lord better than a bullock that has horns and hoofs'. Since the word **מקרין** ("horned") is spelled defectively without the *yod* of the plural, it suggests a single horn.

man is the only being who combines heavenly and earthly elements into one entity, thus (at his best) making harmony between the hosts of heaven and earth.

The Temple continues the atonement function of Adam's original sacrifice. But whereas his ox had one horn pointed upward at God, our sacrificial animals have two horns pointed horizontally at our fellows, who are the usual victims of our sins. The residue of primal sin is still felt in other ways. A woman's purification after parturition lasts twice as long for a girl as for a boy, because the residue of Eve's guilt still needs to be worked off, both for mother and daughter. The uncleanness of the land, mentioned in Leviticus as part of the punishment for the people's sins, is a further reminder of the earth's original contribution to the first sin, by giving gross matter to the creation of Adam.

When Moses begged to be let into the Promised Land, his fondest hope was to have the experience of seeing the Shekhinah at the chosen site (called Lebanon, just as the name Moriah is synonymous with "mountain of myrrh").

One should not think from the indefinite language of Deuteronomy ("the place which the Lord shall choose") that there was ever any doubt as to the ultimate place of God's sanctuary. The place was determined from Adam on. Only the ratification of that choice by all the tribes of Israel remained to be done.

* * *

What are we to make of this complex of ideas? On the one hand, there is not much in it that is new or surprising. The centrality of Jerusalem and Bethel to the intercourse of earth and heaven is very familiar, and even their identification is already a common motif in the midrash and the commentators.¹⁰ That this location was central since the creation of the world is commonplace. That it was a focal-point of Adam's own religious experience, and the site where he offered a sacrifice of atonement (a unicorn, no less!) is a minority view in the aggadah, first appearing in the late midrash *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. Ephraim seems to have first become acquainted with it in the decade after he wrote the

¹⁰ These rabbinic traditions are cited in Kanan Makiya's novel, *The Rock: A Tale of Seventh-Century Jerusalem* (Pantheon, 2001), a work that is exemplary in the ecumenical breadth of its vision, which rightly stresses the continuity between the Jewish and Muslim traditions of the sanctity of the common site of the Temple and the Dome of the Rock.

Gleanings,¹¹ and he may have picked it up from reading the kabbalist Moses Alshekh's commentary on Genesis, published in 1597. The interpretation of *lekh lekha* as referring to this primal human essence to which the pilgrim returns at the spot of origin, may have been Ephraim's own addition.

There is a strong particularizing thrust to this myth, which contrasts with the universalizing tendencies we saw in Ephraim's thought in the last chapter. It affirms as strongly as possible that the world has a center, and that Israel's consecrated site, the Holy of Holies, is this center. The fusion of Bethel and Jerusalem in the rabbinic aggadah, which Ephraim adopts here, gives this combined locus a maximum of the properties which Mircea Eliade (drawing heavily on these very traditions) ascribed to the *axis mundi*:¹²

- It is the geographical center of the earth.
- It is the sacred site par excellence.
- It is the historical origin of the world's creation.
- It is the meeting point of heaven and earth, for prayers to ascend upward and for heavenly bounty to descend downward.
- It is the focus of key events in world history, or at least sacred history.
- Its presence in the territory of the Chosen People is a seal of their chosenness.

On the other hand, one sees a countervailing universalizing trend, both in classical Jewish thought and in Renaissance thought, which emphasizes that God is everywhere. It was Nicholas of Cusa who emphasized the notion that both the world and God have their center everywhere, their circumference nowhere.¹³ Also classical rabbinical

¹¹ We see, for instance, in the *Gleanings* that in discussing pre-Israelite sacrificers to God in Sermon 2, Ephraim mentions Abel and Noah but not Adam.

¹² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harcourt Brace, 1959, Chapter 1: "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred." Eliade mentions the burning bush, Bethel, Gerizim, and Jerusalem, along with the Babylonian ziggurat and a host of examples from other cultures, to illustrate the properties and pervasiveness of the universal notion of the "navel of the earth."

¹³ "When [Nicholas] states that God is both the centre and the circumference of the world [*De Docta Ignorantia* 2, 11], he is to be interpreted neither in a pantheistic nor in an acosmistic sense. The world is not, says Nicholas, a limited sphere with a definite centre and circumference. Any point can be taken and considered as the world's centre, and it has no circumference. God, then, can be called the centre of the world in view

thought gave expression to the contrary tendencies, that the Shekhinah had a preferred locus on the one hand, or was omnipresent on the other hand.¹⁴ What is noteworthy is that Ephraim makes the *axis mundi* such a strongly preferred theme of his discourse, even in the light of the strong endorsement he makes elsewhere of the general philosophical-Maimonidean position, particularly on the issue of divine attributes. It would not be at all surprising for a thoroughgoing particularist, such as Judah Halevi or Maharal, to reinforce the general emphasis on concrete historical experience and exclusive choice of Israel by highlighting the centrality of Jerusalem-Bethel in the way Ephraim has done. But the Maimonidean tradition in general downplays particularism. In Maimonides's *Guide* and Gersonides's *Wars of the Lord*, Israel's history is presented as the contingent embodiment of universal propositions about the nature of divine revelation and providence as they affect all human beings. The same laws apply to all alike, only they are best illustrated in the case of the people Israel. We have seen similar ideas in Ephraim's thought, particularly in connection with the universal nature of Adam and the Ten Commandments. The Omphalos-myth is radically different in tendency. It places Israel literally and necessarily at the center of world history.

It is likely that Ephraim is motivated in this particularist move by the same reasons that historians of Jewish mysticism have ascribed to the kabbalists. The philosophical-universalistic position, taken to its extreme, undercuts the specific value of the Jewish tradition, indeed of being Jewish. If truth and goodness are universal, why remain Jewish,

of the fact that He is everywhere or omnipresent and the circumference of the world in that He is nowhere, that is, by local presence." Frederick Copleston, S. J., *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. III Part II, Image Books, 1963, p. 46. The Cusanian and Einsteinian universes are logically similar, in that all frames of reference are equally valid in each, and none is privileged. The very notion of *axis mundi* is theoretically incompatible with either model; they are models of *decentered* rather than *centered* universes. The decentered aspect of the modern outlook is perhaps the hardest for ordinary people to adjust to. Every anti-modern movement, whether religious or political, has sought to recover that focus around which the world revolves. The goal of an enlightened liberal religious outlook (such as expressed in Peter Berger's *The Heretical Imperative*) is to orient oneself around such a center, while realizing it is one of many provisional centers, each valid for its adherents. It is a delicate question to determine, how many Renaissance religious thinkers, besides Cusa, achieved this kind of outlook. The presence of the universalist motifs (examined in the previous chapter) and the Omphalos motif in Ephraim's thought indicates he may have been reaching in both directions at once.

¹⁴ See Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, pp. 94–97: "The Shekhinah in the West, or Everywhere?"

particularly in a world which makes that such a costly option? Ephraim's Omphalos-myth shows a way in which the Jewish path is not merely equal to others. Jews have unique possession and access of the spot where optimal communication of the divine is possible.

However, the asymmetry which privileges the Jewish viewpoint also has its limitations in Ephraim's version. It does not aspire to theosophy. It describes a feature of the created world, but not of the Creator. It applies to the terrestrial world and even to the supernal world (inasmuch as the Heavenly Sanctuary is located opposite the Earthly Sanctuary), but not to God. There is no synonymy of Shekhinah with "Assembly of Israel," as there is in the Zohar. The doctrine of the *axis mundi* may on some level violate the spirit of Maimonidean rationalism,¹⁵ but it preserves the letter of the Maimonidean doctrines of God's incorporeality and absolute transcendence.

The Letters of Creation

Ephraim cites in several places, with consistency and without any trace of critical irony or skepticism, certain ideas about how the letters of God's name are involved in the creation of the world, its structure and its destiny. For the rabbinic germs of his ideas (and of alternatives we will consider), we should look at the following sources:

ב"בראם—["These are the generations of heavens and earth *when they were created*"]—R. Joshua ben Korha said: [Transpose the letters:] **בהבראם** = **באברהם**. This means: For the sake of Abraham.

R. Abahu said in the name of R. Johanan: [Note the letter *hei* written small:] **בה' בראם** means: With a *hei* He created them. How so? All other letters involve the tongue for their pronunciation, but the *hei* does not; thus God created the world without effort.

R. Judah Nesiya... said, "I asked R. Eleazar... who interpreted the verse: "For in YaH is the Lord Rock of the Worlds" (Isaiah 26:4)—by these two letters [*yod* and *hei*] did the Holy and Blessed One create His world.' But how do we know if this world was created with a *hei* and

¹⁵ Even a thoroughgoing rationalism may incorporate certain features of particularism. One may venerate the individuals—whether Moses, Aristotle, Newton or Einstein—by whose agency the recognition of certain universal truths came into currency among mortals. Nevertheless, the Omphalos myth goes beyond this in ascribing quasi-magical qualities of illumination and salvation to the site where earth and heaven meet invisibly.

the next world with a *yod* or the reverse? From what R. Abbahu said in the name of R. Johanan, that **בִּהְבְּרָאִים** means He created [heavens and earth] with a *hei*, we may deduce that this world was created with a *hei*...and the world to come with a *yod*.¹⁶

The second rabbinic source important for our purpose is: “Everything that God created in His world, He created male and female.”¹⁷

Ephraim develops these themes in his comments to Genesis 1:31, 2:1 and 2:4. Among the points he develops are the following:

- The rabbinic interpretation of the verse “For in **י"ה** is the Lord Rock of the Worlds” also suggests the idea of a gendered creation, for the letters *yod* and *hei* are also the distinguishing letters of the words **אִישׁ** (man) and **אִשָּׁה** (woman).
- The meaning of “all created beings are male and female” is that each being in the “three worlds” plays either an active or a passive role in the chain of generation. Indeed, most beings play both an active *and* a passive role in that process, and are therefore symbolically both male and female. The only exception to this is God, who is active and never passive in that process. This is the true meaning of the rabbinic saying, “the term *man* properly applies only to the Holy and Blessed One.”¹⁸
- It was appropriate that this world was created with a *hei* and the world-to-come with a *yod*. The *hei* is the sign of the feminine, and all affairs of this world are attended by pain, as a woman in childbirth, for the things of this world are constantly in a process of birthing. By contrast, the world-to-come is free of that pain, and therefore resembles males.

Before passing judgment on these ideas, let us look at some other interpretations by way of comparison.

Baḥya cites several interpretations of **בְּהִבְרָאִים**, some of which we have already seen:

¹⁶ *Genesis Rabbah* 12:10 (found also, with variants, in *Exodus Rabbah* 15:22, *Pesikta Rabbati* 109a–b, *BT Menahot* 29b, and Rashi on Genesis 2:4).

¹⁷ *BT Bava Batra* 74b.

¹⁸ See *BT Sanhedrin* 93a, *Midrash Tanḥuma Metzora* 4.

- (*Peshat*, or plain-sense): God created the world without effort, just as one pronounces the consonant *hei* without having to contract the oral muscles.
- (*Derash*, or homiletical): God created the world for the sake of Abraham (בְּאַבְרָהָם is a transposition of בְּהִבְרָאָם).
- (*Sod*, or kabbalistic): God created the world with the use of the letter *hei*, the last letter of the divine name. It is small because it is emanated from *elohim*. It is called “the hand of the Lord,” as in “All this was made by my hand.” (Isaiah 66:2) The first *hei* in the divine name is identified with *elohim* and with repentance (appropriate because Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the world’s creation).

The Zohar offers many interpretations of בְּהִבְרָאָם in various places. Among them are the following:

- בְּהִבְרָאָם is a transposition of בְּאַבְרָהָם and means “for Abraham.” The letters of מִי בָרָא אֱלֹהִים (“who created these?”) and מָה (“what?”) can be similarly unscrambled to form the names אֱלֹהִים and אַבְרָהָם.¹⁹
- God used the *hei* to impregnate the earth, as the male impregnates the female (and as the “male” upper waters impregnated the “female” lower waters).²⁰
- By parallel with “male and female He created them,” one may deduce that nothing is well-formed unless it comprises male and female.²¹
- The interpretations “with a *hei* He created them” and “for Abraham” are complementary. Abraham received the *hei* when he became circumcised and changed his name from Abram to Abraham. “Abraham” signifies the sefirah of *Hesed* (lovingkindness) and the letter *hei* signifies the sefirah of Shekhinah (the divine immanence), but the two are closely associated.²²

Comparison of these three sources enables us to make the following observations:

¹⁹ Zohar I, 3b–4a. (And see I, 86b: “the world is sustained through Abraham.”)

²⁰ Zohar I, 46b.

²¹ Zohar I, 55b.

²² Zohar I, 93a.

- All three sources use the rabbinic midrashic interpretations as the raw material for their own comments.
- The same raw interpretation can end up being regarded as “midrashic” or “kabbalistic” depending on the use to which it is put. For example, the interpretation “**בהבראם** = for Abraham” is counted as merely “midrashic” and not kabbalistic by Baḥya because no esoteric conclusions are drawn from it. However, the same interpretation is made the basis for theosophic speculation by the Zohar.
- All three engage in extended word-play and letter-symbolism, including analysis of parts of the divine names.²³
- Both Ephraim and the Zohar are “mythopoeic” to the point of personifying inanimate created beings such as the earth.
- It seems that Ephraim and the Zohar also share in the male personification of God. Here, however, a distinct difference emerges. Ephraim will engage in this move only where the rabbinic proof-text is ready at hand and the symbolism is transparent. Only after establishing the translation-rule “male = active” does he proceed to cite the rabbinic maxim that “the term *man* properly applies only to the Holy and Blessed One.” The Zohar, on the other hand, expresses the raw sexual imagery of God impregnating the earth and leaves the task of demythologizing to the reader. Also, while the Zohar and Baḥya partake freely of the conceptual framework of the sefirot, this is not part of Ephraim’s repertoire.

Even this cursory analysis is enough to indicate that while there are significant differences between Ephraim’s world of thought and that of kabbalah, there is also a wide area of overlap. Can we be more specific about what constitutes the similarity and difference? Without being so bold as to attempt to characterize what is distinctive about

²³ Ephraim does not enter deeply into symbolism of the individual letters of the divine name as is common among kabbalists. Another example will show, however, that he has some interest in the subject. In *Mikketz*, he faults Joseph for not being sufficiently trusting in divine providence (which he discusses in classic Maimonidean terms, as if Joseph had forgotten the lessons in *Guide* Part III). That God cares for the terrestrial realms is a sign of His humility. That humility is proved by the fact that the spelled-out names of the letters of the divine name *yod, vav, hei* have the lowest gematria of any letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus the person who knows this will make the name of God the source of his trust, which is the meaning of “and the [name] Lord is his safeguard.” (Jeremiah 17:7) The name of God is thus no mere arbitrary signifier, but teaches us something about the divine essence.

kabbalah (a task to which a century of distinguished scholarship has been devoted), can we at least try to characterize what is going on with Ephraim? I believe we can. To that purpose, I will now introduce some conceptual terminology.

Primary and Secondary Process

In his work on interpretation of dreams, Freud introduced the terms “primary process” and “secondary process” to indicate different styles of thought: the former vivid, fluid and symbolic, the latter logical and concept-driven. More recently, the psychiatrist Silvano Arieti refined this conceptual framework and drew many further distinctions.²⁴ He enriched his analysis by drawing on many areas of research, including Jean Piaget’s studies of the evolutionary maturation of thought-processes in young children, Ernst Cassirer’s studies of mythical thought-patterns in primitive cultures, and his own researches in schizophrenic thought-patterns and artistic creativity. While his conceptual formulations and findings are by no means definitive, they are useful for the analysis that I undertake here. I am freely selective of his concepts, and I have revised his language slightly where necessary for purpose of clarity.

Arieti affirms that the features of “primary process” thinking as he defines them are common (*mutatis mutandis*) to small children, the myths of primitive cultures, dream-logic, and psychotic thought-process. By contrast, “secondary process” thinking is roughly identical with Aristotelian logic. A person does not have to study Aristotle to use secondary-process thinking. Rather, Aristotle accurately formalized the waking, marketplace thought-patterns of normal adults in ancient Greek culture, which are typical of adult thought-patterns in most cultures. In his work on artistic creativity, Arieti also suggested the notion of “tertiary process,” to refer to the work of the artist in mediating between the primary process which is the creative fount of his art and the secondary process which navigates external reality.

Some of Arieti’s concepts apply quite aptly to the thought-world of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

²⁴ Silvano Arieti, *The Intrapsychic Self: Felling and Cognition in Health and Mental Illness*, abridged edition, Basic Books, 1976; and *Creativity: The Magic Synthesis*, Basic Books, 1976.

Paleologic (“ancient or archaic logic”) is Arieti’s name for the logic of primary process. (I will sometimes use the term “paralogical” to avoid confusion with the study of ancient archeological remains.) Among the characteristics of paleologic thinking which distinguish it from “normal” logical thinking are the following:

- *Primary identification*. Two objects are identified if they possess some (but not necessarily all) predicates in common. A classic example of primary identification in Talmudic literature is the triple equation: “Satan, he is the evil inclination, he is the Angel of Death.”²⁵ The external agent of evil, the internal impulse to evil, and the agent of medically-defined death may differ (according to Aristotelian logic) in their spatio-temporal circumstances, but to the rabbinic mind they are all embodiments of the same principle, and therefore may be identified.
- *Primary classes*. A large collection of objects may be defined as belonging to the same class if they have some characteristic or family resemblance in common. (By contrast, in secondary-process or Aristotelian logic, objects belong to the same class only if they conform to the same unitary, well-defined concept such as “horse,” “human,” etc.) Astrology and alchemy group into classes all entities, though inhabiting different ontological niches, which nevertheless exhibit a related tendency. One example of a “primary class” we have already seen is all the characteristics and associations connected with Esau: the planet Mars, the sanguine temperament, the archangel Samael, red lentils, red hair, the red hills of Edom, the hairy goat, blood, the tendency to murder, etc. Logically, these are all distinct and may have no causal connection with each other; by primary-process logic, they all belong to the same complex.
- *Verbalization* (or as I prefer to call it, “reification of the word”). Arieti distinguishes three modes of usage of a word: In *denotation*, a word refers to a single object. In *connotation*, it refers to a well-formed concept. In *verbalization* (or “reification”), a word is treated as an independent entity with its properties *qua* word: its phonetics, its spelling (and in our context, its numerological associations, etc.). Primary-process thought regards all these properties of the word as significant and bearing truth-value, and as shedding light each

²⁵ BT *Bava Batra* 16a.

on the other. Secondary-process thought limits legitimate use of a word to one purpose only: referring to the concept which it names, to which task the extrinsic properties of the word are irrelevant.

- *Endoconcept* is Arieti's term for a germ of a concept which has not crossed the threshold of verbalization. An example would be the mood or intimation which a poet or prophet has in the back of his mind while he is searching for the words or the imagery with which to express it. The kinship to the notion of the "ineffable" should be apparent.

It is my hope that this analytical framework may be helpful for analyzing the conceptual patterns in different fields of Jewish thought. It should be clear, for instance, that Talmudic thought displays a constant interweave of primary-process and secondary-process thought mechanisms, of clearly impeccable logic alternating with interpretative moves of the "verbalization" variety and less-frequent recourse to mythopoeic thought. How the pattern of this interweave varies from genre to genre, and from period to period, may be a way for us to arrive at an identifying "fingerprint" of each. In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt here to demonstrate the usefulness of this approach in characterizing the mature thought of Ephraim Luntshitz.

How They Play Out in Jewish Thought: A Thumbnail Sketch

It would be presumptuous of me to make a definitive assessment of the role of primary-process and secondary-process thought in the periods prior to the Renaissance. Some provisional attempt is nevertheless necessary in order to set a context for the 16th-century developments. The following remarks should therefore be regarded as provisional and directed to that purpose.

The mix of primary and secondary process in Biblical thought is heavily weighted to the primary-process. This is seen especially in the magnificent poetry of the Biblical literature, which Maimonides referred to as the "imaginative" faculty of the prophet. The thought mode is close to mythical in certain of the psalms (especially the creation psalms). In the prophetic writings, the poetry is more self-consciously symbolic, i.e. there is usually a clear differentiation between the metaphoric image and the concrete reality it represents. This differentiation is one of the clear proofs that secondary process is active and in control (which

differentiates the poet and the prophet from the psychotic). But this secondary-process thought works behind the scenes, as is the case in the ordinary working life of the average adult, who uses logic automatically without reflecting on how he does so. It has not achieved self-conscious self-definition. This self-consciousness of reasoning was to take place only from the period of classical Greek philosophy onward.

Rabbinic thought has benefited from the encounter with Greek philosophical culture. In rabbinic thought, there is sustained logical argumentation that proceeds by rules, and there are names and formulas for the various kinds of arguments and their rules of operation. At the same time, the rabbis have evolved a mode of interpretation of the Biblical text which gives considerable scope to the primary-process treatment of words as independent entities. Interpretation based on reification of words (gematria, notarikon, and creative etymology) abounds. Textual interpretation proceeds with a great deal of freedom, at least in part because the theory of language (especially grammar) and interpretation (the “four modes” of *peshat*, *derash*, *remez*, *sod*) is not yet as developed as it would become in the Middle Ages.

Jay Harris has demonstrated in *How Do We Know This?* that as the theoretical awareness of the rules of grammar and logic increased in the Middle Ages, the theory and practice of textual interpretation changed accordingly. What had been offered as “normal” deductions from the Biblical text in classical rabbinic discourse, became demoted to *asmakhta’ot*—a term, literally “supports,” implying that the verse offered in legitimation of a practice offers only casual, rhetorical, or suggestive support, far short of logical justification. This more critical approach of the medieval exegetes (such as Ibn Ezra) is the judgment of secondary-process reasoning on primary-process thought. When one has clarified the distinction between the conceptual and reified uses of language, our common reality-sense prefers the former as true interpretation, while retaining the latter as play or ornament, a distinction which classical rabbinical thought generally does not recognize (with some anecdotal exceptions).

In medieval religious philosophy, an analogous criticism takes place in the model of reality itself. If the world proceeds according to physical causality, then the constant divine providential intervention that the Asharites (and more moderately, the Torah) assumed to underly our experience of reality, is dismissed as illusory, based on a primary-process-based wish-fulfillment logic. What, then, is the medieval religious philosopher to make of those Biblical passages which speak of God

working directly in the world? Though their naive sense conflicts with a philosophical-scientific world-model, they do not have to be rejected outright; they can be understood figuratively. Thus secondary-process thought expands its domain, taking over as the principal model of experienced reality. Where it encroaches on older primary-process models, it does not obliterate them but reinterprets them. When Maimonides substitutes philosophical notions of prophecy and providence for the corresponding Biblical notions, he says that the philosophical (secondary-process) notion is a superior description of external reality. However, the Biblical notion, suitably reinterpreted, gives a broader, symbolic interpretation of the larger process which takes place through causal-governed events.

The kabbalistic reaction (like the Romantic revolt against the Enlightenment centuries later) protested what was missing in the new philosophical world-view. If causality governs, purpose is pushed aside or etherealized. If absence of rationality is madness, hypertrophy of rationality is hardly better. If reason forces one to conclude (as the philosopher in Halevi's *Kuzari*) that the question "What does God want of me?" is meaningless, or that God (being immovable) is unresponsive to human concerns, then so much the worse for reason! Imagination is therefore given license to move in where reason fears to tread, but at a higher level of conceptual awareness than previously. The kabbalistic notion of the *Ein-sof* pays the debt owed to the Maimonidean truth-banker (that at least on the highest level of conception, God is unknowable and without positive attributes), while the sefirot mediate between the caring face of God and a religiously hungry humanity. Secondary process has played the role of architect of this grand intellectual structure, carving out the chambers and courtyards within which primary process may roam freely. At its best, classical Jewish mysticism achieves what Arieti calls "tertiary process," the phenomenon of high art, a harmonious result in which primary process achieves what it can do best, under the guidance of secondary process.

All should be well at this point, especially if one could arrange for a world in which people of rational temperament could choose the philosophic route, and people of spiritual temperament the mystical route, and they could agree to live and let live. However, one is often tempted (correctly or incorrectly) to ask: What is the *correct* map of reality? (It partly depends which reality is one addressing: the quotidian, or the ultimate.) If the philosopher-scientist's map denotes "reality," then the same reductionistic interpretation that the philosopher performed

on the Bible's imaginative constructs must similarly be performed on the kabbalist's extravagant productions, and mysticism is reduced to "mere poetry."²⁶ On the other hand, if the kabbalist has achieved a breakthrough to "reality," then all the philosopher's investigations serve only to explain terrestrial reality, while leaving supernal reality (the main thing) untouched, and are to be devalued accordingly.²⁷ The conflict between the two approaches became particularly acute, because the philosophers dared to speak not only about physical reality (the terrestrial realm) but about the metaphysical as well (the question of the divine attributes). On the other hand, the more literal-minded kabbalists sought to push back the claims of philosophy, to rehabilitate the naive sense of the Bible from philosophical criticism, and to speak and act as if the doctrines of the kabbalah are not only symbolically but literally true. At the center, occupying the broad middle spectrum of discourse in Jewish as in general Renaissance thought, stood the proponents of the "perennial philosophy,"²⁸ a wisdom in which religious and philosophical insights are complementary, which achieves Jewish formulation in Isserles's citation of Botarel's dictum that "the wisdom of the kabbalah is the wisdom of philosophy, only they speak in two languages." This, in a nutshell, is the whole complex of issues with which Ephraim became involved, from the point that he stepped in to mediate the conflict between Eliezer Ashkenazi and Maharal in the preface of his *Gleanings of Ephraim*.

²⁶ This is the generally-accepted way of reading Isserles's doctrine in *Law of the Sacred Offering* III, 4, that discourse of the sefirot speaks of the attributes of divine action, nothing more. It is complicated, however, by Isserles's claim that it is necessary to retain the sefirot in some capacity, and the possibility that he does not adhere consistently to his own guidelines in such passages as the speculation of the "architect" and the "agent" toward the end of that section.

The Third Proposition of *Law of the Sacred Offering* II, 2 contains Isserles's passage of commentary on Song of Songs 5:11–16. The interpretation of the anthropomorphic imagery in terms which are philosophically correct is an outstanding instance of using primary process in the service of secondary process. By contrast, in his discussion of the parable of the "architect" and the "agent" toward the end of III, 4, he gets involved in a host of confusing alternatives which (we infer from *Ornament* on Genesis 6:6) Ephraim found unsatisfactory.

²⁷ This seems to be Maharal's claim, that though study of philosophy and the sciences is permitted, they describe only terrestrial reality, and philosophical claims to prove God's existence or speak of God's attributes transgress philosophy's proper limits.

²⁸ The term "perennial philosophy" first occurs in a work of Augustine Steuch, librarian of the Vatican, who in 1540 published *De philosophia perenni sive veterum philosophorum cum theologia christiana consensu libri X*. (*Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Scribners 1973, Volume III, p. 457.)

Ephraim's Use of Primary and Secondary Process

Ephraim Luntshitz provides an interesting case study in the interaction of primary and secondary-process thought patterns for a number of reasons. As we saw, his first work *City of Heroes* shows him with a thorough immersion in rabbinic thought-patterns and as yet negligible exposure to philosophy. He had already internalized the midrashic style of thought as second nature, and it would remain so all his life. The excesses of that style—which are one of the contributing elements of “pilpul”—were an integral part of his repertoire, as in passages like:

And there is another midrash on the word *Bereshit* (“in the beginning”) as follows: “For the sake of three things the world was created, for the sake of hallah, tithes, and first fruits, all of which are called *reshit*, etc.” It is apparent that this midrash hints at the three purposes we mentioned earlier, which are all called *reshit*. Hallah hints at mankind, as our rabbis said: “The first man was pure hallah.” Tithes hint at Torah, which is all contained by implication in the Ten Commandments. And first fruits hint at the world to come, for בכורים (first fruits) is related to בכורה (rights of the first-born), and for this reason Israel are called first-born to God, as it says, “Israel is My first-born son” (Exodus 4:22), for they take a twofold inheritance as befits the first-born, inheriting both this world and the world-to-come....²⁹

Perusal of that entire sermon will show he was on a rhetorical rampage, taking every item he could find that was connected with the word *reshit* and stringing them all together with associations hanging by a thread—one might say, displaying primary process run amok. Part of this is his youthful immaturity, while part is the one-sidedness of his education up to that point. He exhibits here precisely the kind of loose and aimless thinking that he would deplore in his attack on pilpul in the *Six Pillars*, late in life.

We saw how *Gleanings of Ephraim* documents Ephraim's encounter with philosophy. If Aristotelian logic is the defining characteristic of secondary-process thought for Arieti, Ephraim certainly was well-acquainted with it from now on. It would be redundant to catalog all the evidences of philosophical interest from this point on. However, for purpose of the current analysis of primary/secondary-process interactions, the Sukkot sermon (II, 22) is especially important. We recall that it was there that he cited Maimonides's principle that the figurative

²⁹ *City* I, 4.

language in scripture is to be interpreted metaphorically. He also demonstrated the usefulness of this principle by inventing his own metaphor of a vineyard to add to the scriptural texts under consideration and provide the key to their interpretation. Thus he showed the supremacy of secondary over primary process in two ways: through interpreting an existing work of literature, and through producing his own literary-metaphorical work in self-conscious adherence to the principle he had just enunciated. But once one has been able to recognize one's own creative power over the literary or imaginative process, one is less likely to feel that one must follow the interpretive thread wherever it may lead. This passage is but one of many which indicate that Ephraim takes personal responsibility and ownership for authoring texts which generate religious and moral meaning for others. Granting that the fount of that meaning is ultimately in the tradition as a whole, nevertheless Ephraim selects and refines it through his interpretations. He has the power, through the means at his disposal, to generate alternate and opposing interpretations. He must therefore decide constantly whether to assent or dissent to a meaning that the interpretive process offers him. The interpretive process uses imagery, word-play, gematria—primary-process mental mechanisms—together with secondary-process mechanisms such as logic, appeal to experience, and deduction from prior texts. But his selection of a particular interpretation and teaching from the infinite variety that lie at his disposal—that is an act of highest intellectual responsibility, and the highest exercise of secondary-process logic, mediating between the text and the world of experience. That he was aware of all aspects of this role, and claimed it as part of his identity, we see from his prefaces.

Primary and secondary process converge in another of his key ideas. By defining the object of his quest as “seeing” in the double sense of intellectual understanding and communion with God, Ephraim seems to have declared as strongly as possible that both the rational and irrational parts of his being were united in their deepest longing. The illumination he sought would have to have a rational and a supra-rational aspect. The quest for knowledge which Maimonides had led him to, and the quest that led Adam, Abraham, Jacob, and the festival pilgrims of ancient Israel to the place in Jerusalem where earth met heaven, were the same quest.

As for the means of that quest, both philosophical reason and traditional Jewish learning had to be integrated and combined. The supervision of that quest is a secondary-process function. The philosophical

part of the task is secondary-process. But the traditional part of the learning project involved the same amalgam of primary-process and secondary-process logic as it had since Talmudic times. Ephraim never gave up the traditional methods of Talmudic-midrashic intellection, which relied heavily on word association and word play of all kinds. Above all, it was the literary threads which led word by word from Bible to Talmud and midrash to the homiletic use of the present moment, which insured the Jewish integrity of the enterprise.

Word-Play, Gematria, and the Invention of Wit

One of the hardest problems in cross-cultural communication is knowing when to laugh. Modern readers of traditional midrash are often driven to chuckle and occasionally to laugh out loud at the ingenuity of word-play and creative interpretation of difficult verses, or the profusion of imagination that has the frogs in Pharaoh's ovens self-consciously seeking martyrdom, for example. But we do not know if the rabbis who created these interpretations intended to provoke laughter. A debate broke out not long ago among scholars of midrash over this very issue. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz argued against James Kugel and others that the rabbis were in dead earnest when they claimed, for instance, that the Hebrew word זקן ("elderly") derived part of its essential meaning from its suggestion of the phrase *זה שקנה שני עולמות* ("this one acquired two worlds"), or that the word שמים ("heaven") indicates an amalgam of the two elements *אש* (fire) and *מים* (water).³⁰ I do not know if Eilberg-Schwartz is right about the rabbis of the classical period. I would argue, however, that even if he was right about them, and the Talmudic rabbis did not exhibit a sense of humor in their word-plays, a new chapter starts somewhere in late-medieval or Renaissance times.

My argument will proceed along the path of three assertions:

- 1) Arieti shows that the phenomenon of "wit" can be understood in terms of a particular kind of interaction of primary and secondary process thought-mechanisms.

³⁰ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Who's Kidding Whom? A Serious Reading of Rabbinic Word Plays," JAAR 55:766–788, Winter, 1987.

- 2) Ephraim Luntshitz exercised wit; he had a sense of the comic and used it to advantage.
- 3) There are times where Ephraim used word-play in all seriousness, times when he used it wittily, and times where it is difficult for us to determine how serious he was.

(1) *Arieti's Analysis of Wit*

Arieti analyzes the logical mechanism of the common joke as follows:

One perceives a stimulus as witty when he is set to react to logic and then realizes that he is instead reacting to paleologic or faulty logic. The listener is temporarily deceived because he first apprehends the intellectual process of the joke as logical. A fraction of a second later, however, he realizes that the cognitive process is not logical at all, and he laughs. He discovers that he is not reacting to logic but either to paleologic or to faulty logic. Logic, faulty logic, and paleologic may be very similar and, when they are put together as they are in a joke, they may deceive us as identical twins do. It is just a fleeting deception, however. As soon as we become aware of it, we laugh.³¹

More generally, Arieti defines “the comic” as a broader category, in which not just different types of logic, but anything at all may be the subject of the play of the similar-yet-dissimilar: “*The subject perceives a comical stimulus when he is set to react to A and then finds himself reacting to B, because of a confusion between the identity and similarity of A and B.*”³²

(2) *Ephraim's Sense of the Comic*

It is easier to demonstrate Ephraim's sense of the comic in cases where word-play and logic are not so directly involved. Here, for example, is a passage which likely provoked amusement when Ephraim delivered the Sukkot sermon we saw before:

This inquiry is based on the principle that it is the way of the scriptures to express the notion of protection in terms of “shade” or “roof,” for it is the way of those who speak in parables to take something from familiar life as a figure for what is hidden, to mete out to man's ear what it is capable of hearing. . . . Therefore they described the Holy and Blessed One as a protecting shadow, as it says, “The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your shade [upon your right hand].” (Psalm 121:5) For whoever comes

³¹ Arieti, *Creativity*, p. 111.

³² Ibid., p. 115.

in under the shade of His roof to take shelter under His wings is saved from rain, from downpour and from scorching heat—all of which are symbols for chance events which befall one from the astral configuration above, as it says, “A tabernacle (*sukkah*) will serve for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain.” (Isaiah 4:6)... This is very likely the reason for juxtaposing the verse “a sukkah will serve for shade” to the song of the vineyard in Isaiah. If it was speaking of an ordinary sukkah, how could one say that it provides shelter and protection from rain and downpour? It lets the rain right in! But this is an allusion to the shade of the Holy and Blessed One, Who makes a tabernacle in the vineyard for those who watch over His fruit...³³

Ephraim shocked his listeners toward the end of this passage by transitioning abruptly from the lofty intellectual discussion of how a sukkah is used metaphorically to talk of God’s protection, to the everyday mundane experience with which they were all familiar, of a real sukkah which failed to protect them from the rain in the cold, dank days of October in northern Europe. There was also presumably a shift in his persona, as he took leave of the role of holy and learned scholar and teacher, and became for a moment a flesh-and-blood, sensual man who had himself experienced the same phenomenon and felt the same cold, clammy discomfort and break in the holy festive mood of the holiday as his listeners—possibly close to the very day the sermon was delivered! This was undoubtedly experienced as comical by his listeners, and moments like this in his discourses may have contributed greatly to his popularity. We may also classify this instance as “wit” in the sense of the comical juxtaposition of two kinds of discourse, even though the two kinds are not primary and secondary-process thought in this case, but sacred and secular, exalted and mundane.

Another example conforms to this same type:

...It is problematic for the author of the Haggadah, why the Torah uses the word *tomorrow* with two sons—one in this verse and one in *Va’ethanan*: “When your son asks you tomorrow...,” while with the other two sons it does not use the word *tomorrow*, but conversely says: “You shall tell your son *on that day*,” which excludes tomorrow!... Furthermore, why does the Torah mention the question “What is this?” in the context of the redemption of the first-born, but it does not mention it in connection with the Pesah, the matzah, and the bitter herbs, as it did with the wicked son and the one who cannot ask?

In response to these problems, the author of the Haggadah saw fit to say that this verse speaks of the simple son and the verse in *Va’ethanan* of

³³ *Gleanings* II, 22.

the wise son, and the *tomorrow* mentioned in both verses is not an indefinite future time, but the very next day! For while the simple son's father is giving him the Paschal lamb, matzah, and bitter herbs, he does not ask anything, for he does not want to show any disrespect for the service and commandment of the Lord! Nor does he seek the reason for the mitzvah, for would that they always fed him fire-roasted fatlings with matzah from fine flour, together with those bitter herbs which whet the appetite! Why should the simple son ask the reason for all of this, when he lacks nothing? But in the case of the redemption of the first-born, when they give you nothing but are asking you for the redemption-money, then he asks, "What is this?" for even a total fool is smart enough to hold on to his wallet, and not to give money away to someone else for nothing in return! But from the word "tomorrow" we learn that this is a good and simple-hearted man, who does not make fun of the payment or refuse to pay it. For on the day that they ask him for the redemption-money he says nothing, but gives the money; he doesn't ask the reason, so that they should not suspect him of giving grudgingly, or accuse him of complaining about the Lord's mitzvah, or of asking: "Why should I give my money for nothing?" Therefore he is silent on the day of payment, and gives his money to fulfill God's commandment, but nevertheless he asks on the next day, "What is this?" because he wants to know the reason why God commanded us to pay the redemption-money for the first-born.³⁴

Here, too, the comic jolt is provided by the transition from the intellectual analysis of verses to the sensual description of the simple son licking his chops, or holding on to his wallet, from the aura of the academy to that of the dining-table and marketplace. The sensual references contribute to making the humor broad, not the pure intellectual humor that is associated with the term "wit." In the same passage, however, we also have a specimen of humor that is confined to the verbal and intellectual level:

"And if your son asks you tomorrow, 'What is this?'..."—The author of the Haggadah said that this verse refers to the simple son, but R. Isaac Abravanel objected in his book *The Paschal Sacrifice*: "How do we know that this refers to the simple son? Perhaps he says 'What is this?' mockingly, in the manner of the wicked son!" He answers his own objection: "We learn from the answer which God commands us to reply to him: 'With a strong hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt.' Since God commanded us to answer properly, it follows that he asked properly."

But R. Isaac did not answer properly, and whoever sees it will ask: "What is this?" Is it a foregone conclusion that whoever asks "what is this?" is a simpleton? Even if it is clear to God, how can it be clear to

³⁴ *Ornament* on Exodus 13:14.

us? How shall we know what is in the heart of the questioner? Even the Torah does not tell us such fortunes.³⁵

The key part of Ephraim's wit in this passage is his turning around the phrase, "What is this?" which is the subject of the interpretation, to direct it at the answer of his rival interpreter Abravanel. It generates a mild surprise, because of the change of referent, but we are still on the same plane of intellectual, academic discussion.

Differences in Ephraim's Use of Word-Play

To return to Eilberg-Schwartz's question: Can we determine with any certainty when rabbinic word-play may qualify as wit? My answer to this is a qualified yes. I will start with the following proposition: *The use of word-play for witty purpose in a serious midrashic context depends minimally on the discretion of the speaker or author to reject the serious implications of that word-play, at least some of the time.* If one is a dyed-in-the-wool true-believer in the truth of the kabbalah, then every play of words, every gematria (at least in a sacred context) is holy, and laughing at it is sacrilegious. A perfectly consistent rationalist would follow the exact opposite practice, and would decry word-play as fallacious reasoning and gematria as superstitious misuse of words for a purpose other than conceptual expression. Perfectly consistent rationalists do not laugh much, either, except in mockery of fools. The interesting case is presented by the one who is caught between rationalism and a touch of mysticism, for his verbal practice will be unpredictable. Some of his word-plays will obviously be dead-serious (as when he is talking of the use of the letters of the divine name in the creation of the world). In other places, he will puncture the balloon and refute a gematric interpretation, even a time-honored one. And in another case, he will leave his listeners in bewilderment, scratching their heads: "Did he really mean it? Or is he just pulling our leg?" The final case is the truest form of wit.

We have already seen Ephraim's elaboration of the rabbinic play of letters in the creation of the world. Whether he literally believed it or not, he was serious in that exposition. He was speaking of the role of pain and tribulation in this material world which the Aristotelians

³⁵ Ibid.

called “the world of generation and destruction.” By drawing the analogy between metaphysical creation and biological procreation, Ephraim could draw the connection between philosophical speculation and everyday experience. The woman’s pain of childbirth is an apt metaphor for the pain we endure in the Sisyphean task of bringing forth the products of our labor only to see them destroyed. We long for a better world, in which Becoming will give way to Being, and we shall all be as males, spared the pangs of childbirth for all eternity. If there is wit in the imagery, it is subliminal and quite secondary to the profound human message he is sharing with us.

By contrast, Ephraim enjoys puncturing our balloon in his discussion of Abraham’s war against the four kings of Babylonia. There is no more time-honored gematria than the one which tells us that not 318 men accompanied Abraham in that campaign, but only his servant Eliezer, for the numerical value of **אליעזר** is 318.³⁶ Yet Ephraim pours the cold water of experience on this flight of fancy:

Abram mustered his retainers [... numbering three hundred eighteen]—Rashi interprets this as Eliezer alone, for the name **אליעזר** has the value 318. But is it the way of the text to refer to a person by the numerical equivalent of his name? And how will you interpret: “as for the share of the men who went with me,” if only Eliezer went? The best explanation I can find is that even Rashi would admit that Abram took 318 real people, for one is obligated to accomplish as much as one can through natural means, and where nature falls short, the miracle makes up the difference.³⁷

This comment, like many of Ephraim’s, is in the familiar form of the *Tosafot*, with the first part raising a challenge and the second part offering a resolution. As is often the case in the original *Tosafot* themselves, it is the challenge that sticks in the mind, and the resolution is anticlimactic. Rashi was so much a part of the canon in 16th-century Poland that a Jewish primary-school teacher could be fired for teaching the Torah in a sense that disagreed with Rashi’s interpretation. R. Ephraim Luntshitz did not have to worry about that kind of disciplinary action if he disagreed with Rashi, but he did not want to offend his congregants’ piety, and achieving a harmonization after such a blatant

³⁶ This famous use of numerological interpretation occurs in *Genesis Rabbah* 43:2 in the names of R. Simeon ben Lakish and Bar Kappara. It is cited in the 32 *Hermeneutic Rules of Rabbi Eliezer b. R. Jose the Galilean* (Rule #29) as the prime case from which we learn gematria. Ephraim cites it in the name of Rashi.

³⁷ *Ornament* on Genesis 14:14.

challenge was a further way for him to demonstrate his ingenuity. Still, the part that sticks in the mind from this comment is that common sense, bolstered by the growing intellectual consensus on the orderliness of nature, had dealt a severe blow to the naive belief in unlimited miracles, supported in this case by the weak reed of primary-process verbal magic in the form of numerology. Secondary process wins out here over primary process, and exposes gematria as just a game and midrashic ornament.

We may cite another passage, which at first sight seems to show Ephraim going in exactly the opposite direction, embracing both miracles and word-play in extravagant manner:

...The Yalkut interprets: “*The Israelites went up armed*” (חמושים)—this means armed with five weapons (בחמשה כלי זיין). This is problematic. Was the Israelites’ war dependent on weapons? Is it not written, “No shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel!”³⁸ (Judges 5:8) For the Lord was their shield, and the Torah and prayers were Israel’s weapons, as it says, “A two-mouthed sword in their hand” (Psalms 149:6)—two mouths, because both [Torah and prayer] depend on the mouth. In that case, what glory was there for Israel that they went up חמושים in the sense of “armed”—as if they placed no faith in the Lord, God forbid! Even if we say that a person is obligated to do by way of nature whatever is in his power to do, and where nature falls short the miracle makes up the difference, it is still problematic why the text should tell us that each of them had *five* weapons. Why that number? Furthermore, if a miracle or coincidence occurred on the way so that every one of them had five weapons, no more no less, that is noteworthy! Furthermore, it would appear that the Israelites were not trained in warfare at all, for they were engaged in hard labor all those days, and why should they have weapons? They had not escaped with them, and they had to walk with staffs and sling-stones.

Therefore it is fitting to interpret that [the *Yalkut*] comes to tell us that they had no weapons in their hands, but rather the five books of the Torah which are divided into seven (ז')³⁹ sections, by the view of those who hold that Numbers 10:35–36 is a book in its own right.⁴⁰ Thus what

³⁸ Though in the context of Deborah’s song this seems to deplore the lack of military preparedness under Shamgar, Ephraim interprets it as praising the faith of the Israelites in the campaign that they victoriously waged against Sisera, miraculously emerging victorious by God’s help, without the aid of weapons.

³⁹ The play on the letter ז' referring numerologically to “seven,” while its name *zayin* means “weapon,” is the hinge on which the complex word-play of this section revolves.

⁴⁰ If Numbers 10:35–36 (which is set off from the context by inverted *nuns*) is considered a separate book, then it breaks the book of Numbers into three books,

the *Yalkut* says, “חמושים means מזוינים” is all by way of allusion to the Torah. It specifies the word חמושים which is a *double entendre*, and so also מזוינים, for they both have the sense of “weapons,” while for Israel they both allude to Torah. Or if you prefer, חמושים refers to the five books of the Torah and מזוינים refers to prayer, as the verse says, “I praise You seven times each day.” (Psalms 119:164)⁴¹

If we are to find consistency in these two pronouncements of Ephraim, it is not in the theological content of what he says, but in his argumentative and expository method. In both of them he plays the contrarian, arguing against the accepted wisdom. If everyone from Resh Lakish to Rashi has said that “318 men” refers to Eliezer, he must argue the opposite. If the *Yalkut* says in plain language that חמושים means “with weapons,” then he must twist the *Yalkut*’s own language so that its word for “weapon” זין now means Torah and there is no longer any language left with which to maintain the opposite. In each case, the effect he leaves on the listener is one of amazement. In the former case, he has violated the accepted primary-process reading of the passage in favor of a secondary-process understanding. In the latter case, he has subverted the *Yalkut*’s straightforward secondary-process of the passage in favor of a traditional midrashic sense (חמושים = “with the 5 books of Torah”), but he has embellished it with a primary-process twist on the *Yalkut*’s own language which ends in a recursive circle like an Escher drawing. That he has not forgotten the Genesis passage by the time he wrote his commentary on Exodus, is proved by the persistence of his principle, “a person is obligated to do by way of nature whatever is in his power to do, and where nature falls short the miracle makes up the difference.” But this principle goes *with* the flow of his Genesis argument, and against the grain of his Exodus argument. This reinforces the impression that in at least one of the passages, he is arguing just to prove his virtuosity. We know that he does this elsewhere.⁴² In *Six Pillars*, Ephraim would make two fateful admissions: (1) That pilpul was

which added to the other four make seven. In that case, either חמושים (in the sense of “fivefold”) or מזוינים (in the sense of “sevenfold,” based on the numerological equation $zayin = 7$) can refer equally to the literary composition of the Torah.

⁴¹ Ornament on Exodus 13:17.

⁴² The most blatant case of argument for virtuosity’s sake is in his treatment of the Wicked Son (Ornament on Exodus 12:26), where he gives three convoluted and mutually exclusive arguments.

done out of a desire to impress, and (2) that he had done it himself.⁴³ We are free to draw our own conclusions. Pilpul, like punning, may not be the highest form of wit, but it is one such form.⁴⁴

I cannot leave this subject without citing my personal favorite of the word-plays in the *Precious Ornament*, even though it is one which he borrows from Abraham Saba:

Now it is well known that all who are in love with the accumulation of money never perform any good or charitable deed with their money in their lifetime... [Similarly Cain only saw fit to bring an offering when he saw death approaching.] But even his awareness of the approaching end of life only induced him to set aside the smallest, lowliest offering, namely, a flax seed. This is the meaning of the *Midrash Ha-Ne'elam*,⁴⁵ which says that Cain emanated from the Dark Side, therefore the text spells the "end of days" **מקץ ימים** instead of **מקץ ימין**.

When I heard this, I did not understand⁴⁶ what difference it made if the word was spelled **ימים** or **ימין**! Surely, it means that Cain did not give his offering for the right purpose, which is hidden for the righteous in the world to come, as it is said: "You shall arrive at your destiny at the end of days (**לקץ הימים**)."⁴⁷ (Daniel 12:13) Thus Cain denied the resurrection of the dead. But he brought his offering at the end of days **מקץ הימים** thinking that in any case there is an end to all his labor... This is the meaning of the midrash: "One tells the story of Cain to a servant who ate the first-born and sent the last-born as a gift to the king."⁴⁷ This means: In his youth—i.e., the first years of his life, which should be treated according to the custom of the first-born—he eats and enjoys

⁴³ *Six Pillars*, "Pillar of the Torah," concluding section.

⁴⁴ It is even possible that the passage which equates **חמושים** with **מזויינים** and both with Torah is a true joke and the best exemplification of Arieti's analysis of wit in all the cases we have brought for examination here. A lot depends on whether Ephraim's play on *zayin* was an accepted part of kabbalistic word-play at the time. Several discrete steps are involved in the logic here: conversion of a number (7) to a letter (ז), of that letter to its name (*zayin*), and the equation of that name with a homonymic word (*mezuyyan*). Maybe a listener would have accepted this series of steps as legitimate and truth-bearing. But if it was heard as a parody of kabbalistic practice, or an example too far-fetched for that community of listeners, then Arieti's paradigm applies: the train of thought is first processed as genuine logic, then quickly recognized as pseudo-logic, at which point laughter ensues.

⁴⁵ *Midrash Ha-Ne'elam*: A section of the Zohar.

⁴⁶ "When I heard this, I did not understand..." This is R. Ephraim's humor at its slyest. Presumably, he means that when he heard the distinction between **ימים** and **ימין** he did not understand it, because he had not read the last chapter of Daniel in which the spelling **ימין** occurs. But the language which confesses his ignorance ("When I heard this, I did not understand") is a direct quotation from Daniel 12.8—so he *was* familiar with it! This is a variation on the Cretan paradox (in which the man who says "All Cretans are liars" is himself a Cretan).

⁴⁷ *Genesis Rabbah* 25:5.

himself as much as he can, but he sends to the King of the Universe the last-born, i.e. the last days of his life—the days of which he says, “I have no pleasure or desire or bodily delight” (Ecclesiastes 12:1)—he sends these to the king to make of them a service to the Lord, which is a foreign offering in his sight. The last-born is the same as the “end of days,” mentioned in our text.

Then I saw in the book *Bundle of Myrrh* (*Tzeror Ha-Mor*) . . . that if you spell out the names of the letters of the word קרב"ן (“sacrifice”), you get קו"ף, רי"ש, בי"ת, נו"ן. Now take the final letters of these four names, and you get פשת"ן (“flax”). This is the key to understanding the midrash about the servant who ate the first-born himself and sent the last-born to the king. The “first-born” are the initial letters, which spell קרב"ן, namely, the choice selections which are proper to give as a sacrifice, while the “last-born” are the final letters, which spell פשת"ן (flax).

The ingenious transformation from קרבן to פשתן by way of the names of the letters, which is further integrated with the midrash about the “first-born” and the “last-born,” is so impressive that it does not cease to amaze me over the years, yet it has not converted me into a kabbalist. It was obviously too good for Ephraim to withhold from his audience, even though (as he makes clear by his citation) it had already passed through several hands. I try to picture the listeners’ reactions to it. When he first delivers it from the pulpit, there is universal amazement. After the kiddush, a debate starts up among the congregants. The rationalists, who still define their intellectual position by Ibn Tibbon’s introduction to the “Eight Chapters” in Horowitz’s edition, insist that it’s all just a game—a clever one, but the preacher who knocked down Rashi’s gematria of אליעזר couldn’t possibly believe that there’s any truth or substance to this kind of coincidence. The kabbalists, who are asking each other when can they have a turn to borrow the dog-eared copy of *Bell and Pomegranate*, say that this proves that Ephraim agrees with them, and you can’t discard a method which has such tangible proofs as this; it’s simply beyond the power of coincidence. Ephraim notes how vehement the argument of the two parties has become, and his deadpan demeanor conceals his deep satisfaction. He is an enigma, above the fray. He has achieved his purpose. His sermon was a success. They are all transfixed by his wit.

Primary Process and the Ineffable

Primary process can be used in mental games to mystify, but that hardly makes one a mystic. Primary process is also the language of emotion.

A person with just secondary process is deficient in emotion. Primary process also helps point to what cannot be conveyed in words, what Arieti calls the “endoceptual” and Heschel calls the “ineffable.”

There are a few lyrical passages in Ephraim’s work that have this quality, but that was not his strength. He was too talkative, too discursive, too Talmudic to sustain a lyrical tone for long. A better specimen of the intimation of the unseen from the seen can be derived from Isserles, in the passage of *Law of the Sacred Offering* where he comments on the Song of Songs.⁴⁸ It is still not quite poetry—not as finely achieved as Ibn Gabirol’s *Royal Crown* (which similarly mediates between cosmology and religious imagery)—but it will do, for 16th-century Ashkenazic Jewry, as a pointer from the known to the unknown:

In *Leviticus Rabbah* (Kedoshim 25:8) we find: “‘His legs are like marble pillars’—‘his legs’ refers to the world, ‘marble pillars’ [עמודי שש] referring to their formation in the six [שש] days of creation. ‘Set in sockets of fine gold’ refers to words of Torah which are ‘more desirable than fine gold’ (Psalms 19:11)”....

“His head” alludes to the sky, the head part of all the celestial spheres which is called *aravot* (clouds), from which the exalted Lord is called Aravot,⁴⁹ for the principal site of His manifestation is there, as by analogy the person’s is in the head.⁵⁰ “Fine gold” is a figure for the celestial bodies which shine brightly like fine gold. “His locks are curled”—the verse imagines the celestial forces as the hairs on a man’s head.⁵¹ Indeed, Recanati wrote on this⁵² that the hairs indicate divine powers, and they are called “black as a raven” inasmuch as the appearance of black darkens the sight and prevents the eye from seeing, for it is impossible to apprehend these forces in their true essence, as if the appearance of darkness keeps them from view. Alternately, “darkness” alludes to the element of fire which is called “darkness” in the account of creation, as Maimonides wrote in *Guide* II, 30 and some sages followed him on this....

⁴⁸ For the full passage, see Appendix, pp. 259–63.

⁴⁹ As in Psalms 68:5: “Sing to God, chant hymns to His name; extol Him who rides the clouds; the Lord is His name.”

⁵⁰ Phenomenologically, if one were to ask where in the body the “I” is experienced as being located, it would be primarily in the head, for that is the reference point for one’s visual and auditory fields. Similarly, if one asked for a primary place where God is to be found, it is popularly and in most traditions assumed to be in the heavens.

⁵¹ The metaphor is apt. Indeed, in physics, diagrams of electrical or gravitational force are often represented as curved lines, though in physical reality they are invisible. Though physics was in its infancy in 1560, it was not hard even in the medieval cosmological model to picture the planets as bodies of light guided in their motions by invisible force-trajectories (the cycles and epicycles of Ptolemaic astronomy).

⁵² Recanati, *Commentary on the Torah*, Vayehi 77a and Kedoshim 149b.

“His cheeks are like beds of spices”—the princely angels on high are called “the face of the Lord,” as in “My face shall not be seen,” (Exodus 33:23), for the cheeks are on the face. They are compared to beds of spices, i.e. a spiritual delight, for there is nothing that gives the soul delight more than the scent of spices....

“His lips...drip flowing myrrh”—the separate Intelligences are called His lips, as He speaks through their agency with His servants the prophets, just as a person speaks with his lips....⁵³

“His hands are rods of gold” (*gelilei zahav*)—the hands of the blessed Lord are undoubtedly the celestial spheres (*galgalim*), through which He operates on the terrestrial realm....

“His belly a tablet of ivory, adorned with sapphires”—you know the dictum of the Sages, that the sky is like the Throne of Glory, and the Throne of Glory is like sapphire, as it says, “Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire.” (Ezekiel 1:26)⁵⁴...

“His legs are like marble pillars”—these are the six extremities of the world, which are called marble pillars⁵⁵...

...“His mouth is delicious and all of him is delightful,” as it says of creation, “God saw all that He had made, and found it very good... And God blessed.” (Genesis 1:31, 2:3) You have no mouth sweeter than this.⁵⁶ “Such is my darling, O maidens of Jerusalem!”⁵⁷

Here we see Arieti’s “tertiary process” at work. The poetic imagery transports us toward the divine. Yet the demands of reality-orientation are fully satisfied as well. Granted that the specifics of our scientific world-view have changed since 1564 when Isserles wrote this, still within the world-view of his day he was able to achieve a correlation between religious image and scientific description that was satisfactory to both. The third thought-element present here is the Maimonidean philosophical theology, which maintains on the one hand that the attributes of God are unknowable, and on the other hand permits that God may be portrayed through God’s actions and that such knowledge can be intimated through religious imagery, which must be understood figuratively. The role of primary-process here is at once cognitive and affective. Cognitively, it provides a frame for grasping in part what one

⁵³ This is a reference to Maimonides’s conception of prophecy as “an overflow overflowing from God through the intermediation of the Active Intellect.” (*Guide* II, 36)

⁵⁴ BT *Menahot* 43b.

⁵⁵ Another play on the two meanings of *shesh*—“six,” or “marble” (see first example in this passage).

⁵⁶ This comment, and some of the preceding (including the references to Creation), echo the exegesis of the Song of Songs passage in *Numbers Rabbah* 10:1.

⁵⁷ *Offering* II, 2 (Appendix, pp. 259–63, selected).

knows in advance one cannot grasp entire. Affectively, it allows the individual to feel toward God the emotions which the religious poetry inspire, which would not be aroused by the mere factual picture which secondary process provides.

It was toward this integration of primary and secondary process that Ephraim aspired, with less success, by the means we have examined earlier in this chapter. Ephraim may have agreed with Isserles that it is this kind of integration which a philosophically and theologically (read: Maimonideanly) permissible version of kabbalah could achieve. As long as a literalistic understanding of the primary-process ideas did not mislead one into cognitive error, primary process could play a role in nurturing the religious-affective inner life.

Did Ephraim believe that the doctrines such as “creation by divine letters” had a literal truth? Possibly. Though our remarks on Isserles follow a symbolic understanding of the mystical path, let us try a literalistic interpretation for a while. Ephraim would have privileged such doctrines as “creation by letters” over later rivals (such as the sefirot) because the former came directly from the Talmud. It might also have made sense to suggest that in the Jacob’s Ladder hierarchy of knowledge, different logics worked on different levels. The Maimonideans such as Isserles and Ephraim were in agreement with Maimonides’s methodological principle, that Aristotle’s description of reality correctly applied to the sublunar realm. That would mean that secondary process governs in the world of our everyday experience (and whoever does not accept this much is truly psychotic). This did not necessarily apply, however, to the supernal realm, or to the creative process from which this world emerged. Maybe the primary-process logic of the Talmud and the *Book of Formation* could be a correct description of the higher realms beyond our experience? It makes just as much sense, after all, for numbers or letters to be the basis of reality. In the Renaissance, there was not as much knowledge available to choose between competing theories as there is now, so more theories could claim with justice that they had not been falsified yet. It is only since Kepler and Newton that we are very much certain that numbers, after all, are the correct paradigm, and that letters and sefirot do not work, scientifically speaking. Though “creation by letters” might have seemed bizarre even then, it was still in the running. But for them to have any value for us today, they must be taken as suggestive poetry—as Isserles took the Song of Songs. Primary process and secondary process have their proper domains, which must be respected.

The Divine-Human Relationship

Ephraim seems at his most joyful when describing the divine-human relationship as a reciprocal one. The following passage from his commentary on Jacob's Ladder captures this aspect:

The angels of God were ascending and descending on it (Genesis 28:12)—Another interpretation: Because from there flows the effluence to all the worlds. For the lower worlds add strength and energy to the upper, as it were. Therefore the angels of God ascend first, for there they draw the waters of effluence from the wells of salvation, and afterwards they descend to bring down the effluence from the upper realm. This mystery is hinted at by Rashi in his comment on “How lovely are your steps in sandals!” (Song of Songs 7:2)—that Israel praises God descending from the higher realm to the lower, but God speaks of it as if it were ascending from the lower realm to the higher, just as here the ladder starts out “standing on the earth” and ascends upwards. But the glory of God is a hidden mystery.⁵⁸

Rashi (on this passage) points out that in the Song of Songs the woman praises the man starting from his head and going gradually down to his feet, whereas the man praises the woman starting at her sandals and gradually going up to her tresses. This suggests that the woman is standing over the man, and he is looking up at her from down below. But if the man is God and the woman is Israel, they are in the reverse relation from what is expected. The closing phrase (“but the glory of God is a hidden mystery”) is the equivalent of the oft-repeated midrashic כביכול (“as if it were possible”), or the negative theology of Maimonides. It denies that any cognitive conclusion can be drawn from this image; however, one is still left with the affective sense, which is one of reciprocal love and empowerment. God depends as much on the effluence that we bring to Him as we depend on the effluence that comes down to us. Even though the plane of this assertion is emotive rather than cognitive, it is in one sense profoundly anti-Maimonidean. If there is one thing we carry away from Maimonides, it is that we are as nothing before God. But all the 16th-century Maimonideans we have considered (Isserles, Eliezer Ashkenazi, Ephraim Luntshitz) dissented from Maimonides in this, when they affirmed against the master that man is the purpose of creation. The maiden is standing above her lover, and He is looking up at her.

⁵⁸ *Ornament* on Genesis 28:12.

In another similar passage, Ephraim borrows explicitly from Nahmanides:

I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me (Exodus 19:4)—The text mentions three levels, each higher than the previous. First it says, “I bore you on eagles’ wings,” which is similar to “as the nurse carries the infant” (Numbers 11:12); here the Holy and Blessed One is on the level of the father, and Israel is on the level of the child. Afterwards it says, “and I brought you to Me,” indicating that you will be My equal, and we shall be as two brothers on the same level. Finally, it says, “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests,” as if you are kings over me, as it says, “The righteous rules over the fear of God.”⁵⁹ (II Samuel 23:3) This is explained by Midrash *Hazita*⁶⁰ which is cited by Nahmanides in the pericope *Hayyei Sarah*: “Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai asked Rabbi Eleazar b. Jose: “Possibly you heard from your father what is the meaning of ‘the crown that his mother gave him?’ (Song of Songs 3:11) He replied: ‘What is it like? It is like a king who had a single daughter, and was extremely fond of her. At first he called her, “My daughter.” He persisted in his affection until he called her, “My sister.” He persisted further in his affection until he called her, “My mother.” So fond is the Holy and Blessed One of Israel. First He called them, “My daughter,” as it says, “Take heed, my daughter, and see.” (Psalms 45:11) He persisted in His affection until He called them “My sister,” as it says, “Open for me, my sister, my beloved!” (Song of Songs 5:2) He persisted in His affection until He called them “My mother,” as it says, “Hearken to Me, My people, and give ear to Me, O My nation.” (Isaiah 51:4) “My nation” is spelled **לְאֻמִּי**, which is the same as **לְאִמִּי** “to my mother.”⁶¹

This *does* sound crazy—how can we even entertain the notion that God looks up to us as “mother”?—until we realize that the king calling his daughter “mother” is still the king. Just what, however, does all this wild rhetoric about God and humans changing places in the hierarchy mean in practice? A more prosaic passage sheds light on Ephraim’s conception of human-divine reciprocity as it works in practice:

⁵⁹ This radical reading is obtained by freely construing the phraseology of the passage: **צדיק מושל באדם / וכאור בוקר יורה שמש**—putting the break after the second instead of the third word. The modern JPS translation renders more naturally (based on 3:3:3 phrasing): “He who rules men justly, he who rules in awe of God is like the light of morning at sunrise.”

⁶⁰ “The Vision”—a name for the midrashic collection *Song of Songs Rabbah*.

⁶¹ *Ornament* on Exodus 19:4. In fact, the Masoretic text of Isaiah 51:4 spells the key word **לְאֻמִּי**, while the midrashic interpretation “my mother” seems predicated on a spelling **לְאִמִּי**. But the author of the midrash may have had a different version of the text.

The people stood about Moses from morning until evening (Exodus 18:13)—From here we learn that courts do not judge at night. The rabbis said: “Any judge who judges true justice even for one hour, is considered by the Torah as having been made a partner with the Holy and Blessed One in the creation of the world, as it says, ‘It was evening and morning . . .’”⁶² But this needs explaining. For it would seem that the sequence of evening and morning in these two passages is different, for in the case of Moses it starts in the morning and finishes in the evening, while in the Creation narrative it starts in the evening and finishes in the morning.

But think well and understand, that the whole world cannot endure except at a time when there is justice enforced either from below or from above. For the Holy and Blessed One wanted to create the world with the attribute of Justice, and even though He combined it with the attribute of Mercy, the attribute of Justice still remains, for “by justice a king sustains the land.” (Proverbs 29:4) Thus in the midrash we learn that Rabbi Eleazar said: “When there is judgment, there is no judgment; when there is no judgment, there is judgment. How so? If there is judgment below, there is no judgment from above; if there is no judgment below, there is judgment from above.”⁶³ By this ordering of things, the world is secure, for there is no hour that there is not judgment from somewhere. For it is known that the heavenly judgment is active during the night, even though the Holy and Blessed One decides the judgment during the day, which means that when there is no judgment from below during the day, then the Holy and Blessed One judges the lower realms during the day for the violence that ensues among them. But if there is judgment below during the day, there must be judgment on high anyway among the heavenly angels. In that case, the time of judgment on high is from evening until morning, and the time of judgment down below is from morning until evening. For this reason, the judge is a partner with the Holy and Blessed One in the work of creation, and they share equally in the task of sustaining the foundations of all the worlds which stand for judgment. For by justice does the King of the World sustain earth and heaven from evening until morning, and the rabbinic kings by justice sustain the earth from morning until evening. These matters are ancient and well-founded, and it is a precious matter.⁶⁴

We have come full circle. We seek to unpack the meaning of Ephraim’s mystical idea, and it turns out to be rational after all. What, after all,

⁶² BT Shabbat 10a.

⁶³ *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 5:5. This can be taken in the sense: If human society regulates itself properly (judgment from below), there is no punishment (judgment) from above; but if human society fails to regulate itself properly, then there is punishment (judgment) from above.

⁶⁴ *Ornament* on Exodus 18:13. Ephraim announces in the Preface that whenever he concludes a comment with the remark “it is precious,” he is claiming authorship for the main idea in it.

can be more rational than the idea that it is man's responsibility to keep the world ruled under the aegis of justice for the sake of God? Yet the flip side of this idea is that God is indeed dependent on mankind. The king is dependent on the daughter. There is an order to the world which is imposed by God, and there is an order which we enforce on the world by our actions. If we do our part right, the result will be harmonious, and God's will will be fulfilled in the world by our agency. If we neglect our role, then we shall suffer the consequences as the divine order has arranged things. Therefore it is up to us, for whom the world has been created, to respond to God's loving call, to unite mind and heart in the service of God.

And this is the meaning of the knot of the *tefillin*: Just as we bind like a seal upon our heart and arm the unity of the blessed divine name, thus the Holy and Blessed One places us as a seal upon His heart and arm, to make us one nation in the earth. That is the bond between us and our Creator, Blessed be He, that we each bear witness to the other in matter of unity. As one comes to see, so does one come to be seen....

Ephraim continues with how when Moses saw the shape of the Hebrew letter *dalet* at the back of God's *tefillin*, this indicated that he could only see the manifestation of God in the terrestrial world bounded by the four compass points (for the numerical value of *dalet* is 4), but he could not see the other two letters, the *yod* and *shin* hinting at the **שׁ**, the plenitude of reward in store for the righteous in the world-to-come. The oversized letters *ayin* and *dalet* that frame the declaration of the Shema in the handwritten Torah scroll likewise indicate that the eye (עַיִן) of man can only see this quadrangular world (again indicated by the *dalet*).

This is the secret of the large *ayin* and *dalet*, to say that man's eye can only see the four corners of this world, as we said. But the *yesh* is here hinted at by the initial letters of *Shema Yisrael*. This plenitude (*yesh*)—alluding to “endowing those who love [Him] with substance” (Proverbs 8:21)—the eye cannot see it, but our ear has indeed heard this promise, from the mouth of scribes and from books, but the eye has not seen it. This is a precious allusion.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 6:4. “Precious allusion” is Ephraim's code-phrase (explained in the Introduction to *Precious Ornament*) indicating that the idea he expresses here is his original invention.

All is one. Divine-human reciprocity, the promise of the world-to-come, the limits of knowing God in this world, set opposite the aspiration of seeing God when the time shall be right—these are the unifying threads of his vision, his statement of faith.

CONCLUSION

Consolidation of the Polish Maimonidean School

By 1600, the seeds that Isserles had sown in 1550 had borne fruit. The leaders of Polish Jewry (including Prague in the Polish-Jewish orbit) were in consensus that philosophy in the Maimonidean vein (plus a bit of kabbalah) was—if not exactly the main dish of Jewish wisdom, at least an acceptable side dish.¹ The slight variations of detailed expression among them in this respect are minor; they agreed on essentials. The underlying issues were familiar enough that dropping a buzzword was often sufficient to indicate one's allegiance, as we have seen repeatedly throughout this study. Each expressed the same position in a different department of thought—Gans in his scientific and historical treatises, Jaffe in his halakhic “summa” the *Royal Garment*, Horowitz in his ethical commentary *Lovingkindness of Abraham*, Luntshitz in his sermons and Torah commentaries. All referred back implicitly to the key major theoretical statement of this position in Isserles's *Law of the Sacred Offering*, and explicitly to Maimonides's *Guide*, which was accepted as authoritative with the few exceptions we have noted.

Maharal came to within hailing distance of this position from the opposing kabbalistic side, perhaps partly as a result of his friendship with the polymath David Gans. Maharal's position was a lot closer to that of Isserles's disciples in 1595 than in 1580. Joseph Davis has shown how certain thinkers of the younger generation—Joseph b. Isaac ha-Levi and R. Yom Tov Lippman Heller—propounded variations of this outlook.² Further research on the many personalities cited in Jacob Elbaum's *Openness and Insularity*³ will no doubt demonstrate that many others of their milieu expressed similar views.

¹ This is meant in the sense of Mishnah *Avot* 3:18: “The study of astral cycles and mathematics are a side dish to wisdom.”

² Joseph Davis, *Rationalism in Ashkenazic Jewish Culture: R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller and Joseph b. Isaac ha-Levi*, Harvard 1990 (dissertation).

³ Elbaum, *Jacob Openness and Insularity: Late Sixteenth Century Jewish Literature in Poland and Ashkenaz*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1990.

Hindsight shows that this consensus of moderate Maimonidean rationalism was short-lived. It did not survive the death of its chief proponents. By the mid-1600s, philosophy was passé; talmudism and kabbalah reigned supreme.

Ephraim's Later Years

"And the remainder of the deeds of Ephraim of Luntshitz, behold are they not written...?"

During Ephraim's later years of residence in Lvov, Ephraim took on the additional responsibilities of serving as head of its yeshiva.

In 1601, as Ephraim recounts in the introduction to *The Precious Ornament*, he fell seriously ill. In conformity to a popular custom whose original purpose was to confuse the Angel of Death, he took the additional name Solomon and was henceforth known as R. Solomon Ephraim of Luntshitz. The double name is reflected in the prose-poetic stanzas of the *Precious Ornament's* introduction being concluded alternately with "Solomon" and "Ephraim." It also raises anew the question of the relationship of rational and non-rational elements in his personal religious outlook.

In 1604 R. Solomon Ephraim Luntshitz was appointed chief rabbi of Prague, an office he exercised until a year before his death in 1619. However, he retained his ties to the Polish Jewish community, a fact attested by his signature to a document preserved in the journal of the Council of the Four Lands in the fall of 5369 (1608).⁴

In 1610 R. Solomon Ephraim published his *Lips of Knowledge*. This work contains extended comments for each portion of the Torah, based on his sermons of the previous three years. They often recycle ideas from his previous works, finding ever new minutiae which open up based on each previous level of interpretation and deduction.

In 1617 he published *Six Pillars*. This is a moralistic treatise, in the same vein as the *Menorat Ha-Ma'or (Lamp of Light)*, with each section focusing on a particular moral virtue and discussing it in terms of the wealth of rabbinic lore relevant to it. The "six pillars" are taken from the two sayings in Mishnah *Avot* 1:2 and 1:18, the first of which eulogizes

⁴ Halperin, *Records of the Council of the Four Lands* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1945, Vol. I, p. 26.

Torah, worship, and deeds of kindness, the second justice, truth, and peace. Here Ephraim paid Maharal the compliment of imitation, for Maharal's *Eternal Paths* had two sections, the first organized around the principles from Mishnah *Avot* and the other around other miscellaneous virtues. The most interesting part of *Six Pillars* is the end, where he gives the specific application of each virtue to the contemporary social reality. In the matter of Torah, he praises the regular study of Mishnah, which had been instituted by his predecessor Maharal. He particularly recommends for this purpose the use of the new commentary *Tosafot Yom Tov* of his younger colleague R. Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, which had been published in Prague in 1614.

As chief rabbi of Prague, R. Ephraim Luntshitz was called on to authorize the publication of various books other than his own. In addition to the *Tosafot Yom Tov* just mentioned, two are especially significant. One was the *Giv'at ha-Moreh* (*Hill of the Guide*) of Joseph b. Isaac ha-Levi, an original philosophic work rather radical for its time, published in 1611.⁵ Another was David Gans's major astronomical work *Magen David* (*Shield of David*), published in 1612.⁶ Gans had been Maharal's pupil, and was the preeminent scholar of gentile learning (both natural sciences and history) among Ashkenazic Jews of his generation. His openness to Tycho Brahe's model of the solar system (a hybrid of the Copernican and Ptolemaic models) put him near the edge of leading scientific thought of the times. Ephraim's encouragement of Gans's work is a tribute to his own progressive cast of mind.

R. Judah Loew (Maharal) died in Prague in 1609.

R. Mordecai Jaffe died in Posen in 1612.

R. David Gans died in Prague in 1613.

R. Abraham Horowitz died in 1615, having served as rabbi in Lvov.

R. Solomon Ephraim Luntshitz retired from his active communal rabbinical duties in 1618. He died on March 3, 1619 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Prague.

R. Ephraim's younger colleague R. Isaiah Horowitz took over the rabbinical leadership of Prague in his place—briefly, until his own

⁵ See Joseph Davis, *Rationalism in Ashkenazic Jewish Culture*, pp. 197ff, especially p. 199 notes 3–5.

⁶ See Andre Neher, *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the 16th Century: David Gans (1541–1613) and his times*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 79.

departure for the land of Israel in 1621. Isaiah Horowitz died in Tiberias in 1630. His major kabbalistic work *Shenei Luhot Ha-Berit* (*Two Tables of the Covenant*), showing the influence of R. Moses Cordovero and R. Isaac Luria, was not published until 1649 in Amsterdam. But the kabbalistic direction of Polish Jewish thought had already been well established, as indicated by the prominence of thinkers such as R. Nathan Nata Spira (1585–1633), author of the *Megalleh Amukot* (*Revealer of Profundities*) (1637), and R. Samson Ostropoler (d. 1648).

R. Yom Tov Lippman Heller stayed on in Prague as rabbinical judge (*dayyan*) in Prague somewhat longer, until his departure in 1625. He served successively in Nikolsburg, Vienna, Prague, Lublin, Brisk, Nemirov, Vladimir-Volynski, and Cracow, where he died in 1654.

The Dialectic of Faith and Reason

Though this episode of rationalism in Ashkenazic thought came to an end, life goes on. Both in European thought and in Jewish culture, the waning of the Renaissance led to a century marked largely by religious retrenchment. The following century saw the rise of the European Enlightenment, which found an echo in Jewry. Maimonides's *Guide* was published in Jessenitz in 1742. Moses Mendelssohn studied it in his youth and went on to lead the Berlin Enlightenment. He brought Ashkenazic Jewry out into the light of European culture; however, they almost lost their Judaism completely in the transition.

The next century saw the pendulum swing back and forth in quick succession. First there was Romanticism, reclaiming the verities of the heart: Wordsworth, Schleiermacher, historicism. Then late-19th century positivism solidified the "scientific" world-outlook which still forms a basis of the contemporary view of reality. However, the spiritual vacuity of that outlook saw a further reaction in the form of existentialism, postmodernism, and the religious revivals of the 20th century. The Jewish thinkers of this period reflect general thought in including both rationalists (Mendelssohn, Geiger, Hermann Cohen, Mordecai Kaplan) and thinkers of the heart (Buber, Rosenzweig, Kook, Heschel). It seems that the head and heart of humankind are in perpetual tension; neither one ever scores a final victory. Both are needed.

When the historians of 19th-century Jewry looked for a paradigm of harmonious coexistence of Jewish tradition with general intellectual culture, they turned to the "golden age" of Spain in the Middle Ages.

They rejected the immediate Ashkenazic past as representing Talmudic obscurantism, isolated from general learning. This was not entirely accurate (as there were always some, such as Elijah Gaon of Vilna, who cultivated secular learning). However, it did reflect a century of battles with the rabbinic opponents of Enlightenment, from the age of Mendelssohn onward. It was easy in that context to belittle or ignore the achievements of the Polish Golden Age, or the symbiosis of Jewish and general learning that was fostered briefly during that period.

As the famous tale reminds us, people go abroad to seek treasure and ignore what is buried in their own back yard. Happily, the treasures of Ashkenazic Jewish learning are now being reclaimed. The works and legacy of R. Solomon Ephraim Luntshitz should be counted among them.

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APPENDIX

THE POLISH JEWISH RENAISSANCE:
A SOURCE-BOOK

ISSERLES—LURIA CORRESPONDENCE (~ 1550?)

Moses Isserles and Solomon Luria

(published in *Responsa of R. Moses Isserles*, ed. Asher Siev)

From Isserles (Responsum 5)

... The letter of my excellent lord and teacher has reached me. It is more precious than pearls, covered with sapphires. I rejoice and exult in it, seeing that the Lord has fulfilled my heart's desires. For all my life I yearned for the table of rabbis, to gaze at their flasks and draw from their waters, and now the Lord has graced me with the table which is before my lord, which I enjoy as one who enjoys the radiance of the Shekhinah. As my lord's words are more difficult than the previous, I cannot refute them point by point but only raise doubts about them, perhaps as the limits of the understander and the profundity of the subject keep me from understanding them fully...

The gentleman and scholar wrote to me as follows: "You wrote, 'Would that I might know the tubercle¹ that the gentleman has found in my words! Surely the casual conversation of one such as yourself is worth delving into. When you say "tubercle," which is hard as stone, this means that it lacks the moisture of Torah. But maybe I can demonstrate that it is rather a sac of clear water. Even though it be hard as a rock, perhaps I shall succeed, by striking it with the rod in my hand, to extract its waters.' If you are Moses the Teacher, where is your knowledge and wisdom? Not only do your words contradict the Geonim, they contradict themselves!"²

Your words seem ill-suited, for I congratulated you more than myself, calling you the great teacher. You say that my words contradict the Geonim and themselves? Am I greater than Solomon, of whom the gemara says, "O

¹ The image of the tubercle in the lung, and all the following imagery, is based on the discussion in BT *Hullin* 46a–48b on which signs of disease in a lung render the animal *unkosher*.

² The previous stages of the dialogue can be reconstructed on the basis of this report as follows:

Isserles: [some discussion of the laws of lung lesions, *tinri*, etc.]

Luria: "Your words (about tubercles) contain a tubercle themselves."

Isserles: "Would that I might know the tubercle you have found in my words! Surely it lacks the moisture of Torah. But maybe I can demonstrate it is rather a sac of clear water. Even though it be hard as a rock, perhaps by striking it I can extract its waters."

Luria: "If you are Moses the teacher, where is your wisdom? Not only do your words contradict the Geonim, they contradict themselves! (etc. etc.)"

Isserles: [Responsum 5]

Solomon, where is your wisdom? The rabbis sought to exclude Proverbs from the canon because its words contradicted each other. And why did they not exclude it? They said, did we not examine Ecclesiastes [which posed the same problem] and find a resolution? Let us examine this one as well.”³ Similarly, I say if you did not toss my words aside as insignificant, you would certainly have found a reason for their contradiction.

You say first, “A tubercle is hard as a stone which has no moisture.... Such a thing does not exist. Even though it may feel hard as a stone to the hand’s touch, it is not really as hard as a stone, for then it would not be worse than a blockage in the lung, as Rashi explains: ‘They are hard because they are filled with pus.’”⁴ See now, my master and teacher, did not R. Jacob Weil use my very words in his “Laws of Inspection”: “But if they have no pus but are hard as stone, they are not forbidden...and they are called tubercles (*tinri*). Does not the verse say, “I will remove their heart of stone” (Ezekiel 36:26)?—not that it is really that hard, but only similar to it in hardness, like the “foreskin of the heart” (Deuteronomy 10:16).

Even from the gentleman-and-scholar’s words we may learn this, when you say, “but it feels similar to a stone to the hand’s touch.”

As for what you write, “it is not really as hard as a stone, for then it would not be worse than a blockage in the lung, etc.” it appears from your words that the difference between the tubercle and the lobe is in the degree of hardness, I find it exceedingly surprising. Shall a holy one say this? It is the opposite of the view of the Semag, which is cited in the *Hagahot Maimoniot*, Chapter 7: “A blockage in the lung which is hard to the touch but whose appearance is like the lung. But if it appears purulent, it is a tubercle, which they say is kosher.” And this is the explanation of Rashi in *Hullin*, who wrote: “Tubercles [*tinri*] are ulcers larger than *kandi*, and have become hard as a rock, and their appearance is not like that of the lung, but they appear purulent, and they are not blockages, for a blockage has no ulceration and is no different in appearance from the lung, but does not permit ventilation.” It would appear from this that the difference between a blockage and a tubercle is not in the degree of hardness, but only in the appearance. I do not see why the gentleman-and-scholar brings Rashi as evidence for his side, for he seems to support my position. Even if he says “hard as a rock” [rather than “hard as a stone”], a rock is even harder than a stone, as I shall argue later.

If the esteemed sir wished to draw a lesson from my common language—i.e., my implication (from speaking of “tubercle”) that there is no moisture of Torah in me—and then holds this against me, arguing to the contrary that as a tubercle is the aftermath of a purulent eruption, it is impossible that there should not remain some moisture in it—I could have responded on the level of the metaphrand, which is Torah, which is compared to pure living water, not to the little leftover moisture of pus, and therefore I responded to

³ BT *Shabbat* 30a.

⁴ BT *Hullin* 48b top, s.v. *tinri*.

the gentleman, perhaps I may demonstrate to his lordship that it is after all a sac of clear water.

But I will say the truth to my dear sir: Aristotle has written the following about rock-formation: "The vapors in the earth are of two kinds. The one is moist, from the moist nature of the water, and one is dry from the nature of fire. Two species of rocks are generated from them. The one is mined as impure rocks proceeding from the earth, such as arsenic...all these are from the smoking type of vapor. But from the moist vapor come two species. The one of them can be melted down, like copper, silver, and gold; the other can be hammered into shape, like iron." We find a corroborating verse: "A land whose stones are iron," i.e. even though its origin is from a moist substance, of the same moist nature as water, nevertheless we find that iron is harder than stone. So why may I not call something hard as a rock (Rashi's term), even though its origin is from pus which is formed from the combined nature of water and stone-like earth? Therefore I see no contradiction in my words in this respect.

(Isserles continues with a discussion of whether a lung with a tubercle can be kosher, and the status of an adhesion or a sac filled with clear water.)

I will furthermore pose you a difficulty from our common master's words,⁵ since I see that no secret is too hard for you and you are a master of logic. You write: "The logicians write that the relation of the metaphor to the metaphrand is that of the matter to the form." Seeing that our master wrote the opposite—namely that the relation of the metaphor to the metaphrand is that of the form to the matter, surely there was an error here of the student transmitting his language. For the metaphrand is the principal subject matter, as is explained in the Introduction to the Guide, Book I, as is obvious to any inquirer. Let me now say that assuming the metaphrand to be the form and the metaphor the matter, it would be proper for the metaphor to follow the metaphrand just as the matter follows the form. Now since a sac of clear water is more fitting to be likened to the metaphrand which is Torah than a tubercle, which (if you take the metaphor literally) is hard, therefore I know that my sire's intention was as I expressed earlier, and he only wrote what he did subsequently in order to conceal his intention....

From Luria (Responsum 6)

I received your letter on a flysheet written on front and back. I found sharp words in it, and felt as if a knife was plunged into me. You have surrounded me with collected wisdom, mostly foreign, in strange vessels, while the home-bred hangs isolated. The Torah girds itself with sackcloth and laments with her maidens, for those pregnant with sons and daughters are despised and

⁵ The shift from the plural form "my lord," etc. to "our rabbi" indicates that Isserles is now speaking of a third party, namely Maimonides.

rejected, as was the case with Ada and Zillah in the first generations.⁶ You look to the wisdom of the uncircumcised Aristotle at every turn. As I ponder your letter, I see smoke coming from your nostrils like a hearth, and from your anger you give a response that is out of bounds. I considered letting the matter rest, otherwise there would be no end to the cycle of sharp and bitter words except stopping up our mouths as mute. Had you not written, “Shall a holy one say this?” I would have kept silent, but I cannot now contemplate grieving for naught, but I will enter into dialogue and express what is in my heart.

As for the beginning of your argument, taking issue with my writing “If you are Moses the Teacher, where is your knowledge and wisdom?”—I am surprised at your finding complaint with this! Didn’t I point out to you the path you could take in defending your position? I know that the gates of argument are never closed; especially in the last generations you never see someone decisively win an argument, especially against a stout-hearted opponent such as yourself, with the heart of a lion⁷ to tear down or build up; but that is what came to my mind at the time.

(...As for what you objected, citing the Semag)—By the Temple service and the faith, if I was not looking up in the Semag the day after you wrote, and thinking, this wise guy is going to use this very text against me! (...but these features are not the whole difference between a blockage and a tubercle, but just pathognomic signs)...

Then you cited the theory of the uncircumcised Aristotle concerning the vapors in the earth. I thought, woe unto me for what my eyes saw and my ears heard! The centerpiece of your argument is the citation from this impure one, and it issues from the mouth of the sages of Israel like an alien perfume to the Torah—may the all-Merciful save us from this great sin! I will not say all that is on my mind in this regard. I have seen the words of R. Hai and Rabbenu Asher in his responsum, and R. Isaac bar Sheshet.... By the Temple service! I am familiar with their wisdom as you are, but I stay far away from them, for even concerning their fine words the rabbis applied the verse “Keep away from the opening of her house (Proverbs 5:5) [—this applies to heresy].”⁸

⁶ An allusion to Rashi on Genesis 4:19: “‘Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Addah and the name of the other was Zillah.’—Thus was the custom of the generation of the Flood. They would take one wife for procreation and another for sexual pleasure. To the sexual partner the husband would give a cup of purgatives so she should be barren and dress herself as a bride and feed him dainties, whereas her co-wife would be despised and mourn like a widow.” The implication is that by choosing the beguiling pleasantries of Renaissance culture, Isserles is treating the tradition of Torah—which is the only truly fruitful one of the two—as a hateful second-best.

⁷ This is one of several expressions of respect and affection that Luria directs at Isserles in this letter, which point to an important positive dynamic in their relationship. See also the next paragraph and the concluding paragraph of this excerpt. Luria is acting as mentor throughout, coaching Isserles on how best to argue his position, in the manner of a chessmaster-teacher to his chess-student.

⁸ BT *Avodah Zarah* 17a.

There is no heresy or destruction greater than their wisdom. I cannot express my whole meaning in a letter; only in love and affection face to face.

Now, I have seen written in the prayers and books of the young men the prayer of Aristotle. This is the fault of a prince such as yourself favoring them, by mixing his words with those of the living God. His words are good for studying in the out-house, if they want to study them at all. Forgive me for saying, it would be better for you to apply yourself to the study of grammar, for your writing is riddled with inconsistencies as to second and third person, masculine and feminine, singular and plural.... [Luria gives examples...] I write you this out of my love for you...my desire is toward you even though you rule over me....

As for what I wrote, that the metaphor is to the metaphrand as form to matter, what I wrote makes good sense axiomatically, for form shapes matter whenever it has the occasion to govern the hylic force, so does the metaphor to the metaphrand. I am not writing in accordance with the theory of the hierarchy of qualities and categories. The verse, "Man...is compared to the beasts that perish," according to the interpretation of the rabbis, illustrates my meaning, but I have not the leisure to explain at length. This is similar to what the rhetoricians say, that the general topic is the form, and the principal subject is the matter, not perishable matter but the body to which the accidents occur. How much better is our casual talk than their Torah!⁹

...

As for what you wrote at the end: "What my lord has hinted at the end of his words from the matter of the supreme Chariot, which are matters of the secret of the world and the throne of the Ancient of Days"—I cannot speak of hidden matters, for I have no human understanding of the words of the masters of the divine service, which are truly taken from the book *Ma'arekhet Elohut* which you have hinted at. If I know of them, it is not my custom to write or hint about them at all, as it says,¹⁰ "On the morrow he will pay his debt, and the name of God will be cast into the garbage."

You have instructed me, insofar as I have written such esoteric things, in part to no avail, since you know as well as I, that there is the possible risk of its ending in the garbage. Perhaps that is your habit with my writings, but your writings are like a gold crown and a necklace around my throat. I have not written from the *[Divine] Hierarchy*, but you should know this is what I have arrived at on my own concerning deep and hidden matters, which I reveal to no one except modest ones such as yourself, and I thought, perhaps he will plough me and find my riddle. Since you have spurned them for no reason, I have repented of my intention, for I was sinking in mighty waters and brought up a potsherd. Even if it be thrown into the garbage, there is hardly a sin on my part, since it has none of the divine names which may

⁹ If the translation of this passage seems confused, so does the original, at least to me. The last sentence of the paragraph testifies to his discomfort in expressing himself in this idiom.

¹⁰ BT *Rosh Hashanah* 18b.

not be erased... Perhaps you will eventually see the commentaries of Recanati and *The Divine Hierarchy*....¹¹

If you have pushed aside my words with a broken reed, and said that my purpose was for lowly matters, don't I know that the Lord has given you the wisdom of Ethan the Ezrahite, to make and break, and to prove the lizard pure in forty-nine ways. Out of love for you I have taken the trouble to finish this opinion on Thursday after study-session. Surely if you read it carefully and then go back and read your words, you will see that even if the personalities are close, their hearts are far apart. If I am mistaken, let the mistake rest with me....

From Isserles (Responsum 7)

My beloved sir! Your letter arrived on Friday. When I saw it, I arose trembling, when I saw that the entire document was outward rebuke coupled with hidden love. Perhaps God chastises those whom He loves. If I respond, the words will be long, and possibly "where there is much talking, transgression does not cease" (Proverbs 10:19). Therefore should I keep my mouth muzzled while my lord is before me, and say that the RASH is right in his pleading.¹² I thought it better not to belabor any of the outstanding arguments, so I should not be singed by the master's coals, for I see that the Torah inflames him. Yet my heart is also like a burning fire I cannot contain, so I cannot refrain from responding to the issues that have been raised, and I will let the rest be.

First let me respond to the earthquake that I provoked by citing in my last letter a word from the foremost of the Greek philosophers, to which you responded that the Torah is wearing sackcloth, etc. Let me say that this is a legitimate difference of opinion among [Jewish] authorities which it is not up to me to resolve. You have the other opinion available to you, in the collection of Rashba's responsa, in the response of the sages of Provence to him. Even the Rashba only forbade the study of philosophy in one's childhood, before one studies Talmud, which is the bread and wine of which Maimonides wrote in *The Book of Knowledge, Laws of Fundamental Principles of the Torah* 4:13. Whom do we have greater than Maimonides, who wrote the *Guide of the Perplexed*, which is all in this genre! Even though Bar Sheshet wrote in his responsum that Maimonides did this only to refute the heretic, as you know, I have two answers to this, both of them correct in my opinion. The first is that these authorities were only concerned to prohibit studying from the books of the

¹¹ Isserles would indeed cite Recanati's kabbalistic commentary on the Torah and the *Divine Hierarchy* [*Ma'arekhet ha-Elohit*] in *Law of the Sacred Offering*. Evidently at the time of this exchange he was not familiar with them yet, but Luria was. This fits with the primacy of the Maimonidean outlook over the kabbalistic as successive layers in the formation of Isserles's mature outlook.

¹² Play on ש"ש (Rabbi Solomon) and רש (poor man); probable allusion to Exodus 23:3: "Do not glorify a poor man in his pleading."

cursed Greeks, such as *On Interpretation* and the *Metaphysics*, as he mentioned in that responsum. They were right to do so, for they were concerned that someone would be drawn into one or another of their beliefs and be seduced by their wine, which is the wine of serpents and destructive opinions. But they did not forbid learning the words of the sages and their inquiries into the realities of existent things and their nature. On the contrary, by means of this is known the greatness of the Creator, may He be blessed.... Even if the kabbalists hold another view of this, both are the words of the living God. Even though these doctrines were articulated by the pagan sages, the rabbis said¹³ that whoever teaches words of wisdom even among the nations is called a sage. This practice was followed by all of our sages who quoted the philosophers in their books, as is obvious to all from the examples of the Guide and R. Isaac Arama's *Binding of Isaac*, not to mention other works great and small. All the more so, anyone such as myself, who does not enter into the process of logical deduction in depth, but only follows what others have written, is not in any position of danger. Second, even if we say it is forbidden to read any gentile books, as a protective measure because of the forbidden matters in them, there is no authoritative view to forbid the books of our own sages, from whose waters we drink, and certainly not the great rabbi, the Rambam! There is certainly no ground to suspect his writings because of somebody's null-and-void opinion! The author of *Behinat Olam* ("Examination of the World") spoke rightly when he said, "My heart's final word: Put your faith in what the chronologically last and qualitatively greatest of the Geonim, the Rambam, believed." Even if a few sages disagreed with him and burned his books, still his books have gained acceptance among all our latest authorities. They all adopted him as their crowning glory, to cite his word as evidence equal to a law from Moses at Sinai.¹⁴

Let me therefore say I am innocent of this sin. If I cited some words of Aristotle, heaven and earth will testify of me that I never in my life studied his works themselves, but only in the *Guide* where I labored and found, and books of nature such as *Sha'ar Ha-shamayim* which our sages wrote. It is from them that I wrote what I wrote about Aristotle's teachings. Why should I not? Did not Maimonides write in the *Guide* (II, 22) that whatever doctrines Aristotle arrived at pertaining to the sublunar realm, are true? He also wrote that all his doctrines are in agreement with rabbinic teaching, except for some doctrines concerning God, angels, and the celestial spheres, in which alone he strayed from the way of truth.

As for what my lord writes that I am to blame for some youths praying Aristotle's prayer, let it never be laid to me or to any of my father's descendants

¹³ BT Megillah 16a.

¹⁴ We know from Luria's introduction to *Sea of Solomon* on Tractate Hullin (see below) that he regarded Maimonides as far from infallible, but still accorded him a great deal of respect. Isserles is probably aware of his difference with Luria in their estimation of Maimonides as authority, but feels he is within the bounds of stretching toward the positive.

that I would see such a thing and not protest! Rather, all this is still a stock sprouting poison weed and wormwood, an inheritance that they have from their fathers from those who were drawn to the [radical] philosophers and followed their ways. But I never in my days saw or heard of such until now. Were it not for your telling me this, I would not believe that there were any left in our land who harbored such beliefs.¹⁵

As for what you say, that you are familiar with this literature but stay away from it, I have no more knowledge of this than you do, but I will say that given the choice, I would consider it a graver risk to try to decipher kabbalah on my own, than to engage in philosophy, for the stakes are greater should I err, as you know from what Nahmanides said in his introduction to the Torah. I am surprised that you reply to me citing Bar Sheshet's response concerning those who engage in philosophy, for he has the same opinion of kabbalists, as you know. I need not elaborate, for I know it is all clear to you. I will only say that the one is as good as the other, and "the righteous shall walk in them [but sinners will stumble in them]." (Hosea 14:10) In any case, as heaven is my witness, I never engaged in these pursuits except on Sabbath, holidays, and semi-holidays, when other people go for a walk, but on weekdays I engage to the best of my poor abilities in Mishnah, Talmud, codes, and their commentators. A scholar can make up his own mind about such things.

¹⁵ This passage counts against the thesis (based on Ephraim Kupfer's research) that Isserles's Maimonideanism was an outgrowth of the Muelhausen tradition.

SEA OF SOLOMON:
INTRODUCTION TO TRACTATE *HULLIN* (~ 1560?)

Solomon Luria

Solomon of yore said in his wisdom, “More than these,¹⁶ my son, beware of making many books without limit.” (Ecclesiastes 12:12) Our rabbis interpreted this in Tractate *Eruvin*¹⁷ that it teaches the obligation to listen to the words of the Sages who are called *soferim*,¹⁸ for in addition to their innovating and adding to the tradition of the Oral Torah—the Mosaic tradition accompanying the Written Torah, which itself is the shortest in quantity and longest in quality—they also added by way of enactment, making protection upon protection, as our sage said earlier that he made ears for the Torah, as it says, “He gave ear and enacted and composed.”¹⁹ (12:9) Everything that is found in the words of the Sages of the Torah from the days of Moses our Master (peace be his) until now, these are all the “wise” of whom he said, “The sayings of the wise are like goads...they were given by one Shepherd.” Do not be amazed at their far-reaching disagreements, that the one declares impure and the other pure, the one forbids and the other permits, the one disqualifies and the other certifies, the one exempts and the other obligates, the one excludes and the other includes, so long as their purpose is for the sake of Heaven.²⁰ The ancients would not even defer to a voice from heaven.²¹ All of them are the words of the living God, as if each one received it from the mouth of the Almighty by the mouth of Moses, although in fact these words never came from Moses, for they are contradictory, nevertheless that is how the sage portrayed the phenomenon in its expansive and powerful aspect.²² For there is no difference between what is produced by the active intellect when

¹⁶ The traditional midrashic interpretation of this verse is that it warns against writing more books in addition to the canonical books of the Bible. The plain sense is probably, “In addition to everything else I have said, take heed of the following:...”

¹⁷ BT *Eruvin* 21b.

¹⁸ Playing on the etymological relation between ספרים (books) and סופרים (scribes, masters of the Book from Ezra on., i.e., the rabbis).

¹⁹ Luria’s citation from this verse איזן ותיקן וחיבר differs in word-order and in the root of one word from our standard און וחור תקן.

²⁰ This parallels the interpretation of the verse in *Fathers of Rabbi Nathan* 18:2 and *Numbers Rabbah* 14:4, 15:22.

²¹ Alluding to the case of *Tanur shel Akhnai*, BT Bava Metzi’a 59b.

²² The most impressive feature of Solomon Luria’s outlook that leaps out from this description is his sophisticated grasp of the historical development of the tradition, and his appreciation of the mythic-symbolic character of its own self-description as monolithic and all coming “from Moses at Sinai.”

it is stimulated, such as a secondary or tertiary derivative of the intellect, and something which comes to one by the perceptive faculty from the utterance from the Mosaic tradition, even though he did not conceive it in his intellect as following by logical necessity, but rather as a tradition passed down from Moses, one person to another. The kabbalists wrote the reason for this, because all the souls were at Sinai and received [Torah] by way of forty-nine channels, which is seven times seven connected sevenfold, and these are the voices which they heard and also saw. "All Israel saw the voices"—these are the opinions which are divided through the channels—each one saw by way of his own channel according to his apperception, and received in accordance with the power of his supernal soul, whether greater or smaller, the one differing from the other, so that the one will come to declare pure and the second will arrive at the opposite end and declare impure, and the third to the middle position between the extremes, and all of it is true. Understand this!

Therefore the sage said, inasmuch as the words of the Sages are true, they are all words of the living God in their differences, all the more so if they agree together. In that case, ask yourself: Why didn't Moses write everything from the mouth of the Almighty, explicitly as would be proper, so that no doubt might arise from it, and the Torah might have one face and not forty-nine? Apart from this, whatever was proper to add and enact [in the future] ought to have been made known, that if you would arrive at the place where you find a breach in the fence, mend it, and add whatever structures are fitting to add in any case, recognizing that one ought not to enact a decree on the community unless the majority of the community are able to abide by it.²³ To this supposition the sage responded: "There is no end to making many books"—i.e., it is not possible to write books to meet this need, for there is no end or limit to the matter, as he says. For if all the firmaments of heaven were scrolls and all the seas ink, they would not suffice to exhaust the content of even one section of the Torah, with all the questions that arise from it, and whatever novel insights, derivations and lessons may be brought forth from it, not to mention, when all the sages of Israel delve into it with the supernal intellect, what they will deduce from it and add to it. On the contrary, if Moses were to write all this on the Torah, how much more addition there would be to it—addition upon addition—i.e., it is impossible that there would not arise questions and variants and profound ideas on the first level of addition, so that the second level of addition would come to a thousand thousands of the like kind. The sum of the matter is that the sage told us that it is not within the realm of possibility to make all the questions of the Torah known and explicit unequivocally, so that it would be within everyone's grasp—this is impossible. Therefore he entrusted the Torah to the sages who are "planted" in each generation, each one with his own intellectual allotment, empowered to add whatever Heaven instructs him to, and if he comes to declare clean they will facilitate it. Blessed be the All-Merciful Who gives wisdom to the sages!

²³ BT *Bava Kama* 79b.

And now go out and see, O daughters of Zion (Song of Songs 3:11)—who are distinguished²⁴ in Torah and mitzvot! If you are not prophets, you are descendants of prophets. Look and see, for Solomon in his time was addressing all the sages of Torah, whose heart was broad in understanding as the entrance of a palace: “Of making many books there is no end”—i.e., it was impossible even for them to write the entire Torah without there arising questions and differences of opinion, even though in their time the differences of opinions and additions had not proceeded so far. We, the orphans of orphans, whose understanding is as narrow as the eye of a fine needle—so that if the former were as angels we are truly as asses²⁵—draw a double *a fortiori* conclusion! What scroll or book would be necessary to record all of *our* questions, for our incomprehension has no end or limit! For even among those who preceded us there occurred differences and illness and weakness that they said: “Since the time of the schools of Shammai and Hillel, the Torah became two Torahs,”²⁶ and for that reason they had to add upon and duplicate the written Torah, to the point that the Oral Torah no longer sufficed for anything but to put it on parchment as well and make it also a written Torah. They relied on “A time to do [for the Lord]—abrogate the Torah!”²⁷ as the sages of the Mishnah had done, compiling views through the end of the Tannaim, and at their head our holy Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch], who arranged all the Mishnaic teachings by their respective orders, so that for him and his rabbinic colleagues it appeared sufficient for its time. That addition engendered further additions, as there occurred disagreements among the Amoraic sages, leading again to further addition upon addition and differences of opinion, until it was necessary in the days of Ravina and R. Ashi—the leading authority of the last generation—to redact the Talmud, arranging the discussions by their respective orders at the utmost length. In his days the Talmud was concluded, so that there is no addition to it or subtraction from it. Even so, with its long-winded arguments and profundities before each conclusion and decision, not to mention the variants of the arguments throughout the Talmud in different senses, so that it seems to the reader to be declaring pure in one place and impure in another, or to obligate in one place and exempt in another, as if the Talmud itself tears down its structure and goes back on its words, and we don’t know which is prior or later, to take as the final conclusion and legal decision. Even after all

²⁴ The play of **ציון** and **מצויינים** (on this and other verses) occurs many times in the midrash. Luria’s association here is closest to that of BT Berakhot 8a: “R. Hisda said: What is the meaning of: ‘The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob’ (Psalms 87:2)? The Lord loves the gates that are *distinguished* through halakhah more than the synagogues and houses of study.”

²⁵ It was not impossible to combine this pessimistic sentiment with a “Renaissance” outlook (as we see, for instance, in Erasmus). Nevertheless, the self-denigration of the present is more characteristic of the previous generations (see Dinari, **חכמי אשכנז בשלהי ימי הביניים**).

²⁶ BT *Sanhedrin* 88b.

²⁷ This paradoxical interpretation of Psalm 119:126 became proverbial. See BT *Berakhot* 54a, 63a, *Temurah* 14b.

the Geonim and halakhic authorities came and condensed the Talmud, sifting it to fine flour, they did not escape this criticism which I have raised.

It is true that Maimonides the Spaniard created a work which was finer than any previous in this matter, which is orderly in its legal expositions and decisions and short on story-telling, embracing all the Torah in its respective orders, whether currently practiced or not. There is nothing that he left out of the book. Truly, by his way of thinking, he wrote the whole Torah, as if Moses had received it that way from the Almighty, a law from Moses at Sinai without supporting argument. Nevertheless, it is not accepted by one of reflecting mind, because it does not specify its sources. R. Moses of Coucy wrote truly of it, that it is like a dream without an interpretation in this respect, that if someone comes to it with a differing opinion or criticism, he will not be able to come to grips with it, for who knows what were the grounds of his own position—whether from our [Babylonian] Talmud or the Jerusalem Talmud, or from the Tosefta or the Geonim or his own opinion? It may even be a scribal error, as is in fact the case in several places! Rabad criticized him several times with arguments that are patent and evident to all. The *Maggid Mishnah* himself wrote several times that such-and-such was a scribal error, or simply conceded the point without apology. The *Migdal Oz* wrote: “I wonder that such a criticism was authored by Rabad!” and cuts off his words as if with a whiplash, corrupting and perverting his words without rhyme or reason, and squandering his ink to no purpose, as I wrote about him in Bava Kama 8:1 and in other places. All this is out of ignorance, for Maimonides brought no citation or support for his views. Even a brief mention would have sufficed. “For who shall come after the king has already done his doing?” (Ecclesiastes 2:12)²⁸

Let us start again at the beginning—the Talmud, in which we busy ourselves, and whose waters we drink, except that the sages of France, the Tosafists, turned it into a single, unified system. Of them it is rightly said, “the words of the sages are like goads.” They turned it upside down and inside out, in a way that looks to us like a dream without an interpretation or guiding principle, but passage A says X, and passage B says Y, and the one has nothing to do with the other, but the whole Talmud must be straightened out and tied together, and all the mysteries must be solved, and its decisions reconciled. Yet all this has not helped those who came afterward. Controversies still persist among them. They still add and subtract, they still disagree. All the preceding way is not for them. They choose from it what suits them, pointing out that the Tosafists themselves disagree in some places, and their words contradict one another, for in one place we have Rabbenu Tam’s opinion, and in another R. Isaac’s and R. Issac ben Asher (Riba)’s and all the rest. Moreover, you look in one place and find nothing but unresolved questions, but in another place everything has been resolved. They made emendations in many places of the gemara. The Tosafists were largely Rabbenu Tam’s disciples, for eighty

²⁸ I.e., Maimonides in his greatness had built his intellectual edifice with a fatal defect, which no lesser successor can remedy after the fact.

of them studied with Rabbenu Tam in one season and all went on to be invested with authority, such as R. Hayyim Katz, and R. Eliezer of Mainz, and R. Samson of Sens and his colleagues, not to mention innumerable disciples. There is another group, which includes Nahmanides, R. Meir Halevi Abulafia, R. Zerahiah, and Rashba (R. Solomon b. Abraham Adret), as well as the saintly R. Jonah and his disciples, R. Isaac of *Or Zaru'a* (a humble and pure man of whom you will not find the like in more recent times), R. Meir of Rothenberg, who had a disciple who nearly filled his place, namely our rabbi and teacher R. Asher. All these learned well and searched and inquired, and built their foundation on the writings of R. Isaac Alfasi, who selected the Talmud and sifted it through thirteen sieves, as well as on those of the French Tosafists. Between the two of these, everything mysterious was brought out into the light of day.

Not only did these works not lay all problems to rest, but they increased the confusion. The Torah became not two Torahs, but 613 Torahs, from all the disagreements. Each one built his own temple,²⁹ acting as if the scale of justice was in his hand and he was meting out the holy shekel, deciding the law in his favor, with the angels proclaiming him “Blessed.” The Sephardim would say that the Sephardic authors are the most correct, and particularly Maimonides, who possessed all virtues, both internal and external,³⁰ and all the French authorities are like a garlic-shell in comparison. His master would have approved of him, and he was the logical product of his master, as we see from a letter that he wrote to his son,³¹ in which he prescribes for him the study of the sage R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, who was not an expert in the Talmud, and most of his thought-structure and commentary follows the way of astronomy and the natural sciences, and acceptance of outside wisdom. He [i.e., Ibn Ezra] railed in several places against the words of the sages of the Torah and the Talmud. He misrepresented Torahitic teachings as rabbinic, and rabbinic teachings as Torahitic. He declared forbidden things to be permitted, and permitted things as forbidden or uncertified. He has an established reputation, for he was a great sage, and one does not refute the lion, for one does not follow his Torah commentary to prohibit or permit, to obligate or exempt. Indeed, he wrote in many places against the halakhah, even against the sages of the Mishnah and against the Amoraim of the Talmud innumerable times. Truly I heard it said of him that he would boast of this, and would say in public that it is his objective not to be partial, but to interpret the text as far as his reason will take him. “Were it not for tradition” (thus he hinted in several places in his commentary to the Torah)—“were it not for tradition,

²⁹ וְכָל אֶחָד בּוֹנֶה בְּמָה לְעַצְמוֹ, alluding to the “high places” during the First Israelite Monarchy, where local priests conducted their own worship (illicitly, in the eyes of the Biblical chronicler and later tradition).

³⁰ I.e. (probably) both traditional Jewish knowledge and general philosophical knowledge.

³¹ Joseph Davis has pointed out that this “letter” is spurious. (Davis, *Rationalism in Ashkenazic Jewish Culture* (dissertation), p. 136, n. 61)

I would say thus and such.” His words were not right in my opinion, and I believe he has already been held to account for them, for he has given aid and comfort to heretics, Sadducees, and unbelievers. I am the man who has seen my people’s affliction! Even though Maimonides praised him, I would have held my peace, for he followed him somewhat in the ways of philosophy and literary style, as well as the view that by that wisdom one might attain perfection and the soul’s immortality. Would that such an ascent were really an ascent, and nothing more! But this was not enough for Maimonides, but he deprecated the French sages³² and said that he never saw them recognize their creator except from eating boiled beef marinated in oil³³ and vinegar.

This was not the way of the great rabbi Nahmanides, who wrote of them (in his “Laws of the Gemara,” printed in “Novellae of Rashba on Bava Batra,” p. 110): “The French sages gathered most of them to their people—the higher teachers, the primary teachers—they show us every sort.”³⁴ Even though he was Sephardic, he recognized the truth, and gave praise to whoever deserved it. This was unlike Maimonides, who truly got his just desserts when one of his contemporaries stood up to him—the pious and pure Rabad—who criticized him in several places without stint, and despised him as one of those in error, who corrupt and pervert their studies. . . . Moreover, when Maimonides wrote in his book that he³⁵ was a heretic, [Rabad] wrote that several who were greater and more eminent than himself followed this view [of divine corporeality]. Go and see how others pictured and esteemed [Nahmanides]. Why should I mention earlier authorities? But I found in the responsa of R. Asher, who wrote that Nahmanides was well-versed in all the sciences. Indeed, when Nahmanides differs with R. Tam and R. Isaac, R. Asher parts ways with him and prefers to follow these Tosafists, for he holds by a tradition that R. Tam and R. Isaac (and the French authorities in general) were more esteemed in wisdom and higher in rank than Nahmanides. Therefore a litigant is entitled to protest that he should be judged by the law of his community—a Sephardi by Sephardic law, etc.—each choosing his own, by national community. But this is not the way, and that is not what he meant. For from the days of Ravina and R. Ashi, it is not our tradition to decide in accordance with this or that of the Geonim or of the later authorities, but rather [we respect] whoever can certify that his words are based demonstrably and clearly on the [Babylonian] Talmud and the Jerusalem [Talmud], and on the Tosefta in the event that the Talmudic evidence is indecisive.

³² There is no evidence that Maimonides held these views, except for that spurious letter.

³³ Davis renders this “vinegar and garlic,” perhaps seeing or inferring a variant שום/שומן.

³⁴ Obscure out of context. Possibly he was praising the success of the French in educating the common people and keeping them loyal to Jewish observance.

³⁵ I.e., Rabad. Luria greatly oversimplifies here. Maimonides said that whoever denies divine incorporeality, offends against true belief. Rabad maintained that his own views were not at issue in this regard, but he nevertheless wished to defend the Jewish honor of those who might believe that God has a corporeal aspect.

CONTENTS OF *LAW OF THE SACRED OFFERING* (1570)

R. Moses Isserles

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51. The prohibition of leaven on Passover, and commandment of matzah; the four cups of Passover night; why the Evil Urge is compared to leaven and to an old king, while the Good Urge is compared to matzah and to a wise child; how all this relates to the creation or eternity of the world; why they compared eating matzah the day before Passover to fornicating with his fiancée in her father's house.
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 71. The laws of the Nazirite, all its details and associated offerings. Through it we may consider how one should act with regard to the pleasant, the good, the useful, and the infinite, to which the four rules of the Nazirite correspond. Why the saying “Go round the orchard but do not draw near” applies especially to the Nazirite. Wherein did the Nazirite sin? “Whoever is enticed from his wine has knowledge of his Creator.” The tree of knowledge signifies human intellect. The reason Moses desired to enter the land of Israel.
 72. The reasons of the offerings that Adam and his sons offered. Why they said Adam offered a unicorn. It was not written in the Torah because it alludes to the secrets of the sacrifices and how they teach of the Creation. “The rabbis were uncertain whether the *tahash* (dolphin?) in Moses’ day was a tame or wild animal.” The tale of Cain, Abel, and Seth, their offerings, and the secret meanings of their names. “Adam and Eve went to bed as two and came out as seven.” “When they were in the field . . .”—what were they discussing?—about the extra twin-sister born with Abel. “Cursed be the earth that opened its mouth . . .” Cain’s sign: a leprous mark, or the sign of a dog? Of Seth: “And he begat in his likeness and image.”
 73. The sacrifices of Noah. Whether Noah’s sons offered burnt-offerings or offerings of well-being [of which the worshipper partakes]. Why there is more mention of offerings and altars with Noah than with Cain and Abel. Why in some places it is mentioned of the patriarchs that they built altars, but without mention of sacrifices. The sin of the generation of Babel. The significance of the species in Abraham’s “covenant of the pieces” and the ram at the binding of Isaac. Isaac’s altar. Jacob’s pillar (and the apparent contradiction with the prohibition of the pillar in Deuteronomy 16:22). Jacob’s ladder. “The earth was unformed and void”—these are the smooth stones and green line encompassing the world. The stones of Jacob’s pillar became the rock of foundation of the Temple.
 74. The offering that Moses offered at the giving of the Torah, and other events from the Exodus through the Sinai narrative. (“Let us go three days’ journey to worship the Lord”—where, if at all, is this fulfilled?)

Moses serving Jethro at table: “Whoever enjoys the feast where scholars are seated is as if he enjoyed the radiance of the Shekhinah.” “We shall do and hear”—doing precedes hearing. The purpose of existence. David’s fivefold “bless the Lord O my soul”—the fivefold correspondence of the soul to God. “And they saw the Lord the God of Israel.” (Exodus 24:10) “Rabbi Eliezer said: Of what were the heavens created?” And what did the Israelites perceive on that occasion?

75. The sacrifice that Moses offered during the investiture of Aaron and his sons; wherein its details differed from the other offerings, and why the priests were only empowered to serve after this ceremony. “There arose none in Israel like Moses”—but among the gentiles, there arose Balaam. How did God create the world? “He wraps in light like a robe.” (Psalm 104:2)
76. The reasons for the offerings of the priestly investiture and also of the dedication of the Levites. The Golden Calf, and wherein did the sins of Aaron and the Israelites consist? Why did Putiel and Jeroboam select a calf for worship, rather than any other species? Was Maimonides right in denying that the world was created primarily for the purpose of humanity, or were his critics right?
77. The offerings that Balaam and Balak offered, and the altars they built. “Moses wrote his book, the portion of Balaam, and the book of Job.” Why Balaam’s ass strayed three times. Why Balaam had recourse to a diviner, a charmer, and a prophet.
78. The offerings offered in Mount Gerizim and Ebal, and that Joshua offered when he entered the land. The curses that were set on Mount Ebal—why were the blessings not mentioned? Why is the punishment of being “cut off” mentioned in the Torah, but not the reward of the World to Come? “Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah ought not to have begun with the creation narrative, except for the nations’ objection.” Why is the conquest of Canaan especially mentioned, of all the wars that have occurred in the world? The eleven curses correspond to the eleven principles whose denial renders one a heretic. Why in the terms *em la-mikra*, *em la-masoret* are the fundamental principles of the Bible or the tradition called “mother” and not “father”?
79. All the voluntary offerings that the Israelites offered after the Torah was given attest to the creation of the world, and this is the principle of the sacrificial service in every place. Why they did not offer a sacrifice at Saul’s coronation as they did at David’s coronation. The offerings at the beginning of the war narrated in Judges 19–21, and by Gideon and Manoah.
80. The offerings that Hannah offered when she dedicated her son Samuel, and that Samuel offered.
81. Various interpretations of details in the Davidic narrative. How the number 6 alludes to mercy and 5 to judgment. Why the correct way of enumerating the Israelites is through collecting the half-shekel, and how David erred in enumerating them directly.

82. The offerings that Solomon offered in dedicating the Temple. Why he gave thousands of sacrifices. “The thousand are yours, Solomon.” “His word He commanded to the thousandth generation.” “God’s day is a thousand years”—but God has no finite term! A trifle of explanation of the “measure of the Divine Stature” (*shi’ur komah*).
83. The sacrifices which Ezra and Zerubbabel offered at the dedication of the Second Temple. Why there were three Temples (including the one to be built speedily in our days), and three Tabernacles (Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon). Some of the sacrifice of dedication to come.

LAW OF THE SACRED OFFERING (1570)
PART II, 2: FOUR PHILOSOPHICAL PROPOSITIONS

Moses Isserles

First Proposition

Know, O Reader, that the foundation of the Torah is the belief in the creation of the world. This is a peg on which the whole Torah hangs, as all the Sages of Israel affirmed and accepted, whether the kabbalists or those who are drawn after philosophy. Thus the Master Guide [Maimonides] wrote in II, 13:

The opinion of all who believe in the Law of Moses our Master, peace be on him, is that the world as a whole—I mean to say, every existent other than God, may He be exalted—was brought into existence by God after having been purely and absolutely nonexistent, and that God, may He be exalted, had existed alone, and nothing else—neither an angel nor a sphere nor what subsists within the sphere. Afterwards, through His will and His volition, He brought into existence out of nothing all the beings as they are.... This is undoubtedly a basis of the Law of Moses our Master, peace be on him. And it is second to the basis that is the belief in the unity [of God]. Nothing other than this should come to your mind. It was Abraham our Father, peace be on him, who began to proclaim in public this opinion. For this reason, he said, “Maker of heaven and earth.”³⁶

He also wrote (I, 71): “If the world is created in time, it undoubtedly has a creator who created it in time. For it is a first intelligible that what has appeared at a certain moment in time has not created itself in time and that its creator is other than itself. Accordingly the creator who created the world in time is the deity.” Here Maimonides demonstrates that belief in a created world necessitates the existence of God by a primary principle of reason in a way that an eternally pre-existing world does not. For even though he proves the existence of God through philosophical deduction on the premise of a pre-existing world, nevertheless it is difficult to judge the validity of this proof unless one is a great scholar well-versed in the methods of logic and deduction, which is not the case with the premise of a created world. Therefore belief in creation is the basis of the Torah and of faith.

³⁶ I have availed myself of the Shlomo Pines translation of Maimonides’s *Guide* for this and most of the other excerpts (often lengthy) in Isserles’s *Torat ha-Olah*.

It is probably for this reason that the Sages instituted the benedictions “Who Forms the Heavenly Lights” and “Who Brings On The Twilight” as a preface to the morning and evening recital of Shema, for they proclaim the creation of the world. Afterwards one recites Shema, accepting the yoke of divine authority, for the one depends on the other—by reflecting on the creation, one is led to affirm God’s sovereignty.

Maimonides further wrote (II, 23) that in the opinion of the world’s pre-existence “is contained the destruction of the foundation of the Law and a presumptuous assertion with regard to the deity.” He further wrote (II, 25): “The belief in eternity [i.e., pre-existence of the world] the way Aristotle sees it—that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything—destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out, unless one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic internalists...” And at the end of the same chapter: “On the assumption of [an] eternal [pre-existing world], the Law as a whole would become void.” But: “if creation in time were demonstrated—if only as Plato understands creation [i.e., from a pre-existing substance]—all the overhasty claims made to us on this point by the philosophers would become void.”

Second Proposition

Know that many of the philosophic sages believed that even though the world was created, it will not be annihilated. That is the view of Maimonides in II, 27. In II, 28 he says this was the view of King David, who wrote: “He established the earth on its foundations, so that it should never totter.” (Psalm 104:5) He also wrote (in II, 27):

Perhaps you will say: Has it not been demonstrated that everything that comes into being passes away?; if the world is generated it will pass away. Know then that this need not apply to us. For we do not assert that it has been generated according to the rule applying to the generation of the natural things that follow a natural order. For what is generated in accordance with the order of nature must of necessity pass away in accordance with the course of nature. For just as its nature had required that at first it should not exist in this particular way whereas after that it has come to exist in that way, it necessarily also requires that it should not exist in that way forever. For it is established as true that this mode of existence is not permanently attached to it by its nature. However, in view of our claim, based on the Law, that things exist and perish according to His will, may He be exalted, and not in virtue of necessity, it is not necessary for us to profess in consequence of that opinion that when He, may He be exalted, brings into existence a thing that had not existed, He must necessarily cause this existent to pass away. Rather does

the matter inevitably depend on His will: if He wills, he causes the thing to pass away; and if He wills, He causes it to last....

...There are many texts that signify that it will last forever. All the passages from whose external sense it appears that the world will pass away, are most manifestly parables, as I shall explain. If, however, one of the externalists refuses to admit this and says that he must necessarily believe in the passing-away of the world, he should not be dealt with illiberally. However, he needs to be informed that the world's passing-away does not necessarily follow from the fact of its having been created in time, but that he believes in this, as he thinks, by way of accepting the veracity of the one who stated that parable, which he takes in its external sense. From the point of view of the Law, there is no harm in this in any respect whatever.

Since he gives us permission to believe in the world's passing-away, let us follow the simple sense of the matter to strengthen the view that the world will pass away, which is the view of all the kabbalists and the Torah-followers, and agrees with what our rabbis said: "The world will continue for six millenia, and be desolate for one."³⁷ To be sure, Maimonides qualifies this dictum as follows: "They do not have in mind total extinction of being. For the expression, 'and one thousand years it is a waste,' indicates that time remains. Besides, it is the saying of an *individual* that corresponds to a certain manner of thinking." (II, 29) Yet it is not necessary to follow his reading, for the majority of the sages accepted authoritatively that it is to be meant in its plain sense, as they said, "the heavens that will be created in future time,"³⁸ as we will explain below. It is in this connection that they said in the Gemara, "During the thousand years that the Holy and Blessed One is going to renew His world, what will the righteous do? God will give them wings, and they will soar over the face of the waters."³⁹ Evidently it bothered them—if the world has been destroyed, what will the righteous do? They responded that the blessed Lord would adorn them in angelic habit—i.e., the wings, as it says, "each [seraph] had six wings," (Isaiah 6:2) and they would soar over the face of the waters. Possibly it means the supernal waters which are over the firmament, and only the material (terrestrial) world will be destroyed. The supernal waters are not material, as Rabbi Akiva said to his students, "Don't say, 'water, water.'"⁴⁰ Rather, the immaterial supernal Forms are called "water," as R. Isaac Israeli wrote in his book *Foundation of the World (Yesod Olam)*,⁴¹ and Arama in the *Binding of Isaac* in the portion Bereshit. Or if you prefer to say that the waters over which the righteous soar are actual water (in which case the sense is that things

³⁷ BT *Sanhedrin* 97a.

³⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 1:13.

³⁹ BT *Sanhedrin* 92b.

⁴⁰ BT *Hagigah* 14b. The context is the story of "Four entered the Orchard (Paradise)," so R. Akiva was instructing them as to the proper protocol in the celestial realm.

⁴¹ Isaac Israeli of Toledo was the author of the astronomical treatise *Yesod Olam* (1310).

will revert to their primordial state, with the waters covering the earth, as it says prior to creation of the habitable world, “the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters”—Genesis 1:2), there is no harm in this. It is well known that this was the view of the sage Ibn Ezra, as he revealed in his comment on Genesis 8:22, “so long as the earth endures,” at the end of the Flood narrative. His commentators have explained his view of this matter at length. There are also other explanations of the righteous soaring over the waters, which will be elaborated in our discussion of the sacrifices, for in my view the destruction will be all-embracing, as will be clear in Chapter 25. Even if one does not accept this plain meaning, it must imply at any rate the destruction of the habitable world, together with the heavenly host that were created afterwards.

As for what Maimonides said, “‘and one thousand years it is a waste,’ indicates that time remains”—that is not necessarily the case, since the rabbi said, “The Torah was created two thousand years prior to the world,”⁴² but time had not yet been created, yet they said two thousand years, i.e., the equivalent of what would be measured as two thousand years after the world had been created. “One thousand years it is a waste” can be understood the same way. Even though Maimonides’s view can be harmonized by saying that two thousand years is meant parabolically and in a mystical sense (as Ibn Ezra wrote in his introduction to his Torah commentary), nevertheless one can counter-argue from the fact that the Torah mentions “there was evening and morning one day, a second day, a third day” even though the sun and moon had not been set in place until the fourth day, so how could one day, etc. be measured without the heavenly lights by which days are measured? This must be understood in the way we have just suggested, as Arama explained in *The Binding of Isaac* on Portion Bereshit.

I do not mean by this to imply any contradiction in Maimonides’s view. Indeed, he holds (in II, 30) that the lights were set in place on the first day but their benefit was made manifest only on the fourth day, as he explains at length there. In that case, there is no contradiction in his view. However, I wish to say that his view is not in agreement with the majority of the sages, who hold that the heavenly lights were not set in place until the fourth day. As for his supporting his view from the verse in Psalms, “He established the earth on its foundations, so that it should never totter” (Psalm 104:5), I will say that Recanati already reconciled this in Portion Behar.

I will write what appears to me to be the case in this matter, that David (peace be his) was speaking only of the most precious works of creation, that they are not like most generated beings necessitated to destruction. The earth is not like that, for God established it on its foundations so that by the principle of its essence and its nature it should never totter, nevertheless God may still by His exalted will compel its destruction as He compelled its creation. The case is similar with Solomon’s dictum, “The earth remains forever” (Ecclesiastes 1:4)—i.e., by the principle of its customary behavior, its nature and its essence

⁴² *Genesis Rabbah* 8:2.

[it ought to remain forever,] but this does not determine [the outcome if the divine will is to the contrary]. He said similarly, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, etc.)—i.e., applying to everything that happens in the natural way under the governance of the sun.

I am amazed at what Maimonides said in Guide II, 29:

... You constantly find as the opinion of all Sages and as a foundation on which everyone among the Sages of the Mishnah and the Sages of the Talmud bases his proofs, [Solomon’s] saying: “There is nothing new under the sun,” and the view that nothing new will be produced in any respect or from any cause whatever. Even he who takes “new heavens and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17) to mean what people think it means, says: “Even the heavens and the earth that will be created in the future are already created and subsist, for it is said: “They subsist before me.” It is not said: “they will subsist,” but “they subsist.”⁴³

What will Maimonides say of all the miracles and wonders that occurred from the beginning to the end of time and were novel entities? How will “there is nothing new under the sun” be fulfilled? Rather, we must concede that the dictum “there is nothing new” applies to the natural way of things under the sun, but says nothing about the capability of God (may He be exalted) Who has everything in His hand to do with as He wills, for He changes them and annihilates them as per His capability. Those who said that the “new heavens” that will be created in the future are already created, intended to deny any change in the exalted divine will from the day of the world’s creation and onward. This includes also their statement that “there is nothing new under the sun” refers to God’s will not being altered during the time that the sun is over the earth. They also said, regarding other miracles and wonders:

R. Jonathan said: “God set stipulations with the sea that it should divide for the Israelites.... Thus it is written: “The sea returned לִאֲחֵינוּ (to its strength). (Exodus 14:27) [Read rather:] לִתְנָאוֹ—to its prior stipulation.” R. Jeremiah b. Eliezer said: “Not only with the sea did the Holy and Blessed One make stipulations, but with everything that was created in the six days of creation.”⁴⁴

Here you have the denial that the divine will was altered in all of the miracles and wonders, or in a certain one of them.⁴⁵

In sum, I see it is the case that the belief in the world’s annihilation is a belief that was widespread among the majority in Israel, and even in Maimonides’s opinion it is permissible although not mandatory. We shall therefore hold to this

⁴³ The last part of Maimonides’s quote cites *Genesis Rabbah* 1:13 in a version significantly different from ours. (Pines, *Guide*, II 344, n. 55)

⁴⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* 5:4.

⁴⁵ Isserles’s agreement with Maimonides, that the miracles were part of the preordained pattern of natural law, was a crucial pro-philosophical stand. Maharal would differ with this in *Gevurot Ha-Shem* and *Derekh Hayyim* (see excerpts below).

view and say: if it has been demonstrated that the world is to be annihilated, then of necessity one must concede that it was brought into being, for it is generally agreed that a thing which has no end has no beginning, but if it has an end, it must have a beginning. For if it had no beginning, it would then have no end, but we see that it does come to an end, therefore its existence is not eternal. If it had no beginning and went on existing perpetually, then we would have to say it was possessed of eternity. If so, the annihilation of the world proves its creation, whereas proving its creation does not necessarily prove its annihilation, as Maimonides wrote according to his view. This will suffice as preliminary to what we will say on this issue later, God willing.

Third Proposition

Pertinent to our next topic is what Maimonides wrote in Guide I, 72:

... This whole of being is one individual and nothing else. I mean to say that the sphere of the outermost heaven with everything that is within it is undoubtedly one individual having in respect of individuality the rank of Reuben or Simeon. The differences between its substances, I mean the substances of this sphere with everything that is within it, are like unto the differences between the limbs of a man, for instance.

He went on at great length to compare the relation of a man and his limbs to the relation of the world to its parts, and I will only quote here what is necessary for our topic. He said there:

And just as the forces of man that necessitate his generation and continued existence for the time in which he continues to exist are identical with those necessitating his corruption and passing-away, so are the causes of generation in the whole world of generation and corruption identical with those of corruption. To take an example: If it were possible that the four faculties that are to be found in the body of every being that nourishes itself—namely, the attractive faculty, the retentive faculty, the digestive faculty, and the repellant faculty—be like the intellectual faculties and not act except as is proper, in the time in which it is proper, and in the measure in which it is proper, man would be preserved from many very great afflictions and from a number of diseases. However, as this is impossible and these faculties carry out natural activities without reflection and discernment and do not apprehend in any respect the activities they carry out, it follows necessarily that grave disease and affliction occur because of them even though these faculties are at the same time the instrument through which living beings are produced and have a continued existence during the time in which they have it.

This can be made clear as follows. If, to take an example, the attractive faculty would draw to the human body only things that are suitable in every respect and only to the extent needed, man would be preserved from many diseases and afflictions. But as this is not so, and it draws to

the body any matter that happens to belong to the genus it attracts even if that matter diverges slightly from the norm in its quantity and quality, it follows necessarily that it draws to the body matter that is warmer or colder, coarser or finer, than is needed, or more of it than is needed. Consequently the veins are plugged up with this matter, sclerosis and putrefaction occur, the quality of the humors is corrupted and their quantity changed; whereupon diseases appear such as scab, itch, and warts, or great afflictions such as cancerous growths, elephantiasis, and canker, so that the form of one or several parts of the body is corrupted.

This is the case also with regard to the other four faculties in question. And this is also the case with regard to all that exists as a whole. For the thing that necessitates the generation of that which is generated and the permanence of its existence for some time is the mixing of the elements through the heavenly forces that move them and pervade them. And this is the very cause of the occurrence of causes of damage in that which exists—such as torrents, harmful rains, snow, hail, tempestuous winds, thunder, lightning, and the putrefaction of the air—or the occurrence of causes that are very destructive and may bring about the annihilation of one or several lands or of a whole geographical zone—such causes are the sinking of land, earthquakes, hurricanes, and water overflowing from the seas and the depths.

Know that it was not because of all that we have mentioned in comparing the world as a whole to a human individual that it has been said about man that he is a small world. For this whole comparison can be consistently applied to every individual animal that has perfect limbs; but you never hear that one of the ancients has said that an ass or a horse is a small world. This has been said only about man. This is because of that which is a proprium of man only, namely, the rational faculty—I mean the intellect, which is the hylic intellect; something that is not to be found in any of the species of living beings other than man.... Because of this a human individual who, according to a supposition you might make, would be deprived of this faculty and left only with the animal faculties, would perish and be destroyed immediately. This faculty is very noble indeed, being the noblest of the faculties of the living beings. It is also very secret, and its true reality cannot be understood at the first attempt of common opinion, as one can understand the other natural faculties.

In the same way there exists in being something that rules it as a whole and puts into motion its first principal part granting it the power of putting into motion, in virtue of which this part governs the things that are other than itself. And if one supposed that this thing had passed into nothingness, it would have to be supposed that the existence of this sphere as a whole, that of its principal and that of its subordinate parts, had also passed into nothingness. For it is in virtue of this thing that the existence of the sphere and of every part of it endures. This thing is the deity, may its name be exalted. It is only with a view to this that it is said of man alone that he is a small world, inasmuch as there subsists in him a certain principle that governs the whole of him. And

because of this, God, may He be exalted, is called in our language the life of the world.

... The rational faculty is a faculty subsisting in a body and is not separable from it, whereas God, may He be exalted, is not a faculty subsisting in the body of the world, but is separate from all parts of the world... Know that it behooved us to compare the relation obtaining between God, may He be exalted, and the world to that obtaining between the acquired intellect and man; this intellect is not a faculty in the body but is truly separate from the organic body and overflows toward it. We should have compared, on the other hand, the rational faculty to the intellects of the heavens, which are in bodies.

The Sage Ibn Ezra also trod this path in his commentary on Genesis,⁴⁶ to the point that he wrote, that is why the prophets saw the glory of the Lord in human form, for they understood that God is an incorporeal Intelligence Who governs all existing things, higher and lower, just as the human intelligence governs man, and this is well known to everyone learned. And in *The Book of Formation* (*Sefer Yétzirah*) they said, “World, year, soul,” and explain that this is to arrange the one corresponding to the others.⁴⁷

It appears that this is what is meant also in Job by the verse, “He is one; who can dissuade Him? Whatever His soul desires, He does.” (Job 23:13) [Ibn Ezra] wrote that this is a great mystery, and it would seem he intended to imply that **בְּאֵרֶךְ** means “in the world,” which is numerically one.

I would wish to support this idea and image further from what is written in the Torah and the rabbinic writings. It is written in the Torah, “Let us make man in Our image” (Genesis 1:26) and “In God’s image He made man.” (9:6) Even though Maimonides wrote (I, 1) that the “image” of God refers only to the specific form, nevertheless the rabbinic sayings on this do not admit of this interpretation.

It is written in Tractate Shabbat (50b): “A man should wash his face, hands, and feet daily to honor his Maker, as it says, “The Lord made everything for His sake.” (Proverbs 16:4) The Midrash tells of Hillel the Elder, that when he departed from his students, they asked him, “Where is Hillel going?” He said, “To do a mitzvah.” They asked, “What mitzvah does Hillel do every day?” He said, “To wash in the bath-house.” They asked, “Is this a mitzvah?” He said to them, “When the king’s image is placed in the amphitheaters and circuses, isn’t someone appointed to adorn them and polish them? And he is welcomed into the royal company. Shouldn’t this apply all the more to man who is created in the divine image and likeness?”⁴⁸ This shows that they understood the matter literally.

⁴⁶ Ibn Ezra on Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in Our image...”

⁴⁷ “Seven doubles, **בְּגִיד כְּפָרִית** of Foundation... with them He formed seven planets in the universe, seven days in the year, seven gates in the soul, male and female.” (*Sefer Yétzirah* 4:6)

⁴⁸ *Leviticus Rabbah* 34:3.

Even more difficult is the passage in Sanhedrin (37a): “[Man was created singly] to proclaim the greatness of the Holy and Blessed One. For a man stamps several coins with one mold and they are all identical. But the Holy and Blessed One stamps each and every person in the mold of the first Adam, yet not one is identical to another.” Would that I might know what is the mold with which the first man was stamped, and what is the mold of which Rashi wrote in his commentary to Genesis (1:26): “With the mold made for him, for everything else was created by the divine word, but he was created with God’s hands, as it says, ‘You laid Your hand on me’ (Psalm 139:5)—[Adam] was formed like a coin stamped with a die.”

In Tractate Bava Batra (58a) we read: “Rabbi Bana’ah was marking out cave-sepulchres. When he came to the cave-sepulchre of Adam, a voice came out and said, ‘You have looked at the likeness of my image; you may not look at my image itself!’” But is not the glory of God a thing to be searched?⁴⁹ This is well-known as the way of the kabbalists, but from the standpoint of philosophy it is difficult to understand it, except by the way we shall explain.

It is furthermore said in *Genesis Rabbah* (8:7): “When the Holy and Blessed One said to Moses, ‘Let Us make man,’ Moses objected: ‘Master of the Universe! Why do you give the heretics grounds to err?’ The Holy and Blessed One replied, ‘Write it as I say, and let him err who will!’” Albo wrote at length on this in *Principles [Ikkarim]* 1:11, and raised the objection, what great advantage was there in using the phrase ‘let Us make man,’ that God insisted on writing it despite the invitation to heresy that it implied? He tried to answer his own objection, but I do not find his explanation convincing, for even by his reasoning, there would still be room for the heretics to err.

Here, then, is the method we are going to elaborate, which will confirm the greatness of the Creator. Contrary to what one might think, the phrase “let Us make man” actually reinforces the notion of absolute unity! For the true philosophers supported the notion of divine unity from the circumstance that the world is interconnected and operates like a single organism. Now the exalted God is the soul of the world, just like the soul in the human body, as Maimonides explained at length. This will explain the phrase “let Us make,” and how that phrase supports the divine unity (in which case any misconstrual is the fault of the one who errs) as follows:

We will say that man is called a “small world” because he is in the likeness of the greater world with its governor, i.e., the exalted God. The “us” of “let Us make man in Our image after Our likeness” includes the entire world, which is the mold from which man was made for God’s sake. The form of man and his limbs is as the likeness of the world and its parts, expressed in the phrase, “after Our likeness,” while the soul of man resembles God, which is expressed

⁴⁹ Proverbs 25:2: “The glory of God is a thing concealed, but the glory of kings is a matter to be inquired.” Isserles has interestingly appended the predicate of the second stich to the subject of the first, reversing the meaning. This is symptomatic of the philosopher’s positive attitude to applying rational inquiry to divine matters. See Maharal’s opposite treatment of this verse in his First Preface to *Prodigies of the Lord*.

in the phrase “in Our image,” as Maimonides explained.⁵⁰ That is why it is a mitzvah to wash the iconic human body, which is a likeness of the greater world, which is the mold of the king, the Holy and Blessed One.

I also found a midrash of the sages appropriate to this idea. They said that as man has limbs, so the earth has limbs: “[wisdom was born when God had not yet made] the head of the world’s clods” (Proverbs 8:26); [the Moabites complained that Israel’s hordes] “covered the eye of the earth” (Numbers 22:5); “the earth opened its mouth [to swallow up the Korahites] (Numbers 16:32); [the spies described the land of Canaan as] “a land that devours its inhabitants” (Numbers 13:32); [Moses’s blessing describes God as a refuge] “under the arms of the world” (Deuteronomy 33:27); [the Shechemites welcomed Jacob’s clan because] “the land was broad of hands” (Genesis 34:21); [God] “suckled [Israel] honey from the rock” (Deuteronomy 32:13); [Ezekiel describes a people] “dwelling on the navel of the earth” (Ezekiel 38:12); [Joseph incognito accuses his brothers:] “you have come to see the nakedness of the land” (Genesis 42:12); [and Kohelet observed that] “the earth stands forever.” (Ecclesiastes 1:4) Thus goes the splendid midrash,⁵¹ commenting on the last-mentioned verse, which is itself indicative of the idea. Note that “earth” in this connection refers not just to the fourth element, but to the world in its totality, comprising the four elements and possibly even the heavens—all of corporeal existence. How well the rabbis said that this ensemble has parts like the human body!

After I had written this in my aggadot to Tractate Shabbat, I found another anonymous sage who wrote similarly in a commentary to the Song of Songs, citing the verses, “His head is finest gold... his cheeks are like beds of spices... his legs are like marble pillars... his mouth is delicious.” (5:11–16) As I found his words scanty and the writing defective, I could hardly decipher them, but I copied the good part and filled in the rest from my fallible reasoning, thus completing the thought from the two of us.

In *Leviticus Rabbah* (Kedoshim 25:8) we find: “‘His legs are like marble pillars’—‘his legs’ refers to the world, ‘marble pillars [עמודי שש]’ referring to their formation in the six days of creation. ‘Set in sockets of fine gold’ refers to words of Torah which are ‘more desirable than fine gold’ (Psalms 19:11).” [further examples cited]

They continued thus at length to demonstrate the matter which we are touching on, for it is all said about the world. For just as the human soul is in relation to the body, so is the exalted God in relation to the [outermost] sphere. As the soul is sensitive to the body and animates the body and moves it from place to place, and as the body is filled with it from head to toe (for which reason if something touches the body without one’s seeing it, one feels it immediately, while at the departure of the spirit the body is left cold and dry), so the glory of the Lord fills the sphere from the smallest part to the largest, as it says, “the whole earth is full of His glory.” (Isaiah 6:3) That is

⁵⁰ *Guide* I, 1.

⁵¹ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 1:9.

why all the parts of the sphere are spoken of as parts of the exalted God, as it says, “His head... His eyes... His hands... His legs...” —not that God is a body, God forbid! These are the words of Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva in the *Hekhalot* book, who said that whoever know the measurements of the Creator is surely a member of the World to Come.

The words of R. Sherira Gaon and his son R. Hai Gaon elucidated for me the words of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. They said in one responsum which they addressed to the inhabitants of Fez that these words are not meant in their simple sense, but there are myriad mountains of great hidden wisdom contained in them. “His head” alludes to the sky, the head part of all the celestial spheres which is called *aravot* (clouds), from which the exalted Lord is called Aravot,⁵² for the principal site of His manifestation is there, as by analogy the person’s is in the head.⁵³ “Fine gold” is a figure for the celestial bodies which shine brightly like fine gold. “His locks are curled”—the verse imagines the celestial forces as the hairs on a man’s head.⁵⁴ Indeed, Recanati wrote on this⁵⁵ that the hairs indicate divine powers, and they are called “black as a raven” inasmuch as the appearance of black darkens the sight and prevents the eye from seeing, for it is impossible to apprehend these forces in their true essence, as if the appearance of darkness keeps them from view. Alternately, “darkness” alludes to the element of fire which is called “darkness” in the account of creation, as Maimonides wrote in Guide II, 30 and some sages followed him on this.

“His eyes are like doves (כיונים)” means their appearance is white, as if they wash in milk for lack of water, as people who lack places of water wash in milk. The word יונים is used here as in Jeremiah 46:16 מפני חרב היונה (“because of the deadly sword”), where it means oppression and privation. I imagine it is comparing the eye of the firmament to bathing in milk, for Aristotle says in Signs of the Heavens that the appearance of the heavens is like a milky white. “Sitting by a brimming pool (יושבות על מלאת)” —“sitting” means enduring, as in “the Lord sat enthroned at the Flood.” (Psalms 29:10) מלאת (“brimming pool”) refers to perfection and eternity. Maimonides explains the homonymic meaning of these words in Guide I, 11 and 19. It is also possible that the “eyes” refer to the seven planets whose appearance is clear and pure as if they washed in milk for lack of water, as the prophet says, “These seven

⁵² As in Psalms 68:5: “Sing to God, chant hymns to His name; extol Him who rides the clouds (סולו לרוכב בערבות); the Lord is His name.”

⁵³ Phenomenologically, if one were to ask where in the body the “I” is experienced as being located, it would be primarily in the head, for that is the reference point for one’s visual and auditory fields. Similarly, if one asked for a primary place where God is to be found, it is popularly and in most traditions assumed to be in the heavens.

⁵⁴ The metaphor is apt. Indeed, in physics, diagrams of electrical or gravitational force are often represented as curved lines, though in physical reality they are invisible. Though physics was in its infancy in 1560, it was not hard even in the medieval cosmological model to picture the planets as bodies of light guided in their motions by invisible force-trajectories (the cycles and epicycles of Ptolemaic astronomy).

⁵⁵ Vayehi 77a and Kedoshim 149b.

[lamps of the Temple represent] the eyes of the Lord, ranging over the whole earth.” (Zechariah 4:10)

“His cheeks are like beds of spices”—the princely angels on high are called “the face of the Lord,” as in “My face shall not be seen,” (Exodus 33:23), for the cheeks are on the face. They are compared to beds of spices, i.e. a spiritual delight, for there is nothing that gives the soul delight more than the scent of spices. This figure was used with reference to God, as in “the Lord smelled the pleasing odor,” for it is not a material delight,⁵⁶ therefore their delight and satisfaction is likened to a bed of spices.

“His lips...drip flowing myrrh”—the separate Intelligences are called His lips, as He speaks through their agency with His servants the prophets, just as a person speaks with his lips.⁵⁷ This is the meaning of what they said in Chapter *Helek*: “My heart has not revealed it to My mouth—even the angels, who are God’s mouth through whom He speaks, do not know the date of the Redemption.”⁵⁸ “Drip flowing myrrh”—the effluence and delight which are symbolized by spices drip downward to His servants the prophets.

How fitting and wonderful are the words of Maimonides in Guide II, 11 on the topic of emanation and overflow descending from above, which is only the surplus from the angels, in the manner of a rich man who has much wealth that he does not need and so he gives it to others (as he elaborates there). Therefore the verse says, “flowing⁵⁹ myrrh,” i.e., it flows to them first and they take what they need from it, and the surplus they let flow down [to earth].⁶⁰

⁵⁶ The sense of smell is unique among the senses, in that it can be stimulated by particles on the molecular scale, so small as to be thought immaterial prior to the advent of microscopy in the 17th century. Therefore the premoderns considered it to be the most spiritual of the senses. Indeed, one meaning of *spirit* is a distilled essence or extract of a substance. Also, the Hebrew words ריח (odor) and רוח (spirit) are of a common biliteral root, leading to their association.

⁵⁷ This is a reference to Maimonides’s conception of prophecy as “an overflow overflowing from God through the intermediation of the Active Intellect.” (*Guide* II, 36)

⁵⁸ Isserles is either paraphrasing or has a different text. Our text reads: “What means ‘The day of vengeance is in My heart’ (Isaiah 63:4)? Rabbi Johanan said: I have revealed it to My heart, but I have not revealed it to My limbs. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said: I have revealed it to My heart, but I have not revealed it to the ministering angels.” (BT Sanhedrin 99a) Rashi comments: “*I have not revealed it to My limbs*—I did not utter a word through My lips that My limbs could hear, but it was kept hidden in My heart.” Isserles’s formulation conflates all these views into one.

⁵⁹ מור עובר, literally “passing myrrh.” Isserles stresses the connotation of עובר as “passing,” that it is passed on from one recipient to the next, each passing on what he does not need.

⁶⁰ Isserles here conflates the topics of *Guide* II, 11 and II, 36. In Chapter 11, Maimonides speaks of the successive stages of divine effluence to the various separate intellects, concluding with the Active Intellect, which is the lowest of the series. But in Chapter 36, he defines prophecy as the divine effluence reaching the prophet through the mediation of the Active Intellect. Isserles applies the metaphor of the rich king who bestows his surplus to the next in line (which Maimonides used in Chapter 11 for the succession of separate intellects) to the case of prophecy.

“His hands are rods of gold (גלילי זהב)”—the hands of the blessed Lord are undoubtedly the celestial spheres (גלגלים), through which He operates on the terrestrial realm. The prophet uses this figure when he says, “They had human hands under their wings.” (Ezekiel 1:8) Maimonides explicated these matters in his chapters on the Chariot, especially in the beginning of Guide Part III. “Rods of gold, studded with beryl”—refers to the stars which have the appearance of jewels.⁶¹

“His belly a tablet of ivory, adorned with sapphires”—you know the dictum of the Sages, that the sky is like the Throne of Glory, and the Throne of Glory is like sapphire, as it says, “Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire.” (Ezekiel 1:26)⁶² Maimonides wrote (in Guide II, 19): “Abu Nasr (Alfarabi) wrote on his glosses to the Physics, ‘There is a difference between a sphere and the stars, for a sphere is transparent (ספירי) whereas the stars are not transparent (אינן ספיריים).’” Therefore His belly (i.e., the stars) is like ivory adorned with sapphires, i.e. surrounded with a sapphiric appearance but not sapphiric themselves.⁶³

“His legs are like marble pillars (עמודי שש)”—these are the six extremities of the world, which are called marble pillars,⁶⁴ as I interpreted in my book *The Price of Wine* (*Mehir Yayin*) on Esther. “Set in sockets of fine gold”—i.e., set into the earth, which is the center of the sphere, over which the spheres revolve. The earth is pictured as gold sockets just as the head is pictured as fine gold, for the one is as significant as the other in usefulness of existence.

To this point the poet has portrayed the spheres and parts of the universe individually, but from this point on he describes the entire body as one: “He is majestic as Lebanon, stately as the cedars,” going beyond what he said earlier. “Lebanon” refers to the entirety of the world, as in “King Solomon made him a palanquin of wood from Lebanon.” (Song of Songs 3:9) This speaks of the world.⁶⁵ “Stately as the cedars”—which were planted from the

⁶¹ The Hebrew word for beryl תרשיש is also associated with the “ships of Tarshish” that would navigate the vast expanse of the seas, thus combining the immense sublimity of the seas and the sparkling brilliance of a jewel in a single metaphor. The Midrash similarly interprets ממולאים בתרשיש as referring to the sea of the Talmud, where wave upon wave is interspersed with innumerable learned sayings. (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:2) Isserles’s association of this verse with the stars in the sky is similar.

⁶² BT *Menahot* 43b.

⁶³ It is not clear whether Isserles understands the meaning of the quoted passage, that the matter of the spheres of the planets is transparent and therefore lets through the light of the celestial bodies beyond them, whereas the matter of the stars is opaque, as there is nothing beyond them that need be visible. Ivory is opaque and sapphire is a gem with transparency, though generally colored (except white sapphire). The important theological point, however, is unaffected, that Isserles consistently understands the corporeal imagery of Song of Songs Chapter 5 as referring to the heavenly bodies.

⁶⁴ A play on the two meanings of שש—“six,” or “marble.” Ephraim Luntshitz would use this phrase as the title of his last book, in the sense of “the six pillars” [on which the world rests: Torah, worship, acts of kindness, truth, justice, and peace].

⁶⁵ I am not sure where Isserles gets this interpretation. Midrash Rabbah interprets this verse as referring to the Holy of Holies, whether in Jerusalem or in heaven. (*Song of Songs Rabbah* ad loc.)

six days of creation, as it says, “the cedars of Lebanon which He planted.” (Psalms 104:15) “His mouth is delicious and all of him is delightful,” as it says of creation, “God saw all that He had made, and found it very good... And God blessed.” (Genesis 1:31, 2:3) You have no mouth sweeter than this.⁶⁶ “Such is my darling, O maidens of Jerusalem!”

In this vein Baḥya wrote at the end of the portion Bereshit, that the references to “hand of the Lord,” “eyes of the Lord,” or similar corporeal entities refer to God’s angels and servants: when the angel does a hand-like activity he is called “hand,” when an eye-like activity he is called “eye,” and so all of them. Similarly in the Tikkunim of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai.⁶⁷

These matters are very precious in my eyes, and they should be pleasant to every sage, for in this way all vestiges of corporeality are removed from the Lord, may He be blessed and exalted over all blessing and praise. For He has no body or end or beginning, and He is the Cause of all Causes, the Origin of all.

Know and understand that by means of these matter we will understand the secret of tefillin which the exalted Lord has commanded us always to be a reminder between our eyes, and what the rabbis meant when they said that the Holy and Blessed One puts on tefillin.⁶⁸ For all of reality is hinted at by the tefillin which are attributed to the Holy and Blessed One, as will be made clear.

The secret truth comes from the well-known facts that the hand-tefillin has one enclosure and the head-tefillin four enclosures, and that the hand-tefillin is worn opposite the heart and the head-tefillin opposite the brain, and that it is forbidden for a person to wear head-tefillin without first wearing hand-tefillin. Now it is also known that the essential life-force of a person is in the heart, as the sage said, “More than all that you guard, guard your heart, for it is the source of life.” (Proverbs 4:23) It is also known that this life-force is connected from the heart to the brain, by which it is transmitted onward to all the limbs, for all the nerves branch outward from the brain and return to it. Now it is the exalted God Who provides the life-force to the entire universe, which is after the pattern of man and his limbs. Therefore the hand-tefillin have one enclosure to indicate that God is one. But as the creatures which receive the life-force from God are in four orders—the animal, the rational animal (man), the celestial bodies, and the separate intelligences—and as it is through them that the exalted God manifests His greatness and power, therefore the head-tefillin have four enclosures. It is also known that these four orders of beings cannot endure without the exalted God. Therefore the hand-tefillin is the first to be put on, and the last to be taken off, to indicate that the Lord God is first and last, and without Him there is no shred of existence for the other orders of the world which are considered to have life, all the more so for the even-lower orders such as the vegetative, the inanimate, and the simple elements.

⁶⁶ This comment, and some of the preceding (including the references to Creation), echo the exegesis of the Song of Songs passage in *Numbers Rabbah* 10:1.

⁶⁷ I.e., *Tikkunei Ha-Zohar* (70).

⁶⁸ BT Berakhot 6a.

Now as every existent being has four causes—material, formal, efficient, and final—and as even the separate intelligences which have no matter or form, nevertheless are somewhat composite insofar as they can be grasped of themselves (which is like matter) or through their cause (which is like form—all of which is explained in the *Guide* in the chapters on the Chariot, as well as by other authors), therefore it is a law from Moses at Sinai that the tefillin must be square, to indicate these four causes.

Now the square shape of the hand-tefillin has another reason, which is to indicate the existence and unity of the exalted God. For the square-gematria of אַחַד is equal to the simple gematria of אֶחָד.⁶⁹ This hints at the unity and existence of God, and hints as well that the existence and essence of God is the ground of existence of the four orders of being which are indicated by the square shape of the head-tefillin, and that everything exists from Him.

It should not pose a difficulty for you that the rabbis say, “One does not make head-tefillin into hand-tefillin, for one may increase in sanctity but not decrease.”⁷⁰ From what I have said, it might appear the opposite, namely that the hand-tefillin ought to be greater. Nevertheless, the blessed God can only be apprehended through His creatures.⁷¹ It is through them that we come to the realization of the sanctity and existence of the Lord (may He be blessed), and it is known that all beings have their potentiality from the exalted God; from Him they receive their flow and potential. Therefore, when we make a hand-tefillin into a head-tefillin, we are increasing the sanctity of God, for we show that His glory fills the whole world, and the four proceed from the power of the One, for in His power is their power. But we cannot make from the creatures—the four orders with their power—the power of the exalted God, nor ought we to consider doing this.

The rabbis alluded to all this when they said in BT *Berakhot* Chapter 1 that the Holy and Blessed One puts on tefillin, and that He showed Moses the knot of His tefillin.⁷² Now it is known that the portions of tefillin are four: “Consecrate,” “When the Lord brings you,” “Hear,” and “If you obey.” The head-tefillin has the letter *shin* twice—a four-pronged *shin* adjacent to “Consecrate,” and a three-pronged *shin* adjacent to “If you obey.” All this comes to shed light on this mystery.

⁶⁹ The “square gematria” is arrived at by the products of letters of various combinations of letters of the word. Thus: ד"ח multiplied = 32, ח"ד multiplied = 32, א"ד multiplied = 4, ד"א added = 13, and the sum of these is 81, which is the sum of the letters of אֶחָד.

⁷⁰ BT *Berakhot* 34b. This implies that the head-tefillin have a superior sanctity to the hand-tefillin.

⁷¹ This will be a motif of Ephraim Luntshitz's *Ornament* on Genesis 1:1.

⁷² BT *Berakhot* 6a, 7a.

The portion “Consecrate [to Me every first-born]” deals with the orders of living being, as it involves the consecration of firstborns of man and beast. After it comes “When the Lord brings you,” which distinguishes between the first-born of man and the first-born of animals, for the Torah commands us either to redeem the first-born of an unclean beast with a clean one, or to break its neck, and to offer the first-born of a clean animal, while the first-born of a human must always be redeemed, which is a difference between the animal and human orders.

As these orders are composed of the four physical elements, therefore the *shin* adjacent to them has four prongs. Now the *shin* derives its very name from the root שׁנן as in “you shall teach them to your children,” denoting enlightenment.

However, the passages “Hear” and “If you obey” deal with the two other orders of being. “Hear” teaches us of the celestial bodies, as it says, “Recite them when you lie down and when you get up,” (Deuteronomy 6:7) which the rabbis interpreted as the time of lying-down and getting-up, which is morning and evening, determined by the rotation of the celestial sphere. “If you obey” deals with the separate intelligences, when it says, “Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods” (Deuteronomy 11:16)—these are the separate intelligences, which are called “other gods.”

Now, as one may argue the reverse—that “Hear” deals with separate intelligences (as we say “Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever,” which is said in praise of the angels on high), and “If you obey” deals with the celestial bodies (as it says: “He will shut up the skies”)—therefore there arose a serious controversy on the ordering of these two portions, a controversy which is dealt with in the codes and the novellae.⁷³ In any case, the portion in the outermost enclosure makes reference to the separate intelligences, therefore we find adjacent to it the *shin* with three prongs, for the intelligences are described as having three elements, as it says, “He makes the winds His messengers, fiery flames His servants,” (Psalms 104:4) and they are also described as water, as the *Akedat Yitzhak* and *Yesod Olam* demonstrated, for they are the upper waters; however we have not found any place where they are described by the element of earth. The black strap of the tefillin is a hint at the hierarchy and connection of these matters; this is the knot (קשר = connection) of the tefillin. They combine to form the name שדי, which our rabbis explained: “Our God has sufficiency בושדי.”⁷⁴ They said elsewhere, it was because He said to His world: “Enough!”⁷⁵ which hints at what we have explained. This is the secret of tefillin as it appears to me.

⁷³ BT Menahot 34b, Tosafot s.v. והקורא.

⁷⁴ Rashi on Genesis 17:1.

⁷⁵ BT Hagigah 12a.

Fourth Proposition

This is the first proposition which was posited by the Kalam who disagreed with the philosophers. Maimonides cited it in *Guide* I, 71. He said they believed that the whole world—meaning everything material in it—is composed of extremely small particles incapable of being divided further, each particle having nil quantity. These are the atoms, from which the Mutakallimun suppose the world comes into being. Maimonides wrote further that they do not believe the atoms existed from eternity, as Epicurus and the other ancient atomists believed, but that God creates them continually whenever He wishes, and they are also destructible.⁷⁶

We shall now begin, with the help of the exalted God, to explain according to our method the reasons of the sacrifices in general. To this we shall devote a separate chapter.

⁷⁶ It seems strange indeed, given room for just four major propositions of philosophy, to choose the atomistic hypothesis which is cited by Maimonides as a mistaken opinion of the Kalam. Isserles mentions it here because it is for him the basis of the symbolism of the flour-offering, which is composed of matter resembling atoms as nearly as it is possible to simulate them. However, he says in the next chapter (*Offering* II, 3) that as this hypothesis was adopted by those “poor in knowledge,” it is therefore the appropriate offering for a poor man to bring.

LAW OF THE SACRED OFFERING (1570)
PART III, 3: KABBALISTIC SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE DIVINE NAME

Moses Isserles

Maimonides further wrote: “When he arranges the large altar fire, he should arrange it on the east side of the altar.”⁷⁷ You know what they said at the end of Tractate Menahot⁷⁸ and in Sifrei: “Why in all the passages of the sacrifices is the divine name never El or Elohim, but always the Unique Name (YHVH)? So as not to give an opening to the sectarians.” Therefore the Torah says, “Whoever sacrifices to Elohim shall be proscribed, but only to YHVH [should you worship].” (Exodus 22:19) Therefore the large altar fire on which they offered the sacrifices was on the eastern side of the altar, whose nature I have already explained (I, 2), for the eastern side according to the kabbalists represented the Unique Name, as I wrote above (II, 26), and the enlightened will understand it from there. The priest had to make the markings for the altar-fire on the east side to indicate that he began from there, for according to the view of the kabbalists the attribute called “east” is the root of the tree, and the original root of the words.

I find a fitting development of this idea (to offer sacrifice only to the Unique Name so as not to give an opening to the sectarians), based on the saying in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*:⁷⁹ “Before the world was created, there was only the Holy Blessed One and His Name.” And Maimonides commented on this (I, 61): “Consider now how this dictum states clearly that all the derivative names have come into being after the world has come into being, for all these names signify the attributes of His actions.” He goes on at length in this matter, and also says, “So shall it be in the future, as it says, ‘In that day shall the Lord be one and His name one.’ (Zechariah 14:9)” Therefore, since the sacrifices signify the generation of the world and its annihilation, the passages dealing with them mention only the Unique Name, to proclaim how all things shall be after the world ceases, and how things were before the world came to be. This refutes the sectarians who maintain the world is pre-existing. This is the meaning of the kabbalists, who say that the purpose of the sacrifice is to draw all the divine powers together. This is the profound truth of the matter, for it signifies the moment of creation, when all the divine powers were concealed and concentrated together, not yet manifest to the works of creation. This is the matter of the fusion (קירוב) of the divine powers, as I shall elaborate.

⁷⁷ Maimonides Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Temidin u-musafin* 2:7.

⁷⁸ BT Menahot 110a.

⁷⁹ PRE 3.

And this is the language of the Zohar (Leviticus III 4b–5a):

R. Hezekiah once, when in the company of R. Simeon, asked him what was the precise meaning of the term קרבן (offering). He relied: “As is well known to the Companions, it means their ‘drawing near.’ It refers to those holy Crowns which are all knit together and drawn near to one another until they all form a perfect unity to make whole the Holy Name. Hence it is written, ‘a קרבן to YHVH,’ meaning that the drawing near of those Crowns is to YHVH to unify properly the Holy Name so that mercy should be shown to all worlds, and rigor should not be aroused. Hence the name YHVH is used (in connection with the sacrifices), and not the name Elohim.” Said R. Hezekiah: “How glad am I that I asked this question, so as to receive such an explanation. But is it not written, ‘The sacrifices of Elohim are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, Elohim, you will not despise’ (Psalms 51:18)?” He replied: “It does not say here ‘offering’ (קרבן), but ‘sacrifices’ (זבח). It is for this reason that the sacrifices were killed on the north side of the altar, because that is the side of Gevurah, which is designated Elohim, the purpose being to soften and break the spirit of severity, so that mercy may obtain the upper hand. It is fitting, therefore, that a man should stand by the altar with a contrite spirit and repent of his misdeeds so that that stern spirit may be softened and mercy prevail over severity.”

Even though these words contain ancient matters built on the essentials of kabbalah, nevertheless they lend additional meaning to our own words, especially in light of the principle (which I will explain) that all the Sages aimed at the same result, as you shall see in the next chapter.

LAW OF THE SACRED OFFERING (1570)
PART III, 4: ON PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH

Moses Isserles

Since the last saying has made it necessary to speak of things which pertain to the eternal mysteries, namely the ways of kabbalah, I will not hide from the reader what is at the tip of my tongue,⁸⁰ but shall reveal to him my opinion in this matter. As God is my witness, I have greatly feared to speak of a matter on which I have received no personal tradition,⁸¹ namely the root-principle of belief in God, which is the peg on which everything hangs, and how shall I speak on this matter from my own reasoning? But I said, “it is a time to act for the Lord, for they have violated Your teaching,”⁸² (Psalm 119:126) For this generation has declined so far through its sins that I have never in my life seen a master kabbalist,⁸³ who knows this matter clearly from the genuine tradition. Indeed, many of the common people rush to learn about kabbalah because it is enticing, especially as to the authors of recent generations who revealed its secrets explicitly in their books, and even more so in this age when kabbalistic books like the *Zohar*, *Recanati*, and *Gates of Light* have been printed, so that every reader can look into them, and everything is explicit to those who take a peek. Never mind that their words cannot be understood properly by one who has not received the tradition from a master kabbalist! Not only do those with book-learning look into them, but even ordinary householders who don’t know their right hand from their left, who are in the dark when it comes to explaining the weekly Torah portion with Rashi, are jumping on the bandwagon to learn kabbalah. The end result is that this generation, orphaned in sin, is in such decline that a coin clattering in a jug

⁸⁰ Literally, “under my tongue.” The kabbalists understood the verse “Honey and milk are under your tongue” (Song of Songs 4:11) to mean that one should be reticent in discussing the divine mysteries. Isserles is clearly at the point of deciding how much of these mysteries he wants to discuss.

⁸¹ **ידיעה מקובלת**. Isserles admits that kabbalah presents itself as deriving its chief authority from personal transmission of tradition (**מקובל מפי מקובל**—one master kabbalist receiving directly from another), and that he cannot lay claim to this status, as his knowledge is derived only from books.

⁸² I.e., in a time of danger to the Torah, one may violate a small injunction (such as the prohibition on discoursing on secret mysteries without authority) for the sake of the greater good. (This follows the traditional midrashic interpretation of the verse: “When it is a time to act for the Lord, one *should* violate Your teaching.”)

⁸³ **מקובל**, i.e., one who has received the true tradition on genuine authority and has achieved mastery of understanding sufficient to impart it.

makes the biggest noise⁸⁴—whoever knows a little bit shows off and preaches in public, but someday will have to give an accounting. Indeed, ignorance is their saving grace. How blithely unaware is the naked ignoramus of the nature of the impossible! Nothing poses any difficulty to them. But the enlightened know that there are pitfalls in this area of thought, as Nahmanides wrote in the Introduction to his commentary on the Torah (and other early kabbalists concurred), that in the opinion of a few kabbalists, the sefirot are the essence of God, as many kabbalists hinted. The author of *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* (*The Divine Hierarchy*) expressed this at length at the end of Chapter 3, and Rabbenu Bahya wrote at the beginning of his book⁸⁵ on the name *Elohim*: “זכור את בוראֵיךְ with the extra *yod*—and the enlightened will understand their words.”⁸⁶ It is difficult to visualize such things in the mind, and Maimonides wrote (*Guide* I, 50) that true faith is what the heart can grasp, not the words one spouts without any corresponding mental representation.⁸⁷

Even though the kabbalists stretched themselves and used many metaphors to make things easier for the mind to grasp, that they are divine powers which were enumerated and became manifest at the time of creation without causing multiplicity [in the divinity]—for instance, they compared the process to a flame issuing forth from a coal, or a tree with its foliage—the matter still needs clarification, for it is impossible to describe it in purely rational and intellectual terms. It appears from their words that they are of the school who believe in the reality of the divine attributes, whether existing in God or apart from God. Maimonides alluded to [such as] them in the *Guide* Part I Chapter 51, describing their views at length. These views are far from rational. See how R. Issac ben Sheshet, in Responsum 157, complained about the kabbalists for this reason.

I saw the *Offering of Judah* (*Minhat Yehudah*)⁸⁸ on *The Divine Hierarchy* (*Ma'arekhet Elohut*), Chapter 3. He cited Rabbi Menahem Recanati, who demurred from the view that the sefirot were the divine essence, and said they are like the tools⁸⁹ with which a craftsman works. He wrote, “God forbid that they have body and soul, but they are like hues of light, and they are like the light which comes out of the eye,⁹⁰ for the light itself is nothing but the object

⁸⁴ BT Bava Metzi'a 85b. Ephraim Luntshitz will repeat this reference in the introduction to *Ornament*, indicating his distancing from the vulgar kabbalah.

⁸⁵ Bahya, *Commentary on the Torah*, Genesis 1:1.

⁸⁶ The *yod* indicates the plural number, implying that the sefirot are to be included in mention of the deity.

⁸⁷ I.e., those who spout kabbalistic phrases without understanding them, have accomplished nothing.

⁸⁸ *Offering of Judah* (*Minhat Yehudah*): Commentary of Judah Hayyat on the anonymous kabbalistic work, *The Divine Hierarchy* (*Ma'arekhet Elohut*), published 1558.

⁸⁹ “Tools”—כלים, instruments or vessels. No matter which way the word is understood, it indicates the doctrine that the sefirot are not of God's essence, but subsidiary entities that serve God.

⁹⁰ According to the then-prevalent theory that the process of sight involves emission of light from the eye and its reflection back from the seen objects.

apprehended by it which is captured in the representation of the mind, and the existence of that form in the human faculty of imagination.”⁹¹ Now this view is the opposite of that of the other kabbalists, amounting to a denial of the former. I decided not to voice the doubts that occurred to me in kabbalistic matters, for perhaps I was not understanding the kabbalists’ intentions at all, and I would thereby corrupt students of the subject by raising these doubts, especially if they were struck by the force of the doubts but did not accept my proposed solution of them. Better that they should approach the subject in all innocence, and they might experience no difficulty at all! Thus did Maimonides counsel, in *Guide* I, 34, that a student has many doubts raised when he studies quickly. He is quick to understand the difficulties, which tear down the structure, but the resolution of the doubts does not proceed without many steps in reasoning. Thus the one who pursues his inquiry without guidance is like the one who walks and falls into a pit without a planned route of exit, and dies. It would have been better for him if he were lame and could not walk in the first place! So, too, wrote Rabad in his critical glosses to Maimonides.⁹² Therefore I do not wish to expatiate on doubts which plagued me for a long time. I would rather rely on the enlightened reader who is well-read in both philosophy and kabbalah. If he has already experienced difficulty, perhaps he will find a remedy in my words. And if he finds nothing problematic, then fine and dandy! Whoever is not sick or ailing needs no physician to heal him. In any case, one may learn from my words how to refute the skeptic. And the enlightened—may keep silent.

As for the questions which the *Offering of Judah* raises in Chapter 3, I referred to Albo’s *Principles (Ikkarim)* II, 11, where he wrote that the separate intelligences are to be identified with the sefirot of the kabbalists. But he was mistaken, as is evident from the writings of those who believe that the sefirot are the divine essence, “which divide from there and become four branches.” (Genesis 2:10)⁹³ The same is clear from the responsum of Ribash which I mentioned. Therefore incline your ear to hear the words of the wise, and set your heart to my opinion.

I will start by saying that Maimonides philosophized a great deal in the matter of the divine attributes (*Guide* I, 60) and wrote that it is a principle of faith that God has no attribute super-added to the divine essence, but all the attributes refer back to one simple entity. He also wrote (I, 57): “Consequently, He exists, but not through an existence other than His essence; and similarly He lives, but not through life; He is powerful, but not through power; He knows, but not through knowledge. For all these attributes refer back to one notion in which there is no idea of multiplicity.” He wrote similarly in the *Book*

⁹¹ According to this view, the sefirot are analogous to the Platonic forms, mediating between God and created objects in the act of creation, and between the observer and the objects in the act of perception.

⁹² Rabad, glosses on Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance* 5:5.

⁹³ The four rivers branching from one source in the Garden of Eden is taken by the quoted kabbalists as a metaphor for the sefirot branching from the divine essence.

of Knowledge.⁹⁴ He also wrote in *Guide* III, 53 that the attributes of action are the correct ones with which to speak of God. Also (in I, 53): “It accordingly should not be regarded as inadmissible in reference to God, may He be magnified and honored, that the diverse actions proceed from one simple essence in which no multiplicity is posited and to which no notion is super-added. Every attribute that is found in the books of the deity, may He be exalted, is therefore an attribute of His action and not an attribute of His essence.” He also wrote (III, 20) that it is impossible to comprehend the nature of God’s knowledge, for His knowledge is His essence and His essence is His knowledge, for He has no attribute outside Himself, and just as it is impossible to comprehend His essence, so it is impossible to comprehend His attributes, as His attributes are His essence and they all refer back to one notion. He elaborated further in Chapter 53 how from one simple essence there can proceed multiple actions without entailing multiplicity of the divine essence.

I will therefore conjecture that the matter is similar in kabbalistic teaching, and even though it is possible that the matter is more involved than my conjecture, it is nevertheless profitable to develop the idea. It is well known that astronomers have operated by this method. They assume a theory to explain the planets’ movements, even though the postulates of the theory may not correspond to the realities of the heavens, as Maimonides wrote. (*Guide* II, 11) It seems to me that the notion I describe has some basis in the writings of a recent kabbalist, R. Asher, in his book *Valley of Blessing* (*Emek Ha-Berakhah*). It is known that the theory of the sefirot corresponds to the theory of divine attributes of action which the philosophers wrote about, namely the names which were created with the creation of the world (see *Guide* I, 61). This is similar to what is related in Midrash *Tanhuma* on Exodus 3:13:

Moses asked, ‘[When they ask me] “What is His name?” what shall I say to them?’ The Holy and Blessed One said to Moses, ‘Do you seek to know My name? I am called in accordance with My actions. When I judge mankind, I am called *Elohim* (God). When I wage war on the wicked, I am called *Tzeva’ot* (Hosts). When I suspend a man’s sins, I am called *El Shaddai* (God Almighty). When I sit in mercy, I am called *Rahum* (Merciful). This is how I am called in accordance with my actions. Go and tell them, “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, this My appellation for all eternity.”’

Now it is known that the kabbalists identified the issue of the sefirot with that of the divine names. Thus each name refers to a particular sefirah by which God governs the conduct of His world. All the names are equated to their respective sefirot, as the *Gates of Light*,⁹⁵ the *Divine Hierarchy*, and Recanati have written at length. Now if the divine names refer to the attributes of divine

⁹⁴ *Laws of the Fundamental Principles of the Torah* 1:10.

⁹⁵ *Gates of Light: Sha’arei Orach* of Joseph Gikatilla.

action (as per *Tanḥuma*), and also to the sefirot (as per the kabbalists), then the sefirot refer to the attributes of action.⁹⁶ Indeed, the sefirot are the divine powers and actions which became manifest in the context of creation. This is implied by the simile of “a flame issuing from a coal”—even though the flame is super-added to the coal, this does not imply that the emanation is the divine essence, but they were forced to draw an analogy with a material entity to convey what the ear could hear. The proof of this is that all the names which the kabbalists derived are names of the divine actions. For instance, the 32 “paths of wisdom” enumerated [in the *Book of Formation*] correspond to the 32 occurrences of the name *Elohim* in the creation narrative, in which God enacts these 32 paths of wisdom in so many actions. Thus the *Pesikta*⁹⁷ says that the Holy and Blessed One donned ten garments while creating the world. The kabbalists take this as an allusion to the ten sefirot, and it is obvious that the allusion is to the attributes of action through which God acted in creating the world. Similarly we find the saying, “By ten utterances the world was created,”⁹⁸ corresponding to the ten sefirot which are the attributes of action.

And we find in the *Zohar*:⁹⁹

The general principle: The ancient One and the Short Countenance—all is one. All is, was, will be. It did not change, does not change, will not change. If you ask, what is the difference between this and that? All have the same measure, but their ways part from the former, and judgment emanates from the latter. It is from our viewpoint that they differ. The secrets are not entrusted to us, but only to the reapers of the holy field, as it is written: “The counsel of the Lord is for those who fear Him.” (Psalms 25:14)

It is clear from this that there is no differentiation from the first sefirah to the last, not in past, present, or future, but all is one. The distinction is made from our side. The fact of their not being differentiated is only explicable if the sefirot are identified with the attributes of action. This is obvious to the enlightened. And the *Zohar* says at the end of Portion Terumah: “We have been taught that all this [differentiating of the Divine Personality] is from our side, and relative to our knowledge, and that on high, all is one and equivalent,

⁹⁶ ענין הספירות הם תוארי הפעולות. To say, “ענין X is Y” is a weak way of identifying the two (something short of **אין זו אלא זו**), yet the two are roughly in the same semantic domain—the one is the context for the other, or the two are different terminologies for addressing the same subject matter (as Isserles will say later on). Nevertheless, Isserles regards this association as sufficiently strong to support his central argument:

Names = attributes,

Names = Sefirot,

Therefore attributes = Sefirot.

Hence, philosophy and kabbalah speak of the same reality in different languages.

⁹⁷ See *Song of Songs Rabbah* 4:10.

⁹⁸ Mishnah Avot 5:1.

⁹⁹ *Zohar* III, 141a–b.

eternally unchanging, as it is written, 'I am the Lord—I have not changed.'" (Malachi 3:6) We also find many times in the Zohar that the sefirot are called "*Ein Sof*" (Infinite) and "the cause of causes," which is the name by which the philosophers call the First Cause.

We find further in the *Book of Tikkunim* (First Tikkun): "You are wise but not by any known wisdom. You understand, but not by any known understanding, etc." This is identical to Maimonides's "God knows but not with knowledge, lives but not with life, etc." It goes on:

There is no way to know You except to know Your power and might among mankind, and to apprehend how the world is ruled in judgment (*din*) and mercy (*rahamim*), in righteousness (*tzedek*) and equipoise (*mishpat*) in accordance with human deeds. Judgment is might (*gevurah*); equipoise is the central pillar; righteousness is holy sovereignty (*malkhut*); "scales of justice" are the two supports of truth; "a just *hin*" is the sign of the covenant. Thus we comprehend how the world is governed. But *din* is not ordinary justice, nor is *rahamim* ordinary equipoise, nor with the other attributes.

Here he explains that the sefirot refer to the variation in God's actions, but everything refers back to absolute unity and nothing additional is generated, either from the side of the emanator or the emanated, nor is there any change in the divine essence, for God is far above this, as it is written, "I the Lord have not changed." (Malachi 3:6) When the Zohar tells us¹⁰⁰ that this verse refers to the Cause of Causes, it informs us of its meaning, that the Cause of Causes does not change, but change comes about from the side of His actions, which do not bring about any change in His essence, as Maimonides elaborated and as will be demonstrated further.

I found a saying of a recent kabbalist in a commentary to the *Hierarchy* which will support this (Chapter 9):

Know that the attributes are predicates of a substance, and every accident must have a substance and the substance does not subsist in it, but it subsists by virtue of the substance. Therefore the philosophers distanced the attributes severely from God, but the kabbalists predicated of God attributes which do not imply addition, such as a sun and its rays, for the sun is called the "solar globe" or the "great light," and the light emanating from it is called "sun." It is known that the ray is not anything super-added to the solar globe. Thus the entity has two names, which refer to non-additive attributes.¹⁰¹ Similarly the kabbalists predicated non-additive attributes of God. The kabbalists called these attributes by the general name of "sefirot" (recountings), which is to imply that human reason recounts (*יספר*) the praises of God by means of these sefirot, which are non-additive attributes.

¹⁰⁰ Zohar III, 225a, *Ra'aya Mehemna*.

¹⁰¹ תוארים בלתי נוספים.

Here you have fully explicit, in this sage's words, that the sefirot refer to non-additive attributes and to attributes of action, such as the rays of the sun. You see how [the philosophic and kabbalistic] views correspond, for the philosophers also cited the analogy of the sun's rays in connection with the attributes (for instance, Maimonides in *Guide* I, 53). Similarly, Rabbi Simeon the Great¹⁰² in his prayer *Hadrat Kodesh* (*Beauty of Holiness*), after he expounded the doctrine of the sefirot, he said, "Blessed be the exalted God Who does a thing and its opposite as one, which from our side is called attributes, depending whether it causes us anger or pain, but every attribute is heard according to the ear's capacity, in a hint sufficient to the enlightened in knowledge." Look at the commentary on this saying, and you will understand what I wrote, and that this is the view of the true kabbalists.

The *Offering of Judah* also wrote:¹⁰³ "We the true believers predicated non-additive attributes of God, and they are the sefirot which include a thing and its opposite, for none of them has a definite attribute—such as, this for judgment and that for mercy—rather they are as the androgynous type, each possessing features of the other. Through them we can know God and be able to tell of His greatness and exaltation." Here the matter is explicit from the writings of the recent kabbalists, and from there we can judge the meaning of the earlier authorities.

Nevertheless, we find in the *Ra'aya Mehemna* (*Faithful Shepherd*) to Portion Pinḥas:¹⁰⁴

All His names are epithets by which He is called only by mortals. Therefore when a generation is worthy they call him YHWH referring to the attribute of mercy, but when a generation is guilty, they call him ADNY referring to the attribute of judgment. Each generation and each individual sees God in the light of its own attribute. We must not therefore infer that God has any specific attribute or known name, like the sefirah, *for each sefirah has a known name, attribute, boundary, and domain...*

This passage would imply that the names and sefirot are different entities, for the sefirot are definite powers. At any rate, do not depart far from those matters explained above, for even if this one passage is in disagreement, still you should follow the preponderant view, especially as we can reconcile this last passage with it as follows. Let us grant that the sefirot are definite general powers, and the names are individualized and indeterminate. This is because at the time of creation the ten utterances became manifest, and these are the ten modes of activity called sefirot, as was explained. These are the ten definite powers by which the world operates; there is not a day that these ten powers are not active in the world, for this is their set task, domain, measure

¹⁰² Here Isserles seemingly takes at face value the kabbalistic attribution of the Zohar to R. Simeon ben Yohai. I cannot find the text of this prayer in the regular part of the Zohar, nor any mention of the prayer *Hadrat Kodesh*.

¹⁰³ *Op. cit.*, Chapter 1.

¹⁰⁴ Zohar III, 257b.

and boundary. But the names are indefinite powers, varying as this or that generation or individual is deserving of judgment or compassion. Nevertheless, at bottom the sefirot and names refer to the same phenomenon, namely the actions of God in the world, nothing else. At the end of this chapter I will suggest another way to reconcile such passages as this one.

As Maimonides wrote, all the attributes refer to one notion, which is the divine essence, and they add nothing to it. It is impossible to grasp them, just as it is impossible to grasp what is God. The kabbalists wrote similarly, and warned against *kitzut* (splintering)¹⁰⁵ and *perud* (divergence),¹⁰⁶ to teach that everything refers back to perfect unity. It is known what Recanati wrote at the end of Portion Vayehi, and the *Gates of Light*, when they spoke of sefirot or *middot* (attributes)¹⁰⁷—“not to have one think that there was anything material or super-added, God forbid, but that this refers to the divine powers that were manifested, etc.”—and this expresses the truth of the matter. And Recanati wrote at the end of Vayehi: “For the matter of the *middot* is like that of the *to'arim*.” This clearly indicates their view that the *middot* and sefirot are the same as the attributes.

As for what the rabbis said, “Ten, not nine or eleven,”¹⁰⁸ this refers to a philosophical inquiry as to which attributes were worthy of predicating to God, and they disagreed, as we know from their writings.¹⁰⁹ The kabbalists, however, had a tradition that ten was the proper number, as it is a boundary number inclusive of the other numbers.¹¹⁰ The author of *The Divine Hierarchy* wrote that they enumerated ten because it corresponded to the modes of divine activity in the world. You should know that this is how one should understand the thirteen *middot*, for the kabbalists have written that these are the ten sefirot, discounting the initial “The Lord, the Lord, God,” which are proper names by which God is called. The initial duplication of YHWH can be explained as a sign of direct address, or in accordance with the midrash: “I am the Lord

¹⁰⁵ קיצוץ, presumably as in אחר קיצוץ בנטיעות (BT Hagigah 14b–15a). The conclusion of the gemara there is that Elisha ben Avuyah concluded erroneously from his observation of Metatron's prominence, that there were two powers in Heaven. Hence, the offence referred to here is presumably positing a multiplicity of divine powers, for instance, if the sefirot are conceived of as really existing apart from God, yet still truly divine.

¹⁰⁶ פירוד, as in the verse quoted earlier, משם יפרד והיה לארבעה ראשים. The kabbalistic interpretation cited there was that the sefirot were truly of the divine essence, yet branched out from it and became separate. The offence is presumably introducing multiplicity into the godhead, in violation of Maimonides's injunction that a God with plurality is no god at all.

¹⁰⁷ Attributes: here the terminology has switched to מידות, whereas Isserles's term for “attributes” in the prior part of the discussion was תוארים. The term מידות is the preferred rabbinic term, whereas תוארים is standard in the philosophical literature.

¹⁰⁸ *Book of Formation* 1:4.

¹⁰⁹ This assignment of a philosophical meaning to the formula “Ten, not nine, ten, not eleven” of *The Book of Formation* is of course pure conjecture on Isserles's part, and shows his identification of philosophy and kabbalah at one of its weakest moments.

¹¹⁰ Either because 10 is the base of the digital numeric system, or because it is the sum of 1 + 2 + 3 + 4(?).

before one sins, and I am the Lord after one sins and repents.”¹¹¹ “God” (*el*) signifies the sovereignty and power by which God directs the world. The ten remaining are the attributes of divine activity called “sefirot.”

Maimonides wrote on the avoidance of attributes proceeding to a second and third level in progressive depth. (*Guide* I 57–59) The deeper levels are avoidance of attributes that are commonly regarded as pertaining to the essence, such as the attributes “existing,” “wise,” “potent,” “one,” and “primordial.” Even these can only be predicated of God indirectly, by way of negation [of their opposites]. Similarly, the kabbalists singled out certain of the sefirot—especially the first three, which are not understood so clearly to be attributes of action, and might be regarded as pertaining to the essence. Therefore they veiled the matter somewhat in mystery, as one sees from their writings, and started counting from that point downward, which are more clearly attributes of action, as one can tell from their names, Lovingkindness, Power, etc.

Since it is well-known that there are seven days in the week, and on each day was revealed a new phase of creation and a new quality, therefore they matched the divine acts to the creative actions of those days, and assigned each day a unique quality. They also matched every righteous and holy person to a particular sefirah, in such sayings as “The Patriarchs are the Chariot,” etc. Whatever quality was pre-eminent in a particular righteous or holy individual, they said that he was its vehicle,¹¹² for the influence from above is according to the preparation that one makes for it from below, as is clear from the writings of Maimonides and the other philosophers.

... (*skip from 30a to 32a*)

The general principle that arises from all this—I do not pretend to explain all the doctrines of kabbalah in this work, but the general principle is what I have written, that the masters of kabbalah did not enumerate these sefirot and names, except as indicating the ways of the divine actions, which are the attributes of divine action postulated by the philosophers. They called the sefirot and divine actions “emanations,” inasmuch as the actions became manifest at the time of creation. At first was a hidden quality which was not manifest, but nothing was added or changed. It is not my intention to discourse now on the topic of the creation of the world, or to address the contention of the philosophers that this would involve a change of the divine will or the change from potentiality to actuality, for Maimonides and the other sages of Israel have already dealt with it at length, refuting the philosophers’ objections, as I will explain later, God willing. But it is my purpose in this chapter to remove the confusions which beset the discussion of kabbalah.

I will assert that it should be perfectly clear by now that the doctrines of kabbalah are identical with the true doctrines of a believing philosophy.¹¹³ Everything that the philosophers inquired and produced out of their demonstrative reasoning—that the exalted God exists, is one, is not a body or a force in a body, i.e. the whole agenda of philosophical theology—Israel received

¹¹¹ BT Rosh Hashanah 17b.

¹¹² אמרו שהוא מרכבתו. A chariot is after all a vehicle.

¹¹³ דרכי הקבלה הן בעצמן דרכי הפילוסופים האמתיים המאמינים.

from the Almighty at the giving of the Torah. Similarly, whatever finer points they established regarding the avoidance of divine attributes, and other matters associated with it (with the result that some considered it valid to describe God only by way of His actions, or negatively), so did the sages of Israel receive these matters through tradition (קבלה) in the doctrine of the sefirot. The kabbalists had the advantage over the philosophers, that they received the truth in its pristine state, and know matters that the philosophers never considered in their investigations. They know the ways of the divine qualities and their dissemination in the world, how they are associated with names, words, and letters, so much so that they can work their will by means of this knowledge. These are the ways of the names and their powers, which are in the hands of the people of Israel, having been passed down from Moses our Teacher (peace be his). Similarly they received the doctrines of the chariots and the supernal palaces, where are the servants who serve their Creator from whom all proceeds, whether good or evil. They received the names of those servants, which indicate their qualities and powers, and by means of this knowledge they had the power in their hands to use those names and crowns, which they received by way of prophecy, which is higher than human inquiry. All this is obvious to one who acknowledges the truth.

Know that—in accordance with what has been demonstrated—it is not relevant to speak of the sefirot in terms of “first,” “second,” etc. inasmuch as they are all actions of the deity, Who enacts them all from His simple essence. Therefore the kabbalists say, “Their end is fixed from their beginning,” etc.¹¹⁴ The enumeration of the sefirot as Wisdom, Understanding, etc. and calling them First, Second... is all a matter of imparting to the ear what it is capable of hearing, and in order to help people understand how the divine potencies are disseminated. Since that potency is so immense, so profound, so hidden (being expressible only in negative or indirect terms), they posited such an attribute as being “first,” as they had no other way to express it, nor could they express all the attributes simultaneously, but they could only enumerate them one at a time. So writes the *Offering of Judah* in the seventh chapter:

I also had support for this idea in the dictum of the *Book of Formation*, which says in a variant,¹¹⁵ “Ten sefirot of nothingness... One, the spirit of the living God, Two spirit from spirit, etc.” Examine, and you will find that it does not call them “first, second, third, etc.” for if it did, it would appear that they came one after the other. Rather it says, “two, three, four, etc.” to indicate that they are equal in existence, none preceding the others, or if there is an order of precedence it is in rank. Therefore it says, “two, three, etc.” to let us know their number.

Thus it is as I have explained.

¹¹⁴ *Book of Formation* 1:7.

¹¹⁵ “in a variant”—בברייתא. The text of *Book of Formation* 1:14 which the *Minhat Yehudah* now cites differs from the standard version in adding the numbers.

As for when they speak of Sefirah *Y* receiving effluence and continuance of emanation from Sefirah *X*, or of the channels [linking the sefirot]—this is all parallel to what the philosophers posit of the attributes. For it is well known that they demonstrated first by their convincing reasoning that God necessarily exists, from which it follows necessarily that He is One and not a body or a power in a body. The other attributes flow from this, for His being incorporeal rules out all the potencies and movements which pertain to corporeal beings. This also implies denial of [the reality of divine] attributes and whatever else pertains to this. The kabbalists similarly posited first a single sefirah from which follow necessarily the other divine actions and potencies, and the matter of the other negative attributes.

I will furthermore say that the Sages famously compared God to the human soul, as in the Talmudic passage, “‘Bless the Lord, O my soul’ (Psalms 103:1)—let the soul which has these five characteristics [praise God who has the same five characteristics].”¹¹⁶ You will similarly find that the *Zohar*¹¹⁷ compares God [‘s role in the world to the soul’s in] the body, and calls God “the soul of the world.” The same is agreed by the enlightened philosophers. [They draw the analogy that] just as the soul, though it is a unified, simple potency, displays various potencies—the intellectual, the vital, the natural—and from each flows additional potencies (the sensitive potency from the vital, the nutritive and the vegetative from the natural, etc.), so with these [divine] potencies, and these [relationships] are the channels of which the kabbalists spoke.

So did the *Ra’aya Mehemna (Faithful Shepherd)* explain in the portion Pinhas.¹¹⁸ Given that the creation of the world is a novelty against which every heretic and dissenter objects by reason of the change [it implies] in the divine will, and the other objections they raise concerning it, especially that it requires time prior to [the beginning of] time and motion prior to [the beginning of] motion, as Maimonides cited at length in *Guide II*, and as I will elaborate, God willing—the kabbalists posit that at the time of the creation of the world, the will to create the world arose by way of imagination as other [divine] actions, for every action arises in the divine thought and will to be activated. Then God represents the action in the divine mind, and afterwards He executes it. This is the meaning of the first three sefirot which the kabbalists posited. They posited first the will, wherein it arose in the divine will to create the world—that is the first sefirah. Next in the process of creation comes Wisdom, which is representation. Thirdly, all know the rabbinic saying, “*Understanding* means the ability to bring forth one thing from another.”¹¹⁹ Therefore in the

¹¹⁶ BT Berakhot 10a. The term for “characteristics” is דברים. Although four of the five in Berakhot are action-predicates, one (pure) is not. Needless to say, the rabbis were a lot less shy about speaking positively of God’s “attributes,” however one defines them, than the medievals.

¹¹⁷ *Tikkunei Zohar*, Tikkun 13.

¹¹⁸ *Zohar III* 257b, cited above: “All His names are epithets by which He is called only by mortals,” etc.

¹¹⁹ BT Hagigah 14a, Sanhedrin 93b. In its original context, this meant the ability to infer conclusions from logical premises.

sequence of creation, the potency and action which actualized the world was called Understanding. Afterwards the potencies were assigned to actions in accordance with how those actions were distributed in the world. Now these first three actions—Thought, Wisdom, and Understanding—correspond to past, present and future. But from the divine way of being, these are one, for time does not apply to God, nor was the world created in time. Thus God's creative actions are not subject to these considerations, but everything was created in response to God's so willing it, as it says, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made," (Psalms 33:6) meaning the divine will. I will explain later, God willing, when I speak of the creation of the world, how they said that these three potencies are one entity, but from there on down is the beginning of the edifice.¹²⁰

Perhaps, too, in the kabbalist's discussion of these three sefirot they alluded to the philosophical issue cited by Maimonides in the *Guide* I, 69. He says there that every effect has four causes, material, formal, efficient and final. The philosophers wrote that God is the efficient, formal, and final cause of everything.¹²¹ Maimonides went on at length there to explain how these three notions are one notion with respect to God. Therefore when the kabbalists wished to posit the ways of the actions emanating from God in the world, which actions were divided among the seven sefirot starting with Lovingkindness, they first posited the formal, final, and efficient causes, i.e., the above-mentioned potencies. Or they may have been referring to the three notions which the philosophers agreed on when they said that God is the intellect, and the knower, and the known, which are all one. Therefore they called these sefirot Wisdom and Understanding, which refer to intellect and knowing, while Crown refers to the essence of the known. Inasmuch as the action of God proceeds through His knowing Himself, they said that the Primal Artificer is Understanding. Indeed, I have found that the author of *Sefer Emunah (Book of Faith)*¹²² wrote that these three sefirot refer to the Knower, the Known, and the Knowledge, which is exactly what I have written. These are the ways I have found to explain this matter. In any case, it all reverts to that unity which knows of no separation or multiplicity.

Since the kabbalists have written at length, I wrote only the general principle which has been demonstrated, that the sefirot are the attributes of divine action, and there is no disagreement between the masters of kabbalah and the sages of the philosophers, except a difference in terminology. The one school calls them "sefirot" and the other calls them "attributes." Thus wrote R. Moses Botarel¹²³ in his commentary to *The Book of Formation*, that

¹²⁰ I.e., the sefirotic tree shows true differentiation only after the first three sefirot.

¹²¹ God cannot of course be the material cause, being incorporeal. This conveniently reduces the four relevant causes to three.

¹²² I have found no reference to such a book, not even in that comprehensive Hebrew bibliography *בית עקד ספרים*. Perhaps he means the book *האמונות* by R. Shem Tov b. Shem Tov, published 1556 in Ferrara?

¹²³ R. Moses Botarel (14th-15th century Spain) was criticized as a forger and messianic pretender. (Gershom Scholem in *EJ*, 4:1268-9) Nevertheless, his formulation,

the wisdom of the kabbalah is the wisdom of philosophy, only they speak in two languages. Even though some kabbalists seem to contradict this view—for some wrote that the sefirot are of the divine essence, and some wrote they are instruments through which the deity operates—nevertheless they all tend toward this view, for the attributes are in a certain respect the divine essence and in a certain respect the instruments of divine action. Henceforth you should be free of all confusion. You should not be bothered by the material descriptions which the kabbalists gave them, such as “hand,” “foot,” “eye,” “head,” and the like, for Maimonides already demonstrated in the *Guide* Part I that all these terms imply no corporeality, but can be interpreted in terms of the potencies and actions of God, and he explained it at great length. Recanati wrote similarly at the end of the portion *Vayehi*. This is the meaning of all the sages of the kabbalah, and if they were not clear on the point, we have explained it sufficiently here.

To be sure, the *Offering of Judah* quotes the Recanati as follows (which it appears from the context is not his own viewpoint):

However, the philosophers of our people have another view with regard to the qualities (*middot*) and attributes (*toarim*). This is their meaning, in short: that whenever Scripture ascribes qualities to the exalted, blessed Creator, it does not follow that He possesses those qualities, but He performs actions similar to those which we would perform if possessed of certain psychological motives; not that He (may He be exalted) possesses psychological characteristics, for the subject and its quality are two entities, i.e. subject and predicate, which can not in any way be the case of God. See how far their predicament has brought them, and out of good motive, for it is true that the exalted Creator can have no plurality. But know that they truly can have no portion in the mysteries of the Torah and the mysteries of our rabbis. It would be better if they left the mitzvot and explanations without explanation, than to give them an explanation which even schoolchildren know. See the *Guide* Part III, and you will understand the matter.

See how the hatred of some kabbalists for philosophers upsets the right order, to the point that they err in the views of philosophically-inclined thinkers such as the *Guide* and its followers. That is why they wrote as they did, piling argument on refutation, as is known, though it is not the purpose of this book to cite them in detail. That is why this sage wrote as he did, not knowing that he indicted himself in doing so. For it is true and certain that the view of the true kabbalists, who wrote that the sefirot are themselves the godhead, can only be construed in terms of the attributes, as we have explained, and in this manner it is possible to form a mental representation that reconciles a true sense of the divine unity with belief in the ten sefirot. But if you are

found in his commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah* in the 1562 edition of that work, provided for Isserles the perfect epitome of the latter's conception of the relation of philosophy and kabbalah.

satisfied with the view of this sage, that the sefirot are like instruments with which the craftsman works, and not the divine essence, and what you find in the writings of the kabbalists that such a divine name refers to attribute *X*, and such a one to attribute *Y*, means only that the Lord of all acts through them and by means of them—as he went on to say at length—there is no harm in that, since by either of these methods, the intention is to affirm the divine unity.

And since I see that the sage Recanati spoke of this as a matter of opinion and not received tradition, as appears from his lengthy discourse, I have formed the desire to differ with him and to write a different opinion on this, especially since I can base myself on other kabbalists who differ with Recanati's view, as I have shown.

And now it appears that from this dispute we proceed to a greater and deeper dispute. They on their side refer to the defect of which the kabbalists spoke. Thus writes the *Hierarchy* in Chapter 8: "When the thought ascends, the crown becomes the cornerstone, etc.—it is not a matter of diminution of potency, or diminution of sanctity and glory and separation by reason of the lower realms, when their deeds are not properly formed, God forbid, as many of the light-of-faith think because of the weakness of their faith in the words of our rabbis and the words of the kabbalists"—and he went on at length to show that the defect and deficiency are those of the corrupt children.

The *Offering of Judah* complained explicitly on this passage: "If it is the master's meaning that the crown does not receive the defect from Israel's sins, his honor stands; this is a philosophical idea but not a true view from the wisdom of the kabbalah. For what else is the humiliation of the wetnurse and the banishing of the mother, as it says, 'By your sins your mother was banished' (Isaiah 50:1)?¹²⁴ What is the spoiling which a person does when he commits sins, or the unification which he achieves when he performs mitzvot? All the reasons of the mitzvot are based on this principle. Surely, then, we must declare that our sins cause its defect, and similarly the whole structure, for the mother is separated from her children." He went on at length in this argument, piling on parables and citations from the *Zohar*, as you will find at the end of Chapter 8 of the *Hierarchy*. Now all of this is dependent on the first view of the sefirot, for whoever believes the sefirot are the divine essence could not entertain any other view than that of the *Hierarchy*, that it is impossible for humans to cause defect or spoiling of the sefirot themselves, but the defect is only that of the recipients. The author of the *Hierarchy* explains many midrashim and aggadot on this topic, in accordance with his view that the sefirot are the divine essence. But the commentator ignores all his explanations, for he prefers the second view, that the sefirot are like emanated light or instruments in the artisan's hand, therefore they can be subject to change and defect.

¹²⁴ This verse is quoted frequently in the *Zohar*. (I 22b, 27b, 237a, etc. and *Tikkunei Zohar* 6, 19, 21, 31, 56, etc.) The "mother" is the Shekhinah, which is demoted and alienated from the upper sefirot due to the sins of Israel.

Even though I cannot decide a matter on which I have no knowledge, I can still speak from my heart and say that the Holy and Blessed One rejoices in His works when they are perfect, and desires the sanctification of His exalted name, and guards against the profanation of His glory, as Moses indicated in his prayer when he said, “the nations who have heard Your fame will say, It must be because the Lord was powerless...” (Numbers 14:15). Similarly Joshua: “And what will You do about Your great name?” (Joshua 7:9) In that case, God desires His vindication and sanctification. But when Israel sin, they bring about punishment for their sins, by which reason the gentiles say that God has abandoned the earth, or that Israel’s punishment is by reason of God’s incapacity. In that case, the “wetnurse is humiliated,” i.e., they say that God’s actions are unjust, or that He is impotent to do the right and just. This is to impugn the works of God in a certain respect, to say that He does not like them. Thus the parable of the architect and the broker, who say that God is angry with them.¹²⁵ The anger is a figure of speech like the other figures mentioned in the Torah, and the other attributes, which come to indicate that a particular action is against the divine will. This is how the philosophers explained the attributes mentioned of God, and it is the correct way.

Know that Maimonides already wrote in *Guide* I, 29 that the expression in the Torah, “God was sad unto His heart”¹²⁶ (Genesis 6:6) means that God was angry with them because of their evil action. In Chapter 39 he wrote that “heart” as applied to God means the will. He also explained in Chapter 36 the meaning of “kindling of wrath” and “anger” as applied to God.¹²⁷ Therefore it seems that this is the very meaning of the rabbinic midrash using the parable of the architect, which goes as follows: “*God was sad unto his heart*—Like a king who had a palace built by an architect. He saw it and it displeased him. At whom should he be angry, if not the architect?” They spoke further in parable of a king who did business through an agent, and lost—at whom should he be angry, if not the agent?¹²⁸ Here the architect and agent represent the general administration by which the Holy and Blessed One administers His world. That is the “heart” which is identical with the divine will, as was shown. They said that it is against this that God issues complaint, indicating that the Holy and Blessed One cares about those who say that His works are not equitable. It is at this that He is angry, i.e. on their account, which should be clear.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ The reference is to *Genesis Rabbah* 8:3 (cited below).

¹²⁶ NJV “His heart was saddened.” However, the interpretations which follow imply a dichotomy between the subject and the object of the sadness, following a hyperliteral reading of the Hebrew וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים לִבּוֹ. Thus they try to answer: *at what* was God sad? At mankind, or at some aspect of Himself?

¹²⁷ Actually, in *Guide* I, 39 Maimonides discusses only the occasion of God’s anger in human action, namely idolatry. He defers the nature of divine anger to his discussion of the divine attributes (specifically, in Chapter I, 54).

¹²⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 8:3.

¹²⁹ The reader will be pardoned if Isserles’s point seems less than clear. We should first of all remark that Isserles (perhaps following other kabbalistic interpretation) has construed the parable of the architect and the agent in a novel sense. The plain sense

I am amazed at the *Offering of Judah*, that he has not attended to the words of the sage author of the *Hierarchy* in his interpretation of these midrashim. For truly the rabbis who authored this midrash spoke in the manner of the Torah, using human language to speak to the ear what it is capable of hearing. Even though he brought many supports from the Zohar and the *Tikkunim*, that corruption and spoliation are found in the sefirot of the structure, we can only think that the Zohar also spoke in human language, to impart to human beings that degree of understanding which is permitted to them. For there is as it were some defect and spoliation in the honor of heaven brought about by human sins, inasmuch as they cause it to be the case that God cannot act as He wills in His world, and God's name is profaned in His world, which is against the divine will. That is the meaning of "defect and spoliation" which accrues to God from His works. Maimonides wrote in *Guide* I, 46: "You will find that in the whole of the Talmud and in all the Midrashim the sages keep to the external sense of the dicta of the prophets. This is so because of their knowledge that this matter is safe from confusion and that with regard to it no error is to be feared in any respect; all the dicta have to be considered as parables, [and as a guidance conducting the mind toward one being.]"

It is also possible that all the kabbalists' words are true, and that these and those are equally the words of the living God. For it is clear in the Zohar on the Portions Bereshit and Terumah that there are two orders of being. Therefore it would appear that in the lower order (that of "creation [spoliation]") there is spoliation and defect, for there is found the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, and the potencies are crystallized to the point they achieve substance, as is explained in Portion Behar.¹³⁰ But in the upper order are found only potencies and divine attributes, and there is found no spoliation or separation or defect, God forbid, only the emanated potencies which are the divine essence, varying in accord with human actions. And in the Cause of Causes there is no alteration. Thus we can say that with respect to the lower order they said the sefirot have boundary and measure, as it says in the passage of *Ra'aya Mehemna* (*Faithful Shepherd*) which I cited at the beginning of this chapter. In this manner we can explain all the dicta which contradict each other on this topic. This will be clear to every thinking reader.

of the parable seems to be that God entrusted the management of earthly affairs to humankind, who let God down by acting badly; man is the architect or the agent. But Isserles's interpretation is in line with the theme he has developed, that human wrongdoing causes corruption of the sefirot (which is possible only if the sefirot are divine instruments, not the divine essence). Thus the architect and the agent stand for the sefirot entrusted with implementation of the divine will, which fail in their task and then become the objects of the divine anger. This involves him in the very crux of the mythic side of kabbalah, which is resistant to his attempts to translate it into philosophical clarity. Ephraim Luntshitz was probably dissatisfied with Isserles's explanation, for he would write in *Ornament* on Genesis 6:6 that all the commentaries had failed to give a satisfactory explanation of God's "regret." See above, Chapter 6, "Limits of Rational Explanation."

¹³⁰ Zohar III 109b.

It is also possible to say that the sages understood “God was sad at His heart” refers to some separate entity, such as the Intelligences or the angels, through whom God works His will in the lower world. Indeed, the Active Intellect, which is called Governor of the World, is called Architect, Agent, and Humbled Wetnurse, inasmuch as the effluence from exalted God is withheld from it on account of Israel’s sins, nevertheless with respect to God there is no defect, spoliation, or separation, God forbid!

The wise will gain more wisdom¹³¹ from this whole topic, to establish firmly the unity of the One, the Only, may He be exalted to all eternity without change, for Whose honor I have written all this, and may He in His great mercy grant atonement for all my sins and errors in His teaching, for the love and desire of which I have written this, and to confer benefit by recounting my slight and meager comprehension of the mysteries of its wisdom.

But I must reconcile with this view what they said concerning the Work of the Chariot....

¹³¹ Allusion to Proverbs 1:5.

THE *ROYAL GARMENT* (1603)
FROM THE INTRODUCTION

Mordecai Jaffe
(translation by Lawrence Kaplan)¹

I have divided this garment into three parts, all of which can serve as cloaks for the rabbis. I have arranged them in the following order: the first part is my commentary on the *Guide*; the second, my commentary on the *Laws of the Sanctification of the New Moon*, and the third part, my commentary on Recanati. For all the students of the “angels of God” who desire to enter in the *Pardes* and to ascend on the rungs of that ladder which is set erect upon the ground but whose head reaches the heavens knows that he must start at the very bottom, in the lowly condition in which he finds himself and rise up to the heights of the uppermost rung over which God is standing erect. And it is stated, “And behold the angels of God were ascending and descending.” First they ascend to understand all that which exists from the bottom to the top and afterwards they descend to bring down the [Divine] overflow to the world. And the order of study that I have set forth corresponds precisely to the order of the rungs of the ladder, i.e., the levels of reality from bottom up.

First one studies the speculative sciences dealing with nature, which encompass all of the sciences of this our lowly [sub-lunar] world, all of which are treated in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Afterwards one ascends and studies the science of astronomy which deals with the intermediate world, i.e., the world of the celestial spheres which contain all of the stars with the sun at their head as a king leading his troops, the moon as his deputy and the rest of the stars as his hosts. And after that he will ascend even higher on the rungs of the ladder and will enter into the *Pardes* of wisdom onto the road that leads straight away unto the house of the Lord [Beth-El], i.e., he will study the science of *kabbalah*. Then he will merit attaining the apprehension of the First cause, may He be blessed, who stands over them to maintain their existence and to guard them. And this suffices and understand this.

¹ From Lawrence Kaplan, *Rationalism and Rabbinic Culture in Sixteenth Century Eastern Europe: Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe's Levush Pinat Yikrat* (dissertation), Harvard University, 1975. This is a key text for Ephraim Luntshitz, cited in *Gleanings* II, 3 and *Ornament* on Genesis 1:1, 28:12. The citation in *Gleanings* (published 1590, the same year as the first volume of the *Royal Garment*) indicates that Jaffe and Ephraim probably shared ideas orally prior to the publication of their works.

LOVINGKINDNESS OF ABRAHAM (1577)

Abraham Horowitz

Horowitz's Introduction (First Edition, 1577)

Thus says Abraham, son of the humble saintly man, happy in all respects, from the house of Levi, Horowitz. When I set myself to learn and teach the *Eight Chapters* which the great master Maimonides arranged, searched out and composed before Tractate *Avot*, I labored in them and found many fine virtues, worthy characteristics and pure sayings contained in them, more estimable than beryl and onyx. As he was a man of broad intellect and great knowledge, he wrote in laconic style with little elaboration, relying on the understanding of the reader. But it is not easy for everyone to understand them, for most and perhaps all of the words of these chapters are based on philosophical foundations, and whoever does not know its nature will find them as a dream without interpretation, and have no advantage from them, but only a deficiency. Therefore I thought it good to compose a commentary and explanation on these chapters, for use of those young men, knights of learning, that class of youths who are not experienced in walking the ways of philosophy, for the pride and glory of youths is in Mishnah and Gemara, in pilpul and argument, not in large ambitious subjects, philosophical proofs or propositions. For them I have stuck in my head and endangered my soul to make a short commentary in clear style, easy not hard, until these Eight Chapters combined with their introductions should be available and a topic of learning in the mouth of everyone, so that if someone ask him something concerning them he will not stammer but will respond immediately from my commentary. This will count in my merit, and the public will be in my debt because from now on the youth will not have to hear the Eight Chapters from his teacher between the semesters as has been the case in recent years, but he will see with his own eyes that my commentary will be sufficient to serve his needs.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Introduction to the "Eight Chapters"

Thus says Samuel ben Judah Ibn Tibbon: This is the treatise—*Treatise of the Fathers*—well-known in the "Saving Order" [*Nezikin—Torts*], arranged between Idolatry and Authority, without gemara. The great Master Rabbi Moses son of Rabbi Maimon (of blessed memory) wrote his commentary on it in Arabic together with his commentary on the six orders of the Mishnah which is all in that language. He wrote expansively on this treatise since it was of a precious topic, as it speaks of human attributes, some laudable and upright, others

lowly and perverse, of which the better ones clear the way (1) and pave the highway to the intellectual virtues, as the sage [king Solomon] said, "Listen to advice and accept discipline in order that you may be wise in the end." (Proverbs 19:20) And through the intellectual virtues the student will attain to knowledge of his Creator, as the same sage said concerning wisdom, "If you seek it as you do silver and search for it as for treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God." (Proverbs 2:4–5) To explain: seeking and searching for wisdom as if for silver and treasures indicates a search conducted with diligence and supreme application. Whoever searches in this manner will doubtless find and attain his objective. "Then you will understand..." indicates understanding the proof of the Torah's doctrines, which constitute the fear of the Lord. They were merely accepted on trust prior to the pursuit of wisdom, but through wisdom one will know their truth and what is desired from them. I am speaking of the existence of God, i.e., that one will know the existence of God by demonstration, not just by tradition as they were prior to his pursuing wisdom. And the knowledge of God is doubtless the end-goal of human existence, as the blessed prophet said, "[Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the strong man glory in his strength; let not the rich man glory in his riches.] But only in this should one glory: in understanding and knowing Me, that I the Lord act with kindness, justice and equity in the earth, for in these I delight—declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:22:23)

Even though Maimonides interpreted this verse well in the *Guide of the Perplexed* III, 54, and came up with a novel insight more precious than gold and crystal in his interpretation of the phrase "in the earth,"¹ there is an alternative available to some of his words, namely on the words "for in these I delight."² I have a novel understanding of these which I commend as good and true, and likewise on the phrase "justice and equity" I have an interpretation which I offer as preferable to that of the true and blessed sage. Whoever sees both will choose whatever he likes, for the one does not intellectually exclude the other.

I saw fit to mention my novel idea in this introduction so that, though short, it should not be barren of new insight. It is that the object of "for in these I delight" is the phrase, "understanding and knowing Me." He gives the reason why these two things, rather than the three mentioned in the previous verse [worldly wisdom, strength, and riches] are more worth glorying in: because these two (understanding, and knowing God) are the object of God's delight and His desired purpose from the human species, and not the three

¹ Maimonides understood from the word בארץ ("in the land/earth") that this verse meant to refute the Aristotelians, who held that divine providence held sway only in the celestial realm.

² Maimonides understood "for in these I delight" to mean, it is God's purpose that mankind should perform works of justice and equity. By "that I the Lord act with kindness, etc." he understood that the content of human knowledge of God should not be of God's essence, but of God's moral actions in the world.

others, though they may be in all or part contributory to that purpose. It is self-evident that whoever arrives at God's purpose, may congratulate himself on that achievement.

The prophet refers to "understanding" and "knowing [God]" as to two different things, for in my view they do not refer to one object in synonymous fashion (such as "understanding [God] and knowing [God]"). Such synonymous redundancy is used little by the sages. Therefore I interpret them as referring to two different matters. The word "understanding" stands alone and does not refer to "Me." Its meaning is that one should understand whatever is possible to understand and to know, in all existent beings that are the product of causation, (2) knowledge of existence [of something] through its cause insofar as is possible, or knowledge of [its] existence alone where one cannot know more than this. In other words, one should acquire whatever one can of wisdom, and through this one will know Me. The notion of arriving from one's intellect and wisdom of created beings to knowing Him—i.e., knowing His existence and knowing what one should affirm or deny or negate of Him by way of belief—is identical with the notion of "then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God" as I explained it above. As for the "wise man" referred to in the preceding verse ("let not the wise man glory in his wisdom"), this refers to one who possesses the good virtues just for their own sake, as Maimonides said in his interpretation.

Selection from Horowitz's Commentary

(1) Clear the way: For a person does not come to attain the intellectual virtues unless he has already forsaken despicable deeds and chosen good deeds. As the philosopher said: "In a place where deeds do not go properly, contemplation will not be perfect." [1577 edition adds: And as he himself³ said in the book *רוח חן* Chapter 3, that the practical reason is like a ladder from which to ascend to the rungs of contemplation, etc.]⁴

(2) ...in all existent beings that are the product of causation (**העלולות הנמצאות**). All of creation is called this, since they are caused and emanated from the blessed Creator, who is their Cause, for He created and formed them, and they are all the work of His hands in which to glory. R. Samuel says that the word **השכל** means that one should comprehend with his intellect the nature of all existent beings which are produced through causation, such as the heavens, and the super-heavens, and the array of the spheres,

³ The reference is apparently to the book *רוח חן* by Judah Ibn Tibbon, published several times from 1544 onward.

⁴ The added portion indicates Horowitz's agreement in 1577 with Maimonides's view in *Guide* I, 2 and III, 51 that intellectual contemplation of truth stands higher than moral behavior in the hierarchy of human purposes. By 1602 Horowitz renounced that view, along with the view (indicated in the next boldface section) that human immortality consists in union of the acquired intellect with the Active Intellect.

their processions and their number; the earth and all that is on it; the four elements and everything that is in them; how the entire world was created, the arrangement of its various parts, and its end-goal; [1577 edition adds: what is the soul, and whether the soul of man is immortal, and by virtue of what will man merit eternal existence, whether through contemplation or through deeds, and to what will the soul cleave after death, whether to the Active Intellect or to the blessed God]. All these and similar inquiries are called the science of Physics, which is identical with *The Work of Creation*,⁵ while the principles and axioms for understanding the knowledge of God are called the science of Theology⁶ which is *The Work of the Chariot*. Without physics, one cannot enter the Pardes of theology, as Maimonides wrote in his Introduction and in Part I, Chapter 33.

⁵ The identification of physics with *Ma'aseh Bereshit* (the study of the work of Creation) and metaphysics with *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (the study of the work of the Chariot) was made by Maimonides in *The Book of Knowledge* [*Sefer Ha-Mada'*] 2:11 and 4:10, and the *Guide*, Introduction, and was accepted as standard by his interpreters.

⁶ Also called Metaphysics in the philosophical tradition.

DEEDS OF THE LORD (1583)
PART I: NARRATIVES OF CREATION

Eliezer Ashkenazi

From Chapter 2

The first lesson addresses the question which every enlightened reader will raise concerning creation: It is told in our Torah that it indeed took place in seven days, which appears, God forbid, as if the blessed Creator needed to act in time, as is the case with man. Indeed, the rabbis asked, regarding the ten utterances of Creation: Could not the world have been created with a single utterance?¹ As for their answer (“to give ample reward to one who sustains the world that was created with ten utterances”), it fails to provide a reason, why ten and not more or less? It would appear that their intention in not addressing the question of the specific number, was to imply that since the world is sustained by our Torah of ten commandments, therefore the world was created by ten utterances. We explained in Chapter 24 on the Exodus, that there were ten plagues because Pharaoh denied the creation of the world and said, “Who is the Lord? I do not know the Lord.” Therefore he was struck with ten plagues corresponding to the ten utterances of creation.

Returning to the issue of the Sages’ asking, could not the world have been created in a single utterance—one might ask why they did not phrase their question, could it not have been created in a single instant? The objection would then have been stronger, why something that could have been created in a single moment was created in seven days, which is several thousands of moments, as compared with ten-to-one in the matter of utterances. But we can reconcile it on the basis of our assumption, that God first created hylic matter in an instant, but once that matter was created, a time was then required for bringing the first form from potentiality to actuality, equal to the period of the diurnal sphere. You should not ask why the Holy and Blessed One did not create all creatures from hylic matter in one instant, any more than you should ask why a pregnant woman does not give birth at once but only after nine months. Simply, God determined for each of the substances the lawful time that it should take to bring its product from a state of potentiality to actuality—this one in a day, that one in a week, the others in a month, or a year, or several years. So, too, God determined that hylic matter should yield its product corresponding to each utterance in one day. Furthermore, the creative activity of hylic matter with respect to each of the created beings was not

¹ Mishnah *Avot* 5.

localized in one part of the globe. There is good evidence for this principle in the case of the heavenly lights. In order for their creation to be complete, for the stated purpose of providing light to the earth, the dissemination of that light could not take less than a day, inasmuch as it is the diurnal sphere which carries it from east to west, around the whole world, which is then lit by it. By analogy, it is reasonable to suppose that all the creative actions of hylic matter were disseminated throughout the world by the rotation of the diurnal sphere. The case is similar to a cook who wishes to season a casserole. Intending for the spice to be spread evenly throughout the dish, he adds the seasoning at one spot and then stirs the ingredients thoroughly, then adds the next seasoning [and stirs, etc.]. So, too, was the action of the hylic matter by the decree of the Creator, spreading each new creation throughout the world in the course of a day. But God's action in making the hylic matter took place in a single instant and a single moment. This is very advantageous to us, for there is then no place to ask, why did He not create the world in an instant? The creation of hylic matter did take place in a moment, at the first instant. Thus did God create everything instantaneously, not in elapsed time as is the case with human activity.

The second lesson flows from our prior assumption, that God first created hylic matter, from which were generated all creatures in heaven and earth. The difference is this. Suppose, like Abravanel, that the creation of hylic matter is a superfluous assumption. You will see, that is his implication, when he declares it is a reproach to God's omnipotence to say he created the particular things from hylic matter, for God is surely capable of creating each and every thing *ex nihilo*! But he is unable to counter the objection, why Scripture states that God created animals from the earth ("let the earth bring forth living creatures, etc."). Thus he did not create animals *ex nihilo*. Why, moreover, did He command humanity, "Be fruitful and multiply," and did not bring forth a fully populated world such as we have today in one day from nothing?

But you, discerning reader, open your eyes and see, how much more perfect is God's law, i.e. the law of His power [on our assumption]! For if we were to assume that God created each particular *ex nihilo*, then we attribute to Him only the power to make something out of nothing. It adds nothing to one's glory if He can make one thing out of nothing, or a thousand things out of nothing. But our assumption adds greatly to God's glory, by saying that God had the power to make hylic matter out of nothing, and to invest it with the potential to take on any form and divest itself of those forms to take on others. By our assumption, hylic matter was able to take on the form of earth, and to invest the earth with the potential to bring forth living creatures. This testifies to the greater glory and greater perfection of God.

Our assumption has the advantage of implying that God created everything in one "utterance," by creating hylic matter, and invested it with the power to take on and discard all forms without reverting to its prior state. When a potter takes clay and makes a four-sided pot from it, if he wishes to divest it of the four-sided form and remake it into a three-sided pot, he must break the four-sided pot and crumble it to earth, then make it three-sided. It is a tribute to God's power, that He made all things from hylic matter but can

transform them from one form to another without returning them to their original state. Thus He made vegetation and animals from earth [not directly from hylic matter].

The third lesson deriving from our assumption, is (as you already know, for our faith is true) that the Holy and Blessed One gives eternal reward to the righteous in infinite measure also to the body, but the mouth having declared this, reason is very perplexed how to represent it...

DEEDS OF THE LORD (1583)
PART II: NARRATIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Eliezer Ashkenazi

Chapter 21: The Binding of Isaac

“The Lord tested Abraham.” Nahmanides commented: “The matter of ‘trial,’ in my opinion, is the following. Man has absolute freedom to do something or not to do it. It is called ‘trial’ from the side of the one being tried. But from the side of God who tries him, God commands the person to bring something from potentiality to actuality, so that the person may have the reward for a good deed, not merely the reward for a good intention. Know that ‘the Lord tests the righteous’—when He knows that the person is righteous and will do God’s will, then God, wishing to confer merit on that person, commands him in the matter of the trial. But God does not test the wicked, who would not obey. You will find that all the trials in the Torah are for the benefit of the one being tried.”

...
[100b] Gersonides commented concerning the matter of the trial: “God has relinquished control from His hand and entrusted it to the human being himself. God’s knowledge does not determine, but it is like the knowledge of the astrologers who know what potentially may occur, given the circumstances of an individual. It is known that every incident, small or large, that befalls man, was entrusted by God to the powers of the astral bodies; however, God gave man the faculty of reason to strengthen him, so that he may escape from the influence of the astral body. That is the power which is given to humans, to know good and evil. God knows the power of the astral body and its degrees, whether there is power in the person’s intellect to free him of its influence or not; but this knowledge is not a decree.” Ribash cites Gersonides and Rabad in his *Responsum* 118, and then gives his own opinion as follows:

But this is how I see fit to respond to this question. We must necessarily believe that man has freedom of choice over his deeds, to fulfil the commandment of the Torah and merit its recompense, as it says explicitly in the Torah, “See, I set before you this day [life and prosperity, death and adversity...]—Choose life.” (Deuteronomy 30:15–19) We should similarly believe that God’s knowledge encompasses everything that man will do with his choice before it becomes actualized, for we should not impute any deficiency to God’s knowledge, God forbid. But His knowledge does not determine the outcome; for once we have assumed that man has free will, it is then possible that he will do the opposite. Thus, when God knows that person *A* will do deed *X*, God knows he will do it of his own free will, and that it is possible for him to do the opposite. Thus, God’s

will does not determine the outcome. For God's knowledge comprises the proposition that the person will do this of his own free will. If that knowledge were determinative, then it would be knowledge of truth and falsehood combined together, which is impossible. We therefore say that the person's deed does not derive from God's knowledge of it before it is actualized, but rather God's knowledge is derived from the human deed, done freely under the condition of the possibility of acting in opposite manner, even though God knows it before it is actualized. In this way man remains free and God's knowledge remains whole without any deficiency, without depriving man of his freedom.

We must also not ignore what Maimonides wrote in the *Guide* III, 20 on the matter of divine knowledge: "‘For now I know’ should be understood in the sense of ‘I have made known to humankind...’" I will not quote his words at length, for they are well-known. But the gist of his words concerning divine knowledge is that God's knowledge is not like our knowledge, and there is no way for us, given our knowledge, to understand the divine knowledge. He brought support for this from the verse, "Your ways are not My ways, etc." Indeed, it is obvious to any thinking person that God's knowledge is not like our knowledge, for His knowledge is His essence, but our knowledge is an accident in us, so how shall we grasp through our accidental knowledge His knowledge which is His essence? However, we should not on this account abandon the effort to inquire concerning that in our doctrine which is difficult to conceptualize. For if God's knowledge is determinative, then there is no choice or free will, yet the Torah proclaims, "choose life!" On the other hand, if God's knowledge is not determinative, then we impute deficiency to the manner of His knowledge. And if you say we ought not to inquire in this matter, you withhold inquiry concerning all the perfections which are to be attributed to Him. As for the verse which Maimonides brings in support, "your ways are not My ways," it does not imply that we should not inquire into the divine ways. On the contrary, Scripture says "you shall walk in His ways," and "happy is the person who walks in His ways." Rather, the purpose of the verse is to express that God is not fickle or unreliable like human beings, as the passage continues: just as the rain does not fall in vain without fructifying the earth, so God's word does not come back unfulfilled.... But it is certainly valid to infer God's ways from our own ways, even though they are very unequal and different, inasmuch as the Torah has said, "You shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:22)¹ In that case, it is clear that God must have given us the knowledge whereby we may know this. Even if our knowledge is not on

¹ Actually, Eliczer claims that the Torah says, "You shall know the Lord your God." This phrase is not found as such in the entire Bible. Moreover, the phrase, "You shall know the Lord" is found in the Prophets, not in the first five books. However, Eliczer may have in mind Deuteronomy 4:39: "Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other." No wonder Maharal complains (of the "some of the faithful" whose opinion has something to recommend it): "They have even garbled their textual sources" אף כי בלבלו הכתובים (*Prodigies*, p. 6).

the same level as God's knowledge, is it not *our knowledge* that tells us they are unequal? Now if we can grasp through our knowledge that our knowledge is inferior to God's knowledge, we may also hope to know, if God's knowledge is determinative and incompatible with free will, how does the Torah come to command "choose life"? In that case, our inquiry is not to know the essence of the divine knowledge, but it is to know the command which He has commanded us to choose life, and how we are to choose. For if God's knowledge is (God forbid) not determinative,² then our knowledge would be superior to His. For it would not be called knowledge in us to make a claim of something that was not true; how much more so, then, His knowledge, which is knowledge of necessary truth! If you say we should not inquire into this issue because God's knowledge is unlike ours, then you introduce great confusion into matters of the Torah. Furthermore, it would follow that we ought not inquire into God's providence or potency or any of the perfections attributed to Him, since His perfections are not similar to ours.³ Maimonides himself wrote in *Guide* III, 17 concerning providence, that he did not believe that it was through God's providence that the spider kills the fly. But without a doubt it is fitting and proper for us to inquire in accordance with the knowledge that God gave us, to resolve whatever we can, and this redounds to the praise of God, Who is praised by the angels on high and has chosen the legions below. One ought not limit any inquiry concerning God's dealings in the present. However, it is proper to limit inquiry concerning what happened before the creation of the universe, and this is what the verse alludes to when it says, "My face⁴ shall not be seen," from which the rabbis derived the prohibition of inquiring what was above and below, what was before and after.⁵ However, the end [of days] was revealed to Moses, of whom it was said, "You shall see my back" (as I shall explain in the proper place, in Part IV of this work, with God's help).

I have now brought whatever has been said concerning God's knowledge and the resolution of this confusion. Remember and take to heart what

² Here, Eliezer seems to argue for the determinative nature of knowledge in the minimal logical sense: "If Reuben knows X, then X must be true." This does not claim that Reuben's knowledge of X *causes* X to be true, but only that "X is true" is a condition for "Reuben knows X" to be true. For if X is false but Reuben claims X is true, then Reuben is mistaken, and his claim to knowledge is invalidated. If this is true for Reuben, how much more must it be true for God! This argument is taken straight from Gersonides's *Wars of the Lord*, Book III.

³ This is indeed the conclusion that Maimonides draws when arguing for the *via negativa*. But Maimonides then goes on to discuss God's providence, etc. in *Guide* III. Eliezer sides with Gersonides, that we can concede that God's attributes differ from ours as the perfect differs from the imperfect, but that it is still possible for us to speak sensibly about them within our limited purview.

⁴ פני is etymologized as referring to what happened לפנים, i.e., prior to some starting-point (cf. "fore," "before," "forehead"). The double meaning of אחר as referring to what comes temporally or spatially after, is duplicated in the English "aft" or "posterior." Eliezer here follows Maimonides. (See *Book of Knowledge* 1:10, *Guide* I, 54.)

⁵ Mishnah *Hagigah* 1:1, BT *Hagigah* 12b. However, the Talmud does not derive the teaching from this verse.

Maimonides wrote in the Guide I, 50: “Know, you who read this treatise, that belief is not the matter uttered by the mouth, but the matter conceived in the mind, when someone affirms that as he conceives it in his mind, so it truly is. If you consider it sufficient, regarding true opinions or those regarded by you as true, to verbalize them without thinking through in your mind what they really mean, much less the grounds for believing them, you take the easy way out.”⁶ This pronouncement of Maimonides is quite correct, that belief does not consist in mere verbal utterance. It seems David was saying the same thing when he said, “I believed when I said, I am greatly afflicted, I said in haste, all men are deceitful.” (Psalm 116:10) Having said, “I shall walk before the Lord in the land of the living,” which is an affirmation of faith in eternal reward, he said further, “I believed when I said,” i.e., though it may be the case with other people that they say with their mouths “I believe thus and such” and think that this utterance constitutes belief, I am not that way, but I really believe what I say, i.e., when I say something, I have already conceived it clearly in my mind. But “all men are deceitful” when they say that they believe something and think this verbal affirmation constitutes belief. But that is false, for things are not that way.

And so, discerning reader, consider the thing I will tell you in this chapter, for it is profound in the understanding but perfectly simple in its truth. It is that with respect to all the perfections found in the Blessed Creator—whether individual providence, or potency, or performing judgment on the human kind, or knowing hidden and future things—all perfections such as these, of which some are principles and foundations of the Torah, and some are perfections that one must attribute to God—they said concerning all these that inasmuch as they are true articles of faith, every believer ought to believe in them. You will see that Ritba, in his commentary to Maimonides’s *Sefer Ha-Mada’*, wrote that the philosophers advanced solid proofs for God’s existence, unity, and incorporeality, whereas for the fourth principle—namely, the world’s creation—they were of divided opinions and could not demonstrate it philosophically, therefore we should accept it from tradition. He wrote that the proofs for the first three principles are very lengthy and require many steps. He cited a few proofs on whose grounds it is plausible to believe in the world’s creation and the other assertions pertaining to God. I do not think it is merely a matter of belief that we make these affirmations concerning God. You know that belief is not identical to knowledge. It is a misuse of language to say, “I believe that the [celestial] sphere rotates,” since it is visibly the case. Similarly, the term

⁶ Eliezer uses this pronouncement of Maimonides against Maimonides himself. Maimonides wrote it in the context of divine attributes, saying that those who affirmed the reality of divine attributes had not thought through the implication, that such an affirmation implied a kind of polytheism or denial of divine unity. Eliezer suggests that Maimonides is guilty of the same thing, when he affirms that God knows our acts before we perform them, yet we have free will, and defends the inconsistency by taking refuge in our ignorance of the nature of divine knowledge. If we are ignorant of what is divine knowledge, then we lack a clear mental conception of the very thing we claim verbally to be affirming.

“belief” does not to apply to anything that can be proved. Whoever says, “I believe that God exists” will not be counted among the astute, but he should say, “I know that God exists.” Similarly, Maimonides wrote⁷ that it is the foundation of foundations to know, not to believe, that there is a God. Also the Torah does not say “You shall believe in the Lord your God,” but “you shall know the Lord your God.”⁸ As for what it says, “The Israelites had faith in the Lord and His servant Moses” (Exodus 14:31), this was said in praise of them before they had actual knowledge.⁹ As for what it says, “And how long will they have no faith in Me” (Numbers 14:11), the meaning is not that they denied God’s potency, but that they had no faith that God would wish to exercise it on their behalf, as it says elsewhere, “because God hated us.” (Deuteronomy 1:27) Similarly, what it says, “Because you did not trust me enough to affirm My sanctity” (Numbers 20:12) did not mean that Moses and Aaron did not believe in God’s power, but they did not believe that God would be willing to bring water from that rock, as I explain in Part IV, Chapter 28. As for what it says, “And in this matter you have no faith in the Lord” (Deuteronomy 1:32)—it means that they did not believe that God would help them, though they had seen all the signs which He had done for them, as the text spells out—“who goes before you on your journeys, etc.” [so that “faith” applies to] the divine favor. [But the existence of] God is a matter of knowledge, not of faith-without-knowledge, except for the masses who do not attempt to grasp it because their minds are incapable of it.

I therefore say to you that just as it has been rationally demonstrated that God is the First Cause of all existent things, so it is also rationally demonstrated that whatever is a perfection and not impossible can be predicated of God.¹⁰ For since a person who has knowledge has discovered and grasped what is perfection by its nature and what is deficiency, it must necessarily be the case that whoever gave him that insight and discernment shall possess all those perfections. For how shall the insight and discernment of what is perfection come to a person, if that perfection does not exist in reality?¹¹ For inasmuch as God brought about that discernment in man that he should recognize what is to be called perfection, it follows that that perfection should have existence, and if not in God, then it does not exist at all. This is what David said in brief words: “Shall He who implants the ear not hear, He who forms the eye not see? . . . He who instructs men in knowledge?” (Psalms 94:9) This renders explicit our argument, that since God instructs men in knowledge, it follows

⁷ In the opening to *Book of Knowledge*.

⁸ Probably referring to Deuteronomy 4:39: “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other.”

⁹ The remark is interpreted as referring to the Israelites’ state of mind before the Red Sea split.

¹⁰ If only human reason could agree what constitutes perfection! The subjective determination of “perfection” is the Achilles heel of Eliezer’s argument.

¹¹ Eliezer follows a Platonic epistemology, according to which mental entities have real existence.

that whatever man grasps through his knowledge to be perfection by its nature, is certainly found in God, for He taught man the idea. Similarly, whatever man grasps by his knowledge to be a deficiency by its nature, God is free of that deficiency, inasmuch as He taught man to recognize it as a deficiency.

By analogy, when a father teaches his son the nature of a perfection, he will surely not teach him a perfection that has no existence. "Who instructs men in knowledge" is an answer to the heretic, who will argue: "In that case, should not the one who implants a mouth also eat?" Therefore the psalm says, "Who instructs men *in knowledge*," i.e., so they can distinguish between what is a perfection by its nature and what is a deficiency. Thus it becomes clear and obvious to you that whatever is a perfection by its nature is found in God, and this is not a matter of mere belief to you, but of knowledge. But as for knowledge of hidden matters and knowledge of the future, etc.—who ever gave man knowledge to think that knowledge of the future is a perfection? Here you have it clearly that whatever is possible to man to think is a perfection, must be found in God, and we know this through rational knowledge, not through faith-without-knowledge, as some think. I have cited all this to you, my son, so that you should conceive all these matters in your mind in fullest detail. If you cannot form a clear conception of them, do not fool yourself into thinking that verbal assent will suffice.

I will now say to you what can be said of this matter in the briefest terms, and you should conceive them in your mind. When we say that God cannot make another equal to Himself—and similar impossibilities—it is not counted a deficiency in His potency because the notion of "potency" does not include doing the impossible. Similarly, it should not be counted a deficiency in His knowledge if we say that since He created man knowing him to be free-willed, God's knowledge does not apply to that which man has not yet done. For if it were to apply to it, then this knowledge would contradict the original knowledge, that God knew in creating man that he would be absolutely free-willed. In my opinion, that is Ribash's true meaning, even though he did not formulate it in these words.¹²

Although I have not achieved fully satisfying clarity on all these matters, nevertheless it appears that after full study and thinking through the issues, the confusion over which the moderns struggled and the ancients agonized will be dissipated in a fitting manner. We must first of all assume what must by now be clear to every thinker worth his salt: that God is free of all deficiencies and possessed of all perfections within the realm of the possible. There is furthermore no doubt that knowledge is a perfection for the knower, wherefore it is not proper for us to deny God knowledge in any way, since denying Him knowledge would be denying Him perfection. It is further evident, as

¹² This is quite a stretch. Ribash affirms Maimonidean compatibilism, maintaining that divine foreknowledge and human free will are both true and do not contradict each other. Eliezer simply infers from Ribash's affirming free will, that Ribash supports his view, and force-reads the passages of divine foreknowledge to limit them to probabilistic prediction.

Maimonides wrote in the *Guide* III, 20: "A matter concerning which there is a general consensus is that it is not true that new knowledge should come to Him, may He be exalted, so that He would know now what He did not know before."¹³ We shall further assume as known and unanimously agreed by all believers, in the matter of divine providence, that (as Maimonides wrote in *Guide* III, 16):¹⁴

As for my own belief with regard to this fundamental principle, I mean divine providence, it is as I shall set it forth to you. In this belief that I shall set forth, I am not relying upon the conclusion to which demonstration has led me, but upon what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God and of the books of our prophets. This opinion, which I believe, is less disgraceful than the preceding opinions and nearer than they to intellectual reasoning. For I for one believe that in this lowly world—I mean that which is beneath the sphere of the moon—divine providence watches only over the individuals belonging to the human species and that in this species alone all the circumstances of the individuals and the good and evil that befall them are consequent upon the deserts, just as it says: "For all His ways are judgment." (Deuteronomy 32:4) But regarding all the other animals and, all the more, the plants and other things, my opinion is that of Aristotle. For I do not by any means believe that this particular leaf has fallen because of a providence watching over it; nor that this spider has devoured this fly because God has now decreed and willed it.

Now you, discerning reader, will understand that where providence does not extend, knowledge of the future will not extend either, as Maimonides discussed at length.¹⁵ But this will suffice for our present purpose. Remember what was already demonstrated, that according to the words of our rabbis taken from the words of the prophets, it appears explicitly that the final cause of all the works of heaven and earth and what is between them was nothing else than the existence of the human species, as I explained in Part I, Chapter 13. Know also, that clearly human reason does not require at all that God should take care for all human individuals, given that man is fashioned of lowly matter and returns to dust, were it not that our eyes have seen His greatness and His mighty hand, in His coming to take one nation from the midst of another with signs, and that our perfect Torah announces, "I will set My face against that man," (Leviticus 20:5) which proves that God does have regard for the

¹³ Though Eliezer concedes this point here, he ignores it later on. For how can God be ignorant of a person's future actions, yet knowledgeable of his past and present actions, unless God's knowledge changes in time?

¹⁴ Translations of Maimonides's *Guide* are from Pines's University of Chicago edition.

¹⁵ Indeed, Maimonides alternated back and forth between the topics of providence and divine knowledge in *Guide* III, 16–21, implying an intimate connection between them.

individual. We similarly saw from how He took care for the three patriarchs and their descendants—and we are the flock that He tends, recipients of His special providence—all of which verifies for us that He exercises individual providence, for so has His wisdom decreed. Though in virtue of His greatness and our exceeding lowliness we are not worthy of it, nevertheless through His kindness and great goodness His wisdom decreed it anyway. Thus David said, “What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him?” (Psalms 8:5) Take note also of what Maimonides wrote in the *Guide* I, 10:

You know also how often the Sages use the expression: “With regard to what is holy, man may be made to ascend but not to descend.”¹⁶ Similarly the term [to descend] is also used to denote a lower state of speculation; when a man directs his thought toward a very mean object, he is said to have descended; and similarly when he directs his thought toward an exalted and sublime object, he is said to have ascended. Now we, the community of men, are, in regard to place as well as degree of existence, in a most lowly position if we are compared to the all-encompassing heavenly sphere; whereas He, may He be exalted, is in respect of true existence, sublimity, and greatness in the very highest position—an elevation that is not a spatial one. And as He, may He be exalted, wished—as He did—to let some of us have knowledge deriving from Him and an overflow of prophetic inspiration, the alighting of the prophetic inspiration upon the prophet or the coming-down of the Shekhinah to a certain place was termed descent; whereas the removal of this prophetic state from a particular individual or the cessation of the Shekhinah in a place was termed ascent. In every case in which you find the terms descent and ascent applied to the Creator, may He be exalted, this last meaning is intended.

Here you have Maimonides explicitly saying that God’s turning attention to a lowly thing is called “descent.”¹⁷ If so, given our verification that God is free of deficiencies, it is not proper that we should attribute condescension—i.e., paying attention to lowly beings—to God, except for the purpose which our Torah reveals to us, namely that His wisdom decreed—and He willed—the preservation of the political collective through justice. We saw that the generation of the Flood were punished and doomed to annihilation because of their violence. The generation of the Dispersion was similarly punished. Now God desired all this because of what we explained in Part I Chapter 13 of this work, namely that everything that God created was for the purpose of bringing into being the perfect soul who would achieve immortality, and it is impossible for such an individual to engage in intellectual endeavor except

¹⁶ Mishnah *Shekalim* 6:4, et al.

¹⁷ Or, we might say, “condescension.”

within a well-ordered society.¹⁸ Thus Rabbi Hanina¹⁹ would say, “Blessed is He Who created all these to serve me.” Thus, too, the prophet said, “If you produce what is noble out of the worthless, you shall be My spokesman” (Jeremiah 15:19)—implying that the entire purpose of the Creator is to produce substance from nothingness, and not just any substance, but to produce out of the things that are generated and perishable—namely, the four elements plus the quintessence—something eternal, namely the perfect soul. This is the choicest and most exalted purpose.

Having demonstrated that every condescension mentioned of God is for the reason of paying attention to lowly things, and knowing that God pays attention to them solely for that exalted purpose of bringing about that perfect individual who shall achieve his soul’s immortality, it is therefore not fitting that condescension be ascribed to God, except insofar as is necessary for that exalted purpose, namely bringing about the perfect soul.

Now we know that reward and punishment which accrue in judgment to the human kind from God, are only given for deeds after they are committed, whether good or bad. Do not be misled by the rabbis’ saying, “God adds the good thought to the deed [for purposes of reward],” thinking that when a man thinks of doing a good deed—like giving charity, or other mitzvot—even if he does not carry it out, God rewards him as if he had given the charity, etc. No, that is not the case at all! Rather, the rabbis meant that after the person performs the act, God rewards him also for the thought, as if he had performed two acts. Just as the rabbis said concerning evil thoughts, that “fantasies of sin are worse than sin, for the person will receive punishment for the fantasy as well as for the deed,”²⁰ so it is with regard to the good. It is thus clear that divine judgment comes into play only after the deed (see also the rabbinic comment on the verse, “God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is”²¹ [Genesis 21:17]). However, if someone conceives a good thought, [there will

¹⁸ Here Eliezer embraces the Platonic-Maimonidean ideal (see especially *Guide* III, 27).

¹⁹ The saying is quoted in the name of Simeon ben Zoma (BT *Berakhot* 58a) and Simeon ben Eleazar (Mishnah *Kiddushin* 4:14).

²⁰ BT *Yoma* 29a.

²¹ Rabbi Isaac said [based on this verse]: “A person is not judged except on the basis of his deeds as of that time [and not what he may do in the future].” (BT *Rosh Hashanah* 16b) The Midrash Tanḥuma’s comment on this verse is more pointed: “The angel said to Him, ‘Master of the Universe! For this villain, who in future will harass wayfarers, do You raise up the well?’ The Holy and Blessed One replied: ‘What is he now? Isn’t he righteous? I only judge a person according to how he is at the time he stands in judgment before me.’ ...Apply the verse: ‘For He sees deceitful men, He sees iniquity but does not regard it.’ (Job 11:11)” This second midrash is grist to Maimonides’s mill rather than Eliezer’s, and is representative of those many rabbinic sources which stress divine foreknowledge in comprehensive terms, though with less than full philosophical rigor. Thus Eliezer was bucking not only the trend of medieval philosophical doctrine, but much of rabbinic Judaism, in limiting God’s foreknowledge. Nevertheless, he is on firm ground in citing the spirit of the Biblical narratives in support of his view.

be one of two outcomes:] if he is not prevented [from carrying it out], then it will become manifest through his action that it was his intention to do it. But if he be prevented by God (as was the case in the binding of Isaac, as was said to Abraham, “do not lay your hand on the lad”) or otherwise forcibly detained, then he will certainly have his reward as if he had carried out the act. Nevertheless, if he intended to do an action in service of God, and withheld himself voluntarily from carrying it out, there is no reason why he should be rewarded.

It is therefore clear that knowing a person’s action before doing it²² is not at all necessary for rendering judgment, which is required for achieving the exalted goal of which we spoke. That being the case, we have no grounds for attributing to God “descent” and paying attention to knowing man’s deeds, except after those deeds are carried out, be they good or evil. For if you say that God knows what a person is going to do, then we assume descent and deficiency in the conduct of God, that He would pay attention to knowledge of things which are unnecessary for the exalted goal of which we spoke. Understand, too, that there is no doubt concerning what Maimonides wrote in the matter of providence, that it is no deficiency in God for us to say that He does not look after the fly which is devoured by the spider; on the contrary, it would be considered a deficiency in His conduct if he were to look after that fly and pay individual attention to it. Maimonides furthermore wrote that he was driven to say this by what is explicated concerning this matter in the Torah and the prophets.²³

Now, if we were to ask, whether in his²⁴ opinion God knows that the spider will devour that fly before it does so, there is no doubt that it would be fitting to respond that God had not turned His attention to that lowly thing which is not necessary to that purpose, as God has indeed left it to chance. Now you, discerning reader, consider carefully! For Maimonides’s words concerning this²⁵

²² This implies that there can be a difference in God’s knowledge of a person’s action before and after its performance, and therefore a change in God’s knowledge over time. Eliezer was careless in conceding to Maimonides earlier that such a change was impermissible.

²³ Nevertheless, Maimonides said this only concerning providence, not concerning divine knowledge. Although Maimonides intermingled his discussion of providence and divine foreknowledge, he did not draw a rigid equation between the two as regarding their domain of applicability, the way Eliezer does.

²⁴ The Warsaw 1871 edition (= Jerusalem 1972 offset edition) has **לדעתו ז"ל**, which is clearly impossible. The **ז"ל** is unambiguous and resists emendation, and can only refer to Maimonides. Emending **לדעתו** to **לדעת** is clearly indicated.

²⁵ Note carefully, however, that Eliezer has extrapolated Maimonides’s response to his rhetorical question by mere conjecture, introducing an assumption (the equivalent domains of providence and divine knowledge) which is not explicitly found in Maimonides. It is entirely possible to construct an alternative response from Maimonidean assumptions which distinguishes between the two issues. For instance, one may argue that God does not exercise specific providence in the case of the spider-and-fly, but general providence is enough to justify the Biblical statement “He gives food to all flesh,” and the other statements Eliezer cites in this passage. One

are correct. However, in my opinion the momentum of his pen led him to cite this example of the spider devouring the fly, whereas in my opinion there is no doubt that God does indeed take care to provide the spider with prey. There is faithful testimony for this in the verses, "He gives food to all flesh," (Psalm 136:25) and "The lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God." (Psalm 104:21) This implies that even though wild beasts prey on other animals for food, they do so by His providence and His will, for He has thus decreed that some animals shall be food for others, as it says later in the same psalm: "[In the sea] are creatures beyond number...all of them look to You to give them their food when it is due. You give it to them, they gather it up..." This leaves no doubt to any thinking person, that God feeds and provides for all, down to the worm in the belly of the earth. In that case, the spider who devours the fly is also under God's providence to give him his food.

But the second example which Maimonides wrote, that he would not believe that the leaf falls by God's providence, is very fitting. I would think that if these two examples were given by [pagan] philosophers and Maimonides copied them as he found them in their works, it would be nonetheless true that we ought not to say that God has providence over lowly things that are not [even] food and provision for the sustenance of His creatures. For all that God created, He created only for the benefit of the human species, and while they are in life He gives them their sustenance. But we may frame the example in a way that will be correct, namely that God will not take care over whether the spider spins its web or not, or whether the fly flies eastward or westward, and similarly the case with other animals which have no reason and whose deeds it is not proper to bring before the bar of judgment. I will now argue to you that there is no difference between God's knowledge of man's deeds before he does them, and His knowledge of that spider or fly, for the one is as irrelevant as the other to that exalted purpose of which we spoke.²⁶ After all, God does not judge a person to reward or punish him until after the deed, but what the person has done is indeed relevant to the purpose for which God created all creatures. It is not enough to argue that knowing the actions of the fly or spider is an extremely lowly matter, whereas knowing the deeds of a person before they are done is not so low on the ladder. In the estimation of God, the difference between the most gigantic of men and the smallest fly is negligible. Does not the verse say, "I am a worm" (Psalm 22:7)? It is thus proper to say that God does not pay attention to know whether the spider spins its web or the fly flies eastward, for this is in the domain of chance;

may defend this view by the consideration that the individuals of the animal kingdom are governed only by natural law, not moral law, and that the notion of "specific providence" is bound up with governance by moral law. On the other hand, one can assert that God's knowledge extends to all natural things through the logic of natural law, and that the individual events of all domains of nature are embraced by God's knowledge for this reason.

²⁶ Eliezer overlooks here the plausible counter-argument, that God's knowledge of the antecedents of human action might be relevant for God's pedagogic purpose of training humankind for salvation.

similarly, He does not pay attention to know the deed of a person before he does it, for this is in the domain of choice.

You ought not to object, either, that though God does not in fact pay attention to the acts of the spider or the fly, if God wanted to know this, the power would be in God's hands. For we have already explained that this would be a deficiency in the divine conduct. Now it is not within the domain of God's power to encumber God with deficiencies, for a deficiency in the divine nature is among the impossibles. Just as it belongs to the class of impossible things for God to make Himself corporeal, or to make another being equal to God, so you cannot say that if God wanted, He could know the acts of the fly, since we have demonstrated that such knowledge would be a deficiency and condescension in the divine conduct. Indeed, David was astonished that God would even condescend to know the actions of humankind even after they were performed, as he said, "What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him?" (Psalms 8:5) He also said, "Who sits on high, and condescends to see what is in heaven and earth" (Psalms 113:5–6), whose meaning according to our approach is that when David wanted to emphasize God's great and exalted nature, he described God as enthroned so high that even considering the affairs of heaven and earth would be a coming-down for him.

There is further evidence for our description of the matter—namely, that God does not turn His knowledge to know human actions before they are done—from David's words: "Examine me, O God, and know my mind; probe me and know my thoughts."²⁷ (Psalms 139:23) It is clear from the context that it is the purpose of this prayer of David's that God should probe and know what he is about to do. But if God's knowledge already encompassed every action that any human was going to do, then this prayer would be superfluous, for why should David be in a lesser position than the rest of the human species?

Nor should you object in astonishment: "How [according to your argument] can David pray that God turn His knowledge to know what David was about to do? Have you not argued that this would be a deficiency in the divine conduct?" For it is known that when there is a fully righteous person, he is beloved of God! Surely, out of the strength of His love for him, God will turn His attention to know what such a person is about to do also.

This is also the key to understanding what the rabbis said:

R. Phinehas the Priest ben Ḥama opened: "I foretell the end from the beginning, and from the start, things that had not occurred. I say: My plan shall be fulfilled; I will do all that I desire." (Isaiah 46:10)....

²⁷ Eliezer is truly carrying the fight into the opposition's territory with this ingenious argument. Psalm 139, which he cites here, is one of the strongest biblical supports for a strong reading of divine omniscience, and is cited constantly by the medievals for this purpose. Ephraim Luntshitz will emulate him in his interpretation of this psalm—a clear indication of the affinity of their outlooks. (See *Ornament* on Genesis 5:1, cited in Chapter 6, pp. 189–190.)

R. Phinehas the Priest ben Ḥama said: “Whoever reads this verse might ask: ‘Is there contention in heaven, that God should have to say, “My plan shall be fulfilled, I will do all that I desire?”’ What indeed is meant, ‘all that I desire’? God desires to make His creatures righteous, as it says, ‘The Lord desires His [servant’s] righteousness, that [H]e may magnify and glorify [His] teaching.’” (Isaiah 42:21)²⁸

Indeed, the plain sense of the verse would seem to affirm God’s foreknowledge. What, then, is the relevance of making God’s creatures righteous, to the question of divine foreknowledge? And why does R. Phinehas seem to distort the verse from its plain meaning, which seems to speak of God’s knowing all future events, and to construe it as relating to only one instance of future event and divine desire, namely God’s desire to make His creatures righteous? But it fits very well with what we have said. God inquires from the deed of the righteous person in the present, what that person will do in the future. If God judges that the person is on the verge of stumbling, God will warn him to repent, as David said, “Examine me, O God, and know my mind; probe me and know my thoughts. See if I have vexatious ways, and guide me in ways everlasting.”²⁹ (Psalms 139:23–24) There is no need to explain David’s words, as they are very explicit in support of the meaning I have just indicated, namely, that if God sees he is about to do evil, God should provide him with guidance. . . .

²⁸ *Exodus Rabbah* 9:1. (Not *Genesis Rabbah*, as the printed text states.) This is a key text for Eliezer, as it strongly supports divine foreknowledge and gives Eliezer an opportunity to finesse the issue, acknowledging the doctrine in part while tailoring it to Eliezer’s dominant motif of “God knows what He needs to in order to bring about righteous persons.” The ellipsis omits a portion which is relevant to Eliezer’s subsequent discussion: “...‘I foretell the end from the beginning’—The Holy and Blessed One tells from the beginning what will be at the end, as He says to Moses, ‘This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst...they will forsake Me and break My covenant.’ (Deuteronomy 31:16) This is what they are going to do after Joshua’s death: ‘They forsook the Lord and did not serve Him.’ (Judges 10:6) Thus the verse says: ‘I foretell the end from the beginning.’”

²⁹ See Note 28 above.

DEEDS OF THE LORD (1583)
PART III: NARRATIVES OF THE EXODUS

Eliezer Ashkenazi

From Chapter 1

Respecting the issue of the miracles which were related in our Torah, I have seen some of our people's sages congratulating themselves on their philosophizing, especially Gersonides in his book *The Wars [of the Lord]* refuted many arguments and twisted many texts from their simple sense. He drew them with ropes, "new ones come from near," which had never been countenanced by those who feared the Lord and meditated on His name. Indeed, it is easy to remove his bands and cut his ropes like flax singed in the fire, but it would require writing at length such as I detest, and furthermore that is not my purpose in this work. In any case, the general proposition which emanates from his arguments concerning miracles is that if we assume that God is the author of the miracles, then the activity of the Active Intellect would be superior to that of God, for the activity of the Active Intellect proceeds by the natural order continually, while the performance of miracles is the violation and negation of that natural order. Gersonides also broached the issue of the divine knowledge, saying that if His knowledge is His essence, then plurality of cognitions would entail plurality in the divine essence, and change in the divine knowledge would entail change in the divine essence. And now, discerning reader, I will share with you my own views on the matter of miracles and divine knowledge, and when you consider my words carefully, you will see that his arguments fall of their own weight. You already know what I wrote in Part II Chapter 21 of this work on the matter of divine knowledge; see what I said there. Here are my compelling theses on this topic:

Thesis 1: As we proved in Part I, Chapter 13, whatever God created in heaven and earth and all their host, were created only to bring forth from nothingness the perfect, eternal soul. In that case, all of heaven and earth comprises one single work. Note what the verse says: "God completed on the seventh day *His work*," not *His works*. The verse thereby reveals to us that all the work of creation was for one end-goal only. We also said (in Chapter 10) that the verse "Let us make man" means that the Creator said this to all of creation by way of command, to make whole all his deficiencies, as in the formulation of the blessing, "[Blessed are You . . . Creator of many souls] and their needs (deficiencies) upon all that He created," which means that fulfilling the deficiency of all the souls that God created is incumbent on all of creation. We also said that the phrase "let us make man" was an announcement to all of creation that they were only created in order to make the perfect, eternal soul.

Thesis 2: That all created entities add no perfection to God, but God created all these being to bring forth precious issue from refuse,¹ namely the perfect soul from absolute nothingness to eternity. This must necessarily be the case, inasmuch as God is free of all deficiencies, so that He would not withhold any good from its owner, as I demonstrated at length in Part I, Chapter 13; see there.

Thesis 3: That knowledge which is spoken of concerning God, is identical with providence. We must suppose that for God to exercise providence on a lowly being would be a deficiency in Him. Assuming that to be the case, I said in that chapter (Part II, Chapter 21) that God's knowledge would not include what a person is going to do, for that is a very lowly thing, inasmuch as that knowledge is not necessary for the perfect soul's achieving its immortality, which is the purpose for which created entities were created. Having proved that all created beings were for one end-goal, and were all one work, it follows that the knowledge of them is one knowledge, having neither plurality nor change, and that knowledge is the essence of God, may He be blessed, having no attribute external to Him. I will say, to what can the thing be compared? Even though the following metaphor be remote from the subject-matter, I will do the best I can, be what may. It is like a goldsmith who knows how to make a golden goblet, and who knows that in order to do so he must first burn wood, and after the burning he must extinguish the fire to make charcoal, then heat the gold in the fire until it is melted, then take it out of the fire to cool, then harden it in order to beat it with a hammer. Even though this series of actions contains some which are opposite to each other—such as burning and extinguishing, melting and hardening—the knowledge of all of them is a single knowledge: “the knowledge of making a goblet.” The instant that the smith thinks of making it, he knows all this. It is for having this knowledge that he is called a goldsmith. Nor has any additional knowledge accrued to him from making the goblet. I remind you of what I wrote in Part I, Chapter 10, that the phrase “let us make man in our image” was a command to all the works of creation, that they should be instruments and preparation for the perfect soul's achieving immortality. In that case the miracles, which were performed to propagate the faith which would help bring about the perfect soul's immortality, were performed by God with prior knowledge. The highest dignity was attached to this action, insofar as the end-goal for which all beings were created ensued from it. This will demonstrate clearly to you that whatever knowledge is not relevant and necessary for that end-goal is no perfection in God's conduct, for it is very lowly. You will thereby understand also the matter of the miracles, which we have described as a most dignified activity, performed by God Himself. God also brings about the continual order of nature, inasmuch as it is also relevant to propagating the faith which helps bring about the perfect soul's immortality, as it is impossible for there to be miracles without the prior existence of a continual natural order. For He renews

¹ להוציא יקר מזולל. See this phrase in the Second Introduction to Ephraim Luntshitz's *City of Heroes*, a clue that the passage alludes to Eliezer Ashkenazi.

every day continually the work of creation, and if the miracle were continual, there would be no wonder at it, for it is the violation of the continual. That is the meaning of the rabbis when they said, "God made a condition with the sea, that it should split." They meant by this that all the miracles, which are violations of the natural order, as well as the natural order itself, are all part of the same process, since they are all for the perfection of the soul and its attainment of immortality. For when that perfect soul perceives the continuity of nature and its violation, it will recognize that there is a Lord Who created all. Thus the verse told us that all the works of heaven and earth are one work (as it says, "from all *His work*," not *His works*). Even though many of the things which were created are of diverse matters and forms, nevertheless inasmuch as they were created for one end-goal, they are one unified work. What the rabbis said that God made a condition with the sea that it should split, they intended to speak of all the miracles. They specified the sea in particular, because the splitting of the sea would be stronger testimony of the creation of the world than the other miracles. Note the verse, "Tremble, O earth, before the Lord." I have seen one who thought that the sun's standing still before Joshua was more wonderful, inasmuch as it pertained to the sun. Their argument was that it was a more considerable miracle, given the sun's higher degree [of dignity] than the sea. But the argument does not hold weight. For in the case of the standing still of the sun, given that the host of heaven are intelligent beings,² it is not so marvelous that they should perform the commandment of the deity, as is the case with the water, which has no intelligence. David (peace be his) explained this when he said, "Hallelujah, host of heaven," and he did not say "who do His will," as it says of the non-intelligent things such as fire, hail, snow, and frost, stormy wind that does His will."³ I have told you all this by way of anticipation, before I begin in the recounting of the stories of Egypt and the miracles that were performed on it, so that you will not be confused in your thoughts by ideas such as those of Gersonides and others like them. Let me remind you that when you come across these words of mine, you should not decide that you understand them if you have not first looked at Part I, Chapters 10 and 13.

² The medieval Ptolemaic-Aristotelian astronomy could be construed, either that the sun, moon, planets and stars were themselves intelligences, or that they were guided by intelligences. In either case, a deviation from course could be construed as Eliezer suggests, that the intelligent being obeyed God's command.

³ The point is that the inanimate creatures of nature have no will of their own because they have no intelligence, hence perforce they can only perform God's will, whereas the heavenly bodies have intelligence and therefore a will of their own. However, this point is in tension with the point Eliezer makes elsewhere, that only human beings have the freedom to carry out God's will or rebel against it. If the heavenly bodies have a will of their own, but one which is always necessarily conformed to God's will, then could not the psalmist say "who perform God's will" of them as well?

THE LION'S WHELP (1578)

Maharal (R. Judah Loew of Prague)

Portion Bereshit (Genesis 1–6)

“*R. Isaac said, etc.*” In *Genesis Rabbah* it says: “Even though there is not a single superfluous narrative in the Torah—not even ‘the sister of Lotan was Timna’”—for it says in *Sanhedrin* Chapter *Helek*¹ that the word “Torah” applies only to the commandments of the Torah, inasmuch as the etymology of “Torah” is from *hora’ah* [“instruction”], i.e., to instruct us what action we ought to perform. Therefore it is especially the Torah of Moses which is called “Torah,” for in it are written the commandments. Similarly R. David Kimḥi explained that the word Torah comes from *hora’ah*, wherefore only the commandments should be written in it. Know that even though the book of Job was written by Moses (according to the account in Bava Batra), nevertheless if the book of Job were written on the same scroll as the Torah, it would be forbidden to read from that Torah scroll in public. For all these reasons, R. Isaac propounds the objection that the Torah [ought to have started with the first commandment in Exodus 12:1, “This month shall be the first month...”].

“*For if the nations of the world should say [you are robbers, etc.]*”—If you should object: “It is still not explained, what connection is there between giving the land to Israel and the commandments of the Torah?” This is not problematic. For most of the commandments of the Torah are dependent on the land. For example, the heave-offerings, the tithes, and the Temple are observed only in the land. Thus if Israel does not possess the land, these commandments do not apply at all, for in connection with these it is written, “when you possess [the land] and dwell in it.” But the nations of the world will say, “You are robbers and did not possess the land legally, but it came to you by theft.”

Nahmanides similarly wrote that all the commandments of the Torah are in the category of “the rules of the God of the land,” i.e., all the commandments in the Torah pertain especially in the land. This refers to the account in II Kings (17:24–26) that when Israel was exiled, other nations dwelt in the land, and they were ignorant of the rules of the God of the land, whereupon the Lord set the lions upon them. It follows that these “rules of the God of the land” are identical with the Torah. (See Nahmanides on Genesis 26:5, “My commandments, My laws, and My teachings.”) Therefore it was necessary to

¹ Sanhedrin Chapter *Helek* (“All Israel have a portion in the World to Come”): Chapter 10 according to the enumeration in the Mishnah, Chapter 11 in the Babylonian Talmud.

write in the Torah that Israel obtained the land properly, inasmuch as God created it and gave it to them.

If you should object further, "Let us concede that the account of creation was necessary! But what need is there of the other narratives in the Torah?" If only the account of creation was written, supporting the view that the Holy and Blessed One created the land and gave it to whomever it pleased Him, the nations of the world could still rebut, "You speak falsely! The Holy and Blessed One did not give you the land, for He does nothing without a just reason! What reason did He have to take the land from its inhabitants and give it to Israel?" But we now have the whole story in writing, how the early generations provoked the Holy and Blessed One, until Abraham came and received the reward that had been reserved for all of them. God took the land and from the nations and gave it to Abraham's descendants as a legacy. Not to all his descendants, either. For God said to Abraham, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved, etc." (Genesis 15:13) This was not fulfilled in Ishmael nor in Esau, but only in the descendants of Jacob, whom the Holy and Blessed One brought into servitude, whereupon the prophecy "I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve" was fulfilled on their behalf. [The account of all this takes us] up to "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months." (Exodus 12:1) Therefore it was necessary to write all this narrative, to demonstrate that it was Israel who were in servitude and redeemed by God, for which reason the land was given to Israel and not to Ishmael or to Esau.

Nahmanides objected further: Why did it occur to R. Isaac that the account of creation was unnecessary? For if this was not written in the Torah, it might occur to someone that the world is primordial, and that the Holy and Blessed One never created the world *ex nihilo*! For someone who believed in a primordial world, such as Aristotle believed, all the miracles recounted in the Torah which require that God have the power to change the ways of the world, would be impossible. Such a person would disbelieve the Torah altogether. But according to the premise that God created the world *ex nihilo*, all the miracles would be possible. For if God has created the whole world *ex nihilo*, why should we not believe that He could bring about all the miracles?

However, this is not a valid objection. For the creation of the world cannot stand as evidence that the Holy and Blessed One brought all the miracles into being. On the contrary, the miracles stand as evidence for the creation of the world! For we have seen the miracles with our own eyes, but we have not seen the creation of the world with our own eyes. So how can the creation lend credibility to the miracles? Thus Scripture says explicitly, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt," (Exodus 20:2) not "who created heavens and earth." Similarly Scripture bases many commandments on the exodus from Egypt because we saw this with our eyes, and no one can deny the miracle. Thus R. Abraham Ibn Ezra comments on the portion Yitro—see there.

For if the gentiles say, "You are robbers, etc."—And if you say, "If a slave acquires property, it is the acquisition of his master, so if Noah gave Canaan as a slave to his brothers, it is no theft for Israel to take the land from them"—one may

answer: It is written concerning the mitzvot which are dependent on the land, "You shall take possession of it and settle in it." The term יְרוּשָׁה ("take possession") would not be said of land that had come into their holdings through their slave, for יְרוּשָׁה generally connotes "inheritance," that which becomes yours through your fathers. Thus the accusation of being "robbers" does not necessarily mean actual robbers, but rather, that you took the land in a way similar to robbery rather than by inheritance.

...
 "[The world was created] for the sake of Israel and the Torah." (*Genesis Rabbah*)
 One might object: Was the world created specifically for these two? Is it not written, "All the Lord's creation is for His sake," i.e., whatever is created in the world is for the sake of the Holy and Blessed One, and all were created for His glory? "Everything which is called for My Name, I have created for My glory," and there is no glory from the creatures except when they fulfill His commandments and serve Him. But this obtains only with the nation of Israel. Of them it is said, "This people which I have formed for Me shall declare My praise"—for I have formed them for the purpose of declaring My praise. And Israel only serve the Holy and Blessed One through His commandments when they keep the Torah. Thus the world was created for the sake of Israel and for the sake of the Torah, and all the rest of the world was created for the sake of Israel.

Since these two things have a proper rationale that the world should have been created for them, Rashi cites them specifically, even though the rabbis derived midrashically that many other things were the purpose of the world's creation. But the secret meaning of "the world's being created for the sake of Torah" is that the Torah is the fount of all creation, for it was created two thousand [generations] prior to the world. Moreover, the summation of all creation is Israel, for no other nation came into existence after Israel, for even Edom and Moab attained nationhood prior to Israel, and Israel last of all. Since the Torah came first of all, everything else devolved from it, thus justifying the statement that everything was created for its sake, like the tree which is planted and which grows for the sake of the root which is the foundation of its being. On the other hand, its final goal is to bring forth fruit, and for the sake of that end-goal it grows and sprouts, for if it were not for the fruit which will come at the end, it would not grow, and this is a major cause of it. Thus Israel who come at the end of all created beings are the crowning perfection of the world; when Israel emerge, the world is complete; creation stands still, because it has arrived at its end-goal and perfection.

Therefore the world was created for the sake of the Torah, for it is the start and the beginning, and for Israel who is the end-goal of all. Therefore Israel is called *reshit* (beginning), for the end-goal is the beginning in thought. The sum of the matter is that the world was created for the sake of that which is the first-principle and beginning of all creation such as the Torah which is the beginning, for from the beginning everything else follows; and also for the sake of that which is the end-goal and perfection of creation, in which everything is completed and the end comes, and that is Israel. That is why there is a feature in Israel which occurs in no other nation, for you will

find no other nation in last position as Israel, indicating that they complete the world, therefore they are at the end. This explains a saying of the rabbis: "You [Israel] are called 'man.'" For Israel are similar to man, in that all other animals were created prior, and man last, to indicate that man completes creation. Similarly all the nations were created prior and Israel last. These are secret and wonderful matters.

PRODIGES OF THE LORD (1582)
FIRST INTRODUCTION

Maharal (R. Judah Loew of Prague)

First Introduction

“The glory of God is a hidden matter, but the glory of kings is a matter to be searched.”
(Proverbs 25:2)

In *Genesis Rabbah*, R. Levi says in the name of R. Ḥama bar Ḥanina: “From the beginning of Genesis to ‘the heavens and the earth were finished’—this is ‘the glory of God is a hidden matter.’ From there on is ‘a matter to be searched.’” Since a person’s apperception² relates to the person inasmuch as it is his apperception, it follows necessarily that the known object cannot be totally other from the knowing individual, for if it was completely different from him, then it could not be a candidate for human knowledge. For given that human apperception relates to its object, if the object were totally other from the human, the human would have no way of knowing it. That is the reason why there is no explicit mention in the Torah of the World to Come or immortality of the soul after death. If the Torah contained parables such as “A king of flesh and blood warns his servants not to disobey his command, so they may merit the good reward that he promises them...” then it would undoubtedly mention the good destiny that lies in wait in the World to Come and the Garden of Eden, and that if one turn aside from the commandment and rebel against his Creator he will be punished in Gehenna. But the Torah is the word of God through the prophet. Therefore the matters of Torah are according to the prophet’s comprehension. Such things are beyond the purview of embodied man and not part of his reality. As they are immaterial in their essence and not present to him, so the knowledge of them is quite remote from man and “other” to him, and such a thing, separate from human existence, does not enter into the purview of the prophet’s comprehension. One difference between wisdom³ and prophecy is that the Sage apprehends

² The key term of this sentence—**מושג, משיג, השגה** (literally, “grasp”) is equivalent to the “-cept” root in both “percept” and “concept.” (Cf. also *-prehend* in “apprehend,” “comprehend.”) Maharal’s point extends both to sensual perceiving and intellectual conceiving; in each case, human knowledge is limited to those entities which have something ontologically in common with human reality.

³ The key-word **חכמה** could be used by a philosopher to include philosophy as well as the rabbinic tradition (of the “**חכמים**”—the rabbis). In the mouth of an opponent of philosophy like Maharal, the reference is rather to the rabbinic tradition, as the continuation—his discussion of the saying **חכם עדיף מנביא**—makes clear.

through his reason, and therefore is able to apprehend matters that are quite hidden and mysterious. But the prophet is called “visionary” or “seer,” for seeing is a direct perception of what is immediately outside oneself. Thus each prophet must have contact with the object of his prophecy; he has contact with those things and knows them through his prophecy.

Therefore the Sages said, “A sage is better than a prophet.”⁴ The meaning of this is that prophecy resembles the material perception of the eye which senses its object outside, and even though prophecy does not literally operate through material perception, nevertheless just as a physical sense has contact with its object, so is there contact between the prophetic faculty—i.e., the faculty of imagination, or whatever faculty receives the prophecy—and the object of prophecy. Therefore the sage is preferable, for he apprehends and knows hidden things and produces them from his own intellect. Thus the prophet is called “visionary” or “seer” but the sage is not. Therefore it is impossible for the matter of the World to Come or the soul’s immortality to be the subject of prophecy, since they cannot be seen, since they are remote from human experience, and the prophet must have some kind of contact with what he prophesies about. Therefore the World to Come and the soul’s immortality are more properly the province of wisdom, as the sage apprehends hidden matters better. So how could the World to Come be written in the Torah, if it cannot be a subject of prophecy?

Thus the Sages said, “All the prophets prophesied only about the days of the Messiah, but as for the World to Come, ‘no eye has seen them, O God, but you.’ (Isaiah 64:3)”⁵ The meaning of this is that since prophecy requires sight, and this is a kind of contact with the object of prophetic knowledge, they could only prophesy about the days of the Messiah, inasmuch as Messianic reality is a part of this world and is not totally other from human experience, which is also of this world. But the World to Come is so different from this world that prophecy cannot deal with it. . . . Nevertheless the Torah alludes to it, for instance when it says “in order that you may fare well and have length of days” (Deuteronomy 22:7), which is interpreted, “on the day that is completely long.” For length of days does not pertain exclusively to the World to Come, but is a promise to the listener, who is a human existing in this world, that he will have length of days and not perish. If he should die a natural death, it would not be regarded as death if he becomes alive again. Thus the Torah does not speak of the World to Come in its essence, but only promises that he who is found in this world will not perish. But to speak of the World to Come in its essence, not with reference to one living in this world, is unlikely, because the World to Come is alien to the human who is in this world, and alien also to his comprehension. As the prophet has no point of contact with it, how shall he prophesy about it? This is the true reason why these things are not found in the Torah or in the Prophets.

⁴ BT *Bava Batra* 12a.

⁵ BT *Berakhot* 34b.

We may say the same in another way which is also correct. It is the way of Torah to tell of those things which follow essentially⁶ from their cause, which is the way of wisdom, not what follows accidentally. That the Torah leads to the World to Come is not an essential consequence, but an accidental one, for the World to Come was created by God the same as this world was. In that case, it is only proper to say that by observing Torah and its commandments one merits length of days, that he not perish, for sin causes man to perish, and in fulfilling the commandments he merits length of days, as the Torah repeatedly says, “that your days may be long,” “that you may live,” etc. And if he has life, then he will come of himself to the World to Come, which will be at the end. And if he does not fulfill the Torah, he will not have length of days, and death will occur to him, and how will he come to the World to Come? The result is that the Torah is a direct cause not of the World to Come, but only of length of days. Similarly, the Torah gives a person life in this world, but is not the cause of this world. But when the Torah gives life to a person in this world, then he is of himself⁷ in this world. Thus the Torah is an essential cause of length of days, but not of the World to Come. Therefore the Torah mentions only the essential consequence, i.e. length of days, of which the Torah is the essential cause. . . .

But even though the intellect can apprehend hidden things, even it cannot apprehend that which is completely other to human experience, for every apperception has contact and fusion⁸ with its object. Now the world’s coming into actual existence is so different from experiencing the world in its actuality, that there is no resemblance between any thing in its prior state of coming-into-being and the way it is after the fact. Therefore one’s apprehension of this thing—the present existence of the world, and how it came into actual existence beforehand—is so alien to the person who now exists in the world, that we must say “the glory of God is a hidden matter” with respect to the Torah’s account of creation, for from “In the beginning” to “the heavens and the earth were finished” (Genesis 1:1–2:3) the Torah deals with how all being came into actual existence, and this is a matter to be hidden.

It says in Hagigah Chapter 2: “One should not discourse on the forbidden liaisons with three, or on Creation with two, or on the Chariot with one.” The meaning of these three is as follows:

⁶ **המסובב בעצם**. Contextually it appears that Maharal uses this phraseology to mean “direct effect,” and **סיבה בעצם** to mean “direct cause,” which is how I translate it later in this passage.

⁷ **בעצמו**, i.e., independently, on his own steam, as it were, or by other causal agency. The Torah only gives life; other causes supervene to determine whether the person will enjoy this life in this world or the World to Come.

⁸ **חיבור וצירוף**. The concept grasped by the intellect is at one and the same time a pointer representing an outside reality, and part of the intellect itself. Thus the intellect is limited in what it can apprehend by its own nature, and what it has known and understood up to this point.

1. The existence of God is distinguished from all existent beings, and He has no commonality with them.
2. God brought all other beings into existence.
3. They have their own proper order from Him.

Note that God's bringing things into existence (i.e., into actuality) is one matter, and endowing them with their proper order is another matter. For when a builder builds a house, he first designs it in his mind and then brings it into actuality. Thus it says, "God the Lord God (*El Elohim YHVH*) spoke and summoned the world." For the name *YHVH* is a proper noun, indicating that God is distinct from all existent beings, though all beings are sustained in their existence in Him. The name *Elohim* indicates that He is the Creator of all beings, as this name is used in the whole creation narrative. The name *El* indicates His role in ordering all existence. These names indicate that God created all things in judgment, and ordered them in lovingkindness.⁹

"*Nor on the Chariot with one*"—for the Chariot indicates that God is different from other beings, as the Rider is distinct from the chariot He rides upon. Thus the whole topic of the Chariot deals with God's difference from the rest of existence, how He rides above them and directs them, indeed by that very factor by which He differs from them is He able to direct them, just as the rider directs that upon which he is riding. It is similar to the soul in man, which is distinct from the body, and by virtue of that distinctness is able to enliven the body and direct it. Just as this apprehension refers to God's being distinct from any other entity and having no commonality with it, so the apprehension itself is solitary and has no commonality with other knowledge.¹⁰

However, the study of Creation deals with how God brought all things into being and how they became actual. This is the topic of Genesis 1:1–2:3, to which R. Levi applied the first half of the verse "The glory of God is a hidden matter," describing how God brought them into actuality. (The continuation of the narrative speaks not of how the beings proceeded from God, but only from each other.) But in the study of Creation, we are dealing with God coexisting with another entity, namely, that which He brought into existence. It is permitted to expound on this topic, albeit to an individual, for in such discourse the lesson proceeds from the one to the coexisting other.

As for the forbidden liaisons, of which one may discourse to two, this means the secret of the liaisons, i.e., the secret of existing beings and their combination with each other. This is what the secret of the forbidden liaisons comes to address, that God arranged in wisdom that this one may not mate with that,

⁹ Maharal's adherence to the conventional meaning of the divine names (*Elohim* = *din*, *El* = *hesed*, etc.) is one of those typical practices which place one at the gateway from standard rabbinic to kabbalistic thought. The practitioner can defend this practice as adherence to standard rabbinic terminology. On the other hand, it can be the way in which a mystical thinker presents his doctrine in neutral garb for exoteric consumption.

¹⁰ This seems to be the symbolic meaning of the discussion of the Chariot being restricted to a single individual.

nor that with this, in accordance with a particular order which God has wisely arranged between them. Now any ordering is possible only between two [or more] things, for if there were only one thing or one being, there would be no ordering to speak of. Therefore it is proper to discourse on the forbidden liaisons to two. The one who produces the discourse is a third together with them.¹¹ For it is fitting that the object of the analogy proceed the same as the subject, which is the topic of discourse itself. Just as the topic unfolds [from unity to multiplicity], so does the manner of the discourse...

¹¹ This parallels the topic, in which God (who created the beings) is a third together with the two created beings between whom the order subsists.

PRODIGES OF THE LORD (1582)
SECOND INTRODUCTION

Maharal (R. Judah Loew of Prague)

Preamble

It is fitting to explain the way and manner of the wonders, signs, and demonstrations that the Holy and Blessed One wrought in His world, and the mighty acts that He made known to the inhabitants of the world. However, this is not necessary for the believing folk of Israel who do not probe deeply with their minds and intellect to inquire of the hidden mysteries, who follow God's teaching wholeheartedly and accept in perfect trust all the words of the Torah and the prophets. They do not theorize about the miracles and wonders described in these pages, for they know that the Lord exercises His power and will in the world however He desires, to tear down or build up, enlarging or reducing it like the clay in a potter's hand, for He created it from nothing and can return it to nothing. Such is the view of the believers.

But lately we have to deal with the intrepid philo-sophists,¹ who probe God with their minds and deign to theorize about hidden mysteries, and even about everyday common reality they have so many opinions, so that there is no end of different views and theories about the nature of the human mind and soul. But there is no spirit or substance in any of it, for what can mere physical man know, even if God should give him knowledge and wisdom? His knowledge and wisdom are mingled with the material, encased by and bound to matter, so how can he know immaterial entities? And if man cannot make contact with immaterial entities, then he is incapable of judging their nature and activity, unless the hand of the Lord has wrought this, by communicating His ways to Moses and later to the prophets, knowledge which the Sages received from them, and communicated the hidden mysteries to us through their midrashim and sayings. Thus when these philosophizing men theorized from their own opinion and their own mind about the Lord's deeds,² there

¹ חקרי לב/חקקי לב. אגשי חקרי לב. Maharal piggybacks on Deborah's original pun לב, which derided the Reubenites for the shortfall between their intrepid pretensions and their cowardly performance. Maharal adds the additional association with חקירה, one of the medieval synonyms for philosophy, implying that those who engage in philosophical inquiry are cowardly traitors to God's cause just as the Reubenites were.

² "The Lord's Deeds"—מעשי ה'—the title of Eliezer Ashkenazi's book which was completed in 1580 and published in 1583. (For these dates, see Alan Cooper, "An Extraordinary Sixteenth-Century Biblical Commentary: Eliezer Ashkenazi on the Song of Moses," *Frank Talmadge Memorial Volume I*, p. 131.) Maharal's *Prodigies of the*

were some who went out on a completely strange way, and it would not be fitting to mention them or their words, were it not for what our rabbis said, “Learn diligently so that you may refute the heretic.”³

There are some who are of the faithful in Israel,⁴ who came with their minds and opinions upon some of the wonders and miracles which were in times past, and theorized about them, arriving at the opinion that the purported miracles are not in agreement with their theory and views concerning the order of existent things, therefore they sought an interpretation of the miracles which I am about to mention. Yet one should mention in their defense that they did not intend thereby to imply any deficiency about the Author of those miracles. Not at all! It just appeared to their reason that it was not fitting for the true Creator to alter the order of existing things, which were created in perfect truth, to alter something pertaining to the essence of existence, as will be elaborated. For they reasoned that in that case the divine work would be thought to have no permanence. This is the defense one should argue for them. But in another respect they have no defense. Moreover, their arguments and interpretations are incorrect from the standpoint of reason. Their proofs and evidences are fallacious. It is *their* testimonies which fall short of perfect truth. They have even garbled their textual sources, and refer us to interpretations and explanations of miracles (which demonstrate the divine action—indeed, that is why they are called “sign” and “demonstration,” for they signify and demonstrate the action of the awesome God) which are unworthy. They impute impotence to those signs and demonstrations, whose purpose in God’s bringing them into the world was to strengthen the believers.

Lord appeared in 1582. Byron Sherwin places the composition of *Way of Life* (*Derekh Hayyim*) from before 1578 to after 1583 (Sherwin, p. 191); it was published in 1589, with the criticism of Ashkenazi appearing on pp. 233–5. (See translation below, p. 448.) From the pointed reference to “the Lord’s deeds” which is repeated in Maharal’s second introduction to *Prodigies of the Lord*, it seems likely that Maharal had completed *Prodigies of the Lord* with the first introduction by the early 1580s, whereupon he became aware of Eliezer Ashkenazi’s viewpoint and the existence of his book *Deeds of the Lord*, which was in manuscript but not yet published. Maharal thereupon wrote his Second Introduction to *Prodigies of the Lord*, in which he argued in detail against the Gersonidean theory of divine knowledge which Eliezer was to present in Chapter 21 of the *Narratives of the Patriarchs* section of *Deeds of the Lord*. Maharal’s *Prodigies of the Lord* was published in 1582, and Ashkenazi’s *Deeds of the Lord* in 1583. Maharal then took advantage of the appearance of the latter work to criticize Ashkenazi even more pointedly (though still without naming him) in his revision to *Way of Life* (*Derekh Hayyim*), which then was published in 1587. Ephraim Luntshitz had the opportunity to follow all these stages of the controversy before writing his *Gleanings of Ephraim*, which did not appear until 1590.

³ Mishnah Avot 2:14. Maharal is conflating the first two sayings of Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh, thus drawing the interpretation that they are two parts of one thought, i.e. that one should “be diligent in learning Torah” for the purpose of “knowing what to respond to the Epicurean.”

⁴ Maharal seems to address the position of Eliezer Ashkenazi here.

*First Opponent: The Aristotelian-Averroist*⁵

The first, whom I will not dignify to mention except by way of refutation, is the philosophist who says that all things derive from God by that order which is grasped in thought by Him, by way of primal necessity, from which there is not nor will there ever be any deviation; all happens in a habitual, orderly fashion. As everything flows from God in an orderly progression of primal necessity without deviation, there is no alteration in the world to depart from this intelligible order, not even so much as the lengthening of an insect's wing. . . . If miracles brought about any change, they would violate the natural order. . . . Miracles requiring a change in the nature and habit of the world would not be possible. . . . By this view, as the world follows a necessary order without change, it can have no beginning, so it must be eternally pre-existent. He further maintains that one thing cannot be generated from any arbitrary thing, but nature prescribes that each thing can only be generated from its proper cause; thus, how can it be that from water, comes blood? He brings support from a heterogeneous⁶ matter, for natural activities operate according to their nature and habit in the natural world, but immaterial activities operate according to their own principle. The difference is that the natural operates in time and therefore every natural activity requires a duration of time, but an activity which is not natural does not require any time for its activity. . . . thus in one instant the waters turn to blood, which is an act of the divine will. By His will, matter and form come to be in an instant. . . . Therefore do not ask, inasmuch as not every matter is prepared to receive a given form but requires preparation, how is the water prepared to receive the form of blood? This is no difficulty for one who understands, for the requirement of preparation of matter that it may receive the form is a feature of the natural order, and the philosophist had recourse to the principles of natural causality in order to refute miracles. We concede that with respect to the natural order miracles do not exist, but with respect to the supernatural⁷ order all miracles exist. For the lower world is the world of nature. It has contact with the immaterial realm from which miracles come. Indeed, miracles are generated by the contact of this world with immaterial entities. Therefore miracles only occurred in Israel, as will be demonstrated later. Since Israel has contact with immaterial entities, therefore miracles and wonders are to be found among them. This one objects,

⁵ Very likely referring to Eliezer Eilburg. (See Joseph Davis, "The *Ten Questions* of Eliezer Eilburg and the Problem of Jewish Unbelief in the 16th Century," JQR 91:3–4, 2001.)

⁶ מִמִּין עַל שְׂאִינוֹ מִינוֹ, literally, "from one species to a diverse species." Maharal borrows terminology from the laws of kashrut, where mixtures of the same species (מִין בְּמִינוֹ, e.g., wine with wine) follow one rule, but mixtures of different species (מִין בְּשֵׁאִינוֹ מִינוֹ, e.g., beef with vegetable) follow a different rule. Mixing diverse species may work in the kitchen, but not in logical argument.

⁷ בְּעוֹלָם הַנִּבְדָּל. I have translated נִבְדָּל as "immaterial" where modifying "entities." In the context of "realm" or "order," "supernatural" or "transcendent" is more appropriate.

how can it be imagined that a thing be generated from anything at random?—this is impossible according to nature! But outside the bounds of nature, it is not impossible. Similarly, one objects that if the world was necessarily generated by God, if it behaved contrary to the order of nature, this would be a deviation from that order by His will alone; but we say that all is according to His will. Even by his opinion—for he believes in the eternal pre-existence of the world, and that everything proceeds necessarily from God—even though we do not accept his premise, were we to grant the premise the conclusion would still be in error; for though one maintains that miracles which come from God have no intelligible order, that is not the case at all.

But just as the natural world has a settled order by which it operates, so the miracles have an order as well. For there are miracles in the world by virtue of the world's connection, contact, and integration with the supernatural realm. They have an orderly pattern because that connection has an orderly pattern. Therefore miracles are generated only at certain times, and not continually. When God gave the manna to Israel, don't say at all that this was not according to the proper order of reality, for then the order of the world would then depart from that reality within which it is proper to function. For just as it is proper for the world to function according to its nature and conduct, so is it proper for Israel, insofar as they have contact with the supernatural realm, to have patterned miracles.⁸ These miracles have an orderly pattern from God, and nothing about the miracles can be called a change in the created order, for we say that everything has an orderly pattern from God. This philosopher did not know this at all; for had he known it, he should have answered himself even according to his own belief that just as the world is according to the order that God established, so the wonders have an orderly pattern from God as well, and this is no change from the order He established. For just as God established nature according to reason and intellect, so God established the non-natural according to reason and intellect. This further demonstrates that though the miracles are not natural, nevertheless they do not constitute a change. For just as it is proper for things to be generated in the world according to nature, so it is proper for non-natural things to be generated in the world by a supernatural agent. In that case, natural and non-natural entities are explained by the same logic. Whoever does not understand the non-natural will say that this is a novelty which deviates from the worldly order. But this is not the case at all. Just as the natural has a natural cause, so the non-natural has an immaterial cause.

Second Opponent: Gersonides

Let us return to our topic. Some of the sages of our people, like Gersonides, who in his exposition started analyzing the miracles and saying that some were

⁸ Israel is thus uniquely privileged to experience miracles, by virtue of their unique contact with the transcendent realm.

miracles in essence, and others in accident. “Miracles in essence” include the rod changing into a serpent, and the water into blood. “Miracles in accident” includes Moses’s hand becoming leprous, and Jeroboam’s hand withering on the altar.⁹ Also, there are miracles of which the prophet knows in advance, and those of which he does not know in advance. Of those which the prophet knows of in advance, there are also two categories: the one of which the prophet prays before they occur (as when Elisha prayed that the men be struck by blinding light (II Kings 6:18), or that the widow’s son be revived (II Kings 4:35), and the other of which he does not pray but simply decrees them to happen, as when Elijah said, “If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men,” (II Kings 1:10), and the miracle which Elisha worked with the oil (II Kings 4:1–4), and the like.

You will see in the case of all these miracles that there is a prophet present, and you will learn thereby that God intended him to perform these miracles before all of Israel so they would believe that he was a prophet. If the miracles were not dependent on his being a prophet, they would not be a sign of his prophetic mission.

Gersonides inquired further concerning miracles: there must be an agent who performs these miracles, and the agent must know the existent things and their order of operation. For how can one transform a rod into a snake, unless one knows the order and manner of action of a snake? There are then only three possible ways that signs and miracles can come about: from God, from the Active Intellect, or from the prophet. Now if God were the agent of miracles, His action would be inferior to that of the Active Intellect,¹⁰ for the action of the Active Intellect is good in its essence, while a miracle is only accidentally good (for example, changing the rod to a snake was not good by its essence, but only by the circumstance that it would enable the Israelites to achieve perfect faith). Moreover, the action of the Active Intellect would be superior because it applies at all times, whereas a miracle occurs only at one given time. Furthermore, God’s performance of a miracle would involve Him in a change of will and knowledge, unless we say that the occurrence of the miracle was determined and ordered by a primordial will. Now it is absurd

⁹ In the former examples, the essence or object-identity (“quiddity”) of a thing changes miraculously. In the latter, the object remains the same object, but its properties (accidents) change.

¹⁰ The source of this argument is Gersonides *Wars of the Lord* VI, 10. However, there is a close resemblance between the outline of Maharal’s refutation of Gersonides and Eliezer’s refutation of Gersonides in *Deeds of the Lord* III, 1. The resemblance of these two passages is one of the strongest evidences that Maharal became acquainted with Eliezer’s views, either in oral discussion or through reading his completed manuscript, between the composition of his first and second prefaces to *Prodiges*. It would be quite a stretch to claim that Maharal, at this point in his development, had worked his way through Gersonides’s *Wars of the Lord* on his own, yet did not show familiarity here with its general range of topics, much less with the main doctrines of Maimonides’s *Guide*! The far more likely explanation is that Eliezer directed Maharal to just those doctrines and arguments that were pertinent to Eliezer’s own concerns, and to Maharal’s current project.

that God's will would change. But the view that miracles occur in accord with God's primordial will is similar to what might appear from the saying of our rabbis regarding miracles: "The Holy and Blessed One set a condition with creation,"¹¹ and "Five things were created Friday evening at twilight,"¹² i.e., after the world was created but before the Sabbath began. The implications of this are absurd. For in that case, there would be no need to bring about the miracle, but it would happen at the ordained time even without the prophet, which is contrary to common sense. Furthermore, if it was ordained at creation, one of two things must be so: (1) The benefit of the miracle would accrue accidentally, so that the miracle itself would not have occurred for that purpose, for the benefit would be a product of later action, not of the original decreeing of the miracle, which is the height of impossibility and absurdity, that a miracle be created to no purpose; or (2) The circumstance for which the miracle occurs, must itself occur by necessity. Take for example the splitting of the Red Sea. If God knew at the creation of the world that this would happen, that the Egyptians would pursue the Israelites, etc.

Thus far his argument, in brief. Now, if we grant his assumption that the Active Intellect governs all things in the world, we have no grounds for refuting his conclusion, for that is precisely what he assumes, and on that assumption he has built his silver tower.¹³ But if the assumption be not granted, the conclusion falls as well. However, we will take the trouble here to refute his allegation that [God's performance of a miracle] would entail alteration of the divine will and knowledge. For this objection is based on the theory that we cannot posit attributes of God, that God is identical with His intellect, and that if God's knowledge changes, His essence would change, God forbid—for that is their argument.

But we, disciples of Moses, do not say this, and God forbid we should say this of Him! For God—whom the rabbis called the Blessed Holiness, not the Blessed Intellect—His essence is unknowable, except that He is separate from any material thing, body, or created being. That is what is implied in the epithet, "the Holy and Blessed One," for "holy" means "separate." He is utmost simplicity. By being utterly simple, nothing is separate from Him.¹⁴ For

¹¹ *Genesis Rabbah* 20.

¹² Mishnah *Avot* 5:6. The philosophical difference between the Jewish Aristotelians (Maimonides, Gersonides) and Maharal finds natural expression in their different interpretation of rabbinic texts, such as this one. Fortunately, we have Maharal's direct commentary on this passage in the excerpt from *Way of Life* below (pp. 334–36).

¹³ The "silver tower" is an image which Ephraim borrows from Maharal in the introduction to *Gleanings*.

¹⁴ There appears to be a contradiction between Maharal's assertions that "God is utmost simplicity" and that "nothing is separate from Him." The contradiction may however be of formulation only. The notion of God's simplicity is derived from the Aristotelian tradition. The notion of God embracing everything is derived from the kabbalistic tradition. But how God can retain simplicity while embracing everything, is the old "many from the One" problem that plagued much of philosophy, especially in the Neo-Platonic tradition. It is akin to the difficulty which Gersonides rightly points out in Maimonides's philosophy, how God's knowledge can embrace all particulars while

whatever has a boundary and is individualized by it, is thereby separated from what is not within its boundary. But He, being simple, has no boundary, so nothing is separate from Him, thus He knows all and is all-powerful. As He is without boundary, so all proceeds from Him, as will be shown. If He did not know all, or all did not proceed from Him, this would have to be because He was bounded as a specific entity, but that cannot be, because He cannot be delimited;¹⁵ that much is clear. God knows everything by His wisdom and motivates all by His power, for there is no distinction between the intellectual act by which He apprehends things and His actions by which He causes things, for the divine apprehension is also an action and is expressed by an active verb, e.g. “God knew,” which is similar to “God spoke.” Just as God’s actions are categorized one way or another in accordance with the recipient, so God’s apprehension is considered in the light of the recipient. For apprehension is an act, therefore it is expressed by a verb. This is not the place to explain this fully, and we need not belabor it. It is similarly the case with all the other attributes. But the truth is as we said above, that one must not identify God’s knowledge with His essence. The rabbis, in their profound wisdom, indicated the truth in these matters when they called God the Holy One, i.e. God is a simple being, separate from all beings. Therefore they spoke of Him by way of negation, that He is separate from all existent beings. When we say that His knowledge is not His essence, this removes the difficulty that a change in His knowledge would entail a change in His existence, for that knowledge is not His essence, but He is described as all-knowing. This is the way of life which it is fitting for all Israel to know and believe, so that they should not follow in those crooked paths which they invented out of their own mind, making improper allegations¹⁶ about the blessed Lord, as you will see from their words. Therefore what [Gersonides] claims, that [God’s performing miracles] would involve a change in His will, this is not a change in Him, just as a succession

retaining simplicity. Maharal is close to the Biblical view, which is totally committed to the idea of God’s knowing everything in the created world and acting frequently on it, but is not concerned with articulating a concept of a simple, unchanging divine essence. Maharal avoids Maimonides’s contradiction concerning the divine knowledge at this point (which he mistakenly ascribes to Gersonides) by denying that God’s knowledge is identical with the divine essence, declaring instead that it is an act of God, which can therefore be plural, contingent and changing. So far, so good. This is also consistent with Maharal’s emphasis on God’s total otherness. But Maharal muddies the waters here by jumping to the kabbalistic view that God embraces all. If he wanted to have his cake and eat it, he might say that God as *Ein Sof* possesses Aristotelian simplicity and unchangingness and is totally other, while God as *Sefirot* embraces all of creation. But even if this is his view, he is not willing to express it exoterically, beyond the cryptic assertions he makes here.

¹⁵ מוגבל = bounded, delimited, defined (גבול = *finis*, limit, boundary).

¹⁶ ויחפאו על דברים...—this rare form occurs only once in the Bible, II Kings 17:9, in the context of describing the rampant and chronic idolatry that the chronicler names as a cause of the downfall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The pejorative connotations of Maharal’s using this phrase to describe medieval philosophical discourse about God are all too clear.

of different divine actions does not involve any change in Him. Understand these things, for they show the correct model of faith.

And now, consider their claim that God is an abstract mind. Now, any mind knows its object by holding a representation within itself corresponding to the object outside itself. In that case, God would be passive with respect to His effects, and the effect would have priority over the cause. And as for what they say, that God apprehends Himself, and is the cause of those creatures which have their existence from Him, and their formula that “the Intellect, the Knower and the Known are one entity,” which they discuss at great length, from which it follows that the One Who apprehends Himself, Who is the cause of existent beings, is at the same time the apprehended and known—when all is said and done, it is utterly absurd. For the intellect is united with its object, as we said—the intellect has knowledge corresponding to the object. But God has no boundary by which to be defined. If you say God’s essence is intellect, you thereby set a boundary to Him. It is wrong to say that God is united with a particular object of knowledge, implying that He is then that particular thing. Furthermore, they¹⁷ deny Him knowledge of the deeds performed [by His creatures]. For even if He knows existent entities insofar as He is their Cause, how shall He know the deeds they perform, of which He is not the cause, and which one committed against Him, such as sin and iniquity? Therefore to say that God is Intelligence, is unintelligent!¹⁸ Rather you should conclude that we cannot make any specific statement about God.

Therefore, [Gersonides’s] objection—how can pure intellect produce matter?¹⁹—is an objection to the philosophers only if we accept their premise that God is pure intellect. But if we say that God’s essence is pure being, [the objection to the *ex nihilo* doctrine of creation disappears, for] the existent beings of the world can indeed be generated from pure Being. And even though we claim that the creatures which are generated from God are material, inasmuch as He is pure Being He is not delimited, and from His Being proceed all beings—there is no objection here. But if we were to adopt their assumption, that God is pure intellect—for they say His knowledge is His essence—they may well wonder, how pure intellect can be the cause of matter! But we say that God is pure being, without further definition; this does not imply God is Intellect, indeed we do not know His being or substance. Perhaps one will say, then, that God has commonality²⁰ with existent beings and the name of

¹⁷ This charge is correct as applied to the strict Aristotelians and to Gersonides.

¹⁸ סכלו האומרים שעצמותו שכל.

¹⁹ Which Gersonides raises to argue for the existence of primordial matter, in preference to *creatio ex nihilo*.

²⁰ משתתף—The term שיתוף designates partnership and is used in medieval philosophy among other things to describe the Christian notion of Christ’s sharing divinity with God the Father. Here the notion is that God shares being with His creatures. But Maharal rejects this notion, as we shall see. A pantheistic conclusion could indeed be drawn from Maharal’s premise that God is pure Being Who gives rise to finite beings. But he apparently declined to follow that route, at least here.

Being²¹ subsumes them? This poses no difficulty either. For it does not follow, from the fact that all existent beings derive from His Being, that there is any commonality between them and Him. For they derive their existence from Him, and from His pure Being all proceeds, but everything is nothing without Him. His Being is truly called Being, but all else is nothing.

If one object: “If God’s essence is not Intellect—and surely it is not matter, God forbid—then what *is* God?” We respond: If we are unable to define precisely the nature of the human soul, how much more, in the case of the Creator of All, should we refrain from putting this question! “For man cannot see Me and live.”

You can learn all these things from the divine names. The proper name is YHWH = Being, for that is His essence, but intellect is not the same as being. Consider these matters carefully, for these thinkers have strayed from the truth, yet they congratulated themselves that they were sitting in God’s presence.²² But that is not how it is—blessed be He, and blessed be His glorious Name forever! Thus all [Gersonides’s] inquiries, whether God performs miracles, or an angel, or a prophet, have no validity, for it all varies with the circumstances and the miracle in question. There is one kind of miracle which God associates with Himself directly, such as the slaying of the first-born, as Scripture says, “I will pass through the land of Egypt,” which the rabbis interpreted, “I and not an angel, I and not a seraph, I and not an emissary, but the Holy and Blessed One Himself in all His glory.” The splitting of the Red Sea, which was even greater, was also a direct act of God. Some miracles are performed through an angel, as in the case of Daniel (“My God sent His angel, who shut the mouths of the lions”—Daniel 6:23), or the defeat of Sennacherib (“That night an angel of the Lord went out and struck down...the Assyrian camp”—II Kings 19:35). Thus it all depends on the circumstances of the miracle. But to decide that it is all done by God or all by an angel, is fallacious.

As for the argument that if God were the agent of the miracles, then the action of the Active Intellect would be superior to that of God, inasmuch as the Active Intellect’s actions were good in essence whereas those of God were good only accidentally, insofar as they enabled the Israelites to achieve faith—this, too, is absurd and has no validity. If the argument proved that God produced no actions at all that were good in essence, the objection would be valid. But God after all created the Active Intellect, which generates things in accord with God’s will, not some necessary truth. Thus God generates those things which are good in essence, and *in addition* those things which are accidentally good. Even though by itself the accidentally good is not superior to the essentially good, nevertheless performing both of them is on a higher level. For if God did not perform the accidentally good [as well as the essentially good], His action would not be all-encompassing. But one

²¹ שם הויה—a *double entendre*, ambiguous between “being” and the name YHWH, the Biblical proper name of God. Indeed, the strength of Maharal’s argument derives in part from the implied etymology of that sacred name.

²² A swipe at Maimonides’s parable of the castle in *Guide* III, 51.

must ascribe all-encompassing to Him, for He is the Maker of All, and there is nothing apart from Him.

His argument is furthermore flawed to begin with, namely [the argument] that transforming the rod into a snake is good only accidentally, not essentially. It is the same as saying that the event itself occurs not necessarily, but only accidentally. Indeed, it does not conform to the general order of existence which proceeds from God. But it does come to testify to the greatness of the Creator, Who can do anything by His will. As for the angel, from whom it is arranged that good actions proceed, this is because God arranged it so. But the angel cannot alter the order of nature, only God can do so by His will, for the angel is not the all-encompassing agent.

As for what he said further, that if the miracles were arranged by God, they either had to proceed necessarily from His primal will, or else require an alteration of His will—both alternatives are absurd. We already said that even if God wills now to perform a miracle, this would require no change in His essence. We argued at length above that a change in will does not require a change in essence. And if you say the miracle was arranged by God's primal will, this does not imply necessity, as he supposed. For what the rabbis said,²³ "God set a condition with the sea that it should divide, etc.," this means that it was consistent with the order of existence that it *could* happen later, not that it was part of the order of existence that it *must* happen.²⁴ Still, it is possible to alter the order from the side of the recipient, who can turn evil into good through mercy,²⁵ and good into evil through sin. If the Egyptians had repented, they would have overridden the predestined order. There is thus no difficulty here, for that which is pre-arranged can be altered through repentance and mercy, and one should not object that this would constitute a change in the divine knowledge and the divine will, for this has been the way of God from all time, that mercy always annuls the decree. That which has been arranged by God from creation is one thing, and that which is arranged by Him through mercy is another. The one proceeds from order, and the other from mercy, but mercy has its own order. Should one object, that there is a change in the divine will here, that when a person implores for mercy, God changes His mind from willing X to not willing it, we have already replied that this involves no change to His essence. These are actions which proceed from Him, and do not involve any change in His essence, any more than other actions which proceed from Him.

In summary, none of their arguments arrive at any generally valid conclusions. We shall not argue the point any more.

²³ *Genesis Rabbah* 6.

²⁴ The Hebrew is unclear here, but this is what I conjecture Maharal must mean, in order to be consistent with the point he is making.

²⁵ רחמים—either through prayer, or through meritorious acts, either of which can result in a positive alteration in the divine decree regarding the subsequent course of events.

Third Opponent: A Position Somewhat Like Eliezer Ashkenazi's?

It is furthermore objected²⁶ that inasmuch as God arranges the order of existent beings, it is not fitting that God should alter that order. For if God produces a sign like the sun's standing still, which is a negation and alteration of the order of existence, it is not proper that a change in the order should proceed from the Author of that order. Did not the rabbis refute this objection when they said, "The Holy and Blessed One set a condition with the works of creation..."? They meant to respond to the difficulty: since all beings are found to have an orderly existence from God, how can any change come about? For it is fitting that God's works and pattern should endure forever without change. Furthermore, if they are all created in God's Name, which endures eternally without change, then just as His name endures eternally, so the works of creation which are dependent on His name ought to be eternal, "for in Jah the Lord is Rock of the worlds." To this, they replied that when they were created, it was ordered by God that the miracle be built into their pattern, just as the natural order is from Him. The overall pattern is that in creation, He did not determine everything completely according to nature, but He provided also for miracles which are not according to nature, in a way that the miracle would occur eventually. Just as all the works of creation were created by His name, so by His Name He ordered that nature could change and the miracle could be produced—all this was created by His Name. Thus when the miracle occurred, it would not negate the order of existent beings which owe their existence to Him, may His Name be blessed and exalted. We made clear above that the miracles are arranged by God also, and they are not a change in the pattern. Therefore the miracles had an order at the start of creation similar to the order of nature. This is the true meaning of what the rabbis said, "The Holy and Blessed One made a condition with the works of creation," i.e. the miracles had an ordered pattern also. Moreover, when nature changes occasionally at times, this is not a change, for a momentary variation is not at all the negation of nature. Thus the rabbis said:²⁷ "Whoever says Hallel every day is like one who curses and blasphemes." This refers to

²⁶ It is not clear who the target of the next refutation is. In my opinion, Maharal here argues in part against Eliezer Ashkenazi. Although both Eliezer and Maharal cite the rabbinic dictum, "God set a condition with the sea that it should divide," they give it a different inflection. Eliezer interprets it to mean that all the occurrences of Biblical history, including the miracles, are pre-programmed, including the basic natural order and all preordained deviations from that order. Maharal interprets it to mean that God built into the original order of reality a natural and a supernatural dimension, and reserved to Himself the discretion to intervene miraculously in the natural order, according to predetermined rules, whenever He so chose. However, I have not been able to find in *Deeds of the Lord* the interpretations of the sun standing still or the sundial-shadow receding, to which Maharal refers later in this section. Perhaps Eliezer brought another author to the Maharal's attention, which illustrated Eliezer's position in some respects, but differed from it in others?

²⁷ BT *Shabbat* 118.

the psalms of praise which were instituted to commemorate the miracles and wonders that God performs in His world. Whoever says Hallel every day implies that God performs miracles and wonders every day, which is tantamount to blasphemy, for he implies that the world is not orderly in its conduct, but everything is contrary to nature and to the order by which the world ought to operate. This is not a wise observation to make of the creatures created in God's name, and is doubtless derogatory. But if the miracle and change in nature are occasional and temporary, not continual, this does not destroy the orderly course of events. Saying Hallel every day implies that the world has no orderly pattern, and existence has no continuity. I will give a different interpretation of Hallel later; both are true and correct.

He also said that it is impossible that it is impossible that wonders be produced whose concept would in reality entail a contradiction, for instance that a black thing change to white and remain black, for this is contradictory. I say that such a thing is possible and entails no contradiction. Such an event would have both a natural and a supernatural aspect. For when the rod was changed to a serpent, it did not lose its rod-identity entirely to the point of not being called a rod. For if such were the case, then the divine rod would simply have disappeared, and another rod created in its place. If you say that there was now a serpent in its place, with the qualification that this was a serpent that was going to turn back into a rod, then indeed this serpent clearly has something rodlike about it, and could be called by two names, "serpent" because that is its present state, and "rod" because that is what it is going to become. The case is the same with "black" and "white." It is possible for something to become black against its nature, yet it is still white with respect to the state to which it will be restored. It will further be demonstrated that something can have two entirely opposite characters. Thus his words and arguments fail to provide the truth.

He further assumed that it is impossible that there be a change in the celestial bodies. This is because the miracles are actuated by the Active Intellect, which itself is influenced by the celestial bodies.²⁸ Thus the Active Intellect cannot bring about change in the celestial bodies, because it is their passive effect. Furthermore, any loss incurred by the celestial bodies would generate great loss to the lower beings in the terrestrial realm. Therefore he agreed that it is not possible for a miraculous change to occur in the celestial bodies. He then proceeded to interpret the verse, "Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon, O moon, in the Valley of Aijalon!" (Joshua 10:12), and also the receding of the shadow of the sundial which was performed for Hezekiah. (II Kings 20: 8–11) He butchered the scriptures and ruined the prophets; he made mishmash of them in his commentaries. Luckily for the prophets, his interpretation was so far-fetched that whoever would see or hear it would reject it out of hand. If

²⁸ This position is certainly not Eliezer's. Eliezer held that God performed miracles directly. He also had little use for the concept of "Active Intellect." However, the author may be the same one Eliezer refers to in Part III, Chapter 1, who held that the miracle of the sun standing still was greater than that of the splitting of the Red Sea.

his interpretation had only followed the scriptures, perhaps some ignoramuses would have been seduced by it, but now none would be tempted by it. The cornerstone of his edifice is the principle that there will not be any changes in the heavenly bodies, as all miracles are produced by the Active Intellect, which is the passive effect of the celestial bodies—all of which is his own assumption and the fruit of his imagination, which has no basis in scriptures or rabbinic authorities. He thought up this assumption which has no root or basis, and the truth is the opposite of what he thought, as we shall demonstrated, with God's help. But we say that God produces miracles and wonders in His world and is able to produce miracles by His will even on the celestial bodies. As for what this writer said, that great loss would be wreaked on the lowly bodies if such changes are caused in the celestial bodies, that is not so; for the nature and conduct of the world is ordered by God, that it should guide it, and they will continue by the order that God gave them....

(p. 15, bottom) You have here the true explanation of the stopping of the sun for Joshua, that the thing happened exactly as reported. However, we need to consider whether this miracle occurred for the whole world or only in this valley. One may argue that the stopping of the sun occurred only for Joshua and Israel in that valley, but for the rest of the world the sun did not stand still. This would be still a greater wonder, demonstrating the power and wonders of God! If one objected, how it could be conceived that the sun proceed in its course and stand still at one and the same time—as Gersonides wrote, this would be an instance of two opposite predicates of the same subject, which cannot coexist—we already said that his words are incorrect, for it is possible and can well be that the sun proceed on course in its natural aspect, yet stand still in its miraculous aspect. For one thing can have two opposite predicates from different aspects, one by nature and the other apart from nature. There is no doubt that the miraculous, supernatural attribute is of a higher degree and level than the natural. As they are different levels, the sun was in two aspects according to these levels—proceeding in course by respect of nature, and standing still by respect of super-nature. While it was proper that it proceed with respect to nature, so too there is an intellectual aspect by virtue of which it should stand still in the middle of the heavens, as was made clear; it is an intellectual aspect but not natural. Therefore it had cessation of movement on the supernatural level. For Joshua and his people, who needed the supernatural miracle, the sun stood still; for the rest of the world who had no need of the miracle, the course of nature prevailed.²⁹ Similarly, when the rod became serpent, there is no doubt that it was so in a supernatural way, while

²⁹ This is a fascinating line of thought which may be related to the principle that miracles occur for Israel only. One wonders how far he would pursue the principle that alternate and contradictory realities can coexist (and he pushes it *very* far in the continuation here). Is there indeed one world? Are there “parallel universes,” as modern quantum theorists hypothesize? Tamar Ross has investigated the place of miracles in Maharal's cosmological outlook in her article הנס כמימד נוסף בהגות המהר"ל מפראג (“The Miracle as Additional Dimension in Maharal's Thought” in *Da'at* 17 [1986]). Time does not permit pursuing these issues to their logical conclusion here.

in respect of nature it was not a serpent, for if it was a serpent by nature, the rod would have disappeared and a serpent appeared in its place, and there would no longer be any rod, and he could have made the divine rod from a different serpent. But I say rather that it was a serpent supernaturally but not naturally. . . .

You will find in the plagues of the Egyptians that there was the coincidence of opposites in the same subject. Our rabbis said that when there was a bowl filled with water, and an Israelite and an Egyptian drank from it at the same time, the Israelite would drink water and the Egyptian blood. Thus it was that the water retained its natural aspect for the Israelite but its supernatural aspect for the Egyptian. Similarly, with regard to the plague of darkness, they said that it was dark for the Egyptians, but when an Israelite entered the place of darkness, he had light. Thus there were two things in the air at once, light and darkness. For there is no doubt that the Egyptians were not smitten with blinding rays so they could not see the light. That simply was not the case. Rather, there was darkness in the air for the Egyptians, and for the Israelites there was no darkness. Thus you have two opposite predicates of the same subject, which is the air. This reveals a great deal about the power and efficacy of the miracle-maker, who only performs the miracle for the one for whom it should be performed, whereas he who has no need of the miracle remains in his natural condition. Thus the performance of miracles involves two opposite predicates of the same subject, the one natural and the other supernatural. Since the Egyptians who were recipients of the miracle were deserving of the darkness, and Israel deserving of the light, there were two opposites with respect to the recipients. Now the water had some preparation for becoming blood, inasmuch as all water has some admixture and is not entirely pure. Therefore the water became blood for the Egyptians by way of miracle, not nature, that the water received the form of blood by virtue of that preparation; even though it was not complete preparation, they became blood not by nature, while for Israel the water remained normal. . . .

The rabbis said: "Ten miracles occurred for our ancestors in the Temple. . . . [one was] they stood pressed together, yet bowed down and had room."³⁰ This is another thing that is impossible according to the philosophers, for it involves two bodies occupying the same space for a moment, for if they had room while bowing down, the place must have gotten larger, yet the surrounding enclosure was no larger than before. But for the sages of the truth³¹ this is no deviation from nature, for that which occurs by way of miracle and wonder is not natural and has nothing in common with nature at all, that it should be difficult [from that vantage point], but rather it is simply non-natural. Therefore when they bowed, they had room, for this occurred by the realm of the immaterial from which miracles come to the world, and everything is spacious³² there, as if they had left the natural world to stand in the world

³⁰ Mishnah *Avot* 5:4.

³¹ I.e., kabbalists, or simply those who accept the rabbinic tradition as infallible.

³² Spacious but not spatial (if space is an attribute of material entities)?

that is not natural, which does not participate in the natural. The supernatural realm does not push upon the natural to increase the room and make way for more people, only for those worshipping there was room. There is a profound hint in that it was only for the worshippers that the enlargement took place, for the act of worship is for the sake of the divine....

Therefore when Elijah revived the Tzarephite boy and Elisha the son of the Shunammite, this was surely impossible from the natural aspect, but not impossible for the action of God. For since the prophets had contact with the world of the immaterial,³³ they could open the locked gate which is the world of nature, which was locked against material beings. They opened closed gates and entered the world of the immaterial; they brought from the world of the immaterial something which is incommensurable³⁴ with nature.

The general conclusion is that the working of miracles is a departure from the world of nature to generate something which is not natural. How, then, can it occur to us to bring evidence from natural things to the issue of miracles and wonders which are not natural? For non-natural things are created by the Creator just as the natural things are created. You will find that material forms are received insofar as the matter is prepared to receive them, and they are similarly received without material preparation from the blessed God, in accordance with the order of His wisdom, as we have elaborated above. These wonderful things will become clear to you when you understand them. Enough said on the matter of the hidden miracles; may He (be He blessed) enlighten our eyes!

³³ This contradicts what Maharal said in the First Preface, that the prophets were limited by the sensory nature of their apperception to knowledge of this world.

³⁴ שלא יתכן. The Biblical meaning of the root תכן is “to measure.” In philosophical vocabulary, the common meaning is “to be possible/probable.” Either meaning fits this context. The supernatural is impossible by the standards of nature, because it is incommensurable with the natural.

WAY OF LIFE (1589)
ON MIRACLES, DIVINE KNOWLEDGE,
AND NATURAL LAW

Maharal (R. Judah Loew of Prague)

Commentary to Mishnah Avot, Chapter 5

Avot 5:6: Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight: The mouth of the earth, the mouth of the well, the mouth of [Balaam's] ass, the rainbow, the manna, the rod, the shamir-worm, the letters, the inscription, and the tablets. Some say: Also demons and Moses's burial-place and Abraham's ram. Some say: the first tongs by which later tongs were made.

One should ask why these things were specified as being created at twilight and not during the day, and specifically at the twilight of Sabbath eve. Maimonides interpreted this Mishnah in a way that the sages did not intend. He said it was the sages' view that the divine will ought not to change all the time, but that God established the nature of these things from the six days of creation in such a way that at the time when God wanted a miracle to be performed, the miracle would occur automatically, so that it would not involve an alteration of the divine will. Maimonides said that that was also the sages' meaning in the midrash: "Rabbi Johanan said: God established a condition with the works of creation, with the sea that it should split; with the fire that it should not burn Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; etc." Maimonides wrote in his book that the sages' purpose in saying this was that it was very problematic for them that nature might undergo change after its creation, or that the divine will might be changed after it was set a certain way. Therefore they said that from the very first creation God arranged nature in such a way that a miracle would be generated at such-and-such a time, and so the miracle occurred, and it was no change at all in the divine will. Thus Maimonides explained the sages' words.

Certainly it did not occur to the sages, either in this Mishnah or in the midrash, that God arranged at the time of creation that the miracle should occur in its time because of a problem of change in the divine will! These things have no root or foundation at all...

Because it is the view of the philosophers that the divine knowledge and will are the divine essence, so that if God had a change of mind His essence would change, they said that there is no change of will here. How remote are these views from what is sensible! If that were the case, what need would Israel have of prayer at the time of splitting the sea? If nature was arranged that the sea should be split, it was inevitable that it should happen! And if it

was not so arranged, it could not be. It was about this and similar matters that Maimonides said the knowledge that God has of future contingent events does not make them necessary. Even if God knows everything in His primordial will, His knowledge does not determine it. Even if we cannot imagine how such a state of affairs is conceivable, is not God's knowledge His essence? If God's essence is unknowable, then God's knowledge is unknowable [to us]. In this manner Maimonides dismissed all objections, such as deducing from this that everything is predetermined before a person comes to be. All this follows from his equating the divine knowledge with the divine essence. But we say that they have imposed a condition which will not bear scrutiny and which is not to be found in the words of the sages.¹ We have argued at length, in the Preface to *Prodigies of the Lord*, that the divine knowledge is not the divine essence. We cited supporting evidence from the Torah and the sages that the divine knowledge is one of the divine actions, as in "God knew." (Exodus 2:25) In that case, knowledge is one of God's actions and not His essence. Why should we contradict Scripture all the time? ... [lengthy citation from *Prodigies of the Lord* follows here]

...I heard that there was a man in Poland² who when he read my words in *Gevurot Ha-Shem* gathered many people and bad-mouthed me without limit to the effect that all this was a departure from correct faith. He spoke a lot of nonsense and foolishness in order to aggrandize himself and impress others as ignorant as himself, people of this generation who read books which the sages would not have approved of—the third type of those who sit before the sages. All this was to complain against me that I had said that the divine knowledge is not of the divine essence but divine actions. This bad-mouther, why did he not bad-mouth and object to the Zohar and all the worthy books which the kabbalists wrote? Did they say God's essence is intellect? Did they not rather compare God to the soul from which all powers derive? You will find this in all their writings, and it is the view of our rabbis as we have said above. Rabbi Meir³ wrote in *Helek Ha-Yihud* Chapter 11: "The enlightened⁴ called God 'Soul,' because He is the Soul of His attributes." Thus you find that God is Soul to His attributes, which are the emanations. This will demonstrate to you that one cannot say that knowledge—which includes Wisdom and Understanding⁵—is the divine essence. But those who say that knowledge

¹ Maharal is right that equating the divine knowledge with the divine essence is a medieval innovation that is not to be found in the rabbinic sayings. However, the rabbis could have asserted the unchanging character of natural law (a concept which they probably borrowed from the Stoics) without this additional stipulation. See Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Harvard 1979, Chapter 11: "On Providence."

² All agree that this refers to Eliezer Ashkenazi.

³ I have not been able to identify either the "Rabbi Meir" or "*Helek ha-Yihud*" of which Maharal speaks here. It seems, though, from connecting Maharal's sure and authoritative manner both here and in the Second Introduction to *Prodigies*, that Maharal had firmly formed his own outlook from these or similar kabbalistic sources before meeting Eliezer Ashkenazi in the late 1570s.

⁴ חכמי האמת, referring to the kabbalists.

⁵ As *Hokhmah* and *Binah* are among the emanations, they are distinct from the essence

is the divine essence, give no credence to any of the kabbalists' views, and I need not go into any further length on that.

The upshot of all this is that these scholars disagree with all the assertions of kabbalah. Whoever understands the matter from this perspective will know that the correct view is based on the premises of the kabbalistic wisdom. The view of the dissenters is that everything is the divine essence. Yet no attribute can be predicated of Him, as one sees from their words. Those who hear their words—which have, alas for our sins, reached a wide audience—accept them as if they were from Moses's Torah, and tremble when anyone speaks out against them. When they then learn the kabbalistic views, they give them credence and discover that they are true. But if they are indeed true, they fail to realize that they are holding opposite and contradictory points of view. They think it is only a linguistic difference, that one speaks in the language of kabbalah and the other in the language of the philosophers, as if that were sufficient to resolve the contradictions between them.⁶ But all this is a foolish view of people who do not understand the matter, for if they truly understood it, they would then see that the views are diametrically opposed. For would anyone dare to maintain that the kabbalists would admit that everything was the divine essence and that God has no attributes? In that case, what are the *middot* (attributes), and to what should the term “emanation” apply, if attributes can only be applied negatively to God? Who would consider drawing an equation between these two? Those who follow in the paths of the philosophers thought that this is complete unity. Therefore they said all these things. Ordinary people when they read these things think that to deviate from them would be to deny the divine unity, God forbid. But this has no substance, for this is not at all against the divine unity, and there is no ground for such a view.⁷

of God. Maharal here subscribes to the view that the Sefirot are *kelim*—instruments of the divinity, not the divine essence.

⁶ Maharal here cites Isserles's view in *Law of the Sacred Offering* (borrowed from Botarel) but rejects it as an evasion of the issues between philosophy and kabbalah which Maharal considers irreconcilable.

⁷ The continuation of this passage is of great interest for pinning down Maharal's own view on the relation of sefirot to divine essence and divine attributes, and tracing the influence of other kabbalists on his thought. However, it is outside the scope of my purpose here, which is to document the probable dates of his acquaintance with Isserles and the outcome of his dispute with Eliezer Ashkenazi. In all likelihood, Maharal formed his own view of the nature of God as free actor whose knowledge and will (being manifested in the sefirotic emanations) could freely change in history apart from the unchanging divine essence, from kabbalistic sources prior to his encounter with Eliezer Ashkenazi. Sherwin points out (pp. 190–1) that Maharal had substantially completed a draft of *Way of Life* by the time of publication of *The Lion's Whelp* in 1578, but that he modified the current chapter to narrate the aftermath of his argument with Eliezer after 1583. It is likely that in the course of researching these topics to reinforce his position he also gave enough study of Isserles's harmonistic position on philosophy and kabbalah in order to comment on it intelligently. *Way of Life* was published in 1589. Thus the 1580s see a deepening of Maharal's philosophical knowledge and working out of positions which he had already started conceiving earlier under the influence of his kabbalistic studies.

ETERNAL PATHS (1595)
THE PATH OF TORAH: CHAPTER 14
ON TORAH AND GENTILE LEARNING

Maharal (R. Judah Loew of Prague)

We read in Proverbs:

If you make your ear attentive to wisdom
And your mind open to discernment;
If you call to understanding
And cry aloud to discernment,
If you seek it as you do silver
And search for it as for treasures.
Then you will understand the fear of the Lord
And attain knowledge of God.
For the Lord grants wisdom;
Knowledge and discernment are by His decree. (2:2–6)

King Solomon (peace be his) meant to say that the person should prepare himself for wisdom and not be distracted by other things. This is expressed in “If you make your ear attentive to wisdom and your mind open to discernment.” He then continues, “if you call to understanding,” which means that one should love wisdom and yearn for it, for only one who yearns for it succeeds in acquiring it, just as when one person calls out to another, this is surely indicative of his seeking and desiring him. . . . “And cry aloud to discernment” indicates that one labors hard to achieve it, for crying aloud requires effort. “If you seek it as you do silver” indicates an even greater degree of effort. . . . “Then you will understand the fear of the Lord,” for if there is no wisdom, there is no reverence. “And attain knowledge of God,” for the reverse also holds: if there is no reverence there is no wisdom. [There follows a long digression on the enumeration of fear of the Lord as a separate category, and its relation to wisdom.] . . . Because reverence is a separate attainment, it is mentioned separately from the six [categories of wisdom]. . . . Even though it says later, “The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 9:10), this is different from the current passage—“then you will understand the fear of the Lord,” i.e. you will arrive at the higher wisdom to contemplate the truth of the blessed God, and in this way a person acquires reverence from Him to the extent that he apprehends Him.

It then continues, “and attain knowledge of the holy ones.”¹ Understand that this refers to apprehension of the supernal, that everything supernal is

¹ Maharal substitutes קדושים for אלהים. Apparently he understands the meaning

holy—this is the knowledge you will attain. Thus the verse mentions two things which transcend man. The first is the reverence of God; this transcends man insofar as God transcends all, and we know nothing of God, for whatever is not present in human experience is beyond human understanding. But when a person labors to attain wisdom, then he attains whatever understanding of God is possible of attainment. The verse then says, “and attain knowledge of the holy ones”—this is a level of understanding supernal in itself for it is so great, and is called “knowledge of the holy ones.” All this implies that a person needs to expend great effort to contemplate understanding of the supernal.

The passage then concludes, “For the Lord grants wisdom; knowledge and discernment are by His decree [literally: ‘from His mouth’].” It does not say that wisdom, discernment and knowledge are all from God’s mouth, but it makes a distinction. The midrash comments:²

Wisdom is great indeed, but knowledge and discernment are even greater. God *gives* wisdom; but to one whom He loves, He confers discernment and knowledge *from His mouth*. R. Isaac and R. Levi commented on this. The one said: “To what can this be compared? To a king who had a son. The son returned home from school and saw a morsel set before his father. The father cut off a piece and gave it to him. The son said, “I want the piece that is in your mouth.” The father gave it to him. Why? Because he loved him so much that he fed him from his own mouth. Similarly, “The Lord gives wisdom” in the ordinary case; but to one whom He especially loves, “He gives knowledge and discernment *from His mouth*.” The other said, “He gave him from the *putztelin* [chewed-up morsels] in his mouth.”

The distinction here is that every intellectual attainment is called “wisdom” and is a gift of God. But “knowledge and understanding” refers to supernal knowledge, divine knowledge which is entirely transcendent, and this is “from the mouth of God”....

Similarly, the Sages instituted a petition in the Amidah, “You graciously endow mortals with knowledge,” for inasmuch as man is a material being, endowing him with knowledge and intelligence (which are immaterial) is itself an act of grace... “and You teach mankind understanding”... indicates a higher level... “Grant us knowledge, discernment, and wisdom”... even without prayer, God spontaneously gives us [a certain level of knowledge], so what does one need prayer for? We pray for added knowledge and understanding... Surely God endows human beings with knowledge, for the soul without knowledge is not good, and the human species does not lack knowledge. But we pray that He should give us discernment, knowledge, and understanding, for not everyone is privileged with these....

of *elohim* in this context to refer to the supernal beings subordinate to God (whether angels, sefirot, or intelligences), and this verbal substitution makes his reading and interpretation clearer.

² *Talkut Shim'oni* on Proverbs 9:34.

The sages articulated two ideas in Tractate Berakhot:

R. Eleazar said: “Knowledge is so great, that it is mentioned at the start of the weekday benedictions.” R. Eleazar said: “Knowledge is so great that it is mentioned between two divine names, as it says, ‘For a God of knowledge is the Lord.’ (I Samuel 2:3) Furthermore, one should not have pity on whoever lacks knowledge, as it says, ‘For they are a people without understanding; that is why their Maker will show them no mercy.’ (Isaiah 27:11) R. Eleazar also said, ‘Whoever has knowledge, it is as if the Temple was built in his days. Knowledge is mentioned between two divine names, as it says, ‘For a God of knowledge is the Lord.’ And the Temple is mentioned between two divine names, as it says, ‘[The place You made Your abode, O Lord,] the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands established.’” (Exodus 15:17)³

The Sage’s words are exceedingly wise, explaining how the attribute of wisdom is supreme over all, so that through wisdom mankind is close to the supernal realm. The last saying (“knowledge is so great that it is mentioned between two divine names”) clarifies the first saying (“knowledge is mentioned at the start of the weekday benedictions”). For the weekday benedictions describe the bounty which God confers on the world; thus since knowledge is so high in rank and closeness to God that it is mentioned between two divine names, therefore it comes first in the bounties which God confers on the world... It is indeed difficult for the recipient to acquire, but God confers it continually...

...That knowledge appears between two divine names is indicative of the fact that one who attains knowledge achieves complete cleaving to God...

The saying, “Whoever has knowledge, it is as if the Temple was built in his days,” indicates that through the Temple, this world is elevated from the material level to the supernal level... similarly, when a person has knowledge, he ascends from the material level to the supernal level...

Since knowledge is the connection and attachment to the Blessed One, Israel who are children of God should properly have that added knowledge, for through that knowledge comes that connection and attachment to the Blessed One. For whoever is without knowledge should be given no compassion, but as Israel are children of God, He has compassion on them as a father over his children, hence they ought to have the added knowledge. This ties in with the midrash of the king who fed his son out of his own mouth; so [God feeds Israel from His mouth] knowledge and understanding. The dispute between R. Isaac and R. Levi is that by the view of the former he gives him a piece which is partly in his mouth and partly outside it; thus God grants some of His wisdom to Israel, but not necessarily that higher wisdom which is wholly supernal. But by the view of the latter, he gives him the chewed-up morsels which are entirely in his mouth, i.e. Israel’s special wisdom is entirely supernal. This controversy concerns profound matters concerning the wisdom that is special to the sages of Israel, but both agree that through that higher wisdom

³ BT *Berakhot* 34a.

humankind achieves complete connection with the Blessed One, and we will not delve further into this here.

The Sages elaborated on this matter in Tractate Berakhot: “Whoever sees the sages of the nations of the world should say, ‘Blessed is He Who gave of His wisdom to flesh and blood.’ Whoever sees the sages of Israel should say, ‘Blessed is He Who has shared of His wisdom with those who fear Him.’”⁴ What is the difference between the two? The difference is that “giving” wisdom (as in “who gave of His wisdom to flesh and blood”) does not connote the essence of the wisdom which is God’s, for inasmuch as they are flesh and blood, material creatures, God has endowed them with a kind of wisdom but not the truest divine wisdom which is immaterial and supernal. But with Israel God has shared the supernal divine wisdom. Do not object that man cannot attain the divine wisdom in any case. For the Torah is the divine jurisprudence; even though it appears to refer to material matters, nevertheless the intelligence in the Torah is the supernal intelligence which has given an altogether intellectual rule of law to Israel. It does not depend on the depth of wisdom. Even though the deeper reasons underlying the Torah are profound beyond measure, nevertheless even the exoteric sense of the Torah manifests an altogether divine, supernal intelligence.

Therefore the midrash says, “If someone says to you, ‘There is wisdom among the nations,’ believe him; for it says, ‘I will cause wisdom to perish from Edom [implying they had it originally].’ But if someone says to you, ‘There is Torah among the nations,’ do not believe him; for it says, ‘[Zion’s] king and princes are among the nations; there is no Torah.’”⁵ For the sages of the nations are not worthy of the divine, supernal intelligence which is the Torah. Similarly, Maimonides said in his work [the *Guide*] that what the gentile sages say concerning the sublunar realm is to be heeded, for they are wise concerning the physical world. But that which they say concerning what is above the lunar sphere—the metaphysical—is not to be heeded. For they are wise concerning the physical world, but concerning what is beyond the physical—the divine wisdom—one should not listen to them. As for their calling physical wisdom “wisdom” in the full sense, there is indeed no verbal distinction between speaking of “wisdom,” whether of Israel or of the nations. However, God gives Israel wisdom straight from His mouth, as the blessing indicates, “who has shared of His wisdom with those who fear Him,” as contrasted with “who gave of His wisdom to flesh and blood.” Still, the term “wisdom” is used, although their wisdom is not divine supernal wisdom beyond the material.

If so, it would appear from this that one may study the wisdom of the gentiles, for why should one not learn wisdom which has its source in God? Gentile wisdom is from God, inasmuch as God gave of His wisdom to them. It is not correct to argue that even though it is “wisdom” in the full sense, nevertheless one should not depart from the Torah, of which it is said, “You

⁴ BT *Berakhot* 58a.

⁵ *Lamentations Rabbah* 2:13.

shall meditate on it day and night.” One may bring evidence for this argument from Tractate *Menahot*: “Ben Dama asked R. Ishmael’s nephew: ‘One such as myself who has learned the entire Torah, is it permitted for me to learn Greek wisdom?’ He cited against him the verse, ‘This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth.’ Go and examine, what hour is neither day nor night, and learn Greek wisdom in that hour.”⁶ It would seem to be proved from this that it is forbidden to learn Greek wisdom, because it is written, ‘You shall meditate [on the Torah] day and night.’ But it is apparent that the ‘Greek wisdom’ referred to there is wisdom which has no application at all to the Torah, such as poetry or parables.... but surely it is permitted to learn those sciences which deal with the realia and order of the world. This can be supported by the passage: “We learned: At that time they said, ‘Cursed be the man who raises swine, and cursed be the man who teaches his son the wisdom of the Greeks.’ But they permitted the household of Rabban Gamaliel to discourse in Greek wisdom, because they were close to the [Roman] government.”⁷ The usage of *לספר* (“to discourse”) [instead of *ללמד* (“to study/teach”)] indicates linguistic studies. Such studies would confer no advantage for understanding matters of Torah, and is therefore forbidden. But scientific study is not forbidden, for such study is like a ladder on which to ascend to the wisdom of Torah.⁸ Furthermore, why would one call it “Greek wisdom,” if it is used to consider the realia of the world? Is not this wisdom common to all mankind? But an objection may be raised from a midrash: “‘It is not in heaven’—Samuel interpreted: ‘Torah [wisdom] is not to be found among astrologers whose art deals with the heavens.’ They replied to him, ‘But are you not an astrologer and well-versed in Torah?’ He replied to them, ‘I only study astrology when I am free from [the obligation to study] Torah, namely when I go to the out-house.’”⁹ In that case, it was not permitted for one to study extraneous wisdoms except when one was free of Torah and unable to study it at all. The reason concerns what we have said about the difference between Torah and other wisdoms, for Torah is the completely divine wisdom and jurisprudence of God, as we elaborated above. You do not find this quality in the heavens, which are themselves material. As long as people study the heavens, this is not supernal divine wisdom. Therefore you do not find Torah in one who specializes in the study of the heavens. Therefore the study of the other sciences such as physics, which deal with the realia of this material world, would be similarly forbidden.

But we find elsewhere: “They said of R. Johanan ben Zakkai that he was never idle from Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, aggadot... astral cycles, gematrias, the conversations of the ministering angels, conversations of demons, conversations of palm-trees...”¹⁰ In that case, it is permitted to teach all of these, and

⁶ BT *Menahot* 99b.

⁷ BT *Bava Kama* 82b.

⁸ Here Maharal uses Jaffe’s leading metaphor of the ladder.

⁹ *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 8.

¹⁰ BT *Sukkah* 28a.

it is incumbent on us to teach them. [Samuel's] reply, "I only study it...when I go to the out-house," applies to divination from stars, which does not deal with the fundamental realities of the world or its order. But the science of the progression of the stars and planets should be obligatory to study.

There is evidence for this in Tractate Shabbat:

R. Simeon ben Pazi said in the name of R. Joshua ben Levi in the name of Bar Kappara: "Whoever knows how to reckon the astral and planetary cycles and does not reckon them, of him Scripture says, 'They do not regard the work of the Lord, and do not see the product of His hands.'" Rabbi Samuel ben Nahmani said: "How do we know that it is obligatory to reckon the astral and planetary cycles? Because it says: 'For it is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of all the peoples.' What is considered wisdom in the eyes of all the peoples? You must say, this refers to reckoning the astral and planetary cycles."¹¹

This implies that the astral and planetary cycles in the heavens are considered the work of the Lord, and the heavens are considered the product of His hands, as it says, "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers..." (Psalms 8:4) This is because from the heavens a person is able to recognize the dignity of the Maker who make them, and the greatness of His power and His wisdom, when one considers their procession and their order. Therefore one is obligated to know and recognize one's Creator. It is called "your wisdom in the eyes of the peoples" because the gentiles wish to edify themselves¹² in this science, and became profoundly well-versed in it to an extreme degree, as is known. Others habitually came after them and overturned the product of their labors and analyzed it, as in the case when one came who was called the Master of the New Astronomy,¹³ who proposed a different model, contradicting all the understandings of his predecessors and the model they had given for the procession of the stars and planets and the heavenly causes. He proposed a new scientific model, though he himself wrote that he could not reconcile everything. When Israel reckon the astral and planetary cycles with their good sense and knowledge—as regarding the matter which was in dispute among the gentiles concerning the time in which the sun completes its cycle and the moon its cycle, they could not square their view—for how

¹¹ BT *Shabbat* 75b.

¹² להתחכם. The usual derogatory sense of this word is familiar from the start of the Second Introduction of *Prodigies* (where the first edition has להחכים in the same sense). Here Maharal's attitude is mixed. He seems to show genuine admiration for the achievements of the contemporary European astronomers, including Tycho Brahe and Kepler with whom Maharal's student David Gans was directly acquainted. Yet his final verdict here is that Jewish astronomy is superior, as it is of divine origin.

¹³ Copernicus. This is the first mention of Copernicus in Jewish literature, as Hillel Levine has pointed out. ("Paradise Not Surrendered: Jewish Reactions to Copernicus and the Growth of Modern Science.")

could they square their view when each one propounded wisdom,¹⁴ from his own opinion and reason? And how could one reckon the minutes and hours in which each sphere completes its circuit? But the sages of Israel, with whom the matter was traditionally received from Moses at Sinai, to whom the blessed Lord entrusted it¹⁵—to Him alone is it possible to know the truth. Thus it is that our received tradition concerning the procession of the sun and the moon is said to be more correct and acceptable, the more so as the early sages of Israel had reliable knowledge of everything, as they had received it from prophecy from the mouth of Moses. Therefore of this it is said, “For this is your wisdom and knowledge in the eyes of the peoples.”

From this we may deduce that a person should learn any matter pertaining to consideration of the essence of the universe, and is obligated thereby, for it is all the work of the Lord, and it is incumbent to consider it and to recognize one’s Creator thereby. Yet the matter still needs inquiry, as it is forbidden to learn from an unworthy teacher, as we discussed earlier in the case of Rabbi Meir who learned Torah from Aher. But that is not decisive proof, as in that case he was learning in person from him and there is the closeness and attachment of the pupil to the master who is unworthy, and therefore it is forbidden. But from books which such a master has written, this does not apply.

Still, the matter needs inquiry whether it is permissible to study from their books which contain matters contradictory to the Torah of Moses our Teacher (peace be his) concerning the creation of the world, the divine knowledge, the immortality of the soul and the world to come. For perhaps one should beware that foreign lips should drip honey, when they speak words in accordance with their intellect, not at all based on tradition but only according to their speculation. One should beware that perhaps one who studies them will be drawn after their arguments and proofs, as we have found some people

¹⁴ Here the sense of the verb **התחכם** is more negative, though still in continuity with the preceding. The achievements of both Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomy were indeed marvelous, more sophisticated from a theoretical standpoint than anything that Jewish astronomy came up with. Yet how is it, asks Maharal, that the gentiles found it necessary to adjust their calendar in the Renaissance because of the discrepancy of eleven days which had accumulated over the centuries, while the Jewish lunar-solar calendar was more reliable? Maharal suggests that it may be because the Jews got their wisdom directly from God, whereas the differing opinions of the gentile astronomers, based on human reason, did not “square” with each other, or with the realities they described. Maharal’s view is consistent with Gans’s report that Brahe congratulated him that the rabbis’ astronomy was more correct than Ptolemy’s. Maharal probably took this statement in a different sense than Brahe intended it. No doubt Maharal was naïve in neglecting the secular origins of rabbinic astronomy and its dependence on gentile astronomy. It is nevertheless remarkable how Maharal was able to pay legitimate respect to the fruits of human reason, while maintaining his usual view that the divine wisdom is superior to it.

¹⁵ It is tempting to speculate whether R. Solomon Luria, with his sense of the development of the legal tradition, would have accepted this account of Moses transmitting the complete details of the calendar to his heirs.

drawn after them, as human intellect tends to be deficient and unable to grasp a matter thoroughly. But if one's intention is in accord with the maxim, "Know what to respond to the heretic"—and if he does not know the heretic's views, how can he know what to respond to them? hence, he needs to know their views—this is certainly permitted, if his intention is to learn their arguments in order to refute them, for this is a great and major obligation, to refute the heretic. They counted this among the great matters, so that you might see that it is regarded as very important. In such a case it is permitted, and we should not worry that he should be drawn after their opinion if it was his original intention to contradict their words, as they have spoken against the Torah and the view of the rabbis.

But to do such a thing as to cite their words in order to interpret the words of Torah through them, they shall have no portion or memory in the Torah of Moses; to them applies the verse "the fame of the wicked rots."¹⁶ (Proverbs 10:7) And in Tractate Sanhedrin they interpret "So God will tear you down for good, [will break you and pluck you from your tent]" (Psalms 52:7) to mean that a legal opinion shall not be cited in the name of Doeg;¹⁷ how, then, should they cite matters from those who did not believe in the Torah of Moses at all? Nor have we found a case in the Talmud where they cite someone outside the Torah tradition to bring from him a matter of wisdom. But recently, now that these books have become widespread and people's views have been drawn after their words to be worldly-wise also in matters touching the essentials of faith, for it is man's nature to desire the pursuit of such inquiries. Hence some of them departed from principles of faith in some respects. And how is it possible for a person to judge these matters with his speculation, given that the true grasp of such things as these is remote from human capability? Even concerning something much closer to us and present to our eyes, we cannot make a definitive judgment; how much less so in the other case? Surely if an argument from gentile sources is an amplification and support for our sages' views, this is worthy of acceptance, but if it is not a support for the faith of our sages, and if it goes even slightly against what is found in the Torah, God forbid that one should accept even a small matter. Especially concerning the conception of God, which is totally other from human conceptions, as we explained above on the text "if you seek it as you do silver... then you will understand the fear of the Lord." For one cannot make a determination on the conception of God except through great labor. Therefore one should pay no attention to gentile views, for they neither know or understand such matters. Thus it should be clear to you that one should not rely on gentile views when they are in opposition to our Torah or to the

¹⁶ Paradoxically, this verse is used in the Mishnah to damn those who had expert knowledge and did not teach it. (Mishnah *Yoma* 3:11)

¹⁷ BT *Sanhedrin* 106b. Doeg (to whom Psalm 52 is explicitly devoted) was interpreted by the rabbis as the prototype of the brilliant scholar who misused his learning for evil purposes.

words of the sages, for when you ponder intelligently on the words of our sages you will find in them in every place that they knew of a matter where the gentile sages departed from our faith, they refuted the contrary opinion and error until there is no ground for holding it.

WORDS OF PEACE (1586)
SERMONS 3–5 (EXCERPTS)
HUMANITY'S PLACE IN THE COSMIC HIERARCHY¹

Isaac Adarbi

Sermon 3

It is written in our sacred Torah that it is an essential and not accidental property of man, as it is written, “For it is not an empty thing for you, for it is your life,” (Deuteronomy 32:47) i.e., it is not something that a person can be empty of, as opposed to qualities like blackness or whiteness, without which a person may be imagined, but rather an essential quality without which they cannot be imagined, such as life.

Thus it is written, “For it is your life and the length of your days.” Since this is truth, we must inquire what are the conditions that are necessary for it to be essential. We shall see if this applies to our sacred Torah. We say that the sage said in the beginning of his book on logic that something is essential only if three conditions apply. First, when you understand the essence of something and what is essential to it, you will not be able to imagine that subject in your mind or to understand it without the presence of that quality. If you understand what is “man” and what is “life,” you cannot form an understanding of “man” without including “life.” But if you exchange “life” with some other quality, you can understand man without it occurring to you if he is white or not.

Second, the whole cannot exist without its first having the part which is posited in its place, whether in thought or in reality. It is understood that it is impossible that there be life without there being man or horse. This precedence is not temporal but logical, but the two may be equal in point of time.

¹ I have included this selection because of its discussion of the question of humanity's place in the divine hierarchy, a popular Renaissance topic which Ephraim discusses in *Ornament* on Deuteronomy 32:1. It is one possible channel among others through which Ephraim may have become acquainted with this idea. As usual, Ephraim's reticence on his contemporary sources leaves us in the realm of guesswork. On the one hand, it is very likely that Ephraim read Adarbi's book which came out in the period that Ephraim was growing and maturing in his sermonic art. On the other hand, it is curious that Ephraim would have read such a striking image as the observant Jew sustaining the harmony of the worlds through meditating on Torah, and made no mention of it. (Of course, since Ephraim's major work *Rivevot Ephraim* [*Myriads of Ephraim*] was lost, we cannot rule out the possibility that he used it there.)

Third, the essential cannot be an effect. It is impossible that one say that such-and-such causes the man to be living, or causes black to be a quality of appearance, or causes four to be a number. Rather, man is living by his nature, not by a causal agency. For if it were a causal agency, we could imagine that something causes him to be man but not living, but this cannot be conceived in thought.... (3d)

"All who are linked to My name, whom I have created, formed, and made for my glory" (Isaiah 43:7)—we should mark well the three verbs used in this verse: *bara*, *yatzar*, *asah*.... This implies that man is composed of three components: hylic matter, elemental matter, and form. The verse says: Whoever is linked to the divine name—and has achieved perfection such that he is worthy of the honor of being so associated with God, free of every defect and imperfection, when one reaches such a level, God says "I have created him, etc."—then his creation in the fullest sense, including hylic matter, elemental matter, and form, is complete; but if it is not complete, then he lacks even hylic and elemental matter. If he does not reach his full degree and does not go to his blessed Director, then he is as one who does not exist, and does not truly possess even hylic and elemental matter....

He brought support for this and said at the end of his words: "It turns out from this that a body is an entity, and it is composed of two entities, form and hylic matter. But their combination is not the association of two distinct entities that exist in the uncombined state, but it is a mental combination." In that case, it would appear from this that hylic matter has no actual existence without form, nor has form any actual existence without matter. Therefore the verse does not say **אף עשיתיו** ("I have *moreover* formed it"), for such a phrase is only used in the case of self-subsistent entities that can exist independently. But that which is not found without another is not referred to using **אף**. He does, however, say **אף עשיתיו** of the true form which is the intellect and soul which God inserts in him, which truly makes and establishes the human being in the same manner as that other verse, "God made the two great lights," to which Rashi comments: "He established it on its watch, and that is the true *making* of it." Here too **אף עשיתיו** means establishing the human being, and refers to the soul, which is the person's true establishment. And it exists independently, for it is a self-subsistent being which does not depend on the body. Therefore he can say **אף עשיתיו**. In that case, it would appear that the human being is not complete in his creation until he achieves his perfection, as it says, "a created people will praise the Lord" (Psalm 102:19)—a people is complete in its creation when it praises the Lord; but if it has not come to the point of praising the Lord, then it has not achieved createdness.

The reason [4c] for this is that it is a well-accepted principle that in order for a proposition to be true, there must be agreement between [the representation] within the soul to [the object] outside the soul. But with God it is the opposite: the thing itself must agree with the notion in the divine mind, in order for the thing to be true. The reason for this is that for a human being, the cause of his knowledge is the existence of the known object. For us to see something, there is a percept in our minds, and therefore the effect must agree with the cause. But God's knowledge is not acquired from things, but

the reverse: His knowledge is the cause of the thing coming to be in existence. Therefore the effect must agree with its cause. In the human case, if the percept in his mind does not agree with what is outside him, then what is in his mind is false, and it is as if it does not exist [in the reality outside]. Thus when a thing does not agree with what is in the divine mind, it is as if that thing does not exist. In that case, when a person is wicked, he does not agree with the divine concept of man, and it is as if God has not created that person, until he becomes perfected; thus he is as if he did not exist. This agrees with the rabbinic saying.

This is what our sages meant when they said that a proselyte when just converted is like an infant who is just born, i.e., until now he is as if he did not exist, but now that he has received the yoke of Torah he is as one who is born and come forth to the air of the world. Thus the idolatrous nations, since they have no Torah, are not called “man.”²

(4d) [All agree that a Jewish infant acquires Torah by the age of three, or even in the womb when precognition takes place.]

(5a/b) An Israelite apostate who betrothed a Jewess, even though he willingly worships idols, his act of betrothal is binding, and he needs to divorce her. This is because even though he sinned, he is still an Israelite. Thus his essence has not changed.

Sermon 4

Just as the Torah is the essence of mankind and not an accident, and as we have proved that the Torah is the essence of all reality, and as the rabbis said in *Song of Songs Rabbah* on the verse, “I have likened you, my darling [to a mare in Pharaoh’s chariots]” (Song of Songs 1:9): “R. Hanina said in the name of R. Aha: ‘It is written, “Earth and all its inhabitants dissolve; it is I who keep its pillars firm. Selah”’ (Psalm 75:4)—If it were not that Israel stood on Mount Sinai and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey,” the world would dissolve and revert to chaos.³ Who, then, establishes the world? “It is I who keep its pillars firm”—by virtue of the utterance “I the Lord am your God,” I keep its pillars firm.’”

² It is perhaps because of this harsh sentiment that the Third Sermon was omitted from later editions of *Words of Peace*.

³ This was a favorite aggadah of Ephraim Luntshitz, which he cited repeatedly. (See *Ornament on Ha’azinu* below, pp. 423–24.) A key question arising concerning this notion within the Renaissance world-view might be phrased: “What is the special characteristic of humankind, in connection with the Torah, by virtue of which they are essential to the perpetuation of the universe?” To this question, Adarbi and Luntshitz give slightly different answers. In Ephraim’s view, it is because humankind, when possessed of Torah, is the species which uniquely comprises spirit and matter, thus providing the middle link of the great chain of being and integrating the higher and lower realms. In Adarbi’s view, it is because the Torah itself is the key to maintaining the harmony of the cosmos, and it achieves this purpose only when studied and practiced by humanity.

Thus the sages said on the verse, “There was evening and there was morning the sixth day”:

[There were three kinds of creation. The first was **בריאה** from nothing, resulting in hylic matter, or *prima materia*.]

The second is the creation of some object from hylic matter. By giving form to that matter, the thing is completed until it is tangible and sensible to the sense of sight, and actual. The first is not actual, because it was not tangible or sensible, but only conceived intellectually.

The third is the generation of one object from another through transmutation of form, as in the case of an egg generated from a drop, or a fledgling from an egg.

(7b) We find similarly that the Torah is comprised of three parts: words, statutes, and judgments.

Sermon 5

In this way God sought to clarify, test, and verify the lesson which I wrote that the Torah is the essence of all entities, in two respects. First, in the previous sermon I wrote that God intended in giving the Torah, in its general and detailed provisions, that they be oriented to the works of creation. This implies that all existing beings are dependent on the existence of the Torah. It is also verified in another respect, that God suspended the nature of all things that he created at the time of creation, when He gave the Torah. This is to indicate and teach that just as the existence and perpetuation of all existing beings depends on the existence of the Torah, thus all beings and their nature are subordinated to the Torah to perform its bidding, but they have no self-subsistent nature in opposition to it. This is the root and meaning of the faith in miracles and wonders, that all existing beings are subordinate to the Torah to do the will of those who fulfil it, inasmuch as the Torah is the cause of their being, so it is the cause of their non-being and annihilation at the time of need, as it says: “Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon.” (Joshua 10:12) And so in many other cases.

(8d) It says: “I the Lord am your God.” The purpose of this saying, in my humble opinion, is to say how all beings have their existence and essence dependent on our sacred Torah. This is in two respects. The first is that the Torah gives them existence and perfect continuance, because all beings are subordinate to the will of those who engage in the Torah and fulfil its mitzvot, but have no lasting nature without it. In this respect it is told: God said to Israel, “Do you accept the Ten Commandments which correspond to the Ten Utterances with which the Holy and Blessed One created the world? ‘God made the one corresponding to the other’ (Ecclesiastes 7:14); if the one is not, the other will not be either.” They said, **עלי עשור [ועלי נבל]**. This means, **עלי עשור**—“the Ten are incumbent on me.” What is the meaning of **נבל** (harp or other musical instrument)? It is my task to play the music of the universe on the ten-stringed harp, which consists of the nine astral bodies, plus the matter in the sublunar sphere. How does this work? Just as the harp requires that all its parts be firmly in place and its strings arranged beside each other in

order to produce its melody properly, thus the world requires that everything be arranged harmoniously, from the Cause to its effects, so that the divine abundance shall descend from on high to down below through its channels, its entry-points and exit-points, without any obstruction. All this is dependent on me. How so? *עלי הגיון בכנור*—it is my task to breathe on the mouth-organ.⁴ The person must hum with his mouth and the instrument plays, but if he does not continue playing the instrument in synchronization with the breathing of the mouth the instrument is distorted and gets out of arrangement. Thus the person hums with his mouth to direct and straighten the playing of the instrument. For the person by his humming acts like a bridle and harness to the instrument, to guide it and direct it into an upright position with all its stops and its raisings and lowerings. Thus is the meditation that I meditate in the Torah (as in “You shall meditate on it day and night”). It is like a bridle and harness to the order of the world. If my meditation is well-ordered and directed to the service of God, then the world, its order, its entry-points and exit-points will be well-established. But if my meditation is badly ordered and is not directed to the service of God, then the melody of the world and its arrangement are disordered; the bundle falls apart, and the arrangement of the accidents to each other is in disarray. Each goes its own way; the divine abundance does not descend through its channels, as they are not oriented the one to the other. Thus it all depends on Israel, by means of the Torah. Therefore they said, *עלי עשור*—it is incumbent on me to receive the Ten Commandments, as all beings are dependent on our receipt of the Torah, as the rabbis interpreted the verse, “Earth and all its inhabitants dissolve; it is I who keep its pillars firm. Selah.” (Psalm 75:4)

(9b) God similarly suspended the nature of all beings when He gave the Torah, so that they should not act by their nature, but all things supernal and terrestrial should be subordinated to the Torah, to those who engage in it and who fulfil its commandments....

...For the world at all times has need of mankind to stand on his watch and to perform the divine will, in order to keep the world perpetually in its melody for whatever will be needed. Without this, nothing has any lasting nature to act on its own. All things are contingent in both directions: whether for good or the alternative. It is up to man to keep them going and to play their melody.

⁴ Adarbi probably had in mind an instrument like the bag-pipes, where the person must breathe to keep the instrument in shape, while his hands ply the keys releasing the air into the pipes.

CITY OF HEROES (1580)

Ephraim Luntshitz

“One wise man prevailed over a city of warriors, and brought down its mighty stronghold.” (Proverbs 21:22)

From the First Preface

...Therefore have I shaken my quiver for the aid of the Lord
in the City of Heroes
to go forth at the head of the vanguard
to ride in the chariot of the study of Torah,
but I will tell what is marked down in the writ of truth
to reveal the hidden depths of aggadot and midrashim which are sealed
and concealed
that pertain to each portion,
in an easy manner,
I have caught hold of it and will not let go,
as is explained in the preface before us.
But before I come to the City of Heroes,
I must give praise to God,
for I remember His wonders from before,
and I will discourse on His deeds,
to tell the latest generation the lovingkindnesses of the Lord
for the good He has bestowed on us,
and still His hand is outstretched
to save us from the accidents of the age.
In the course of things we will explain the how and what of this work,
and my apology will be made clear as I go over it again and again
as I know the reason why the rebellious of the generation mock every
book and preacher.
Am I now better than my fathers?
For there is no memory of earlier books which they wrote,
pages flying on the theme of reproof of their contemporaries,
and there is no counting the recounters of the ills and upheavals of that
generation,
but I saw these books stashed in corners unnoticed,
unless one found in them a novel interpretation,
stripping old sayings of their form and dressing them up in new
costumes

until they were unrecognizable.
 As for the new preaching,
 I saw many fine worthies standing up to preach in public
 but there was not in all their words a glimmer of reproof
 to tell the people their sin,
 only when they preached some new interpretation
 stripping old sayings of their form and dressing them up in new
 costumes
 or a midrash pleasing to the people
 they call such a one holy and all run after him
 as well as any ill or bruise
 as when the preacher is not bothered that he cites a saying not in its
 proper form
 or that he distorts or overturns it to fit his discourse,
 but all this seems fitting to him and his listeners
 and they do not complain
 as long as the new meaning flows smoothly.

But that is not my style
 and I do not desire to take their path
 for I do a new thing in the earth
 to fulfil every man's desire
 for some want to know the path of instruction
 and some want to understand the meaning of the tales in the Talmud
 and other midrashim
 and some want to understand the Torah portions
 and some want to understand the virtues and proper behavior
 and the one who fears God will satisfy them all...

From the Second Preface

...Understand, you hotheads of the people—
 Why should hatred flame among us
 and the fire of jealousy be kindled in our hearts
 with none to extinguish it?
 Is it not better for us to serve long labor in the field of Machpelah¹
 (diversity)
 with a house and loft over it
 built on the precious cornerstone of instruction,
 to release the bands of folly
 and to give to the simple-minded a heap of wheat
 to grind the grain and meal of Torah?
 For in wisdom shall Torah's house be built

¹ From כפל, alluding to the plurality of views among Ephraim's contemporaries.

and in understanding will the loft stand firm on its posts
 To pursue the scriptures, tales and expositions
 as a hammer strikes the rock.
 For over the years I have seen how many wander²
 to seek and scout after wisdom
 and they went to inquire of the Lord
 through investigating and delving³ into hidden meanings
 of the tales which tie and bind⁴
 the band which He founded to be foundation
 of the world of strictures and discipline
 and to guide the scattered flock of Israel
 the sayings and midrashim elaborated in the Talmud
 and other teachings here and there
 which the sages tell and do not hold back from their children of the
 latter generation
 telling the praises of the Lord with respect to His ways and His deeds
 wholesome and in abundance from the guild of preachers, seekers of
 the Lord
 who shall not lack all good—the land of the living is theirs.
 To whom does the beauty and delight of Israel belong if not to them?
 For they gave ear and inquired
 they made ears for the Torah
 coined many parables
 to teach the bow to the sons of Judah
 trained archers, fighting the war of the Lord, the war of Torah
 to bring forth precious issue from refuse⁵
 whatever they can grasp from the exposition of the laconic and cryptic
 tales
 to wean the masses of their extravagant understandings⁶
 which are far-fetched by the standard of human reason
 and by that examination the plague ceased
 from perceiving their inner meaning through the enlightening speculum
 and to remove this stumbling-block the wise of the preachers
 were aroused to add other commentary and homily
 but these latter erred in judgment

² Key words **ישוטטו** and **לתור** may allude to Eliezer Ashkenazi's peregrinations in the worlds of Mediterranean and European Jewry.

³ **מצד החקירה והדרישה**. These key-words are taken from the Talmudic law of cross-examining witnesses (see Deuteronomy 13:15) and as such are unquestionably legitimate. But their double-entendre cousins have the meanings of "philosophy" and "homiletics"—two of the intellectual enterprises of the age.

⁴ Play on various words from the root **אגד**—**אגודה**, **אגדה**.

⁵ **להוציא יקר מזולל**—a key phrase of Eliezer Ashkenazi, describing God's purpose in creating the world. See *Deeds of the Lord* III, 1.

⁶ This is one objective of the rationalists with which Ephraim was evidently sympathetic, and which he practiced intermittently.

violating the natural sense of their texts⁷
 for their discourse mostly follows the philosophical fashion which is the
 standard among the nations.
 They seek after them (seek and you shall be rewarded)⁸
 but they are adrift in the land,
 they are estranged from the tenor of the holy tongue,
 for with stammering speech and in a strange tongue
 they speak to this people.⁹
 Though their speech is eloquent and mellifluous as honey,
 they falsify the rock of testimony
 and render the Torah a sealed book,
 the original rich sense of the texts is forgotten
 for they have changed their meaning and become unrecognizable.
 And they say,
 Taste and see how it is good for the soul that interprets them,
 to overturn the texts, discarding the husks and eating the kernels.

But I did not delight in these,
 rather I have held fast with my right hand
 to the plain sense of the sayings which relate
 to every notion and every portion
 and I have quickly summarized the novel interpretation
 deriving it from the original saying or scripture in brief
 for I have not seen fit to quote at length from extended expositions from
 other books
 or to extend my own work from another work which I did not labor
 on
 except from the sayings I gathered from the Talmud and other mid-
 rashim....

Sermon on Portion Bereshit (Genesis 1–6)

It is known that in the case of any proper work to be accomplished or any project to be achieved, the essential point is the end-goal [תכלית] of the project. Therefore anyone who is wise should be clear-sighted and consider from the start of the project what will be the end result. Therefore the end-goal is

⁷ Here Ephraim shows the flip-side of his ambivalent attitude toward the rationalists at this stage in his development. He feels they go too far in reading philosophic meaning into the traditional texts.

⁸ דרוש וקבל שכר (or: “Preach and you shall be well paid.”) A double or triple entendre, tying together the various meanings of דרוש, including “seek after” (the nations for your standard) of the first half of the line, as well as the traditional rabbinic meaning: “Study it for the sheer intellectual benefit.”

⁹ This may refer either to Eliezer’s lack of ease in Yiddish, or to Ephraim’s judgment that his philosophical interpretations were foreign to the idiom of Jewish discourse.

called “beginning,” for thought precedes deed, as the rabbis said, “the end of accomplishment, first in thought.” Similarly, when the Master of Secrets came to create His world, He engraved the world before him and saw under what condition it could endure and what end-result it would arrive at. Thus He would sketch out in His thought whether it could endure if it were to operate in accordance with a different condition, and saw it could not endure. This is the meaning of the saying, “He would build worlds and destroy them”—all in thought—until He sketched out in His wisdom the condition that all existent things in the world would be generated from Him (may His name be blessed) and all would return to Him, and thus it was revealed that He is First and Last.

Now go and learn what is the end-goal in the creation of the world, and you will find that the Lord, Blessed be He, is the end and the beginning. This explains what the rabbis said: “All comes from the first cause, and all returns to the first cause.” The explanation of this is revealed in what they said in the *Midrash of Rabbi Eliezer*: “The Holy and Blessed One sketched out the world and saw that it would not endure until He created *teshuvah* (repentance, return)”.... And the return of all the causes to the First Cause by way of the unfolding chain¹⁰ of being is known, that the end-goal of all the created beings is the human being, created last, and all the implements which were created in the six days of creation were only created for mankind, as Rabbenu Bahya elaborated with powerful evidences to this purpose in the portion Tazri’a, citing among other things the verse, “Behold, the heavens and celestial heights are the Lord your God’s; however He desired your ancestors...” (Deuteronomy 10:14). It is demonstrated there that inasmuch as mankind are the essential principle of all existence, it follows that they are the end-goal of all created beings. And the end-goal of mankind is that they observe God’s commandment, as it says, “The end of the matter, all having been heard: Fear God and keep His commandments, for that is all of man[’s purpose].” (Ecclesiastes 12:13) And the end-goal of fulfilling the commandments is the spiritual reward of the world to come. And it is known that this spiritual reward is not in eating and drinking, but the righteous sit with crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the Shekhinah. Thus it is manifest that the end-goal of all existence proceeds chain-wise back to the radiance of the Shekhinah. This is what they meant by “all returns to the First Cause,” and that is the *teshuvah* that God created, through which is manifest that He is the First Who brought all existence into being, and He is Last of all the causes, as all end-goals are directed back to Him.

This is hinted at in “the end of the matter, everything having been heard...”—i.e., that these three end-goals—mankind, who is the end-goal of all creation, and the Torah which is the end-goal of man, and the World to

¹⁰ דרך השתלשלות המציאות. The terminology is evocative of the “great chain of being” notion which permeated Renaissance thought and is rooted in the medieval neo-Platonic tradition and in kabbalah. I have chosen to translate these terms as “chain,” “hierarchy,” or “procession” depending on the context.

Come which is the end-goal of the Torah—all were hinted at the end of the Creation narrative. For mankind was formed last, and after his formation is a hint of the Torah which is man's end-goal, when it says "*the sixth day*," adding the direct article ה (= 5) which hints at the five books of the Pentateuch. Or we may follow Rashi in saying that the small *hei* in the word בִּבְרָאִים implies "for the *hei* he created them—i.e. for the Five Books." And immediately after hinting at the Torah, the text hints at the World to Come which is the end-goal of the Torah, when it says "The heavens and the earth were completed," hinting at the day which is completely Sabbath, at which time all the works of creation will be finished off and annihilated, as it says, "For the heavens will be salted like smoke and the earth wear away as a garment" (Isaiah 51:6), interpreting כֵּלָה (he completed) as meaning כְּלִיּוֹן (annihilation). It turns out that the three end-goals are all hinted at the end of the narrative, as Ecclesiastes said: "The end of the matter, all has been heard." And Solomon¹¹ then spelled out what these three end-goals are: "Fear God, and keep His *commandments* (= Torah), for this is all of *man* (= man). For God shall bring all deeds to *judgment* (= World to Come)..."

.... Since these three end-goals were the essential point of existence, they were certainly first in thought, for the end of accomplishment is first in thought. Therefore they are all called "beginning" (*reshit*). The World to Come is called "beginning," as the rabbis learned from the verse, "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden *mi-kedem* (in the east / in the former time)." The Torah is called *reshit*, as it says, "[Wisdom says...] The Lord acquired me at the beginning of His way." (Proverbs 8:22) Mankind (*adam*) is called *reshit*, as we know from the rabbinic midrash on the verse, "Flock of My tending, you are *adam*," (Ezekiel 34:36) i.e., that "mankind" which is the purpose of all creation is Israel,¹² which is called *reshit*, as it says, "Israel is holy to the Lord, the first-fruits of His harvest." (Jeremiah 2:3) Thus, all three are called *reshit*.

From here, the midrashim diverge into many interpretations of the words *bereshit bara*. Some say: "For the sake of Israel, who are called *reshit*." Some say: "For the sake of Torah which is called *reshit*." Some say that the letters of בְּרֵאשִׁית transposed form יֵרָא שַׁבָּת, one who "reveres the Sabbath," which is furthermore a hint at the day which is "wholly Sabbath"¹³ about which one should be reverent, for great is the day of the Lord. According to these interpretations, all three purposes are hinted at by the word *reshit*.

Some say *reshit* refers to Moses (see Deuteronomy 33:21: "He saw that the *reshit* [the best] was his." And this is also a hint at the Torah, for the Torah is not preserved except by the humble who are compared to water, which leaves

¹¹ Traditionally, Solomon was the author of Ecclesiastes.

¹² This equation of "mankind" with Israel seems at first sight to detract from the universal significance of the exposition, which speaks otherwise of *adam* (mankind). Ephraim was forced into this for technical reasons, to create an indirect textual link of *adam* with *reshit*. The insistence with which *adam* is repeated sounds a universal theme, to which this one mention of Israel is subordinate.

¹³ I.e., the World to Come.

the exalted heights and descends to a lower place.¹⁴ Therefore [the world was created] for Moses's sake, of whom it is said, "For I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:10) He was also called "Moses = the drawer" for the sake of the future, for he was possessed of this virtue more than the usual, therefore he merited that the Torah be given through him.

There is another midrash on the word *reshit*: "For the sake of three things the world was created, for the sake of the dough-offering (*hallah*), the tithes, and the first-fruits, all of which are called *reshit*."¹⁵ It seems that this midrash, too, refers to the three purposes that we have mentioned, which you recall were also called *reshit*. The dough-offering alludes to mankind, as the rabbis said, "The first human being was pure *hallah*."¹⁶ The tithes allude to Torah, which is summarized by the Ten Commandments. The first-fruits allude to the World to Come, for *בִּכּוּרִים* ("first-fruits") is related to *בְּכוֹרָה* ("first-born"). Israel are called God's first-born ("Israel is My first-born son"—Exodus 4:22), therefore by right of primogeniture they receive a double portion, inheriting this world and the next world, as I will explain later in connection with Esau's sale of the birthright.¹⁷

Thus all three end-goals are hinted at by the word *reshit*. Therefore we should understand the opening of Genesis ("Bereshit" God created...) as meaning: For the sake of those three end-goals which are called *reshit*, God created mankind, and with respect to those three, it was necessarily the case that mankind be mingled of intellect and nature, and that freedom be given him to abhor evil and choose good or the reverse. For the supernal creatures are pure intellect that have no portion in matter and do not know how to do evil, therefore they are not subject to reward and punishment. Thus the Torah and the World to Come which were created before the world were not created for them. Nor were they created for those terrestrial entities which are pure matter and do not know how to do good, but only for mankind who is comprised of supernal and terrestrial elements, as the rabbis said: "'Let him call to the heavens above'—this is the soul; 'and to the earth to judgment with him' (Psalms 50:4)—this is the body."¹⁸ Thus mankind is intermediary between the intellectual and corporeal beings, and is comprised of intellect and nature. For that reason he was eligible to receive the Torah which is founded on reward and punishment, and similarly [eligible for] the World to Come. Thus read: "*Bereshit*"—for these three end-goals God created mankind and included in him elements of heaven and earth, of intellect and nature, so that he should conduct himself with respect to these three end-goals, so that being created in

¹⁴ BT *Ta'anit* 7a.

¹⁵ *Genesis Rabbah* 1:6.

¹⁶ PT *Shabbat* 2:6.

¹⁷ If this is not pilpul, then what is? Reading this in his later years when composing his critique of pilpul in *Six Pillars* (see below) probably would have caused Ephraim embarrassment and might have prompted his mild confession there.

¹⁸ BT *Sanhedrin* 91b.

the divine image he should exemplify that wisdom, and by virtue of it merit light in the light of eternity.

If these end-goals are hinted at in this portion, we must nevertheless explain also how all the rest of human happiness, and all the other causes and end-goals of existence, and how they relate to the true end-goal, are all hinted at in this portion. In this manner, all the commentators and midrashim went and derived from this portion every notion of human happiness and its opposite, and the notion of Israel¹⁹ vis-à-vis the nations and *their* happiness and doom, and the notion of the Torah and wisdom,²⁰ until there is hardly a word in the portion from which heaps and heaps of laws and midrashim were not derived, and a person might grasp from it every notion of Torah and wisdom, human conduct and punishment and reward, to the point that they left us no room for further elaboration. In that case, how could R. Isaac say that the Torah ought to have started from “this month shall be...” (Exodus 12:1), and cast aside all the lessons derived from this portion and those after it, not to speak of the commandments which the Torah includes in these earlier sections, such as the sciatic nerve, circumcision, etc.?

Nevertheless, there are grounds for reconciling R. Isaac’s words. First we should explain how all the topics of the portion bear on the three end-goals we have mentioned, and other matters of mankind, and how all other creatures were created for their sake. Then we will explain R. Isaac’s words, one issue at a time.

[there follows a detailed midrash of the stages of creation]

(p. 12b) After all these momentous references, the text mentions mankind last, to indicate that they are the end-goal of all created beings, and for their sake all preceding things came into being. That being the case, it is proper for us to analyze the matter of the creation of mankind and their being placed in the Garden of Eden, and the matter of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life, and the four rivers proceeding from the garden, and the chain of events leading to their sin. Even though the books written on these subjects are filled with knowledge as the waters cover the sea, and have left nothing large or small whose meaning they have not firmly established, still we shall not shy away from adding additional insights on these matters, for the words of Torah have many facets. I would claim that the creation narrative portends the whole career of human endeavor, down to the final reward and punishment, as well as establishing that the Holy and Blessed One is the first of all causes. And yet R. Isaac claimed that the Torah ought to have begun from “this month shall be first to you”! He meant that even though the preceding portions portend such great and important matters of eternal and universal significance, even so, the verse “this month shall be first to you” also reveals the matter of divine

¹⁹ From this, it is evident that Ephraim’s earlier mention of Israel was tangential and did not imply that only the nation of Israel was implicit in reference to “Adam = mankind” in his reading of Genesis 1.

²⁰ Probably alluding to the idea that the Torah (identified midrashically with the Wisdom of Proverbs 8) was the blueprint for Creation. (*Genesis Rabbah* 1:1)

supremacy, that the blessed God is prior to all else, that He brings all else into being, that everything was created for the sake of mankind, and that everything is based on the foundation of reward and punishment. All this is hinted at in the verse, “this month shall be *to you*.” For it proclaims that the astral order, in its workings in the lower spheres, is entrusted *to you*. When you do the will of the Omnipresent, Israel has no lucky star, for they are not subject to the rule of the Zodiac. From this, one can deduce that the world has a primal Ruler, without whose consent the astral beings have no power to effect any influence. Reward and punishment are also implied in this. It is also clear from this that mankind is the end-goal of all created beings, for when humans do the work of the Omnipresent, then He delivers the astral system into their power to serve them. Now if this verse has all these implications, and is the first commandment besides—i.e., if the first commandment reveals the power of the First and Primordial One—it would be proper to advance the location of this verse and begin with it, while the passages in Genesis could remain at the end of the Torah, since reward and punishment, which occur after human actions, could properly be mentioned at the end of the narrative. However, R. Isaac offers the refutation to his own objection, by quoting the verse, “The power of His deeds He told to His people, to give them the inheritance of nations.” This means it is necessary to begin the Torah with the Creation narrative, otherwise the nations would argue that the world existed from past eternity, and that there is no justice or judge. They would bring as evidence for their argument that when Israel took possession of their land, they were sinful and stiff-necked, not deserving of the land by their own merits, as the Torah says, “Not by your righteousness [...] do you come to take possession of their land.” (Deuteronomy 9:5) Thus [in R. Isaac’s epigram] they are made to say, “You are robbers,” i.e., you are sinners, for every sinner is called a robber, as it says, “The sinner robs his soul.” (Proverbs 8:36) Nevertheless, you conquered the lands of the seven nations. In that case, surely the Zodiac rules all. Therefore the Torah started from Genesis, to establish the priority of God in the heart of the masses, and to demonstrate to them the power of God’s deeds, how He established His world on the way of reward and punishment, as will be explained (with God’s help) in the matter of the creation of mankind, that God keeps kindness for thousands, and from these portions will become clear that even if Israel were not worthy at that time, nevertheless God turned over the land to them by way of fulfilling the oath that He swore to their ancestors, to give them the inheritance of the nations. He furthermore gave them the land whose air makes one wise (as the rabbis explained the verse “the gold of that land is good”—there is no Torah like the Torah of the land of Israel).²¹ Even though originally they were not deserving of the land, they were deserving later, in the land which is a place well-suited to service of God. This passage is fraught with significance, as it says, “He gave them the lands of nations and the labor of peoples they will inherit, in order that they would observe His laws and foster His teachings.” (Psalm 105:44–45)

²¹ *Genesis Rabbah* 16:7.

GLEANINGS OF EPHRAIM (1590)

Ephraim Luntshitz

הלא טוב עוללות אפרים מבציר אביעזר?

Are not Ephraim's gleanings better than Abiezer's vintage? (Judges 8:2)

From the Preface: Allusion to Isserles¹

And this is the teaching of the gift-offering (וזאת תורת המנחה)
which was brought to us from our sister Wisdom, the sister of Pleasant-
ness,
and the name of her brother is: He Will Be Brought As A Gift
to the reverence which shall rise upon the head of those who revere the
Lord,
who have a name and hand upon the throne of Yah,
to sit on the seat of God in the heart of the sea of wisdom
in which the righteous enjoys safety everlasting,
not singed even when they walk in the midst of fire
nor shall rivers drown them
even when they come like a straitened stream
they shall not cause straitening to Ephraim.

(next stanza skipped)

And this is the teaching of what comes to his mind (וזאת תורת העולה)
(על רוחו)
saying, why are we sitting here many days
while our brethren the house of Israel, are they not feeding in a land
not theirs?
We remember the care through which we have passed amidst other
cares—
This is many days we have cared about our redemption and our soul's
liberation...

¹ This passage can be found on page 14 of the Zeriha 1991 edition of *Olelot Ephraim*. For interpretation of both passages from the preface, see beginning of Chapter 5, pp. 91–93.

Allusion to Debate of Maharal and Eliezer

Did you not know—have you not heard—what happened to the sages of philosophy, who sank in the mighty waters and brought up a potsherd in their hand, failing dismally in the matter of God's existence? If that is the case, then by this plea every thinking person may exempt himself from treasure-hunting amid the deep dark depths of secret mysteries!

However, our rabbis have already refuted this view by saying, "The work is not yours to complete, but you are not free to desist from it." For every industrious thinking person is obligated to search in every hole and cranny, as far as his intellect can reach, and that is sufficient, and the rest he can leave to another. Indeed, if inquiry is based on the conjecture of reason alone, there may happen to the inquirer what happened to others, so that if one comes and builds a tower with its top in the heavens, and sets its foundations on the conjecture of his reason, suddenly there comes another man after him and topples it from its pedestal, knocking down wall and tower and all. "When the foundation is destroyed, what has the righteous accomplished?" (Psalm. 11:3) ["Unless the Lord builds a house,] its builders labor in vain on it." (Psalm. 127:1) For who knows if the first opinion was correct, or the second?

In that case, the only good thing is for a person to rely on true tradition, and to inquire, where are the scriptural sources and traditions which will testify and tell the reliable testimony of the Lord concerning God's existence and all the principles of doctrine of our Torah, and of all the desired deeds which a person shall do and live by them to eternal life, and "the way of life, a rebuke of discipline," (Proverbs 6:23), to awaken the sleeping from the slumber of the time, and those who forget the truth in the vanities of the world, which is alone the intent of this work.

GLEANINGS OF EPHRAIM (1590)
PART II: SERMONS ON THE FESTIVALS

Ephraim Luntshitz

Sermon 1

Organic Unity of Cosmos as Model for Human Harmony
(based on Maimonides, Guide I, 72)

[Text:] § 22 The Midrash says: “For the sake of four things were our ancestors redeemed from Egypt: Because of their sexual chastity, because they refrained from slander, because they did not change their language, and because they did not change their names.”

[Thesis:] If the existence and survival of all beings depends on their being a single collective, so that all the parts of creation are united, this will reveal to us the perfection of our own existence: for when this people of the Lord shall be “one nation in the earth,” then the universal and particular world shall stand, and the kindness of the Lord will be upon His reverent followers from eternity to eternity. But in the absence of peace, the thread of kindness is snapped, and the children are exiled from their Father’s table. On this principle and nothing else depends the redemption from Egypt and all redemptions which follow it.

[Argument:] This inquiry is based on the principle which was explained by the Master Guide [Maimonides] in Part I Chapter 72, that the existence of all beings depends on all the parts of creation and all worlds being connected and bound up together, united as a single individual who is composed of many parts. This takes place by something that mediates between the opposing poles of creation and combines them, as for instance man, who has a portion in the lower and higher realms, combines the lower and higher together. Maimonides went on at length to say that the Holy and Blessed One is One and His Name is One, and all beings which have their existence from Him and proceed from this original unity, depend on their survival on their cleaving to Him (may He be blessed). But this will not be or come to pass, except only when they also subsist in unity, in the joining of their parts one to another. For this reason the Holy and Blessed One is called the Lord of Peace, the King to Whom peace belongs, and He (may He be blessed) is a simple unity without any composition. The closer one approaches to the Blessed First Cause, the more one receives the overflow of peace, the great gift of all the beings that are below Him, as it says, “...” For the angels in the upper world are comprised by a single element, like Michael of water and Gabriel of fire. They possess unity in that they are not composite; yet as they are of different species, there is division between them. The Holy and Blessed

One makes peace between them, as they derived from the verse “He Who makes peace in His high places.” (Job 25:2) Now the celestial spheres in the middle world are composed of two elements, as it says² that the heavens were created from fire and water. The division in their case is more acute as they are more remote from the blessed First Cause. As for the terrestrials, they are composed of four elements, being most remote of all, and for that reason they are the most prone of all to division. They are never at all in agreement, both because they are diverse individuals, and because each individual is internally at war with himself because of the opposition of the matter and the form, as we know from their definition.

We have seen in the *Binding of Isaac* commentary on the portion of Noah, that the survival of all beings depends on the survival of mankind, for when it all flesh corrupted their way on the earth it is written, “God saw the earth that it was corrupted.” (Gen. 6:12) The orders of the upper and lower realms were in disarray because their survival depends on cleaving to the blessed God, as it says, “You who cleave to the Lord your God are all alive today.” (Deuteronomy 4:4) When their cleaving to God was taken away, they were all dead corpses. But when the lower realms are in one bond and peace prevails among them, then by virtue of their unity they possess cleaving with God, and by mankind’s cleaving to God all other beings of the upper and lower realms survive as well, for they were all created for his sake, as all the sages of truth agree. Thus the rabbis said (YS Devarim 953) that as long as Israel are in a single bond, the Shekhinah is among them, as it says, (Deuteronomy 33:5) “‘He was king in Jeshurun’—when? ‘When the heads of the people assembled together.’ Similarly (Amos 9:6): ‘He builds His lofts in heaven’—when? ‘When He establishes His band on earth.’”

For this reason we find that from the day that the world was created, the Holy and Blessed One did not give His Torah or allow His Shekhinah to find a permanent resting-place in the lower realms until the coming of the generation of the wilderness, when they were all of one heart and there was peace among them, as it says...

Sermon 2

Defending Maimonides on Sacrifices
(based on Maimonides, Guide III, 32)

[Text:] § 31 “R. Isaac said: The Torah should not have started until ‘This month shall be first to you...’ because it is the first commandment which Israel was commanded. For that reason did it begin ‘in the beginning’? So that ‘He declared the power of His deeds to His people...’”³

² YS *Bereshit* and BT *Hagigah* 12a.

³ Rashi on Genesis 1:1.

[Thesis:] If it is accepted as true that one who is commanded and does a mitzvah is greater than one who is not commanded but does it, and slander is counted as transgressing three categories of sin, and the satisfaction of one hour in the next world is greater than all of this world, then it will be easy to explain the reason why the Torah would have fittingly begun ‘This month shall be first,’ and why the quote ‘He declared the power of His deeds’ is an answer to this, and why the Great Sabbath (prior to Passover) occurs on the reading *Metzora*’ or *Aharei Mot* in leap years.

[Argument:] This inquiry is based on the principle that it is not too wonderful or remote to consider that the end-goal of the perfected person is to cleave to God, for this is the whole purpose of man who aspires to this rank, that his soul should cleave to the First Cause, blessed be He, in the eternal world, when he eats in this world of the Torahitic tree of knowledge, which by eating he will live forever by reason of that cleaving, as it says, “You who cleave to the Lord your God are all alive today.” (Deuteronomy 4:4) For the Holy and Blessed One is called the Fountain of Life.... However, no being aspires to this cleaving except the human being who is created in the image of God and inwardly resembles Him in being able to understand and reason. This is the reason for the cleaving of the knower with the Known.⁴

This advantage comes to man from the aspect of the tongue, for the superiority of man is none other than the rational soul, which is called the “speaking soul,”⁵ as it says, “The man became a living soul,” which Onkelos translates, “a speaking soul.” In that case, speech is the superiority which man possesses over all the animals, for external speech is the messenger of the internal soliloquy of the heart, for the heart forges the thought and its messenger the tongue goes out and speaks what is in the person’s heart, as it says, “My heart is astir with gracious words; I speak my poem to a king; my tongue is the pen of an expert scribe.” (Psalms 45:2) From here it is clearly evident that the tongue is the pen of the heart.

Once it is granted that the tongue holds the essential superiority of man over all the other animals, it follows that the tongue requires extra guarding more than the other organs, and similarly the heart which is the source of the

⁴ In this context, the knower appears to be the human being who has attained knowledge of God, hence God is the known. This may be an allusion to the questions posed by Horowitz in the 1577 version of *Lovingkindness of Avraham* (but omitted in the 1602 version): “what is the soul, and whether the soul of man is immortal, and by virtue of what will man merit eternal existence, whether through contemplation or through deeds, and to what will the soul cleave after death, whether to the Active Intellect or to the blessed God?” The formula “the knower and the known” is of course an allusion to the philosophical formula (which can be traced from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* XII, 7 through *Guide* I, 68) that in God, the knowledge, the knower and the known are all one.

⁵ הנפש המשכלת שקראוה נפש מדברת. The former expression agrees with החלק השכלי, used in the Ibn Tibbon translation of Maimonides’ *Eight Chapters*, Chapter 1. The latter is the commoner term for “rational soul,” which would have been familiar to Ephraim from Bahya and Nahmanides.

interior soliloquy, as it says, “More than all that you guard, guard your heart, for it is the source of life,” (Proverbs 4:23) and: “Who is the man who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech.” (Psalm 34:13–14) We do not find “guarding” spoken of any of the other organs, just of the heart and the tongue...

Thus you find that the superiority of humankind, and the peg on which hangs their perfection and felicity, consists of three essential things which every discerning person ought to bear continually in mind:

- (1) Greater is the commanded person who performs a mitzvah than the uncommanded, for one may not see the radiant splendor of the face of the Shekhinah except by reason of performing the mitzvot in the Torah, from which observance one merits that eternal perfection and cleaving to the Shekhinah after death, as we said.
- (2) A slanderous tongue is counted as transgressing three categories of sin, for which reason one should guard one's tongue from evil so that one not lose that thing on which his perfection and felicity essentially depend, namely the tongue.
- (3) The satisfaction of one hour in the next world is greater than all of this world. By keeping this in mind one will aspire to that eternal light and despise the delights of this world.

These three matters are alluded to in the three Torah portions, Tzav, Metzora', and Aharei Mot...

The principle “one who is commanded and does a mitzvah is greater than one who is not commanded but does it” is supported by the verse, “The offering of Judah and Jerusalem shall be sweet before the Lord as in days of yore”—i.e. in the days of Moses, because in his days Israel were commanded and performed it. But the alternate interpretation “as in the days of Noah and Abel” differs with the former, and holds that one who is not commanded but does it is greater than one who is commanded, therefore Noah's offering was greater, as per our previous assumption.

How nicely the interpretation “like Noah and Abel” fits with our explanation,⁶ for then there were no idols. This indeed adds support to the one who thinks that the uncommanded is greater than the commanded one, for if there were no idols in the world, then surely the Holy and Blessed One would not have commanded Noah concerning offerings and sacrifices.

For even in the time of Moses, the Holy and Blessed One did not command Israel concerning offerings and sacrifices except to uproot idol worship from their midst. We find this explicitly in Maimonides's *Guide*, that the sacrifices have no intrinsic reason for their observance, but the principal reason was because in those days the gentiles worshipped idols by means of sacrifices, and

⁶ Ephraim's argument so far has been: The contrast between Noah's sacrifice and Israel's sacrifice elucidates the contrast between the uncommanded worshipper and the commanded one. This midrash agrees with the foregoing classification.

if the Holy One had withheld the Israelites from sacrificial worship entirely it would have been too difficult for them to wean themselves of that to which they had been accustomed, and they would not have listened to Him. The living God commanded them to keep this service as was their custom, but they should not offer their sacrifices any more to the satyrs, but only to the Lord, as it says, (Leviticus 17:7) “They should no longer offer their sacrifices to the satyrs...they should bring them to the Lord.” All this is the gist of Maimonides’s words in *Guide* Part III [Chapter 32]. Many have pounded him for this opinion and refuted his reasoning from the circumstance that Noah and Abel brought sacrifices when there were not yet idols in the world. You will find all this explained in the *Binding* on Portion *Vayikra*.

However, from the midrash which we are explaining we can strengthen the position of Maimonides. For apparently one cannot bring the example of Noah and Abel to refute him, inasmuch as they were uncommanded. Therefore their action does not contradict Maimonides’s premise, for they may have arrived independently at the idea that this action was efficacious as service to God, as others who worshipped similarly believed. If God had commanded Noah and Abel to bring sacrifices, then this would be evidence for Maimonides’s opponents against his view. But as they were not commanded, it provides no such evidence. This is obvious.

The fact that the midrash specifies “that there were not yet idols in the world” is decisive proof that Noah [and Abel] were not commanded concerning sacrifices. For since there were no idols in the world, there was no need to command them about sacrifices, and surely they did what they did on their own initiative. Thus, they were not commanded and yet did it. In that case, surely Noah’s and Abel’s sacrifices were greater than Israel’s, who were commanded in order to uproot idolatry, as Maimonides says.

There is powerful evidence for Maimonides’s view in what the rabbis said (YS Shemot 195) about the Paschal offering: “‘Draw and take yourselves sheep’—draw your hands from idolatry,” i.e. draw your hands from the service of idols which you offered up till now, and take yourselves sheep for the service of the Lord. This is proof that on that day the Israelites acted in the capacity of “one who is commanded and does” with the intent of uprooting idolatry from their midst.

Sermon 3

Seeing With Both Eyes:

Philosophical Meaning of the Torah’s Laws

[Text:] § 39 “It is taught: R. Johanan ben Dahabai says in the name of R. Juda b. Bathyra: Whoever is blind in one of his eyes is exempt from appearing, as it says: ‘All your males shall be seen’—in the manner that one sees, so shall one come to be seen. Just as it is normal to see with both eyes, so one should come to appear with both eyes. R. Tanhum said: One who is deaf in one ear, as it says, “On the feast of Sukkot... [you shall read this Teaching aloud] in

the presence of all Israel in their ears” (Deuteronomy 31:10–11)—implying both ears. R. Tanhum also said: One who is lame in one leg is also exempt from appearing, as it says, “Three פַּעַמִּים [times] a year” (Deuteronomy 16:16)—פַּעַמִּים [also means footsteps and is plural] implying two.” (Talmud *Hagigah* 2a–3a)

[Thesis:] If one plumbs the words of the psalmist who says, “One thing has God spoken, two things have I heard,” (Psalm 62:12) the worthy will learn to survey the circuit of his foot, and split the people who are in the small city, and the one half shall be sacred to the Lord, to participate in their circle in the morning which pertains to the light of reason, and in the other circle in the evening which pertains to the sense of material sight. This will reveal to us the meaning of the blind, deaf, and lame who are exempt from appearing.

[Argument:] This inquiry is based on the principle, which should be evident to all the discerning, that we are the people of the Lord who believe with a perfect faith that this is the Torah which the Lord bestowed on his people, and He did not do likewise with any other nation but only to His kin Israel, His firstborn son, whom He created in thought before the mountains were formed. It is they who sit first in the kingdom of heaven; theirs is the right of the firstborn, to take a double portion by possessing two worlds, as the law of the firstborn prescribes. For the attainment of this purpose He bestowed on them this one Torah which has two portions, in that each mitzvah has both an evident and a hidden meaning.

The evident meaning is to privilege them for its sake with all the necessities of this world which are evident to the sense of sight. This refers to all the common mitzvot such as eating matzah, removing hametz, performance of sukkah, lulav, tefillin, mezuzah, etc. The hidden meaning is to privilege them with the hidden eternal world. This is the divine inquiry: to enter into the divine mysteries which are alluded to in each mitzvah in the Torah. It was for the sake of the mysteries of the Torah that the angels sought to receive it, for by means of those mysteries the enlightened can ascend the ladder of levels equivalent to “Sinai,” (סִינַי = סֵלֶם = 130),⁷ for it was on Sinai that the secrets of Torah were transmitted. It is like a ladder and a paved road—it is called the way of sanctity—to elevate the inquirer from level to level and from inquiry to inquiry until he comes to attain and to see the radiant splendor and glory of the blessed God’s Shekhinah. For intellectual comprehension ascends from level to level in the mystery of the vision of the ladder which Jacob saw, in accordance with the rabbinic midrash which said the ladder had four levels.⁸

This is because every investigator needs to understand first the essence of the natural beings in the lowest world. From there he will ascend to the next higher level, namely the comprehension of the beings in the middle world of

⁷ Bahya on Portion *Vayetzei*, citing the Midrash.

⁸ BT *Hullin* 91b. Here Ephraim follows Jaffe’s interpretation of the story which Jaffe sets in the introduction of *The Royal Garment* as a parable for the book’s topical arrangement.

the celestial bodies, and from there to the comprehension of the beings in the highest world, namely the angels. From there he will ascend to the comprehension of God's existence from the aspect of His deeds and actions. These are the four levels that were in the ladder, according to the mystery of the verse, "And behold there was a ladder set on the earth"—this is the lowest world—"and its head reached heaven"—this is the middle world—"and the angels of God"—this is the highest world—"and behold the Lord was standing upon it"—this is the comprehension of God's existence.

To arrive at the secrets corresponding to all these levels, the discerning inquirer is aided by the detailed practices performed on the three festivals of the Lord, the holy convocations, and by the other mitzvot in the Torah. But not many are able to attain these secrets because of the intellectual limitations of the inquirer and the profundity of the subject, and they only take these things in their basic sense. Therefore the divine wisdom has seen fit to set special occasions for Israel, three times during the year, to guide the footsteps of those poor in wisdom and understanding along upright paths, the ways of the Lord, and to teach them knowledge and sage counsel in His holy place which is better suited than other places to attaining wisdom ("for from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem"), until their path be well-paved toward the Lord to ascend the mountain of the Lord and stand in His holy place, and to come to the realization of the existence of God and see the splendor of the presence of the supreme King from the particular works.

Therefore it is said, "all your males," specifying the males because they are the strong and mighty ones to stand in the palace of inquiry and investigation.⁹ Not so the simple-minded, whose heart is too foggy to understand, and like women¹⁰ their mind is too weak for understanding the mysteries that underlie the mitzvot, so they only take the matters in their basic sense. Scripture says "there are many sides to sagacity," (Job 11:6), and the psalmist said "One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard." (Psalms 62:12) From this we learn that every mitzvah has another meaning in addition to the plain sense.

For this reason, the king was commanded to write out a duplicate of the Torah. By "king" is meant the rabbis, who are to write on the tablet of their heart the duplicate Torah, the revealed and the hidden, as opposed to the common man, who only knows one part of it. He is called blind in one eye, and deaf in one ear, and lame in one foot.

⁹ בהיכל החקירה והדרישה. These vague words, taken from the law of judicial investigation ("you shall investigate and inquire and interrogate thoroughly"—Deuteronomy 13:15), are suggestive once more of the twin methods of philosophical inquiry and midrashic interpretation.

¹⁰ Ephraim here echoes the rabbinic prejudice נשים דעתן קלות. To his credit, he will later argue against the application of this maxim and rise to the defense of women's intellectual capability in the case of Eve, in *Ornament* on Genesis 3:1. Maybe one of his female auditors complained about his (and other rabbis') reflexive denigration of women, and he thought it over and decided there was something that needed to be said on the other side? See Chapter 6, pp. 157–65.

For physical seeing is when a man sees the things as they are written and the practices as they are performed visibly through the sense of sight. But inner vision is the seeing of the heart and intellect, as Kohelet says, “My heart saw much wisdom and learning.” (Ecclesiastes 1:16) Similarly there is also sensory hearing but also inner hearing, as [Solomon asked God], “Grant, then, Your servant a hearing heart,” referring to the faculty of understanding. Similarly there is also physical walking, such as when we run on our legs to perform a mitzvah. But there is also inner intellectual going, as the midrash points out [of Elisha who perceived Gehazi from afar], “Did not my spirit go along...?” (II Kings 5:26)¹¹ This refers also to walking in the way of wisdom, as in “You shall walk after the Lord,” (Deuteronomy 13:5) and “I run in the way of Your commandments.” (Psalms 119:32) For all the Torah is called a way, as the prophet says, “For the ways of the Lord are straight.” (Hosea 14:10) Thus whoever is not complete in both kinds of seeing—the physical and the intellectual—is called blind in one eye, to wit, the intellectual. Similarly with hearing and walking: whoever is bereft of the spiritual part is called deaf in one ear or lame in one leg.

[Ephraim cites examples of double references to the senses: **אם שמוע ראה** **ראיתי, כי עין בעין, סולו סולו תשמע**.]

It says, “They shall not appear before Me empty-handed,” (Exodus 34:20) in the sense of “It is not an empty word for you,” which the rabbis interpreted, “If it is empty, the fault is with you,” i.e. because of your limited comprehension, but no mitzvah has any aspect which is empty, without significance, but is replete with the deep dark depths of secret mysteries.¹² Therefore it says, “They shall not appear before Me empty-handed,” that you should not think that this pilgrimage ascent is an empty matter without significance, but when you enter into the courtyards of inquiry and investigation, even if you cannot comprehend everything in its deepest truth with full clarity, nevertheless you are not free to desist from it, but whatever it is in your power to do, do it,¹³ as it says, “each according to the gift of his hand, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you.” (Deuteronomy 16:17) Thus you should inquire and inspect up to the point that your intellect is capable of reaching, according to the blessing of the Lord your God who has give you intelligence and understanding, as it says, “For the Lord grants wisdom”

¹¹ Ephraim is referring to *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 1:36, which anticipates his entire exposition of how seeing, hearing, and walking are used in a metaphorical sense.

¹² **סודות נסתרות טמונות באוצרות תהומות**. This phrase occurs identically in the preface, where Ephraim debates the problematic of metaphysical speculation. This (together with the succeeding thought, that even if you cannot understand something completely you are not free to refrain from trying) indicates the thematic continuity of II, 3 with the preface. Thus Ephraim apparently considers investigation of the reasons for the mitzvot to be continuous with the metaphysical quest over which Maharal and Eliezer Ashkenazi debated.

¹³ Ecclesiastes 9:10. This (and the references to Ecclesiastes in Sermon 22) is a key to the part that Ecclesiastes plays in Ephraim's tempered optimistic attitude toward life and learning.

(Proverbs 2:6); “Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? . . . He who has clean hands and a pure heart . . .” according to the sense of “When you come to appear before Me, who asked of you to trample my courts?” (Isaiah 1:12)—i.e., the purpose is not simply physical walking, but that you should enter the palace of intellectual inquiry, as we said. “Pure of heart” also refers to intellectual vision, as we said.

It is also proper to connect the thought, “in the manner that one sees, so shall one come to be seen,” with the midrash in *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, on the verse, “the Lord will keep for you the covenant and the kindness”¹⁴ (Deuteronomy 7:12):

A parable of a king who married a lady. She gave him two flowers, whereupon he bestowed on her two flowers. . . . Thus you find that Abraham gave his children two flowers, namely righteousness and justice, as it says, “For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children . . . to do what is just and right.” (Genesis 18:19) So the Holy and Blessed One bestowed on them two flowers to match them, namely kindness and mercy. . . . In the end, the Holy and Blessed One decreed that all four flowers should be made into a crown for Israel’s head, as it says: “I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, and with kindness and mercy.” (Hosea 2:21)

You see from this midrash that God acted with reciprocity, so that just as God comes to see with both His eyes—as the eyes of divine providence are doubly open with kindness and mercy—so should the person come to be seen with both his eyes, i.e., he should always appear before God adorned with both his flowers, namely righteousness and justice.

The meaning of righteousness and justice is that a person must always perfect himself with the better virtues for the betterment of society in this world, by banishing envy, hatred, pride, and pursuit of luxury. He should avoid pernicious extremes and seize hold of the golden mean in all his doings. This is called *mishpat* (justice/equity), as in “he conducts his affairs with equity.” (Psalms 112:5) For this is the way of equity: that one should set the scales of justice at the midpoint, so that the pans do not tip to one side or the other. Thus is the proper manner with the virtues, to avoid tipping to either extreme, and to seize hold of the mid-point, just as in meting justice it is forbidden to favor one party or the other. The attribute of righteousness is perfection of the divinely-mandated practices of Torah and mitzvah for achieving perfection in the world to come. [Both are alluded to in the verse:] “He performed the Lord’s righteousness, and His justice for Israel” (Deuteronomy 33:21): righteousness is for the sake of the Lord, by performing the practices that He desires, and justice, which is ethical betterment, is for the sake of Israel, i.e.

¹⁴ *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 3:7. We translate here literally “the covenant and the kindness” (instead of the more idiomatic modern JPS “will maintain faithfully for you the covenant”) to stress the feature of the Hebrew—that God gives two presents to the people Israel—which is the basis of the midrash.

it is a necessary matter for civic society in this world, so that people shall be agreeable with one another.

In response, the Holy and Blessed One sees and supervises with a double supervision: in this world and in the world to come...

Sermon 4

On the Festivals, the Golden Mean, and Avoiding Worldliness

[Text:] § 42 It is taught: They ask and teach concerning the laws of Passover thirty days before Passover...¹⁵

[Thesis:] If the enterprising anticipate a mitzvah from the moment they are commanded it, it becomes clear why the period is thirty days; for immediately after Purim, when they have “fulfilled what they have accepted,”¹⁶ they are energized to deal with the laws of Passover, to connect one remembrance with another remembrance.

[Argument:] This inquiry is based on the principle that “remembering” is the basis of faith and the center around which all the mitzvot of the Torah revolve. For if forgetfulness prevails, the end result will be that Israel will forget the Lord and spurn the Rock and testimony, the Torah sealed in his studies.¹⁷ It was similarly revealed to Moses of Coucy in his night vision that the verse “Take utmost care...so that you do not forget” (Deuteronomy 4:9) is the central principle of the Torah.

We find “remembrance” in three contexts. Of the Sabbath, it is said, “Remember the Sabbath day.” (Exodus 20:8) Of the Exodus from Egypt, it is said, “So that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 16:3) And of the fringes it is said, “Look at it and remember.” (Numbers 15:39)

It immediately appears that these three remembrances remind us of three central principles of our faith, namely the existence of God, revelation of Torah, and providential reward and punishment:

- (1) Remembrance of the Sabbath corresponds to the existence of God, for the Sabbath is a proof of the creation of the world, and the creation is proof of the Creator.
- (2) Remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt verifies providential reward and punishment.
- (3) Remembrance of the fringes verifies the revelation of Torah, as it says, “Remember all the commandments of the Lord.” Therefore the blue cord resembles the sea, and the sea resembles the sky.

¹⁵ BT *Pesahim* 6a.

¹⁶ Standard midrashic interpretation of Esther 9:27, referring to the Jews’ willing acceptance of all the mitzvot in the generation of Esther and Mordecai.

¹⁷ וינבל צור תעודת תורה חתומה בלימודיו—playful conflation of Deuteronomy 32:15 and Isaiah 8:16.

This is what the rabbis implied when they said, “‘Remember’ and ‘observe’ were said in a single utterance: Whatever has ‘remembrance’ associated with it has ‘observance’ associated with it, and vice versa.”¹⁸ By this they meant that whoever observes a mitzvah certainly remembers all these significances, for without the remembering it would not constitute observance.

§ 43. Therefore we find in the Masorah that the word שמור occurs three times in the full spelling, with the *vav*: (1) “Observe the month of Abib..., for it was in the month of Abib that the Lord your God freed you from Egypt” (Deuteronomy 16:1); “Observe the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:12); “Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you.” (Deuteronomy 6:17) These are virtually the same three things for which remembrance was mentioned, which is a telling demonstration that remembrance is the cause of observance, in the same sense as “take heed [לִדְּרֹשׁ] lest you forget” (Deuteronomy 6:12), and similarly in connection with Purim, “Consequently these days are recalled and observed” (Esther 9:28) and with Passover, “so that you may remember the day of your departure from Egypt” (Deuteronomy 16:3). Thus it is fitting to connect one remembrance with another remembrance, and thus immediately after Purim, which is thirty days before Passover, it is proper to discourse on the laws of Passover, for these two remembrances fit a single pattern, and the continuity of the thirty-day period between them is indication that they share a common notion.

This will be shown in the following way. It is well known that the human lifetime is divided into three periods: ascendancy, maturity, and decline. The three festivals of the year were arranged accordingly: Passover, in the spring, is a paradigm of the time when a person emerges into the world, as the midrash says on the verse, “Or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another...?” (Deuteronomy 4:34)—like a calf plucked from its mother’s womb.¹⁹ Thus the days of Passover are like the days of youth, in the beginning of the warm season which are a symbol of this world, for it is a time of preparation for the world to come, just as one prepares in the summer for the winter, as it says, “He who lays in stores during the summer is a capable son.” (Proverbs 10:5)

The festival of Shavuot corresponds to the years of maturity, for it is nearly at the peak of the warm months, the time of the first fruits. It is that time that the body is fully built on its foundation, its clusters are ripe with promise of grapes to make foaming wine fully mixed of Torah and wisdom.

The festival of Sukkot is at the end of summer, an allusion to the days of decline and the end of one’s lifetime. This is indicated by the bullocks of the festival, which diminish each day just as the bodily powers diminish in this period of life. It is called Festival of Ingathering, for it is close to the time when a person is gathered from the world, when he gathers from his grain

¹⁸ BT *Rosh Hashanah* 27a, *Shevuot* 20b.

¹⁹ Reference to *Midrash on Psalms* 107:4.

and wine whatever the trap of his mind can bring up from Torah and good deeds to bring as provisions to his eternal home.

In accordance with these three times, we find that every action and deed has three aspects:

1. There are things which a person does solely for the sake of the body. This is found for the most part in the years of ascendancy, the days of youth, corresponding to which the holiday of Passover was established. Therefore the offering associated with Passover is a sheaf of barley, which is animal fodder, as we see from the offering of the adulteress ("she performed an animal act, therefore her sacrifice comes from animal fodder,"²⁰ i.e., barley). So it is with a man in the days of his youth: all his yearning and desire is to nourish his material, animal soul; therefore his sacrifice is animal fodder, i.e. barley.
2. The second way is at the opposite extreme: when a person does all his actions for the sake of the spirit. This is found in people at the time of decline, i.e. old age: the closer one comes to the gates of death, the more one perceives the deficiency bound up with the desires of this world, for their end is vanity. Therefore a person despises them in old age, and acts solely for the sake of the soul. For this occasion comes the Festival of Ingathering, when a person leaves his regular dwelling for a modest temporary shelter, and seeks no luxuries for this period. For this purpose there comes in this holiday also the water libation, for it is at this time that a person pours out his soul and his blood to the Lord, as it says, "Pour out your heart like water [in the presence of the Lord]!" (Lamentations 2:19) The elderly always indulge in many supplications, as it says, "I pour out my speech before the Lord, [I lay my trouble before Him]." (Psalm 142:3) It is near to the time of death which is compared to a water libation, as it says, "We must all die; we are like water that is poured out on the ground." (II Samuel 14:14)
3. The third way is the golden mean between the two extremes, and that is when one acts equally for the needs of body and soul. This is found when a person is in the years of maturity, when body and soul are equally important to him, and the powers of each are equal. For this occasion comes the holiday of Shavuot, and its offering is two loaves of bread, corresponding to the sustenance of body and soul which share equally.

[There are three verses starting with the word **ועשה** which illustrate the same idea.]

This relates to what Maimonides wrote, that the sense of touch, connected with our bodily needs, is a shameful thing. He cited a parable of this in *Guide* III, 8:

²⁰ BT *Sotah* 15b.

This is like the case of a man with whom the king had become angry, whereupon he commanded him to remove refuse from one place to another, to his shame. That man tried in every way to hide himself on the occasion of his humiliation, perhaps removing a small quantity to a nearby place so that his hands and garments will not be soiled, and so that other people will not see him. Free men would act in this manner. A slave, however, would rejoice in this and would not consider that he has been subjected to a great hardship. He would throw himself with his whole body into this filth, soil his face and hands, and carry the dung in public, laughing the while and rejoicing. The state of the various classes of people is similar. There are among men individuals to whose mind all the impulses of matter are shameful and ugly things, deficiencies imposed by necessity [for thus the Ruler of the World prescribed]... Consequently one's recourse to those things should be reduced to the extent to which this is possible... one should feel sorrowful because one does them... and be in control of all these impulses...

—so as not to sully the cloak of righteousness and the garb of the soul, namely one's good deeds. This is what is meant by "covering one's nakedness" (Exodus 28:42)—i.e., concealing the display of what is shameful, and not indulging in luxuries. This is the significance of Sukkot, which corresponds to the years of decline when a person does not indulge in luxuries and leaves his regular dwelling for a modest temporary shelter. That is why the priests²¹ wore linen breeches, for the word **בד** (linen) is connected to **בדידות** (loneliness) and isolation, for in that day a person becomes solitary and withdraws from the vanities of the world to become a dweller in tents. The majority of mortals assemble and gather much more than they need, with the excuse that they are doing it for their children or relatives. (I explained the shamefulness of their position in § 15.) But consider the old man who planted a carob tree, saying, "As my fathers planted for me, so I will plant for my children." Finding himself in old age, close to the gates of death, and seeing that all his imaginary concerns are leaving him—he has no son or brother to save him from the day of death, and he is left alone and solitary, without a helper or a support except for his good deeds—with this remembrance he endeavors to increase the spiritual possessions which are his alone, shared by nobody else. This is the secret of the Sukkah, the modest shelter for him alone. This is easily understood.

Through this exposition we can explain the midrash, "'Distribute portions to seven or even to eight'—seven refers to the days of Passover, and eight to the days of Sukkot, including even Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur."²²... In my opinion, this text comes to encourage three groups of people to repentance, for there are three groups of people corresponding to the three festivals. Some arouse themselves to awaken from the sleep of the

²¹ In Exodus 28:42, just cited.

²² *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* on Ecclesiastes 11:2.

times in repentance even in their youth, and they do not sleep through the morning, for morning is the best time of human life.

Some repent at mid-life, when they arrive at the years of understanding...

Some stumble all their days in darkness, through cloud and fog, without the lamp of commandment or Torah of light, until the evil days of decline come when they see their hand loses its strength; then they arouse themselves as if from a waking dream and return to the Lord.

But some despair of being able to repent...therefore King Solomon came to admonish them that they should not despair of repentance altogether...

It will also be evident that for these three seasons King Solomon composed three books...the Song of Songs in his youth...corresponding to Passover...and this book is Holy of Holies because repentance in youth is the best, and it is the essential purpose of the Song of Songs to arouse a person to cleave to the blessed God rather than be alienated from Him by sin, as it says, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine"...

And Proverbs he composed in mid-life when he was full of wisdom and understanding, for forty is the age of understanding, and it corresponds to Shavuot on which was given the Torah which embraces all wisdoms. It would have been proper to say Proverbs on Shavuot. However, since Proverbs is full of parables and riddles, whereas Moses's prophecy was clear and without riddles, we do not say Proverbs on Shavuot, so that one might not say that the Torah is a book of parables.

He composed Ecclesiastes at the end of his days, and said, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," for he saw then in retrospect that all the matters of this world are vanity and striving after wind. Therefore one says Ecclesiastes on Sukkot, at the time of [the year's] decline...

After this exposition, it will be clear to us why the rabbis said that we should ask and teach concerning the laws of Passover thirty days before Passover.... [The first is to motivate a person to repent at the beginning of his life, and not wait for troubles such as befell the Jewish people under Ahashuerus to motivate him....]

Or we may say that Passover is the beginning of Israel's sunrise, corresponding to a person's youth, whereas Purim corresponds to evening...²³

The second reason is that thirty days is also a period of ascendancy and decline, as with the moon....

The third reason is that Israel will express their eagerness to start early with mitzvot by clearing the house of all kinds of leaven, to show that they are desirous of serving God...

Thus it should be that those who are eager engage early in all mitzvot, and fulfil what they have already received, so that henceforth all their efforts shall be to cast from their hands all temporal sins and engage in the service of the blessed God, to clear the house of all leaven before the High Priest comes to see the plague that infests the human habitation. Therefore they said, "thirty days before Passover." And where they said elsewhere that Moses ordained to

²³ The end of Biblical Israel's history.

study the laws of Passover on Passover;²⁴ this refers to the laws which are to be practiced on the very day of Passover. But the laws which are to be practiced before Passover, such as koshering pots and removing leaven from the houses and courtyards, surely the labor of this mitzvah requires thirty days because it is so great! Thus have I begun in the name of the Lord to come into the explanation of the details of this festival. May the Lord enlighten my eyes in His Torah! Amen.

Sermon 22
A Sermon for Sukkot

§ 148. [Text.]²⁵ “On the first day you shall take the product of *hadar* trees, etc. (Leviticus 23:40)—Is it indeed on the first day? Isn’t it rather on the fifteenth of the month? But it is the first day for accounting of sins. A parable of a province, etc.”²⁶

[Thesis.]²⁷ Though they be worthy and many, the spirit of the Lord drives them on to escape from temporal calculations and to enter under the shade of the Almighty, to take shelter under His wings. From the day of their birth until they return unto dust, that day on which they come under His protecting roof is worthy of being called the first day for accounting of sins. For His is the right to determine what is first, whether in time or in rank.

[Argument.]²⁸ This inquiry is based on the principle that it is the way of the scriptures to express the notion of protection in terms of “shade” or “roof,” for it is the way of those who speak in parables to take something from familiar

²⁴ BT *Megillah* 4a, the *locus classicus* for prescribing the Torah portions to be read on the various festivals. Thus, the Torah reading for Passover deals with the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, and includes the laws of the Paschal offering which was offered in the first instance on the very night of the Exodus.

²⁵ Ephraim assigns numbers to his key texts throughout the book for his own ease of reference. Each sermon starts with a primary key text, and other secondary key texts are introduced in the course of the exposition. The numbers are used for cross-referencing throughout the book. This is one evidence of his reworking the text of his sermons for publication.

²⁶ YS 651. The parable is of a province which owed taxes to the king. When the king came to visit the province, they sent out a welcoming delegation fifteen miles from the city to greet him, and then five miles, and then at the city itself. The king forgave a third of the taxes at each of the stations. Similarly, the Jews acclaim God at Rosh Hashanah, at Yom Kippur, and at Sukkot. By the time Sukkot comes, all the sins are forgiven, and the slate is clean to start anew.

²⁷ After the first key-text of each sermon, Ephraim typically gives a rhapsodic expression of the themes he intends to develop. The present flowery passage weaves together allusions to Nahum 1:12, Isaiah 59:19, Ruth 2:12, Psalm 104:29, Genesis 19:8, and Deuteronomy 21:17—a fine example of his practice of borrowed elegance.

²⁸ After the thematic statement, Ephraim typically shifts into analytic mode and states the theses that he wishes to argue, or that are the presupposition for his argument. He typically introduces this section with the phraseology: הקדמת ענין זה: מבואר (או ברור) ש...

life as a figure for what is hidden, to mete out to man's ear what it is capable of hearing. In the same way, we find verses which attribute to the Holy and Blessed One corporeal organs, such as "the eyes of the Lord," "the hand of the Lord," and the like, all of which is to express the matter in a style for the masses, as Maimonides explained in [the *Guide*,] Part I. In this respect, we find scriptures which express God's salvation metaphorically as rain, as it says, "and He will come to us like the rain" (Hosea 6:3), since the benefit and need of rain is well recognized, as the lives of all beings are dependent on rain, so they are dependent also on the utterance of the Omnipresent Blessed One, for if the Holy One were to remove His protection and abandon them to chance occurrences, they would quickly perish; but you who hold fast to the Lord are all alive today, (Deuteronomy 4:4) standing and enduring. Therefore they described the Holy and Blessed One as a protecting shadow, as it says, "The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your shade [upon your right hand]." (Psalm 121:5) For whoever comes in under the shade of His roof to take shelter under His wings is saved from rain, from downpour and from scorching heat—all of which are symbols for chance events which befall one from the astral configuration above, as it says:

§ 149 "A tabernacle (*sukkah*) will serve for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain." (Isaiah 4:6) For there is no escaping these, unless it please God to let him save his soul by coming in to take shelter in the shadow of the Almighty. Therefore the ancients saw fit to compare the covering of the *sukkah* to the shade of the Almighty, as will be explained.

This is very likely the reason for juxtaposing the verse "a *sukkah* will serve for shade" to the song of the vineyard in Isaiah. If it was speaking of an ordinary *sukkah*, how could one say that it provides shelter and protection from rain and downpour? It lets the rain right in! But this is an allusion to the shade of the Holy and Blessed One, Who makes a tabernacle in the vineyard for those who watch over His fruit, the righteous fruit of the tree of life which grows from the Torah, which is the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts, whose yield is the wine, preserved in its grapes from the six days of creation, the secrets of the divine, for וין equals סוד²⁹—as it says, "He brought me to the house of wine" (Song of Songs 2:4)—this is Sinai, where was given the Torah which is expounded in seventy meanings, the numerical value of וין.³⁰

This matter can fundamentally be explained by way of parable and poetic figure as follows:

A parable:³¹ A king sent his devoted and loyal servants to a distant land, indicating that they would be ordered to cultivate it and guard it. They were

²⁹ The numerical value of וין (wine) and סוד (secret) is each 70. This was the basis in part of the Talmudic proverb, נכנס וין יצא סוד—"when wine goes in, the secret comes out." Depending on the context, סוד can mean either mundane secrets or divine mysteries. (See BT *Erwin* 65a, *Sanhedrin* 38a.)

³⁰ *Numbers Rabbah* 2:3, *Tanhuma Bemidbar* 10.

³¹ This parable, of Ephraim's invention, was suggested by the parable of Isaiah 5 but is very different from it.

charged not to live off its produce during the time that they were working it, but the fruit of that vineyard would be put in storage for their eventual benefit, for it is very long-lasting, as opposed to other fruit which grows up in the morning and withers by the evening, and is not put to storage because it is readily available but does not keep well. Now since they were commanded not to live off that vineyard, the king had to provide them for their sustenance small vineyards which stood around the large vineyard beloved of the king. From these vineyards they could take fruit to eat; however these fruits could not be kept in storage, for they would not keep with the passing of time, nor would they survive the transportation back home. The foolish workers were seduced by the immediate benefit of the small vineyards, which could be enjoyed at once and were necessary for their immediate survival, which was not the case with the large and spacious vineyard, the benefit of whose fruit can only be appreciated after a long time. Now as they were blind (though blessed with eyes) and shortsighted, they withdrew from the larger project, and this for two reasons. The first reason is what we already said, that the benefit of the small vineyards was tangible and evident, so they cultivated them regularly, sensing that their home lay there, while they worked on the large vineyard only sporadically, as the benefit was remote to them. The second reason is that as they grew apart from each other, the team fragmented and their cooperative project disintegrated, like that other project of the Tower of Babel, which fell apart because the players could not work together; therefore they chose to work on their own individual tiny vineyards, each by himself. When the king saw how the project fell apart for these two reasons, he decided to mend the breach through the following two injunctions:

- (1) They should dwell only occasionally in the tabernacles of the small vineyards, but dwell regularly in the large vineyard. By this means, they should come to recognize that that is where their true home lies, while the cultivation of the small vineyards is of secondary importance.
- (2) They should always band together. By this means, they will succeed in their purpose, and assist each other in performing the work of the king as he commanded.

With the assistance of this parable, the meaning and secret of these two mitzvot—sukkah and lulav—which we were commanded at the same time, will become clear.

§ 150. Solomon shed light on our parable when he said, “Don’t stare at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has gazed upon me. My mother’s sons quarreled with me, they made me guard the vineyards; my own vineyard I did not guard.” (Song of Songs 1:6–7) This should be understood in the sense explained in the *Binding of Isaac*,³² that all temporal possessions are symbolized

³² Isaac Arama, *Binding of Isaac*, exact location unknown. Ephraim’s frequent citation of Arama in this sermon is typical of his practice throughout *Gleanings*. He mentions in the introduction to *Gleanings* that *The Binding of Isaac* on Portions *Emor* and *Aharei*

by the sun. Therefore, a sukkah whose sunlight exceeds its shade is unfit, for it indicates that its owner relies more on temporal possessions (symbolized by the sun) than on the shade of the Almighty. Indeed, whoever trusts in his wealth surely blackens his pure soul with deeds that ought not be done, until its rational form is diminished, and its demeanor is darkened.

Therefore the congregation of Israel says, "Do not consider me swarthy. Indeed, I have been immersed in the waters of Shihor,³³ and I am black in my deeds, for the sun has burned me—I trusted in temporal possessions, which come from the bountiful yield of the sun. "My mother's sons quarreled with me"—what has brought me to this pass, is that my brothers, who are my partners, persuaded me to tend the small vineyards, that ruin the vineyard³⁴ of the Lord of Hosts, to the point that I neglected the cultivation of my own special vineyard, to wit, the Torah and mitzvot. For the King, Lord of Hosts, sent [us] for our sustenance to this world, for the cultivation of the great vineyard, i.e. the Torah, as we saw earlier. He commanded us not to live off it, not to make it a spade to dig with,³⁵ for the mitzvot were not given for the purpose of temporal benefit,³⁶ but rather to set aside store for the eternal home of the pure soul, for that is its portion from all its toil. He also provided small vineyards for us—these are temporal enterprises, which a person certainly needs, and whose benefit is tangible to the material eye, for one cannot survive without them! But as for this great vineyard, which is symbolic of the Torah, everyone has an equal hand in it, and the Torah's project will not be completed without the cooperation of those worthy and many individuals, as they said, "It is not given to you to complete the work [but you are not free to exempt yourself from it]."³⁷ Its benefit will only be evident in the World to come, which no eye has seen except God alone.³⁸ It was on this basis that Eve was misled, for she saw that the fruit was a delight to the eyes (Genesis 3:6), in contrast to that eternal felicity which the eye does not see. That is why I did not tend my own vineyard, for I considered the dwelling in this world to be a permanent dwelling, as it was tangible to the material eye, and my own special vineyard was not cultivated or sown. In the words of Solomon:

Mot is the only recent work which he has seen that deals extensively with the homiletic meaning of the holidays. (*Gleanings* (Hebrew), Vol. I, p. 22) He seems to have read Arama avidly in this period, and picked up a lot of small points of imagery and specific interpretation of passages. However, Arama's anti-philosophic outlook passed him by. Ephraim's central theme of the significance of the sukkah as designed to wean man from temporal pursuits is basic to the rabbinic conception of it, and is expressed by Arama in his lengthy commentary on Leviticus 23:33.

³³ See Jeremiah 2:18: "What, then, is the good of your going to Egypt, to drink the waters of the Nile (מי שחור)?" Ephraim plays on the common root of שחור (Nile) and שחור (black).

³⁴ Play on Song of Songs 2:15: "Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards."

³⁵ Mishnah *Avot* 4:5.

³⁶ BT *Eruvin* 31a.

³⁷ Mishnah *Avot* 2:16.

³⁸ Allusion to Isaiah 64:3.

"I passed by the field of a lazy man, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense. It was all overgrown with thorns, etc." (Proverbs 24:30–31)

He³⁹ gave two reasons for the ruin of that vineyard: (1) "That the sun has gazed on me," i.e., that I relied more on temporal possessions which come from the bounteous yield of the sun, and I made them into a permanent dwelling, as we said. (2) "My mother's sons quarreled with me," so that the field of communal enterprise was not cultivated or sown on account of the estrangement of our hearts. In response to these two conditions, the mitzvot of sukkah and lulav came to mend the breach. For the four species of the lulav teach that Israel constitute one band, as will be explained in its place, God willing. And the sukkah bids us to come and take shelter under the shade of the Almighty, to give our primary attention to the vineyards of the Lord of Hosts, and to make of these small vineyards an occasional dwelling. "*My vineyard*" (which I have not tended) refers to those spiritual pursuits which belong properly to me and not to strangers, as opposed to those illusory temporal goods. For it can happen that a man must suddenly leave to others all the wealth and property which he has built and planted, and not enjoy the fruit of all the labor which he has labored for in vain.⁴⁰

§ 151. It seems that this is what the rabbis meant when they said, "Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion, as it says, 'When you eat the fruit of your labors [... you shall be happy].' (Psalm 128:2)"⁴¹ How did they learn from this verse that one who rejoices in his portion is called rich? I say that it is well known that wealth is divided into two parts. The first part is what is already consumed and expended from one's assets for the needs of body and soul, while the second part is what still remains visibly in hand. It is customary for people to regret what they have consumed, and to rejoice over what they still have in hand. It is the latter that gives them joy and pleasure, when they say, "How rich I am! How much treasure I have!" But this is a bad custom and the opposite of the truth. For truly anyone to whom God has apportioned understanding will understand and appreciate that a person ought only to rejoice in that which he has consumed, for that is truly his portion. He ought to give thanks and praise to the blessed God, that he has been lucky enough to eat of the fruit of his labors, for that is his portion—whatever he has expended in eating and drinking and other necessities, as well as for Torah and charity. On the other hand, whatever he still has in hand is nothing at all to rejoice over, for it is possible that his fortunes will suddenly decline, or strangers will rob him, or he will leave his wealth to others, or rivers will flood his land, or his possessions will go up in flames. With nothing left in hand, for what should he rejoice? So the portion which he has consumed is definitely his own, while that which is left in his holding is not definitely his.

³⁹ I.e., Solomon. In conflating the insights of Proverbs 24:30 and Song of Songs 1:6, Ephraim follows the traditional attribution of both books to Solomon.

⁴⁰ General allusion to Ecclesiastes (appropriately, the third Biblical book attributed to Solomon!), especially 2:18–21 and 5:15–6:2.

⁴¹ Mishnah *Avot* 4:1.

You will see that this is the very form and likeness of what Kohelet says: “Only this, I have found, is a real good: that one should eat and drink [and get pleasure with all the gains he makes under the sun...] *for that is his portion*. [Also, whenever a man is given riches and property by God] and is also permitted by Him to enjoy them *and to take his portion* [and get pleasure for his gains—that is a gift of God.] (Ecclesiastes 5:17–18) These verses tell and testify (“the testimony of the Lord is faithful”) that the portion which is consumed is his true portion in which he should rejoice. Therefore they said, “Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion,” i.e. the portion which is consumed, which is his true portion, as it says, “*When you eat* the labor of your hands, you are happy.” You see that this verse says approvingly that the portion which is consumed is what confers wealth, and that is what a person ought to rejoice in. As it says, “There is nothing better for man than to enjoy his possessions, since that is his portion. For who can enable him to see what will happen afterward?” (Ecclesiastes 3:22) One may also say that “his portion” refers to life’s necessities, but that one should not rejoice in the luxuries that he has, for they are not his portion, but only what he needs for his subsistence is called his portion, and he should rejoice only in it, as it says, “When you *eat* the labor of your hands, etc.” This is obvious.

Now on this festival, which is called “the time of our rejoicing,” it is proper for us to discern what makes our rejoicing complete. We are guided in this respect by the command to leave our regular dwelling and stay in a temporary lodge, in order to know, make known, and let it be known that happiness is not to be found in all the possessions of this world which we regard as our permanent dwelling. Rather, true happiness consists in entering under the roof of the Almighty, as it says, “he who rejoices in his portion,” which is elucidated in the verse, “The Lord is my portion, I say with full heart.” (Lamentations 3:24) For that portion which is consumed in expenditures for Torah and charity has already been given to the Lord, and is therefore his without a doubt. Therefore it says, “*My vineyard*”—designated for me—“I have not tended”—I went astray after those small vineyards, thinking they can provide perfection, while the wall of the Lord’s vineyard is breached and trampled.

That is why [the text of Isaiah] juxtaposes the song of the vineyard to the verse, “a sukkah shall serve as shade.” The verse, “Let me sing for my beloved a song of my lover about his vineyard (Isaiah 5:1) refers to the perfect Torah of the Lord, which is symbolized by a vineyard, as it says, “[Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars,] she has prepared the feast, mixed the wine, etc.” (Proverbs 9:1–2) and also: “He brought me to the house of wine”—referring to Sinai where the Torah was given with 70 interpretations, the numerical value of פ”⁴². “My beloved had a vineyard on a fruitful hill... he hoped it would yield grapes. Instead, it yielded wild grapes” (Isaiah 5:1–2)—i.e. the whole Torah was turned to heresy. “What shall I do for my vineyard?... I will remove its hedge, that it may be ravaged”—i.e., base men, symbolized by creeping thorns, broke down its wall and opened it

⁴² *Numbers Rabbah* 2:3, cited above.

up to be trampled, for even those who ought to build walls and stand in the breach turned corrupt and despicable, as it says, “The guardians of the Torah ignored me.” (Jeremiah 2:8) “I will command the clouds to drop no rain on it” (Isaiah 5:6)—the festival of Sukkot being [the start of] the rain season, as they did not observe the commandment of the sukkah properly, and did not come under the shade of the Almighty, therefore “they shall receive no rain.” (Zechariah 14:17)

“For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the House of Israel” (Isaiah 5:7)—the Lord entrusted His vineyard to the house of Israel, as it says, “Solomon had a vineyard in Baal-hamon. He entrusted the vineyard to the guards, etc.” (Song of Songs 8:11) That is why [Isaiah] prefaced this song with the verse, “A sukkah shall serve as shade by day and as a shelter for protection against rain and downpour.” (Isaiah 4:6) He could not be talking about an ordinary sukkah, for it lets the rain right in! Rather, he is talking about taking refuge in the shade of the Almighty. For every person of Israel on whom the light of reasoning shines, recognizes and knows that lodging in this world is a temporary arrangement, and the worthy will take refuge in the shade of the Almighty which is a refuge for His people from withering heat or downpour that might befall them from the astral configuration, as it says, “He will rain down upon the wicked blazing coals and sulphur,” (Psalms 1:6) as well as from great torrents of water, as it says, “Were it not for the Lord who was on our side...the waters would have carried us off.” (Psalms 124:1–4)

§ 152. This is the basis of the midrash: “Mortals ceil their habitations with wood and stones [and earth], but the Holy and Blessed One ceils His upper chambers with waters.” (Psalms 104:3)⁴³ Therefore the law of the Sukkah states: “A ceiling which has a pavement-barrier (מעזיבה) is unfit”⁴⁴—this is a ceiling of mortals who ceil their upper chambers with wood and stones, and plaster them with earth, which is all symbolic of those who take shelter in the shade of illusory possessions. The word for barrier (מעזיבה) indicates abandonment (עזב), for in the end he will be abandoned by his possessions and will abandon his wealth to others. But the ceiling of the Holy and Blessed One has no barrier over it, for God will never abandon those who take refuge in Him. God uses water as His ceiling, for the utility of rain and water is recognized by all. In this connection, “shade” and “rain” have the same significance; therefore the biblical verses compare divine salvation alternately to the shade of the sukkah or to rain, as it says, “He will come to us like rain, etc.” (Hosea 6:3). And since the Holy and Blessed One is denoted by both figures, we find in Zechariah when he specifies the punishment of the gentiles who do not come up to celebrate the festival of Sukkot, that it is written, “they shall receive no

⁴³ *Genesis Rabbah* 4:1.

⁴⁴ Corollary of Mishnah *Sukkah* 1:7 (BT *Sukkah* 15a), which says that if the ceiling is without a pavement-barrier, it can be converted into a sukkah-roof by appropriate remedies. מעזיבה refers to pavement or plastering above the roof to serve as a floor to the story above. Thus, if a roof has a pavement-barrier above it, it is fit as an earthly dwelling but not as a sukkah.

rain.” (Zechariah 14:17) This means they shall not enjoy the Lord’s salvation which is symbolized by rain. As to why precisely this punishment was designated for the gentiles with respect to this mitzvah, it will be explained, God willing, in a following text.

After this discussion, it will be clear to us why this day is called “the first for the accounting of sins.” I will explain it in four ways.

The first way is that this day is called “first” because it is first in rank and dignity over all other days. For on this day we leave behind our status of permanent residents to dwell in this world as temporary guests, and whoever considers his dwelling in this world a temporary stay is well-versed in the accounting of sins, for he watches his actions and is strict with himself in all his deeds, to the point of being aware of every misstep. Therefore repentance is also easy for him, as he keeps track of each and every flaw of his soul, just as an invalid must keep track of all his symptoms or it will be hard for him to find the right remedy. So it is too with those sick in soul; the well-informed keep a fine tally of their sins, as it says, “The heart of man will consider his way,” (Proverbs 16:9) and “to those who consider His name,” (Malachi 3:16) as well as the midrashic interpretation of “Come to Heshbon.” (Numbers 21:27)⁴⁵

Not so those sects who think they can dwell tranquilly in this world as if in permanence, and who build themselves secure houses with spacious stories, and who pass their days in vanity, piling up food, silver, gold, and human treasures like the dust, until they grow haughty and forget the Lord who made them, despising their Rock and Savior Who gives them the power to amass wealth.⁴⁶ These groups are surely ignorant of the tally of their sins, which has swelled and increased to a point beyond all counting, and knows no reckoning. If they could be counted, they would be more numerous than the sand. For such a one has committed sins by the bundle, and it is hard for him to repent, for everything has become permitted in his eyes, and he imputes no guilt to his soul⁴⁷ for anything. But the worthy person keeps close track of all

⁴⁵ All three verses use the root **חשב** (to consider or make an accounting), which Ephraim interprets in connection with “accounting of sins.” The midrash on Numbers 21:27 is found in BT *Bava Batra* 78b: **מאי דכתיב: (במדבר כ"א) על כן יאמרו המושלים וגו' המושלים—אלו המושלים ביצרים... בואו חשבון—בואו ונחשב חשבוננו של עולם, הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה, ושכר עבירה כנגד הפסדה... תבנה ותכונן—אם אתה עושה כן, תבנה בעולם הזה ותכונן לעולם הבא** (מושלים) would recite, Come to Heshbon...? The **מושלים** are those who exercise control over their urges. ‘Come to Heshbon’—come let us make take account of things in their eternal aspect, how the expense of a mitzvah is offset by its reward, while the advantage of a transgression is offset by its punishment. ‘It [you] will be firmly built and well-founded’—if you do thus, you will be built up in this world and firmly founded for the world to come.”

⁴⁶ Conflation of Deuteronomy 8:11–18 and 32:15. The critique of the self-importance of the wealthy is a major theme of Ephraim, discussed by H. H. Ben-Sasson in *Tziyon* 19 (1954), pp. 142–166.

⁴⁷ **ולא ישים אשם בנפשו**. Allusion to Isaiah 53:10: “That if he made himself an offering for guilt (**אשם תשים** **אשם נפש**), he might see offspring and have long life, and that through him the Lord’s purpose might prosper.” The libertine with a clean

his deeds and calculates how many debits sit against him on the ledger of his heavenly Creator, for sin is counted as a debit, just as a fool's heart inclines toward the left side. Thus David proclaimed proudly, "For I recognize my transgressions." (Psalms 51:5) Thus this day is called "first for accounting for sins" because [dwelling in the sukkah] leads one to an examination of one's own sins, therefore it ranks first.

The second way: This festival comes after the Day of Atonement and the days of repentance, during which all one's sins have already been forgiven, so one is now like a new creature, born today, with neither merit nor demerit to one's name, for that is the effect of repentance by definition. Furthermore, this festival has seven days corresponding to the seven decades allocated to a person's life, during all of which a person ought to sit in the shade of the Almighty and dwell in this world in a modest fashion. Therefore this day is called "first for accounting of sins," indicating that even in the first ten years of one's life (corresponding to the first day of Sukkot), although one is not fully culpable for one's deeds, nevertheless when old age rears its head, then one is uncertain whether the Holy and Blessed One will include one's youthful sins in the reckoning as well. Therefore David prayed, "Be not mindful of my youthful sins and transgressions." (Psalms 25:7) Why did he assume that God *would* be mindful of them? The matter is similar to visiting the sins of the parents on the children. Even though it says, "[Parents shall not be put to death for children,] nor children be put to death for parents" (Deuteronomy 24:16), nevertheless if the child follows in his parents' footsteps, the Holy and Blessed One visits the parents' sins upon him, even though he had no hand in those deeds. The same should apply all the more in the case of youthful sins, in which he did have a hand, if he repeats the same culpable pattern in maturity, that the Holy and Blessed One should include his youthful sins in the reckoning. Therefore they said that this is the first day in the accounting of sins, to motivate a person, that if he does not walk in the ways of the Lord when he arrives at maturity, then he will surely be bringing harm on himself, for also the first day will be included in the reckoning and he will be punished for youthful sins as well.

The third way follows the approach that we mentioned in the introduction to Passover, that the three festivals correspond to three periods [of life]: ascendancy, maturity, and decadence. The sages have agreed that the Feast of the Ingathering [Sukkot] corresponds to a person's taking leave of the world, as Arama commented on Portion *Shemini*: "Indeed, after the days of the harvest have passed, there is set for us the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year (Exodus 34:22), for it is a paradigm of the ingathering of man from the world, as it says, 'When you gather in the results of your work, etc.' (Exodus 23:16), for in a person's final days he ought to remember the days of his vanity and to make a fine accounting with his soul of the time he has spent, etc."—and so the rabbi expounded at length.

conscience is the polar opposite of Isaiah's suffering servant—a fine example of ironic quotation.

The main point is that this day was established for the accounting of sins, for in one's days of decline one should make accounting with oneself, for the day of the Lord approaches, the time when all flesh will surely come to give judgment and accounting before the King of Kings, the Holy and Blessed One, on the day that one leaves this world which one considered one's permanent home, and come to the World to Come which one considered a temporary abode but which is in fact the permanent abode and eternal home. This is the meaning of what the rabbis said in Tractate *Nedarim*: "If the young tell you "Build!" and the old tell you "Tear down!" then tear down and do not build, for the tearing-down of the old is building, and the building of the young is tearing-down."⁴⁸ And they cite evidence from the case of Rehoboam.

Indeed, this passage is a marvelous parable of what we have said, that everyone has the task of building two houses. One house is in this world, a house of cedar⁴⁹ with spacious stories and silver and gold. The second house is an eternal house, to make a dwelling place for one's soul as befits its dignity. But the two houses contradict⁵⁰ each other, for the building of the one implies the tearing-down of the other. For as long as all one's efforts and dealings are directed at the buildings of this world, one's eternal house is left desolate and empty. Thus they build ruins for themselves, as it says, "[For now would I be lying in repose . . .] with the world's kings and counselors who [re-]build⁵¹ ruins for themselves, or with nobles who possess gold and who fill their houses with silver." (Job 3:13–15) So too the reverse: as long as all one's strivings are to build oneself a foundation-seat in the World of Light to sit eternally before God, then necessarily one's house must be desolate, for not everyone merits two tables.⁵² But as for the counsel of the children, they are of the children of the blind⁵³ on whom the light of reasoning does not shine, for they consider the habitation of this world permanent and primary. The counsel of the elders who have acquired wisdom is the opposite of this. If the elders tell you to tear down your house in this world, by all means tear it down! For this tearing-down is in fact the building-up of your foundation-seat in the eternal home. But the building of the sophomoric⁵⁴ young is in fact the tearing-down of the eternal

⁴⁸ BT *Nedarim* 40a.

⁴⁹ Allusion to II Samuel 7:2, where David says to the prophet Nathan, "Here I am dwelling in a house of cedar, while the Ark of the Lord abides in a tent!"—and proposes to build a temple to remedy the imbalance.

⁵⁰ סותרים זה את זה, a play on the two meanings of the root סתר: to contradict (in logic) or to tear down (in carpentry).

⁵¹ The original meaning was probably "rebuild," i.e. Job would be privileged to lie in death with kings who accomplished great feats such as rebuilding ruins into standing cities. The homiletic sense, of course, is that all the material accomplishments of the mighty in this world are as futile as a building project whose end product is nothing but ruins.

⁵² I.e., not everyone can be privileged enough to enjoy both material and spiritual success. (BT *Berakhot* 5a.)

⁵³ מילדי העורים, play on מילדי העברים ("This must be one of the Hebrew children," Exodus 2:6).

⁵⁴ The untranslatable מחכמה has the dual sense of "too young for

home, as we have said. Similarly: “[A city is built up by the blessing of the upright,] but it is torn down by the speech of the wicked,” (Proverbs 11:11) and “Those who ravage you and ruin you come from your midst.” (Isaiah 49:17)⁵⁵ For they think that there is no accounting in Sheol where one goes [after death].⁵⁶ Therefore they say that this day is the first for the accounting of sin, which is clear to those of understanding and the enlightened.

The fourth way: It is well known that all human perfection depends on shunning evil and doing good. We find this at three times in this month: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

On Rosh Hashanah, the blowing of the Shofar comes to confound Satan; this is “shunning evil.” It also comes to gather all the seed of Israel in one band (as will be explained under Rosh Hashanah, § 212), which is the cause of doing good (as will be explained there).

Similarly, on Yom Kippur, Satan is cast aside, which is “shunning evil,” and “doing good” is brought about by the peace which prevails among the people of Israel on Yom Kippur.

So too on this festival, dwelling in the modest and temporary abode of the sukkah results in shunning evil by discouraging the pursuit of luxuries, while the lulav with its four species bound as one encourages doing good. For when Israel are bound together as one, then the Holy and Blessed One in the capacity of King of Israel receives them as a people, as it says, “Then He became King in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Israel together.” (Deuteronomy 33:5) Even though we banded together on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and took upon ourselves the yoke of divine sovereignty, nevertheless the Holy and Blessed One did not fully adopt us as a people, inasmuch as we did not enter into a full and lasting covenant together. For the shofar of Rosh Hashanah is only an admonition for us to band together. And on Yom Kippur, though people forgive each other out of good will, they quickly revert to their former habits. But on this festival, we are bound together by (1) a single leader possessed of Torah and mitzvot, symbolized by the etrog. Grasping it in the left hand indicates his strength and force of character, for the left hand stands opposite the right hand of the Shekhinah, and the right hand of the Lord is exalted, bestowing strength and power to turn the many from sin, and to bind together with that strength of hand the other three groups, namely: (2) those with Torah but no mitzvot, (3) those with mitzvot but no Torah, and (4) those empty of Torah and mitzvot alike. These three groups correspond respectively to the palm, the myrtle, and the willow. But when they are bound together with a full and lasting bond, then the Holy and Blessed One takes us to Himself as a people. Therefore this day is the first for accounting of sins, for if the Holy and Blessed One

wisdom” or “shaken away from wisdom.” “Sophomoric” similarly has the dual sense of “sophos/moros = wise/stupid” as well as callow or immature.

⁵⁵ New JPS translation: “Those who ravaged and ruined you shall leave you.”

⁵⁶ Indeed, Ecclesiastes 9:10 says exactly this, as Ephraim is aware. But for him it is not the whole story.

had not taken us to Himself as a people, then accounting of sins would not be in place, for He would not be so strict with us if He had not yet received us in that capacity. This agrees in every respect with what will be explained later in § 177 on the verse, “I set the Lord opposite me always.” (Psalms 16:11) That passage continues “You will teach me the path of life” (where **חיים** has the same numerical value as **לולב**) “...delights are ever in Your right hand,” which the rabbis also interpreted as a reference to the lulav, by which Israel demonstrate to the gentiles that they are victorious.⁵⁷ For when Israel are at peace with each other, the other nations fall before them, and the enlightened will understand.

This completes the explanation that we wanted to add in this short essay. May the Lord enlighten our eyes in His Torah and instruct us of His ways. Amen, and so may it be His will.

⁵⁷ Ephraim’s image is borrowed from *Leviticus Rabbah* 30:2: “‘You will teach me the path of life’ speaks of Israel. Israel said before the Holy and Blessed One: ‘Master of the Universe! Teach me the path of life!’ He said to them, ‘Here are the ten days of penitence between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. **שובע שמחות את פניך**—read not thus, but rather **שבוע שמחות**—these are the seven mitzvot of the festival, and what are they?—the four species of the lulav, plus sukkah, the *Hagigah* (festal) offering, and rejoicing. What is ‘delights in your right hand are **נצה** (victory)’? R. Abin said, This is the lulav, like one who is victorious and holds a wand. A parable of two who entered before the judge, and we do not know who won, unless we see one of them holding a wand in his hand, and then we know that he won. Similarly, Israel and the nations of the world go in and contend with the Holy and Blessed One on Rosh Hashanah, and we do not know who won, but when Israel depart from God’s presence with their lulavs and etrogs in their hands, we know that Israel came out victorious.”

THE PRECIOUS ORNAMENT (1602)
INTRODUCTION

Ephraim Luntshitz

יש זהב ורב פנינים וכלי יקר שפתי דעת:
הבן יקיר לי אפרים?

Gold is plentiful, jewels abundant; but wise speech is a precious ornament. (Proverbs 20:15)
Is not Ephraim a dear son to me? (Jeremiah 31:20)

Introduction

Precious is Your kindness, O God¹—
That kindness on which the universe is built²—
With lower, second, and third decks He made it³—
Before the mountains were conceived,⁴
Before You brought forth the earth and its fullness,
His name alone was exalted.⁵
There was none to call on His blessed name,⁶
Nor was there any one to serve⁷ the Lord—
The Lord saw that there was no person,⁸
He was distressed that there was no one to recognize His mighty and
blessed authority;
On whom should His presence rest?
And to whom could the arm of the Lord be revealed?⁹
Then it occurred to the Blessed One
To create the heavens with His word, and all their host,
And establish His band on earth.¹⁰
On every level are His servants, who do His will;

¹ Psalm 36.8.

² Psalm 89.3.

³ Genesis 6.16. See the three-level world hierarchy (earth, stars, angels) in *Ornament* on Genesis 1:1.

⁴ Psalm 90.2.

⁵ Psalm 148.13.

⁶ Isaiah 64.6.

⁷ Genesis 1.5.

⁸ Isaiah 59.16.

⁹ Isaiah 53.1.

¹⁰ Amos 9.6.

Everywhere incense is offered to His blessed name¹¹
 By those who see the King's face.¹²
 In the terrestrial realm He chose humankind,
 Whom He created in wisdom,¹³
 So that their wisdom excelled that of the ancients¹⁴
 Who preceded them in creation.
 Last and dearest is the human, created in God's image,¹⁵
 In the iconic likeness of his Maker,
 Who endowed him with understanding
 In abundant degree and abundant force.¹⁶
 From the general sort Yah chose for Him Jacob,
 The scion of His lover Abraham,
 Who called throatily in the name of El Olam, the God of the Universe:
 "This God is our God, Who directs the supernal and terrestrial realms;
 There is none else besides Him,
 And the whole earth shines from His glory."
 For He made the righteous one of the world shine forth from the East,
 And the people who walked in darkness saw the Light of the Lord.
 They held steadfast to this faith, generation after generation,
 And the face of the world was filled with knowledge and fear of God,
 From Jacob His inheritance, the threefold cord,
 Just as the throne of the Lord stands on three legs.
 This is my meditation and opening from the peak of Amana,¹⁷
 To sing the song of the Lord, like the Song of Songs that is

Solomon's

Precious was the word of the Lord in those days;
 There was no widespread vision.¹⁸
 For two thousand years there was waste among the gentiles, without
 Torah,
 For it was sealed up in His storehouse,

¹¹ Malachi 1.11.

¹² Esther 1.14.

¹³ Blessing אשר יצר ("who created humankind in wisdom") from Jewish daily prayer book.

¹⁴ I Kings 5.10 with a twist. In this context, human beings (created on the sixth day) are said to be wiser than their "ancients" created on the first five days.

¹⁵ Mishnah *Avot* 3.14.

¹⁶ Genesis 49.3.

¹⁷ Song of Songs 4.8. The Hebrew ראש אמונה is also the title of Isaac Abravanel's philosophic work *Principles of Faith* (1494)—another of Ephraim's clever allusion to book-titles that he scatters through his prefaces.

¹⁸ I Samuel 3:1. The allusions (mostly Biblical) continue thickly and fiercely as before (as typically in this genre), but we will not document all of them from this point on.

While the exceptional ones of the generation were isolated.
 But the Lord made a spirit of relief to pass over the land,
 A spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.
 He prepared His good word for the seed of His lover Abraham,
 To give them a pleasing inheritance,
 The pleasing words of the true Torah,
 Fair and righteous laws for them to follow,
 That this splendid prize should fill them
 With blessing from the Lord and favor from the Denizen of Sinai.
 They stood straight-legged on Mount Sinai.
 They saw things more precious even than Ezekiel.
 A sage is preferable to a prophet,
 For he sees the vision of the Almighty.
 Whoever is wise of heart possesses the Torah;
 From his soul's labor he is filled with sweet happiness
 And joy in the right hand of the fiery law.
 To him are revealed the mysteries of wisdom;
 The secrets are laid bare to him, but they do not trouble him.
 This is Torah, and this is its reward!
 Her friends will eat her fruits,
 The holy fruits of the first pruning;
 They eat her fruits in this world,
 But the principal is exalted in honor
 For the sages to take possession of it when they come into their rest,
 Inheriting three hundred and ten worlds.
 There will sprout the horn of David's redemption,
 And He will set him as a commanding beacon and illuminating Teaching
 To all the children of Israel in their dwellings.
 For the pure utterances of the Lord will reflect honor on their owners,
 The experts in Bible and Mishna, in Talmud and lore
 (He has established their band on the earth)
 To nourish them from the fruit of their deeds in this world,
 And You increase strength to the enfeebled,
 So he shall be mighty like

Ephraim

Precious even more than wisdom and glory
 Is the little suffering of him who lends his shoulder
 To bear the burden of the Lord's word.
 Is it not a small thing?—and our soul shall live from it.
 For if the Lord's commandment is broader than the sea,
 It is yet easy in the doing,
 For the Lord has not laid a heavy yoke on us.
 And it is a small thing that the Lord asks of us,
 To fear the Lord and walk humbly with the Lord,

To give us all life as this day.
 And despite this, Israel knows not light from heavy,
 My people understand not future from past,
 Nor foolish from pure.
 They have cast off the yoke of Heaven's authority,
 And let themselves into anarchy.
 This generation seeks love in self-indulgence,
 And they carry the ambition on their shoulder to seek glory,
 Locking horns with each other like wild goats.¹⁹
 But they do not seek the face of the Lord, their portion.
 Each seeks only his own profit,
 Therefore they are exiled for want of knowledge.
 For God said, lest they repent when they see
 That the Lord fights against them, face to face,
 And they return in heartfelt penitence.
 So he gave up the "horns" to their enemies—
 The horn of Israel is cut down like an Ashera.
 He saw they were in straits, for they returned to the Lord,
 And shouted, saying: "Return unto us, O Lord of our salvation,
 For we have sinned!"
 Quickly he returns and repents of the evil;
 He sends His word and heals them.
 Israel sees that there is relief,
 And his ears grow too heavy to hear, he is cast backward.
 The Lord also turns away from them.
 Shall God do all this three times
 To a proud man who shows no awe
 To His awesome sanctuary?
 He thrust them into another land;
 He takes back His provision and protection from them
 And exposes them, naked and bereft of any achievement.
 Israel grows more and more impoverished as their Exile drags on,
 And as the years pile on, they ask: "Do we deserve all this?
 Perhaps someone will be found to turn and repent of his evil ways,
 So that the Lord will also turn from His blazing anger,
 And those who walked backwards as the tents of Kedar
 Will be as the pavilions of

Solomon

Precious is the spirit of a man of understanding,
 Who will understand and glean guidance for a people's conduct.
 They do not understand how far their ways are from the Lord's ways!

¹⁹ כִּי יִשְׁתַּעַר שְׁעִיר עַל רֵעֵהוּ—apparent allusion to Daniel 8.21, 11.40.

It is a topsy-turvy generation, which turns over the bowl,
 And has the arrogance to judge the good evil and the evil good,
 To exalt the worthless
 While those rich in wisdom are seated below.
 They call the fool prince,
 To seat him with the princes of the people
 Of the God of Abraham, the Lord.
 They divide into clagues and factions,
 Some in love with money, some with illusions of glory,
 Some with sensuality, some with gossip.
 A town with every defect present!
 While the lovers of the supernal truth are few,
 Insignificant in number!
 The breaches in the wall exceed the standing part,
 This one says, "I am for the Lord, and sanctity dwells in me:
 I will not come to the city to dwell on the heights of the metropolis!"²⁰
 That one invokes the name of Israel, saying:
 "I have striven with God and with men, and I have prevailed!"
 Yet a third writes a challenge to God himself, saying:
 "Mine is the light, and I have made it;
 My hand is in every branch of knowledge.
 Who can compare with me? Let him say so, and measure up!"
 Still another says: "Mine is the world and its fullness!
 Who can rival me in works of gold and silver,
 Or in fashioning the wood of the tree of life?"
 Another grasps the one and does not let go of the other.
 All these (and those like them)
 Are the doom of the city;
 They tear down, but do not build!
 The breach springs up before them;
 The wall collapses before its builders.
 My spirit presses tight in my belly,
 My heart quakes within me
 Like a coin jangling in a jug²¹
 Like a bell and a pomegranate²²—
 I cannot hold it in!²³
 My word lies on my tongue like a burning sore,²⁴ saying:
 How long will you judge unjustly,

²⁰ Proverbs 9.3.

²¹ BT *Baba Metzia* 85b, proverbial expression for a loud ignoramus.

²² Exodus 28.34. "Bell and pomegranate" (פעמון ורמון) alludes to the commentary on Cordovero's פירוש רמנים of that title, which was published later but may have been available in manuscript in 1602.

²³ Jeremiah 20.9.

²⁴ Conflating II Samuel 23.2 and Proverbs 16.27.

Turning light into darkness and darkness into light?
 Will you gouge out these men's eyes, by denying the obvious?
 Be astonished, O heavens, at this!²⁵
 Was there ever the like?
 An exiled and dispersed people,
 Much despised among the nations,
 Refuses to repent for certain infamous scandals,
 Acknowledged by all;
 And revealed is the sin of

Ephraim

Precious in the sight of the Lord
 Is the burden of His saintly ones²⁶
 (The yoke, obedience, endurance, and the like)!
 I answer my heart:
 What do you gain by deploring
 The degeneration of the generations?
 Are you any better than those
 Who called out from deep in their throats,
 Until their throats croaked,
 And still the people did not listen to them?
 They mocked the kings of the Lord,
 Cursing them and despising them!
 Will you become one of them?
 Wake up! Why do you slumber,
 Sitting and wondering at something
 Which is not in your power to remedy?
 Should you deny yourself on their account²⁷
 From becoming a man of valor and mighty deeds,
 Performing salvation and seeking his people's welfare
 As in previous times?
 They are precious to you, so that you speak to their heart
 Good words of consolation
 Of the just precepts of the Lord
 Which bring joy²⁸ to a worried and grieving heart.
 Don't worry about a world which is not in your jurisdiction!
 Gird your loins like a man,²⁹

²⁵ Jeremiah 2.12.

²⁶ Conflating Psalms 116.15 and Zechariah 12.3.

²⁷ הלהן תעגנה לבלתי היות לאיש...—Ruth 1.13, conflated with I Chronicles 11.22.

²⁸ Psalm 19.9.

²⁹ Job 38.3.

Be diligent and responsible
 To expound to them by the word of the Lord
 Whatever the fortress of your mind shall bring up!
 For if you were to worry about things which you cannot correct,
 There would be no end to your labor and worries!
 Rise up and do, for the matter lies on you!
 If they belittle you and despise you, saying
 "How will this one help us?"
 Be silent, but do not yield your place.
 As they spoke to me day after day, I thought:
 Don't the people curse him who withholds grain?³⁰
 I will stretch forth my hand again as at previous times
 To set a table in the wilderness;
 For these my words will have benefit
 Like a table set out³¹ before the multitude:
 Behold the couch of

Solomon

Precious even more than pearls is the Torah of the Lord!
 For if gold is plentiful and jewels abundant,³²
 One's inheritance is increased by them;
 But he is sick unto misery all the day,
 Worrying that he has not attained
 Double or quadruple what he has!
 Such a one does not rest
 Until his days and years of agitated striving after wind are ended,
 In the manner of every striver after wealth
 Who has so many troubles and tribulations tied on his shoulder.
 Not so the word of the Lord!
 For they give rest to the weary³³
 Like cold water to a tired soul
 He shall not be weary nor labor—
 This is the resting place!
 For its breasts will nurse you at every time
 To find new things
 Which ear has not heard, nor eye has seen!
 Its words of love are sweet

³⁰ Proverbs 11.26.

³¹ Ezekiel 23.41. Allusion to the *Shulhan Arukh*, the famous code of Jewish law by Joseph Caro (1565).

³² Proverbs 20.15: "Gold is plentiful, jewels abundant, but wise speech is a precious ornament (כלי יקר)." This is the first allusion to the title of the book.

³³ Isaiah 28.12.

To those who seek to clothe themselves in a new garment
 So that he who sees it will say:
 “See, this is something new which the ancients never experienced!”
 If because of the disorder of a topsy-turvy generation
 His heart is hot within him,
 When he sees he cannot repair the breach in the House of Israel, for it
 is too great—
 This is my consolation in my affliction,
 To seek from the Book of the Lord
 That it be the source of my enjoyment every day,
 Dispelling the cares of the heart from the vanities of the world,
 And attaching them to the labor in Torah
 Which rejoices the heart of man,
 So is banished the wrath of³⁴

Ephraim

Precious is wise speech³⁵ which speaks clearly,³⁶
 Bringing forth from the lips outward
 All the treasure stored in the recesses of my heart
 To teach the people of Judah difficult matters
 And subtleties of the Torah,
 Each according to his understanding,
 Revealing secrets and hidden things
 Which were only revealed to the rare individuals of a generation,
 And to those few whom the Lord singled out,
 Giving them an understanding heart and learned tongue
 In abundant degree and abundant force.
 But in those generations the gates of wisdom were locked,
 And that which the Lord had opened was closed,
 For the Lord would give wisdom
 Knowledge and understanding from His mouth to some particular
 man,
 Putting a word in his mouth:
 “Thus shall you say to the children of Israel.”
 They close the doors of his lips,
 And of necessity he lays a hand on his mouth!
 For they think that God chose what they chose.
 But most such choices are made of jealousy,
 And one wishes only to contradict his fellow,
 To deny him the pleasure of his own choice.

³⁴ Isaiah 11.13.

³⁵ Second allusion to Proverbs 20,15, source of the book's title.

³⁶ Job 33.3: ודעת שפתי ברור מללו, alluding to שפתי דעת from Proverbs 20.15.

Such choice is made for the wrong reasons,
 For each one chooses his relative or friend,
 Whether he is worthy of the service of God or not,
 As in the case of Joshua ben Gamla.³⁷
 But they never appoint for the service one worthy of it.
 For from the time of the ascendancy
 Of jealousy and baseness which descended to the world,
 The poor is not recognized in the presence of the rich.³⁸
 Even if everyone agreed that this is the man
 Of whom the Lord said:
 "He will release My exiled people³⁹ from their pit of troubles
 And I have put My Torah in him to gladden the people who walk in
 darkness"⁴⁰
 They will despise him and pour contempt on him,
 Forcing away him whom God brought near.
 The learned tongue which God gave him will cleave to his palate,
 As they say to a piece of wood, "You are my father."
 Be astonished, O heavens, at this blind people,
 Which has eyes that see the opposite of what is there,
 Contradicting what they have already known.
 So I say, what will be will be!
 In place of a tongue, I have a fluent scribe's pen which God has given
 me,
 To write with my pen what is in my mind, whatever thoughts God has
 blessed me with,
 To bring out the vintage wine pressed from the grapes
 Of the vineyard that belonged to⁴¹

Solomon

Precious honor above my merits has God granted me!⁴²
 I have everything⁴³—a delightful storehouse of old and new interpreta-
 tions and homilies which I have stored away
 For the benefit of those who revere the Lord and meditate on His
 name,⁴⁴

³⁷ High priest of the Second Temple, appointed because of his great wealth.

³⁸ Job 34.19 reversed.

³⁹ Isaiah 45.13.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 9.1.

⁴¹ Song of Songs 8.11.

⁴² Untranslatable allusion to Esther 6.6. Haman says to himself: "To whom would the king want to give honor more than me?" The last three words (יקר יותר ממני) are transformed by their use in this context.

⁴³ Genesis 33.11.

⁴⁴ Malachi 3.16.

Who love the truth and acknowledge it,
 They will console me from the toil of my hands.⁴⁵
 It is they who seek me every day, saying:
 “Stir yourself, for the thing depends on you!
 For because of our iniquities the true Torah gets scarcer every day;
 Our minds shrink; truth is hard to find;
 And the true sages of the generation
 (Whose little finger is thicker than my thighs)
 Dwell in obscurity.
 So be as one of them!
 The outpouring of your lips—do not withhold a good thing from its
 owners,⁴⁶
 So long as God assists you to bring the scented wine from the grapes
 of your mind!”
 Therefore I stand on my watch⁴⁷ as in times past,
 To compose upon the Torah a precious commentary,
 Some of it cornerstones, some of it tent pegs⁴⁸ on which all else hangs.
 For in it are included the explanation of many hidden and sealed
 matters
 Where most of the commentators came to gather⁴⁹
 But found no adequate interpretation or adequate reasons.
 There are also included in it many words of moral exhortation
 To those who love words of rebuke and reproach.
 This composition will be useful and precious to those who acknowledge
 the truth.
 I therefore call it כְּלִי יָקָר—**A Precious Ornament**—
 For whoever reads it will say in response,
 Is not a precious son to me⁵⁰

Ephraim?

Precious are your dear ones
 Who have given themselves to the Lord's Torah,
 Who labor in it day and night;
 They never stop unearthing the secrets of wisdom
 And its many subtleties⁵¹—

⁴⁵ Allusion to Genesis 5.29.

⁴⁶ Proverbs 3.27.

⁴⁷ Habakkuk 2.1.

⁴⁸ Zechariah 10.4. R. Ephraim is probably referring to the webs of argumentation which proceed from initial assumptions (like tents tied to their tent-pegs). פִּנָּה could mean “tent-face” if vocalized *paneh*.

⁴⁹ Exodus 16.27.

⁵⁰ Jeremiah 31.20.

⁵¹ Job 11.6.

Literal interpretations, figurative interpretations, all new—
 Gladdening God and people.
 At its heart, it is decked with a hidden love⁵²
 And visible admonition.

As for me, I am **Solomon Ephraim**, son of my father and teacher, the great Rabbi Aaron of blessed memory. I have been troubled and harried these many years. My greatest consolation in my affliction was my occupation in writing several books. In my youth I wrote the book *City of Heroes*. When I was a little older I wrote the book *Gleanings of Ephraim*.⁵³ I spent the most time in the writing of *The Myriads of Ephraim*⁵⁴—which because of its length could not be printed for lack of funding. Then in the year 5361 (1601) just before Purim, I fell dangerously ill for several weeks, so that they gave me the additional name **Solomon**.⁵⁵ God in His mercy brought me out of death's shadow back into life, as I am today. I made a vow to the Lord, and I will pay it⁵⁶—to write this book for the glory of God and His Torah, and for the honor of the Directors and Leaders of the Three Lands (may their Rock and Redeemer protect them) who sit first in the Kingdom of Heaven and are known in the community for praise and renown. They aided me with their strength, and supported with their purse the publication of this book. May God reward their endeavor fully as they deserve.

I have called this book ***The Precious Ornament***—after the verse: “Is not Ephraim a precious son to me?” and the verse: “Wise speech is a precious ornament” said by Solomon. Thus the title alludes to both of my names. And in many places in this book, where I thought my interpretation surpassed the alternatives, I have written: “This is a precious interpretation,” for that is the simple truth. Very occasionally I cite other commentators by the rubric, “Some say...” without citing their names explicitly, because I see that they are dealing with the opinions of those many commentators who come forward to interpret the Torah with practically nothing new to say. In most places where there is a seemingly obvious interpretation, it is found in many commentaries; I don't know if they all arrived individually at the same idea, or if some of them wrapped themselves in a borrowed cloak. So I cannot cite it in the name of its author, for many said it, and I would be like a peddler advertising his wares⁵⁷ if I were to name them all, therefore I say simply, “Some say...” But where I find an opinion only in one or two authors, I cite the author. In all events, I have elected to abbreviate the opinions of others considerably, in order not to pad my work with ideas that are not the fruit of my own labor.

⁵² Song of Songs 3.10.

⁵³ Judges 8.2.

⁵⁴ *Rivevot Ephraim*, allusion to Deuteronomy 33.17.

⁵⁵ To avert the evil eye. Some believed that the Angel of Death would be fooled by the change of name.

⁵⁶ Jonah 2.10.

⁵⁷ BT *Gittin* 33a.

All my words are very close to the plain sense, and sometimes there is also a suggestive hint, for so I have observed in all the commentators.

This is my portion from my labor,⁵⁸
And the work was established by the hand of⁵⁹

Solomon

Precious is what my eye has seen,⁶⁰
For there is yet a vision for the set time,⁶¹
Of which the Lord has spoken,
To have mercy on the poor of His people
Who are scattered to all the distant ends of the land and seas,
Plodding from pitfall to pitfall!
There are many days left for Israel,⁶² firstborn of troubles,
To smelt out and purify his dross as with lye.⁶³
If because of our feeble understanding
We have none in our midst who knows
How long till the end of troubles, time of miracles—
It is known to the Lord!
For God has calculated it for the good;⁶⁴
Why do I need to know the secrets of the all-Merciful?
Will the Lord not fulfill His good word
Which He has promised to the house of Israel,
When the set time shall arrive,
Or when Israel shall make good their ways?
For they will see that their strength is gone,⁶⁵
And troubles are in the ascendancy.
Who is the man who will not see,
Who is the soul who will not afflict himself?⁶⁶
Let him turn to his heart, to return wholeheartedly to the Lord!
Then the Lord will be good to us,
Restoring the exiles of His people,
Raising high the horn of His anointed,⁶⁷

⁵⁸ Ecclesiastes 2.10.

⁵⁹ Conflation of I Kings 2.46 and I Kings 7.51.

⁶⁰ Job 28.10.

⁶¹ Habakkuk 2.3.

⁶² II Chronicles 15.3.

⁶³ Isaiah 1.25, Malachi 3.3.

⁶⁴ Genesis 50.20.

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 32.36.

⁶⁶ Leviticus 23.29.

⁶⁷ I Samuel 2.10.

Whose horns are like the horns of the wild ox⁶⁸—
And these are the myriads of

Ephraim

⁶⁸ Deuteronomy 33.17.

THE PRECIOUS ORNAMENT (1602)
ON GENESIS CHAPTER 1

Ephraim Luntshitz

From Portion Bereshit (Genesis 1–6)

Gen. 1:1: In the beginning created God—It would have been proper for the Torah to begin with the name of God, so much so that our rabbis had to change the text when they translated the Torah into Greek for Ptolemy, so that it began: “God created in the beginning...”¹ The commentators found reason to praise our version, for it is impossible to understand the existence of God except with reference to his manifestations, his deeds, and the work of his hands which he created. These alone bear faithful witness to God’s existence. Therefore our text begins: “In the beginning created”—and only then: “God.”

This interpretation has the following difficulty, however: The text should ideally read: “Created God in the beginning...”! For one should place God’s name as early as possible, consistent with the reason just given. And the creatures which pre-existed our world (to which the word *bereshit* alludes, according to most of the commentators) offer us no evidence for God’s existence.

Moreover, the author of *The Binding of Isaac*² based this interpretation on this midrash:³ “It says in the Psalms, ‘Your humility makes me great.’⁴ A mortal king proclaims first his name and then his works, but God proclaims his name only after he has proclaimed his works.” But we must inquire: Wherein has God shown his humility, and wherein has he made us great?

The best explanation I can find is from Rashi, who tried to resolve this in saying: “This word (בראשית) begs to be interpreted! The world was created only for the Torah, which is called ראשית (‘The Lord created me at the beginning of His course’)⁵ and for the people Israel, which is also called ראשית (‘Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His harvest’).”⁶ He means that one can only recognize the existence of God through the evidence of the Torah and Israel. Therefore each is called ראשית, because each is a prelude

¹ BT *Megillah* 9a. Actually, the standard Septuagint has the same word-order as the Hebrew—Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν—so the rabbis must be referring to a lost version of the Greek translation.

² Isaac Arama.

³ *Genesis Rabbah* 1.10.

⁴ Psalm 18.36.

⁵ Proverbs 8.22.

⁶ Jeremiah 2.3.

by means of which we come to the recognition of God's existence. Indeed, the Torah propagates the belief in the creation and in the divinity of God. Israel was also able to propagate the belief in God's existence by way of the oral tradition, which goes back to the first man, Adam, who saw the world desolate and built up, and who is a reliable witness to the renewal of the world, which is evidence for the existence of him who renewed it. This oral tradition was propagated by the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

There is a third way of knowing God's existence, but not everyone can attain it: to apprehend the existence of God from rational inquiry, and from knowledge of all the beings which exist in all three worlds, as follows: First, the inquirer must investigate the essence of the beings in the lower world, which is the easiest. Second, he should inquire of the essence of the created beings in the middle world (i.e., the celestial spheres). Third, he should ascend by the ladder of the chain of levels to know the essence of the higher (angelic) world. Finally, he should rise to the knowledge and understanding that there is a God over all of them. Seeing things in this arrangement corresponds to Jacob's vision of the ladder with four levels:⁷ (1) "And there was a ladder standing on the earth"—this is the comprehension of the lower world; (2) "and its top reached the heavens"—this is the middle world; (3) "and the angels of God went up and down on it"—this is the higher world; (4) "and the Lord was standing on it"—now he has fully achieved the knowledge of God's existence.⁸

But not many are wise enough to come to the secret of the knowledge of God by this method of inquiry, inasmuch as human beings are wayfarers in the vale of sorrow, i.e., this material world. It is therefore enough for a person to achieve knowledge of God's existence through oral tradition or through the Torah, as we said earlier.

In this connection, the rabbis said⁹ that the lower realms mention God's name after two preceding words, as it is said: *שמע ישראל*—"Hear, Israel, the Lord..."¹⁰ But the higher realms mention God's name only after three preceding words, as it is said: *קדוש קדוש קדוש ה' צבאות*—"Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of hosts..."¹¹ Since the inhabitants of the higher realms are pure of intellect, it is easy for them to ponder the essence of the three worlds, so they are not permitted to utter God's name until they have prefaced it with the thrice-repeated holy, i.e., until they have first mastered the knowledge of the essence of the lower beings and their realm of origin, and thereby they will sanctify God to the lower realm. Next, they will ascend to understand the essence of the beings of the middle realm, and will sanctify God as sovereign over them. Then they will ascend to comprehend their own essence, and finally

⁷ Genesis 28.12–13.

⁸ This interpretation of Jacob's ladder is borrowed from the Introduction of Mordecai Jaffé's *Levush*.

⁹ BT *Hullin* 91a.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 6.4.

¹¹ Isaiah 6.3.

they will rise to grasping the name of the blessed God. Therefore they do not mention God's name until they have first sanctified him in all three worlds. But as for the beings of the lower world, whose intellect is not so pure, and who cannot all endure this long process of inquiry, it is enough for them to come to the recognition of God's existence after the two words **שמע ישראל** (Hear, Israel). The first word **שמע** signifies hearing the words of this Torah which proclaims God's divinity. The second word, Israel, signifies the tradition which was passed down in the people of Israel, starting with Adam and his descendants, until Abraham publicly proclaimed the divinity of God (as Rashi interprets the verse: "the Lord, God of heaven, who took me from my father's house").¹² From his time, the divinity of God was proclaimed by the whole line of Israel and Judah, as it is said: "God is made known in Judah; his name is great in Israel."¹³

That is why the first three words of the Torah are: **בראשית ברא אלהים**—the first word, *bereshit*, alludes to Israel and the Torah (both called *reshit*), both paths to knowledge of God. The second word, *bara*, refers to the creation, which is a different path to knowledge of God. Finally, it was a mark of God's humility, that he alluded to Israel (through the word *reshit*) prior to his own name, which is indeed a great honor and glory to Israel; that is why the Psalm says, "Your humility has made me great." And some say that God's humility consists in that he first dealt with the needs of his world, and then proclaimed his name.

Gen. 1:11: Tree of fruit producing fruit for its kind—Every tree is called a "tree of fruit," and they all produce fruit, some for food and some for healing. As for the phrase, "producing fruit for its kind," this needs interpretation, in the light of the verse: **כי האדם עץ השדה**, which can be read: "For the tree of the field is [considered] a human being."¹⁴ Indeed, the tree is similar to human, both with respect to its height and with respect to its eternal destiny, as it is said: "There is hope for a tree." All the grasses are related to the other animals, with respect to their lowly stature and inasmuch as they have no permanent root or branch, but "they blossom like a flower and wither." God created each kind of food specially assigned to the kind of creature that would eat it, and he made a correspondence between the one species and the other, as it is said: "He satisfies each living thing with its desire," i.e., he satisfies each living thing with what is desirable to it, by reason of being similar to it in nature and condition. That is why the text says: "And to all the animals on land... I give all the green grasses for food": the grasses are assigned specifically to those forms of material life that are without speech or reason. But to the man he says: "See, I give you every seed-bearing grass...and every tree..." Because of man's material nature, he is assigned

¹² Genesis 24.7.

¹³ Psalms 76.2.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 20:19. The more accepted modern interpretation (corroborated by medievals such as Rashi) understands the verse ironically: "Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?"

the grasses; but because of his spiritual nature, he is also assigned the trees. Thus each kind is associated with its corresponding kind. That is why the text reads: “producing fruit for its kind”: for its own kind, i.e., for the human kind. But where it says “seed-bearing grasses,” it does not say “for its kind,” because the grasses also produce food for humans, which are not its kind in every respect. Nevertheless, where God made the grasses, the text does say “seed-bearing grasses for their kind,” because the grasses are akin to humans in one respect, i.e., with respect to the humans’ material part.

The rabbis said that the earth sinned, inasmuch as God told it to make “trees of fruit”—i.e., the tree should be edible and taste the same as the fruit—whereas it made “trees producing fruit,” where the fruit is edible but the tree is not.¹⁵ Therefore when Adam sinned, the earth was also punished for its sin and was cursed. But here one should ask: why was the earth not punished immediately? That is not difficult to answer. The essential part of the curse was that the earth should produce mosquitos and fleas (as Rashi explains on the verse “Cursed be the ground for your sake”). But all these things bother human beings. As long as the humans did not sin, the earth was not condemned to spawn forth these accursed creatures; for even though the earth had sinned, what had the humans done, that these mosquitos and fleas should chase after them? But once the humans had sinned, both parties were worthy of this curse. Later (Portion *Aharei Mot*), on the verse “And the earth was unclean, and I punished it for its sin,” I will explain, God willing, that it was God’s purpose that the earth give the creatures a pure and delicate matter, but it gave them a gross and thick matter instead. Had the earth given the creatures a pure and delicate matter, the trees would have tasted like their fruit, and people would not impulsively follow their senses and would not come to sin at all. Therefore the earth is blighted for all the sins of humans, and this is reckoned as punishment for its own sin, as I shall explain there, God willing.

We can correctly draw another inference from this, namely, that when the serpent saw that the earth deviated from the plan of its creator and nevertheless was not punished, he found reason to say to the woman: “You will surely not die”—even if she should transgress her creator’s will, just as the earth was not [yet] punished for producing trees which tasted differently than their fruit. Even the words that the serpent used hint at this. He said: “Did God say you should not eat of the trees of the garden?”—i.e., is the tree edible, that he should command you not to eat of it? The woman responded in kind: “Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat”—I concede your point that only the *fruit* of the trees of the garden is fit for eating, and not the trees themselves, therefore God only had to command us concerning the fruit of the trees in the garden, and not concerning the trees. The serpent then said: “You will surely not die”—if you concede that the earth deviated from its creator’s plan and nevertheless was not punished, then you will not die either.

Gen. 1:13: The sixth day—The letter ה (“the”) is added in mention of the sixth day. Now, the value of ה in gematria is 5. This indicates that God set

¹⁵ Ephraim borrows this interpretation from Abravanel.

a condition with the world, that all would be contingent on Israel's acceptance of the five books of the Torah. Alternatively, you may say that the full name of the letter ה (i.e., א"ה) has the value of 6, and everything would be contingent on the outcome of the events of the 6th of Sivan (the day of the revelation on Mount Sinai). The reason for this is that the higher and lower realms of creation are opposites, and they cannot survive together unless there is some mediating entity which combines and integrates the two opposite parts. This is the human being, who has a material part and also a spiritual part from God on high, and the survival of his spiritual part depends on receiving the Torah. Thus, if Israel had not received the Torah, there would be no mediator to integrate the two opposing elements, and the world would of necessity have to be turned back into chaos.

Do not try to refute this argument from the case of the time prior to the giving of the Torah, for there were always righteous people engaging in the Torah, such as Noah, Shem, Eber, and the patriarchs. God was their exemplar and was with them, and God's name יה-וה in gematria equals 26, corresponding to the twenty-six generations from Adam to Moses that the world survived without the Torah being received by a numerous populace. But after twenty-six generations, which fulfilled the numeric value of God's name, there was no longer enough strength in the individuals of each generation to support the foundation of the world, except through the acceptance of the Torah. Therefore, whoever busies himself in the Torah makes peace between the heavenly host and the earthly host. More light will be shed on this topic below, in the commentary to Portion *Ha'azinu*, God willing.

As for the world being created in precisely six days, the commentators said that this is a hint of this world's being destined to last for six thousand years: Two thousand years void, without Torah (corresponding to the two occurrences of the letter א in the verse: "The earth was chaos and void," for א"ל means "thousand"); two thousand years with the Torah (corresponding to the two occurrences of the letter א in the verse: "In order that the Torah of the Lord be in your mouth..."); and two thousand years of the days of the Messiah, corresponding to the two occurrences of the letter א in the verse: "Until Shiloh come"; and this is correct. Other commentators have interpreted the six thousand years as corresponding to the six days of creation, and we shall not expand on that theory. And some say that is why there is an extra ה on the sixth day, because the world was created with the ה, and after finishing his work, God set down his tool by the sixth day (literally: the day of ו"ו, where ו"ו means "six" or "hook"), since he did not want it to be next to him on the Sabbath day. From this one should learn that every craftsman should set his craft aside on the sixth day.

Gen. 1:31–2:1: The sixth day. The heavens and the earth were finished—יום הששי ויכלו השמים—The initial letters of these words spell God's holy name YHWH.¹⁶ This supports what I said above about the twenty-six

¹⁶ Ephraim borrows this acronym from Baḥya ben Asher.

generations. According to the plain sense, the story of creation finishes with the mention of the divine name **יה**, which is obtained by combining the unique letters of **איש** (man) and **אשה** (woman). This agrees with the rabbinic saying that whatever God created in his world, he created male and female. It is said: "For in Yah (**יה**) the Lord is the rock of the worlds." I would like to say in this connection that everything which God created in this world has resemblance both to the male and to the female principle, if we conceive of the male principle as generative, and the female as receptive, just as the female is receptive with respect to the male. But every created thing is generative in some respect, and receptive in another. How so? God is of course the prime generator, who gives flowing words, the God of the upper world, but he does not receive a generative impulse from any other being. The upper world passes the generative impulse on to the middle world; thus the upper world plays the receptive (female) role with respect to the First Cause, but plays the generative (male) role with respect to the middle world. Similarly, the middle world is receptive (female) with respect to the upper world, and generative (male) with respect to the lower world.

As for the lower world, while it as a whole is only receptive and not generative, nevertheless all the individual creatures in it are interdependent on each other: sometimes they give, and sometimes they receive; and moreover, they have the real gender identities of male and female (for example, in the animal kingdom). Thus we are justified in saying that all beings have a generative and a receptive aspect, except for God himself, who is generative but not receptive. This is what the rabbis meant, when they said in several midrashim: "The word **איש** ('man') applies only to God" (as in: "The Lord is a man of war"), i.e., the term **איש**, in the sense of a purely generative being, refers only to God, for all other beings depend on him, but he does not depend on any of them.

As for applying the term **איש** ("man") to ordinary human beings, it does not apply in a primary sense, but in a derivative sense, together with "woman"; but the term "man" in its primary sense applies only to God. Therefore the text concludes the creation on the sixth day with the name **יה**, which combines the unique letters of **איש** ("man") and **אשה** ("woman"), to teach that God created them all male and female. Therefore, in this world we do not use the full four-letter name of God **יה-וה**, but only the letters **יה**. But in the world to come, which is the world of complete Sabbath, we will use the complete name, "For the dead will not praise Yah (**יה**).". Therefore the final letters of God's name (**וה**) are indicated in the first words (**ויכלו השמים**) dealing exoterically with the seventh day and hinting esoterically at the future time which is that "world of complete Sabbath," for then God's name will be made complete. Similarly, David ended Psalm 104, which deals with creation, with the name **יה** ("Hallelujah = Praise Yah"). See further discussion of this in Portion Re'eh, on the verse: "For because of this thing..."

Gen. 2:4: This is the story of heaven and earth בִּהְבְּרָאם (when they were created)—The rabbis interpreted the abnormally small **ה** as follows: **בה"א בראם**—"with a **ה** he created them," i.e., God created the present world

with the letter ה, and the world to come with the letter י. The author of this midrash seems to be of the opinion that all the songs of this world are in the feminine gender, such as the שירה חדשה of the Haggadah, for the suffix ה is the common indication of feminine gender in Hebrew, as well as forming the distinguishing mark of the word אשה (“woman”). This is because all the joys of this world are mingled with pain and anguish, like the pangs of childbirth; indeed, all the affairs of this world are a process of birthing. But the world to come was created with the letter י associated with the male, who does not experience the pain of childbirth. Thus in the world to come, all will be like males, who do not give birth, and the joy there will be complete. Thus the name יה comprises the unique letters of איש (“man”) and אשה (“woman”), and the י is used everywhere to designate the male principle, and the ה to designate the female principle.

Gen. 2:4b: On the day that the Lord created earth and heaven—

Note that in Chapter 1, heaven comes before earth. The rabbis said that God wanted at first to create the world by the attribute of justice alone, but he saw it would not endure, so he changed his plan and joined the attribute of mercy to that of justice. But God is not a man, that he should repent! So what was in his mind at first? Rather, the heavens and all their spiritual host can endure God’s justice better than the terrestrial realm which is made of dust. So each received its appropriate counterpart. Thus, in Chapter 1, the text uses the name אלהים (“God”), which connotes justice, and next to it is the word *heaven*, which includes the heavenly hosts, all of which were created with the attribute of justice. But here, God’s name appears as יהוה אלהים (“the Lord God”), connoting the combination of mercy with justice, and next to it is the word *earth*, for the inhabitants of earth need this combination. Of this combination, the psalmist said: “One is the word of God, twice have I heard this.” Originally the word of God is one, i.e., one attribute is recalled by the name *God* in the phrase, “In the beginning God created...” But afterwards, twice have I heard this, i.e., two attributes are alluded to in the phrase “when the Lord God created...” There is a latent hint in the phrase זו שנים (“twice this”): read it “twice זו”, for זו in gematria is 13, and twice 13 is 26, the value of יהוה, the name of mercy. But twice 13 can also be taken as אחד (“one”) and אהבה (“love”), each of which is 13 in gematria, which combine to yield the name of God’s mercy. These are also found together in the Shema: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is *one*. And you shall *love*...” And why didn’t God create the world with the name אלהים alone? “Because strength belongs to God (אלהים)” —all God’s strength and power is associated with the name אלהים, and the creatures of this world do not have the strength to endure the entire display of his power and might. But “Yours, O Lord (יהוה = אדני) is the kindness”—your name אדני (“Lord”) is associated with kindness and mercy, and the time will come that you will reward each person for his deeds according to the strength of the recipient and doer, not according to your strength, O Lord. Note that the second person is used in the phrase “Yours, O Lord, is the kindness,” whereas the third person (called “hidden” in Hebrew grammar) is used in “Strength belongs to God.” For in the hour of God’s wrath, when the attribute of judgment is dominant in the world, it is as

if God hides his face from us. But in the hour of kindness and mercy, “may the Lord cause his face to shine upon us.” This is easily understood.

Gen. 3:23: To till the soil from which he had been taken—Not for nothing does the text specify: “the soil from which he had been taken”! I have also found mentioned that Adam settled on Mount Moriah—from where did they deduce this? There is also a rabbinic tradition that Adam offered an ox with one horn—how did they base this on the Torah? It seems they are all based on this verse: “the soil from which he had been taken” is the same place of which it is said: “You shall make me an earthen altar,” as the rabbis said: God created him from the place of his atonement, so that it might provide atonement for him, i.e., Mount Moriah, to which God sent him to work the earth, and to build from it an earthen altar, on which he offered a sacrifice for atonement, and he said that he had been taken from that very soil, and this was the location [literally: “gate”] where he had sinned, for the earth had given him thick, gross material, which was the cause of his falling into sin, as I explained above on the verse “tree making fruit”—look it up. Therefore, in the place which caused the sin, should be its atonement. That place—the earth—caused him to sin, therefore the earth was obligated to assist him in atonement, in that he would work the soil and make from it an altar on which he would sacrifice an ox with one horn. This is a correct explanation of the commandment of an earthen altar, for the thing which caused the sin should be used to repair the damage it caused. This is the meaning even according to the view that God gathered the earth for Adam’s creation from all corners of the earth, since the place from which the soil of the altar was taken was the foundation stone on which the whole world rested, and the soil which was taken from the center of the earth was equivalent to soil taken from all the corners of the earth. This also resolves the difficulty of the verse: “The ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.” Rashi interprets: God folded up the land under him. I say: he did not necessarily fold it up, but since he was lying on the place of the navel of the land and its center, it was as if he lay on the entire land.

Gen. 6:6: And the Lord regretted that he had made man on earth (בְּאֶרֶץ)—Read: “with the collaboration of the earth,” as I commented in the name of Ramban on the verse “Let us make man—I and the earth,” for the earth contributed thick, gross material. As for “the Lord regretted” and “his heart was saddened”: the meaning of this is elusive and deep, deep down; who can discover it? All the investigators have tried to answer it at length: 165 this one says one thing, and that one says another, and they are all as prophesying. There are many such matters in the Torah, which are sealed mysteries, to all of which I say, etc.—not to go on at length with these exegetical exercises, for the human mind fails to comprehend it, for all these uncertainties arise for us because we try to grasp the divine knowledge in terms of our knowledge. But Scripture tells us the opposite: “My thoughts are not your thoughts.” So how can we arrive at God’s thoughts, which are not known to us, when we haven’t the means to grasp them?

THE PRECIOUS ORNAMENT (1602)
ON GENESIS CHAPTER 28

Ephraim Luntshitz

*Portion Vayetzei, on Genesis 28:12:
The Philosophical Meaning of Jacob's Ladder*

And he dreamed, and there was a ladder standing on the earth— Maimonides wrote¹ that God explained to Jacob the hierarchical order of the three worlds, for when he said *standing on the earth*—this is the lower world; *and its top reaching heaven*—this is the middle world; *and the angels of God ascending and descending on it*—this is the world of the angels; *and the Lord was standing on it*—to teach that God is above the highest and rules over all of them. Abravanel objected² that to ascribe such ideas to Jacob ignores the limitations of his time

¹ Maimonides refers to Jacob's ladder twice in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the Introduction, he uses the verse describing the ladder as a paradigm of prophetic imagery, and he says: "The word ladder refers to one idea; set upon the earth to another; and the top of it reaching heaven to a third idea; angels of God to a fourth; ascending to a fifth; descending to a sixth; and the Lord stood above it to a seventh idea."

Characteristically, Maimonides leaves us in the dark as to just what these seven different ideas were. But the standard commentators on the *Guide* (Abravanel and Crescas) identified "earth," "heaven," and "angels" as referring to the three worlds (the terrestrial world, the astral spheres, and the intelligences), and both Jaffe and Ephraim followed their example. (See also Bahya's commentary on *Vayetzei*.) Later, in Chapter 15 of Part 1, Maimonides focuses on the interpretation of the word נֶצַח as meaning "established forever", and he writes:

Whenever this term is applied to God it must be understood in this sense, as: "And behold, the Lord stood upon it," i.e., appeared as eternal and everlasting, "upon it," namely, upon the ladder, the upper end of which reached to heaven, while the lower end touched the earth. All may climb up this ladder who wish to do so, and they must ultimately attain to a knowledge of Him who is above the summit of the ladder, because He remains upon it permanently.... "Angels of God" who were going up represent the prophets.... How suggestive, too, is the expression "ascending and descending on it!" The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as [the acquisition of knowledge] precedes the application of this knowledge for the training and instruction of mankind.

² Abravanel, in his commentary on this passage, cites no fewer than eight interpretations of the ladder, including these two passages of Maimonides. He rejects especially the second—along with other intellectualist or allegorical interpretations—because they are irrelevant to the movement of the story at this point. He says it would have been far more appropriate for Jacob to learn about the intellectual road to knowledge of God while he was studying in the yeshiva of Shem and Eber. What interest would he have in these matters when he is fleeing for his life from his brother Esau, leaving

and place. I would defend Maimonides against the charge of anachronism as follows: he knew what the ancients wrote. Furthermore, you will find in Arama and in Rabbenu Bahya and even in Abravanel that even the gentile sages agreed to this view of reality. Also, the three portions of the Tabernacle corresponded to the three worlds, as you will find fully explained in the books of the great scholars we have mentioned. According to this depiction, Jacob was certainly in the right place for such a vision, to wit, Mount Moriah, on which God had planned since the beginning to build the Temple. Therefore God showed him in a vision the structure and outline of the three worlds, thus hinting that in future time he would build the Temple after the structure and outline of these three worlds.

Another interpretation: God showed him the structure of the three worlds to indicate that they had their source in this place, which is called the Foundation Stone, because on it the world was founded.

Another interpretation: Because from these flows the effluence to all the worlds. For the lower worlds add strength and energy to the upper, as it were. Therefore the angels of God ascend first, for there they draw the waters of effluence from the wells of salvation³ and afterwards they descend to bring down the effluence from the upper realm. This mystery is hinted at by Rashi in his comment on “How lovely are your steps in sandals!”—that Israel praises God descending from the higher realm to the lower, but God speaks of it as if it were ascending from the lower realm to the higher, just as here the ladder starts out “standing on the earth” and ascends upwards.⁴ But the glory of God is a hidden mystery.

I am astonished that R. Isaac Abravanel wrote that this vision is not in the right place, especially in the light of the midrash which interprets: *There was a ladder*—this is a lamb; *standing on the earth*—this is an altar, etc. You see demonstrated here that the ladder signifies the Temple, in which Jacob slept that night. Furthermore, in the Temple was seated the Sanhedrin, from whom emanated Torah and knowledge by distinct stages. The seeker of wisdom must first understand the essence of the beings of the lower world—a ladder standing on the earth. From this he ascends to a higher stage, and understands the beings of the middle world, i.e., the orbits and movements of the planetary bodies—with its top reaching the heavens. From this he ascends to understand the separate intelligences of the higher world—and angels of God were going

his parents and journeying to a foreign land? Rather, says Abravanel, we must first of all understand that the place of Jacob’s dream was actually Jerusalem, and the ladder represents the connection between heaven and earth at that geographical point, through which God’s providence flows from heaven to earth, and the angels bring the fragrant incense of the sacrificial offerings from earth to heaven. It was of existential import to Jacob at that moment to experience God’s providence, so that he would know that the blessings promised to Abraham and Isaac would pertain to him as well, and that he would have God’s protection when he went to Aram to confront Laban.

³ Isaiah 12.3.

⁴ Song of Songs 7.2. Rashi, s.v. “the raising of the feet.”

up and down on it. It mentions “going up” and “going down,” because there are four camps of angels attending the Shekhinah, according to Recanati on Portion Balak: Uriel is chief of the air, Michael is chief of the water, Raphael is chief of the earth, and Gabriel is chief of the fire. It is known that it is the nature of water and earth to fall, and of air and fire to rise: hence **עולים ויורדים**—“going up” and “going down,” each in the plural indicating two. From this he ascends to comprehend the existence of God—“And the Lord was standing over it.”

Thus, by all these arguments the vision was at the right place. As for its being at the right time, it occurred then because Jacob was fleeing from Esau; the razor was at his head; he was in danger of the sword’s blow. Therefore he was stopped by heavenly guidance, that he might pray here at this place where his forefathers prayed, for the Temple is called a House of Prayer;⁵ and it had already been promised that so long as the voice of Jacob was raised in prayer, the hands of Esau would have no power over him. Furthermore, the Temple is the antipode of Esau, for Esau’s craft was the forging of all implements of copper and iron,⁶ to make weapons of war. But of the Temple it is written: “No iron implement was heard in it,” and: “You shall not defile it with iron.”⁷ Therefore God showed Jacob the site of the Temple, as a sign that by virtue of it he would be spared from iron weapons, as it says: “Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go.”

According to the rabbis, the bottom of the ladder was standing in Beer Sheba, and its top was at Bethel, and the midpoint of its length was opposite the Temple, to signify that the Temple is the middle link which mediates between the two extremes of heaven and earth. It is the dwelling place of the Shekhinah in the lower realm, as it says: “I will dwell (**ושכנתי** < Shekhinah) in their midst”⁸—i.e., in the middle, in order to combine the extremes so they will find unity. Some say that the ladder signifies that God was standing over Jacob, and that he established his dwelling-place in the lower realm along with his angels who do his will. Therefore it says “going up” before “going down,” because their dwelling-place was in the lower realm. Also, **ארצה** expresses the nuance that the ladder was standing “towards the earth,” rather than “on the earth”; surely, then, the legs of the ladder were in the heavens, and just reaching the earth. The phrase “and its head reaching the heavens” tells us that each end of the ladder was called a “head,” and that by Jacob the world was turned upside-down, and whoever would seek the Lord would have to descend, for there the Lord was standing above him.

⁵ Isaiah 56.7.

⁶ Allusion to Genesis 4.22.

⁷ Exodus 20.22, inaccurately cited.

⁸ Exodus 25.8.

THE PRECIOUS ORNAMENT (1602)
ON EXODUS CHAPTERS 12–13
“PILPUL OF THE FOUR SONS”

Ephraim Luntshitz

*Portion Bo, on Exodus 12:26, 13:14:
Pilpul of the Four Sons*

Exodus 12:26—And when your children ask you, “What is this service to you?”—The Haggadah of Passover concludes that this verse speaks of the wicked son, who says mockingly: “What is this service to you?” in the same vein as: “What is man that you should be mindful of him?” and it concludes: “Moreover you should set his teeth on edge [give him a stinging rebuke] and tell him: **It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt**—for me and not for him; had he been there, he would not have been redeemed. The objection has been raised: Why did he not mention the answer which is given right after the question in the Torah: **You shall say, “It is the Passover service to the Lord, because he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians but saved our houses”**”? Instead, he took as an answer a verse which is not contiguous with the question of the Torah! Furthermore, that verse has already been used as the answer for the child who does not know how to ask a question, and in that usage we do not draw the inference, “for me and not for him”! How do you derive from one verse two opposite answers? R. Isaac Abravanel was exercised by these difficulties in his book *The Passover Offering* (*Ze'evah Pesah*), and he entered into forced arguments and unsatisfying answers. So now open your eyes and see how I will now interpret the whole story of the four sons of whom the Torah speaks in a way that will resolve all the problems and riddles which troubled Abravanel. First I will resolve the problems that were just mentioned in the answer to the wicked son, in three different ways.

The first way is that the verse **You shall say, “It is the Passover service . . .”** is not connected with the previous verse at all, but is a separate topic. This is supported by the consideration that it should have said: **You shall say unto them, It is the Passover service . . .** just as the answers to the other sons say, **You shall tell your son, You shall say to him**, etc. Why should it say here: **You shall say, It is the Passover service**, and not specify to whom he is speaking? It is also problematic: why does it say elsewhere of the Passover sacrifice, **You shall serve (ועבדת) this service**, whereas here it says, you shall carefully observe (ושמרתם) this service? It is

further problematic that elsewhere the text refers to a son in the singular (**You shall tell your son**; the simple son: **And when in time to come your son asks you, saying “What is this?”**; the wise son: **When, in time to come, your child asks you: What mean the decrees . . .?**), but here it says: **When your children ask you**—in the plural!

But surely the text speaks here of a time when many rebellious children arise and plot to destroy the cornerstone of this ceremony and to turn the people away from the worship of the Lord. In the case of such severe disruption, the service requires extra special guarding, so for that rebellious generation the text prescribes: ושמרתם—you shall carefully observe this service—care for it so that it is not destroyed! Then it explains: when does the service need especially careful observance? **When your children ask you, what is this service to you?**—i.e., the service needs special care when a rebellious generation of children comes and asks mockingly, “what is this service to you?” For it is with a mocking tongue that they speak to this people, to turn the people away from the worship of the Lord. Of such a time it says, “You shall carefully observe this service,” for it requires extra care to withstand such ridicule. There, too, the text mentions *children* in the plural, for extra care is not necessary in the case of a single mocker, for his opinion is disregarded in the face of universal consensus. Thus the first verse is not connected to the verse which follows.

The following verse, **You shall say, It is the Passover service . . .** is a separate topic, as Rabban Gamaliel said: “Whoever does not explain these three things on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation: Pesah, matzah, and bitter herbs.” Where does Rabban Gamaliel get the authority to say that in addition to actively performing the mitzvot, a person is also obligated to tell verbally about their meaning? Surely he learned it from the verse: **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice . . .** which commands verbal recitation in addition to performance. But it is still not mentioned that we are obligated to tell of the meaning of the matzah and bitter herbs, for this verse mentions only the Passover sacrifice! Therefore it says later, **You shall tell your son on that day, it is because of this that the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.** The author of the Haggadah interprets: “Because of this (בעבור זה)—can only mean at the time when the matzah and bitter herbs are lying before you.” Why does he not include the Pesah also, and say: “at the time when the Pesah sacrifice, the matzah and the bitter herbs are lying before you”? Surely because the obligation of verbally explaining the meaning of the Pesah sacrifice is already mentioned in the verse, “You shall say: ‘It is the Passover sacrifice . . .’” But it has not yet been mentioned that one is obligated to verbally explain the meaning of the matzah and bitter herbs even if nobody asks about them! Therefore the verse **You shall tell your son** refers only to matzah and bitter herbs, that one is obligated to explain them verbally to the members of his household even if they do not ask him anything.

In that case, the Torah does not yet give any answer to the wicked son who asks mockingly, “What is this service to you?” The author of the Haggadah is of the opinion that the verse, **You shall tell your son** is an answer both

to the wicked son and to the son who cannot ask. It is problematic that he interprets this verse as referring to a son who cannot ask; how does he know that the son is silent because he does not know how to ask? Perhaps he is silent because he is so thoroughly wicked that he does not even condescend to speak of this mitzvah at all, so contemptible is it to him! R. Isaac Abravanel raised this objection, but he gave no solution. The answer given in the Torah is no evidence as to the son's state of mind, for who can know a person's hidden thoughts, whether they are innocent or mischievous? The Torah cannot give us this prophetic power, to say before God that his thoughts are revealed. They are revealed to God, to be sure, but we have no such knowledge. Is it a foregone conclusion that every silent child is silent because he cannot ask?

Therefore my heart says, this is not the way, but here is how you should explain it: The inference "for me, but not for him" is not automatically to be derived from the verse saying **what the Lord did for me**, but the inference depends rather on the thoughts of the child who sits before him: if the silent son is wicked and has no regard for the ceremony, then the inference "for me but not for him" is valid, since the father tells him that for the sake of this ceremony God performed all those miracles for me when I left Egypt. It follows from this that if I did not engage in this service, I would not have been redeemed, and thus the wicked son, if he had been there, would not have wanted to perform this service, so he certainly would not have been redeemed. But if this silent son does not know how to ask, and does not despise the service, then who will say that if he had been there he would not have performed the service? You may assume that if he were there he *would* have performed the service himself, and then he surely would have been redeemed! You should not infer in his case, "for me but not for him"! The fact that the father says "for me" does not warrant this inference at all, for the father had to speak thus, since the son was not in that generation, and how could the father say "for us"? The son may draw his own inference, depending on whether he regards the ceremony as having validity or not. If he does not believe in it, then surely he would not have engaged in it had he been there, and then he certainly would not have been redeemed, for it was by virtue of this service that the Lord performed the exodus and the other miracles when I left Egypt, and whoever did not engage in it was not redeemed. But if the son believes in the ceremony but has not the wit to ask, then surely if he had been there he would have engaged in it himself and would have been redeemed also. The Torah therefore says: If it should happen that your son sits before you and puts his hand to his mouth and does not ask you anything, and you are uncertain whether he is silent because he does not know how to ask or because he is wicked, then to extricate yourself from this confusion, say to him: **It is because of this that the Lord did for me when I left Egypt**. Then you will have done your duty either way: if he is evil at heart, you will have delivered him a stinging rebuke when you said **what the Lord did for me**, for since he does not recognize the ceremony, he will draw the inference, "for me and not for him." But if he is not wicked but does not know how to ask, then say this verse to him and he will not draw the inference "for me and

not for him,” for if he had been there he surely would have been engaged in this ceremony.

For this reason, the text uses the verb **והגדת** “you shall tell,” not **ואמרת** “you shall say” or **ודברת** “you shall speak.” For by the method we are using, **אמר** connotes gentle speech and **דיבר** connotes rebuke, but **הגיד** can mean the one and the other. It can mean words as tough as sinews, as Rashi interpreted on Exodus 19.3 (even though he inferred this from the extra **י** in **ותגיד**, it would mean the same even without the **י**). It can also mean gentle language, as in the cognate noun **אגדה**: “Tales which draw the heart of a person like water.” And in Tractate *Shabbat* the rabbis interpret **ויגד משה** in both senses. Therefore the text says here: **You shall tell (והגדת) your son**, for if he does not know how to ask, you will be drawing his heart to the service of the Lord, as it says: **Draw and take your sheep**, i.e., draw the hearts of your sons to the service of the Lord. This is similar to “tales which draw the heart,” cited earlier, and this is gentle speech. But if he is evil-hearted, then by these words you will be feeding him words as tough as sinews, which set the teeth on edge, for he will infer from your words “to me but not to him.” From this the author of the Haggadah learned to include in the answer: “You should set his teeth on edge [give him a stinging rebuke].” He inferred the entire answer to the wicked son from the verse, **You shall tell your son...** For if the Torah said you should speak thus to the silent son out of uncertainty, in case he was wicked, you may infer with certainty that you should answer in this manner to a wicked son who says explicitly in a mocking tone, “What is this service to you?” This is a precious explanation, and here is room with me to elaborate it further in various ways, and whoever looks into the matter may choose what he prefers.

The second way is to satisfy the majority of the commentators, who are of the opinion that the verse **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice...** is connected with the previous verse, and that it is an answer to the wicked son and to those rebels who seek to destroy the cornerstone of the service, as we explained above. We can say that it is the intention of the author of the Haggadah that you should answer the wicked son from the verse, **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice**, for whatever may be inferred from the verse: **It is because of this that the Lord did for me when I left Egypt** may be inferred from this verse also. For the wicked son asks: “What is this service to you?”—to you and not to him, for he believes that there is no transcendent reality to this service, but it is only for your enjoyment, for you are the ones eating and drinking. You shall say to him, **It is the Passover sacrifice for the Lord**, not for us. The sign of this is that **he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses**. How, then, will you say that it has no reality? Whoever engaged in the service was saved from the plague, but the Egyptians who did not engage in this service were smitten, and he also saved our houses by virtue of this service. From this verse, one may make the inference “for me and not for him,” for the wicked son would admit that if he had been there, he would not have performed this service, so he surely would

not have been redeemed, but would have been smitten with the Egyptians, who did not engage in this service and were therefore smitten. As for what the Haggadah says: “Say to him: ‘It is for what the Lord did for me’”—this does not mean that he should say the same verse which you say to one who does not know how to ask, but the intention is that you should respond to him in this fashion, using the verse, **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice.** Why does the Haggadah not cite the verse in its proper form? It adds the comment: “You should set his teeth on edge,” but it has not specified the thing which sets his teeth on edge. Therefore it provides a commentary on the verse **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice**, saying that from this verse it will be understood that **it is for this** Passover sacrifice **that the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt**, and saved us from the plague, and the wicked son will inevitably understand that it was for me and not for him, for had he been there he surely would not have performed the service, and so he would not have been redeemed, but he would have been smitten with the Egyptians. By this explanation you set his teeth on edge.

As for the word **וְכָסֵם** (“*moreover* you shall set his teeth on edge”), this is in accordance with what the rabbis said, that when the Israelites tied up the ram to the spit, the teeth of the Egyptians were set on edge, for the Egyptians also mocked this mitzvah, for they thought that everything was governed by the constellation of the Ram. But this is the opinion of the wicked son also, and as soon as he sees Israel engaged in this mitzvah, his teeth are automatically set on edge, as it says: “The wicked man shall see it and be vexed, he shall gnash his teeth, his courage shall fail.” In addition to the gnashing of teeth which occurred of itself, you will cause further gnashing of teeth by telling him the commentary on the verse **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice**, from which he will understand the point: “It is for this that the Lord did for me—and not for him.” If you quoted him the verse in its original form, the wicked son might not understand the point that would cause him to gnash his teeth. But by itself, the verse **You shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is because of this that the Lord did for me**, even though it says **for me** explicitly, still you might not absolutely infer from it “for me and not for him,” for how should the father say to the son “what the Lord did for *us*,” if the son was not there at the time of the Exodus? The father would have to say “for me” without the implication “and not for him, for had he been there he would not have performed this ceremony.” Who would say with certainty that he would not have performed the ceremony? You should assume rather that he would have performed it and have been redeemed with all his Israelite brethren! But the verse **You shall say: It is the Passover offering** gives better support to the inference “for me and not for him,” for there it is explicitly stated that those who engaged in the mitzvah were saved from the plague, while the Egyptians who did not engage in it were smitten. In that case, the wicked son who with mocking words says, “What is this service to you?” and excludes himself from the community, would surely not have performed this ceremony if (he had been there, so of necessity he would not have been redeemed, but he would have been smitten with the Egyptians. This is a correct and precious deduction.

The third way is to satisfy those commentators of the Torah and Aggadah who are of the opinion that the author of the Haggadah believed you should answer the wicked son with the verse **It is because of this that the Lord did for me**, which is interpreted for the son who cannot ask, and that he also thought that the Torah gave two answers for the wicked son, the one from the adjacent verse **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord**, and the second hinted by the verse: **It is because of what the Lord did for me**. He thought that the latter verse gave an answer both for the wicked son and for the son who cannot ask, basing this on the use of the verb **והגדת** (on the theory that **דבר** connotes rebuke, **אמר** connotes gentle speech, and **הגיד** can mean either—see above: the “first way”). By using this verb, the text hints that the father should tell this verse to two kinds of children—to the one who cannot ask, so that by telling him he will draw his heart to the service of God, as it is written: **Draw, and take**. As we said above, for the son who cannot ask there is no justification for the inference “To me and not to him,” but only for the rebellious son to whom you tell words as tough as sinews to set his teeth on edge; for him the inference is indeed justified, for had he been there he would not have performed this service, so he would not have been redeemed, since even for me the Lord did this only **בְּעָבוּר זֶה**—**by virtue of this** [ceremony]. Had this verse been written only for the son who cannot ask, it would have used the verb **ואמרת** (gentle speech), and had it been written only for the wicked son, it would have used the verb **ודברת** (rebuke). Furthermore, the verse was not placed adjacent to the wicked son’s mockery; this, in addition to the verb **והגדת**, allows it to refer to both sons.

It was the Torah’s view that you should first try to win over the wicked son to the service of God through gentle speech, which is why it first gives the answer: **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord**, using the word **ואמרתם** connoting gentle speech. This verse does not obviously imply “for me and not for him,” since it does not explicitly say **for me**. But if he stiffens his neck and does not listen to quiet talk, then **You shall tell your son** words tough as sinews, to set his teeth on edge, and say: **It is for this that the Lord did for me**—for me, and not for him. This is the meaning of **Draw, and take**—**draw** Israel (as with Aggadah) with gentle words to the service of the Passover, but if they do not listen, then take them in your hands against their will, for hard words are like forcing someone by hand, which is indeed “taking.”

As for the fact that the author of the Haggadah does not mention the adjacent verse **You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice**, it may be that he hints at it through the word **אף** (“moreover”), i.e., of course you should answer him that adjacent verse, I needn’t mention it because it is so obvious!—but moreover, you should answer him a second verse to set his teeth on edge, if he does not repent first. Thus by the word *moreover* he hints at the adjacent verse in the manner of “not only this, but also that.” The Torah wrote two answers for the wicked son, one gentle and one severe, and the author of the Haggadah advises you not to be intimidated by the wicked son—in addition to the gentle answer, give him also the second one to set his teeth on edge. Don’t be surprised that the same verse can be interpreted in two contradictory

ways, for we have already said that the inference comes not from the word **to me**, but is dependent primarily on the character of the person addressed, whether he serves God or not. Therefore for the wicked son you draw the inference “for me but not for him”; but as for the son who cannot ask, had he been there he would have performed the ceremony, so the inference does not apply to him—had he been there, he would also have been redeemed.

Exodus 13:14: “And if your son asks you tomorrow, ‘What is this?’...”—The author of the Haggadah said that this verse refers to the simple son, but R. Isaac Abravanel objected in his book *The Passover Offering*: “How do we know that this refers to the simple son? Perhaps he says ‘What is this?’ mockingly, in the manner of the wicked son!” He answers his own objection: “We learn from the answer which God commands us to reply to him: ‘With a strong hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt.’ Since God commanded us to answer properly, it follows that he asked properly.”

But R. Isaac did not answer properly, and whoever sees it will ask: “*What is this???*” Is it a foregone conclusion that whoever asks “what is this?” is a simpleton? Even if it is clear to God, how can it be clear to us? How shall we know what is in the heart of the questioner? Even the Torah does not tell us such fortunes.

The best explanation I can find is that it is problematic for the author of the Haggadah, why the Torah uses the word **tomorrow** with two sons—one in this verse and one in Portion *Va’ethanan*: **When your son asks you tomorrow...**, while with the other two sons it does not use the word tomorrow, but conversely says: **You shall tell your son on that day**, which excludes tomorrow! The problem is: Why does it not say **tomorrow** for all of them, or on that day for all of them? Furthermore, why does the Torah mention the question **What is this?** in the context of the redemption of the first-born, but it does not mention it in connection with the Pesah, the matzah, and the bitter herbs, as it did with the wicked son and the one who cannot ask?

In response to these problems, the author of the Haggadah saw fit to say that this verse speaks of the wise son, and the **tomorrow** mentioned in both verses is not an indefinite future time, but the very next day! For while the simple son’s father is giving him the Paschal lamb, matzah, and bitter herbs, he does not ask anything, for he does not want to show any disrespect for the service and commandment of the Lord! Nor does he seek the reason for the mitzvah, for would that they always fed him fire-roasted fatlings with matzah from fine flour, together with those bitter herbs which whet the appetite! Why should the simple son ask the reason for all of this, when he lacks nothing? But in the case of the redemption of the first-born, when they give you nothing but are asking you for the redemption-money, then he asks, **What is this?** for even a total fool is smart enough to hold on to his wallet, and not to give money away to someone else for nothing in return! But from the word tomorrow we learn that this is a good and simple-hearted man, who does not make fun of the payment or refuse to pay it. For on the day that they ask him for the redemption-money he says nothing, but gives the money; he doesn’t ask the reason, so that they should not suspect him of giving grudgingly, or accuse him of complaining about the Lord’s mitzvah, or of asking: “Why should I

give my money for nothing?” Therefore he is silent on the day of payment, and gives his money to fulfill God’s commandment, but nevertheless he asks on the next day, **What is this?** because he wants to know the reason why God commanded us to pay the redemption-money for the first-born.

The Torah has given us a sign, that **if he asks you tomorrow, What is this?**—i.e., he asks you on the day *after* the payment, but on the day of the payment he doesn’t ask anything—then surely he asks “What is this?” with a simple heart and in all innocence! For if he wanted to mock or complain against God’s command, he would have his say on the day of payment in order to get out of paying. But since he was silent on the day of payment and asks on the next day, surely he is a good, simple-hearted man asking a proper question, so you should give him a proper answer: **With a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, and the Lord killed all the first-born. . . .** Or if a son sees his father giving the redemption-payment for a first-born animal, and does not ask anything on the day of payment lest they suspect him of wanting to prevent his father from performing the mitzvah, but he asks him the next day, he is also regarded as asking from a simple heart; and since he asks the simple question, What is this? without going into the details, we judge that he also has a simple mind, and is not sharp enough to pick apart all the details of the matter. But if he had asked this question on the day of payment, it might be that he is not so simple, or so innocent.

Similarly, the verse **If your son asks you tomorrow** in Portion *Va’ethanan*, which is interpreted as referring to the wise son’s question, also uses the word *tomorrow* referring to the day after the Passover service, for the wise son fears to ask on the day of the mitzvah, lest the hearer suspect him of mocking the commandments at the time of their performance in order to prevent the people from engaging in the divine service. Without this distinction, many ask, what is the difference between the wicked son’s question and that of the wise son [since both use the word לָכֶם—to you]. Not many are wise enough to perceive the nuances of language to distinguish between them, and they suspect him of mocking. To avoid this suspicion, he also asks on the day after the observance. But the wicked son, whose whole intention is to prevent the people from engaging in the divine service, speaks his words at the time that the mitzvah is performed, and taunts them: “What is this you are engaged in? To think that grown people like you should be involved with such trifles!” Thus the text does not say “tomorrow” in his case. Moreover, the Torah says: **You shall tell your son on that day**—just as he speaks his words on the very day of the observance, so you should reply to his words immediately. We have already explained that this verse tells you how to instruct two sons. For the wicked son, it is obvious that you should answer him immediately, lest he flatter himself that he left you speechless, so that you had to excuse yourself with “Come back tomorrow and I will give you an answer.” Thus you should answer a fool according to his folly immediately on that day. As for the son who cannot ask, why should you tell him on the next day? Isn’t it better to tell him at the time that the matzah and bitter herbs are spread out before you, so that you may draw his heart to the service of God?

In this vein, I will also explain the words of the wise son as given in Portion *Va'ethanan*. One may ask the author of the Haggadah why he didn't mention the answer given in the adjacent verse, **We were slaves . . .**, but said instead: "Tell him the laws of the Pesah: We do not follow up the Paschal lamb with an aftercourse." I say that the wise son's question asks for the reasons of the fire-roasted meat, the matzah, and the bitter herbs in the order they are mentioned in the Torah: **They shall eat the meat roasted in fire . . . together with matzot and bitter herbs**. He asks of these three in the same order: **What are the testimonies, the edicts, and the judgments . . .?** The "testimonies" refers to the fire-roasted Passover sacrifice, for the offering of the Paschal lamb offers faithful testimony that God rules over the stars, even over the constellation of the Ram, which is the first-born and chief of all the constellations, and all the more so over the other constellations. It says: "The blood shall be a *sign* to you," and a sign is a testimony and evidence of something, as we explained above on the verse "This new-moon shall be. . ." "Edicts" refers to the matzah, which symbolizes submission through the fact that its dough does not rise, as I explained in my short writing *The Course of Life* (*Orah La-hayyim*) Chapter 25. Every edict refers to the setting of a rule of limits, as it says of the sea: "When I made breakers my limit (קֶרֶן) for it . . . and said, 'You may come so far and no farther.'" Thus the dough of the matzah is given a rule of limit that it should not rise. This teaches us a lesson of submission. Yet the matzah is also a symbol of freedom, for by virtue of their submission our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt, as it says: "It is not because you are the greatest of peoples that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the least of peoples"—I chose you just because you humble yourselves before me. Therefore the rule for leaven is that it should be burned, for whoever is guilty of pride is punished by fire, as it says in the *Yalkut* [*Shim'oni*] on the verse: "The burnt-offering which rises where it is burned . . .": "It is the nature of fire to ascend, therefore it is expiated by the burnt-offering which ascends." Also it is the rule that leaven is forbidden even in a trace quantity, and the same is true of haughtiness. Unlike other ethical qualities where a person should strive for the golden mean, haughtiness is to be avoided completely, as the rabbis said: "No part or parcel of it," thus forbidding it even in the smallest quantity. The rabbis also said: "Be very, very humble," to put aside pride and distance oneself from it as much as possible. "Judgments" hints at: They embittered their lives, for which the Egyptians were visited with judgments. Punishments are called "judgment," as it says: "For he teaches him the just way, his God disciplines him."

But after the Torah quotes the question of the wise son in the order, "Pesah, matzah, bitter herbs," it tells you to reverse the order in giving the answer, telling him first of the bitter herbs, then the matzah, then the Paschal lamb, for that alludes to the order in which the son will achieve his spiritual growth. First a person must bring his material being into the furnace of suffering to purify it and refine it of its corruption; through this he will come to achieve submission before his creator, and through this he will come to recognize the reality of God. Therefore the Lord brought Israel into the furnace of suffering which is Egypt, to purge their material being to bring them into submission, and from that they would come to the recognition of God's existence. The first

two are as preparation for the third thing, which is to come to the knowledge of God's existence, for this is the final desideratum and the purpose intended by them all, to achieve faith in Him (blessed be He), as it says: **Draw and take yourselves sheep**—draw your hands from idolatry, and take sheep for the service of the Lord. And it says in the Haggadah: “*Also* tell him of the laws of the Pesah”—i.e., even though the Paschal lamb is mentioned first in the performance of the mitzvah, because it is the final goal and highest in importance, nevertheless you should answer him about the Paschal lamb last, according to the order of the answer given there, as will be explained.

Don't make the mistake of saying that the Torah reversed the order of question and answer merely as a stylistic device! Rather, it was with full intent that the Torah reversed the order and told us to answer first concerning the bitter herbs and then the matzah and finally the Paschal lamb, to indicate the order of spiritual development. One should learn from this that the Pesah which comes last is the most essential thing. For this reason, the penalty of excision applies to nonperformance of the Passover sacrifice, which is not the case with matzah and bitter herbs—he who does not eat matzah or bitter herbs is not punished with excision. The author of the Haggadah orders us to bring a good, substantial evidence from the laws of the Paschal lamb, as the rabbis said: “One does not follow up the Paschal lamb with an aftercourse.” The reason for this is so that the taste of the Paschal lamb should remain in his mouth at the end. Why did they not insist that the taste of the matzah or bitter herbs should remain in his mouth at the end? Because the Paschal lamb is the most essential thing and final goal to be desired from the eating of the matzah and bitter herbs, for it is a sign of faith in God.

As for the phraseology, “*Also* you shall tell him...” this means that just as the Torah has reversed the order, so *also* you should answer him in that order. And if your son asks you why the Torah reversed the order, you should bring him an argument from the laws of the Paschal lamb, that the rabbis said we do not follow up the Paschal lamb with an aftercourse. You should argue from this that just as the Paschal lamb should remain in one's mouth at the end, so should it remain at the end in the answer to the son who asks, as the Torah prescribes.

The intention is to give as an answer all the verses mentioned in the Torah in connection with the wise son's question, and this is the order. First it says: **You shall say to your son: We were slaves...** through verse 23. This all tells us the reason for the bitter herbs, which are a commemoration of the enslavement, as it says: “They embittered their lives with hard work.” Then it says: **The Lord commanded us to observe all these edicts**, through the end of verse 24, which all gives the reason for the matzah, which is called an edict, as was explained above, for it teaches us submission and humility. And it is written: “The effect of humility is reverence of the Lord.” So it says here: **to observe all these edicts, to revere the Lord...**, for submission leads one to reverence. Finally it says: **It will be therefore to our merit/righteousness** (הַצְדָּקָה), which is the answer for the Paschal lamb, which comes as a testimony to God's sovereignty. For it says of the mitzvah of the Pesah: “I will *pass over* you,” where Rashi interprets וּפָסַחְתִּי as: “I will have mercy on you,” i.e., you will now be freed of the dominion of

the stars, which operate by the iron rule of necessity and have no power to do anything out of mercy, grace, or righteousness, and you will come under the wings of the Shekhinah of God, who acts out of absolute freedom, who performs deliverance and does righteousness out of mercy. This is the meaning of: **We shall therefore have righteousness when we observe faithfully this whole mitzvah.** For many mitzvot are tied up with the mitzvah of the Pesah; therefore the text says **this whole mitzvah**, i.e., one mitzvah which contains many others. Before the Lord our God—i.e., by virtue of this mitzvah we shall escape the dominion of the stars and stand before the Lord our God, to take shelter under his wings. This is the purpose of the Passover; let the enlightened gain wisdom.

THE PRECIOUS ORNAMENT (1602)
ON DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 32

Ephraim Luntshitz

*Portion Ha'azinu, on Deuteronomy 32:1:
Humanity as Key Link in the Hierarchy of Being*

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; let the earth hear the words I utter! Rashi commented: “Why did [Moses] call heaven and earth to witness against [Israel]? So that if Israel should say, ‘We have not accepted the covenant on ourselves,’ who could come and contradict them? Therefore he called the heavens and earth as witnesses, for they endure forever. So if Israel are meritorious, [the witnesses shall come and give their reward, etc.]” Some texts read as I have quoted, which makes the last sentence a completion of the same reason. But others add the word “ועוד—furthermore” before the last sentence, breaking it off as a separate reason. This makes the first reason problematic, for do the heavens and earth have a mouth to speak with? You might have said, “There is no speech and no words”¹ except that the heavens give dew and rain, and the earth yields her produce² when Israel perform God’s will, and they withhold it when Israel do not perform God’s will—all of which proves that Israel have accepted the covenant. But in that case, the continuation (“and furthermore, if Israel are meritorious...”) is but a redundant repetition of the first reason!

But we can justify this reading in the light of what the rabbis said: “‘And there was evening and morning the sixth day’: the extra *hei* teaches that everything was provisional and contingent on the sixth of Sivan, so that if Israel would accept the Torah, well and good; but if not, the world would revert to chaos.”³ Therefore, when we see today that the heavens and earth endure, and have not reverted to chaos, this is proof positive that Israel have accepted the Torah. Thus it is written, “Therefore bring heaven and earth to witness against them”⁴—what testimony do they have to offer? The very fact of their existence, for this is the “testimony of the Lord which is faithful,”⁵ that the people of Israel have accepted the Torah, for had they not, the heavens and earth would not be standing, but would have reverted to chaos.

¹ Psalm 19:3.

² Deuteronomy 11:14–17.

³ BT *Shabbat* 88a, and a key aggadic dictum of Ephraim from *Ir Gibborim* onward, cited also by Maharal later in *The Splendor of Israel* (*Tiferet Yisrael*).

⁴ Deuteronomy 31:28.

⁵ Psalm 19:8.

The reason why the existence of heaven and earth is conditional on Torah is the following. The supernal and terrestrial realms are opposites, which require a mediating term to join them. Such is the human being, composed of matter and form. This composition is achieved through the Torah, for without the Torah man is like a beast⁶ and has no portion in the supernal. Thus whoever engages in Torah brings peace between the heavenly and earthly families,⁷ so that they should not oppose each other, by virtue of the mediating term which combines them. Thus it is written, “May my discourse come down as the rain,” for everything that flows from one place to another connects them.⁸ Just as the rain descending from heaven to earth connects heaven with earth, so my teaching (i.e., the Torah), which is brought from heaven to earth, is the place where heaven and earth kiss.⁹

⁶ Psalm 49:13.

⁷ The juxtaposition of the themes of Torah, peace, and the supernal and earthly realms is found in *Numbers Rabbah* 11:7, but this formulation seems original.

⁸ **כי כל ניצוק חיבור**. Actually, the opposite is the law, according to Mishnah *Tohorot* 8:9: **הניצוק והקטפרס ומשקה טופח אינן חיבור לטומאה ולא לטהרה**.

⁹ The phrase is from BT *Baba Batra* 74a, but identifying that place with Torah is original.

LIPS OF KNOWLEDGE (1610)
ON GENESIS CHAPTER 28

Ephraim Luntshitz

יש זהב ורב פנינים וכלי יקר שפתי דעת:

Gold is plentiful, jewels abundant; but wise speech¹ is a precious ornament. (Proverbs 20:15)

Pericope § 254, Portion Hukkat
On the Purifying Power of Torah:
“This is the Torah: When a Person Dies in a Tent...”

This is the statute of the Torah... (זאת חקת התורה)—It should say *זאת חקת הפרה* (“this is the statute of the heifer”), as it says elsewhere “this is the statute of the Passover” (Exodus 12:43)! And if you say that case is different, as the Passover offering has already been mentioned in that portion, was not the heifer also hinted at in the episode of Marah (where it says *שם שם לו חוק ומשפט* [and the word *חוק* is traditionally interpreted to refer to the law of the red heifer, which was therefore commanded at that time])? Another problem [for our consideration]: why did the rabbis interpret from the verse *זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל* (“this is the Torah: when a person dies in a tent”) to mean that the words of Torah only endure when people mortify themselves for its sake?² What relevance does that idea have to this portion? And what relevance has the midrash, “let the mother come and clean up her son’s filth”?³

It appears that this matter deals with the impurity of a dead body which is caused by the Impure Side,⁴ because of the pollution which the serpent laid upon Eve. When Israel stood on Mount Sinai, their pollution ceased, for by their receiving the tablets they became free of imperial domination and free of the Angel of Death, as it says, “[the divine writing was] engraved on the tablets—*חרות על הלחות*—do not read *חֲרוֹת* but rather *חִירוֹת* (free).”⁵ “Free

¹ “Wise Speech”—*שפתי דעת*, literally “lips of knowledge.” Note how the titles of two successive books—the *Precious Ornament* and *Lips of Knowledge*—derived from the same Biblical verse.

² BT *Berakhot* 63b.

³ Midrash *Tanhuma*, *Hukkat* 8; YS *Hukkat* § 759.

⁴ *סטרא אחרא*, synonymous with *סטרא דמסאבא*, the cosmic principle of Evil or Impurity in the kabbalistic tradition. This selection from Ephraim’s later period is more permeated with the spirit of kabbalism than his earlier writings, but he still prefers to back up all his points with references to the classical rabbinic sources.

⁵ *Exodus Rabbah* 32:1, 42:7; see also Mishnah *Avot* 6:2 (in prayer book).

from the Angel of Death” does not mean that people would not die altogether (for it does not say “free from death”), but only from the Angel of Death. In other words, they would not die by the Angel of Death, through whom the impurity of death is communicated,⁶ but by the divine kiss. Now, as the Golden Calf brought about the shattering of the tablets, the impurity [of death] was restored. Hence, [the rabbis said that] the calf soiled the palace of the king, inasmuch as it brought back the impurity of death. Thus, let the heifer [mother of the calf] come and clean up her son’s filth, by removing that impurity. Now even though before the giving of the Torah it was written before the Holy and Blessed One,⁷ and the portion of the heifer was written in it, this can be explained. For even the objectors must concede that if Adam had not sinned, no one would die at all. Hence the difficulty would remain: was not the Torah written before God in heaven thousands of years before the world was created, and the portions of inheritance and levirate marriage were written in it! The answer given in the *gemara*—“on condition”⁸—is insufficient. But it seems to me these difficulties can be resolved on the assumption that the Torah was written before the Lord without any spacing between the letters, and it was all the names of the Holy and Blessed One, in the manner that the letters combined together, and they were separated in a different, esoteric way, not the separation of letters that was given to us (i.e., the revealed way). This is what was meant by the saying, “The [heavenly] Torah was written in black fire on white fire”⁹—that is, the hidden Torah in black, and the revealed Torah in white. The angels thought that the Torah contained only the esoteric part, which they were more worthy of possessing than terrestrial creatures; therefore they said, “Give your splendor to the heavens” [i.e., don’t give the Torah to mortal man]!¹⁰ Moses’ reply to them indicated that the Torah had a revealed face also. On this assumption, we can say that if Adam had not sinned, nobody would die, and even though Israel was conceived in thought before the creation of the world, nevertheless the portions of inheritance and levirate marriage would have been given to them without the spaces between the letters, so they would be applicable only in their esoteric sense. When Adam sinned, death was decreed for him and his descendants, and so these portions were [re-]written with the spaces between the letters. Furthermore, from the time that death was decreed for him, the decree stipulated that it should be through the Angel of Death, on account of the pollution which the serpent laid on Eve. When Israel stood at Sinai and received the tablets,

⁶ This assumes the standard rabbinic equation: “The Serpent = Satan = Angel of Death.” (See BT *Bava Batra* 16a: “Satan is the evil inclination, and is the Angel of Death.”)

⁷ *Midrash on Psalms* 90:12; Nahmanides commentary to the Torah, beginning of Genesis and elsewhere.

⁸ Presumably, that these laws were given conditionally, in case Adam should sin and all these conditions would then be applicable. I cannot find this discussion in the Talmud.

⁹ *Midrash on Psalms* 90:12.

¹⁰ BT *Shabbat* 88b.

thus becoming free of the Angel of Death, that pollution ceased for them.¹¹ It then occurred to God to give the Torah with the spacing between the letters except for the portion of the heifer, which He would give without separation of letters as there was no need for the revealed meaning, since without the Angel of Death, there is no uncleanness imparted by death through divine kiss! But when they sinned through the Golden Calf, that freedom from the Angel of Death was annulled, and impurity of death was restored. Therefore God gave them also the portion of the heifer with separation of the letters, for the calf soiled the palace of the king, and the heifer cleans up her son's filth, which is that impurity.

But the effect of the tablets, which make one free of the Angel of Death, still remains. For we find that when Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] died, "the priesthood was abolished"¹²—which is to say that it was permitted for the priests to participate in his burial, because he had no impurity, because he mortified himself for the sake of Torah and did not have enjoyment from the world even as much as his little finger. Therefore he had no impurity, for evidently he died of a divine kiss and not by the Angel of Death. Thus you find that the Torah and the heifer work to the same effect. Just as the heifer removes the impurity of a dead body, so does the Torah remove that impurity. Therefore our portion begins, "This is the statute of the Torah," for whatever is said about the heifer, the same law applies to the Torah. But it has not yet been specified in what respect the law of the heifer applies to the case of the Torah. Therefore the text first specifies the laws of the heifer inasmuch as it removes impurity, and then it says, "This is the Torah: When a person dies in a tent." This is problematic: why does it specify that he *dies* in a tent? Does the impurity of a tent-enclosure apply only in the case when someone dies in a tent? Does it not apply equally if one dies outside of the tent and was brought into it afterwards, that it renders impure whatever is within the tent-enclosure? But it speaks of one who "dwells in tents [of study]" like Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch], who mortified himself in the tent of words of Torah. In such a case there is surely no impurity, for the Torah removes impurity as does the heifer—if one mortifies oneself for it, surely one will die by a divine

¹¹ The rabbinic source for this idea is in BT *Shabbat* 145b–146a: "Why are idolators polluted [Soncino translation: "lustful"]? Because when the serpent mated with Eve, he imparted pollution to her. When Israel stood at Sinai, their pollution ceased. Since the idolators did not stand at Sinai, their pollution has not ceased." This idea seems originally, in rabbinic times, to have served as a Jewish response to the Christian notion that the Original Sin acquired from the Fall in Eden needs to be cleansed, therefore one must accept Christ's atonement. The rabbis responded: Yes, there was sin, and it needs to be erased, but we have Sinai to achieve that purpose. Over a thousand years later, in the Reformation period, this argument was ready-made to serve Ephraim in his disputation with Christians in the same way as the original argument served in early Christian times.

¹² Mishnah *Sotah* 9:15 has: "When Rabbi Ishmael ben Pavi died, the splendor of the priesthood was annulled. When Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] died, humility and sin were no more." Did Ephraim misremember this passage, or did he encounter a variant somewhere?

kiss, which imparts no impurity, and the law of the Torah will turn out to be equivalent to the law of the heifer. Just as the Heifer purifies the impure and defiles the pure, so Torah. If he dies, he lives, and if he lives he dies. For one who mortifies himself for the Torah will live—that is, even in his death he is called alive, great in works, for it is as if death does not apply to him.¹³ This interpretation is well-founded and clear[ly true].

¹³ Ephraim does not specify the converse case. We may attempt to fill in: if one attempts to observe the Torah while enjoying all the pleasures of this world, his Torah will be corrupted and it will not have the desired effect.

EPHRAIM LUNTSHITZ ON PILPUL: A HISTORICAL NOTE AND TWO TEXTS

For generations, the reputation of Ephraim Luntshitz has been shaped disproportionately by these two short passages from his final book (his criticism of pilpul at the end of the section “*The Pillar of Torah*” and the positive remedy he offers at the end of the book). The early 20th-century Jewish scholars Israel Bettan and Israel Zinberg praised Ephraim as a follower of Maharal in the fight against “pilpul,” a small band of enlightened leaders fighting a lonely battle against a tradition of obscurantism. This emphasis served the ideological needs of their generation, to distance themselves from the one-sided Talmudic immersion of their traditional east-European progenitors and find heroes in their own struggle for intellectual modernization. As our contemporary Elhanan Reiner has pointed out, the 16th-century reality of the “debate over pilpul” is much more complex.¹ A casual reading of Ephraim’s works in every period of his productivity will show that he participated in the phenomenon of “pilpul” (however one defines it) with great enthusiasm and gusto. (See the previous excerpt “Pilpul on the Four Sons” as a shining example.) He even admits here: “Though I myself learned [or taught]² the *hillukim*, nevertheless I hope to God that my pilpul was close to the plain sense and close to the truth; such pilpul should not be discouraged so much, for there is some advantage to be derived from it.”

The principles of consistency underlying Ephraim’s practice of pilpul elsewhere and his criticism of it here are not hard to articulate. Pilpul is intellectual dessert (or in its original etymology, “pepper,” a spice to be added to the main dish). It is no substitute for “filling one’s belly” with “meat and wine” (to use an analogy that Maimonides used when advocating that one should acquire mastery of the more basic Jewish curriculum of Torah and halakhah before indulging in philosophy, and that Ephraim echoes below). Here Ephraim addresses himself to the proper pedagogical methods to be used for instructing the young. The ideas he advances echo the pedagogical principles of Maharal (a subject to which a small literature has been devoted). A beginning student who has not mastered the basic meaning of a simple

¹ See Elhanan Reiner, *תמורות בישיבות פולין ואשכנז במאות הט"ו-ה"ז והוויכוח על הפלפול* (“Transformations in the Yeshivot of Poland and Germany in the 16th–17th Centuries and the Controversy over Pilpul”) in *Studies in Jewish Culture in Honour of Chone Shmeruk* (Hebrew Section), Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1993, pp. 9–80.

² Ashkenazic linguistic practice is sometimes imprecise in distinguishing between the *qal* and *pi'el* forms of *למד*, perhaps because the Yiddish *lernen* was used for both the intransitive and transitive senses “learn” and “teach.” Though Ephraim uses the *qal* here, he probably means “taught.”

text will be badly educated indeed if one attempts to impress him with the kind of mental gymnastics that the Tosafists indulge in, or that (to take a description that Reiner cites)³ the rabbi would engage in for the recreation of his students in a festive setting, with the book closed before him, after the regular season of learning was complete. A system of pedagogical principles was required to clarify what approach was appropriate in each circumstance. Maharal instituted such a systematic approach, and also clarified the place of the study of secular subjects that was appropriate in a balanced curriculum. The substance of his approach, as well as its similarity to that of Comenius and the Bohemian Brothers is the subject of Kleinberger's *המחשבה הפדעועית של המהר"ל מפראג* (*The Educational Thought of Maharal of Prague*, Jerusalem, 1962) and Otto Kulka's essays (see Bibliography). Ephraim no doubt emulated Maharal in this endeavor. But that is only one side of the question of "Ephraim and Pilpul," to which additional systematic study can profitably be devoted at a future date.

³ Reiner cites Caspali's description of the yeshiva of R. Judah Mintz in Padua at the beginning of the 16th century. (Reiner, *op. cit.*, p. 16) See also Dimitrovsky, *על דרך הפלפול* ("On the Method of Pilpul"), in Hebrew section of *Salo Baron Jubilee Volume*, American Academy for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 1975.

SIX PILLARS (1617)

Ephraim Luntshitz

Conclusion of Part I: "The Pillar of Torah"

In this exhortation I have seen fit to conclude the "pillar of Torah" by saying that in our generation it is quite feeble and hanging over the void. For in all the ways of learning there is no wholeness, from the time one comes to the age of reasoning until he grows old. For before the lad knows to renounce evil and choose [good], he is entrusted to a "melamed" [elementary schoolteacher] to teach him scripture. One week he learns a few verses from the Portion *Bereshit*, the next week a few verses from *Noah*, and so forth. He only teaches him the meaning of the words, not the connection of the verses. Even if he studies the entire portion with him, he never teaches him the connection of ideas. Afterwards he starts to learn Mishnah or Gemara. But he still does not know about the principle that God is one, or acceptance of the yoke of His reverence and commandment, because he knows nothing about the love of the Lord or the fear of the Lord or the commandment of the Lord. What is the point of teaching him Mishnah or Gemara? From all that he has learned in Scripture, he has derived nothing of substance—it contains no learning of Torah, but only learning of language, to speak in the sacred tongue (Hebrew), for he will only remember the meaning of the words. But one could study the sacred tongue with him without any book at all, in the manner that one learns any ordinary language. I am amazed how one can call mere linguistic study "the study of Torah." Is this Torah?

Also, when one teaches the student Gemara, one teaches him tractates of which he has no need of knowing, such as *Erwin*, *Hullin*,⁴ and the like. With the passing of time, all is forgotten, and his memory retains nothing of all that he learned. One has acquired only the talmudical method, but not the

⁴ *Erwin*: the study of the fictive legal procedures to amalgamate residential zones for the purpose of easing the restrictions of carrying on the Sabbath. *Hullin*: the detailed laws of kashrut, including especially the inspection of the organs of slaughtered animals for imperfections. (This was the subject in which Luria and Isserles were engaged at the time of their fateful dialogue—see above, pages 24–29 and 223–30.) Both these areas of law, though still in practice in traditional Jewish communities, are highly technical and properly to be relegated to experts. Their study by ordinary students had no practical application but was prized because the difficulty of these subjects provided the opportunity to display intellectual brilliance, whether on the part of the teacher or the students.

knowledge to perform any mitzvah properly, nor any moral instruction of which youth is in need.

The reason for all this is pride, for the father only wants to puff up the reputation of his son, so that others should say, "See how this one is tender in years but is learning halakhah, or Tosafot, or *hilluk*! He knows *pilpul*, how to draw an elephant through the eye of a needle!" When he progresses in years, he will get to sit in the circle of the "learned." There the essence of study is sharpening the wits, the empty and vain pilpul which they call "*hilluk*." Heavens, be astonished at this!—that an elder rabbi, ensconced in a yeshiva, should pervert what is common knowledge to him and to others in order to say, "I have a new insight to tell you, and indeed it is the plain sense of the Gemara!"—when he knows full well that it is not the plain sense.⁵ Is there such blindness in the world, that he should lie to himself and to others? Is this what is commanded, that he should sharpen his wits through falsification, to waste his days in vanity and cause his listeners to waste their days similarly? It is all to make a glorious name for himself.

I myself know that there are a few lonely survivors in this generation who have as their constant desire to abolish this kind of study, but they have not the power to do so, for they are perceived by the mass of the people as deviant...they are vastly outnumbered by the many rabbis who oppose them in the land. The majority think that this pilpul is the essential of Torah. They entice them with words until the words of those who cry out and protest are annulled and have no weight. In this way the pillar of Torah is completely corrupted.

At the end of this book we shall speak further of the proper order of instruction; see there. Whoever of you reveres the Lord and listens to the voice of His servant, take these words to heart to establish pillars for the Torah, to strengthen this pillar on which the whole house of Israel is based, for it is our life and the length of our days.

"Exhortation on the Pillar of Torah"
(from the Conclusion of Six Pillars)

We have already said in the previous chapters that all six pillars⁶ have grown feeble. Therefore I have established these pillars by my desire and request

⁵ If Ephraim thought back at this point to his sermon on Bereshit in *City of Heroes* (above, pp. 354–59), he could have found numerous examples of this kind of exaggerated reasoning.

⁶ The "six pillars" are Torah, worship, deeds of kindness, justice, truth, and peace. The enumeration is based on two sayings in Mishnah *Avot*, in which Rabbi Simeon the Righteous and Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel each cited three different things on which the world rests. Maharal had already adopted the framework of these six major principles in his ethical treatise *Eternal Paths*. Ephraim's *Six Pillars* emulates Maharal's earlier work in form and content.

from all men of truth, pursuers of justice, in whose heart is the Torah of the Lord, who cry out and protest against every hateful thing in order to annul it, and to mend every breach in the wall of the house of Israel, for it is great. Thus the earlier ones went out to repair the right-hand pillar, the pillar of the Torah, on which all the house of Israel rests, and to order aright the breath⁷ of children's mouths, the house of their master on which the world endures, so that their mouths not spout forth vanity and pursuit of wind when the studies are not ordered properly.

The proper order is to teach them first Scripture with syntax and the meaning of the words from the first verse of Genesis to the last verse of Deuteronomy, not according to the practice of the teachers in our generation in these lands who study with the lads each week a few verses from the portion that is read that week, and the next week a few verses from the following portion, only the meaning of the words without syntax, all disconnected and next to nothing, picking up in the course of a year isolated fragments of which he cannot make any topical connection. Even the word-meanings which he has learned add nothing to his understanding, for he loses the memory of them when he does not know what they are about. Therefore the only good thing is to teach him the entire Pentateuch in a regular fashion, including an understanding of the connection of the topics. Then when he is old it will not depart from him. He should learn from this the knowledge of God's existence so that the reverence of Him should be before him, and he should know the divine commandment.

When he has studied all of Scripture⁸ and understands the commandment of the Lord, then one should teach him those portions of the Mishnah which are practiced in our time, and afterwards those tractates dealing with the sacred offerings and laws of purity and impurity which are not so necessary for the youth until he grows older and has his belly full of the mitzvot which are practiced daily or at set times.⁹ When he has informed him of all of these, then he can teach him Talmud. If he is not capable of this, they should teach him the "twenty-four" books¹⁰ in place of this. And every day he should instruct him in moral matters and how to revere the Lord daily.

That is not how today's teachers operate. They are only concerned with collecting their wages, and with completing the task that is immediately due for a given day or a given hour. They do not care about instructing the student in reverence for God, or morals, or proper conduct. Therefore most

⁷ Ephraim plays here on two meanings of the word **הבל**: "breath" in the neutral sense, and "wind/vanity" in the negative sense.

⁸ Though "Scripture" (**מקרא**) has the broader meaning of the entire Hebrew Bible (including prophets and later books), in this curricular context it no doubt means just the five books of the Torah, as the later reference to the "twenty-four" indicates.

⁹ *Daily or set times*—Referring to the two basic categories of rules comprised in the first division of the *Shulhan Arukh*, i.e. the *Orah Hayyim*—those practiced every day (such as prayer and kashrut) and those less frequently but still with regularity (Sabbath and festivals).

¹⁰ The "twenty-four [books]" is the proverbial term for the entire Hebrew Bible.

students make it obvious when they are set free to go home, for the earth is shattered by their voices. They have no respect for their elders, nor for each other. They dance like calves in the streets, a crowd without culture or manners. In some cases their custom becomes second nature, for even after they grow up they are stubborn and obdurate, insubordinate to their superiors and disrespectful to their elders, because they never learned any better from their teachers in their youth, because those teachers were interested only in collecting their salaries.

This has become a chronic illness among us, of which most are unaware. They wonder why this is the case among the youth of Israel more than among the other peoples. The truth is that it is the fault of their teachers, in combination with the fact that most parents spoil their children and spare the rod because they rely on the teachers to discipline them. But the teachers pay no attention to the proper goal. On the contrary, they mislead the parents through flattery. A teacher will praise the child to the father's face and say, "This lad will be great in Torah," so that the father will hire him as a teacher. When the lad is barely ready to study the basic law,¹¹ the teacher will say he is ready to study *Tosafot*, and to pull an elephant through the eye of a needle. The father is pleased to hear this, and joins him in skipping over the mountains and hills to teach him what is far beyond his understanding. In the end the student is left with nothing. He has collected handfuls of wind. Whatever he has learned has grown up in a night and vanishes in a night.

I sat and I considered the great advantage that comes from the system of studying Mishnah which was instituted by the great Rabbi Loew¹² of blessed memory here in the holy community of Prague in all the synagogues, to learn in study-pairs after the prayer service—a single chapter, but of great reward. A great benefit has ensued from this. For all the householders who are not intellectual enough to study halakhah every day (and some of them because they lack the leisure) can at least learn one chapter of Mishnah daily. Therefore I also propose, conclude, and agree to strengthen this practice with all vigor and strength, especially now that the commentary *Tosafot Yom Tov*¹³ on the Mishnah has appeared, which is sufficient for every reader. Therefore everyone who fears the Lord should commit himself to study the Mishnah. And in every city, holy communities where the word of the king the Lord of Hosts reaches, they should praise the righteous deeds of the Lord and establish this institution, for it is very important.

Also with regard to the system for instructing the youths, I have already written that the principal subject of instruction after Scripture should be Mishnah.

¹¹ *Halakhah* in this context probably meant the halakhic epitome of the tractates of the Talmud by R. Alfasi, or the *Tur* code of R. Jacob ben Asher and its successors (Jaffe's *Royal Garment* being at least as popular as Caro's *Shulhan Arukh* for a century after its appearance).

¹² I.e., Maharal.

¹³ This now-classic work by R. Yom Tov Lippman Heller, also a resident of Prague at this time, had just appeared.

Any God-fearing man who teaches his son for his benefit, with a view for his future success, should defer the study of Gemara until the lad is knowledgeable at least in those orders of the Mishnah which are practiced at this time, for this is the way that the light of Torah will find a home. When the lad is familiar with the Mishnah, then he will easily understand the Gemara. But this is not the case if he studies the Gemara first, for then the Gemara will be like a sealed book, and he will not understand what he is studying.

As for the great sages of the land, I had an argument with them many times to abolish the method of study based on wit-sharpening and pilpul which goes by the name of *hilluk*, for in my opinion he who diverges from known fact is in the category of one who “shows contempt for the word of the Lord.” I could not persuade them. There are two reasons for this—those who pursue a superior place of honor and authority, and who desire each one to sit in the circle of the wise, and who say, “If it were not for this pilpul, what advantage would one person have over another?” They furthermore contend that they see with their own eyes that whoever is regarded as sharper is promoted to positions of authority in the world of learning. But the truth is not so. For our eyes see that in those lands where they do not learn spurious pilpul, as in the land of Israel and the lands of other nations, they have mastery over all branches of learning and all the codes, since they have more available time, not frittering their days and large parts of the year in vanity as we do in these lands. We see with our eyes how especially with our young men this play of wits causes them great damage, because whoever does not show mastery and reputation in this vanity is considered as nothing, and willy-nilly he is terminated from his studies. But if the main business of learning was Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud and codes, he would hold his own with them. The heads of the yeshiva do all this for their own honor, for a large crowd of people is glory to a king—many youths come flocking to them, and even if the chaff is more numerous than the wheat, they pile up heaps upon heaps. The former sit silently, the latter cackle. Is such learning good in God’s sight? For I know that there are in this generation many fine young men whose heart is like a lion’s in the Torah, and whose souls yearn for the Torah, but because they are not expert in this pilpul, they are considered worthless. Therefore they cease their studies immediately after they are married, for they think there is no future for them. There are a few exceptions who have the fear of God in their hearts and do not care about the praise or criticism of people, and continue to study regardless. Though I myself learned [or taught]¹⁴ the *hillukim*, nevertheless I hope to God that my pilpul was close to the plain sense and close to the truth; such pilpul should not be discouraged so much, for there is some advantage to be derived from it. But it is better in any case not to teach it altogether, for each one says that the truth is on his side. Therefore it is good to abolish it altogether, and especially those contentions whose falsehood is obvious to all. Thus many of the great authorities, suffering from exile, agree to abolish

¹⁴ See note on the ambiguity of למד (equivalent to the Yiddish *lernen*) above, page 429 note 2.

it all together so that we shall engage ourselves all our days in the Torah of truth and upright laws, and it will go well with us.

It is furthermore a great principle of Torah not to use learning as a means of quarreling or of putting on airs. Many of the sages of our generation are exalted greatly on account of their learning, and have an exceedingly haughty spirit....

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