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BIBLE AND PHILOSOPHY, A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

In this paper we will be dealing with one of the most urgent contemporary issues -- the relationship between the Bible, philosophy and culture in our postmodern situation. We are apparently confronted with totally new and unprecedented problems. However, an historical vision can contribute, in my opinion, to a deeper understanding and a better analysis of our subject. An additional remark is necessary. I would like to analyze the problem from the perspective of Jewish religious thought. Some of my conclusions are particular to my religion, but others, perhaps most of them, are, in my opinion universal.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages had to fight for its position on the map of Jewish culture. It had to confront what may be called the rejection thesis, according to which, philosophy is a non-Jewish and non-biblical phenomenon and must therefore be rejected. The most extreme expression of the rejection thesis is to be found in the writings of 13th century tosafist, R. Moshe ben Hisdai Taku, of the now infamous town of Dachau. Hisdai asserts that the whole philosophical and mystical endeavor is the product of a foreign, malignant, influence. As a curiosity, I will mention the story he invented concerning the supposed imprisonment of R. Saadia Gaon (882-942, the father of medieval Jewish philosophy). During his supposed imprisonment, R. Gaon had the 'opportunity' to share a cell with a non-Jewish scholar who initiated him into the pernicious ways of philosophy. This is, according to R. Moshe Taku, the original sin that blemished all the subsequent development of Jewish Thought, including such undoubtedly pious movements as *Hasidut Ashkenaz* (the important social and ideological pious circle in medieval German Jewry). R. Moshe Taku is undoubtedly an exception. However we repeatedly find the rejection thesis, especially during internal polemics. The conflict between the two approaches reached one of its peaks during the period of the Sephardic center's decline. Hence, in kabbalistic writings we can find the idea that, on the one hand, the

Kabbalah is autochthonous, while, on the other hand, philosophy bears the mark of foreign influences.

Jewish thinking responded at times with what can be called the originality thesis. The origin of philosophy in general lies in the ancient Jewish oral tradition that was partially lost with the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth, the dispersion, and the subsequent decline of Jewish life. The originality thesis was bound up with a conception that can be called the reconstruction ideal. This was expressed in an extraordinary effort and endeavor: the restoration of a whole corpus of scientific and philosophical works in Hebrew.

The originality thesis is certainly old. We find it already in Aristobulus of Paneas, Philo's predecessor. According to Aristobulus, Plato and the philosophers borrowed from a pre-Septuaginta version of the Torah. In the Middle Ages we find different variants of this concept, including a legend concerning Aristotle's ultimate conversion to Judaism.¹ The most notable representatives of this school of thought are, in my opinion, the medieval translators, and first amongst them the Tibbon family. We could consider this approach a myth, whose purpose was to legitimize the propagation of sciences, even within the context of Talmud Torah. However, we would be mistaken not to view their belief as sincere. Most translators developed the concept that their translation is nothing more than a restoration of the original text. R. Jacob ben Machir ibn Tibbon (c. 1236-1307) writes in the introduction to his translations of Euclides' *Elements*, that with this translation he is only practicing the *Mitzvah* (commandment) of *hashavat aveida*, bringing back the lost glory. ² Another

¹ See M. Grabmann, "Aristoteles im Werturteil des Mittelalters", *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben II* p. 92, ff. cf. E. N. Adler "Aristotle and the Jews" *REJ* LXXXII, S. Baron *A Social and Religious History of the Jews (SRHJ)* VIII p. 306 n.16. Rabbi Yehuda Halevy resumes this approach, saying that "the roots and principles of all sciences were handed down from us first to the Chaldeans, then to the Persians and Medians, then to Greece, and finally to the Romans". (*Kuzari* II.66), cf. also the notes of Cassel p. 172 n. 2 and of S. Munk on the *Guide* I.71 (I, 334 n. 3) and in his *Melanges de philosophie juive et arabe* p. 466 n.1. cf. Baron *SRHJ* I, pp. 198 f., 386 n. 43; II pp. 157, 390 f. n. 36 VIII p. 316 f. n. 32. On this thesis see the survey of David Kaufman *Die Sinne, Jahresbericht der LandesRabbinerschule in Budapest*, Budapest 1884 p. 3 ff

² נשאני לבי...

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להעתיקו מלשון הגרי אל לשונינו
ולהחזיר אבידה לבעלים
ולעשות לנו שם כשם הגדולים
להסיר מעלינו חרפת הערלים
האומרים כי מכל חכמה אנו משוללים

translator, R. Judah ben Shlomo Nathan (Maestro Bonjudes Nathan from Avignon), has described his position with a paraphrase of the words of Genesis. In a play on words, Sarah, the representative of Jewish culture, is now barren, and Hagar the maidservant was converted by historical vicissitudes to the position of mistress (*sarah*).³

Medieval Jewish thinkers believed in the originality thesis without being aware of the fact that there was some truth in it. The roots of Jewish philosophy are certainly ancient, but they were almost entirely forgotten by Jewish thinkers. We can locate the beginning of the relationship between Bible and philosophy in the Jewish community of Alexandria in the last two centuries of the Second commonwealth, primarily with the impressive figure of Philo the great Jewish-Alexandrine philosopher. As Harry A. Wolfson rightly emphasized, this Alexandrian synthesis represents the birth of religious philosophy in general. In Wolfson's opinion, the history of religious philosophy extends from the first synthesis made by Philo, till the crisis of religious philosophy in Spinoza, because "Benedictus is the first of the moderns, and Baruch the last of the medievals."

However, Philo presents in his work a third concept that can be called the complementary thesis. There are indeed different sources of knowledge. Our spiritual construction must therefore be based on all of them. Religious philosophy is a dialogue between Revelation and Reason, two of the channels through which the Lord speaks to human beings. Reason is universal, and therefore we have to accept the truth, regardless of the identity of the person who has presented it. The most interesting expression of this attitude is found, in my opinion, in an anonymous commentary to *Parashat Noach*, extant in the Vatican. This commentator, who apparently lived on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean in the late fourteenth or fifteen century, wrote an extremely

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⁴ Of utmost originality is his view on the vineyard (*Kerem*) that Noach planted. For him, this *Kerem*, is nothing less than synonymous with the *Pardes* of the Sages. Noach, his sons, and his grandson Canaan all entered, like the four famous *Tannaim*, into the *Kerem-Pardes*. Noach *hetzitz venifga*, looked and was injured, Ham *hetzitz vemet* looked and died. Canaan *kizetz benitiot*, separated the roots, and both Shem and Jafet, like Rabbi Akiva, *nichnisu beshalom veyatzu beshalom*, they entered in peace, and returned safely.

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allegorical interpretation of the Deluge and of the developments thereafter.⁴ The truth is divided between two traditions (Shem and Japhet), and the way in which both of them complement each other provides the conditions for the development of man.

The significance of the bounds between philosophy and religion was many-sided. It helped to develop the theological language, but overall it signified the existence of a universal language that permitted communication between different traditions, and within which religious contentions could be discussed.⁵

Philo concluded the marriage between philosophy and the Bible. Many children were born from this wedlock. They belonged to different religious traditions but all of them were nourished at Philo's bosom. In the Jewish tradition the most distinguished of these children was undoubtedly Maimonides. Despite his critical stand against many Aristotelian contentions, Maimonides' work represented the fullest harmonic synthesis between the Bible and philosophy.

Maimonides' position is, as always, unique. As with many other major problems, here we can find a creative synthesis of almost all possibilities. Maimonides' basic intuition was that the Bible contains fragments, and even whole books, like Job and the Proverbs, and also the wisdom literature in general, that testify to the existence of a philosophical tradition. This is *a fortiori* true of the Talmudic *Aggadah*. A simple but interesting example can be found in Maimonides' explanation that, when speaking of the different heavens, the *Aggadah* is expressing the idea that the ontological status of the soul before a person's birth is different than its status after death. This implies a direct confirmation of Maimonides' psychological theories and the denial of the idea of a 'returning' of the soul to a previous state. Many other examples express the similarity between the religious and the philosophical tradition. The idea of the

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⁵ It is interesting that the provencal thinker R. Yedaia Hapenini of Béziers, in a letter to R. Shlomo Ibn Adrat (Rashba), proclaimed in his Apology of philosophy, the principles of provencal philosophy that philosophy is universal and can therefore open even for strangers, the doors to eternal Happiness.

ethical golden middle way, common to Greek philosophy and Talmudic thinking, is well-known. But the most important of these common ideas is the idea of *Imitatio Dei*, or in biblical garments, the precept of going in the ways of the Lord.

Maimonides does indeed speak of the originality of Jewish philosophical synthesis, but his main contention is the recognition that thinking is a universal endeavor and therefore it is almost absurd to demand a Jewish origin of ideas. Maimonides expresses this idea in his famous statement in the *Shemona Perakim* the eight introductory chapters to the ethical treatise *Avoth*: hear the truth from whoever expressed it: ושמע האמת ממי שאמרה.⁶

What were the cultural implications and the social consequences of this synthesis? It is impossible to give a general answer. However, if we will limit ourselves to examples from Jewish life in the Iberian Peninsula and Provence we shall see that the possibility of a universal language was connected to a break and alienation inside the Jewish community. Its visible expressions were the severe religious controversies in the 13th century. Of course, it was a struggle between a fundamentalist conception of the Torah and what I would like to call a hermeneutical conception. But beyond this conflict lies a more fundamental fact that must be emphasized. Throughout the ages, the synthesis between Torah and philosophy was a most fruitful influence on Jewish religious life. But still we will have to admit that philosophy was and will be an elitist discipline. Maimonides thought that the solution to the problem lies in the existence of what I would like to call mediated authority, in classical Hebrew *kabbalah*.⁷ Philosophy can and must influence, but the living philosopher, who should become a model for imitation by the masses, mediates this influence.

⁶The relationship between the sacred texts and philosophy is expressed in the hermeneutical principles. A well-known example is Maimonides' explanation that, when speaking of the different heavens, the *Aggadah* is expressing the idea that the ontological status of the soul before man's birth is different than its status after death. This implies a direct confirmation of Maimonides' psychological theories and the denial of the idea of a 'returning' of the soul to a previous state. There are some issues in which we can see that this parallelism is evident. The most important of these is the idea of *Imitatio Dei*, or in biblical garments, the principle of going in the ways of God.

⁷ This term must not be confused with the kabbalistic concept. In philosophical usage it suggests the existence of an authority whose verdict we accept even if we can not follow his argumentation.

Philosophy became an important component of Jewish religious life and thinking, but in a systematic way, marginal.⁸ In a way, most Jewish medieval philosophers thought that philosophy must be an esoteric doctrine. The aims of this esotericism were twofold. Abraham, Maimonides' son, testified that his father had "intended to teach a single wise man who comprehends the subject in its true light, even if he was misunderstood by a thousand fools."⁹ However, this was not Maimonides' position in the *Guide*. He was very careful because he knew that philosophy may be dangerous for unsophisticated people. In this, he continued the Talmudic tradition that the mysteries of Creation, *Maase Beresit*, and the mysteries of the Chariot (Ezekiel I), *Maase Merkava*, must remain secret. On the other hand, as later Maimonidean thinkers feared, a too overt philosophical theology may be dangerous. As I have already mentioned, the 13th century witnessed a series of grave controversies that culminated in the burning of *The Guide of the Perplexed* by the Dominicans in Paris in 1234.

The philosophical ideal generated bitter theological controversies throughout the Middle Ages. But an additional important aspect of the conflict lies in another field. In my opinion, the harshest attack on philosophy was directed against the role it played during the time of the expulsion from Spain. The accusation was made that precisely people who had a philosophical education were less inclined to suffer the ordeal of the expulsion and uphold Jewish principles.

The expulsion of the Jews from Provence and Spain marked the decline of philosophical studies. Their renaissance in modern times may be exemplified in the figure of Moses Mendelsohn and his relationship to modern philosophy. The most important aspect of the new approach that Mendelshon represents is the faith in 'illumination', that is the conviction that what was in the Middle Ages the inheritance of a select minority may now become the patrimony of the masses. Certainly that could have been possible in principle, but it was not realized. In a way, we are now perhaps further from this ideal than in the Jewish Middle Ages.

⁸ The library of the Vatican has an important collection of Hebrew manuscripts. I have studied many of them through the years, and I am still amazed by the fact that many of the manuscripts that contain philosophical texts, originated in Candia, a small Jewish community. Philosophy was important but still marginal.

⁹ See *SRHJ* VIII, p. 70.

Strangely enough, we have the testimony of homilies which could not have been understood by people who had no solid philosophical background. Different processes and currents that characterize most modern developments oppose the modern ideal of philosophical mass education. Even disregarding them, we can understand the problematic situation that is presented before us today. It should be emphasized that the domination by the electronic media and by all that they imply is not conducive for developing a philosophical sensibility. When we discuss the significance of the Bible in our culture today, we have to try to put the question in its general context. The Bible is the book par excellence. Certainly its fate has been the fate of the book in general -- the decline of the written word and the overtaking of its vital functions by the electronic media.

This is certainly true, but it is only a half-truth. We still have to add another aspect that, in my opinion, has not been properly acknowledged. Contemporary academic and scholarly philosophy has acquired such a high degree of sophistication that it can be understood in depth only by a sparse number of scholars and a few select intellectuals. This is, certainly, the tragedy of philosophy in our contemporaneous times. I believe that we can find a dramatic example in the influence of Emmanuel Levinas' work. His technical philosophical works are closed for the majority of intellectual readers. Likewise, they represent intricate riddles for many scholars who have tried to study his marvelous writings. I would like to venture a bold analogy. The fate of philosophy can be compared to that of classical music. On the one hand, we find different trends of popular music that exploit every new avenue which the electronic world offers, and on the other hand, classical music is becoming more and more sophisticated and technical, alienated from our instinctively melodic ears. The penalty for the disdain for melody in modern music is an ever-increasing marginality and the loss of contact with the masses.

THE GARDEN: PARDES

I have just mentioned, as an example, Levinas' philosophical works. We can contrast them with his magisterial Talmudic lessons that have had an extraordinary impact on each of his many readers. This phenomenon opens

another domain that we have to explore, i.e., the realm of the interface between Jewish thought and hermeneutics.

As we shall see, this domain emerges from the need to differentiate between two different aspects of the main subject of our discussion: the Bible as a text and the Bible as a cultural component in our civilization.

In the Jewish tradition, we find the existence of a fourfold method of interpretation. These methods are represented in the word *Pardes* (like Paradise, i.e., a garden), an acronym for the four methods: *Pshat*, *Remez*, *Drash* and *Sod*. Many studies have been dedicated to these methods. I would like to reexamine them, giving them a new reading, relevant to our time.

Pshat represents what we can call the plain interpretation level. It attempts to discover the 'true' meaning of the text. I have purposely used this ambiguous word in order to preserve the ambiguity of the method. I do not have the possibility here of going into detail, into the dilemmas and problems that await us in this field. I personally believe in the possibility of uncovering the hidden authorial intention that underlies a text. Nevertheless, even if we would consider this avenue to be impossible, or even more so, meaningless, we would still have to utilize the method of *Pshat* within the literary and historical context of the text.

This literary and historical method has been transformed in the last hundred and fifty years from the classical manner to the modern method in which the text is now being studied in the academic world. Herein lies one of the foci of our problem. In order to understand it, we have to begin with an acknowledgement of the basic paradox that lies in the foundation of every analysis of our problem.

In a way there is an inverse function and even an inherent contradiction between the development of the modern scientific system of exegesis and the impact of the Bible on culture in general. Scientific study meant the development of the philological-historical approach. This entailed a new understanding of the text, the creation of a specialized elite, and paradoxically, the closing of the doors of the Bible for the non-specialist, that is the general public. In general, we have to conclude that as a consequence of this process, women and men became more and more alienated from the Bible. The most important reason for this alienation lies in the intrinsic factor that the scientific study of the Bible meant, in a strange

way, burying the text under the dust of history or the sands of the very archeological excavations that tried to unearth and exhume the lost past.

As we have seen, the religious Jewish tradition has emphasized the existence of different levels of interpretation. That means to say, again, that we have to complement *Pshat*, scientific hermeneutics, with additional approaches. Certainly, *en miqra yotze mide peshuto*, the Scripture never loses its plain meaning. Nonetheless, *Pshat* must be complemented. Using an incisive pun, one of the Hassidic rabbis commented that with a slight change in the order of the letters, the word *Pshat* פּשׁט becomes converted into the word פּשׁט, *tipesh* means foolishness.

The most commonly known of these approaches is the *Midrash*. The root of this word is דָּרַשׁ, *darosh* means not only our active scrutiny of the text but also our demands from the text. *Midrash* is a totally creative exegesis. It can be studied and described in many ways, but its most important feature is, without doubt, its actuality. This was the idea that inspired homiletics throughout the ages. It is interesting to note that, in Hebrew, preaching was described by the word *drasha*. Undoubtedly, in its original meaning, the root *darosh* used here meant the request of the believer going to the prophet searching for the word of God. In the times of the Second Temple we find a crucial semantic change. The request is transferred from the prophetic voice to the written text. God's word is now being searched for in-between the lines of the text. The text is not only the crystallization of a now silent voice, it becomes the origin of new voices, the origin of the oral law. Writing may become autistic. Oral law always means a dialogue. At least, it needs the ears of the disciple.

In the *Midrash*, the interpreter examines the text as a firm believer in the eternity of its meaning, searching for its' relevant message, here and now. There may be controversies in the identification of this message, but beyond this, there is a basic underlying accepted premise. This may be a message of consolation or admonition, but it must be relevant. This was the secret of the *Midrash*. It meant the possibility of constantly re-reading the text and having its significance come alive.

The third method of exegesis is that of *Remez*. This Hebrew word means hint, veiled allusion, insinuation, and suggestion. According to the traditional conception, the Torah, the text, is replete with allusions. But I would like to turn the concept upside down. In Hassidic thought, it is the world that is full of sparks of Holiness, allusions that guide us to the Divine. Our postmodern world became profane, hollow. The third hermeneutical method opens our eyes to the necessity of building a world of suggestions that can guide us to the Bible. To give a more explicit example, we should try to put sparks of Holiness into the arts.

The fourth method is *Sod*. This is traditionally the mystical approach. According to the Kabbalists, the text can be interpreted with a different semantic key. I cannot go into the exciting endeavor of explaining these ideas. But I would like to characterize the kabbalistic enterprise, as it may be seen from our perspective, as an attempt to find a dimension over our rationalistic functionalistic way of thinking.

Levinas' Talmudic lectures constitute a remarkable example of the importance and significance of hermeneutics. I believe that Levinas' essays have scholarly importance. They are influenced by the insights of my late Socratic teacher, the mysterious Professor Shoshani with whom Levinas studied. However Levinas' studies may be not recognized in their full weight by the academic establishment in leading Talmud departments worldwide. However, the importance of his work lies precisely in the viability of the creation of bridges between the academic and scholarly levels and the non-specialized intellectuals. Hermeneutics has become the maidservant of philosophy and religion.

Now we can return to the understanding of Maimonidean thesis on the mediated character of the philosophical endeavor. Maimonides was convinced of the necessity for a twofold relationship to the truth. Expressed in classical Hebrew terminology, Maimonides spoke of the *nigle*, the overt and manifest doctrine, as opposed to the *nistar*, the esoteric teaching. The bridge between the two lies, of course, in the personality of the religious philosopher. Maimonides expressed this commitment in his *Sefer Hamitzvot*, his *Book of Precepts*. Imitation of God or 'going in His ways', is one of the focal precepts of the *Halakha*. But it is reserved for the *Talmidei Hakhamim*, the sages who can understand by themselves where

are these ways and towards what do they lead. Beyond this precept we find another one, the precept that calls all of us to cleave to the sages. It is a mediated Imitation of God.

Despite the many differences, Hasidism continued this way of thinking. More than thirty years ago, we witnessed a vivid polemic between Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem on the essence of Hasidism. Scholem's disciples attacked Buber's dependence on Hasidic tales, which he considered to be authentic and comprehensive expressions of Hassidic thinking. In opposition to this, Scholem considered the esoteric mystical writings to be the key to the understanding of this thinking. The mere existence of the polemic between these two great minds testifies that there are many trends in the complex phenomena of Hasidism. But it also portrays the duality of Hasidic teachings -- the aristocratic mystical interest on the one hand, and the democratic existential concern for the soul and body of the masses, on the other.

What is lacking in these structures is the consciousness that perhaps two levels are not enough. The complexity of our lives implies that at least three levels are necessary. Between the lonely philosophers and the common people there are empty places for an intellectual elite who should build the bridges between them. This is perhaps the inner meaning of culture in our time. Culture represents, in my opinion, the possibility of using the fruits of science in philosophy even for those who cannot share the specialized language or the academic knowledge. The extraordinary development of the specialized disciplines implies the indispensability of mediation. Culture is mediation.

THE EXPULSION

One of the central problems throughout the ages was the nature of the philosophy with which theologians had to deal. Here Maimonides may also be of inspiration for the modern Jewish theologian. Maimonides was presented with different alternatives. We have already mentioned his opposition to fundamentalist approaches and fideistic thinking. But his relationship to philosophy was critical. It is important to see it in his historical context. We can identify two different clear-cut

settings. In one of them, religious thought is confronted with a consolidated “official” philosophical school, and the cultural enforcing of one way of thinking.

In the other setting, that is, in Saadia’s days in 10th century Bagdad, the situation was totally different. In every problem that he is dealing with, Saadia presents us with a long series of positions against which he is arguing. These series begin almost regularly, with Aristotelian and Platonic positions, but they end with Indian and Chinese philosophical assertions. We can easily see the contrast between the dogmatic and authoritarian position of philosophy in Maimonides’ times and the chaotic and anarchic situation in Saadia’s philosophical milieu. Testimonies from his time document the broad-mindedness of this period. Open discussions on philosophical subjects were attended not only by Muslims, but also by agnostics, Parsees, materialists, atheists, Jews and Christians. The discussions were based not on dogmas but on ‘human reason.’

In order to understand Maimonides’ method, we must be aware of the tacit assumption that underlies the classic peripatetic position, the belief in what I would like to call the mathematical model of philosophy. This is the conviction that there is only one true philosophy and that to speak more about ‘Jewish’ philosophy is absurd. One expression of this concept is the uselessness of recording the name of the author of some truth, as Maimonides expresses it in his commentary to the Mishna.

However, the most important consequence of this approach is the claim to the universality and uniqueness of the philosophical system. The consequence of this position was, of course, the differentiation between the Aristotelian analytical doctrine of philosophy and the other schools whose methods are only dialectical, imitating the truth. Maimonides’ critical review of the history of Jewish philosophy in his letter to Shmuel Ibn Tibbon, his Hebrew translator, is the best example of this model. Even though in Maimonides’ time philosophy was not totally monolithic, he did not accept, in its full import, the mathematical method. Moreover, he fought against it, showing the limits of human knowledge. However, the problems were much more complex. In the midst of Aristotelian philosophy, different schools developed. Aristotelian philosophy was split between Alfarabi’s and Avicennas’ schools, and Averroes’ teachings were already circulating in Maimonides’ days, ambushing the established doctrines.

In this context we can understand the revolutionary position of Gersonides, R. Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344). Despite the differences, all the above-mentioned schools apparently belonged to a common established family. In the apparent unity of a univocal method and a common set of axioms, different theories developed in the most crucial and problematic fields, such as the nature of the intellect, and hence the possibility of human immortality and its meaning. The accepted and revered psychological Aristotelian texts turned into the scene of a long-standing struggle between opposing interpretations. The Stagirite's work was mediated by Hellenistic, Arabic and Jewish commentators. In fact, Theophastrus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and later Ibn Rushd, represented a whole spectrum of different positions, that all spoke in the name of a common Aristotelian heritage. Hence, R. Levi ben Gershon drew the inevitable conclusion that philosophy is indeed no exact science, and different 'parties', and 'streams' do indeed exist. Jewish philosophy thus became a viable and legitimate possibility, and a necessary complement to philosophy. Gersonides' exegetical approach changes as a function of his philosophical method. From a methodological point of view we have reached an impasse, an *epoche*, which the Torah can help us overcome. The study of the text is now a source of inspiration for our philosophical study, and not merely "clay in the hands" of the philosopher-exegete. Despite his detractors' claim that his *Sefer Milchamot Hashem, The Book of the Wars of the Lord*, were in reality wars against the Lord, we can sense a new religious enthusiasm in Gersonides' writings. More than a personal religious relationship, it is a belief in a religious world-order, the expression of which is found in the Torah. The text becomes central to the creation of a world-view that can, with justice, be called religiously Jewish.

Gersonides presented us with a new philosophical program. This is reflected in the literary aspects of the most important works of Jewish philosophy. In my opinion, Maimonides' *Guide* is primarily an exegetical book. Some of its parts are of course exceptions to this characterization, and certainly, his study on Creation is the most important one. In works written in his youth, Maimonides expressed his wish to write two exegetical treatises on the Prophecies and the Talmudic Aggadah. Apparently, these books were not written. In my opinion, they

are included in the *Guide*. The main difference between the plan and its realization lies in the esoteric character of the *Guide*, a method that was seldom used in the Mishnah commentary and in his monumental Halakhic code, the *Mishneh Torah*.

Gersonides was a great commentator. He wrote commentaries on the Bible and supercommentaries on Averroes' Aristotelian writings. His *Wars of the Lord* is different. Gersonides' philosophical master-work should not be considered a *perush*, a commentary, but rather a collection of *hidushim* novellae or *tosaphot* addenda. He is primarily and essentially interested in the problematic issues, where the Aristotelian method cannot give an unequivocal answer.

Maimonides believed that there are limits to human reason, "a boundry is undoubtedly set to the human mind which it cannot pass." However, our present chaotic situation is closer to Saadia's and Gersonides' position than to Maimonides'. Moreover, it presents us with a totally new radical situation. In a certain way, when comparing ourselves with the medieval Aristotelians, we can say that we are now in a totally different and even the opposite situation. Medieval Aristotelians believed that the teachings of philosophy are univocal, and that there is only one truth. Postmodern thinking does not believe in the existence of even one truth. However, I would not like to seek refuge in a fideistic position. The fideist denies the possibility of any contribution by the autonomous human mind. I would still like to believe, like Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Paquda, that even though philosophy is a human creation it is a *mitzvah*, a central duty of the heart.

Our situation may be described using Maimonides' exegesis of the Paradise Story, as I understand it. Without specifying in detail his interpretation, we can say that Maimonides distinguishes between the two trees of Paradise. The tree of *daat* represents knowledge that is corrupted by good and evil, by our interests and tendencies, a knowledge that is and will be vitiated by subjectivism.

The tree of life, *etz hahaim*, also represents knowledge, but this is true knowledge, that cannot be corrupted or adulterated, the knowledge that opens for us the doors of eternal and true life. Maimonides teaches us that even if partially, science and philosophy belong to the tree of life. In any case, his teachings imply, in my opinion, the ideal -- what belongs now to the tree of knowledge may be

transformed to part of the tree of life. This ideal is lost in postmodern thinking. There is no more tree of life. If indeed this is true, we may have definitely lost Paradise.

I don't think that we have lost the battle. In my opinion, the future of the Universities depends on the outcome of this battle. But our dialogue with philosophy is becoming problematic. This brings us, in my opinion, to a redefinition of our endeavor. Faith means the pursuit of subjective certainty in a world of objective uncertainty. Philosophy has perhaps lost the possibility to have roots. We will not be able to build our knowledge on solid foundations. The possibility of a foundation is perhaps forever lost. But philosophy can still have wings. It must be considered to be the farthest adventure of human beings. Its duty is to help us to build our world conception. This is in my opinion the new and true meaning of Pascal's wager. Religious belief is the ultimate bet. We are gambling in the three dimensions of human existence that are represented by the three Hebrew key words: *emuna*, *mitzvah* and *tikvah*. *Emunah* is faith, the belief that there is a transcendent realm, and perhaps that there are even fingerprints of it in our world. *Mitzvah* means faith in the distinction between good and evil, which transcends interests and relativism. *Tikvah* means hope, in Redemption and in Utopias.

Perhaps the situation has totally changed. During the past generations we looked to philosophy as the unshakable construction where we could possibly find support for faith. From the perspective of Jewish thinking, we can say that the situation is now reversed. Religion must become the foundation for philosophy. Not in a dogmatic way, but on the contrary, as a study of the implications of the ultimate human bets. Philosophy will then become hypothetical in character. But it will be alive again. It has lost its roots, but has gained wings.

This program also has important repercussions in its relationship to the nature of Jewish philosophy in particular and religious philosophy in general. Jewish philosophy is, in essence, a dialogue between the pride and arrogance of autonomous human thinking and the humility of accepting God's revelation. Our philosophical situation implies that we should accept as normative the historical fact, according to which Jewish Philosophy is not a rigorous, univocal body of normative beliefs but rather a flexible set of alternatives in which everyone can find his or her own expression. Many times religious students are faced with two

options, both of which are, even nowadays, widespread. One option is the study of a normative religious world-view, the indoctrination into a binding complete corpus of beliefs. The other choice is the more or less sophisticated mechanical application of the methods of classical historical methods in philosophy, and, as we have seen, in biblical exegesis. The truth lies, in my opinion, in a third way – a presentation of the alternative possible synthesis of human thinking and Revelation. Here, the conflictive nature of philosophical endeavor becomes critical. Philosophical thought is a far cry from mathematics; *machloket*, conflict and debate are essential and not accidental to it, and the systems are our best bet as to what constitutes reality.

This redefinition is, in my opinion, one of the foci of the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Braslav (1772-1811), a singular Hasidic teacher who is little-known in the outside world despite his increasing popularity in Jewish religious circles. In a series of Kafka-like tales that he told his followers in the first years of the 19th century, he presents us with the predicament of our age. I would like to summarize his teachings by saying that our life is a struggle against the three masks of evil: temptation, doubt and desperation. Classical religious life is seen as a battle against temptation. But the real war begins when the doubt enters into our life. There is no objective possibility of resolving the dilemmas of doubt. Solution lies in an act of faith. But after doubt, there is still a third war. Our battle against despair is guided by hope.

Rabbi Nachman presents us with a post-Maimonidean conception of the world. He taught us that whenever we are told a story, or are presented with a doctrine, somewhere in another side of the world the anti-story is being told. We will be forever unable to discern the true story from the false. But, I think, we will still be judged if we do not distinguish between them. Philosophy can help us in the writing of these texts. It will be, perhaps, equally servile to all the storytellers. Now we know that the final decision is not in its hands, but in the hands of Faith.

But perhaps we will someday realize that this is not the whole story. Perhaps we can compliment Rabbi Nachman's view with Rabbi A. Y. Kook's (1865-1935) conception. One of the most important pillars of Rabbi Kook's thought is the idea that there is no philosophy that does not contain some truth. Every doctrine is correct in the central point of its position, but it errs when it proclaims

that it is the whole truth. Using kabbalistic symbolism, we can see the whole history of Jewish Philosophy as similar to the process of gathering and redeeming the sparks dispersed all over the world. The sparks are sparks of truth. The development of philosophy is nothing less than the development of all possibilities, and the integration of all possibilities is the truth. Rabbi Kook tells us, following the kabbalistic conception, that humanity is embodied in the primordial Adam. This image, in its philosophical implications, means the organic conception of truth that becomes therefore identical with humanity in its fullness. This is the sense of the kabbalistic *Sefira* of *Malchut* that comprehends the total spectrum of ideas. But for us this is, of course, messianic utopia. We have still to live in the midst of doubt. The tower of philosophy that we are building is a tower of Babel whose foundations lie on the swamp of our epistemological finitude.