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CONTINUING THE TRAJECTORY: RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK ON KING DAVID'S REQUEST

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In his recent essay in *The Lehrhaus*, "Trajectories of Tradition: Skin Lesions and Tent Impurities,"[1] Professor AJ Berkovitz examines the exegetical career in early modern and modern times of a *midrash* found in *Midrash Tehillim*, an early medieval anthology of rabbinic Psalm commentary.[2] In this *midrash*, King David asks God to let those who read and recite Psalms "receive reward as if [they studied the topics of] skin lesions and tent impurities." Berkovitz, taking note of the differing and conflicting interpretation of this *midrash* offered by a variety of early modern and modern rabbis, argues that this rabbinic debate "lay[s] bare the mechanics that push tradition to grow and change." Or, as he states more elaborately and eloquently in his essay's conclusion, what these interpretations really provide is

> a microcosm of the way that tradition works—how a single, seemingly simple line of text can stimulate conversation, stir controversy, be turned over and over, and be analogized and explained in 49 ways. For ultimately, the life of tradition does not merely rest in single moments of exalted interpretation, but rather in its ability to retain its staying power while engendering further creativity and fostering change.

While Berkovitz canvasses a wide spectrum of rabbinic scholars who commented on this *midrash*,

[1] AJ Berkovitz, "Trajectories of Tradition: Skin Lesions and Tent Impurities," *The Lehrhaus* (May 10, 2023), https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/trajectories-of-tradition-king-david-on-skin-lesions-and-tent-impurities/.

[2] *Midrash Tehillim* 1:5.

and covers an equally wide number of issues the *midrash* raises, at the heart of his examination is a debate between two towering rabbinic figures—the great German rabbi and mystic, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (ca. 1555-1630), better known as Shelah, an acronym based on Horowitz's encyclopedic compilation of ritual, ethics, and mysticism called the *Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* (Two Tablets of the Covenant) and the great Lithuanian talmudist and kabbalist, Reb Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821), the leading student of the Gaon of Vilna and founder of the Volozhin Yeshivah—regarding the question the *midrash* leaves unanswered: Did God grant David's plea?

Shelah, Berkovitz notes, as part of his "champion[ship of] popular piety as a valid and validating expression of religious life," in a comment on *Yoma*,

> brings David's demand back into the active consciousness of Jewish discourse. The line is rarely quoted before his time, and it proliferates after. And it serves a particular purpose. It raises the religious status of reciting chapters and verses from the Psalms by equating pious psalmody with (and, in some sense, claiming that it combines the best of) other enduring and indisputable Jewish values: prayer and Torah study. In the words of Shelah, David assures that "one who chants Psalms—it is as if he prayed, and it is also as if he studied Torah."[3]

On the other hand, Berkovitz indicates, Reb Hayyim of Volozhin,

[3] Shelah, *Asseret Ha-Dibberot, Yoma, Ner Mitzvah,* 1:53. Actually, Berkovitz is not quite exact when he states that "in the words of Shelah, David assures that one who chants Psalms—it is as if he prayed, and it is also as if he studied Torah." What Shelah writes is that "one who says Psalms, it is as if he prays, and it is also as if he occupies himself with Torah, for King David of blessed memory already requested that those who recite Psalms receive a reward as if they occupy themselves with the depths of the Torah, [namely,] skin lesions and tent impurities." Thus, King David only assures the people that "one who says Psalms—it is as if he occupies himself with Torah." The assurance that "one who says Psalms—it is as if he prays" is one that Shelah makes on his own authority, evidently being an obvious point not requiring any special request on King David's part. Incidentally, Shelah's paraphrase of the *midrash* as "receive a reward as if they occupy themselves with the depths of the Torah ["*omek ha-Torah*"], [namely,] skin lesions and tent impurities," serves to answer a question that, as Berkovitz notes, was raised by such later giants as Hida and Rabbi Zadok of Lublin, namely, why did King David, in making his request that those who recite Psalms "receive a reward as if [they studied the topics of] skin lesions and tent impurities," specifically single out "skin lesions and tent impurities?" As opposed to the suggestions of Hida and Rabbi Zadok, which rather fancifully seek to find some symbolic significance possessed by the topics of skin lesions and tent impurities that would explain why King David had singled out those topics, Shelah's formulation, "as if they occupy themselves with the depths of the Torah ["*omek ha-Torah*"]," seems to suggest that the topics of skin lesions and tent impurities were singled out precisely on account of their difficult and challenging nature. Thus, what King David was requesting was that those who recite Psalms, even though such recitation does not require any great intellectual effort, should receive a reward as if they occupied themselves with the most difficult and demanding topics of Talmud study. Note also that Reb Hayyim of Volozhin refers, as we shall see below, to "anyone who studies the laws of Talmud in depth and with toil."

> an ardent advocate for Torah study as Judaism's apex value…in his magnum opus, *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*…reshapes the idea of *Torah Lishmah* (engaging with the Torah for its own sake) into the pursuit of talmudic intellectualism that still reigns supreme in many Jewish circles. Yet prior to his time, as Reb Hayyim admits, "Most of the world until now explained its meaning as attachment [to the divine (*devekut*)]." And they cited David's dictum as proof. Reb Hayyim, in turn, rebuts. He acknowledges that those who recite Psalms every day attach themselves to God. But he also argues that "anyone who studies the laws of Talmud in depth and with toil, it is a thing greater and more loved before God than saying Psalms." Attachment, the aim of Psalm piety, does not equal the deep study of Torah—the true essence of *Torah Lishmah*. To buttress this idea, Reb Hayyim acknowledges David's words, but only to countermand them: "Who knows if God agreed to this [i.e., to David's request], since we do not find in their words, of blessed memory, what answer God answered him for his request." In the eyes of Reb Hayyim, the psalmist failed in his petition to equate Psalm piety with Torah study.

Despite Berkovitz's reference to Reb Hayyim of Volozhin's "pursuit of talmudic intellectualism *that still reigns supreme* in many Jewish circles" [emphasis added], he does not refer to any contemporary readings of this *midrash* that support that of Reb Hayyim. Instead, he refers to a late nineteenth century hasidic Psalm commentary by R. Mordecai Rothstein that supports Shelah's reading and critiques Reb Hayyim for shortchanging David. Contrary to Reb Hayyim's assumption that God turned down David's request, R. Rothstein affirms that God obviously heeded the prayers of His pious psalmist.[4] Berkovitz then sets this issue to the side and turns to other aspects of this *midrash* dealt with by commentators.

Yet the trajectory Berkovitz outlines continues in our own day. Surprisingly, Berkovitz passes over what is by far the best known recent discussion of this *midrash*, a discussion that as part of its powerful espousal of Talmudic intellectualism unequivocally affirms Reb Hayyim's reading. I refer, of course, to the discussion of this *midrash* found in R. Joseph Soloveitchik's classic essay, *Halakhic Man.*[5] Moreover, his discussion in *Halakhic Man* turns out

[4] Mordecai Rothstein, *Sefer Tehillim: Sha'arei Parnassah Tovah*, 261a.

[5] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man,* trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983). A fortieth anniversary edition of *Halakhic Man*, with a new preface, introduction, annotations, and a glossary by the translator, to be published by the Jewish Publication Society, will be appearing in September 2023.

not to be R. Soloveitchik's final word on this *midrash*.

II

In *Halakhic Man* (section XIV, part one), R. Soloveitchik develops the theme that "[t]he approach to God is… made possible by the Halakhah,"[6] by which he means not so much halakhic practice as halakhic cognition. As he states:

> Primarily, halakhic man cognizes God via His Torah, via the truth of halakhic cognition. There is truth in the Halakhah, there is a halakhic epistemology, there is a halakhic thinking [that] "the measure thereof is broader than the earth" (Job 11:9). There is a Torah wisdom "that is broader than the sea" (ibid.). And all of these are rooted in the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, the revealer of the Law. This approach is…a theoretical-normative one… To be sure, we can also find in the Halakhah a practical approach to God, an approach to God through the performance of the commandments… But this approach only follows in the wake of the first approach. The primary approach to God is the ideal-normative-theoretical relationship that prevails between God and halakhic man.[7]

R. Soloveitchik continues to develop this idea until he arrives at the issue of the relative values of the study of *halakhah* and the recitation of Psalms and hymns:

> Halakhic man…is very sparing in his recitation of the piyyutim…because he serves his Maker with pure halakhic thought, precise cognition, and clear logic. He does not waste his time reciting songs and hymns. The cognition of the Torah—this is the holiest and most exalted type of service. He serves the Creator by uncovering the truth in the Halakhah, by solving difficulties and resolving problems.[8]

At this point, R. Soloveitchik illustrates the superiority of the study of *halakhah* over the recitation of Psalms and hymns through relating some personal incidents:

> Once my father entered the synagogue on Rosh Ha-Shanah, late in the afternoon, after the regular prayers were over, and found me reciting Psalms with the

6 *Ibid.*, 85.

7 *Ibid.*, 85-86.

8 *Ibid.*, 87.

> congregation. He took away my Psalm book and handed me a copy of the tractate Rosh Ha-Shanah. "If you wish to serve the Creator at this moment, better [to] study the laws pertaining to the festival." While the congregation would recite piyyutim on the Days of Awe, [my grandfather] R. Hayyim [Soloveitchik] would study Torah. On Rosh Ha-Shanah he would study the laws of *shofar*, on the Day of Atonement the laws pertaining to the sacrificial order of the day.[9]

R. Soloveitchik concludes his own discussion with the ringing declaration:

> God Himself sits and studies the Torah and "God only has in His world the four cubits of the Halakhah" [Berakhot 8a]. The study of the Torah is not a means to another end, but is the end point of all desires. It is the most fundamental principle of all.[10]

This declaration leads directly, without any introductory material, into a lengthy quote from Reb Hayyim's *Ruah Hayyim,* his Commentary on *Avot*, where one finds his fullest use of the *midrash* about King David's request and God's alleged rejection (according to Reb Hayyim) of that request, which Reb Hayyim uses to support his view that *Torah lishmah* does not mean Torah for the sake of cleaving to God, but rather Torah for the sake of Torah, that is, "to comprehend, through the Torah, the commandments and laws, and to know each and every matter clearly, both its general principles and its particulars."[11] While Berkovitz quotes sparingly from Reb Hayyim's discussion, as found in his famous systematic work, *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*, paraphrasing and condensing his argument, R. Soloveitchik presents a lengthy extract from Reb Hayyim's discussion that extends for more than a page in length.[12] The extract ends with Reb Hayyim's citing the rabbinic statement that "God only has in His world the four cubits of the Halakhah," the very statement R. Soloveitchik cited in his declaration introducing this lengthy extract from *Ruah Hayyim*. Lest there be any doubt as to R. Soloveitchik's complete identification with Reb Hayyim's view, R. Soloveitchik ends this section with this brief but unequivocal comment:

> The above is the declaration of R. Hayyim Volozhin, the outstanding student of the Gaon of Vilna and the founder of the Yeshivah of Volozhin; and it would appear to me that it needs no comment.[13]

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9 *Ibid.*, 87.

10 *Ibid.*, 87.

11 *Ruah Hayyim*, 6:1, quoted in *Halakhic Man*, 88.

12 *Halakhic Ma*n, 87-89.

13 *Ibid.,* 89.

In a word, this lengthy extract from *Ruah Hayyim*, containing Reb Hayyim's reading of the *midrash* where King David asked God to let those who read and recite Psalms "receive reward as if [they studied the topics of] skin lesions and tent impurities," in which God, according to Reb Hayyim's understanding, rejected his request, serves as the capstone of R. Soloveitchik's powerful exposition of talmudic intellectualism in *Halakhic Man*.

III

The above is well known and, indeed, had R. Soloveitchik followed his own advice and not commented further on this passage from *Ruah Hayyim* and more generally on the *midrash* about David's request, his use of *Ruah Hayyim* as the capstone of his exposition of talmudic intellectualism in *Halakhic Man* would have provided an interesting appendix to Berkovitz's essay, but perhaps would not have merited an essay of its own. But, as already alluded to, R. Soloveitchik does return to this *midrash* in a later essay, his halakhic discourse "*Birkhot Ha-Torah*" in *Shi'urim Le-Zekher Abba Mari, Z"L*, Vol. 2;[14] and while he refers there briefly to Reb Hayyim's discussion in *Ruah Hayyim*—and only in a footnote at that!—his main analysis of the *midrash* in this discourse differs sharply from that of Reb Hayyim, and comes closer to that of Shelah.

In this discourse, we see R. Soloveitchik's distinctive blend of rigorous "Brisker" halakhic analysis and broad hashkafic reflection characteristic of many of the essays in *Shiurim Le-Zekher Abba Mari*. R. Soloveitchik begins the discourse in classical fashion by noting an apparent difficulty in a passage from *Mishneh Torah*—a "*shverer* Rambam"—in this case an instance where Rambam appears to repeat himself. Rambam, in *Hilkhot Tefillah* 7:10-11, in connection with the morning blessings, states: "A person who rises in the morning to read the Torah…, whether he reads the Written Torah or the Oral Torah, must first wash his hands and recite three blessings and then read." After listing the three blessings, Rambam concludes, "Every day a person is obligated to recite these three blessings and afterwards read some words of Torah."

As R. Soloveitchik notes, Rambam appears to repeat himself. Did he not state at the beginning of the *halakhah* that a person who rises in the morning to study Torah must first recite three blessings? Why then make what seems to be the same point at the end that "Every day a person is obligated to recite these three blessings and afterwards read some words of Torah?"[15]

R. Soloveitchik answers that these two statements represent two separate and fundamentally different *halakhot*:

> The first rule, that it is forbidden to study Torah without a blessing, corresponds in its nature and status to that same prohibition hanging over benefitting from the world

[14] "*Birkhot Ha-Torah*," *Shi'urim Le-Zekher Abba Mari, Z"L* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2002), 2:7-22.

[15] "*Birkhot Ha-Torah*," 7.

> without a blessing or the performance of commandments without blessings… The second rule, "Every day a person is obligated to recite these three blessings" is rooted in a different nature altogether, in the commandment of Torah study. In its context, there is special fulfillment and particular obligation devolving on each and every person to read the written Torah or oral Torah and to bless the revered and awesome Name of the Lord Who gave us His Torah… This is a unified fulfillment: Torah study together with its blessings.[16]

Thus, this second *halakhah* relates to "the nature…of the commandment of Torah study," and is not a law concerning the nature of blessings and when they are required. This second *halakhah*, requiring the joining together of Torah study and praise of God, a joining which applies both on a communal and individual level, is further seen by R. Soloveitchik as part of a broader union of Torah and *tefillah*. In support of this broader union, he points to the talmudic ruling (*Berakhot* 31a) that "we do not stand up to pray…except after a conclusive halakhic decision," and the similar ruling in the Palestinian Talmud (*Berakhot* Chapter 5, Halakhah 1) that "a person should not stand up and pray…except after words of Torah."[17]

The rationale for the unity of Torah and *tefillah* can be found, in R. Soloveitchik's view,[18] in Rambam's *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 5, where he lists prayer as a biblical commandment based on the verses "And you shall serve the Lord your God" (Exod. 23:25) and "to serve Him with all your heart" (Deut. 11:13). Rambam there explains that, though the commandment to serve God is a general commandment, and such commandments, as he points out in *Shoresh* 4, are not included in the list of the 613 commandments, this commandment is included inasmuch as it entails the specific duty of prayer, in support of which he cites the Sifre: "'And to serve Him' (Deut. 11:13): This refers to prayer."[19] What is significant for our purposes, as R. Soloveitchik emphasizes here and elsewhere,[20] is that Rambam goes on to cite the continuation of the Sifre. "'And to serve Him' (Deut. 11:13): This refers to study." Rambam further cites a late halakhic *midrash* which states "'And [sic] Him shall you serve' (Deut. 10:20).[21] Serve Him through [the study of] His Torah; and serve him through His sanctuary," of which the latter phrase Rambam understands to mean "to go there and pray." From this, R. Soloveitchik goes on to say, "a wonderful

16 *Ibid.*, 7-8.

17 *Ibid.*, 12-13.

18 *Ibid.*, 13-14.

19 *Ibid.*

20 See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), 70.

21 *Birkhot Ha-Torah*," 13.

thing is explicit in the words of our Master [Rambam], that service in the heart refers to two things, to prayer and to Torah. Through the study of the Torah, a person fulfills service in the heart as he does through prayer."[22] (It should be noted, however, that in this passage from *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, unlike *Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:1, Rambam does not explicitly refer to prayer as service of the heart.) It follows, R. Soloveitchik concludes, returning to his point of departure, "that Torah and prayer blend to form a single unit and the fulfillment of a unified commandment of service in the heart."[23]

In this discourse, R. Soloveitchik offers a number of suggestive points of resemblance between prayer and Torah study, explaining in which ways they constitute service of the heart. It appears to me, however, that we can gain a deeper and more precise understanding regarding the sense in which R. Soloveitchik considers prayer to be service of the heart from an observation in another halakhic discourse, "*Semikhat Ge'ulah Le-Tefillah*."[24] And even though R. Soloveitchik does not discuss Torah study there, his observation will bring to light perhaps the deepest resemblance between prayer and Torah study and (what appears to me to be) the key way in which both constitute service of the heart. In that discourse, R. Soloveitchik makes the following penetrating and radical point:

> Fundamentally, with regard to the relationship between the commandment and that which gives rise to the obligation to perform it, prayer differs from all commandments of the Torah that a person is obligated to perform. With reference to all other commandments, to begin with, the obligation of performance devolves on the individual, and this obligation transforms the person's act into a mitzvah-performance… For example, with reference to grace after meals, the individual is obligated to recite blessings after he has eaten, and this obligation gives rise to the halakhic entity of grace after meals… However, with reference to prayer, which is an entity of *rahamim* [an appeal for (divine) mercy]...the order is reversed. The blessings of prayer do not obtain the rank of being halakhic entities of blessing in every sense of the term through obligation of the individual, but on their own. There exists a halakhic entity of *tefillah* arranged in its blessings, that does not depend at all on an individual's obligations. It derives from [prayer] being intrinsically an appeal for [divine] mercy… To the contrary, the individual's obligation

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, 14.

24 "*Semikhat Ge'ulah Le-Tefillah*," *Shiurim Le-Zekher Abba Mari, Z"L*, 2:42-66.

> [to pray] derives from the fact that it exists as a halakhic entity of *tefillah* [prior to the obligation].[25]

R. Soloveitchik brings many proofs for this contention, which I cannot discuss here. The point I wish to make in this context is that although R. Soloveitchik does not make this point explicitly, this idea that *tefillah* is an entity of *rahamim*, an appeal for [divine] mercy, independent of and prior to a person's obligation to pray, and its consequence that one does not pray "in order to discharge one's obligation,"[26] constitutes, for R. Soloveitchik, the deepest meaning of prayer as service of the heart.[27]

Moreover, in light of this idea, the resemblance between Torah study and prayer is almost obvious. Just as the existence of the halakhic entity of *tefillah* "does not depend at all on an individual's obligation" to pray, but "derives from [prayer] being intrinsically an appeal for [divine] mercy," so too the existence of the halakhic entity of Torah does not depend on a person's obligation to study, but derives from the Torah being intrinsically *devar Hashem*, the word of God. And just as 'an individual's obligation [to pray] derives from the fact that it exists as a halakhic entity of *tefillah* [prior to the obligation]," so too a person's obligation to study derives from the fact that a halakhic entity of Torah exists [prior to that obligation]."[28]

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[25] "*Semikhat Ge'ulah Le-Tefillah*," 47. I discuss this view of R. Soloveitchik at greater length in my review essay of his book *Worship of the Heart*. See Lawrence J. Kaplan, "Review Essay: Worship of the Heart," *Hakirah* 5 (Fall 2007), 89-93. For a strikingly similar analysis of the unique nature of prayer, see R. Yitzhak Hutner, Essay #5, *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh ha-Shanah* (New York: Gur Aryeh, 1986), 58-59.

[26] "*Semikhat Ge'ulah Le-Tefillah*," 46.

[27] The striking differences between Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz's views on prayer and those of R. Soloveitchik, as expressed here, leap to mind. For Leibowitz, contrary to R. Soloveitchik, prayer is exactly like all other commandments, and consequently it is only the obligation to pray devolving on the individual that transforms the act of prayer into a *mitzvah*-performance. Similarly, again contrary to R. Soloveitchik, for Leibowitz, one prays precisely in order to discharge one's obligation. See Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "On Prayer," *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, edited by Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University, 1992), 31.

[28] This idea, I believe, underlies the famous view expressed both in *Minhat Hinukh*, commandment 430, s.v. "*U-mevu'ar Sham be-Shulhan Arukh,*; and *Hiddushei Maran Griz Ha-Levi al Ha-Rambam*: *Hilkhot Berakhot* 11:16, s.v. "Ve-hinneh," that the blessings over the Torah are *birkhot ha-shevah* (blessings of praise) and not *birkhot ha-mitzvah*. Note, as well, that Professor Abraham Feintuch in his study, *Ve-Zot Li-Yehudah: Iyyunim al Hilkhot Berakhot le-ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem:Ma'aliyyot, 2003),159-163, discusses the blessings over the Torah in the chapter devoted to *birkhot ha-shevah* and not in the one devoted to *birkhot ha-mitzvah*. Of particular relevance is the well-known explanation offered by Gri"z (R. Yitzhak Zev Soloveitchik) in the immediately above-mentioned discussion in the name of his father (R. Hayyim Soloveitchik) as to why women recite the blessing over the study of the Torah: "The blessing over the study of the Torah is not a blessing over the fulfillment of the commandment of study of the Torah, but is a separate law that Torah requires a blessing… And women are exempt only from the commandment to study the Torah, but this does not mean that they have no connection with the act of studying the Torah. Therefore, their study is considered an act of study of the Torah, and it is entirely fitting that they recite the blessing over its study." This explanation of Gri"z strikingly calls to mind Professor Leibowitz's understanding of the significance of Torah study, if formulated slightly differently, and, as in this insight of Gri"z, expressed in connection with women. With respect to Torah study, unlike prayer, he acknowledges that its importance extends beyond its existence as a positive

What this entails is that, from a purely halakhic point of view, the dialogical relationship between God and man, as expressed in God's word to man (Torah) and man's word to God (*tefillah*), though it gives rise to the obligations to pray and study, both precedes and is independent of those obligations. And this, I would contend, is the deepest meaning of R. Soloveitchik's contention in *Birkhot Ha-Torah*, that both prayer and study are service of the heart!

It is in light of his contention in his discourse on *Birkhot Ha-Torah* about the fundamental unity of Torah and *tefillah*, deriving from their both being service of the heart, that R. Soloveitchik, immediately afterwards in the discourse, argues that we can understand "the request of King David that the recitation of the songs and praises found in the Book of Psalms be accounted as significant as the study [of the topics of] skin lesions and tent impurities."[29] At first glance, R. Soloveitchik notes, this request of King David is difficult to understand. He asks:

> Why didn't [King David] request that the merit of reciting the songs of Psalms be accounted as significant as some other commandment—such as charity, performing deeds of loving-kindness, offering sacrifices, putting on tefillin, wrapping one's self in *tzitzit*, or similar commandments? Why did [David] desire that an arrangement like this be equal specifically to occupying oneself with Torah?[30]

R. Soloveitchik replies:

> The question does not require great exertion. This equation was based on the foundation of service in the heart which is fulfilled both in Torah study and in the recitation of praise and thanksgiving, and David requested that the value of service in the heart through the recitation of

commandment. Consider the following, in "The Status of Women: Halakhah and Meta-Halakhah" (http://www.leibowitz.co.il/leibarticles.asp?id=86#_ednref2):

> For besides its significance as the performance of a Mitzvah, Talmud Torah enables the Jewish person to share the Jewish cultural heritage and its spiritual content. One might almost say that it makes the student party to the presence of the Shekhinah in Israel. Keeping women away from Talmud Torah is not to exempt them from a duty (as is the case with some other Mitzvoth) but is rather to deprive them of a basic Jewish right.

In sum, while with reference to the religious significance of *tefillah*, Leibowitz and the Soloveitchik family are at opposite poles, with reference to the religious significance of Torah study they espouse the same basic view. I think it is unfortunate that Leibowitz did not extend his insight regarding Torah study to *tefillah* and abandon his positivist view of prayer, a move called for both on halakhic and phenomenological grounds.

[29] *Birkhot Ha-Torah*, 15.

[30] *Ibid.*

> the songs of Psalms be equal to Torah study.[31]

In his explanation of the *midrash* in this discourse, then, R. Soloveitchik moves away from the extreme intellectualism of *Halakhic Man*, his view there being that Torah study, inasmuch as it is not "a means to another end, but is the end point of all desires…the most fundamental principle of all,"[32] possesses unique value, a view which led him to follow Reb Hayyim of Volozhin in emphasizing that, given this unique value of Torah study, God rejected David's request that the recitation of Psalms be accounted as equal to such study. To the contrary, in this discourse he emphasizes *the fundamental commonality of Torah study and prayer*, inasmuch as both are forms of service of the heart, thereby coming closer to the view of Shelah who underlines the appropriateness and justice of David's request.

To be sure, in a footnote to this discourse, R. Soloveitchik, as already indicated, refers briefly to Reb Hayyim's discussion of this *midrash* in *Ruah Hayyim* and Reb Hayyim's conclusion that God rejected David's request, but it is not at all clear from the note whether or not R. Soloveitchik agrees here with that conclusion.[33] R. Menachem Genack, a leading student of R. Soloveitchik, in his essay, *Inyenei Birkhot Ha-Torah* in *Shi'urei HaRav—Tefillah and Keriat Shema*, a very learned presentation and discussion of R. Soloveitchik's discourse *Birkhot Ha-Torah* in *Shi'urim Le-Zekher Abba Mari*, as well as other of his presentations on the subject of *birkhot ha-Torah*, suggests that, though both Torah study and prayer are forms of service of the heart, nevertheless "the primary form of service of the heart and knowledge of God takes place through Torah study more than prayer."[34] R. Soloveitchik himself, further on in his discourse, suggests that Torah study is superior to prayer, for while the commandment of prayer exhausts itself in being service of the heart, Torah study, in addition to being service of the heart, is also a fulfillment of the independent commandment of study.[35]

Still, whatever residual superiority Torah study may possess over prayer in R. Soloveitchik's view, the main thrust of his discussion in the text of the discourse of *birkhot ha-Torah* is to stress, as noted above, the common nature of Torah study and prayer as service of the heart. Similarly, though R. Soloveitchik may hedge in the footnote of the discourse as to whether or not he agrees with Reb Hayyim of Volozhin that God rejected David's request, again the main thrust of his discussion in the text of the discourse is to explain and justify the

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31 *Ibid.*

32 *Halakhic Man*, 87.

33 "*Birkhot Ha-Torah*," 15, n.7.

34 "*Inyenei Birkhot Ha-Torah*," *Shi'urei HaRav—Tefillah and Keriat Shema*, edited by Menachem Genack (New York: OU Press, 2010), 28. Note how R. Genack, by referring to "knowledge of God" in addition to "service of the heart," introduces into the "*Birkhot ha-Torah*" discourse a note of intellectualism typical of *Halakhic Man*, thereby blurring the lines between the two works.

35 "*Birkhot Ha-Torah*," 15.

propriety of that request, precisely in light of the similarity between Torah study and prayer arising out their shared nature as service of the heart.

The move, then, from R. Soloveitchik's explanation of the *midrash* about King David's request in *Halakhic Man* to his explanation in his halakhic discourse, *Birkhot Ha-Torah*, illustrates his general move away from the intellectualism of *Halakhic Man* to his more existentialist mode of analysis, with its emphasis on in-depth religious experience and the personal dialogue between man and God found in such essays as "The Lonely Man of Faith," "Majesty and Humility," "Catharsis," and "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah."[36] Note the extended and carefully worked out parallels between prayer and *talmud Torah* in "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," if somewhat different from the ones in *Birkhot Ha-Torah*. But since in this essay R. Soloveitchik does not cite the *midrash* about King David's request, we will have to leave an analysis of it to the side. But I trust my essay has served to strengthen a key theme emerging from Professor Berkovitz's essay, namely, the inextricable link between the history of midrashic interpretation, its twists and turns, and the twists and turns of the history of Jewish thought.[37]

Endless Exploration: Judaism's Only "Principle of Faith"

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The question of dogma and belief has occupied a central place in Jewish thought, particularly since Rambam's presentation of his Thirteen Principles.[1] The various challenges and defenses that arose in response to these Principles not only ushered in a new discipline within Jewish philosophy but also radically changed the way that Jews experience their religious commitment. The rich history here is generally well-known, and today we live with its aftermath, including the ubiquity of the Thirteen Principles in Jewish education and liturgy. What is less commonly appreciated is the unique

[36] See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), 25; Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), 38; Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), 70.

[37] I would like to thank Chesky Kopel for his very careful and precise reading of my essay and his many helpful suggestions, both large and small, which contributed significantly to its improvement.

[1] Rambam (1138-1204) first presented his Thirteen Principles of Faith in his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, in his introduction to *Perek Heilek*. These principles also seem to be reflected in his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, particularly in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* and *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.

I would like to thank Lehrhaus editor, R. David Fried, for greatly improving this essay through his valuable suggestions, and R. Dr. Sam Lebens for the many illuminating conversations that helped me to refine and clarify these ideas.

compromise position, championed by a diverse and venerable collection of rabbis, that took Rambam's idea of legislated belief in a new direction. In their view, it is not belief but inquiry and investigation that lay the foundation for our commitment to Judaism. In adopting this view, we will see that they not only untangled a problematic knot in Rambam's philosophy but also aligned the study of his *ikkarim* (fundamental principles of faith) with a broader ideal of intellectual exploration that was central to the thought of important Torah authorities.

The Challenge

One of the earliest and most powerful challenges to Rambam's project came from R. Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410).[2] Striking at the root, Crescas claimed that the entire notion of commanded belief was incoherent. Unlike our actions, our beliefs are not something we experience as being chosen. We do not *choose* to believe that cats exist or that two plus two equals four. Beliefs like these are simply the natural consequences of the facts and experiences we have acquired. It is therefore inconceivable that the Torah would legislate a commandment regarding belief, a commandment we cannot choose to obey or disobey.

Over the centuries, Crescas has found himself in good company. R. David ibn Zimra (1479-1573), Radbaz, similarly concluded that we are "coerced" with respect to our beliefs. Radbaz considers this principle to have very practical ramifications, even exempting a preacher from punishment after he publicly shared theologically problematic views: "And the reason is clear – since his heresy is only because he thinks that what arose in his investigation is true, he is therefore coerced and exempt."[3] In the nineteenth century, Shmuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), Shadal, concisely expressed the same position: "Moses did not dictate articles of faith, because God does not command belief, that is, He does not command that which cannot be commanded."[4]

Perhaps the most surprising support for Crescas comes from someone who ostensibly set out to defend Rambam's Thirteen Principles – R. Don Yitzhak Abarbanel (1437-1508).[5] While upholding

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[2] Crescas' challenge, originally appearing in *Ohr Hashem* 2:2:5, is cited and explained by Abarbanel in his *Rosh Amana*, chapter 4. All citations of this work are to the 1988 reprint of the Koenigsberg, 1861 edition. My intention is to limit the analysis to Abarbanel's understanding of Crescas. Crescas' philosophy is complex, and his general understanding of the commandments hinges largely on whether we attribute to him a hard or soft determinism or perhaps even a limited free will doctrine with respect to our mental states. See note 8 below, particularly the recent work by Professor Segal.

[3] *Responsa* 4:187 (no. 1258). Radbaz may actually be going further here than other authorities, who seem to make a distinction between attaining proper beliefs and retaining heretical ones. See note 6 below.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Hebrew are my own.

[4] Translated from the Italian by Daniel A. Klein in "A Letter to Almeda: Shadal's Guide for the Perplexed," *Hakirah* 10 (2010), 230. Shadal's position seems to be largely tied to his unique understanding of the Torah's goals for humanity. In the same letter, he maintains that one who keeps the commandments out of a "love for order" but lacks faith in the revelation of Moses is nevertheless "worthy of salvation," and he takes issue with Rambam's metaphysical approach to human perfection (234-235).

[5] See *Rosh Amana*, chapters 11 and 17.

the idea that Exodus 20:2 ("I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage") presents us with a biblical commandment, Abarbanel also concedes to Crescas that beliefs are ultimately involuntary and therefore not subject to command. His compromise position, which he attributes to Rambam himself, presents us with a radically different understanding of what the Torah expects from us.

The Exploration of Belief

Abarbanel argues that while beliefs themselves are natural consequences of perceived evidence, the acquisition and investigation of that evidence is certainly a volitional process. It is this process of inquiry, *only* this process of inquiry, that is commanded here by the Torah, and our efforts to arrive at ideal beliefs through this process are the sole determinants of our Divine reward (or punishment). In other words, the resulting beliefs are not our problem.[6]

Let's take a moment to appreciate the implications of this approach. Assume two Jews, one who possesses a firm yet simple faith, an *emunah peshutah*, but feels no need to investigate or deepen it, and a second Jew who delves into the relevant subject matter but has not yet emerged with a strong conviction regarding the Creator's existence. According to Abarbanel, it seems clear that Rambam would consider this second Jew to be fully in compliance with the commandment. The first Jew, like a genuinely kind person who nevertheless chooses to ignore the Torah's laws of charity and tithing, is a sinner.

Although Abarbanel's approach is motivated to some extent by Crescas' challenge, he also sees it reflected in the language of Rambam himself. As formulated in the *Mishneh Torah*, the commandment is to know – not merely believe in – the existence of God. Such knowledge cannot be achieved without philosophical investigation.

What would Crescas himself say to this? Professor Eliezer Schweid explains that, for Crescas, "it is not only permitted to analyze this proposition in order to verify it, but it is proper and necessary to do so. But after we prove God's existence, we must then accept His commandments, and they will limit our

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[6] Abarbanel's attribution of this position to Rambam is somewhat surprising given what Rambam writes in his *Shemonah Perakim*, chapter 2. (I thank my friend, R. Matt Schneeweiss, for drawing my attention to this.) There, after noting the complexity of the issue, Rambam seems to maintain that the intellect is indeed subject to commandments in the form of correct beliefs, despite the fact that these lack a "*ma'aseh mitzvah*." It may be that Abarbanel found sufficient ambiguity in Rambam's position to permit his interpretation.

More problematic may be Abarbanel's claim that an unintentional heretic, one who arrives at heretical beliefs through honest but mistaken speculations, nevertheless loses his reward in the World to Come (*Rosh Amana*, ch. 12; Rambam himself makes this point in *Moreh Nevukhim* 1:36). This seems to fly in the face of his claim that we are only held accountable for our efforts in investigation, not our resulting beliefs. Perhaps the answer lies in Abarbanel's comparison of heretical belief to poison. Though Divine reward is determined by our efforts in investigation, heretical belief intrinsically separates us from that reward, just as poison naturally separates us from life. The rationale for this distinction requires investigation, but even according to this approach, it seems to be only heretical *beliefs* that are fatal, not agnostic or skeptical positions.

theoretical purview from that point onward."[7] In other words, Crescas views philosophical investigation as a preparatory phase that is largely curtailed by our acceptance of the commandments, while Abarbanel's Rambam views the commandments themselves as an impetus for further investigation.[8]

Abarbanel is far from alone in his reading of Rambam. R. Masud Hai Rakkah (1690-1768), author of the *Ma'aseh Rokei'ah* commentary on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, explains that "he [Rambam] did not write 'to believe' because the essential commandment is through true knowledge, in the manner of Avraham our forefather (peace be upon him) and in the manner of 'know the God of your father and serve Him.' Through this, belief will be strengthened in his heart of its own accord."[9]

As Rambam makes clear in the opening chapter of his *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*, Avraham's true knowledge was gained through a thoughtful investigation of the natural world and its theological implications. According to R. Rakkah, this investigation is what Rambam codifies for this commandment. The attendant belief in God is a valuable product, something that comes "of its own accord."

This explanation is cited by R. Menahem Krakowski (1869-1929) in his own *Mishneh Torah* commentary, *Avodat Ha-Melekh*, which is in turn cited by R. Yosef Kapah (1917-2000) in his explanation of this *halakhah*. Similarly, R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) adopts Abarbanel's approach to the problem of commanded belief.[10] We see that this compromise position, which maintains belief as a religious ideal to strive towards while rejecting it as a legal obligation, was a preferred and recurrent approach among Rambam's commentators.

R. Meir Leibush Wisser (1809-1879), Malbim, seems to embrace this approach as well.[11] After accepting Crescas' challenge, he explains that Rambam was careful to codify the commandment in terms of knowledge, not belief. "And the commandment," writes Malbim, "is to strive to know this with a clear knowledge." To strive; but to attain is beyond what any law can command. In understanding the commandment in this manner, great rabbinic thinkers across the centuries envisioned a Judaism that requires striving, curiosity, inquiry, and exploration. And particularly

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[7] See *The Classic Jewish Philosophers*, trans. Leonard Levin (Brill, 2007), 375.

[8] Though beyond the scope of this essay, this debate is intertwined with Crescas' and Rambam's differing views on the nature of human perfection. For a fascinating explanation of how the commandments facilitate our love of God within Crescas' deterministic system, see Professor Aaron Segal's "Crescas, Hard Determinism, and the Need for a Torah" (forthcoming in *Faith & Philosophy*).

[9] *Ma'aseh Rokei'ah* to *Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:1.

[10] *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 26, 114-123.

[11] Commentary to Exodus 20:2.

within Rambam's highly intellectualized conception of the commandment, it requires philosophy.

This last point is worthy of special attention because, while Rambam ultimately found himself among a majority that consider Exodus 20:2 to represent a biblical commandment, his is a minority position with respect to what this commandment entails. Abarbanel contrasts Rambam's commandment of a philosophically-informed belief in God with other major interpretations, which he summarizes.[12] According to R. Moshe of Coucy (1200-1260), the verse represents a commandment to believe in the Divine origin of the Torah. According to R. Yitzhak of Corbeil (d. 1280), it is a commandment to believe in Divine providence. According to R. Avraham ibn Ezra (1089-1167), it is an expansive commandment "to know Him and to love Him with all one's heart and to cleave to Him constantly and not to remove one's reverence for Him from upon one's face." Abarbanel aligns this interpretation with Rambam's fifth principle of faith, that it is fitting to serve and praise God.

To the extent that all of these interpretations entail a type of belief, they are all equally vulnerable to Crescas' challenge and all equally amenable to Abarbanel's resolution. In other words, those who wish to fulfill this commandment according to all opinions would simply be required to broaden the types of inquiries and explorations they undertake. This would lead them not only to new branches of philosophy, but also *beyond* philosophy, to new realms of experience. After all, if one's goal were to explore those subjects that might culminate in a belief in Divine providence, would philosophical analysis necessarily be the best or only avenue? Could not history, personal experience, the study of nature, or meditation, be equal or superior means?

This compromise position seems to have many advantages. It conforms to the majority position that maintains the existence of commandments of belief while avoiding the lethal blow of Crescas' refutation. It also defines Jewish commitment not in terms of what we *claim* to believe but in terms of what we *aspire* to believe. Perhaps most importantly, it aligns these commandments of belief with what may be the overarching purpose of the commandments as a whole.

Divine Tour Guides

In a recent paper, I argued that a surprisingly diverse body of Rishonim and Aharonim approached the Torah as a system of exploration.[13] In their view, our engagement with the commandments is meant to encourage and direct our exploration of reality. By traveling this world with the Torah as our tour guide, we expose ourselves to transformative spiritual experiences.

What exactly is the nature of these experiences? Rishonim such as Ralbag (1288-1344) considered our immortality to be born from our attainment of

[12] See *Rosh Amana,* chapter 7.

[13] "Imitations and Semblances: How the Mitzvos Direct Our Exploration of Reality," *Hakirah* 33 (2023), 257-279. Among the authorities discussed are Rambam, Abarbanel, and R. Moshe Isserles (Rema).

intelligible concepts – the scientific and philosophical facts of reality – and they understood the Torah to be guiding us to such facts. Sometimes this guidance takes the form of symbolic representation, such as parallels between the structure of the Tabernacle and the cosmos, and sometimes it is simply a matter of steering our attention. In his commentary to *Parashat Emor*, Ralbag suggests that being confronted with the diversity of plant life in the commandment of the *arba'ah minim* (the four species) should inspire our study of botany. Under this model, Jewish philosophy may share its subject matter and conclusions with other philosophical systems; what is unique is its methodology of introducing us to them.

Other sages stressed the commandments' role in producing a more participatory form of knowledge. It is our experiential encounter with Divine instruction that illuminates the mundane and reveals its theological significance. While there is a notable difference in emphasis, these two approaches are not at all opposed and share much in common. Fundamentally, they both view the commandments as a sort of guidance system, revealing the presence of underlying meaning without explicitly defining it. Jewish philosophy becomes not a philosophy *of* Judaism but a philosophy *through* Judaism.

To cite an example of this second, participatory approach, R. Yehuda He-Hasid (1150-1217) offers the following explanation for the purpose of Creation:

> Hashem said to Himself, "I will create the universe—not because I have need of it, but so that My creations will rejoice in Me when I am revealed to them in My wisdom. And those who know Me and do My will—I will reveal to them My unity and My secrets, and their souls will exalt in Me…"[14]

According to R. Yehuda He-Hasid, the general purpose of Creation is our rejoicing in the revelation of Divine wisdom. There is also a second level, the revelation of His unity and secrets, which is reserved for those who know God and fulfill His will, i.e. those who observe the commandments. But how exactly do the commandments bring us to this second level of revelation, and what do they have to do with the more general purpose of Creation, the revelation of Divine wisdom? In the following passage, R. Yehuda He-Hasid seems to address these questions:

> And if you will say, since He did not create for His own need, why did He command them to perform mitzvot?—we can reply: It was for the righteous, so that they would serve Him and praise Him from every individual species that He

[14] *ibid.*, 270. The passage is from R. Yehuda He-Hasid's *Imrot Tehorot Hitzoniot u-Penimiot*, recently published with commentary by R. Yaakov Yisrael Stahl (Jerusalem, 2006).

> created. He created day and night—we praise Him by day and by night. It is the way of honor to give a master from the first that he bestowed upon him, as it is said, "And you shall honor Hashem from the first." And He commanded regarding the seeding of mixed species—to testify that each is separate, and this demonstrates His unity. One who mixes seeds is as if he denigrates that which the Creator desired. And He commanded regarding sacrifices—it is the way of honor for a servant to appear with a pleasant gift for his master. And for this reason, He distanced the blemished from His service, as in the priests and the sacrifices, as it is said, "Offer it now, if you please, to your governor."[15]

We see that R. Yehuda He-Hasid ties the purpose of the commandments to our recognition of "every individual species that He created," and this gives us an answer as to how the commandments further our appreciation of Divine wisdom. After all, every human is already aware of the cycle of day and night, but the commandments tied to this cycle encourage a heightened awareness and appreciation of its existence. R. Yaakov Yisrael Stahl, in his commentary to this work, notes that R. Yehuda has been careful to include examples from every realm of reality in this brief passage: the celestial (day and night), the botanical (seeding of mixed species), the zoological (the sacrifices), and the human (the priests). R. Yehuda He-Hasid is therefore alluding that our experience of reality, as mediated by the commandments, must be truly encompassing.[16]

This passage also makes explicit the connection between the commandments and the revelation of Divine unity that was indicated earlier. When one observes the numerous distinctions within reality that are highlighted by the commandments, such as the laws of mixed species, he recognizes a complex but unified natural order and, by extension, a unified Orderer.

The idea that the Torah serves as a guide or "prod" for our proper engagement with this world is also present in the writings of Hazal. In *Hagigah* 3b, we are taught the following:

> Why are words of Torah compared to a goad (Ecclesiastes 12:11)? To tell you that just as this goad directs the cow to its furrows, to bring forth life to the world, so too do words of Torah direct their learners from the paths of death to the paths of life.

Besides the metaphor of the goad, it is fascinating to note that this *gemara* presents the "bringing forth of

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[15] *ibid.*, 271.

[16] R. Yehuda He-Hasid's *Imrot Tehorot* reveals his extensive study of natural philosophy, particularly in its moral and theological aspects. See also *Sefer Hasidim* §589 (§14 in Parma edition).

life" as arising from our involvement with this world, from our alignment with the "furrows" of reality that we, like cows, might not naturally recognize. In other words, the Torah spurs and directs our progress, but life depends on our engagement with the values of lived experience.[17]

To cite a final and even more ancient source for this vision of Judaism, we can turn to Philo of Alexandria, "Judaism's first philosopher"[18] and author of our "oldest recorded *midrash*."[19] A contemporary of Hillel and Shammai who used his eloquence and erudition to paint a vibrant picture of Judaism, Philo's work remains unknown to most Jews today. This is particularly unfortunate considering his focus on many of the religious, philosophical, and cultural questions that are at the heart of modern Jewish discourse.

In his discussion of Avraham's "Covenant Between the Parts," Philo notes that many ridicule this passage and consider it nothing more than the description of a sacrifice, without deeper meaning.[20] "But such people," says Philo, "are (in the class) of those who judge and evaluate the whole by only one part, and do not, on the contrary, (judge) the part by the whole." To understand this passage, we need to understand the intention of the Torah as a whole, since "the Legislation is in some sense a unified creature."

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[17] R. Yoshiyahu Pinto (1565-1648) acknowledges this implication in his commentary on the *Ein Yaakov*, but is deeply disturbed by the idea of characterizing the Torah as a guidance system *towards* life, instead of as life itself. He therefore constrains the Gemara's teaching, insisting that we are only discussing the unique case of a sinner being guided to repentance. But this interpretation is not at all suggested by the simple language of the Gemara, and it seems unnecessary given the sources we have presented.

[18] Philo is given this title by R. Shlomo Goren, who goes on to call Philo "a Jew given over in heart and spirit to the Jewish nation and to everything sacred to it." See his *Torat Ha-Philosophia* (HaIdra Rabba, 1998), 112. It is worth surveying Philo's overwhelmingly positive reception within Jewish history. R. Avraham Zacuto, in his *Sefer Yuhasin*, mentions Philo as "a great sage." Numerous rabbis of Renaissance Italy, including R. David Provencal and R. Yehuda Moscato, refer to him as "the sage, Rabbi Yedidya," and R. Simha Luzzatto, chief rabbi of Venice, champions Philo as "a man not only of remarkable erudition in the Greek language, but also of incomparable learning in human as well as divine doctrines." See Simone Luzzatto, *Discourse on the State of the Jews: Bilingual Edition*, trans. Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa (De Gruyter, 2019), 203. Chief Rabbi of Moravia, Nahum Trebitsch, in his approbation for an 1838 Hebrew translation of Philo's works, similarly reveres Philo as "one of the *gedolim* and men of renown… a great philosopher and magnificent advocate, in addition to his wisdom in our holy Torah."

[19] This is the subtitle of Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Belkin's *The Midrash of Philo* (Yeshiva University Press, 1989), a work revealing abundant parallels between Philo's exegesis and the midrashic tradition. Belkin has demonstrated that Philo was undoubtedly connected to the *mesorah* of Hazal; see his *Philo and the Oral Law; the Philonic Interpretation of Biblical Law in Relation to the Palestinian Halakah* (Harvard University Press, 1940). R. Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg similarly recognized Philo as a reliable transmitter of authentic tradition. When discussing the existence of Torah and ethical law before Mount Sinai, he cites a tradition from "the ancient sage, Philo the Hebrew" (*Ha-Ketav Ve-haKabbalah* to Genesis 20:6). Philo himself notes his reliance on "some of the elders of the nation; for I always interwove what I was told with what I read" (*On the Life of Moses*, 1.4).

[20] *Questions on Genesis*, 3.3. Translations of Philo's works are from the Loeb Classical Library edition: F. H. Colson, G. H. Whitaker, and Ralph Marcus, eds., *Philo* (Harvard University Press, 1929–1962).

What, then, is this intention? Philo sees it as a system of enlightenment that "describes the various forms of knowledge," including natural, and particularly moral, philosophy.[21] But this description of knowledge often takes a veiled form, "through which not only are the traces of the truth followed out but they are also hidden." The Torah simultaneously reveals and conceals, illuminates and obscures. In other words, it is not a textbook but a guide, prompting our own conscious efforts at discovery.

Throughout his works, and particularly in his allegorical interpretations, Philo made it clear that his explanations were likely possibilities.[22] Though he certainly had confidence in his ability as an exegete and as a philosopher, his general approach was to open doors of philosophical thinking, not close them.[23] Much like Ralbag and R. Yehuda He-Hasid, Philo approached the Torah as a catalyst for philosophical thought and reflection.

Within this context, the compromise position taken by Rambam's interpreters fits perfectly. The Torah is a system of exploration through and through, from its commandments of belief to those involving speech and action. In the former, the Torah presents us with a destination and demands that we undertake a journey towards that place of ideal belief. In the latter, the Torah prescribes encounters, practices of mindful experience, and bids us to contemplate what those encounters can teach us about the world and about ourselves. Such a vision offers a profound integration of the Torah's legal and philosophical components. More importantly, it yields a Judaism that is dynamic, non-dogmatic, and endlessly adventurous.

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear Saba, R. Shlomo Jakobovits zt"l – a brilliant scholar, an exceptional pedagogue, and an ever-curious spirit.

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[21] According to Marcus, Philo uses the word "gnostic" (i.e., concerned with knowledge) to convey this intention. Yonge, translating from Aucher's Latin, has "scientific." Philo goes on to demonstrate how the various sacrificial animals correspond to "the parts of the universe," before offering a more ethically-oriented interpretation. For Philo, even the study of nature must culminate in the acquisition of virtue (see *On the Change of Names*, 73).

[22] It is quite common for Philo to begin his exegesis with the word "Perhaps…" For Philo's general approach to literal vs. allegorical interpretation and his encouragement of the reader's allegorizing, see *On the Confusion of Tongues*, 190.

[23] How does Philo's unified vision of the Torah approach the subject of principles of faith? At the end of his treatise *On the Creation*, Philo lists five beliefs (including beliefs in God's existence and providence) that some have called "the first creed in history." See Erwin R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* (Yale University Press, 1962), 37. However, Professor David T. Runia argues compellingly that these beliefs are not "a creed or articles of faith in which one must believe before one can belong to Judaism," but rather necessary premises for a proper understanding of Scripture (David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria, on the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Brill, 2001), 394. A full analysis of Philo's views here would need to take into account his allegorical approach, the place of theology in his concept of *eudaimonia*, and his relative free will doctrine – likely yielding a position that shares elements with both Crescas and Abarbanel.