

Andrew V. Kudin

JEWISH
PHILOSOPHY
AND
KABBALAH



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Introduction

The Burden of Understanding

Aristotle ends the *Nicomachean Ethics* by naming the best life available to a human being, and it is a life of contemplation.¹ He recommends it on the ground that it needs almost nothing. The just man requires other people to be just toward; the brave man requires danger; the generous man requires money and someone poorer than himself. The contemplative requires only that he be left alone. His activity is the most self-sufficient there is, the one closest to what the gods do all day, and it is pursued for no result beyond itself.

No Jewish philosopher could accept that description, and the reason is not that any of them lacked the nerve.

In this tradition, understanding does not terminate in itself. It converts, immediately and without ceremony, into obligation. A conclusion reached about the nature of God alters what a person may say in prayer. An interpretation of a verse alters what he must do on Friday afternoon. Even contemplation, in its most rarefied kabbalistic form, was held to accomplish something outside the mind of the contemplative — to open a channel or to close one, to repair a relation in the upper worlds or to leave it damaged. There is no vantage point in this literature from which a man may look at the truth and owe it nothing.

What is grasped becomes what is required. The clearer the sight, the heavier the demand.

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Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah are studied by different scholars, taught in different courses, and shelved in different sections. The separation has a history. The nineteenth-century founders of the academic study of Judaism, working to present their tradition as rational and respectable, treated the kabbalists as an embarrassment — a growth on the body of a religion whose real intelligence lay in Maimonides. Gershom Scholem spent a career overturning that verdict, and the verdict has been overturned, but the shelving survived it.

The separation is also false to the material. *Sefer ha-Bahir* surfaced in Provence within a generation of the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Nahmanides

was the leading talmudist of his age and a kabbalist, and did not experience himself as two people. The controversy over Maimonides and the earliest circulation of kabbalistic doctrine occupied the same decades, the same towns, sometimes the same men. A book that files philosophy in one volume and mysticism in another conceals the fact that they grew up in one room.

They are also, more importantly, two answers to a single pressure. Maimonides asks how far demonstration may go before revelation must correct it. Luria asks what a human act does to an order that was broken before any human existed. Underneath both lies the same question about what knowledge costs the knower. The philosopher who learns that God has no body must then decide what to do with a congregation praying to a God with a hand. The kabbalist who learns that his intention at a particular word of the liturgy affects the relations among the divine powers has acquired a responsibility he cannot put down. Neither has been released by his understanding. Both have been conscripted by it.

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The characteristic failure in writing about this literature is not error but looseness.

The literature invites it. Kabbalah in particular has been claimed as the ancestor of quantum physics, the Big Bang, depth psychology, systems theory, and most schools of modern spirituality. The claims rest on resemblance: the imagery of contraction sounds like a cosmological account of contraction, the language of hidden unity sounds like the language of entanglement, ten emanations arranged on three lines look like a diagram of something. Resemblance is cheap. Any two symbolic systems of sufficient richness will produce it on demand.

Influence must be shown, not felt. A documented connection requires declared sources, identifiable texts, translations that can be traced, inscriptions, titles, a record of reading. Anselm Kiefer names Lurianic doctrine and titles his work with a Lurianic term; that is evidence. Marc Chagall paints figures floating over rooftops and has often been called mystical; that is atmosphere.

Sufi practice left a documented mark on Jewish pietism in thirteenth-century Egypt, and the documents are named. Vedānta did not leave a mark on medieval Kabbalah, and no amount of shared vocabulary about unity will manufacture one. Pico della Mirandola read

kabbalistic texts in Latin translations prepared to serve a Christian argument, which is a fact about the direction of transmission and about what survives it.

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Jewish philosophy formed where inherited revelation met rational inquiry, and it never resolved the meeting. Across some two thousand years its authors examined creation and prophecy, the reach of Divine law, the freedom of the will, the fact of suffering, and the shape of a good life — always within an existence already ordered by covenant, study, worship, and communal memory. Their conclusions diverged violently. What held is that the inquiry stayed answerable: to God, and to what human action does.

Kabbalah became one of the strongest currents inside that inquiry rather than a departure from it. The Bahir, the zoharic literature, and the teaching of the kabbalists of Safed built symbolic accounts of the divine world, of creation and exile, of prayer and commandment, and of the human capacity to reach dimensions of existence that cannot be seen. The knowledge they pursued was meant to change the one who acquired it — his intention, his worship, his standing before God.

One word shows what is at stake in the whole book.

In the Mishnah, measures are enacted *mipnei tikkun ha-olam*, for the repair of the world.² The phrase is administrative. It refers to rules adopted so that the legal and social order will not seize up — so that a woman is not left unable to remarry, so that a lender is not deterred from lending. Nothing cosmic is intended.

In Lurianic Kabbalah the same word names something vast. The vessels prepared to hold the divine light shattered under it, sparks of holiness fell and were caught in the husks of the lower world, and *tikkun* is the labor of raising them.³ Every commandment performed with the proper intention accomplishes some part of it. The work is unfinished, and it is finished by human beings, and the alternative to doing it is not neutrality but deeper damage. This is a doctrine with a precise structure, transmitted through a technical literature, requiring years of study before it can be practised at all.

In contemporary usage *tikkun olam* means the pursuit of social justice, broadly construed. That usage draws on ancient and genuine Jewish demands for justice and compassion. It is also a phrase that can

now appear on a fundraising letter without obliging anyone to anything in particular.

The word survived all three. Between the second and the third, something was lost that this book is about: a vocabulary that once placed a person under an exact and burdensome demand, thinned into a term of approval. A symbol severed from the discipline that produced it keeps its name and loses its teeth.

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Some limits should be stated plainly.

This is not a history of Judaism, nor of Jewish law, nor a survey attempting completeness. Figures appear because they carry the argument; a number of considerable thinkers do not appear at all. Hasidism enters where it bears on the questions at hand and is not treated in its own right. Jewish thought after Levinas lies outside the scope.

Quotations from the Hebrew Bible follow the Jewish Publication Society translation of 1985. Where an argument turns on the Hebrew, the divergence between that rendering and the alternatives is taken up in the text rather than settled in silence. Translations from the Talmud, the midrashim, the Zohar, and the liturgy are the author's own. Hebrew and Aramaic terms are transliterated lightly, glossed where they first appear, and thereafter used as the sources use them.

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The story begins with a library that contains no philosophy at all, and with the men who spent a millennium arguing about it before anyone thought to ask a philosophical question of it. The questions arrived from outside, in Greek, in a city on the Egyptian coast. Everything after that is the long consequence.

PART I

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

I.1

Before Philosophy

There is no philosophy in the Hebrew Bible.

The books that Jewish thinkers would spend the next two thousand years interpreting philosophically do not argue, define, or demonstrate. They narrate, command, accuse, lament, praise, and go silent at exactly the points where a philosopher would begin to press. None of them asks what being is, or whether the will is free, or how a just God can permit the innocent to suffer — though one entire book circles that last question for forty chapters without ever putting it as a question.

The philosophical problems were read into these texts afterward. Philo, Saadia, Maimonides, and the kabbalists of Safed all worked on a corpus that had not been assembled with them in mind, and a great deal of their originality lies in what they had to do to make it answer.

What existed before philosophy was a set of materials, and the peculiar authority those materials had already acquired before anyone thought to interrogate them.

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The Tanakh is a library rather than a book: writings gathered across something close to a millennium, mostly in Hebrew with patches of Aramaic, by authors who had no idea they were contributing to a single object. The name is an acronym for its three divisions — Torah, *Nevi'im*, *Ketuvim* — and the divisions are not merely editorial. They rank. Law is derived from the Torah in ways it is not derived from the Prophets, and the Writings, the loosest of the three, took longest to settle.

The prologue that Ben Sira's grandson attached to his Greek translation around 132 BCE speaks of the Law, the Prophets, and the other books that followed them.¹ The third category exists by then. It has no name and no fixed membership.

Older textbooks report a council of rabbis at Yavneh closing the canon around the year 90. There was no such council; the idea is a nineteenth-century reconstruction that historians have given up. What the sources actually preserve is slower and less orderly. The Mishnah still

records an argument over whether Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs “defile the hands” — the idiom for sacred standing — with Rabbi Akiva declaring that the whole world was never worth the day the Song was given to Israel.² Books were still being disputed centuries after most of them had been written.

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Three features of this material would shape the philosophical tradition that followed.

The first is covenant.³ The tie between God and Israel is cast as *berit*, and the form was borrowed rather than invented. Scholars comparing Deuteronomy with Hittite treaty documents of the second millennium have pointed to a shared architecture: a preamble reciting what the sovereign has already done for the vassal, then the terms, then blessings for compliance and curses for breach. The comparison has been pushed further than the evidence allows and cannot be dismissed either. What matters for philosophy is the shape rather than the pedigree. A covenant is contractual, historical, and breakable. It has a date. It can be violated, and the prophets spend their careers announcing that it has been.

The second is the Name. Four consonants, YHWH, which came to be left unspoken, another word substituted for them in reading. When Moses asks at the bush what he should say the God of his fathers is called, the answer he receives is grammatically a verb — built from the root of to be, ambiguous between present and future, and translated ever since with a shrug: I am that I am, or I will be what I will be.⁴ A name that behaves like a verb resists being made into a definition. Philosophers would find this both an obstacle and an opportunity.

The third is the ban on images. The Decalogue forbids a sculptured image or any likeness, and the prohibition is a rule about practice, not a claim about God’s nature.⁵ It says nothing whatever about incorporeality, a doctrine that would take another fifteen centuries to formulate. Meanwhile the same books describe God’s hand, His arm, His face, His back; He is angry, He relents, He is grieved that He made man. The most concerted labor in medieval Jewish philosophy would be spent explaining what such sentences mean, and the labor was necessary because the Bible had never worried about it.

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Genesis opens with creation by speech. God says, and the thing is. There is no fight.

That absence is loud. The Babylonian Enuma Elish has Marduk kill the sea-goddess Tiamat and build the world out of her corpse; violence at the origin is the standard ancient Near Eastern account.⁶ Genesis 1 declines it. But Genesis 1 is not the Bible's only cosmogony, and the older pattern surfaces elsewhere without much disguise — the crushing of Leviathan's heads in Psalm 74, the hacking of Rahab in Isaiah, the stilling of the sea in Job. The serene chapter was placed first. It did not displace what it was placed in front of.

Even its opening words are unsettled. The King James Version made a complete sentence of them, and creation out of nothing found there its most convenient proof text. Modern translators, following a reading Rashi had already defended, make them a temporal clause instead.⁷ On that construal the first verse is not a sentence but a subordinate clause — when God began to create the heavens and the earth — and the main action does not arrive until the third verse, with the utterance of light. The earth is already there when it does, unformed and dark, a wind or a breath of God moving over the water. The unformed matter is present before the first recorded act, not produced by it.

Whether Genesis teaches creation from nothing is therefore a question the Hebrew declines to settle. Maimonides would build a great deal on its declining.

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The library disagrees with itself, and not at the margins.

Deuteronomy runs an exact moral economy.⁸ Obey and the rains come in season, the harvest holds, the years are long; disobey and there is drought, defeat, exile. The doctrine is stated with no hedging at all.

The Book of Job is built to demolish it. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar recite Deuteronomic theology competently and at length — suffering follows sin, so search yourself — and at the end God tells Eliphaz that the three of them have not spoken rightly of Him, as His servant Job has.⁹ The orthodox position has been assigned to the men who turn out to be wrong. And the voice from the whirlwind offers nothing

resembling a defense: it speaks of the foundations of the earth, of rain falling where no man lives, of the ostrich who forgets her eggs, of two monsters no one can hunt. Justice is not mentioned.

Proverbs promises that wisdom yields long life, riches, and honor. Qohelet, working the same genre, reports that the wise man dies exactly as the fool does and is forgotten just as fast, and that everything is hevel — breath, vapor, the thing you cannot hold.¹⁰ Nahum is a poem celebrating the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah sends a prophet to Nineveh, has the city repent, has God spare it, and closes with the prophet sulking on a hillside because it was spared. Whoever assembled the Book of the Twelve put both of them in one scroll.

Here is the seed of philosophical argument, conducted by juxtaposition rather than by inference. The tradition kept its contradictions instead of resolving them, and the habit proved decisive. A canon that argues with itself requires interpreters, and interpretation would become the discipline in which Jewish thought did most of its work.

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In the year 70 the Temple burned, and sacrifice did not pause. It stopped. The altar was gone, the priesthood had nothing to officiate, and a religion organized around an altar had lost it.

The Talmud tells how Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was carried out of the besieged city in a coffin and obtained from the Roman commander permission to keep a school at Yavneh.¹¹ It is told as a story, and may be one. What the story is doing is transparent enough: it explains a substitution that had in fact taken place. Another rabbinic text has Rabbi Joshua stand in the ruins and cry that the place where Israel's sins were atoned is destroyed. Yoḥanan answers that there is another atonement, as good, and cites the prophet Hosea: God desires goodness, not sacrifice.¹²

Study and prayer took over the function of the offering. The scholar replaced the priest, the house of study replaced the Temple court, and the change was permanent.

Around the year 200, under Judah ha-Nasi, the accumulated teaching was fixed in the Mishnah. Its most extraordinary feature is a refusal. Where the sages disagreed, the Mishnah does not adjudicate and does not tidy up; both positions stand on the page, attributed. A passage

in the tractate *Eduyot* explains why the rejected view is written down at all: so that a later court, finding it persuasive, may rely on it.¹³ A legal code that preserves the rulings it declined to adopt is making a claim about what law is.

The claim is made explicit in the doctrine of the Oral Torah. Moses received it at Sinai and handed it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly — so the opening of *Pirkei Avot*, which is a chain of custody rather than a chronicle.¹⁴ The written text, on this view, was never self-sufficient. Revelation arrived incomplete and is completed through transmission, which is to say through human beings, arguing.

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One passage states the position outright, and it has been quoted ever since.

Rabbi Eliezer disputes with the majority over the ritual purity of a particular oven, and cannot persuade them. So he calls for signs. A carob tree uproots itself; the sages reply that a carob tree proves nothing. A stream reverses; a stream proves nothing. The walls of the study house begin to lean and are rebuked into stopping halfway, out of respect for both parties. Finally a voice comes from heaven and says the law is as Eliezer says. Rabbi Joshua rises to his feet and answers with half a verse from Deuteronomy: it is not in heaven.

The Talmud glosses him. The Torah was given at Sinai; we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, since it was written there that one inclines after the majority. Later, Rabbi Nathan meets Elijah and asks what God was doing at that moment. Elijah reports that He laughed and said: My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.¹⁵

Quotation usually stops at the laughter. The passage does not. Eliezer is excommunicated, everything he had declared pure is burned in front of him, and the story runs on into his grief, the storm at sea, and the death of the man who ordered the ban. Whatever the sages had won, the text declines to let them enjoy it. Whether any of this occurred is unanswerable and largely beside the point; what the passage establishes is a position, and the position is that once the text has been given, its meaning is settled from below.

None of this is philosophy. The rabbis built a procedure. They argue without pause and almost never about first principles: the disputes

concern what follows from a verse, how far a term extends, which precedent governs the case at hand. Nobody asks whether God exists. Nobody defines Him. How a commandment could bind a free agent is not raised, because the agent's freedom has not yet been made into a problem.

Problems of that kind require a second vocabulary, and a reason to want one.

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Both were available in Egypt.

By the third century BCE the Torah had been translated into Greek at Alexandria, for a Jewish population that had stopped reading Hebrew. A later legend, preserved in the Letter of Aristeas, has seventy-two elders produce seventy-two identical versions; the legend is worth less than the fact behind it, which is that Jews were now reading Moses in the language of Plato.

Translation is never only translation. Where the Hebrew of the burning bush gives Moses a verb, the Greek gives him a participle: *ho ōn*, the One who is.¹⁶ A phrase about presence and futurity has become a statement about existence. Nobody had decided to import metaphysics. It came in with the grammar.

Into that library, that habit of argument, and that Greek, a wealthy and learned Jew of Alexandria would carry the vocabulary of Plato and the methods of the Stoics. He maintained to the end that Moses had got there first.

I.2

Alexandria: Moses in Greek

The Emperor Gaius received the Jewish delegation from Alexandria in the summer of 40, in the gardens of a property he was having redecorated, and he did not stop working while they spoke.¹ He moved between the buildings giving instructions about the glazing and the wall paintings; the ambassadors moved with him, putting their case in fragments as he went from room to room. At one point he turned and asked why they refused to eat pork. The rival delegation from the Greek community laughed. He dismissed them at last with the observation that these people struck him as unlucky rather than criminal, being too foolish to believe he had the nature of a god.

Philo led that embassy. He was by his own account an old man, and the business before the emperor was not dietary curiosity.

Two years earlier the Jews of Alexandria had been attacked in their own city with the prefect's compliance. Aulus Avillius Flaccus, governing Egypt for Rome, allowed images of the emperor to be installed in the synagogues, which made them unusable; then permitted the Jewish population to be driven into a single quarter and their houses and shops elsewhere to be looted; then had members of the council of elders flogged publicly in the theatre, in the manner reserved for Egyptians rather than for men of standing. Beyond Alexandria there was worse coming. Gaius had ordered a statue of himself erected in the Temple at Jerusalem, and the order was still live when the delegation reached Rome.³ The crisis ended in January of 41, when Gaius was murdered by his own officers.

So the man who had spent a lifetime writing about the ascent of the soul toward a God beyond all description spent his old age at a trot through a garden, behind a young emperor discussing window glass.

He wrote it down afterward in two books, *Against Flaccus* and *The Embassy to Gaius*. Their purpose shapes the account. Flaccus was eventually arrested, stripped of his property, exiled to the island of Andros, and put to death, and Philo presents that sequence as the visible working of Divine justice — a shape imposed on the events rather than found lying in them.² The reporting is close and specific all the same,

and much of what is known about the violence of 38 comes from these pages and nowhere else.

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Philo was born around 20 BCE into one of the richest Jewish families of the Roman world. His relatives mark out the range of what an Alexandrian Jew of that generation could become.

His brother Alexander held a senior customs post and was wealthy enough to lend money to a Herodian prince and to pay for the gold and silver plating on nine of the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem.⁴ Alexander's son, Philo's nephew, was Tiberius Julius Alexander, who abandoned the practice of his ancestral religion, entered Roman service, rose to be prefect of Egypt, and in the year 70 served as chief of staff to Titus at the siege of Jerusalem. Philo wrote philosophical dialogues in which this nephew appears as the skeptical interlocutor, arguing against providence and against the rationality of animals.

One family, in two generations: the man who devoted his life to expounding the Torah in Greek, and the man who helped burn the Temple his father had gilded. The tradition that produced Philo was not a settled thing with a single obvious future. It was a set of possibilities under pressure, and assimilation to Rome was among them.

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Almost everything Philo wrote is commentary on the Five Books of Moses.

He worked in several parallel series, and they differ in address. One expounds the Law systematically, for a reader who might be a sympathetic Greek. Another proceeds verse by verse through Genesis in a mode of sustained allegory, for readers already inside. A third is cast as questions and answers. The whole enterprise assumes that the Torah is a Divine text whose surface conveys law and history while its depths hold an account of the cosmos and of the soul.

Allegory is the instrument. Abraham's departure from Chaldea becomes the mind's migration away from astrology and the worship of the visible heavens. Sarah and Hagar become philosophy and the preliminary studies that must precede it, so that the union with the servant before the union with the mistress describes an order of education rather than a domestic arrangement. Jacob wrestling is the

practice of virtue under strain. Egypt is the body, and the exodus from it is what it sounds like once the equation is granted.

Read quickly, this looks like a technique for evacuating the text. Philo knew that, and he attacked it.

There were interpreters in Alexandria who had drawn the obvious conclusion: if the Sabbath signifies the soul's rest in God, and circumcision signifies the excision of pleasure, then a man who has grasped the meaning has no further business with the practice. Philo's answer is unambiguous and it is delivered with contempt.⁵ The inner sense is real; the outer observance is also commanded, and a man who abandons it is behaving as though the soul could be tended while the body is left to rot in the street. He notes that such people would not last a week if their neighbours took the same liberties with them.

The passage matters beyond Philo. It is the first surviving statement of a position that appears repeatedly under other names: that understanding does not discharge obligation. He read Genesis as a Platonist and kept the Sabbath as a Jew, and he did not think the second was a concession to the weak.

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The philosophical apparatus came from wherever it served. Metaphysical images out of Plato, the psychology and much of the ethics out of the Stoics, the analysis of intellect and cause out of Aristotle. Philo took what he needed and dropped what could not be reconciled with the Torah, and he never granted any school authority over the text he was expounding.

The *Timaeus* gave him a vocabulary for creation: a craftsman, an intelligible pattern, an ordered cosmos made in its likeness. Genesis gave him a God who creates freely and from nothing beside Himself. Philo's solution to the collision has had a longer life than anything else he wrote. The Forms are not a realm standing beside God, independent and eternal. They are God's thoughts.⁶ The intelligible world is the Divine mind in the act of conceiving what it is about to make, as an architect's plan of a city exists nowhere but in the architect until the stones go down.

That move subordinates the whole Platonic apparatus to a creating will, and it did not stay in Jewish hands.

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Then there is the Logos, which is where Philo becomes difficult and where he became dangerous.

The difficulty is structural rather than personal. Philo held two positions with equal firmness. God is utterly beyond the reach of the mind — we can know that He is, never what He is — and God nevertheless made this world, governs it, and speaks to Moses.⁷ Something has to occupy the distance. The Logos is what occupies it: Divine reason as it holds the intelligible patterns together and turns toward creation.

Philo describes it with whatever image the passage requires. Pattern. Instrument. The eldest son. God's shadow.⁸ The archangel. High priest of the cosmos. The images do not add up to a doctrine, and there is no evidence that Philo wanted them to; he was an exegete producing readings, not a systematician defending a definition. What the images have in common is a refusal to let the Divine essence be touched. Whatever the Logos is, God remains beyond it.

His Christian readers found a use for the material that Philo had not intended and could not have anticipated. What he had left as a shifting figure for Divine reason, an unstable something between God and the world, was available to a theology that wanted exactly such a figure and wanted it made flesh. Philo did not prepare the way for that doctrine. He supplied the vocabulary in which it could be stated, which is a different thing and turned out to be enough.

His distinction between knowing that God is and knowing what God is went in another direction, and eventually came home. It is the seed of everything the medieval Jewish philosophers would do with the Divine attributes, and Maimonides would build his negative theology on ground that Philo had cleared without knowing whom he was clearing it for.

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Neither of them read him. That is the strangest fact about Philo, and it needs stating plainly.

The rabbis do not cite him. Not once, in the whole of the Talmuds and the classical midrashim, does his name appear or a passage of his get quoted. Whether they had never heard of him or had heard and were

uninterested, the silence is total, and it lasted for something like fifteen centuries.

The Church, meanwhile, kept everything. Christian scribes copied his works, Eusebius devoted attention to him and passed on a story that he had met the apostle Peter in Rome, and Jerome remarked that one could not tell whether Plato was imitating Philo or Philo Plato.⁹ A Jewish commentator on the Torah, writing to defend the Law of Moses against Greek condescension, survived because Christians found him useful and Jews did not preserve him.

He was brought back into Hebrew in 1573, by Azariah dei Rossi of Mantua, who called him Yedidyah the Alexandrian and devoted a discussion in *Me'or Einayim* to the question of whether such a man could be counted a reliable Jew at all.¹⁰ Dei Rossi's own book was banned by several rabbinic authorities for its handling of received chronology and legend. The reintroduction of Philo to Jewish letters arrived, appropriately enough, in a volume that was itself condemned.

What Philo demonstrated is that the operation could be performed: that the Torah would sustain philosophical reading without being reduced to philosophy, and that a man could hold the two in one hand. What the reception of Philo demonstrates is how narrow the margin was. The performance was flawless, and the audience left.

The operation would have to be invented again, in another language, far to the east, and eight centuries later.

I.3

Baghdad and the Cities of Spain

In the spring of 922 the Jews of Babylonia and the Jews of Palestine kept Passover on different days.

The disagreement was arithmetical. Aaron ben Meir, who headed the academy in Palestine, had announced a calculation that shifted the festivals by two days, and he had the traditional right of the Land of Israel to proclaim the calendar on his side. The academies of Iraq had the weight of numbers and the practice of generations on theirs. Two days is nothing; two days is the difference between eating leavened bread and committing a sin for which the Torah prescribes being cut off from the people. For two years the question of who could say what day it was split the Jewish world.

The man who broke the deadlock for Babylonia was an Egyptian in his late thirties who held no office at all. Saadia ben Joseph, from the Fayyum, had arrived in Iraq with a reputation built on grammar and polemic, and he circulated letters and calculations until the communities followed Baghdad. Six years later the exilarch made him head of the academy at Sura.¹

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Two years after the appointment, Saadia refused to sign a judgment the exilarch wanted signed. The case concerned an inheritance and a fee; the principle concerned whether the head of an academy was an officer of the exilarch or an independent authority in law.

David ben Zakkai deposed him and appointed a replacement. Saadia deposed David ben Zakkai and appointed a rival exilarch.² Each excommunicated the other. The caliph's court was drawn in, money changed hands on both sides, and Saadia lost — losing an argument with the head of the Jewish community of Iraq was not, in the end, a close-run thing. He spent something like seven years out of office in Baghdad, writing.

One of the works from those years, *Sefer ha-Galui*, was a defense of his own conduct written in biblical Hebrew and laid out with accents and verse divisions, in the manner of Scripture. The gesture is not

modest. He was reconciled with the exilarch around 937, returned to Sura, and died there in 942, in his sixtieth year.

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The book that mattered was finished in the middle of the quarrel, in 933.

The Book of Beliefs and Opinions is the earliest systematic exposition of rabbinic Judaism as a philosophical theology, and its preface says exactly who it was written for. Saadia had watched men sink in doubt.³ Some had drowned in it; some were floating and did not know how to reach land. He was writing for people whose inherited faith had stopped being obvious to them, and he thought that condition treatable by argument.

His tools came from Arabic kalām, the disputational theology of the Muslim schools, whose questions he shared and whose methods he adapted. Greek philosophy reached him through Arabic, and Aristotle governs nothing in his system.

The core claim is that reason and revelation deliver the same content. Unaided reason can establish that the world was created, that it had a creator, that the creator is one, and that human beings are obliged to act justly. Revelation states the same truths and adds what reason could never derive — that the animal must be slaughtered thus, that the day of rest is the seventh. Saadia divides the commandments accordingly: those whose value the mind can see for itself, and those known only because they were commanded.

The division is elegant and it costs something. Once a rational floor has been laid under the law, the rest of the building invites a question. What is the purpose of the commandments the mind cannot justify?⁴ Saadia has answers, and Maimonides would have better ones, and the question never went away.

On creation he is firm to the point of exhaustiveness: the world came into being after absolute nonexistence, by will and power, and he assembles proof after proof to close every exit.⁵ On freedom he is firmer. God knows what a man will do and does not thereby make him do it, because knowledge of an act is not the cause of the act.⁶ Reward and punishment presuppose that the deed belonged to the doer. Without that, the whole apparatus of commandment collapses into theatre.

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There was a reason a man of Saadia's generation had to argue rather than assert, and its name was Karaism.

The Karaites held that Scripture alone binds, and that the rabbis had built a vast legal structure on authority they did not possess. The challenge was not philosophical. It was practical and it was winning converts, and it went to the root: if the written text is sufficient, the Oral Torah is an imposition dressed as a revelation.

Saadia attacked them for most of his life, and his counter-argument is worth stating because it is not a claim about authority at all. Scripture alone is unusable.⁷ The text says to slaughter as I have commanded you, and describes no method. It forbids work on the Sabbath and does not define work. It is written in a language whose words are known only because their meaning was transmitted by people who used them. A reader who declines all tradition cannot get as far as construing the sentence he proposes to obey.

The same conviction produced the rest of his output. He translated the Bible into Arabic, with interpretation folded into the translation, so that Jews whose daily language was Arabic could read their own Scripture — smoothing away the anthropomorphisms as he went, which is a theological decision made silently in a work of translation. He wrote the first Hebrew dictionary and the first systematic Hebrew grammar in the tradition. Much of the polemic survives only in fragments recovered from a storeroom in Cairo.

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Solomon ibn Gabirol was a poet, and by most accounts an unbearable one.

Solomon ibn Gabirol was born in Málaga around 1021, lost his father early, and lived most of a short life in Zaragoza. He was writing formidable Hebrew verse at sixteen. He was also sick, disfigured by some skin disease, dependent on patrons, and incapable of flattering them; his poems record with equal fluency his contempt for the men around him and his knowledge that his contempt was ruining him. He seems to have died somewhere between 1053 and 1058, still under forty.

His philosophical work is called *The Source of Life*, written in Arabic as a dialogue between a teacher and a pupil, and it contains

something remarkable.⁸ There is no verse of Scripture in it. No rabbinic citation. No reference to Israel, the commandments, or the covenant. A Jewish poet who wrote one of the great liturgical poems of the Hebrew language produced a metaphysics from which every trace of his religion has been removed.

The doctrine is Neoplatonic and it makes one move of its own. Everything that exists apart from God is composed of matter and form, including the things that have no bodies — souls, intelligences, the whole spiritual hierarchy. Matter, in this scheme, is not what a physicist means. It is whatever underlies and receives, at every level, and the universe is a single ladder of it. Between the First Essence, which is beyond knowing, and everything else, ibn Gabirol places the Divine Will, which creates and moves and holds the levels together — a term doing something like the work Philo's Logos had done, arrived at independently.

Then the book vanished into another language, and its author vanished with it.

The Arabic original was lost. What survived was a Latin translation, *Fons Vitae*, made in twelfth-century Toledo, and Latin Christendom took it up seriously. The doctrine that spiritual substances contain matter became a live scholastic question; Aquinas argued against it at length.⁹ The author was known as Avicebron, and was assumed to be a Muslim, or possibly a Christian. Nobody suspected a Jew, because nothing in the book suggests one.

The identification was made in 1846 by Solomon Munk, in Paris, who noticed that a set of Hebrew excerpts compiled by Shem Tov ibn Falaquera in the thirteenth century matched the Latin text passage for passage.¹⁰ Falaquera had translated them directly from the Arabic and named their author. Eight hundred years after his death, ibn Gabirol got his name back.

What he had never lost was the other half of himself. Keter Malkhut, The Crown of Kingship, moves from the Divine attributes out through the spheres and the angels and down into the body and the soul, and ends in confession. It entered the liturgy of the Day of Atonement, where it is still recited. The man who wrote philosophy without a single Jewish word wrote it, and the congregation that says it has mostly never heard of *Fons Vitae*.

Judah Halevi thought both projects were mistaken.

Judah Halevi was born around 1075, probably at Tudela, and was the finest Hebrew poet of a period that had several. He wrote wine songs and love poems and elegies and hundreds of liturgical pieces; he also wrote a small group of odes to Zion whose first line is quoted by people who can quote nothing else in medieval Hebrew: my heart is in the East, and I am at the far edge of the West.¹¹

His one work of prose argument is known as the *Kuzari*, and its full Arabic title announces the program — a book of refutation and proof on behalf of the despised religion. It takes the historical conversion of the Khazar kingdom and turns it into a frame. The king dreams repeatedly that an angel tells him his intentions please God and his actions do not. He summons a philosopher, then a Christian, then a Muslim, and finally, with reluctance, a Jew.

The philosopher goes first and is dispatched first. His God is the conclusion of an argument: perfect, unchanging, thinking only Himself, unaware of the king and unable to be moved by him. Halevi's objection is not that this God is unprovable. It is that if the argument succeeded, it would give the king nothing. You cannot pray to a conclusion.¹²

Then the Jew is asked what he believes, and his answer is the hinge of the book. He does not begin with the maker of heaven and earth. He says he believes in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who brought the Israelites out of Egypt with signs and wonders, and sustained them, and gave them the Land.¹³

The king is taken aback and says so: he had expected something about the creator of the world. The reply is that beginning there is the philosophers' way, and it produces opinions, of which there are as many as there are philosophers. What Israel has is not an inference. It is testimony — an entire people present at one event, who saw, and who told their children, who told theirs. Halevi is prepared to rest the whole structure on a chain of witnesses and to say openly that this is a weaker foundation by philosophy's standards and a stronger one by any standard that matters.

The rest of the book follows from that. Prophecy is not the reward of intellectual perfection, which is what the philosophers said and what Maimonides would say again. It depends on a capacity Halevi calls the Divine Order, transmitted in a line from Adam through the patriarchs

and inhering in Israel as a people. The Land of Israel is uniquely suited to it. Hebrew is the first language and the best.

This is the most uncomfortable position in medieval Jewish philosophy for a modern reader, and softening it would be dishonest. Halevi is making a claim about constitutional difference between Israel and the nations, and he means it. He also, in the same book, compares Israel to the heart among the organs: the most sensitive part of the body, which feels every disorder anywhere in it, and which is for that reason the sickest organ there is.¹⁴ Election, in his hands, is a diagnosis rather than a privilege.

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Around 1140, in his sixties, Halevi sold what he had, left Spain, and set out for the Land of Israel.

The traditional story of what happened next is that he reached the gates of Jerusalem, prostrated himself, began to recite his ode to Zion, and was ridden down and killed by an Arab horseman. It is a superb story and there is no early evidence for it; the earliest version comes from a chronicle written more than four hundred years afterward.

The documentary record is less shapely and much better.¹⁵ Letters and accounts recovered from the Cairo Geniza, and worked over in the last century, put Halevi in Alexandria and then in Fustat, delayed, feted, pressed by admirers to stay, arranging money and passage. He was an old and famous man being made much of, and the making-much-of was part of what kept him. The documents show him boarding a ship at Alexandria in the spring of 1141. He was dead within a few months. Whether he ever stood on the shore he had written about for forty years, nobody knows.

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Three responses, then, to the arrival of Greek philosophy in Arabic dress.

Saadia took its instruments and used them to defend the tradition, and made rational demonstration a permanent part of Jewish theology. Ibn Gabirol went in without looking back, wrote metaphysics of a purity that left no room for his own people in it, and lost his name for eight

centuries. Halevi mastered the philosophers' arguments in order to refuse them, and staked everything on a history that no argument could produce.

All three were possible because all three wrote in Arabic, inside a civilization where these questions were being fought over in every direction at once. Another answer would come from the same world, from a man who had read all of them, and it would push the first road so much further than Saadia had that Halevi's objection would be raised against it for the next four hundred years.

I.4

Maimonides and the Storm After

Somewhere around 1178, in Fustat, Moshe ben Maimon finished a book of fourteen volumes and wrote an introduction to it containing one of the most provocative sentences in the history of Jewish letters. A man should read the Written Torah first, he says, and then read this, and he will know the whole of the Oral Torah, and he will not need any other book between the two.¹

The claim is immense. The entire accumulation — Mishnah, two Talmuds, the geonic responsa, the codes, the commentaries, the arguments of a thousand years — has been digested, adjudicated, and set out in ordered Hebrew prose, and the reader may now have the results without the process. The Mishneh Torah covers everything, including the laws of sacrifice and purity that had not been practicable since the Temple fell and would not be practicable again in any foreseeable world. And it names no sources. Where the Talmud preserves the dispute, Maimonides gives the ruling, unattributed, in a voice that does not argue.

Abraham ben David of Posquières read it and began writing objections in the margins, and his glosses have travelled bound into the text ever since, which is a kind of poetic justice. His complaint went to the heart of the thing. Maimonides had abandoned the way of all authors before him, said Rabad, by omitting the sources; and now, when someone finds an error, there is no way to check the work.²

A tradition whose central habit was the recording of dissent had been handed a book that recorded none.

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The man who did that was a refugee, and had been one since childhood.

He was born in Córdoba in 1138 — possibly 1135; the sources permit both — into a family of judges. In 1148 the Almohads took the city. Their programme in al-Andalus left Jews and Christians a narrower choice than the Muslim law they claimed to be restoring had ever required, and the family went on the road for something like a dozen

years, moving through southern Spain and then to Fez, which was Almohad territory and therefore no safer.

What the family did to survive those years is a genuine and unresolved question. An Arabic source of the following century states that Maimonides professed Islam outwardly in Fez and returned to Judaism in Egypt. Some historians accept the report; others regard it as hostile invention. What is certain is that he wrote a treatise for Jews living under exactly that pressure, arguing against those who told them that a coerced verbal profession made them apostates — a man who says the words with a knife at his throat has not left his people, and the rabbi denouncing him from safety should consider his own position.³ Whether the argument was personal cannot be established.

They left Fez in 1165 by sea, landed at Acre, went up to Jerusalem and Hebron, and came down into Egypt. His father died soon after. In 1168 he finished his commentary on the whole Mishnah, in Judeo-Arabic, having begun it at twenty-three on the move — the introductions to it contain his eight chapters on the soul and the thirteen principles of belief that would later be versified and sung in synagogues by people with no idea where they came from.⁴

Then his brother drowned.

David ben Maimon supported the household by trading in precious stones, which left Moshe free to study; on a voyage in the Indian Ocean the ship went down with David and with the family's money aboard. A letter survives in which Maimonides describes what followed.⁵ He lay ill for a year, feverish and in despair. Eight years later, he writes, the wound has not closed, and it will not close: everything that consoles him reopens it, because every good thing reminds him that his brother is not there to see it.

He was then responsible for the widow, the child, and himself, and he would not take money for teaching Torah. So he practised medicine. He rose to be a physician in the household of Saladin's chief minister, and for the last decades of his life he was also the effective head of the Jewish community of Egypt.

The letter he wrote to his Hebrew translator about his daily routine has been quoted for eight hundred years and deserves to be.⁶ He rides to Cairo in the morning. If nothing is wrong at the palace he is back in Fustat by afternoon, ravenous, to find the courtyard filled — Jews and gentiles, officials and poor men, waiting since morning. He eats his one meal of the day, treats patients until nightfall and often for two hours

after it, and by the end is speaking to them lying down from weakness. On the Sabbath the community comes to study, and they arrange the week's business, and at midday they leave and some of them come back after the afternoon prayer. Do not expect, he tells his translator, to find an hour in which I am free.

The Guide for the Perplexed was written in that hour.

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It was written for one man, and it says so.

Joseph ben Judah had come to Egypt to study with Maimonides, had shown the aptitude and the trouble that go together, and had left. The Guide is addressed to him and to readers in his condition: men trained in Torah who have also studied philosophy and discovered that the two will not sit in the same head. Such a man, Maimonides says, is left in perplexity — he either abandons the intellect and lives with the wound, or abandons what he was raised on and loses more than he knows.

Before the argument starts, the reader is warned about the book he is holding. Maimonides lists the causes that produce contradictions in written works, and states plainly that his own book contains contradictions belonging to certain of those causes, deliberately introduced.⁷ The chapters are out of order. The crucial statement will be made once, in passing, in a discussion of something else. He is writing about matters that the tradition holds should not be taught to more than one student at a time, and he has committed them to a book, and this is his compromise with that prohibition.

Eight centuries of readers have therefore disagreed about what the Guide actually says. The disagreement is not a failure of scholarship. It was designed in.

What can be stated flatly is the demolition it performs on language about God. Every attribute predicated of the Divine essence introduces composition, and composition is incompatible with unity, so nothing positive can be said of what God is. The way forward is negation.⁸ To say God is not corporeal, not affected, not subject to change, not multiple, is to remove errors; each removal brings the mind nearer, and the destination is never reached. The biblical language of hand and face and anger is accommodation. Scripture speaks in the language of human

beings, and a reader who takes it literally is not being pious but worshipping something that does not exist.

On the origin of the world he does something more interesting than either side wanted. He reconstructs Aristotle's case for eternity at full strength, better than most Aristotelians could, and then observes that it is not a demonstration.⁹ It is persuasive, and it is not proof. And he adds, in the same breath, that had it been proof he would have reinterpreted the opening of Genesis without hesitation, exactly as he reinterprets the verses that give God a body. Scripture bends to demonstration. Creation stands not because the Torah says so but because the philosophers failed to close the argument.

That is the most radical sentence in medieval Jewish philosophy, and it is placed where a hurried reader will pass over it.

Prophecy he treats as a natural perfection that God may withhold.¹⁰ The prophet needs a developed intellect, a disciplined character, and an imaginative faculty of extraordinary power; without the preparation there is no prophecy, and with the preparation there may still be none, because the will of God can prevent it. Evil he treats as privation — illness the absence of health, ignorance the absence of knowledge — and adds that most of what men suffer they do to each other or to themselves, and that the man who arraigns the universe is usually a man judging the whole of creation by the state of his own appetites.¹¹

And the commandments have reasons. All of them. Maimonides refuses the position that the law is inscrutable, and then applies his principle to the sacrificial cult, and concludes that God permitted sacrifice because a people formed in Egypt could not have been brought to worship without it — a transitional concession, a ladder to be climbed and left.¹² He was not forgiven for that paragraph.

Near the end he offers a parable. A ruler is in his palace. Some subjects live outside the city walls and have no notion of him. Some face the city and walk away from it. Some come toward the palace and cannot find it.¹³ Some reach the walls and walk around them without locating the entrance. Some get inside and wander the antechambers. And a few come into the presence and speak with him. Maimonides then places the classes: the men who have studied law and tradition their whole lives and never asked a philosophical question are the ones circling the walls. They are close. They are outside.

That, in a book by the man who had just codified the entire law, is a provocation of a high order

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He died in 1204 and was buried at Tiberias. The storm arrived within a generation.

Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation, done in consultation with Maimonides himself, put the Guide into the hands of communities in Provence and northern Spain who read no Arabic and had no preparation for it. What reached them was not the Guide alone but the Book of Knowledge, the philosophical opening of the Mishneh Torah, in which the resurrection of the dead is handled briefly and the world to come is described as an existence of intellects without bodies.

In the 1230s Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier and his circle placed the philosophical works under ban. Defenders answered with counter-bans. Letters went out across the Mediterranean; delegations travelled; David Kimhi, elderly and ill, went from town to town in Spain arguing for the dead man. Nahmanides, whose authority both sides wanted, attempted a settlement that satisfied nobody, and warned the northern rabbis that they were condemning a man they had not read in a language they did not know.

Then copies of Maimonides' works were burned at Montpellier by the Dominicans, and the charge went round the Jewish world that the anti-Maimonideans had denounced their own tradition's books to the friars.¹⁴ Whether the accusation was true has been argued about ever since and cannot be settled from the surviving evidence. That it was believed is beyond dispute, and it poisoned the quarrel permanently.

The fight went dormant and revived. In 1305 Solomon ibn Adret of Barcelona, the leading legal authority of his generation, issued a ban on the study of Greek philosophy and natural science by anyone under the age of twenty-five.¹⁵ Medicine was exempted. The compromise tells you the shape of the anxiety: the danger was not knowledge but knowledge acquired before a man's loyalties had set.

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Two men afterward took the Maimonidean method further than its author, and each broke something.

Levi ben Gershom worked in Provence in the first half of the fourteenth century, and worked at everything: Talmud, biblical commentary, mathematics, logic, astronomy. He built an instrument for

measuring the angular distance between stars that was used by European navigators for centuries, and he compiled astronomical tables that Latin readers wanted translated. There is a crater on the moon named for him.

His philosophical book is called *The Wars of the Lord*. His opponents called it *the Wars against the Lord*, and they had a case.

Maimonides had held that God's knowledge is unlike ours and that the question of how it coexists with human freedom lies beyond us. Gersonides refused the refuge.¹⁶ If God knows in advance which way a man will choose, the man cannot choose otherwise, and no amount of insisting that Divine knowledge is different will dissolve the contradiction. So he took the other exit. God knows the order of things and everything that follows necessarily from it; contingent particulars, precisely as contingent, He does not know until they occur. Freedom is preserved and omniscience is qualified, and Gersonides says so without flinching. On creation he broke the other way, arguing against creation from nothing and for the shaping of a pre-existing formless body.

Hasdai Crescas attacked from the opposite direction, and he attacked the foundation.

He was crown rabbi of Aragon and a man who had reason to distrust intellectual consolation. In the massacres of 1391 his only son was killed at Barcelona; Crescas wrote the account of those months himself, in Hebrew, community by community.

His *Light of the Lord* begins by observing that the whole Maimonidean structure rests on Aristotelian physics, and then dismantles the physics.¹⁷ He argues that a vacuum is possible, that an actual infinite magnitude involves no contradiction, that the Aristotelian definition of place fails. Each of these is a load-bearing element in the proofs of God's existence that Maimonides had adopted from the philosophers, and Crescas is not defending those proofs — he is showing that they collapse, and that God must be known some other way.

His alternative is that the Divine essence is goodness, and that what God does is love. The purpose of the commandments is not to perfect the intellect but to attach the soul to God through love, which is available to people who will never read a syllogism. On human freedom he moves toward necessity, and accepts the consequence more calmly than most.

Two and a half centuries later a young man in Amsterdam, working through the Hebrew library available to him, would take from Crescas

the arguments about infinity and the necessity of the divine nature, cite him by name in a letter, and put them to a use that would have appalled him.

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The controversy that broke out over the Guide in the 1230s was fought in Provence and Catalonia, in the same towns, in the same decades, by some of the same men who were then circulating a very different kind of book — one that offered no proofs at all, that spoke in parables about a king and his daughter and a spring in a garden, and that claimed to be older than anything the philosophers had.

Nahmanides was arbitrating the Maimonidean quarrel with one hand. With the other he was writing commentary containing hints he refused to explain, addressed to readers who already knew what he meant.

I.5

Provence to Castile: Kabbalah Appears

Around 1180, in the towns of southern France, a book began to circulate that had no author, no argument, and no beginning.

It opens on a verse from Job about men who cannot see the light in the skies, and takes its name from one word in that verse — *bahir*, bright.¹ What follows is a few dozen pages of fragments in Hebrew and Aramaic: a question with no context, an answer that does not fit the question, a comment on the shape of a letter, a parable introduced with the formula to what may this be compared, and then a new subject without a transition. A king had a daughter and gave her to a servant. A king planted trees in his garden and dug a spring to water them. A king had a treasure and hid it. The book almost never says what the king stands for.

Tradition attributed it to a sage of the first century. That attribution is not credible and was probably not meant to be tested, and where the material actually came from is a question with no settled answer; parts of it are demonstrably old, and the compilation is not.

What matters is what was inside it, because nothing quite like it had been written before.

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The *Bahir* speaks of ten *sefirot* by which heaven and earth were sealed, and connects them with the ten fingers a priest raises to bless and with the ten utterances at Sinai. The word had appeared centuries earlier, in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, where it belonged to a different vocabulary altogether. Here it means something else: powers within God, distinct from one another, in relation to one another, and describable.

No fixed sequence has emerged yet. A power appears as light in one passage and as wisdom in another, and elsewhere as a crown, a root, a heart, a daughter, a king's treasure. The doctrine that later Kabbalah would set out in ordered diagrams is here still liquid, moving between images, and the book seems to prefer it that way.

Three things in it would prove decisive. The powers are inside the Godhead, which means that describing them is describing God, not describing something God made. One of them is feminine, and the

relations among them include union and separation, which opens a language for the divine that the philosophers had spent three centuries closing off. And human action reaches them — a commandment performed below has an effect above.

At the same moment, the Guide for the Perplexed was stripping away every positive statement about the Divine essence as an offence against unity. The two books were written within a generation of each other. They are not two positions in one debate. They are two different accounts of what it is even possible to say.

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The material passed from Provence into Catalonia, and the man at the crossing point was blind.

Isaac the Blind was the son of Abraham ben David of Posquières, the same Rabad whose objections crowd the margins of the Mishneh Torah. He was the first figure we can identify who taught the sefirot as a systematic doctrine and had disciples who wrote it down, and he is the reason the tradition has a name attached to its beginning at all.

He also objected to what his students were doing with it. A letter survives from him to the circle in Gerona, complaining that these matters were being spoken of openly, written down, and spread among people unprepared for them.² The founder of the school was already trying to close a door that his own pupils had opened.

He lost. The Gerona circle — Ezra ben Solomon, Azriel, and others around them — wrote commentaries that gave the doctrine order and put it into circulation. Within two generations the esoteric tradition had a literature.

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And it had Nahmanides, which changed everything.

Moshe ben Nahman of Girona, born in 1194, was not a marginal enthusiast. He was the outstanding talmudist of his generation in Christian Spain, a physician by trade, the man both parties in the Maimonidean quarrel wanted on their side, and eventually the figure to whom the crown of Aragon turned when it wanted a Jew who could speak for the Jews. His novellae on the Talmud are still studied. His defense of the earlier authorities against their critics is a monument of legal argument.

That man wrote a commentary on the Torah in which, at intervals, he says: and by way of truth, such-and-such. Then he stops. The hint is a few words long, it presupposes the sefirotic doctrine, and it explains nothing. In his introduction he tells the reader flatly not to attempt to work these passages out — that no reasoning will reach them, that they can be received only from the mouth of a teacher, and that a clever man deducing his way into them will come to grief.

The instruction was ignored immediately and permanently. Supercommentaries appeared whose entire purpose was to decode Nahmanides' hints, and they are still being written.³

His endorsement did something no argument could have done. Kabbalah stopped being a private tradition of a few families in Provence and became a thing that the most respected legal authority in Spain evidently believed. He never defended it, never expounded it, and never apologized for it. He simply wrote as though it were true, in a book about the Torah that every literate Jew would read.

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In July of 1263 he was ordered to Barcelona to defend Judaism in public.

The initiative came from the Dominicans, working with a convert from Judaism named Pablo Christiani who had a new method: rather than attacking the Talmud, he would prove Christianity out of it. The rabbis' own literature, he argued, contains passages showing that the Messiah has already come. King James of Aragon presided, in his palace, over four sessions.

Nahmanides was in an impossible position and he knew it. He obtained a promise of free speech before he would begin, and then made a move that has been argued about ever since. Not everything in rabbinic literature binds a Jew's belief. There are three kinds of books, he said: Scripture, which we accept entirely; the Talmud, which explains the commandments and is authoritative in law; and the homiletic material, the aggadah, which is a preacher's book — a man may believe it or not, as it seems right to him.⁴

With that distinction he removed the ground from Christiani's method at a stroke, and he paid a price for it that Jewish thinkers have been paying since. He had conceded, in public, before a king, that a large part of the tradition is not binding.

He also said the hardest thing in the room. The real difficulty between us, he told the king, is not the Messiah. It is that you believe of God something that reason cannot carry: that the Creator of heaven and earth was in the womb of a Jewish woman, was born, was killed. That, he said, no Jew and no reasonable man can accept — and he said it to a Christian monarch surrounded by Dominicans.

The king dismissed the assembly and, by Nahmanides' account, said he had never heard a wrong cause so well defended. Then Nahmanides went home and wrote out what had been said. The Dominicans read the account, charged him with blasphemy, and pressed for punishment. The king shielded him and then could not. In 1267, aged seventy-three, he left Spain and did not return.

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He reached the Land of Israel and went up to Jerusalem, and wrote to his son about what he found there.

The city was ruined and mostly empty; the greater the sanctity of a place, he observes, the greater its desolation.⁵ He found two brothers who were dyers, who bought the right to their trade from the governor, and who gathered a minyan in their house on the Sabbath. He got hold of Torah scrolls that had been taken to Nablus and brought them back and founded a synagogue. He tells his son that he is writing this letter in Jerusalem, and that he left his family and his household and his sons and his home and his soul is with them.

He died in 1270. Nobody is sure where he is buried.

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The Zohar came out of Castile, and it is a world rather than a treatise.

The Zohar follows the weekly portions of the Torah, and it is presented as the teaching of Shimon bar Yoḥai, a sage of the second century, and the companions who travel with him. They walk through the Galilee. They meet a donkey driver who turns out to know more than any of them. They stop under a tree and one of them opens with a verse, and the verse opens into the relations among the divine powers, and the discourse ends and they walk on. Someone weeps. Someone

kisses the speaker on the head. The frame is not decoration; the teaching is inseparable from the walking and the company and the road.

The language is Aramaic, and it is nobody's Aramaic. It is a literary construction — the Aramaic of the Talmud reworked, stretched, given cadences and vocabulary that no one ever spoke, in order to sound like the second century to readers of the thirteenth.

The corpus is not one book. Sections differ in style, language, and period. There is the main body of homilies; a stratum in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic much occupied with the soul, death, and the world to come; a set of extraordinarily compressed texts on the configurations of the divine, and the great assemblies in which those compressed texts are expanded — including the scene in which Shimon bar Yoḥai, dying, discloses what he withheld all his life, and the room fills with fire.⁶

What the Zohar teaches cannot be summarized without being falsified. Two things can nevertheless be said without doing so. The first is that the Torah, in its reading, has a body and a soul, and that a man who attends only to the narrative surface is looking at clothes and calling them a person. The second is that human action carries weight in the upper world — that a commandment performed with the right intention strengthens a union above, and a transgression feeds the other side and lengthens an exile that is not only Israel's.

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The manuscripts began to appear in the last decades of the thirteenth century, in Castile, and their circulation is associated with Moses de León, who died in 1305.⁷ What that association amounts to — editor, transmitter, author, or something the categories do not fit — has been the central question of Zohar scholarship for a hundred years.

The book's authority grew slowly and then irreversibly. It was one esoteric text among several in the fourteenth century. After 1492 it travelled with the exiles into North Africa, Italy, and the Ottoman lands, and it acquired a status no other post-talmudic work has held. It was printed at Mantua and Cremona at the end of the 1550s, over the objections of rabbis who thought the printing press was precisely the wrong instrument for a book of secrets, and the objectors were right about what would happen and could not stop it.

Within a generation of those printings, in a small town in the Galilee where a number of the exiles' grandchildren had settled, men were reading the Zohar as a map — and one of them concluded that it described a catastrophe.

I.6

Safed: A World in Pieces

In the middle of the sixteenth century a hill town in the Upper Galilee with a few thousand Jews in it produced the law code that Jewish practice still runs on, the hymn sung on Friday night in every synagogue on earth, the first systematic exposition of Kabbalah, and the doctrine that would reorganize Jewish religious life for the next three hundred years.

Safed had none of the obvious qualifications. It was small, remote, and poor by the standards of the cities the exiles had come from. What it had was Ottoman rule, which after 1517 meant that Jews could live there without asking anyone; a wool and cloth trade that made a living possible; and a hillside a few miles away at Meron where Shimon bar Yoḥai was believed to be buried.

That last item is not decoration. The men who gathered at Safed had the Zohar in print for the first time, and they were living beside the grave of the sage whose voice speaks in it. They went out to that grave and to the graves of the other early sages, and prayed there, and performed exercises there, and believed that souls answered.

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The concentration of talent in that town, in one generation, has no parallel that I know of in Jewish history.

Joseph Karo was there, compiling the *Shulḥan Arukh*. Shlomo Alkabetz was there, and one Friday afternoon he and his companions walked out into the fields to meet the Sabbath as a bride, and he wrote a poem for the occasion which is now sung by congregations that have never heard his name. Moshe Cordovero was there, and Moshe Alshekh, and Eliezer Azikri, who wrote another poem that is still sung. Isaac Luria arrived at the end.

Two facts capture the atmosphere.

The first is that Joseph Karo — the most cautious legal mind of his century, the man whose rulings govern Sephardi practice to this day — kept a diary of visitations.¹ A voice spoke through his mouth, at night and sometimes in company, identifying itself with the Mishnah personified, praising him, rebuking him, promising him that he would

be burned at the stake for the sanctification of the Name. He recorded these communications for decades. The book survives. The author of the *Shulḥan Arukh* believed that an angel dictated to him, and his colleagues believed it too.

The second is that in 1538 a group of Safed rabbis attempted to restore the ordination that had lapsed sometime in late antiquity, on the reasoning that a restored Sanhedrin would be needed for the redemption, which they expected. The attempt was blocked by the rabbis of Jerusalem on procedural grounds and collapsed. What matters is that it was attempted. These were not men speculating about the end of days as a theological topic. They were making arrangements.

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Moshe Cordovero came to a tradition that had accumulated for three hundred years without ever being tidied.

The *Zohar* contradicts itself. The Provençal and Geronese kabbalists had used the same terms differently. Sefirot were numbered one way in one book and another way in another; symbols overlapped; whole systems of correspondence had been built independently and did not agree. Anyone who wanted to know what Kabbalah taught had to decide first which Kabbalah.

Cordovero finished the *Pardes Rimmonim* — the Orchard of Pomegranates — in 1548, at the age of twenty-six. It sorts the whole inheritance into topics, states the positions, weighs them, and rules. It is the work of a first-class legal mind applied to mysticism, and it made Kabbalah teachable.

The question it exists to answer is the one that had been implicit since the *Bahir*. If the sefirot are within God, then God has ten parts and the whole edifice of Jewish monotheism is finished. If they are outside God, then Kabbalah is worshipping intermediaries and the philosophers were right to be alarmed.

Cordovero's formula is a knife-edge: He is they, and they are not He. The sefirot are the Divine essence acting through instruments; the essence is entirely present in each and is not identical with any. To make this graspable he offers the image that everyone afterward borrowed. Water is poured into glass vessels of different colours.² In the white vessel it appears white, in the red red, in the green green. The water has not changed. What differs is the vessel and the eye.

He also wrote a commentary on the whole of the Zohar so vast that it was not printed until the twentieth century, and one small book that outlasted both.

Tomer Devorah takes the sefirot and turns them into an ethics.³ Since the human being is made in the image of the divine, and the divine acts through these attributes, a man's business is to make his conduct resemble them. Under Keter he must be endlessly patient, bearing insult without withdrawing goodwill from the one who insulted him. Under Hesed he must give beyond what is owed. Under Gevurah he must hold his anger in and use it only where it serves. The book is short, practical, and unsentimental, and it converts a cosmology into a discipline for behaving decently. It is the finest thing to come out of Safed and the least famous.

Cordovero died in 1570. The tradition reports that a pillar of fire followed his bier, that Isaac Luria was among the few who saw it, and that Luria took this as the sign of his own succession.⁴ The report belongs to the hagiographic literature that grew up around Luria afterward. What is certain is that Cordovero died, and that within a very short time the system he had spent his life ordering was superseded by the teaching of a man who had been in the town for a matter of months.

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Yitzḥak Luria was born in Jerusalem in 1534, to an Ashkenazi father and a Sephardi mother. The father died early. The mother took the boy to Egypt, to a wealthy uncle, and he was raised there and educated in the Talmud by a first-rate teacher — his early training was legal and thorough, which matters, because what he later produced is often described as though it came out of a trance.

Then he withdrew. The accounts say he spent some years in seclusion on an island in the Nile, studying the Zohar alone, coming home only for the Sabbath, and eventually not speaking except in Hebrew and only when he had to. The accounts come from his disciples and from a collection of stories assembled afterward, and they have the shape of hagiography, and something like that period of solitude probably occurred.

He arrived in Safed in 1569 or 1570. He taught for about two and a half years. In the summer of 1572 an epidemic went through the town and he died of it, aged thirty-eight.

He wrote almost nothing. A commentary on part of the Zohar, and three Aramaic poems for the Sabbath meals — that is close to the whole of what came from his own hand. Everything else that bears his name was written down by other people, from what they remembered him saying.

His circle was small, perhaps a few dozen men with an inner group of ten or so. He told each of them where his soul came from — every soul, on his teaching, being a spark of the soul of the first man, so that each has a particular root and a particular repair that only he can perform. He assigned each disciple his own work accordingly. They went out to the graves in the hills and lay on them and performed unifications there. He is said to have read a man's soul-history from his forehead.

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What he taught can be stated in four movements. The shape of the doctrine is what everything afterward reacted to.

Before anything else, God is all there is, without limit and without a place in which something else might be. So the first act of creation is a withdrawal. God contracts, leaving a void — not a place empty of God in any simple sense, but a space in which something that is not God can exist at all. Into that space a single thin line of light is drawn.

The light is then to be received by vessels, and the vessels are made to receive it, and they fail.⁵ The light is too strong for them. They shatter. Fragments fall, and clinging to the fragments are sparks of the light they were meant to hold, and these are caught among the shards in the lower world, where the shards become husks — the powers of concealment and impurity, which have no life of their own and live on the sparks they imprison.

Everything that exists, including this world, is the aftermath of that failure. Repair means gathering: separating the sparks from what holds them, raising them, restoring the relations that broke. And the work is assigned to human beings, through the commandments, performed with the right intention. Nobody else is going to do it.

That reorganizes the whole account. Creation no longer begins with a sovereign act producing a good world that human beings then spoil. It begins with withdrawal and proceeds through catastrophe, and the human being arrives late, into a wreck, holding the only tools that will repair it. Exile is not a punishment that befell Israel; it is the condition

of the sparks, of the Shekhinah, and of the world as such. And a man eating a meal with the proper intention is doing cosmic work, which means a man eating a meal without it is not merely failing to help.

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Whether this system is a response to the expulsion from Spain remains the central interpretive question about it.⁶

The classic answer, argued most forcefully by Gershom Scholem, is that it is: that a catastrophe without precedent in Jewish memory demanded an account in which catastrophe is written into the structure of reality, that exile became a cosmic category because a whole people had been made to live it, and that this is why the doctrine spread as fast as it did. The reading is powerful, and it has the merit of explaining the reception.

The objections are also serious. Luria's circle wrote a great deal and did not, on the whole, write about 1492. Their preoccupations are with souls, transmigration, the details of intention in prayer, and the graves in the hills. Two generations separate the expulsion from the teaching. Scholars since have pointed out that the diffusion of Lurianic Kabbalah can be accounted for by other things — print, the prestige of Safed, the organizational energy of the disciples — without a collective trauma doing the work. The question remains open, and the elegant version is contested.

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Without Ḥayyim Vital none of it would have survived, and he is the strangest figure in the story.

He was born in Safed in 1542, studied first under Cordovero, and attached himself to Luria in the last two years. After Luria died, Vital claimed the teaching as his own charge. He required the other disciples to swear that they would not disseminate what they had learned, and set about writing it up himself: the great systematic exposition, the gates of intention, the gates of transmigration, in enormous and precise detail.

He also kept a private book of dreams.⁷ In it he records his own visions, other people's dreams about him, the declarations of a possessed woman concerning his stature, the assurances of various figures that he is the Messiah of the house of Joseph, and, alongside all of it, an unhappy and unresolved anxiety about whether any of it is true.

There is nothing else quite like it in Hebrew literature. The man who fixed the most demanding system of religious discipline in Jewish history was, on the evidence of his own diary, uncertain of himself for fifty years.

His guarding of the manuscripts was so effective that the tradition preserves an account of how the material escaped: that during an illness his brother was bribed, the writings removed for a few days, and a team of copyists set to work around the clock. The story may be embroidered. Something of the kind evidently happened, because the texts circulated in Vital's lifetime and against his will.

There was also a competitor. A man named Israel Sarug travelled in Italy and northern Europe presenting himself as Luria's disciple — a claim the surviving evidence does not support — and taught a version of the system with a more philosophical cast, particularly on the question of what the contraction of God actually means.⁸ It was Sarug's line, not Vital's, that reached Christian Europe and shaped what Christian readers took Kabbalah to be.

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Within two generations the Lurianic system had spread through Italy, the Ottoman lands, North Africa, Poland, and Germany. Its intentions entered the prayer books. Its fasts and vigils entered the calendar. Its account of transmigration entered ordinary belief.

And it carried an implication that nobody in Safed had stated as a prediction but that everyone could draw. If the sparks are being gathered, and if the work has been going on for as long as the world has existed, then the work has an end. Something like a countdown had been installed in the religious imagination of most of the Jewish world.

In 1665 a man in Gaza announced that the count had reached zero.

I.7

Amsterdam: The Sentence of 1656

The document that cut Baruch Spinoza out of his congregation is short, and it names no crime.

Written in Portuguese, read aloud in the Talmud Torah synagogue on the Houtgracht, dated the sixth of Av, 5416 — the twenty-seventh of July, 1656. Abominable heresies, the text says.¹ Monstrous deeds. The gentlemen of the ma'amad had known of these for some time; witnesses had come forward; the young man had been admonished and would not be moved. Then the curses, borrowed wholesale from Deuteronomy, waking and sleeping, going out and coming in. Then the ban: no member of the congregation may speak with him, write to him, or do him any service, and none may come within four cubits of where he stands. A final clause, which would age strangely, forbids the reading of anything he might write.

Not one sentence says what he thought.

This is the harshest sentence in the surviving records of the Portuguese community of Amsterdam, and it was passed on a merchant's son of twenty-three who had published nothing. Every reader since has had to supply the missing charge from the books Spinoza wrote afterward — which is to say, from evidence that did not yet exist on the day he was condemned.

He had been born into that community twenty-three years earlier, on the twenty-fourth of November, 1632. His people were anusim: Iberian Jews forced into Catholicism, who had crossed to the Dutch Republic and taken up openly what their parents had practised in cellars, or half-forgotten, or invented from rumour. In Amsterdam they were free to be Jews, which left them the harder problem of learning how. They built a school, imported rabbis, printed books, and reconstructed a tradition many of them had first encountered as a suspicion about their own grandparents. Michael d'Espinosa, Baruch's father, prospered in trade and served the congregation; when he died in 1654 the sons took over the firm.

A community assembling itself out of memory and books does not enjoy the luxury of tolerating a scandal. Dutch toleration was real, and it was also a permission that could be withdrawn. The Reformed clergy

took an interest, and so did the magistrates. The congregation had already seen what one unmanageable member could cost it.

Uriel da Costa had denied the immortality of the soul and the authority of the rabbis, been banned, recanted, been banned again.² In 1640 he submitted to the full ceremony of readmission: the public confession, the lash, and then his body laid across the threshold of the synagogue so that the congregation might step over him on the way out. He went home and shot himself. Spinoza was seven years old and lived a few streets away.

Sixteen years later the ma'amad was not dealing with an unknown quantity. It was dealing with the second case.

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What is remarkable about Spinoza's response is that there was none. No appeal was lodged. Da Costa had recanted; Juan de Prado, banned two years later, would try to; Spinoza did neither. Nor did he take the exit standing open, which would have ended the matter at a stroke. Baptism was available, respectable, and would have opened Leiden and Utrecht to him. He was never baptized. He left the congregation and joined nothing.

He changed only his name, and hardly that: Bento in Portuguese, Baruch in Hebrew, Benedictus in Latin. All three mean blessed, and he went on answering to it after the congregation had cursed him.

He studied Latin with Franciscus van den Enden, an ex-Jesuit who ran a school, staged plays with his pupils, held opinions about God and the state that alarmed the authorities, and was eventually hanged in Paris in 1674 for conspiring against Louis XIV. He learned to grind lenses, and did it well enough that the instrument-makers of the Republic respected the work. Glass dust settles in the lungs. It has often been supposed to have shortened a life already threatened by consumption, though the supposition is a modern one and the evidence for it is weak.

He lived in Rijnsburg, then Voorburg, then The Hague, in rented rooms, on a small annuity and what the lenses brought. In 1673 the Elector Palatine offered him a chair at Heidelberg with full freedom to philosophize, provided he did not use it to disturb the established religion.³ Spinoza answered that he did not know within what limits such freedom would have to be confined, and declined. It is the same refusal

as the first, in a politer setting. He would not accept a position that permitted him to think on condition.

The books arrived without his name. The Theological-Political Treatise was printed in Amsterdam in 1670 behind a false Hamburg imprint and a publisher who did not exist; the States of Holland banned it in 1674.⁴ The Ethics he withheld. It appeared in the Opera Posthuma in the year of his death, over the initials B.d.S., and was banned in its turn.

In November 1676 Leibniz came to The Hague and spent several days with him. Three months later, on the twenty-first of February, 1677, Spinoza died in his lodgings at forty-four.

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One story survives, if it can be trusted. Johannes Colerus, a Lutheran pastor who wrote in the 1700s and lodged in a house Spinoza had once occupied, reports an attempt on his life on the synagogue steps, and a cloak preserved with the knife-hole still in it. Colerus was not the first biographer — an anonymous life, usually attributed to Jean-Maximilien Lucas, was written within a year or two of Spinoza's death — but the knife belongs to Colerus, half a century after the event, at second hand, with no contemporary source to support it.⁵ Possibly it happened. But the story has the shape of an invention — a motive supplied for a departure that required none.

What can be established is the document, and the document withholds precisely what a reader wants from it: opinions condemned, and not one of them stated. Whether the young man of 1656 already held what the Ethics would argue twenty years later is not a question the ma'amad answered, and it is not one that can be settled from the sentence they passed.

The doctrines belong among the arguments, not among the lives. What matters is the shape of the break. Jewish philosophy had spent a thousand years asking how far reason might go before revelation must correct it. In Amsterdam a man raised on that question stopped answering it — and the tradition, for the first time, expelled the philosopher instead of arguing with him.