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## THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF NACHMANIDES — FROM HIS EXEGESIS OF THE MITZVOT

The purpose of this study is a critical portrayal of Nachmanides' fundamental religious teachings as compared to those of his great predecessors and contemporaries in the world of Jewish thought, as viewed from his attitude toward the mitzvot.

During the thirteenth century, in which Nachmanides lived, and prior to that, one can discern three major expositional systems of Jewish *Weltanschauung*: the Talmudical, the Philosophical, and the Mystical. Historically, these three expositions gained strength with their ability to explain and conceptually integrate the Divine commandments of the Torah, which represent the *modus vivendi* and *operandi* of Jewish living, into their respective systems of religious thought.

Nachmanides' genius displayed itself by his great profundity in all three expositional systems. As a brilliant Talmudist, he not only utilized his vast knowledge of halakhic and midrashic sources in the interpretation of the mitzvot, but also stressed the master-servant attitude, expounded by the Talmudists, as an essential ingredient in the fulfillment of the mitzvot. This approach is highlighted in his exegesis to the mitzvah of *Kiddush Hashem*—the sanctification of His name: "It is befitting to sanctify His name . . . because we are His servants, for He has redeemed us from Egypt."<sup>1</sup>

He also appears to have been well acquainted with the various philosophical trends of his time, often taking issue with them. Unlike Maimonides, Nachmanides opposed any attempt to syn-

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thesize the tenets of Torah tradition and those of Greek philosophy.

Thus, he freely airs his criticism of Aristotle, "the chief of the philosophers, may his name be erased" for his intellectual "cruelty" and "obstinacy," in that "he has denied things which many had seen, and whose truth we have realized, and which has become known to the world."<sup>2</sup>

He considered Torah knowledge far superior to that of philosophy and the sciences:

It is self-evident that the major benefit of a study of the sciences derives from its role as a handmaiden to this wisdom, which is called "the knowledge of the creator" . . . And the philosophers themselves agree that the benefit of all these sciences is to lead up to the science of first principles, which includes a study of the Separate Intelligences, the angels . . . until they reach the First Cause, blessed and elevated be His kingdom. Then they investigate how the creatures derived from The First Cause, and explain, or attempt to explain, other matters. However, doubts and differences of opinion develop, until even their chief philosopher failed to furnish evidence whether the universe is eternal or created, and arbitrarily preferred the idea of eternity . . . behold, in comparison, even a young Jewish child reads and knows more about Creation, for it gathers from the Torah what was created on the first, second day, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, he readily availed himself of his broad knowledge in the natural science of his day for exegetical purposes in his monumental commentary on the Bible.

However, despite his extensive exegetical activities in the Bible and the Talmud, and his comprehensive grasp of contemporary philosophical trends and of the natural sciences, the inner fibres of his sensitive personality were permeated by the spirit of the kabbalah, as then known to a select group of scholars in the small Spanish city of Gerona.

From his numerous kabbalistic hints and allusions throughout his Biblical exegesis, which at times penetrated even his Talmudical commentaries, emerges the portrait of a spiritual giant, whose soul, in ecstatic awe before the Divine, yearned for the revelation of God's ineffable mysterium in the universe. Although

the major part of Nachmanides' Biblical commentaries consists of Peshat, Halakhah and Aggadah with elucidations on philological, literary, scientific, juridical, and philosophical problems, one is unable to penetrate and fathom the roots and moorings of his religious thought without, at least, a partial mastery of his *Sitre Torah*, the hidden mystical teachings embedded in the traditional texts. Their significance in comparison with the other layers of his exegesis is highlighted by Nachmanides' unique standard heading to these hidden teachings: "*Al Derekh Ha-Emet*" — "According to the Method of Truth."

This particular Method of Truth separated the mystical Nachmanides and his *chaverim* (fellow initiates) from the Talmudists or the philosophers and their *Weltanschauung* and their interpretation and conceptualization of the mitzvot. This ideological distinction, dictated by the uniqueness of the Method of Truth, manifests itself in the following five fundamental areas of the religious realm: a) The Religious Experience; b) Its Object; c) Its Goal; d) Its Conceptual Faculties, and e) Its Corpus Symbolicum.

### *The Religious Experience*

The religious experience of the kabbalist is distinguished by its motif of *unio mystica* between the world of man and the world of God. Instead of the philosopher's striving for merger between the human searching intellect and the Divine Active Intellect, and in addition to the activistic, practical *imitatio dei* of the Talmudist, the kabbalist strives for a merger of human and Divine will within the framework of a continuous, contemplative, intuitive effort. The soul strives to elevate itself and return to its primordial, celestial, sefiric source in the Godhead, via which all avenues of mundane life become permeated and unified by the permanent glow of Divinity, as expressed in the following words of Nachmanides: "You shall always remember the Name and His love; your thought shall not detach itself from Him during your journeying on the road, while you lie down and while you get up, to the extent that (though) verbally you shall be in contact with people, your heart shall be before God."<sup>4</sup>

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This continuous, contemplative communion with the Godhead differs from that of the Catholic mystic, as reported by St. Theresa: "Who (in this state) seemed divided from her own soul . . . She complained of her soul . . . saying that it always enjoyed solitary peace, while leaving her so full of troubles and occupations, that she could not keep it company."<sup>5</sup>

This all-pervasive communion with the Divinity is a mundane forerunner of Nachmanides' sublime state of the Resurrection of the Dead, which, unlike Maimonides, he visualizes as a refined, more spiritualized, everlasting reunion of soul and body. Here, the sublimation and spiritualization of bodily functions will have reached its climax via complete harmony between body and soul, in continuous contemplation of the Divine in the World To Come (in contradistinction to the World of the Souls in Gan Eden after death). This is reflected in the following statement in *Shaar Ha-Gemul*: "The soul's existence (following Resurrection of the Dead) in its mystical union with the Divine is comparable to that of the angels. By the soul's elevation over the body, it abolishes the physical powers of the body, and the body's existence will be comparable to that of the soul, without need for food, like Moses during his forty days on Mount Sinai."<sup>6</sup>

This spiritualized World To Come, according to one of Nachmanides' cryptic allusions in his exegesis to the *Sefer Yetsirah*,<sup>7</sup> is destined to come to its final culmination after 18,000 major cycles of 50,000 years each. On this issue, he is, once more, in disagreement with Maimonides<sup>8</sup> who believed in the perpetual existence of the universe on the basis of the words of David: "He laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be moved forever."<sup>9</sup>

*The Object Of The Religious Experience*

The ultimate object of Nachmanides' religious experience is the mystery of the Godhead, as revealed in the ten Sefirot.

This revealed Divinity, the personalistic living God who guides Israel's historic course via the cosmic and historical blueprint of the Torah, is dialectically distinguished from the *Ein-Sof*, the

impersonal *deaus absconditus*, who is hidden and unknowable in the depth of his own self. This conceptual distinction between a revealed, living God and a hidden unfathomable God is, perhaps, one of the most basic differences between Nachmanides, on one hand, and Maimonides and Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, on the other.

Furthermore, unlike his two predecessors, Nachmanides believed in positive attributes of God (though not in corporeality), which he equated with the ten Sefirot. They represent stages in the revelation of God's creative power, and are patterned along a sort of Hegelian hierarchy of Divine triads, i.e., *Hesed*—Love; *Gevurah*—Power; *Rahamim*—Compassion, unified in substance and essence by the all-encompassing stream of the Divinity. Generally, the kabbalist perceives God as a dynamic merger between absolute Being and absolute Becoming, so dramatically reflected by Nachmanides' mystical cosmo-historic theme in mitzvot *Shmittah* and *Yovel* which is diametrically opposed to the dualistic view of the Gnostics.

This dynamic interrelationship between absolute Being and absolute Becoming in Nachmanides' view of the Divinity serves also as a key in his attempt to solve the old paradox of Divine Knowledge versus human Free-Will. He touches upon this problem in his analysis of the necessity for the trials and tribulations, which God has arranged for the *Tsaddik* (the righteous). In agreement with Maimonides, he believes that man has Free-Will. Therefore, the trial is to test man, because, as applied to God, the term trial is antithetical. However, contrary to Maimonides, Nachmanides bypasses the inherent paradox of the problem, and focuses his interest upon the purpose and benefit derived from the trial to the *Tsaddik*. The pivotal point in the necessity for the trial of the *Tsaddik* is the theme of ethico-spiritual, cathartic self-realization and Becoming of the Divine spark embedded in the soul of the *Tsaddik*, as part of the overall, global, cathartic Becoming of the Divine via its cosmo-historical developmental stages. Such opportunity for self-realization and Becoming is, according to Nachmanides, a great privilege, and hence never given to the *Rashah* (the wicked), whose life pattern is opposed to the ethico-spiritual unfolding of the Divine in the cosmo-historical setting.

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*The Goal Of The Religious Experience*

The goal of Nachmanides' religious experience is the synchroni-  
zation of human and Divine Becoming into one majestic unity  
of everlasting Being, mirrored by every aspect of universal exist-  
ence, from which both, not only man but also God, as it were,  
benefit. This is achieved by perpetuating the mystical flow of  
Divine creative power in the grandiose network of the Sefirot  
and the cosmo-historic media, via the religious mystical experi-  
ence, of which the fulfillment of the Biblical commandments is an  
integral part.

It is the awe-inspiring task and responsibility of man to guar-  
antee the continuous mystical flow of Divine creative power into  
the infinite number of arteries and channels of all Being. In this  
task, man is helped by a mystical parallelism between his own  
spiritual and physical configuration on the one hand, and the  
dynamic configuration of the Godhead and His Torah with its  
mitzvot, on the other.

Spiritually, this parallelism is reflected by an identity in essence  
of the pre-existential human soul with its Divine counterpart, the  
*sefirah* of *Binah*, wherefrom it descends into the human body  
via the *sefirot* of *Tifereth*, *Yesod*, and *Malkhut*, as expressed in  
the following passage of Nachmanides:

This verse alludes to the eminence of the soul, its origin and its secret  
(esoteric) distinction, by mentioning in this connection, the full Divine  
name (*Hashem Elokim*), and by further stating, that He blew the soul  
of life into his (man's) nostrils, to inform that she (the soul) does  
not originate in the (basic) material elements, as is true of the soul  
of the (lower) living creatures, nor is it derived via gradations from  
the Separate Intelligences; but it is a spiritual essence from the Great  
God, from whose mouth comes knowledge and understanding (Prov-  
erbs 2, 6; referring to the *sefirot*: *Malkhut* (Mouth); *Daat* (Knowl-  
edge); *Binah* (Understanding), according to Kabbalistic interpretation,  
since one who blows into the nostrils of another, bestows upon him  
from his own soul . . . because the soul originates in the *sefirah* of  
*Binah* (and descends to man) via truth (*Yesod-Tiferet*) and faith  
(*Malkhut*).<sup>9a</sup>

Physically, this parallelism between the world of man and that of God is reflected by a symbolic configurational correspondence between the overall physical, anatomical-skeletal structure of man and the spiritual-dynamic configurational arrangement in the Divine pleroma of the sefirot, alluded to by Nachmanides in his *Shaar Ha-Gemul*:<sup>10</sup> "Furthermore, this configuration (of the human body) contains profound (esoteric) secrets, for the formation of this configuration was not arbitrary, without purpose."

A more detailed description of this mystical parallelism is given by Nachmanides in his exegesis to third Mishnah of the Book of Creation:

Ten Sefirot Belimah (a mystical term, as yet insufficiently explained, possibly referring to the infinite, abstract, ineffable nature of the sefirot) corresponding to the ten fingers, referring to the ten sefirot, which are hidden and belimah, and their counterpart in the lower creation, where we find the ten fingers of the human hand and the ten toes of the human foot at man's two extremities, they are arranged—five juxtaposed to five—these acting on the Right side of Mercy and those on the Left side of Stern Judgment—and a singular covenant posited in the middle by way of circumcision (of the male member) the tongue, and the mouth,—namely, they are united in three places in a complete union; by way of circumcision (of the male member) which is in the form of a yod, to allude to the union of *Chokhmah*; by way of the tongue, in the form of a vav, alluding to the Middle Line of the Great Name (*Tiferet*); and by way of the mouth, the opening via which speech is produced, in the form of a *heh*, hidden, and alluding to the union of *Binah*.

This mystical parallelism between the ten fingers and toes of man and the ten sefirot comes directly into focus, for example, in Nachmanides' allusion to the deeper significance of mitzvat *Kiddush Yodayim Ve-raglayim* (sanctification of the hands and feet via washing) in the temple: "Because the hands and feet are at the two extremities of the human configuration, for the hands are above his body and the feet below, alluding to the ten sefirot . . . therefore, the servants of God (the *kohanim*) were commanded to wash their hands and feet for the purpose of sanctification, as the translation by Onkelos of the term *Verochat-su* — *Vikadshun* (in this particular instance) indicates."

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One mitzvah in particular reflects the theme of synchronization and merger of human and Divine Becoming into one holistic Being with its dual benefits. This is the mitzvah of *Shabbat*. In contradistinction to the Talmudists and the philosophers, who stressed the peripheral aspects of mitzvot Shabbat, i.e., its physical and spiritual benefits to man, Nachmanides highlights its central aspect of Divine unity by elevating it to its broad universal dimensions belonging to the world of the Divine.

The major aspect of this theme of Divine unity in mitzvot Shabbat is the Divine creative force which underlies both the Exodus from Egypt and the creation of the world and makes manifest God's control of the cosmo-historical process. Because of this central motif of dynamic Divine unity as revealed in the cosmo-historical events, Nachmanides requires a daily remembrance of mitzvot Shabbat, unlike Maimonides, who limits *Zachor* to the day of Shabbat itself by means of *Kiddush* and *Havdalah*. The climax of this continuous remembrance of Shabbat is the intimate meeting between man and God on the day of Shabbat itself, which has its dynamic esoteric roots in the ever renewed mystical union between the two major sefirot, *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. These two sefirot are the archetypal representatives of the various polarities in the dynamic make-up of the universe, such as Male-Female, Active-Passive, etc. Their intensified union on the day of Shabbat, facilitated by the fulfillment of mitzvot Shabbat, gives rise to an increase in the Divine creative flow within the Divine pleroma of the *Atsilut*, and, simultaneously, grants to man the *Neshamah Yeterah*, the additional soul, which brings him the true pleasure containing something of the Future World. In a sense, then, the goal of the religious experience, via the fulfillment of the mitzvot, is both anthropocentric and theocentric, in that it not only benefits man but also the world of the Divinity.

### *The Conceptual Faculties of The Religious Experience*

The most important faculty for the religious experience is the sublime soul, a "Divine spiritual entity from His Great Name,"



which, because of its affinity in essence with the Divine, can elevate the mystic to the sefiric heights of the Divinity, and enable him to fathom the esoteric dynamics of that Divinity. In that ability, Nachmanides differs from Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, whose concept of God is beyond systematic comprehension. He also differs from Maimonides in that he stresses the intuitive faculty over the philosophical-logical intellect in the contemplative, meditative effort upon the Godhead.

Directly related to this conceptual divergence is his peculiar concept of the *terminus technicus* *sod*, referring to the esoteric, mystical, metalogical concepts of the kabbalah, as contrasted to the esoteric-intellectual, logical concepts of philosophy. Yet, simultaneously, alongside the intuitive, mystical, metalogical approach to the *realia* of the religious experience, Nachmanides also emphasizes the significance of the intellectual-logical research into the postulates of religion, in the following important passage of the *Shaar Ha-Gemul*:<sup>13</sup>

And if you will ask, in view of an unfathomable component in the Divine judgment of humanity, why don't we depend on our faith in God's final good judgment, which knows no imperfection? This is an argument of fools and despisers of wisdom. Through our study of the religious truths revealed in the theodicy, we reach a higher level of understanding of God's ways and acts, which cannot be achieved by the unconditional, unreflective believer. It is the duty of everyone, whether he serves God out of love or out of fear, to explore, with his mind, the righteousness and justice of the Divine judgment in accordance with his ability, in order to clarify to himself the theodicy of his creator. The complete understanding of this theodicy can, however only be reached through the esoteric secret teachings of the kabbalah.

Yet, on the other hand, Nachmanides strongly warns against the pitfalls of pseudo-research, whether on the intellectual-logical or mystical-metalogical plane, which may befall the believer in his search towards an understanding of God's ways.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Corpus Symbolicum Of The Religious Experience*

Nachmanides' conceptualization of the mitzvot as a corpus symbolicum of man, God, and the universe, wherein every unit

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is a representation and reflection of everything else, is a natural dialectic consequence of his concept of the Divinity as an all-pervasive dynamic force, which also makes the Talmudists' and the philosophers' distinction between miraculous and natural phenomena an artificial and illusory one. The mitzvot, according to this approach, are not merely educational, moral, utilitarian media for the benefit of man, nor allegorical signs for abstract, metaphysical truths, but are creative, dynamic entities, which, because of their intrinsic identity with the Divine, are powerful instruments in the unfolding, creative process of the Divinity in the universe and in the history of mankind. This peculiar fusion of finitude and infinity in the religious act of the mitzvah makes it a true representative of Nachmanides' *Weltanschauung*, in general, and of his conceptualization of history, in particular.

Accordingly, the historical phenomena are characterized as fleeting, time-suspended moments, evolving from the cosmogonic blueprint of *Maaseh Bereshit*, the esoteric doctrine of creation, passing through a cathartic movement of progression and regression in the struggle between Good and Evil, and their respective protagonists, the *Tsaddik* and the *Rasha*, and reaching their culmination in the eschatological utopia of the end of days with the final victory of the *Tsaddik*, symbolized by the appearance of the Messiah. This mystical pendulous movement of history, swinging back and forth between finitude and infinity, enables the faithful to meet and experience the infinite Divine at every point of the historical arena, provided he regards it with the perspective of the mystic. This perspective is deeply rooted in Nachmanides' peculiar concept of the Torah, which combines the *Torah Kedumah*, preceding Creation by two thousand years, the *Torah She-Be-Ksav*, the Written Law, and the *Torah She-Baal-Peh* — the Oral Law, into one dynamic, creative unit, mystically linked to the tri-faced, archetypal Torah of the Divine sefirot. This explains Nachmanides' paradoxical insistence upon the Talmudic saying, "A verse doesn't lose its literal meaning" on the one hand, and his kabbalistic statement: "The whole Torah consists of Divine Names," on the other. It also explains the all-embraciveness and inexhaustibility of the Torah as a source book

of all knowledge, exoteric and esoteric, particularly stressed by Nachmanides in the following introductory remarks to his Biblical exegesis:

Everything is written in the Torah, explicitly or by allusion. Our Rabbis already said (Rosh Hashana 21b): "Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world . . ." They mean by that, that in the creation of the world, there are fifty gates of understanding; for instance, in regard to the creation of the minerals, one gate of understanding revealing their force and origin; regarding the creation of that which springs up from the earth, one gate of understanding; concerning the creation of the trees, one gate . . . This series leads up to the creation of possessors of a speech-giving soul, enabling him to contemplate the secret of the soul and know her essence . . . From there it leads up to the spheres and to the heavens and their hosts. For in every one of these, there is one gate of wisdom which is unlike the wisdom of the other . . . Furthermore, there is a tradition of truth in our hands, that the whole Torah consists of the names of the Holy One, blessed be He; for the letters divide themselves into names with a different meaning . . . The whole can be treated so, quite apart from the combinations of *Gematriyaot* of (Divine) names . . . Therefore a *Sefer Torah* in which a mistake has been made in one letter, "full" or "defective," is disqualified . . . It would seem that the Torah which was "written with black fire upon white fire" [Shekalim, 6, 1 (14b)] was in this form which we have mentioned, namely, that writing was without a break between the words, and it was possible for it, when being recited, to be read as forming names, or in the way we read it, as containing Torah and commandments.

Hence, the mitzvot also, as focal points on the Divine map of the Torah, reflect both the mundane-finite, and the transcendent-infinite aspects of that Torah.

### *Three Major Categories of Mitzvot*

In accordance with an outline, already mentioned in the Bible, Nachmanides divides the mitzvot into three major groupings: *Edot* — Testimonies; *Mishpatim* — Social Laws; *Chukkim* — Statutes.

#### *Edot* — Testimonies

The Testimonies, as their name implies, represent living memorials to the Divine wonders and miracles, as revealed during

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the exodus from Egypt and the creation of the world. Both events represent, in the *Weltanschauung* of Nachmanides, two sides of the same dynamic coin — the Divine manifestation in the cosmic-universal and historic-national phenomena. Hence the fundamental point in this two-dimensional manifestation of the Divine is the absolute merger between the cosmic and the historical occurrence, linked by their common dynamic creative base, the mystical pleroma of the Divine sefirot.

Pivotal in this merger between the cosmic and the historical via the Divine creative base, commemorated by the Testimonies, is Nachmanides' emphasis upon the significance of the miracles in the everyday existence and sustainment of the Jewish People. He differentiates between *Nissim Nistarim* (Hidden Miracles) and *Nissim Gluyim* (Visible Miracles). The former represent those unheralded miracles which distinguish the history of the patriarchs, and the overall providential relationship of God to the Jewish People, based upon the framework of reward and punishment. The latter signify those miracles which were foretold either by a prophet or by another messenger of God, highlighted by the Divine manifestations of the exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the Divine revelation on Mount Sinai. Here are his exegetical remarks to Genesis 46:15:

I will tell a matter, the truth of which is clearly demonstrated in the Torah, namely, that Scripture mentions only those miracles which were initially foretold and subsequently performed by a prophet, or an angel revealed as a messenger of God. On the other hand, those miracles, occurring within the natural process of history for the purpose of assisting the righteous or punishing the wicked, are not mentioned by the Torah or the prophets . . . and indeed, why should Scripture mention them? For the one who commits incest or eats forbidden fat will not die naturally . . . The same is true of all Divine promises pertaining to the rewards and blessings (which the Torah-observant Jew will receive). It also applies to the prayers of our King David, as well as to our own prayers, which are all directly dependent upon invisible miracles.

As a matter of fact, "All major foundations of the Torah are based upon and revealed via invisible miracles, and its entire

reasoning is linked to the (Divine dynamics of the) miracles, and not based upon natural law" (Ibid.). Moreover, Nachmanides' three major religious dogmas of *Creatio ex Nihilo*, Omniscience, and Providence are dynamically revealed and strengthened by both the visible and invisible miracles, as stated in his *Dera-shah Torat Ha-Shem Temimah*:<sup>15</sup> "The visible miracles reveal *Creatio ex Nihilo*, God's Omniscience and his Providence; and the invisible miracles . . . (also) bear witness to that effect, though in a hidden manner."

Moreover, any Jew who denies God's providence through the visible and invisible miracles has no share in the Torah: "No person has a share in the Law of Moses until he believes that all events (connected with our existence), whether pertaining to the individual or group, are determined by miracles and not by the law of nature."<sup>16</sup>

Only the nations of the world are subject to the law of nature, which is governed by the heavenly constellations and the Separate Intelligences: "God created everything, and put the power of the lower creatures into the hand of the upper spheres. The guardianship of each nation in its land was handed to a certain star or constellation as known by astrology, and this is what is written: 'Which the Lord thy God hath allotted unto all the peoples under the heaven' (Deut. 4:9), for he apportioned to all of them constellations in the heaven, and above them the higher angels as their guardians."<sup>17</sup>

The two fundamental dynamic relationships of God to Israel, the visible and the hidden miracles, differ not in essence but only in form, and are mystically linked to the two major names of God, *Elokim* and *Havayah*. These, in turn, correspond to two major sefirot in the Divine pleroma, *Malkhut* and *Tiferet*. The *Nissim Nistarim* derive their dynamic force from *Elokim*, the sefirah of *Malkhut*, via which God "appeared to the patriarchs by superceding the power of the heavenly constellations, in order to perform with them great miracles without abolishing natural law."<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the *Nissim Gluyim* have as their source of power, the *Shem Havayah*, the sefirah of *Tiferet*. In mystical union with *Malkhut*, it momentarily supercedes the causality of natural law by "supernatural creative acts" for the sake of

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God's people.

These two interdependent Divine names, *Elokim* and *Havayah*, also played a most significant role in the Divine revelation at Sinai, and left their imprint upon Nachmanides' dynamic interpretation of the Sinaitic revelation. Thus, he explains the first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord, thy God." This means: "I already alluded to these two holy names."

Nachmanides' special focus upon the dynamism of continuous supernatural Divine providence regarding the history of Israel, beginning with the wondrous guidance of the patriarchs, may have also been responsible for his opposition to Ibn Ezra's contention that part of the Jewish people prior to the Sinaitic revelation doubted prophecy: "Rabbi Abraham asserted that part of Israel doubted prophecy . . . and only now (following the revelation at Sinai) were they convinced of the phenomenon of prophecy. This is not correct, for the seed of Abraham never harboured a doubt concerning the truth of prophecy, because they believed in it since the days of their forefathers."<sup>19</sup>

### *Mishpatim* — Social Laws

The Social Laws have as their dynamic, juridical base, the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet, . . . because the one who doesn't covet won't ever cause damage to his fellowman."<sup>20</sup> Like his predecessors, Nachmanides stresses the maintenance and organization of personal and social relationships as the major purpose of the *Mishpatim*. However, unlike Ibn Ezra and other Biblical exegetes, who view the judge as executor of the Divine Laws, Nachmanides views God himself as the ultimate judge in every legal decision. This is strikingly revealed by his literal interpretation of the term *Elokim* in Exodus 21:6: "To allude that God will be with them (the two litigants) in their law suit, and he declares their innocence or guilt." This interpretation is further evidence of the dynamic omnipresence of the Divine in mundane affairs in the world-view of Nachmanides.

This intimate merger between human and Divine judgment is particularly highlighted by Nachmanides' emphasis upon the supremacy of the rule of law versus naked power and coercion,

as revealed by his etymological definition of the term *mishpat*: "Because it represents adequate measure," excluding arbitrary measures, and by the overall aim of human welfare of the Mishpatim: "That one should love his fellowman, follow the advice of the elders, lead a modest family life, and engage in amiable, peaceful, social and business interaction."<sup>22</sup>

Especially, the Torah legislation concerning the stranger and other helpless members of society such as the widow and the orphan, reveals the antithesis between primitive arbitrary power and merciful and understanding justice in the Mishpatim. Following his rejection of Ibn Ezra's and Rashi's exegesis to the above legislation, Nachmanides continues as follows: "The correct interpretation . . . of God's message, 'You shall not wrong the stranger, neither shall you oppress him, and think that he has no rescue from your hand'," lies in the realization that you (yourself) were strangers in the land of Egypt, and I (God) saw the oppression with which the Egyptians oppressed you, and I took your revenge, because I see the tears of the downtrodden, who have no consoler and rescuer. I save every individual from the one stronger than him. And also the widow and the orphan you shall not afflict, because I will hear their cry, because all these do not rely upon their own strength, but they rely upon me."

Moreover, Nachmanides emphasizes that this attitude of justice and mercy towards the helpless must be voluntary and come from the heart, as he points out concerning the social legislation of releasing slaves, and giving charity to the poor. Unlike Maimonides, he counts these two laws as separate mitzvot. In connection with the release of slaves, he writes as follows: "Mitzvah 16 tells us not to feel sorry upon releasing the slaves in the seventh year, and not to consider it a loss and depreciation of our wealth and honor so that the court would have to force us . . . but we should demonstrate desire and good will in fulfilling the commandment of the One who sent us free from harsh masters, blessed be His name and elevated, and this will be for our good in that He will bless us in return with slaves, riches, property, and with honor . . ."<sup>23</sup> Similar are his words regarding charity: "Mitzvah 17 tells us not to feel sorry when giving charity, nor to give it unwillingly, or consider it a

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depreciation (of our wealth), but to consider it as a reward, benefit and increment to our monetary wealth, because He blessed be He, will repay us everything many times double."<sup>24</sup>

### *Chukkim — Statutes*

The third and most important group in Nachmanides' division of the mitzvot are the Statutes. "The *sodot* (secrets) which He has in the Torah . . . have good reason and maximum benefit." The statutes represent both esoteric, kabbalistic symbols, and utilitarian media with physical and spiritual benefits. In this group are the prohibitions relating to the dietary laws and the laws concerning sacrifices. As kabbalistic symbols, they aim at the mystical linkage between the Divinity, the cosmos and the course of history. As such, they partake in the overall goal of all mitzvot, expressed in Nachmanides' simply worded yet most far-reaching religious manifesto: "That we shall believe in our God, and acknowledge that He has created us."<sup>25</sup> This, on a mystical plane, constitutes the returning of the cosmo-historical phenomena to their Divine source via man's recognition of the Divine in all being.

Generally then, Nachmanides' exegesis to the Statutes is distinguished by its search for their positive, intrinsic core, as contrasted to Maimonides' extrinsic, historical approach to them. This divergence in interpretation comes into particular focus in the approach to the sacrifices. Nachmanides vehemently opposes the rationalistic historical reasoning of Maimonides for the Sinaitic legislation of the Sacrifices, which essentially views them as a concession to the cultic milieu of ancient Israel and as a medium to redirect the pagan sacrificial cult towards the one God. In one of his strongest criticisms of his great predecessor, he states: "These are useless words, which treat a great issue lightly, and cause defilement to the holy altar."<sup>26</sup>

Nachmanides proposes two reasons for the institution of sacrifices. One based upon a physio-psychological parallelism between the various parts of the sacrifice and those of the repentant, already mentioned briefly by Ibn Ezra. The main object of



the sacrifice, according to this exposition, is a renewal of intimate rapprochement between man and God via the symbolic sacrificial act, accompanied by the ethical confession of the repentant.

However, this exposition, which he calls "heart-winning," does not, as yet, satisfy Nachmanides' search for the deeper inner value of the sacrifices. He finds it in the "hidden *Sod*" embedded in the symbolism of the sacrificial service, which he calls "A great principle," and concerning which he engages in a rather lengthy discussion, not usually found in his Method of Truth. The central aim of the *sod hakorban* is the reinstitution of universal unity by establishing a mystical three-dimensional closure between man, God, and the cosmos. In this process of harmonization, the contemplative-mystical effort of the kabbalist reaches up to the inner world of the Divinity, to the highest sefirah of the *Atsilut*, *sfirot Kether*, and activates the Divine effluence via the sefirot of *Chokhmah*, *Binah*, and *Tiferet*. The latter sefirah, through its intimate, dynamic relationship to the last sefirah of the *Atsilut*, *Malkhut*, controls the cosmic-historical occurrences, particularly as they relate to the history of the Jewish people.

The profound influence of the sacrificial act upon the cosmic events is expressed in Nachmanides' following exegetic passage in *Genesis* (2:8):

They said in *Genesis Rabbah* (16:5): "*le-avdah u-le-shamrah.*" These are the sacrifices, as it is said, "You shall serve God" (Ex. 3:12) . . . Their intention in this remark is, that plants and all living beings are dependent upon higher forces, from which they receive their power of growth, and that through the sacrifices, there will be a flow of blessing to the higher (forces) and from them to the plants of the garden of Eden. And from them again they will come into being and live in the world through the rain bringing favor and blessing, through which they will grow. And so, they have said: (Gen. R., 15:1) "The trees of the Lord have their fill, the cedars of Lebanon, which he has planted" (Ps. 104:16). Says R. Hanina: "Their life shall have its fill, their water shall have their fill, their plantation shall have its fill." "Their life" refers to their foundations in the upper world; "their waters," to his godly treasure (*Hag.* 12b) which cause the rain to come down; and "their plantation" to their (controlling) forces in the heavens, as they have said (Gen. R., 10:6): "There is not an herb which has not a planet in heaven that strikes it and says to it: "Grow,"

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as it is said: "Do you know the statutes of the heavens, can you establish the dominion thereof in the earth" (Job, 38:33).

The major influence of the sacrifices upon the historical arena, with the faithful in its center, Nachmanides reveals in Leviticus (1:9). There, he warns against the danger of a gnostic dualistic approach to the sacrificial symbolic act by directing the mystical meditation, the *kavanah*, which accompanies the sacrifice, to the sefirah of *Malkhut* exclusively, and consequently endowing her, so to say, with independence. This would interrupt the even flow of the Divine blessings, and turn them into a curse for the sacrificer. Hence, the sacrificer must always have in mind the intimate union of the two sefirot, *Malkhut* and *Tiferet*, and, with them, the whole *Atsilut*, centralized in the sefirah of *Tiferet*, which is also called God's *Unique Name*.

Nachmanides finds this *sod* alluded to in the Talmudical saying: "The entire sacrificial service should be concentrated upon (literally: emptied upon) the *Unique Name*."<sup>27</sup> This mystical union within the Godhead and his cosmo-historical manifestations is, according to Nachmanides, also expressed by the Hebrew term, itself, for sacrifice: *korban*, which means closeness and unity. By elevating the symbolical significance of the sacrificial institution to such universal heights, it is not surprising to see Nachmanides drawing a parallel between the man-God communion during the sacrificial service, and the one on Mount Sinai. Both reveal the dynamic confluence of the Divine, the cosmic, and the historical process in all its mystical depth.

It is the overall aim of the corpus symbolicum of the mitzvot to re-establish the primordial spiritual serenity and dynamic harmony, which existed at the beginning of time and which had been disturbed by the archetypal sin of Adam, whose fall wrought havoc in the upper and lower spheres by disrupting the mystical union between God and his *Shekhinah*. One major consequence of Adam's Fall was the emergence of Evil as a force counterposed to Good. Hence, any transgression of the Torah commandments strengthens evil, and widens the gulf between God and his *Shekhinah*, which can only be closed through *Yihud* — the

via mystical reunification of all cosmo-historical phenomena with the Godhead via unconditional surrender to God and the enactment of his mitzvot, especially when executed in the land of Israel, which has both a mundane and mystical significance in Nachmanides' world-view. This unconditional surrender on the part of man to God was deeply embedded in Nachmanides' personality, as evidenced by his mystical hymn:

From the beginning of time through eternities  
I was among his hidden treasures.  
From Nothing he called me forth, but at the end of time  
I shall be reclaimed by the King.<sup>28</sup>

His perpetual yearning was directed towards re-edification of all Being through its mystical return to its primordial germinal Divine source at the End of Days, as he alludes to in the last strophe of that same hymn: "And when things will return to their primordial source, you will change (the place of the soul) to good, from the outer garden to the Garden of the King."<sup>29</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Leviticus 22:32.
2. *Torat Hashem Temimah* [sermon], (Vienna: 1873), p. 7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
4. Deut. 11:22.
5. A. Poulain, *The Graces of Interim Prayer*, p. 284.
6. *Torat Haadam*, 83b.
7. Ed. Gershon Scholem (Kiryat Sefer: 1930), p. 404.
8. *Guide*, 2, 28.
9. Psalms 104:5.
- 9a. Genesis 2:7.
10. *Torat Haadam*, 84b.
11. Ed. Scholem, pp. 405-406.
12. Ex. 30:19.
13. *Torat Haadam*, 75b.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

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16. Ex. 13:16.
17. Lev. 18:25.
18. Ex. 6:2.
19. Ex. 19:9.
20. Ex. 20:13.
21. Ex. 15:25.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Glosses on Maimonides' Sefer Hamitzvot.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Ex. 13:16.
26. Lev. 1:9.
27. *Ibid.*
28. M. Rapaport, *Toledot HaRamban*, p. 21.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 22.