

The author of this essay is rabbi of the Green Road Synagogue in University Heights, Ohio.

TORAH FROM GOD: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MAHARAL OF PRAGUE

“The Holy One, Blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world.”¹ It is with such deceptive simplicity that the rabbis present the paradox inherent in the doctrine of “Torah from God.” If the Torah is the word of God—the articulation of his will and wisdom—it must surely be infinitely broader and deeper than anything we can comprehend. If the Torah is the articulated wisdom of God, then embedded in the recesses of the “plain meaning of Scripture” are layers of meaning that must ultimately lie beyond our grasp. Professor Gershom Scholem, with his majestic analytical power, has already explained the manner in which this question was explored by the Masters of Kabbalistic Wisdom.

. . . Only through the medium of infinite refraction can the infinite turn into the finite human word, and even then it lends to such a word a depth which goes far beyond anything representing a specific meaning, a communication with other beings. The word of God—if there is such a thing—is an absolute of which one can as well say that it rests in itself as that it moves in itself. Its emanations are present in everything in all the world that strives for expression and form. In this context, the Torah appears as a texture woven from the name of God. It represents a mysterious unity the purpose of which is not primarily to convey a specific sense, “mean” something, but rather to give expression to that creative power itself that is concentrated in the name of God and which is present in all creation as its secret signature in one or another variation . . . Only after it has passed through numerous media can such a message, originally but an expression of Being itself, become communication as well.²

A variant of this insight is to be found in the teachings of the Maharal of Prague. Here we can begin to discover the full power of religious significance implicit in the notion of Torah from God.

For the Maharal, the just quoted *midrashic* aphorism is central to the meaning of this doctrine.³ If the Torah is the word of God, it surely is much more than just a book of narratives and laws. Here the rabbis are telling us that Divine Creation implies an antecedent purpose or a Divine idea that underlies the creative process that produces the cosmos. And if God reveals His Divine word to human beings in the Torah, that Torah surely bears within itself the clue to God's creative purpose. Creation and Revelation are not distinct and unrelated doctrines. Each bears the meaning of the other. The rabbis tell us that it was for the sake of the Torah and for the sake of man that the world was created.⁴ If Creation and Torah are expressions of Divine power that contain each other, neither the Torah nor man are totally self-contained purposes. All purposes in God's world are interrelated. Man is created to serve his Creator, and the Torah is the wisdom through which man can learn how the Creator is to be served.⁵

Since the Torah is the antecedent purpose of all creation, in principle there can be no contradiction between the authentic character of man and his world on the one hand and the dictates of the Torah on the other. This is what the Talmud means when it says that man is created with the proverbial 248 organs corresponding to the 248 positive commandments and man's world passes through the 365 days of the solar year corresponding to the 365 negative commandments.⁶ Rabbi Simlai's aphorism concerning the 613 commandments constitutes a profound symbol of congruence between man's world and the Torah (*Makkot* 23b).

The Maharal emphasizes that the Talmud does not mean that the 613 commandments are structured to correspond to man's spatial-temporal limitations; if that were true the commandments would have, at best, mere functional significance. Instead, it is the other way around. Since the Torah is the antecedent purpose for which man and his world were created, it is man's organism, man's world, and the limits of man's life that are created to correspond to the wisdom of the Torah enshrined in its commandments. The commandments are the ends that give form to human and specifically Jewish self-realization. Indeed, what else could be meant by saying that man is created in God's image if not that man's organism conforms, at least potentially, to God's purpose for creation?⁷ Or we might say that only through the observance of the Torah's dictates is human authenticity attainable.

The importance that the Maharal attaches to the notion of the pre-existence of the Torah can hardly be overemphasized. In more

“modern” terms we might say that the Maharal excludes from consideration the idea that the Torah is to be understood merely as the expression of a social contract whose dictates have primarily conventional significance.⁸ The Torah is not binding on us only because we entered into a legal agreement to obey its dictates. If that were true, the binding character of the halakhah would derive solely from the formal circumstances under which the covenant of Sinai was contracted. For the Maharal much more is implied in the doctrine of Torah from God. The Torah is not a mere social contract but a social contract emanated from a metaphysical principle. The Torah is the structure of Divine purpose—the structure of an ideal community of Israel conceived as a people reconstituted in the image of God.⁹ The binding character of the Torah derives less from the way in which the Torah was given to Israel than in the character and content of the Torah and its relation to the character of the people of Israel.

Toward the beginning of his homily on the Torah, the Maharal defines the Torah as absolute intellect.¹⁰ This breathtaking assertion clearly demands elucidation. What is absolute intellect, anyway, and how is such a notion supposed to be intelligible to human beings? Perhaps we can bring this peculiar claim into focus if we compare it to Aristotle’s description of God as the supreme thought thinking itself. In less cumbersome terms, the essential Torah for the Maharal is the principle of intelligent order.¹¹ And this returns us to the idea with which we began: the Torah is the antecedent purpose of all creation or God’s creative thought.

But now we have to come to grips with the empirical evidence. What has such an idea to do with the text of the Torah itself—or even the oral Torah extended from it? The Torah after all, consists of narratives and laws very much bound to specific, apparently contingent events and situations in this world. On the face of it the Torah does not even seem to be terribly unique. After all, there is a vast human literature of narratives and laws, and the casual reader must be forgiven if he finds some of this other literature as compelling and instructive as the Torah in our possession.¹² In exactly what sense does just this text and this content express absolute intellect? Predictably, the Maharal talks of inner meanings of the Torah concealed beneath the surface of its plain meaning.¹³ But this claim will only be convincing if the interconnection between the Torah’s plain meaning and its esoteric meaning can be demonstrated in some way. The plain meaning would have to be explained in light of the Torah’s deeper meanings.

Undoubtedly, the Maharal believed that much of this information

could be found elsewhere—in the Zohar and in other earlier esoteric works that seek to elucidate the secret meanings of the Torah. But the Maharal himself sharpens his focus on the points of intersection between the ostensible and hidden meanings of the Torah. In his analysis these points of intersection are intricately tied to the points of intersection between the temporal and the Divine in the human personality.

Man, in contrast to animals, is not a completed entity. In animal life, the character of the individuals of each species is almost totally circumscribed by the nature of the species. Men, although limited by the constraints of earthly existence, can develop in an almost infinite variety of unpredictable directions. This is possible because a Divine soul has been implanted in his organism, somewhat analogously to the way seeds of every kind are planted in the soil.¹⁴ Individuals of the human species can grow and develop morally and intellectually in all kinds of unique ways. All kinds of moral and intellectual choices are possible, and a multitude of human types thus emerges as a consequence of human determinations. The character of humanity is in this sense created by man himself. No preconceived definition of man absolutely circumscribes human behavior.

Although almost infinite variety is possible in our species, authentic self-realization is not possible along every path.

For the Maharal, man's soul is from God, and it is out of place in this world. The primary precondition for authentic self-realization is to recognize the alienated character of human life in the corporeal world.¹⁵ We are always tempted to permit ourselves to be overwhelmed by the exigencies of the moment and the temptations of the flesh. When we do this, our personal beings become defined by these exigencies, and we lose our capacity for transcendent movement beyond the limitations of time, place, and the desires of the flesh.¹⁶ The human dilemma might be stated this way. Our souls give us the freedom to develop in an almost endless variety of ways, but most of the choices are destined to lead us back to the imprisonment of physical necessity. Only the most single-minded determination to transcend this temporal trap offers the hope of moral and intellectual freedom to realize our true selves. But self-realization is still only possible if we are prepared to be defined through an understanding of the Divine origin of our souls. We must be prepared to negate our egos, shaped as they are out of the particular occurrences of our private lives, and give ourselves up to God's purposes.¹⁷

It is important to emphasize that for the Maharal, self-realization is very different from self-definition. To define oneself is to limit

oneself.¹⁸ Self-realization can result only from the virtue of humility. A truly humble man makes no assumptions about himself. He “knows his place” (*Perek Kinyan Torah 6*). Being totally unassuming about himself, he is radically open to God’s defining power. Thus Moses is “the humblest of all men” (Numbers 12:3).¹⁹ Israel is the chosen instrument of God not because she is greater than all peoples but because she is “the least of the nations” (Deuteronomy 7:7).²⁰ Negation of the ego and the limiting factors of time and place are the preconditions for receiving God’s Torah—the antecedent purpose for which man was created.

For the Maharal, a strong dose of asceticism is part of the process that leads to the negation of the ego. This is partly why the Torah is given to Israel in the desert.²¹ But he also recognizes that the needs of the body can scarcely be denied. “If there is no flour, there is no Torah” (*Abot 3:21*). For this reason, Israel does not wander perpetually in the desert but is given the land of Israel—“a land that lacks nothing” (Deuteronomy 8:9)—so that the material preconditions for spiritual perfection are present.²² This notion—the relation of the material to the spiritual—is symbolically embodied in the commandments regarding the *omer* of barley and the *sephirat haomer*. The process of counting the *sephirah* begins with a barley offering that permits the use of the new crop and culminates in the celebration of the giving of the Torah on the fiftieth day. Barley is the food of cattle—the symbol of physical constraints. The giving of the Torah is the point of union between man and God. The counting of the *sephirah* is symbolic of the process of spiritual ascent that attaches our physical beings to spiritual self-realization.²³

The commandments that are entailed in the process of *sephirat ha-omer* illustrate the transcendent goal implicit in all of the commandments. Thus, for example, the Sabbath interrupts physical toil to enable the soul to attain the peace necessary as a precondition for spiritual and intellectual elevation. Circumcision binds sexual need to a transcendent purpose. The prohibitions against idolatry prevent moral and intellectual separation from God.²⁴ And all of the commandments are organically interrelated, forming a single purpose and a religio-social structure for Israel.²⁵

Even though the text of the Torah contains more than just the commandments, legislation is its primary concern.²⁶ The term Torah means wisdom, and the commandments are expressions of the Divine wisdom we must try to understand. But contemplation alone is never adequate. The commandments—God’s revealed wisdom—must be embodied in the life of Israel, thus restructuring corporeal existence

according to Divine wisdom. That is why the Torah is given to men and not to angels.²⁷ Men, who are formed as corporeal organisms, possess an “evil inclination,” and must freely choose to vanquish it according to a moral purpose, are the proper recipients of the Torah. It is the moral choice to reshape one’s life according to the Torah’s dictates that leads to the establishment of God’s kingdom and thus manifests the antecedent purpose in creation. The angels, who are not of this world, do not have the capacity to transform the corporeal world into God’s kingdom. Only man can do this, and it is in this sense that man is superior to the angels.²⁸ Once the process of self-realization through Torah is begun in earnest, this process leads beyond the observance of the commandments to that speculative wisdom that is known as the “inner Torah,” “for the soul can never be filled.”²⁹

The paradox of receiving Torah from God is explained in the context of the paradox of the human condition. Man’s physical organism is of this world, but it both contains and gives expression to an essential structure that is Divine and has the capacity to transform our world into a Divine image.³⁰ Man’s psycho-physical organism is like a garment fit to a Divine purpose. The Torah speaks in corporeal terms in order to realize this Divine purpose. The narratives of the Torah also speak to this fact about the human condition and elucidate the points of intersection between God and man—the timeless and the temporal. Especially noteworthy here is the manner in which the Torah describes the emergence of the people of Israel and the shaping of her unique destiny to be the recipient of the Torah.

In his introduction to the homily on the Torah, the Maharal grapples with the puzzling juxtaposition of the account of Moses’ reunion with Yitro together with the grand central event of the Giving of the Torah. For the Maharal this juxtaposition underscores the distinction between Israel and the nations of the world.³¹ “Greater is he who observes because he is commanded, than he who observes without being commanded” (*Avodah Zarah* 3a), Israel accepts the Torah out of moral and historical necessity. Everything that has occurred in Israel’s history to this point has been a step on the way to the grand event. And the Exodus from Egypt has bound Israel to her Divine Redeemer in a morally inextricable manner. In spite of Israel’s willing affirmation of “we will do and obey,” Israel never really enjoyed the option of rejecting God’s sovereignty and His commandments. Israel’s acceptance of the Torah was predestined from the beginning. If Israel had rejected the Torah, the entire world would

have lost its *raison d'être*.³² As already noted, the Torah is the purpose for which man and his world were created.

Yitro's adhesion to the Torah, on the other hand, admirable though it is, does not flow out of any prior moral obligation, nor is human destiny in any way at stake in this choice. The juxtaposition of Yitro's conversion with Israel's lonely encounter with God at Sinai underscores the historical necessity and universal stakes involved in Israel's receiving the Torah. No one who carefully reads the narrative in Exodus concerning the giving of the Torah can miss the vagueness with which this event is demarcated in time and place. Mt. Sinai is ultimately an unknown spot in the desert whose sanctity lasts only as long as God's Glory is revealed on it. The precise day on which the Torah is given is only vaguely suggested. Throughout the account the number three keeps reverberating—a point emphasized in a well-known passage in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a).³³ The Torah is given in the third month, on some sort of third day, through Moses, the third born in his family, to a people founded by three patriarchs. For the Maharal the number three signifies a median point or a point of intersection between opposite and mutually defining extensions. In time, the "third point" is the present or the point that stands eternally between past and future.³⁴ To be sure, the history of Israel is a real history that occurs within the limits of time and space. But while there is a time when Abraham seals the covenant of circumcision on his flesh and a time when Israel leaves Egypt, and even a time for the Giving of the Torah, the latter event points beyond itself. The Giving of the Torah cannot be precisely fixed in the narrative in either time or space because the Torah is always being given. The historical covenant of Sinai must have had a definite time because men can only function in time. Indeed, it is the unique historical life of Israel that creates the conditions for the giving of the Torah. But in the religiously most significant sense, Israel is always being given the Torah, for the Torah is not limited by the past or the future.

What emerges unmistakably from this course of analysis is that the Torah's binding power is only incidentally related to the actual historical events at Mt. Sinai. It is not the genesis of the Torah in Israel that creates its binding character but its content. The covenant of Sinai is constantly being enacted with Israel because Israel's character as a nation is built up out of the Torah and its commandments. Thus does the central narrative of the Torah—the Giving of the Torah—occur at a place that points to no particular place and at a time that points to no particular time.

Modern Jewish thinkers—Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike—

have been hypnotized by the idolatry of historicism. This idolatry seeks to "prove" or "disprove" religious truths on the basis of the archaeological record of contingent historical events. It is as if the truth of timeless propositions depend on their genesis for verification. But, since the Torah is the word of God, its justification can hardly depend on this or that archaeological discovery. The events of the Torah point eternally beyond themselves and project the ideal structure of Israel and her destiny to walk eternally with God. The Maharal's homilies on the Torah and the *mitsvot* are shining jewels of a religious world view that comprehends the implications of being the constant recipients of the Word of the Living God.

NOTES

1. *B'reshit Rabba* I:2 Maharal, Kol Kitvei Maharal, Vol. IV, *Drush Al Ha Mitsvot* (New York: Judaica Press, 1969), p. 51.
2. Gershom Scholem, *Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser, (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 268.
3. Maharal, loc. cit.
4. *B'reshit Rabba* I:6, compare to Maharal loc. cit.
5. Maharal, pp. 50-52.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid. Compare to *Derekh Ha Hayim* (Tel Aviv: Pardes), pp. 107-111.
8. A modern version of the social contract covenantal theology approach along Orthodox lines has been articulated by Dr. Jose Faur in "Understanding the Covenant," *TRADITION*, 9, No. 4, (Spring 1968), pp. 33-53.
9. Maharal, *Drush Al Ha Torah*. ("כל זה יורה כי היא צורת ישראל ושהתבטלה היו מוכרחים גם הם ליבטל")
10. Ibid. p. 16. ("בהיות שהתורה היא שכל גמור, והשכל הוא נבדל מן הגוף לגמרי, איך אפשר שיהו שני הפכים הנושא אחד דהיינו התורה שהיא שכל גמור והאדם בעל גוף... ")
11. *Derekh Ha Hayim*, p. 111. ("הסדר המושכל העליון היא התורה אשר מתחייב מן הש"י שהיה פועל כפי הסדר המושכל הזה")
12. *Zohar Bahalotkha*. ("מאן דאמר דהיה ספורא דאורייתא לאחזאה על ההוא ספורא בלבד קאתי תיפח רוחיה! דאי הכי לאו איהי אורייתא עילאה, אורייתא קשוט... אלא דאיהו כניש כל מילין דהדיוטין כגון דעשו, מילין דהגר, מילין דלבן ויעקב... אי הכי אקרי תורת אמתו")
13. Maharal, *Drush Al Ha Torah*, pp. 12-19.
14. Ibid., pp. 10-12.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., pp. 16-17.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. p. 19. ("והתורה אינה מתקיימת במי שיחשוב את עצמו בעיניו לדבר-מה, כי כל דבר יהיה מה שיהיה, יש לו גדר וגבול שהוא מוגבל בו. אז אין ערך לו אל התורה מצד שהוא ברחקו...")
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid. p. 17.
21. Ibid. p. 16.
22. Ibid. p. 20.
23. Ibid. p. 15, pp. 22-23.
24. Ibid. pp. 28-29.
25. Ibid. p. 28 Compare to *Derekh HaHayim*, p. 125! ("כי כל המצוות הם דבר אחד")

26. *Drush Al Ha Mitsvot*, p. 50.
27. *Drush Al Ha Torah*, pp. 12-14.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid. p. 15.
30. *Derekh Ha Hayim*, pp. 107-112. For the Maharal, Maimonides' identification of the Divine image with the human intellect is inadequate. The entire organism reveals Divine characteristics—it is a garment both concealing and revealing Divinity.
31. *Drush Al Ha Torah*, Introduction, pp. 4-8.
32. This is the force of the puzzling Aggadah, *Avodah Zarah* 2b (compare to *Shabbat* 88) "If you accept the Torah, well and good and if not, there will be your grave."
33. Loc. cit., pp. 24-25.
34. Ibid. "כי הדרך השכלי שייך בו לשון עת שאינו נופל תחת הזמן כלל... לכן בהיות העתה הוא המחבר זמן כי הוא תכלית העבר והתחלת העתיד... ואיננו זמן בעצם, לכן לא נתיחד לנתינת התורה כי אם החדש השלישי..."