

Abraham ibn Ezra's "Yesod Mora"

By: H. NORMAN STRICKMAN

Rabbi Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1092–1164) was one of the outstanding scholars produced by medieval Sephardic Jewry. He was a poet, mathematician, astrologer, and grammarian. Above all he was one of medieval Jewry's greatest Bible commentators.

Abraham ibn Ezra was born in 1092 C.E.¹ in Tudela, Spain and passed away in 1164. It is unclear whether he died in London,² Calahorra³ or Rome.⁴

¹ According to a statement found in several codices, Ibn Ezra (henceforth "I.E.") died on Monday, the first day of Adar 1 4927 (January 23, 1167) at the age of seventy-five. If this date is accepted, then I.E. was born in 1092. See M. Friedlander, *The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah* (London, 1873), p. xxvii, n. 54. However, Heinrich Graetz believes that I.E. was born between 1088 and 1089. See Heinrich Graetz, *Divre Yeme Yisra'el*, ed. and trans. S. P. Rabinowitz, vol. 4 (Warsaw, 1916), p. 212.

² E.Z. Melamed, *Mefareshei ha-Mikrah*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), p. 520.

³ Abraham Zakuta, *Sefer ha-Yuhasin*.

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Although Ibn Ezra's reputation is primarily based on his Bible commentaries, he was also a philosopher of note.

Ibn Ezra's philosophical ideas are scattered throughout his biblical commentaries. They are the focus, however, of his *Sefer Yesod Mora ve-Sod Torah*, literally, *Treatise on the Foundation of Awe and the Secret of the Torah*.

Yesod Mora not only rhymes with *ve-Sod Torah* but is parallel to it. Thus *Mora* and *Torah* have one meaning. So do apparently *Sod* and *Yesod*. Indeed, in the first chapter of *Yesod Mora*, Ibn Ezra spoke of *Yesod ha-Torah ve-Sod ha-Mora* (the foundation of the Torah and the secret of awe).

Ibn Ezra's use of the word *secret* does not apply only to the mystical and esoteric. It also applies to mundane facts that a person is not always aware of.⁶ Thus, *sod ha-Torah* (secret of the Torah) may be taken to imply, the meaning of the Torah. It includes both down-to-earth and esoteric explanations of the *mitzvot*. The word *yesod* (foundation) connotes "explanation," for Ibn Ezra believes that one should understand the foundation of the *mitzvot*, that is, the reasons for the commandments.⁷

It thus appears that *Treatise on the Foundation of Awe and the Secret of the Torah* is another way of saying "Treatise on the Reasons (*yesod/sod*) for the *Mitzvot* of the Torah (*mora/Torah*)."

It should also be noted that Ibn Ezra identified the fear of God with the negative commandments. Thus, Ibn Ezra writes:

⁴ L. Zunz, *Die Monatstage des Kalenderjahres* (Berlin, 1872), p. 4. Quoted in Friedlander, p. xxvi, n. 53.

⁵ Ibid. 1:3.

⁶ See Ibn Ezra on Gen. 1:12 where God's telling Abraham that he should go to the land of Canaan is referred to as the revelation of a secret.

⁷ *Yesod Mora* (henceforth *Y.M.*) 8:1. *The Secret of the Torah: A Translation of Ibn Ezra's Sefer Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Ha-Torah* (henceforth "*The Secret of the Torah*"). H. Norman Strickman. (New Jersey: Jason Aaronson, 1995) p. 40. "An intelligent person may ultimately learn the very many clearly stated reasons that the Torah itself offers for the precepts."

The words *to fear the Lord thy God* [Deuteronomy 14:23], though stated in the positive, encompass all negative precepts.⁸

"I found one verse which embodies all the commandments. The verse is, *Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God; and Him shalt thou serve* [Deuteronomy 6:13]. Now *Thou shalt fear* takes in the entire negative commandments pertaining to the heart, lips and deeds. It is the first step that one climbs in one's ascent to the service of the Glorious God."⁹

Now if *mora* stands for the negative commandments, then it stands to reason that *Torah* stands for the positive commandments.

Hence, it is possible that *Treatise on the Foundation of Awe and the Secret of the Torah* means, strictly speaking, "Treatise on the Reasons for the Negative Commandments and the Meaning of the Positive Commandments of the Torah."

Sefer Yesod Mora ve-Sod Torah (henceforth *Yesod Mora*) was composed by Ibn Ezra in London toward the end of his life.¹⁰ *Yesod Mora* was the first major book on Jewish philosophy to be written in Hebrew. Indeed, in its time it was one of the few philosophical books available to those who did not understand Arabic.¹¹

Unlike Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, Judah Ha-Levi, and Maimonides, Ibn Ezra did not offer polemical justification for writing his work.

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon claimed that he wrote his *Sefer ha-Emunot ve-ha-De'ot* for his coreligionists who were faltering in faith. Thus Rabbi Saadiah Gaon writes:

I will begin this book, which it is my intention to write, with an exposition of the reason why men in their search for Truth

⁸ *Y.M.* 2:5; *The Secret of the Torah*, p.40.

⁹ *Y.M.* 7:12, *The Secret of the Torah*, p.40.

¹⁰ Graetz, p. 225.

¹¹ *Yesod Mora* had considerable influence on the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. See *Sifrut ha-Musar ve-ha-Derush*, ed. Yosef Dan (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), p. 121.

become involved in errors, and how these errors can be removed so that the object of their investigation may be fully attained; moreover, why some of these errors have such a powerful hold on some people that they affirm them as truth, deluding themselves that they know something.¹²

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, Ibn Ezra's contemporary and friend, wrote the *Kuzari* to defend Judaism from attacks by Muslims, Christians, philosophers, and heretics. He wrote:

I was asked to state what arguments I could bring to bear against the attacks of philosophers and followers of other religions which differ from our own and against the heretics who differ with the majority of Israel.¹³

Maimonides wrote his *Moreh ha-Nebukhim* for those Jews who were disturbed by what they saw as a conflict between philosophy and religion. Thus Maimonides wrote:

The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy law, who conscientiously fulfils his moral and religious duties, and at the same time has been successful in his philosophic studies. Human reason has attracted him to abide within its sphere; and he finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching based on a literal interpretation of the Law... Hence he is lost in perplexity and anxiety.¹⁴

The purpose of the *Moreh Ha-Nebukhim* was to resolve this perplexity and anxiety. The composition of *Yesod Mora* was apparently not motivated by any such purpose. Ibn Ezra explained that he wrote this work in response to a request for a book explaining the commandments:

¹² Saadia Gaon, "The Book of Doctrines and Opinions" in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, ed. Alexander Altmann (New York: Athenaeum, 1969), p. 25.

¹³ Judah Ha-Levi, "Kuzari," in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, ed. I. Heinemann (New York: Athenaeum, 1969), p. 25.

¹⁴ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. by M. Friedlander (London: Pardes, 1904), p. 2.

The awe-inspiring God knows my heart's sincerity. For I did not compose this book to show that I mastered the sciences or to glorify myself by showing that secrets have been revealed to me. Neither did I write it in order to argue with our ancient sages, for I surely know that they were wiser and more God fearing than I. I composed this book for a revered and noble individual whom I taught the books that I wrote for him. I troubled myself to compose a book for him dealing with the commandments only because of my great love for him, for I found him to be a person of integrity whose fear of the Lord exceeded that of most men.¹⁵

Ibn Ezra opened *Yesod Mora* with an evaluation of the various branches of knowledge. He noted that man's rational soul separates a human being from the rest of the animal kingdom. This soul is a *tabula rasa* when first placed in the body. It is put there in order to be developed. If a human being cultivates his rational soul properly, then it acquires eternal life. In the words of Ibn Ezra:

The soul is destined to return to God the glorious who gave her. She was placed in the body to be shown the Lord's work, to study the works of her Master and to observe His commandments.¹⁶

Man's soul is unique. When it is first placed in the body... it is like a tablet set before a scribe. When God's writing is inscribed upon this tablet...then the soul clings to God both while it is yet in man and later after it leaves the human body.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Y. M. 2:4. The Secret of the Torah*, p. 40. The individual referred to was most probably Joseph ben Ya'akov, one of Ibn Ezra's patrons. Ibn Ezra had earlier expressed his gratitude to Joseph ben Ya'akov in an introductory poem to *Yesod Mora*, where he wrote: "As I finish I thank God and His friend, Joseph the son of Jacob, for the gift of his hand."

¹⁶ Introduction to *Y.M.; The Secret of the Torah*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Y.M. 10:2. The Secret of the Torah*, p. 143.

Ibn Ezra claimed that all branches of wisdom are rungs in the ladder that leads to true wisdom.¹⁸ “Wisdom is the form of the supernatural soul which does not perish when the body dies.”¹⁹

Ibn Ezra analyzed the role of traditional learning in the development of the soul. He maintained that the various branches of Torah study have value in the development of the rational soul but, in and of themselves, are insufficient for its full development.

Ibn Ezra opened *Yesod Mora* with an analysis of the study of the *Masorah*. He found the work of the Masoretes very valuable, for they “preserved Scripture in its original form without any additions or deletions.”²⁰

Nevertheless, a person who has mastered the *Masorah* but does not understand the meaning of Scripture is like a person who holds a medical book in his hands and knows all that there is to know about its page makeup but does not comprehend its contents. Similarly, “One who has mastered the *Masorah* but has not studied any other wisdom is like a camel that carries a load of silk. It is of no use to the silk and the silk is of no use to it.”²¹

Ibn Ezra then addressed the study of grammar. He stressed the importance of the knowledge of grammar, for one cannot fully understand the text of the Torah without it. Furthermore, one who knows grammar will be able to express himself more elegantly in prose and in poetry. However, since the value of grammar is in its use as a tool with which one decodes Scripture, one should not spend one’s entire life studying it or in grammatical scholarship.²²

Ibn Ezra then discussed the study of the Bible.²³ He observed that there are people who devote their entire life to the study of

¹⁸ Introduction to *Y.M.; The Secret of the Torah*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 7:12.

²⁰ *Y.M.* 1:1; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 8,9.

²¹ *Ibid.*; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 9.

²² *Ibid.* 1:2; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 10–12,

²³ *Ibid.* 1:3; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 12–18.

Scripture and believe that they have reached the highest level of human perfection because they devote all of their abilities to this discipline. Ibn Ezra argues that devotion to the text of the Pentateuch alone is insufficient for the understanding of God's law, for while it is true that the Torah "is the source of life and the basis of the commandments, it is beyond the ken of any scholar to fully comprehend even one precept of the Torah if one does not first master the oral law."²⁴

The study of Scripture, specifically the Prophets and the Writings, also has its drawbacks, for while it is true that some commandments are clarified by these sources, the results are meager in proportion to the effort expended in their study. It is ironic that a man who owes his fame to his reputation as a Bible commentator claimed that the rewards of scriptural study are small "in comparison to the effort expended in knowing the names of the Israelite cities; the accounts of the judges and kings; how the temple was constructed and how the one which is yet to be built is to be made; and the words of the prophets, some of which have already come to pass while others relate to the future. We can ascertain the meaning of some of the latter by research. In other instances we grope walls as do the blind. One commentator offers one interpretation and another a different one."²⁵

Ibn Ezra said: "Even if we know the entire Book of Psalms [what have we gained?] For though written under Divine Inspiration, it contains no prophecies for the future. The same is so with Job, Solomon's works, the five Scrolls and the Book of Ezra."²⁶

Ibn Ezra then discussed the study of the Talmud.²⁷ According to Ibn Ezra, there are scholars who view knowledge of the Talmud as the ultimate wisdom. Ibn Ezra notes that these scholars

²⁴ Ibid.; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 13.

²⁵ Ibid.; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 17.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. 1:4; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 18–21.

do not bother to study the *Masorah*; they also consider the study of grammar a waste of time and neglect the study of Scripture.²⁸

Ibn Ezra conceded that these scholars are somewhat justified in their approach, for the Talmud explains all the commandments, “which if a man does, he shall live by them.” However, Ibn Ezra argued that as important as the study of the Talmud is, one must master additional sciences if one wants to master God’s law completely and develop one’s rational soul.

Thus, a student of the Talmud must know Scripture and its grammar.²⁹ A scholar who has not mastered these disciplines will not be able to properly understand the verses of the Torah quoted in the Talmud. He will not know whether these verses are being interpreted literally or midrashically. Hence, without knowledge of Scripture and its grammar, one cannot fully comprehend the Talmud.³⁰

Ibn Ezra argues that one cannot properly comprehend the Talmud if one does not know the sciences, for there are many passages in the Pentateuch and the Talmud that are either incomprehensible or given to misinterpretation by one who has no prior knowledge of the sciences.³¹

Thus without knowing astronomy one cannot comprehend the Talmudic statement to the effect that “At times the conjunction of the moon and sun come at longer intervals. At times the conjunction of the moon and sun come at shorter intervals.”³² Similarly, the dictum “The moon is hidden from us [in Babylonia for twenty-four hours, six from the old moon and eighteen from the new moon]. From them [in the Land of Israel] it is hidden six hours from the new moon and eighteen from the old moon.”³³

²⁸ Ibid.; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 19.

²⁹ Ibid.; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 20.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 4-7; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 18-26.

³² *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 25a.

³³ Y. M. 1:4; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 20-21.

Furthermore, if a person does not know geometry, he will not be able to comprehend the proofs offered in tractate *Eruvin* for the Sabbath boundaries.³⁴

He goes on to say:

There are many things in the writings of our sages that require... interpretation. For example, the statements: "He who is awake at night [and turns his heart to vanity has his blood on his own head]."³⁵ The prohibition of drinking "uncovered³⁶ water"³⁷ pertains to the physical sciences.³⁸

The reference to Igrath, the daughter of Mahalath,³⁹ relates to the laws of astrology.⁴⁰ The statement to the effect that the moon spoke evil of the sun⁴¹ is linked to the science of astrology.⁴² Many matters in Scripture also require interpretation. It thus must be pointed out that *Kobelet* speaks of the four elements,⁴³ namely, heaven (fire), earth, wind (air) and water. "The sun also rises" (Ecclesiastes I:5) refers to heaven.⁴⁴ "But the earth remains the same forever," (ibid. v. 4), "On its rounds the wind returns" (ibid. v. 6)... and "All streams flow into the sea" (ibid v. 7) refer to the other three elements.

³⁴ Ibid 1:5; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 21.

³⁵ *Avot* 3:4.

³⁶ This is the reading in Joseph Cohen's edition of *Yesod Mora* (Bar Ilan University Press, 2002). Other texts have "borrowed water." *Pesahim* 11a.

³⁷ I.E.'s paraphrase of *Terumot* 8:4: *Three liquids are prohibited if uncovered: water, wine and milk.*

³⁸ Lack of sleep is harmful to the body. So is drinking water that has been uncovered for something might have fallen into it.

³⁹ The queen of demons. Cf. *Pesahim* 112b. "Do not go out alone... on the nights of either Wednesday or Sabbath because Igrath the daughter of Mahalath, she and 180,000 destroying angels go forth, and each has permission to wreak destruction independently."

⁴⁰ It alludes to the evil influence that Saturn exerts on those nights.

⁴¹ Cf. *Hullin* 60b.

⁴² It alludes to a certain conjunction of the moon with the sun.

⁴³ Earth, air, water and fire.

⁴⁴ Fire.

Many other things also require explanation [such as] the statement to the effect that the waters are upon the heaven.⁴⁵ Likewise the statement that the sun, moon, and stars are in one firmament⁴⁶ requires explanation.⁴⁷ Whatever Scripture says is all true.⁴⁸

Ibn Ezra clearly believed that Talmudic scholars who are ignorant of the sciences cannot properly understand certain parts of the Bible and Talmud. In fact, he held that they probably misinterpret these passages.

The fact is that Ibn Ezra did not value Talmudic learning as an end in itself. He prized it only insofar as it taught a person how to fulfill his obligations to man and God.

Ibn Ezra criticized scholars who devote all of their efforts to the study of Talmudic passages that have no practical relevance. Thus, Ibn Ezra criticized those who devote all their time to the study of the order of *Nezikin*.⁴⁹ He argued that “One judge... is sufficient to straighten out that which is crooked.” As to the value of the study of these laws per se, Ibn Ezra wrote that “If all of Israel were righteous there would be no need for the order of *Nezikin*.”⁵⁰

Ibn Ezra maintained that one must master philosophy and the physical sciences if one wants to fully develop one’s soul. It is only when a person knows the sciences and the secret of God’s

⁴⁵ Gen. 1:7.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 1:18.

⁴⁷ The sun, moon, and stars are above the firmament. They only appear to be in the firmament. See I.E. on Gen. 1:17.

⁴⁸ *Y.M.* 1:6, pp. 23,24.

⁴⁹ The Order that deals with damages.

⁵⁰ *Y.M.* 1:8; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 30-31. Ibn Ezra apparently takes *nezikim* (damages) in its narrow sense: deliberately harming another person or his property. He believes no righteous person would do so; hence his comment. One may argue that Ibn Ezra is stretching a point, for there are many gray areas in interpersonal relations about which decent people may disagree and require adjudication.

Throne and the "Chariot" and knows God, his soul cleaves to God while he is yet alive and continues clinging to God after it leaves his body.⁵¹

One may ask: If the development of the soul depends upon knowledge of philosophy and the natural sciences, what need is there for the Torah?

Ibn Ezra believes that the Torah teaches **basic beliefs** such as the existence of God, the existence of the soul and the World to Come. The study of the natural sciences and philosophy clarify and amplify the truths taught by the Torah. Ibn Ezra writes that there are "Many matters in Scripture" that require explanation. Thus, "an intelligent person who did not study psychology will not understand the five ways in which a human being's soul is similar to its creator." According to Ibn Ezra a person can comprehend "the mystery of the soul, the secret of the heavenly angels, and the concept of the World to Come as taught in the Torah, the prophets and the sages of the Talmud" only after he masters the natural sciences, logic, mathematics, and the "science of proportions."⁵²

Furthermore, Ibn Ezra implies that studying only philosophy may leave a person with doubts. However, there can be no doubt about these truths if they are taught in the Torah.

Psalm 19:8 reads, "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." Ibn Ezra comments:

Up until now Scripture explained how an intelligent person can find proof of God's existence and recognize God's deeds.⁵³ Now David goes on to say that there is a better, more precious and more believable witness than the above. That witness is provided by God's law, His testimonies, precepts, positive commandments, negative commandments and His ordin-

⁵¹ Ibid. 10:2; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 143.

⁵² Ibid. 1:9; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 33.

⁵³ Verses 1-7 of Psalm 19 deal with God as He is revealed in nature. Scripture now speaks of God as He is revealed in the Torah.

ances... Scripture reads *restoring the soul* because the Torah removes doubt from the soul.⁵⁴

Furthermore, Ibn Ezra believes that the desires of the flesh impede the development of the soul. He believed that one of the primary purposes of the *mitzvot* is to prevent man's corporeal nature from dominating the body and thereby hindering the development of the soul. The *mitzvot* do this by restricting man's appetites.⁵⁵

According to Ibn Ezra, the Nazirite⁵⁶ represents the ideal religious personality. The Nazirite separates himself from secular life. He is therefore a holy person.⁵⁷ When the Nazirite completes his term and wants to go back to drinking wine, a drink that stirs sexual passion,⁵⁸ he must bring a burnt offering, a sin

⁵⁴ A person who bases his beliefs solely on philosophical speculation can never be certain of the truth, for someone may disprove his line of argument. However, a person who bases his beliefs on the Torah can be certain that what he believes in is true. Ibn Ezra seems to be paralleling Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi who wrote: "They (the philosophers) are full of doubts, and there is no consensus of opinion between one philosopher and another (Kuzari 5:14)... In some cases the art of the Kalām (medieval Arabic philosophy) does greater harm than the principles of truth, because it teaches doubts... sparks are kindled in the souls of people naturally open to religion and approachment to God, by the words of the pious, sparks which become luminaries in their hearts, whilst those who are not so gifted must have recourse to the Kalām. He often derives no benefit from it; nay, he comes to grief over it (Ibid. 5:16). Judah ha-Levi's *Kitab al Khazari*, translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld (1905).

⁵⁵ Ibid. *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 143.

⁵⁶ Num. 6:21.

⁵⁷ Ibn Ezra to Num. 6:5. "The Nazirite is holy because he separates himself from wine." See also chap. 33 of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*: But abstinence from drinking wine is also called holiness; in reference to the Nazirite it is therefore said, *He shall be holy* (Num. 6:5).

⁵⁸ See I.E. to Num. 6:2.

offering and a peace offering. He also has to shave his hair at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. He is so treated⁵⁹ because he is distancing himself from his holiness and is returning to mundane existence.⁶⁰

Ibn Ezra held that sexual conduct is also an impediment to holiness. He notes:

Scripture states, sanctify them today and tomorrow (Ex. 19:10). The Torah then goes on to say, *come not near a women* (ibid. v. 15).⁶¹ It is for this reason that a man who has relations with his wife is *unclean* and is prohibited from praying until he washes.⁶² The sages of the Mishnah similarly noted that it was customary during the period of the second temple for a skin to be washed⁶³ if even one drop of semen fell upon it.⁶⁴ Furthermore, a person who experiences a seminal emission is prohibited to eat sanctified flesh.⁶⁵ Scripture was likewise very stringent with regard to a menstruating woman and a woman who gave birth.

According to Ibn Ezra circumcision serves to remind a Jew "not to defile his soul by engaging in an act of sexual intercourse that is not in accordance with the way of truth."⁶⁶ According to Ibn Ezra the patriarch Jacob eventually reached a point in his life

⁵⁹ His hair is publicly shaved.

⁶⁰ By ceasing to be a Nazirite. This is also the opinion of Nahmanides. See Nahmanides to Num. 6:11: "A Nazirite must bring a sin-offering when the days of his Naziritehood are fulfilled... for until now he was separated in sanctity and the service of God, and he should... have remained separated forever" (Chavel translation.)

⁶¹ Do not have sexual relations with a woman. In other words "sanctify them" means, instruct them not to have sexual relations.

⁶² See *Berakhot* 20b-21a.

⁶³ Immersed in a *mikveh*.

⁶⁴ Lev. 15:18; *Kelim* 1:5.

⁶⁵ Lev. 15:16; 7:20.

⁶⁶ *Y.M.* 7:8; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 102.

when he ceased to have sexual relations. Ibn Ezra believes that Jacob is to be emulated. He writes:

The intelligent person will act as did our father Jacob when he vowed, *then shall the Lord be my God* (Gen.28:21), for when Jacob came to Beth-El, he said, *Put away the strange gods that are among you* (ibid. 35:2). He left the sheep and separated himself to serve God. He never again slept with a woman.⁶⁷

Ibn Ezra makes a similar point in his commentary on the Pentateuch regarding Moses. Ibn Ezra believes that Moses eventually ceased having sexual relations with his wife, because he was in constant communion with God. According to Ibn Ezra this aspect of Moses' behavior was the reason for Aaron's and Miriam's displeasure with him.⁶⁸

Ibn Ezra points to Elijah and Elisha as embodying the ideals one should emulate. "They forsook the world and served God alone."⁶⁹

In addition to curbing man's lust, the mitzvot of the Torah provide instructions that, if followed, ensure an individual's wellbeing. Indeed, the Torah's negative mitzvot may be compared to the prohibitions laid down by a physician.⁷⁰ In fact, Ibn Ezra held that a person is not rewarded for observing negative commandments. The reward of observing a negative commandment lies in the avoidance of the evil that falls upon a person who commits any act that the Torah prohibits.⁷¹

Ibn Ezra explained that while some commandments are observed only by belief, faith must permeate the observance of all commandments. Indeed, he argued, "If belief is lacking, then the

⁶⁷ Y.M. 7:11; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 107.

⁶⁸ I.E. on Num. 12:1. This is the opinion of the Midrash and Rashi. See *Sifrei* 99 and Rashi on Num. 12:1.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 10:3; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 143.

⁶⁹ Ibid.10:3;

⁷⁰ Ibid. 7:3; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 92.

⁷¹ Ibid.

observance of the commandments is meaningless."⁷² In other words, the commandments are to make one aware of the existence of God.

According to Ibn Ezra a person must not only be conscious of God but must cleave to Him. Ibn Ezra notes that the Torah states:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, The Lord is one... Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day... Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deut. 6:4-7).

According to most commentaries, the above speaks about Torah study. However according to Ibn Ezra, it speaks about cleaving to God. Ibn Ezra notes that the above verses speak of the four shifting positions of the human body: sitting, walking, lying down and rising. It teaches us that wherever we are and in whatever position we find ourselves we must cleave to God.⁷³

One must not only cleave to God but also share his consciousness of God with his fellow human beings.

One who reaches the level where he is always conscious of God and His deeds and wonders, and informs people of God's glory by not saying anything, without mentioning God's name, is one of those *who turn the many to righteousness*⁷⁴ (Daniel 12:3).⁷⁵

How does one cleave to God? According to Ibn Ezra, "God is all," that is, His Glory manifests itself in the working of the world. Cleving to God means knowing and contemplating

⁷² Ibid. 7:2; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 91.

⁷³ *Y.M.* 10:1-2; *The Secret of the Torah*, p.142.

⁷⁴ The Book of Daniel tells us: "They that turn the many to righteousness 'shall shine' as the brightness of the stars forever and ever."

⁷⁵ *Y.M.* 7:11; *The Secret of the Torah*, p.108.

God's work.⁷⁶ "The Soul was placed in the body to be shown [the Lord's creation] to study the works of her master, and to observe His commandments."⁷⁷

According to Ibn Ezra God is far off and at the same time close by.⁷⁸ He is far off because a human being can never attain the knowledge of God Himself. One cannot behold God's face. However, God is also close by because He permeates the world. Man can look upon God's back, that is, connect to God via the knowledge of His work. In the words of Ibn Ezra:

⁷⁶ Maimonides had a similar concept. However, whereas Ibn Ezra speaks of cleaving to God, Maimonides speaks of loving and fearing God. He writes:

"It is a commandment to love and fear the... Almighty, for it is written, *And you shall love the Lord your God* (Deut. 6:4), and it is also written, *You shall fear the Lord your God* (ibid. verse 13). What is the way to love and fear God? Whenever one contemplates the great wonders of God's works and creations, and one sees that they are a product of a wisdom that has no bounds or limits, one will immediately love, laud and glorify [God] with an immense passion to know the Great Name, as David has said, *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God* (Ps. 42:3).

"When one thinks about these matters, one will feel a great fear and trepidation, and one will know that one is a low and insignificant creation, with hardly an iota of intelligence compared to that of God, as David has said, *When I observe Your heavens, the work of Your fingers... what is man, that You are heedful of him?* (ibid. 8:4-5). Bearing these things in mind, I shall explain important concepts of the Creator's work, as a guide to understanding and loving God. Concerning this love the Sages said that from it one will come to know the One who spoke and the world came into being." Translated by Immanuel O'Levy (with some changes). (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* Chapter 2:1-2). Available on the Internet at: <<http://www.panix.com/~jjbaker/rambam.html>>.

⁷⁷ *Y.M.* 1:7; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *Y.M.* 12:4; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 179.

An intelligent person can know the One in the following way. He can know the One by cleaving to the One who contains all. However, a created being cannot know God's entire goodness. This may be compared to the sunlight which passes over someone whose eyes are closed. He cannot see the face of the brightness of the sun until it passes.⁷⁹ Scripture therefore states, I will make all My goodness pass before thee (Ex. 33:19). Now, cleaving unto God's total goodness is metaphorically called cleaving to God's face.⁸⁰ The cleaving of created beings to God [via the contemplation of His works] is called [seeing God's] back. This is what Scripture means by *and thou shalt see my back*. (ibid.)⁸¹

In keeping with his belief that God is incorporeal, Ibn Ezra notes that Scripture speaks of God's back and face metaphorically, for the Torah speaks in the language of man.⁸²

When man knows God's work he attains eternal life. Thus Ibn Ezra writes:

Man's soul is unique. When given by God, it is like a tablet set before a scribe. When God's writing—which consists of the categorical knowledge of the things made out of the four elements, the knowledge of the spheres, the throne of glory, the secret of the chariot, and the knowledge of the Most High—is inscribed upon this tablet, the soul cleaves to God the Glorious while it is yet in man, and also afterwards when its power is removed from the body which is its place (here on earth).⁸³

⁷⁹ A person cannot look directly at the sun. He can enjoy the sunlight only when not facing the sun.

⁸⁰ Or seeing God's face. See Ex. 33:19. This is beyond human ken.

⁸¹ *Y.M.* 12:3; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 178.

⁸² I.E.'s point is that the Torah employed anthropomorphic language. Maimonides makes an identical point in his *Guide for the Perplexed* part 1, chap. 26. I.E. is wont to state this point over and over again in his commentary on the Bible.

⁸³ *Y.M.* 10:2; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 143.

According to the Talmud, there are 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah.⁸⁴ Almost all of the post-Talmudic scholars take this Talmudic statement literally. A number of them composed lists of the 613 commandments. Although these scholars disagree as to which of the laws mentioned in the Torah are to be included, they all accept the concept of 613 *mitzvot*.⁸⁵

Ibn Ezra believed, “In reality there is no limit to the commandments” because each *mitzvah* of the Torah has infinite implications. In the words of the Book of Psalms, *I have seen an end to every purpose; But Thy commandment is exceedingly broad* (Psalm 119:96).⁸⁶ If we want to compile a list of the commandments, however, we have to follow the laws of logic and categorize the commandments. If we do so then the *mitzvot* do not add up to 613 commandments. In fact according to Ibn Ezra’s calculations, there are only about sixty *mitzvot* in the Torah.⁸⁷

Ibn Ezra takes sharp issue with those who list the *mitzvot*. He argues that they do not have a consistent system for classifying the commandments:

Some of them list the prohibition of seething a kid in its mother’s milk once. Others count it as three commandments because it is written three times in the Torah... Some count the particulars and the categories. Others count only the particulars in some instances and only the categories in others. Some count a commandment that comes in two formulations twice.⁸⁸

Ibn Ezra explained that the *mitzvot* are divided into positive and negative commandments.⁸⁹ He notes that the command-

⁸⁴ *Makkot* 23b.

⁸⁵ Gerson Appel, *A Philosophy of the Mitzvot* (New York: Ktav, 1975) p. 26.

⁸⁶ *Y.M.* 2:3; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 39.

⁸⁷ *Y.M.* 2:3. See also Yosef Cohen and Uriel Simon, “R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Tora. Ma-hadura Me-vu'eret. Mahadura Shenniya*” (Bar Ilan, 2007) p. 96, fn. 24.

⁸⁸ *Y.M.* 2:3; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 39.

⁸⁹ *Y.M.* 7:1; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 89.

ments are observed in the following ways: (1) belief, (2) speech, and (3) action.⁹⁰

Mitzvoth observed by belief include (1) belief in the existence of God, (2) belief that God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, (3) loving God, (4) cleaving to God, and (5) loving one's neighbor.⁹¹

Commandments that are observed by speech include (1) reciting grace after meals, (2) praying, (3) reciting *Hallel*, (4) teaching Torah to one's children, and (5) discussing the contents of the Torah.⁹²

Commandments that are observed by deeds include: (1) offering sacrifices, (2) eating *matzah* on Passover, (3) building a *sukkah* on *Sukkot*, (4) giving charity, (5) sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Ha-Shanah, and (6) fasting on Yom Kippur.⁹³

Ibn Ezra distinguished among three types of *mitzvot*.

1. Rational laws. Ibn Ezra refers to them as *pikkudim* (deposits). The *pikkudim* are so called because God deposited them in the mind.⁹⁴ "These laws are not contingent upon place, time or any other thing."⁹⁵ These laws "were known via reason before the Torah was given through the agency of Moses [at Sinai]."⁹⁶ "The Decalogue, with the exclusion of the Sabbath, is an example."⁹⁷ The *pikkudim* include those laws classified by tradition as *mishpatim* (civil laws) and various types of behavior such as laws against incest and adultery. These laws are the fundamental laws of the Torah.
2. Symbolic precepts. Commandments that serve as reminders of the rational laws or of precepts that all Israelites, both men

⁹⁰ Ibid. 7:2; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 91.

⁹¹ Ibid. 7:9; *The Secret of the Torah*, p.104

⁹² Ibid. 7:10; *The Secret of the Torah*, p.105.

⁹³ Ibid. 7:11; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 106-107.

⁹⁴ Ibn Ezra on Psalm 199.

⁹⁵ Y.M. 5:1; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 75.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

and women, are obligated to be conscious of at all times. The Sabbath, which recalls creation, is an example.⁹⁸

3. Esoteric commandments. These commandments possess a purpose that only a few can fathom. One man in a thousand knows the reason for them.⁹⁹

Ibn Ezra believed that there is a reason for all the commandments of the Torah.¹⁰⁰ Unlike Saadiah Gaon and Judah Ha-Levi, he did not divide the *mitzvot* into divine decrees, which do not appear to be based on reason (*shimiyot*)¹⁰¹ such as the dietary laws or the sacrificial system, and rational laws (*sikhliyot*)¹⁰² such as do not murder, do not lie, do not commit robbery and the like. Like Maimonides after him, Ibn Ezra maintained that all *mitzvot* possess a coherent teleology.

Ibn Ezra taught that an individual is obligated to observe all the commandments even if he does not understand their purpose or function. A person who refuses to observe the laws until he knows the reason for their observance will remain without guidance.

He will be like a child who refuses to eat bread until he first knows how the ground was ploughed, the grain planted, harvested, winnowed, cleansed, ground, sifted, kneaded and baked. If a child acts thusly, he will surely die of starvation.

The correct thing for a child to do is eat normally and, as he grows, ask a little at a time until all of his questions are answered. Similarly, an intelligent person can ultimately learn the very many clearly stated reasons, which the Torah itself offers for the precepts.¹⁰³ However, there are commandments the reason for which “only one man in a thousand knows.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Ibid. 5:2; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 78.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 8:1; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 111,112.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 111,112.

¹⁰¹ Traditional commandments.

¹⁰² Rational commandments.

¹⁰³ *Y.M.* 8:1; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 111,112.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.11:7; *The Secret of the Torah*, pp. 159,160.

Yesod Mora also offers a numerical interpretation of God's name and an explanation of the Hebrew alphabet. According to Ibn Ezra the letters of God's name *YHVH* have philosophical significance. *YHVH* is a variant of *EHYH*.¹⁰⁵ The *alef* stands for the number one. The number one is the first of all numbers. All other numbers flow from it, and it is present in all numbers. Similarly God is one, everything comes from God and God is present in all. *Yod* stand for the number ten. The number ten is a variant of the number one, for it is the first of the tens and is present in all the tens that follow it.

The numbers five and six are likewise special numbers. When multiplied by themselves they are never lost. Similarly God is present in everything.

Thus the name *YHVH* or *EHYH* indicates that God is One. He is the creator of all and He is in all.¹⁰⁶

There are many parallels between the teachings of Ibn Ezra and those of Maimonides (1138–1204). In fact a strong argument can be made that *Yesod Mora* and other works of Ibn Ezra greatly influenced Maimonides.¹⁰⁷

Ibn Ezra believed that man's uniqueness lies in his intellect. In fact he believed that "man's intelligence is the angel which mediates between him and his God."¹⁰⁸ Maimonides had a similar point of view:

¹⁰⁵ Exodus 3:15. *EHYH* is spelled *alef, heb, vav, heb*. *EHYH* is a variant of *YHVH*. See I.E. on Exodus 3:15.

¹⁰⁶ *Y.M.* 11:7; *The Secret of the Torah*, 159-160.

¹⁰⁷ See Isadore Twersky, "Did R. Abraham Ibn Ezra Influence Maimonides?" (Hebrew) in *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Polymath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁸ I.E. Introduction to his commentary on the Torah; *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch (Genesis)* Translated & Annotated by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur Silver (New York: Menorah Press, 1988), p. 10.

I have shown you that the intellect which emanates from God unto us is the link that joins us to God.¹⁰⁹

On account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty... man's distinction consists in a property which no other creature on earth possesses, viz., intellectual perception... On account of his Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the almighty.¹¹⁰ (*Guide*, 1:1, p. 14; 3:51, p. 386)

Ibn Ezra held that the Torah is to be interpreted in accordance with the dictates of reason. He believed that

Every precept, be it minor or major, must be weighed on the scale of one's heart wherein the Eternal has planted some of His wisdom. Thus when there appears something in the Torah that is intellectually impossible to accept or contrary to the evidence of our senses, then we must search for a hidden meaning. This is so because intelligence is the basis of the Torah. The Torah was not given to ignoramuses.¹¹¹

Maimonides had an identical notion. In fact, one of his reasons for writing the *Guide for the Perplexed* was to interpret traditional Jewish teachings in accordance with the dictates of reason.¹¹² One of his methods of doing so is to attribute secret meanings to passages in the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash that contradict reason.¹¹³

Ibn Ezra believed that there are secret interpretations of the Torah that are best kept from the common people, and that it is necessary to write in such a way that only the initiated will understand. Thus he notes that there is a bird that cannot see on

¹⁰⁹ *Guide* 3:51; Friedlander translation, p. 386.

¹¹⁰ *Guide* 1:1; Friedlander translation, p. 14.

¹¹¹ I.E. Introduction to his commentary on the Torah; Strickman & Silver translation p. 10.

¹¹² Introduction to the *Guide*; Friedlander translation, p. 2.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

sunny days and is able to see only at night. In other words, some people are better kept in the dark, for they cannot comprehend the full truth.¹¹⁴ Throughout his commentary on the Bible Ibn Ezra hints at secrets, either by explicitly saying so or by such statements as "and the intelligent will understand," or "I cannot explain," or "a secret (*sod*) is hidden here."

This is precisely the method chosen by Maimonides in the *Guide*. In a sentence reminiscent of Ibn Ezra's parable of the bird that cannot see during the day, Maimonides writes that Scripture spoke in metaphors "in order that the educated may comprehend it according to the measure of their faculties and the feebleness of their apprehension, while the educated persons may take it in a different sense."¹¹⁵

According to Ibn Ezra, man gains immortality by developing his soul. He writes:

Man's soul is unique. When given by God, it is like a tablet set before a scribe. When God's writing—which consists of the categorical knowledge of the things made out of the four elements, the knowledge of the spheres, the throne of glory, the secret of the chariot, and the knowledge of the Most High—is inscribed on this tablet, the soul cleaves to God the glorious while it is yet in man, and also afterward when its power is removed from the body which is its place [here on earth].¹¹⁶ If the soul grows wise it will share the secrets of the angels and will then cleave to God the Glorious.

Maimonides had a similar notion:

A person's aim must be the aim of man as man, viz., the formation of ideas, and nothing else. The best and sublimest among them is the idea which man forms of God, angels, and the rest of the creation according to his capacity. Such men are

¹¹⁴ I.E. Introduction to his commentary on the Torah; Strickman & Silver translation, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ *Guide*, Introduction; Friedlander translation, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ Y. M. 10:2; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 143.

always with God, and of them it is said, “Ye are princes, and all of you are children of the Most High.” (Ps. 82: 6)¹¹⁷

The fourth kind of perfection is the true perfection of man: the possession of the highest, intellectual faculties; the possession of such notions which lead to true metaphysical opinions as regards God. With this perfection man has obtained his final object; it gives him true human perfection; it remains to him alone; it gives him immortality, and on its account he is called man... Your aim must therefore be to attain this [fourth] perfection.¹¹⁸

According to the Talmud, the Torah speaks in the language of man (*dibberah Torah ke-lashon benei adam*). However, the Talmud employs this phrase in a halakhic sense. In other words, no laws are to be derived from what appears to be Biblical verbosity, as in the phrases *hikkaret yikkaret*,¹¹⁹ shall utterly be cut off (Num. 15:31); *ish ish*,¹²⁰ any man (Lev. 152); and *ganev yigganev*,¹²¹ but if it be stolen (Ex. 22:11).

Ibn Ezra applies the Talmudic concept of *dibberah Torah ke-lashon benei adam* to all instances in which Scripture speaks of God in human terms. Thus in commenting on Gen. 1:26 Ibn Ezra writes:

We know that the Torah spoke the language of man, for it was given to humans who speak and hear. Now a human being cannot speak of things above or below him without employing human terminology. Hence Scripture uses such terms as ‘the mouth of the earth’ (Num. 16:30), ‘the hand of the Jordan’ (Num. 13:29), and ‘the head of the dust of the world.’ (Prov. 8:26)

Similarly, in commenting on ‘for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and He ceased from work and rested on the

¹¹⁷ *Guide*, 3:8, p. 262.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 3:54, p. 262.

¹¹⁹ Lit., cut off, he shall be cut off.

¹²⁰ Lit., a man, a man.

¹²¹ Lit., stolen, it be stolen.

seventh day' (Ex. 31:17), Ibn Ezra writes, *ve-hatorah dibberah kelashon bene adam*, the Torah spoke in the language of man. Maimonides follows suit. He writes:

You no doubt know the Talmudic saying *The Torah speaks according to the language of man*, that is to say, expressions which can easily be comprehended and understood by all are applied to the Creator. Hence the description of God by attributes implying corporeality, in order to express His existence because the multitude of people do not easily conceive existence unless in connection with a body, and that which is not a body nor connected with a body has for them no existence.¹²²

God is incorporeal and has no physical form... If so, what does the Torah mean when it says, "under His feet" (Exodus 31:18), "inscribed with the finger of God" (ibid), "the hand of the Lord" (Exodus 9:3), "the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 38:7), "the ears of the Lord" (Numbers 11:1) and other such statements? These phrases are in accordance with the minds of people who can grasp only physical existence. The Torah speaks according to the language of man.¹²³

There are many *aggadot* in the Talmud that run counter to reason. Ibn Ezra claimed that these *aggadot* have a secret meaning:

There is a secret meaning to the midrashic statement to the effect that the world will exist for 6,000 years;¹²⁴ as to the Midrash which states, "One (the sun) was not greater than the other (the moon)," there is a secret meaning to it.¹²⁵ The Rabbinic statement that "Noah drank from his vineyard on the day he planted it" is not to be taken literally.¹²⁶ Our sages say that God showed Moses the knot of the *tefillin*. These words are correct. However, its meaning is not in accordance with that of the wise men of this generation who interpret the Rab-

¹²² *Guide* 1:26; Friedlander, pp. 35,36.

¹²³ *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, 1:8-9.

¹²⁴ I.E. on Gen. 1:15.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 1:16.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 9:20.

binic statement literally. On the contrary, this has a deeply hidden secret meaning.¹²⁷

Maimonides similarly believed that many *aggadot* have a hidden meaning. He notes that some people take all *aggadot* at face value regardless of their content. The problem with this approach is that, while based on piety, it portrays the Rabbis of the Talmud in a negative light, for many *aggadot* contradict reason and appear foolish.¹²⁸

According to Maimonides, “All the passages in the Midrash which, if taken literally, appear to be inconsistent with truth and common sense... must be taken figuratively.” Many of them “have some secret meaning.”¹²⁹

The medieval Jewish philosophers were concerned with explaining the divine commandments. Saadiah Gaon divided the commandments into traditional (a-rational) commandments and rational commandments. Ibn Ezra disagreed with this differentiation. Believing that all the divine commandments are rational, he argues: “All of the commandments fall into one of the following two categories. One category consists of rational laws which God implanted into the minds of all intelligent human beings. There are many such commandments. The only one of the Ten Statements which does not fall into this category is the command to observe the Sabbath. The second category that the precepts fall into is that of ‘Hidden Commandments,’ that is, commandments for which the Torah does not reveal any reason. Far be it for one to even think that any of these commandments contradict reason. We must in all instances observe everything that God has commanded us, whether their secret has or has not been revealed to us... (we) must search for its meaning in the books of the wise men, of blessed memory... we must investigate and try to understand it with all our strength.”¹³⁰ Maimonides accepted

¹²⁷ I.E. on Ex. 33:21.

¹²⁸ Maimonides; *Introduction to Chapter 11 of Sanhedrin*.

¹²⁹ *Guide*, Introduction; Friedlander translation p. 5.

¹³⁰ I.E. on Ex. 20:1.

Ibn Ezra's premise. He too asserts that all commandments of the Torah have a purpose that can be discovered.¹³¹

It should be noted that unlike Maimonides, Ibn Ezra put forward his ideas in an extremely short form. He did not elaborate on them. In fact the entire *Yesod Mora* is under thirty pages.

Ibn Ezra considered man to be a microcosm (*olam katan*).¹³² So did Maimonides. However, whereas Maimonides devoted an entire chapter of the *Guide* towards explaining this concept,¹³³ Ibn Ezra was satisfied with merely noting it.

It is impossible to say how much Maimonides actually took from Ibn Ezra. One can only point out the parallels. It is possible to argue that Ibn Ezra and Maimonides drew from the same sources. However, the fact of the matter is that Ibn Ezra preceded Maimonides and that the latter has more of an affinity to Ibn Ezra than to other thinkers that preceded him.

It should be noted, however, that while there are similarities between Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, there are also major differences.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra believed that astrology is a true science. He was not only a student of astrology but also a practitioner of its arts. He cast astrological charts and served as an astrological consultant. Ibn Ezra authored a number of works dealing with this science, some of which were translated into Latin. He played a major role in spreading this lore in his travels.¹³⁴

Ibn Ezra maintains that many commandments in the Torah can be explained by the teachings of astrology.¹³⁵ He believed that the vestments of the High Priest and the Ark of the Covenant have astrological significance.¹³⁶ Many of the secrets that Ibn Ezra hints at in his commentary on the Torah allude to the

¹³¹ *Guide* 3:26; Friedlander translation pp. 310–312.

¹³² Gen. 1:26; *Yesod Mora* 12:3; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 177.

¹³³ *Guide* 1:72; Friedlander translation pp. 113–119.

¹³⁴ See Shlomo Sela. "Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham Ibn Ezra's Thought" (Israel, 1999).

¹³⁵ See Ibn Ezra on Ex. 20:14. See also Chapter 9 of *Yesod Mora*.

¹³⁶ See Ibn Ezra on Ex. 25:40; 28:5.

science of astrology. According to Ibn Ezra, the fate of individuals and nations is determined by the arrangement of the heavenly bodies.

All things that were created and exist upon the earth are dependent on the arrangement of the heavenly bodies.¹³⁷

One who knows the ways of the spheres knows the mind of the Most High.¹³⁸

A human being's rational faculty can comprehend the truth which the heavens declare and the firmament shows. It can accomplish the aforementioned by employing the vision of the corporeal eye and the perception of the eye of the inner soul.¹³⁹

Ibn Ezra believes that men can avert the fate that the stars have in store for them by studying the laws of astrology:

God granted wisdom to man and implanted in his heart the intelligence to receive power from on high to add to his good or to diminish his evil.¹⁴⁰

In contrast to the above, Maimonides considers astrology to be a superstition and contrary to Jewish law. The Pentateuch prohibits a Jew to "observe times."¹⁴¹ Maimonides explains:

Who is an observer of times? They that point at times, saying astrologically: That day is a good one, that day is a bad one: that day is fit to do that particular work, but that year, or that month, is bad for that particular thing... He who does aught because of the signs of astrology, and times to do his work or goes on his mission on the very time set by the heaven-gazers, is flogged. For is it not said, "Nor observe times"?¹⁴²

Maimonides elaborated on his attitude towards astrology in a letter to the Jews of Marseilles:

¹³⁷ Ibn Ezra on Ps. 33:3.

¹³⁸ Ibn Ezra on Ps. 19:1.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibn Ezra on Ex. 7:3.

¹⁴¹ Lev. 19:26.

¹⁴² *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry* 11:9; *Book of the Mishneh Torah* translated by Simon Glazer (New York, 1917).

With abiding conviction we can only affirm the principle validated by men of science that all the assumptions of the astrologers are false.

I am aware that it is possible to find some individual opinions of our sages in the *Talmud*, the *Mishnah* and *Midrashim* supporting astrological assumptions about the potency of the stars at a man's nativity. This should not be disturbing to you inasmuch as we must never abandon practical *Halakhah* for the sake of upholding dialectical arguments. Moreover, it is not feasible to surrender demonstrative rational knowledge and embrace the opinion of one individual sage who might have missed a crucial point at that time, or he may have proffered an allegorical remark not to be taken literally, or that his statement was meant as a temporary measure referring to a specific incident. For is it not apparent that many statements of the Torah cannot be taken literally but, as is clear from scientific evidence, require interpretation that will make them acceptable to rational thought? Our eyes are set in the front and not in the back. One should therefore look ahead of him and not behind him. I have thus revealed to you with these words my whole heart.¹⁴³

The book of Exodus states: "And if men contend, and one smite the other with a stone, or with his fist, and he die not, but keep his bed; if he rise again, and walk abroad upon his staff, then shall he that smote him be quit; only he shall pay for the loss of his time and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed" (Ex. 21:18-19). The Rabbis of the Talmud say that the above verse gives physicians permission to heal.¹⁴⁴

According to I.E. this permission to heal is limited to wounds delivered to the outside of the body. However, the treatment of internal wounds is to be left to God:

¹⁴³ "Letter to the Jews of Marseilles" in *Letters of Maimonides*, translated and edited, with introductions and notes, by Leon D. Stitskin (New York, 1977).

¹⁴⁴ *Berakhot* 60a; *Bava Kamma* 85a.

Permission has been granted to physicians to heal blows and wounds that are visible on the surface. However, it is in God's hand to heal any illness which strikes inside of the body. It is thus written, "For He maketh sore, and bondeth up" (Job 5:18).¹⁴⁵

The great gift that God granted Israel was that they would not have any need of physicians alongside God if they observed the Torah. They would not have any reason to act like king Asa¹⁴⁶ who was criticized by Scripture for seeking the help of physicians.¹⁴⁷

Maimonides disagrees with the above notion. He believes that a person should consult physicians in time of illness.¹⁴⁸ In fact he believes that the Torah requires those trained in medicine to heal the sick:

The Torah requires the physician to heal Jews. This is part of what they said in the Talmud when they explained that the verse "you shall surely restore it to him"¹⁴⁹ includes the obligation to heal the sick. For if you see someone being harmed and you can save him, you are to save him with your body, with your property, or with your knowledge.¹⁵⁰

Whosoever is able to save another and does not save him transgresses the commandment "Neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor." (Lev. 19:16)¹⁵¹

The above clearly implies that a physician who fails to respond to aid a sick person is in violation of a Biblical commandment. This is the way Rabbi Joseph Karo understood Maimonides. The former writes:

¹⁴⁵ I.E. on Ex. 21:19.

¹⁴⁶ Scripture criticizes King Asa for making use of physicians when ill. We thus read: *Yet in his disease he (Asa) sought not to the Lord, but to physicians* (2 Chron. 16:12). It is clear from the latter that the Bible considers King Asa's action as sinful.

¹⁴⁷ *Yesod Mora* 7:6; *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 98.

¹⁴⁸ *Introduction to Avot (Shemonah Perakim)*, Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 22:2.

¹⁵⁰ *Commentary on Mishnah; Nedarim* 4:4.

¹⁵¹ *Mishneh Torah; Laws of Homicide* 1:14.

The Torah gave permission to the physician to heal; moreover, this is a religious precept and it is included in the category of saving life; and if he withholds his services, it is considered as shedding blood.¹⁵²

Note has already been taken of Ibn Ezra's embrace of the institution of the *nazir*. Maimonides had a totally different point of view:

The Torah says regarding the *nazir* who was prohibited from using wine and cutting hair, "Atonement should be made for him for the sin he has committed against the soul" (Num. 6:11). The Sages said that if the *nazir*, who merely separated himself from wine, requires atonement, then how much more does the individual who separates himself from all things require atonement. Therefore, the Sages commanded that one should not separate oneself from anything, except from things which the Torah has forbidden, and one should not abstain from using permitted things by means of vows and oaths. The Sages said, Is it not what the Torah has forbidden enough that you have to forbid for yourself other things?¹⁵³

Yesod Mora is divided into twelve gates (chapters). Ibn Ezra concludes *Yesod Mora* with an invitation to the reader to enter the gate that leads to God. The invitation still stands. ❧

While working on the final draft of this article my beloved sister, Ha-Rabbanit Yospah Fishman, of blessed memory, passed away. She was a pious woman who put her trust in God and was dedicated to His service. She leaves behind children and grandchildren, both here and in Israel, who are devoted to the study of Torah and the observance of God's commandments.

¹⁵² *Shulhan Arukh; Yoreh De'ah* 336.

¹⁵³ *Mishneh Torah; Hilkhhot De'ot* 3:1. Based on O'Levey and Birnbaum translation. *Maimonides' Code of Law and Ethics: Mishneh Torah* abridged and translated from the Hebrew by Philip Birnbaum (New York, 1974).