

Avraham and Sarah in Provence

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Hardly a Man is Now Alive Who Remembers the *Cherem* of 1305¹

In the years 1305-1306, the rabbis of Barcelona, led by Rashba, issued bans (*charamim*) against the study of philosophy, science, and allegorical explanations of *Tanach* until one had reached the age of twenty-five. The language of the *charamim* makes clear that the concern was that these secular studies were being given primacy over the study of the Torah and also that these philosophical studies had led to allegorical interpretations of Torah that were objectionable.² The ban had been requested by some of the rabbis of Provence, led by Rav Abba Mari,³ who looked to Rashba, the acknowledged *gadol hador*, to help fight what they believed was a cancer growing in their midst. Young men would stand up in the *batei midrash* of their communities and present allegorical interpretations of the Torah that R. Abba Mari and Rashba considered heretical.⁴

¹ Some of the relevant information is preserved in the standard versions of *Teshuvos HaRashba*, but most of the important information was not printed until the 19th and 20th centuries, and some has yet to be printed. It seems that for centuries the works of the followers of Rambam in Provence vanished from the public scene; only in this century was the invaluable work of Meiri published for the first time. Was this a result of the *cherem* of 1305?

² See next section, “The Offending Allegory of Avraham and Sarah.”

³ R. Abba Mari wrote a commentary on the *Rif*. While we note that much of the work of this period has only recently begun to be printed, his work has been completely lost.

⁴ *Minchas Kena'os* printed in *She'eilos U'Teshuvos HaRashba*, 2000, Mesorat Yisrael edition, vol. 10, *Iggeres* 5.

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Provence, a hundred years after the death of Rambam, had come entirely under his influence. His works of *halachah*⁵ and *hasbkefab*⁶ were the primary focus of Torah learning, and his position, that philosophical insight was necessary to gain a deep understanding of Torah, was adopted. R. Abba Mari himself was a follower of Rambam's thought,⁷ and in his opinion the ban that he had proposed was in accord with Rambam's teachings. Rambam instructs his students to fill their stomachs with "bread and meat,"⁸ i.e., the Talmudic teachings of Rava and Abbaye, before engaging in the deeper wisdoms.⁹ Moreover, Rambam had explained that *Chazal* had demanded that the most extreme care be taken in teaching these matters which, because of their depth, are easily misunderstood.¹⁰ They should not be expounded to the masses as *Seudah Sblis* Torah.¹¹

The ban was met by opposition on the part of many of the rabbis of Provence, including such luminaries as Rav Menachem Meiri.¹² They might have been willing to accept it, had it been the will of a majority of the rabbis of Provence, followers of Rambam. They

⁵ Works written in Provence that have only recently come into use include the commentary of *Rabbeinu Manoach* and *Sefer HaBatim* that expound on *Mishneh Torah*. The Shabsi Frankel edition includes *Rabbeinu Manoach's* commentary, and the *Sefer HaBatim* is cited in the recently printed volume on *Sefer Ahavah*.

⁶ Besides the works that will be mentioned later on, the *sefer Maaseh Nissim* by Rav Nissim of Marseilles has only recently been printed.

⁷ See Moshe Halbertal's *Bein Torah Le'chochmah*, p. 155ff. He cites *Minchas Kena'os* to prove this, e.g., pp. 246-247.

⁸ See *Minchas Kena'os*, pp. 550-551, 556-557 cited by Halbertal (*ibid.*), p. 158.

⁹ ואני אומר שאין ראוי להיטייל בפרדס, אלא מי שנתמלא כרסו לחם ובשר; ולחם ובשר זה, הוא לידע ביאור האסור והמותר וכיוצא בהן משאר המצוות. ואף על פי שדברים אלו, דבר קטן קראו אותם חכמים, שהרי אמרו חכמים דבר גדול מעשה מרכבה, ודבר קטן הווייה דאביי ורבא; אף על פי כן, ראויין הן להקדימן: שהן מיישבין דעתו של אדם תחילה, ועוד שהן הטובה הגדולה שהשפיע הקדוש ברוך הוא ליישוב העולם הזה, כדי לנחול חיי העולם הבא ואפשר שיידעם הכול--גדול וקטן, איש ואישה, בעל לב רחב ובעל לב קצר (הל' יסדה"ת ד:יג).

¹⁰ עי' הל' יסדה"ת ד:י"א.

¹¹ *Minchas Kena'os, Iggeres* 5.

¹² See Halbertal (*ibid.*) chapter 5, devoted to Meiri's opposition to the *cherem*. R. Abba Mari did not even include Meiri's letters of contention in his *Minchas Kena'os*.

judged, however, and rightly so, that Rashba's motivation in making the bans was not merely the will to prevent the misinterpretations arising from these philosophical studies, but to quash their study altogether. R. Abba Mari writes to Rashba that the various *darshanim* are violating the prohibition of publicly revealing the secret knowledge that is meant to be hidden.¹³ Rashba responds that they are innocent of this for they know nothing of the secret wisdoms, but rather their sin is that they lead the public to heretical ideas.¹⁴ The *Rosh*, who had moved from Germany to Toledo, also became involved and is quite frank about his feelings on the issue.

It is known to Your Honor that it was with unhappiness that I signed this document [of *cherem*]. How could I sign that they not study it until the age of twenty-five, thus implying that after twenty-five I am permitting it, while in fact I believe it is prohibited to study it at all in this generation. But, it is only not to discourage others from signing that I signed.¹⁵

The Offending Allegory of Avraham and Sarah

While the first proclamation of the ban is quite general,¹⁶ in the sec-

¹³ *Minchas Kena'os, Iggeres 5.*

¹⁴ ואותם האנשים אשר אמרת, שמגלים פנים בתורה לדרוש בראש הצבור בבתי כנסיות במעשה מרכבה, יגלו שמים עונם, על שדורשים דברי הבאי ומפרסמים ברבים שגעונם. אך באשר האשמתם על אשר מגלים מה שכסה עתיקו של עולם, אומר לי לבי שלא גלו דבר מן הנעלם. ואין בידם עון הגלוי. וסכולתם ומעוטי ידיעתם מצילים אותם, מחטאתם (מנחת קנאות, עמ' שמ"ה).

¹⁵ *Minchas Kena'os*, pp. 834-835 (my own translation).

¹⁶ מגידים כל הנעשה בענין לימוד חכמות חיצוניות, ואל הדורש דרשות של דופי. בהסכמת כל הקהילה הקדושה אשר בברצלונה, ובהסכמת הרב הגדול מרנא ורבנא רבי שלמה י"ץ ובית דינו. אוי להם לבריות מעלבונה של תורה, כי רחקו מעליה. הסירו המצנפת והרימו העטרה. איש מקטרתו בידו וישימו קטורה {ת} לפני בני יון ובני קטורה. כזמרי יקריבו את המזדינית לעיני כל ושלחו לאפם אל הזמורה. לא הכירו פנים במשפט אל הבכירה ולפני הצעירה נתנו משפט הבכורה. לא ישיבו ויתנכרו כנכרים וכשעירים בראש כל חוצות. לאלה ידקרו ואת בניהם ילמדון. על כן בראותנו בכנף הארץ פה יקוש, ויונה תקנן בעברי פי פחת, חרדנו ואמרנו ופשתה המספחת, ועמדנו וכתנו ברית לאלוהים ולתורת ה' אשר קבלנו אנו ואבותינו בסיני. לבל יתערב זר בתוכנו, וקימוש וחוח לא יעלה בארמונותינו. עבדים אנחנו עבדי ה'. הוא עשנו ולא אנחנו. וגזרנו וקבלנו עלינו ועל זרעינו ועל הנלווים אלינו בכוח החרם: לבל לימוד איש מבני קהלינו בספרי היונים, אשר חברו בחכמת הטבע וחכמת האלוהות. בין המחוברים בלשונם בין שהועתקו בלשון אחר, מהיום ועד חמישים שנה, עד היותו בן חמש ועשרים שנה. ושלא ללמד איש מבני קהילתנו את אחד מבני ישראל בחכמות האלו, עד שיהיו בני עשרים וחמש שנה פן ימשכו החכמות ההם אחריהם. ויסירו אותו מאחרי תורת ישראל

ond iteration of the *cherem*, the rabbis get down to specifics.¹⁷ Apparently, the allegory that they find most offensive, for it is the one mentioned first and repeated often thereafter,¹⁸ is that of equating Avraham and Sarah with *chomer* (חומר) and *tzurah* (צורה)—which, for the sake of simplicity, we will call matter and form. In modern-day terminology this would translate into what we call *gashmiyus* and *ruchniyus*.¹⁹ R. Abba Mari alludes to this allegory at the very beginning of his *Minchas Kena'os*,²⁰ which is, in part, a collection of letters related to the *cherem* that were written by Rashba, R. Abba Mari himself, and other rabbis of Provence.

The actual *cherem* accuses the proponents of this allegory of believing that Avraham and Sarah are no more than an allegory and did not actually exist. Rashba intimates²¹ about and to Rav Levi ben Avraham that R. Levi at least implies this in his *sefer Livyas Chen*. An-

שהיא למעלה מן החכמות האלה. ואיש איך לא יגור לשפוט בין חכמת אנוש בונה על דמיון מופת ורעיון. ובין חכמת העליון אשר בינינו ובינו אין יחס ודמיון. וכן אדם שיוכן בתי חמר הישפוט אלוה עושהו לאמור חס ושלום זה אפשר וזה לא יוכל עשוהו. זה באמת יש מביא לידי הכפירה הגמורה ומזה ינצל באמת כל לומד התורה. והוצאנו מכלל גזרתנו חכמת הרפואות אע"פ שהיא לקוחה מן הטבע לפי שהתורה נתנה רשות לרופא לרפאות. ומה שהסכמנו והחרמנו בספר התורה במעמד כל הקהל, ביום השבת בפרשת אלה הדברים שנת ששים וחמש (לפרט האלף החמישי (=שנת 1305))

¹⁷ מה יוחיל עצור ועצור במלין מי יוכל. מי ינחמנו מעצבון לבבנו ולא יעמדו לפנינו איתאיל ואוכל. האם כלכל ודרדר והימן ירפאו המים הזדונים ונגועי הזמן. אל מי מקדושים נפנה ומי בדור נאמן. יביא צרי מגלעד לרגל תמעד ולפצע נאמן. מקום המשפט ומקום הצדק שמה ראינו כמה סדקים ואין מחזיק את הבדק. ארץ ארץ ארץ שם יולדו אנשי השם תורת השם בקרבם חושן המשפט על לבם. שמה ישבו כסאות למשפט זרע קדש שופט ונשפט. ועוד היום כל העדה כלם קדושים זולתי קצת אנשים קריאי עדה ולמעלתם על העם ראשים. בניהם אשר יקומו מאחריהם בראו משחית לחבל. ובחבל נביאים בכינור ונבל יסוכבו עיר וירדפו אחרי ההבל. כדברם רתת חשבו כי נשאו הם בישראל. ובראש כל חוצות ללא אלהי אמת אמרו אלהי אלהיך ישראל. וזה ימים עוררונו מארץ פרובינס' השרידים בקנאם את קנאתם לדת משה ויהודים. כי שם אנשים עושים התורה פלסטרונכם יחשב כי ישב לנפיל חומות ודברי תורה סותר. לחצוב להם בארות בארות נשברים ומחפאים על דברי תורה ודברי חכמים אשר לא כן דוברים ודורשים בבתי כנסיות ובבתי מדרשות משתיהן דברים לא יחיו בהן. ולמרות עיני כבוד כל ישראל פורצים לעיני הכל כל גדרי התורה. ואף באבותינו הקדושים שלחו לשונם מה שלא עשו עובדי עבודה זרה. כי יאמרו על אברהם ושרה כי הוא חומר וצורה. ושנים עשר שבטי ישראל הם שנים עשר מזלות. השמע עם מיום התחלק הארץ לגבולות כדבר הרע הזה או הנשמע כמוהו כי יחזרו הכל לתוהו ובהו

¹⁸ See, for example, *Minchas Kena'os*, *Iggeres* 5.

¹⁹ The “physical” and the “spiritual.”

²⁰ See introduction.

²¹ *Minchas Kena'os*, *Iggeres* 16.

other leading rabbi of Provence states that the impression is given from the popular *sefer* of that period²² *Malmed HaTalmidim* of R. Yaakov Anatoly. In all the attacks against the ban, however, there is no mention of anyone actually defending such a position. In Rav Yedayah Hapenini's letter²³ of defense to Rashba, he says that he investigated and found that the accusation is based on a misunderstanding of the intent of a *darshan*. The fact that such an allegorical interpretation is given does not imply that the literal reading of the Torah is also not true. One might argue that since one claims that the message of the passage is the allegorical one, therefore the literal meaning should be ignored, but our Rabbis said that²⁴ "there are seventy faces to the Torah," and hence imply that many truths are taught in the same passage. This unique work, that comes directly from the Creator, teaches literal truths while at the same time conveying allegorical insights, which, in fact, in many cases may be more important than the literal facts themselves. We will explain this in greater depth later on in this essay.

It is possible that an occasional *darshan* may have taken things a step further and claimed some things were not to be taken literally. In fact, once the methodology of philosophical/allegorical interpretation is accepted, this is a reasonable deduction. But the defenders of the philosophy of Provence themselves agreed with Barcelona that such a step would be heresy. Especially with regard to Avraham and Sarah, Rav Yedayah concedes that such a radical position would be an uprooting of the Torah.²⁵ The followers of Rambam in Provence cer-

²² ראה ההקדמה למנחת קנאות: "להתפשטות רעיונות כאלה סייע הרבה הספר "מלמד התלמידים" של ר' יעקב אנאטולי. ספר זה היה נפוץ מאוד ונתקבל על חוגי חובבי הפילוסופיה בספרד ובצרפת הדרומית. היו נוהגים לקרוא בו באזני הקהל בשבת אחרי הצהריים. פירושו של ר' יעקב אנאטולי דומהו לבשו צורות משונות. למשל, אברהם ושרה רומזים לחומר וצורה; שנים עשר השבטים הם י"ב מזלות; יצחק ורבקה, רמזו על השכל הפועל והנשמה המתבוננת; עמלק הוא יצר-הרע; הסיפור בספר בראשית על מלחמת ארבעת המלכים נגד החמשה, הריהו מלחמת ארבעת היסודות נגד חמשת החושים; אפילו משה רבנו, שדבר עם אלקים פה אל פה, אינו אלא משל, וכו'. דעות כאלה הובעו לפני קהל רב מעל בימות בתי-הכנסת, בחוצות-עיר ואפילו בכינוסי-משפחה (עפ"י אגרתו של ר' שלמה בן יצחק מלוניל שנדפס ב"לטרבודה", שנה ד', עמ' 421)

²³ We will cite his defense later on.

²⁴ "שבעים פנים לתורה", אותיות דר' עקיבא.

²⁵ אוי לאוזניים שכך שומעות, ואוי לנפש העלובים שכך יאמרו להם באוזניה. על בני שיכוליה שכולם מתאימים מסכימים לבלתי השאיר לתורת אלוהינו שרש וענף, ישורשו מארץ חיים. מי שזו אמונתם ובעד מגידי התלונות מהולכי אורה, ה' הטוב יכפר, וכסא אדוננו ותורתו נקי

tainly would not be likely to take such a position, there being nothing in his words ever to suggest it, and his stated (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:25) position is to accept the literal except when the literal is logically untenable.²⁶

The Symbolism of Man and Woman, *Chomer* and *Tzurah*, in Rambam, Plato, and Jung

However, the source of the Avraham/Sarah allegory itself, explains Rav Yedayah, is in fact the teachings of Rambam. Just as those who ban open their attack on philosophy with this allegory, Rambam opens his magnum opus on Jewish philosophy with an explanation of this very allegory. Rambam, in the introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim*,²⁷ explains the methodology of prophetic allegories and uses as his example the prevalent metaphor in *Sefer Mishlei* that speaks of the harlot. She represents the physical urges of the flesh. The last chapter of the book deals with the “woman of valor,” the perfected flesh that Rambam refers to as the *chomer hamesukan*, that has imbibed the values of the intellect, i.e., the *tzurah*, which is the צלם אלקים. Rambam notes that this allegory is universal and is found in Plato.²⁸ Modern scholars of psychiatry, such as C. J. Jung,²⁹ identify Logos (intellect)

עד עולם.

²⁶ That which defies nature or the rules of logic would not be taken literally. Whether one who claims that we should not take the entire *Sefer Bereishis* literally is, in fact, a heretic will not be discussed here and requires an essay in itself. It is worthwhile, however, for each reader to consider what, if anything, he himself considers acceptable as being non-literal. For example, does he think the dialogue recorded in the Torah is an accurate recording of what was said, or perhaps words selected by the Torah to teach the essence of what each party thought or implied to the other? Should one choose to believe that the latter is true, we have already reduced the literalness of the Torah, and I doubt that most would accuse one who takes this position of being an *apikoros*. But starting from this position we can start to slowly add other elements that weaken the literalness of the Torah, not only in *Bereishis* but as far as *Devarim*.

²⁷ Also see *Moreh* 1:17, 3:8.

²⁸ See *Moreh* 1:17.

²⁹ See, for example, “Man and His Symbols,” Chapter 3, p. 179.

with the male, and Eros (the desire for physical contact) with the female.

In analyzing this allegory, it is important to understand a basic Jungian principle. Jung clarifies the concept of allegory by using the word “symbol” and defining what it is. A “symbol” is not a word or object that is used arbitrarily to stand for something else,³⁰ but that which symbolizes an idea does so because it innately identifies with that which it represents. Among colors, red often is used to represent danger because it is the color of blood and in the human psyche—in the³¹ collective unconscious, the sight of red conjures up a feeling of danger. So, too, woman identifies with *chomer*, as in Mother Earth for example, because physical life springs from the body of woman. Moreover, women are more prone to emotion, which is part of the human *chomer*, while men are more inclined to be detached intellectual thinkers. Thus the allegory of man/woman as *tzurah/chomer* is not merely some universal sign-language, but innate symbolism. So when the Torah says that Avraham the man acts in a certain way and we know that Avraham is a man of perfected intellect, then we understand that if Israel follows in the steps of Avraham, similar results will follow for them. This is the principle of *מעשה אבות סימן לבנים*—“That which happens to the Fathers (of the Jewish people) is a sign of what will happen to their children.”³² And this is the key for the justification of a dual interpretation of the *Chumash*.

³⁰ This is merely a “sign.” In “Man and His Symbols,” Jung and his students explain the importance of “symbols” to people. The book was written for laymen and is easily understood. Jung begins the first chapter, “Approaching the Unconscious,” by distinguishing between “signs” and “symbols.” My extremely brief description of his view, including the example of blood, is my own framing of his insight.

³¹ See the above note. The “collective unconscious” is explained in Jung’s chapter “Approaching the Unconscious.” Because there is substantial commonality between all men and their experience of life, certain symbols will impact all people in a similar way even though they are never consciously and intellectually able to explain why.

³² This is actually not a statement of *Chazal* but is based on *Bereishis Rabbah* 48, and has been popularized by Ramban. See his commentary to *Bereishis* 12: 6, 10 where in fact he applies it to Avraham and Sarah going down to Egypt. We will discuss the allegorical message of this event later in this essay.

Rambam's Students and the Allegory of *Chomer* and *Tzurab*

In the printed texts of the *Malmed HaTalmidim* by R. Yaakov Anatoly we, in fact, do not find³³ any reference to Avraham/Sarah as *tzurab/chomer*, although we note above that one accuser claims he is the source for this metaphor. Perhaps it was censored from his manuscript, or the accusation is that the application to Avraham/Sarah is based on his usage of man/woman as *tzurab/chomer*. In the small part of the printed text that we have of *Linyas Chen*³⁴ the allegory is mentioned, but only briefly.³⁵ However, R. Levi refers us to a lengthier discussion of the concept later in his work. The editor, Professor Chaim Kreisel, in a footnote³⁶ quotes this section from a manuscript that has not yet been printed. Rav Yedayah, in his letter, while tracing the source of the metaphor to Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim*, says that indeed the accusations leveled with regard to the Avraham/Sarah allegory are in relation to this explanation given by R. Levi. He does not mention R. Levi by name but speaks of "one of the valued scholars of the land against whom the accusations have been leveled." R. Levi used the metaphor in order to explain an *aggadah* that the students of Rambam living in Provence would of necessity refuse to take literally. Rav Yedayah stresses that Rambam's teaching demands that they not take literally supernatural *aggadic* accounts.

The Gemara describes an *Amora*, Rav Benaah, who was marking graves, and when he came to that of Avraham and Sarah, he was informed by Eliezer that they were lying together in the cave with Sarah looking at Avraham's head. Nevertheless, he was given permission to enter by Eliezer since the *yetzer hara* is inoperable at that stage and nothing private would be interrupted.³⁷ R. Levi states first that

³³ At least, I could not find any.

³⁴ My thanks to R. David Guttman for finding this passage.

³⁵ *Linyas Chen*, p. 665. See pp. 54-56 where he uses it with regard to Adam and Chavah.

³⁶ Note 122.

³⁷ ויקר מקרנו שאחד מחשובי החברים בארץ ההיא אשר עליה התרעומת הביא בדבריו מאמר נמצא לחכמים ז"ל בתלמוד וזה נוסח המאמר רבי בנאה הוה מצוין מערתה דרבנן כי מטא למערתה דאברהם אבינו אשכחיה אליעזר עבד אברהם דקאי קמי בבא אמר ליה מאי קא עביד

the *Rif* had already noted that this all refers to a dream. He goes on to explain³⁸ that this refers to the *Amora's* search of an understanding of the perfect intellect of Avraham while it was on earth, i.e., the dark cave of earthly existence. He comes to understand that even that intellect never frees itself from its *chomer*, but the *chomer* itself is perfected as represented by Sarah looking at Avraham's head (intellect), and by the fact that the two remain bound together. Rav Yedayah notes that the ramifications of this are many, but here he stops from explaining because of the prohibition of discussing the secret wis-

אברהם אמר ליה גאני בכנפיה דשרה וקא מעיינא ליה ברישיה א"ל זיל אימא ליה בנאה קאי אבא אמר ליה ליעול וליתי מידע ידיע דיצר הרע בהאי עלמא לא שליט עאל ציין ונפיק (ב"ב פ"ג דף נ"ח). מצא האלוהים את עוון כולנו ועמד זה ודרש שזה המאמר בודאי יש לו סוד וצריך פירוש. כי לא יתכן להאמין שהאבות הקדושים במערת המכפלה או בבית עולמים וצורר חיהם, ינהגו אלו המנהגים הפחותים ההכרחיים לנו בעולם הזה מן המאכל והמשחה, וכל שכן חברת הנשים אשר היא חרפה לנו ביחוד יותר מכל מושגי חוש המשוש אשר עליו התייחסה חרפת האדם ועל כן נראה לו שאותו המאמר כולו משל. כאלו ירצה לומר שזה השלם היה מעיין בתכונת מדרגות השלמים כל ימי העצרים בעולם התחתון, שהוא המערה באמת והשפל הגמור בבחינת עליונות התכלית האחרון המקווה לכל שלם זהו ציונו מערות החכמים. והבדילו בבחינת יתרונם קצתם על קצת במעשים ובעיון. ומצא מתוך התבוננותו, שהשכל האנושי היותר שלם שימצא בשום אדם ושחומרו היותר זך והנאות שאפשר שלא ימלט בשום פנים מחסרונות רבים, כמו מתנומה ושכחה ושיבוש וקשי ההסתכלות וזולתם. שהם כדמות השינה אשר היא התבטלות החושים ממושגיהם שסיבת התרדמה היא כולה מיוחסת לשכל. היא חברת החומר ושיתופו עד שתיפרד החבורה היא בעלותו מן המערה לבקר בבית אלוהים. זהו דהוה גאני בכנפיה דשרה ומידיעת זה והבנתו יצאו לנו בודאי תועלות בקצת משורשי התורה, ובפרט בנבואה ובהשגחה. אלא שנניח זיכרונם ליראת האריכות, והנשאר מחלוקת המאמר בא ליפות המשל ולהסתיר הסוד. כמו שלמדנו הרב הגדול זכרוננו לברכה במשלי הנבואה, שלא נבקש פירוש לכל הפרטים שיבואו במשל ואמנם היות דרך הנביאים לפעמים לתאר הצורה לזכר, והחומר לנקבה. ולכת החכמים ז"ל בזה בעקבותיהם, זה בארו לנו הרב הגדול ז"ל ובזה האמין הרב ואחריו כל בעל נפש בגלילותינו נמשך, שיש ספר במשלי ספורים רבים מהנקבה שיש בגלויים תועלת המוסר וההנהגה, ובהיתרם תועלת ידיעת אמיתת שורשי המציאות בזה העניין. והמאמר הנזכר, מפני שהוא רומז על שכל היותר שלם שבבני אדם, ושנושאו היותר חשוב וזך ההבנה לקח בגלויים מהזוגות שנמצאו בעולם הזוג היותר נכבד שנמצא, והיותר נבחר, שהם אברהם אבינו ושרה אמנו עליהם השלום והמנוחה.

³⁸ This is a brief summary of how R. Yedayah expresses this explanation. It is worth comparing R. Yedayah's recounting of the explanation which is reproduced in the above note with that in the *Linyas Chen* itself. R. Levi gives more detail in the original explanation than is recorded by R. Yedayah. R. Yedayah does not even note that the *Rif* had stated that this all was a dream. Perhaps he did not have the written word itself and in fact he refers to what the scholar had said, and he may be retelling an explanation he heard verbally.

doms (*sodos*) openly.

The *Linyas Chen* also explains³⁹ the allegory of male/female with regard to *Adam* and *Chavah*, expanding upon the words of Rambam and referring to the Greek principle regarding physical birth that maintains that the body comes from the mother while what we call *tzurah* comes from the father. Rambam himself had alluded to this and writes⁴⁰ that this gives us a key to understanding the allegory of the שנה. Rambam hints to us by asking, “Why does the *nachash/satan/yetzer hara* come to woman?” and asking us to examine the dual descriptions of man’s creation as a singular male/female creation and as divided into two sexes. Rav Levi ben Avraham spells out what Rambam meant. The *yetzer hara* (*nachash*) brings one to sin by taking possession of the bodily desires of the *chomer*, symbolized by woman, that is subject to these temptations.⁴¹ As Rabbi Avahu says, “There was an initial intent that man and woman (*chomer* and *tzurah*) be independent, but at the end they were created as one,” i.e., bound together as the result of the process allegorized in the story of the sin of Adam and Chavah.⁴² The intellect (*tzurah*) wishes to be independent from physical demands, and there is a constant struggle within each man and within mankind. The intellect, which can perceive the truth and knows that this world is only the anteroom to the World to Come, struggles with man’s physical being, which wishes only to enjoy the gifts of this world—but “woman gives to man and he eats.” The call of the *chomer* is irresistible.

Similarly, Rav Yaakov Anatoly, quoting Rambam, often uses the

³⁹ See pp. 54-56; See also *Hakirah* 5, “Reclaiming the Self.”

⁴⁰ *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:30. See “Encountering the Creator,” pp. 7-9.

⁴¹ וכן המכוון בסוד אדם וחוה לרמוז אל הצורה והחומר, כאמרם (מו"נ ב:ל) "אדם וחוה שניהם נבראו, מתאחדים היו מגב לגב וכו' כי מתחלת הבריאה שזכר הכתוב, זכר ונקבה ברא אותם כלומר כל אחד לעצמו, כמו שנ' בצלם אלקים ברא אותו, ונאמר ויקרא את שם אדם ביום הבראם".... זו פרצופין ברא הקב"ה באדם וחלקו, כלומר שנתן בידו כח כולל, בו תוכל להיות רוחני או גשמי. או ר"ל שכל אחד משמש כפי הצורך, והיתה חוה לעזר, כאלו שניהם מכוונים לתכלית אחת. אחר שסרה ונעשת כנגדו נחלקו... והקשו לו מאמרו זכר ונקבה בראם, שנראה מזה שכל אחד משניהם חשוב לעצמו, כי הבינו זה הפסוק על הצורה והחומר. ותירץ כדר' אבהו דאמר שבתחלה עלה במחשבה לבראות שנים, ולבסוף לא ברא אלא אחד, כלומר כי כונת השם הראשונה באדם שיהיה שכלו וצורתו חלוק מהחומר, והוא בבחירתו נדבק בחומר והיה לבשר אחד.

⁴² *Chazal* refer to the intended lesson, that *והוא ימשול בך*, that the intellect must struggle for dominance, when they say *אם פוגע בך מנוול זה משכהו לבית* Rambam alludes to it as well in *Moreh* 3:8.

metaphor⁴³ of man/woman as *tzurah v'chomer*. He explains⁴⁴ “and he shall rule over you,”⁴⁵ stated to *Chavah*, as the need for wisdom of man to control the material wants of the *chomer*. The fulfillment of this he sees in Yaakov, the dweller of tents of study, who goes on to herd flocks, i.e., show mastery over the physical world.⁴⁶ The metaphor is to be applied on different levels and pertains to many situations, for the allegory is based on symbolism and is an innately true concept.

Rashba's Rejection of the Allegory

Rashba had been led to believe that R. Levi ben Avraham was a source of heresy and he wrote to an acquaintance in Luniel to reprimand him for hosting R. Levi.⁴⁷ Rashba says that R. Levi denies all miracles. When told that, in fact, the only miracle he denies is that of the midrashic claim that the letters in the *luchos* were suspended in air, Rashba says that this is sufficient to prove that he denies all miracles.⁴⁸ In response to the accusations against him, R. Levi wrote a letter to Rashba to defend himself, but R. Abba Mari did not choose to preserve this letter in his *Minchas Kena'os*.⁴⁹ Rashba's response to R. Levi, however, is preserved.⁵⁰ He attacks the allegorical interpretations found in *Linyas Chen*. It would seem, at first, that he considers the interpretations heretical. Later, however, it seems that his claim is that they lead others into heresy because they will misinterpret them, but that the author is a man of unique wisdom who has a deep under-

⁴³ See *Malmed HaTalmidim*, for example, the end of *Parashas Bereishis* and *Parashas Vayeitzei*, p. 25a.

⁴⁴ as does Rambam in *Moreh* 3:8.

⁴⁵ והוא ימשל בך (בראשית ג:טז).

⁴⁶ *Malmed HaTalmidim* p. 30.

⁴⁷ *Minchas Kena'os*, *Iggeres* 14. The host eventually evicts R. Levi, attributing the death of his daughter to his having had R. Levi in his house. *Ibid*, *Iggeres* 17.

⁴⁸ *Minchas Kena'os*, *Iggeres* 42.

⁴⁹ He does not give us much if anything of the arguments against the ban. The arguments of R. Menachem Meiri, hardly a radical, are not found in his work. His is apparently not an unbiased presentation of the arguments of the day.

⁵⁰ *Minchas Kena'os*, *Iggeres* 16.

standing of the ideas he is expressing, and this understanding itself is not heretical. However he closes with what he had written elsewhere, that even if the ideas are not heretical, they are wrong. He tells R. Levi that he should learn the wisdom of the Torah rather than these foreign wisdoms and alludes to what this wisdom is when he refers to it as **בכל** (“with everything”). Ramban, in his commentary on the Torah (*Bereishit* 24:1), quotes a mystical *midrash* that in the verse **וה' כל בך את אברהם בכל**,⁵¹ the **בכל** refers to a daughter according to some and to others a daughter whose name is **בכל**. In the latter part of Ramban’s explanation of this *midrash* he seems to be equating this daughter to the wisdoms he had referred to in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah. There he contends that all the sciences and all the mystical wisdoms are found in the Torah and understood by those who have mastered its secrets. Rashba, a master of *kabbalah*, clearly sees **בכל** as a reference to this wisdom.

Since the Torah is the highest of wisdoms and the absolute truth, and all other wisdoms, while there may be some truth in them, are on a much lower level,⁵² Rashba therefore exhorts the scholars of Provence who have immersed themselves in science and philosophy to turn instead to the true wisdom of *kabbalah* to understand the secrets of the Torah. This exhortation is echoed in the words of the original ban⁵³ which states that the “Torah of Israel is above all these wisdoms ... and the wisdom of man cannot in any way be compared to the wisdom from on high.”

Moreover, according to Rashba, the allegory of *chomer v'tzurah* is absolutely wrong. His allusion to the **בת** (daughter) that represents wisdom demonstrates that Torah knowledge itself is female—thus it is not *chomer* that is allegorically feminine but that knowledge we have identified with the *tzurah*. The *Zohar* (II 95a)⁵⁴ thus alludes to the wisdom of the Torah that has gone into exile, as the *Shechinah*—which is generally identified with the feminine aspect of G-d.

⁵¹ “And G-d blessed Avraham with everything.”

⁵² See *Hakirah* vol. 2, *U-Madua Lo Yeresem*.

⁵³ פן ימשכו החכמות ההם אחריהם, ויסירו אותו מאחרי תורת ישראל שהיא למעלה מן החכמות האלה. ואיש איך לא יגור לשפוט בין חכמת אנוש בונה על דמיון מופת ורעיון, ובין חכמת העליון אשר בינינו ובינו אין יחס ודמיון.

⁵⁴ Quoted by Gershom Scholem in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, chapter 4, p. 141.

Additionally, in the metaphor used commonly in *kabbalah*, the male and female are not *tzurah*/spiritual and *chomer*/physical, but rather both are spiritual abstract elements and two sides within G-d Himself. There is a concept of *zivvuga kaddisha* (holy marriage) that is a union of the two *sefiros*, *tiferes* and *malchus*, which is between G-d and the *Shechinah* (the feminine aspect of G-d).⁵⁵ Whereas outwardly there is a marriage between G-d and Israel,⁵⁶ the process takes place within G-d himself.⁵⁷ Whereas the Kabbalists would go out on the eve of Shabbos to greet the “Shabbos Queen” (שבת המלכה), the Rambam speaks of the Sages of Old waiting for “Shabbos the King” (שבת המלך).⁵⁸ According to Rambam, any aggadic allusion to a spiritual joining, such as the *mishnah* (end of *Taanis*) which refers to *Matan Torah* as the day of the wedding, pertains to Israel, the female/*chomer*, coming close to G-d, who is pure *tzurah*.⁵⁹ While Rashba tries to break the Provencian scholars of spreading nonsense that can lead to heresy, he directs them to study that which they, as Rambam’s students, probably consider a dangerous discipline that they feel can lead to heresy—apparent descriptions of G-d Himself.

Foreign Women and Forgeries

Rashba uses a metaphor to complain about what is happening in Provence. “They have taken foreign women into their homes and cast aside the daughter of Yehudah.”⁶⁰ This metaphor casts women as wisdoms, the facilitators of the *tzurah*, and represents the kabbalistic thinking of Rashba, as it considers the other wisdoms as competitive wives (צרות) to the Torah. According to Rambam’s approach, such a metaphor would be totally inappropriate. Firstly, the other wisdoms are the wisdoms that were once known by Torah scholars

⁵⁵ See G. Scholem, *ibid*, p. 138ff.

⁵⁶ כנסת ישראל.

⁵⁷ See G. Scholem, *ibid*.

⁵⁸ ומתעטף בציצית ויושב בכבוד ראש, מייחל להקבלת פני השבת, כמו שהוא יוצא לקראת המלך. וחכמים הראשונים היו מקבצין תלמידיהן בערב שבת, ומתעטפים; ואומרים, בואו ונצא לקראת שבת המלך. (הל' שבת ל:ב).

⁵⁹ See note 3.

⁶⁰ *Minchas Kena'os*, *Iggeres* 20, יהודה בת יפושא ושלחו לנפשה בת יהודה. See also the language of the original *cherem*, כל כזמרי יקריבו את המדינית לעיני כל.

and are part of *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereishis*.⁶¹ All wisdom is part of the same whole. *Avodah Zarah* is the opposite of wisdom—it is falsehood and foolishness.⁶² Thus, in his introduction to the *Moreh*, Rambam speaks to his student of how he tested and trained him in these many wisdoms before he was willing to study the deepest wisdoms with him.⁶³ These wisdoms are a part of Torah itself. Secondly, since these wisdoms are the facilitators of Torah knowledge, they could not be personified as women but only as men (*tzurah*). In fact, when R. Abba Mari hears the metaphor of “the daughter of foreign gods”⁶⁴ being applied to the sciences, he objects that according to his understanding, the metaphor only applies to heresy, and he asks Rashba for a clarification, that he apparently never received.⁶⁵

Yet, in two of Rambam’s famous letters, he uses the metaphor of foreign or straying wives to refer to these wisdoms. Thus it is no surprise that one of these letters has already been identified by scholars as an obvious forgery. In this exchange of letters, the student to whom Rambam wrote the *Moreh*, complains that the daughter that he gave him to wed⁶⁶ has been unfaithful and has abandoned him and he asks Rambam to return her to him “for he is a prophet or he will be

⁶¹ See *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*, chapters 2-4.

⁶² See *Hilchos Avodah Zarah*, chapter 1 and the end of Chapter 11.

⁶³ “I was then not yet able to test your powers of apprehension, and I thought that your desire might possibly exceed your capacity. But when you had gone with me through a course of astronomy, after having completed the [other] elementary studies which are indispensable for the understanding of that science, I was still more gratified by the acuteness and the quickness of your apprehension. Observing your great fondness for mathematics, I let you study them more deeply, for I felt sure of your ultimate success. Afterwards, when I took you through a course of logic, I found that my great expectations of you were confirmed, and I considered you fit to receive from me an exposition of the esoteric ideas contained in the prophetic books, that you might understand them as they are understood by men of culture.”

⁶⁴ בת אל נכר.

⁶⁵ נמצא כתוב בספר, בעל בת אל נכר ומחבק חק נכריה, לפי דעתנו כוונתם על העוסקים בדבר מינות דורשים בהגדות של דופי מדיחי תושיה, ומקצת אנשים יאמרו כי כוונת הספר בבת אל נכר, על חכמת התכונה וחכמת הפילוסופיא, כי טה מראות עיניהם, תת גבל שלשים להם, והיה כבא דבתר אדוננו באר היטב, מביני דבריך הנכוחים, יהיו ששים ושמצחים (מנחת קנאות דף 444). Halbertal notes this (*ibid.*) p. 161.

⁶⁶ Her name is כימה apparently from חכמה.

one.”⁶⁷ Rambam replies in kind, that she has not been unfaithful and the student is not a prophet nor will he be one. Allegorically, the first letter would seem to be a claim that the philosophy the student has been taught had betrayed him and has led him astray, and Rambam must help him restore his faith. Rambam responds that the wisdoms are pure and the problem is with the student—that he seeks to go too far in unraveling the mysteries. He must continue in these studies, but in the pursuit of wisdom, not prophecy. Shailot suggests⁶⁸ that these letters perhaps originated in Provence or Spain at the time of the Maimonidean controversy. It thus would portray Rambam as having seen the danger inherent in these wisdoms to those not capable of fully comprehending them, and instructing them to not go past the limits of their intellect. These letters,⁶⁹ which were perhaps a rebuke to the philosophers in Provence, highlight how, with the rise of anti-Maimonideans, there was also a rejection of Rambam’s metaphor in favor of that of the kabbalists.

The other reference to “foreign women” is in the famous letter to the wise men of Luniel.⁷⁰ Rambam attributes his errors to his over-involvement with these foreign women/wisdoms that limited his time for Torah study. G-d knows that he had only brought them in to be handmaidens to his wife the Torah, but his involvement with them got out of hand. Rashba⁷¹ quotes this passage from the *Iggeres* in his argument for the placement of the ban. However, one cannot possibly believe that this oft-quoted (especially in our day) passage

⁶⁷ The “he” being the letter writer. This is a reference to the verse in *Bereishbis* הוא הוּא כִּי נִבִּיא הוּא.

⁶⁸ *Iggeres HaRambam*, ed. Shailot, p. 695. See there also for the references as to where these “*teshuvos*” can be found.

⁶⁹ Perhaps not forgeries, but a literary creation meant to teach this allegorical lesson and where the readers understood that the author was not really Rambam.

⁷⁰ שאף על פי שבטרם אוצר בבטן התורה ידעתי ... והיא אילת אהביו אשת נעורי... ואף גם זאת נשים נכריות נעשו לו צרות, מואביות עמוניות אדומיות צידוניות חתיות, והקל יודע כי לא נלקחו מתחלה אלא להיותן לה לרקחות ולטבחות ולאופות, ולהראות לעמים את יפיה כי טובת מראה היא עד מאד, מכל מקום נתמעטה עונתה, שהרי נחלקה לבי לחלקים הרבה בכל מיני חכמה.. ושגיאות מי יבין, והשכחה מצויה בכל וכל שכן בזקנים. (אגרות הרמב"ם דף תקב, מהדורת שילת).

⁷¹ See the standard version of *Teshuvos HaRashba* 1:414-416.

was actually written by Rambam. Rav Kappach⁷² contends the entire *Iggeres L'Chachmei Luniel* is a forgery. Certainly parts of it have been tampered with, and that Rambam scholars contend that it is entirely authentic is surprising.⁷³ How can one read this introduction—a devaluation of secular learning, and not be shocked at finding it attributed to Rambam? One should read it after the introductory letter to the *Moreh*⁷⁴ and ask himself if these two letters can be reconciled. In addition, the metaphor of “foreign women” comes from the hand of a R. Abba Mari follower in Provence or one influenced by the Rashba of Cordova, but not from Rambam.

Following Your Heart

There is, however a primary source that, at first glance, substantiates the allegorical interpretation of Rashba. The *Sifrei* (*Bamidbar* 15:37) reads, “ ‘Do not stray after your hearts’ refers to heresy as it says (*Kobeles* 7:26) ‘And I find more bitter than death, the woman who is a trap and whose heart is a net’... ‘nor after your eyes’ this is promiscuity as it says (*Shoftim* 14), ‘Take her for me for she is fitting in my eyes.’” While *Chazal* understandably identify promiscuity—the drive of the *chomer*—with woman, they also identify intellectual straying with woman. In *Midrash Kobeles* (*Kobeles* 7:26), Rav Isi of Kesarin also equates this woman in *Kobeles* with heresy. Although Rabbi Elazer (*ibid.*) equates her with physical lust, Rambam in fact follows the *Sifrei* and quotes this *derash* in the *Sefer HaMitzvos*.⁷⁵

However, this *derash* is in fact consistent with Rambam’s thought, for it is based on the end of the verse that tells us *והרמים לבה*—“her heart is a net.” The drive to heresy—*מינות*—is brought about by the *chomer* whose intellect has not developed. As Rambam often explains,

⁷² See *Kesavim* of R. Yosef Kappach, vol. 2, pp. 643-662. See also the introduction to the letters to *Chachmei Luniel* in Shailot’s edition quoted above for his rebuttal of Rav Kappach’s stance.

⁷³ Shailot applies to this introduction the word “נפלא” which is only apt when relating its meaning to the word *פלא* translated as “astonishing” or perhaps “shocking.”

⁷⁴ See note 62.

⁷⁵ *Sefer HaMitzvos*, *lav* 47—see Frankel’s text as his is the only one that brings the fuller version of the verse in *Kobeles*, including the phrase *והרמים לבה*.

the intellect of man must dominate human physical drives,⁷⁶ and when the heart⁷⁷/intellect (essence of man) has been dominated by *chomer*, then the result is a distortion of the intellect that leads to heresy (מינות). This use of “heart” is better understood by studying the *midrash* (*Yalkut*) on the first verse in *Mishlei* which presents an argument between two of our most prominent *Tanna'im*. Rabbi Eliezer says wisdom is found in the head and Rabbi Yehoshua says it is found in the heart, to which he brings many proofs from *Tanach*, concluding that this is so because “all of one’s limbs are dependent upon it.”⁷⁸ When the essence of man, represented by the heart, is the heart of the woman/*chomer*, then the result is heresy. However, intellectual straying and foreign thought is not represented by a straying woman but by the straying “feminized” heart.⁷⁹

Thus, when *Kobeles* continues in the next verse with “One man in a thousand have I found, but a woman amongst all these have I not found,” the *Midrash Kobeles* continues, “A Man—this is Avraham, but a woman amongst all these have I not found—this is Sarah.” Reaching the level of pure truth that *Kobeles* seeks is only possible via the crystallized intellect represented by Avraham, and is not to be found even in the *chomer hamesukan* represented by Sarah. The metaphorical relationship between *chomer/tzurah* and Sarah/Avraham is alluded to clearly in the words of *Chazal*.

⁷⁶ As in *Moreh* 3:8 on “and he will rule over you.”

⁷⁷ The use of the term לב for intellect is consistent with such verses as *מחשבות לבי* and Rambam’s definition of prayer (*Hilchos Tefillah* 1:1) *אי זו היא עבודה שבלב, זו תפלה*.

⁷⁸ The first chapter of *Shemonah Perakim* explains that the human *tzurah* is not to be viewed as an animal body with a human intellect attached, but the entirety of the human being is a unique entity dominated by the intellect.

⁷⁹ The verse (*Mishlei* 7:4) “Say to wisdom you are my sister” would seem to pose a challenge to us as well. It is answered similarly as to what we have said here. See note 98.

Rashi vs. Rambam in *Sefer Mishlei*

Rashi, however, on this verse in *Kobehes* (“more bitter than death, the woman”) comments, “The woman’—*Apikorsus*,” interpreting that woman herself, not her heart, represents foreign heretical ideas. Rashi introduces his commentary on *Mishlei* by saying, “The entire content is made up of metaphors and parables with the Torah allegorized as a good woman and idolatry⁸⁰ as a harlot.” Then, when the *אשה זרה* first appears in *Sefer Mishlei*,⁸¹ Rashi again explains that the metaphor of the “straying woman” (*Mishlei* 2:16) refers to heresy, while Rambam tells us that this metaphor always refers to physical desire.⁸² Rambam’s view is also that of Ibn Ezra, who begins *Sefer Mishlei* by explaining that it deals with the pursuit of wisdom and the exhortation “to distance oneself from the corrupted woman; one is called upon to kill foolishness and desire which come from the part of the human that was created from the ground, and to breathe life into the pure soul.” Ralbag (*Mishlei* 2:16), the Provencian philosopher, also explains the *Sefer Mishlei* in this light. “The straying woman’—this is the desirous soul for it is foreign and strange to man, i.e., it is not the essence of one but the human spirit is.” Thus the battle lines of the allegorical treatment of woman are drawn in *Sefer Mishlei*. Rashba follows in the tradition of Rashi as well as that of *kabbalah* in his understanding of the allegorical meaning of woman.

Sarah or the Torah as the *Eishes Chayil*

Rambam explains⁸³ that the close of *Sefer Mishlei* refers to the per-

⁸⁰ The *Metzudas* uses the term *מינות* rather than *עבודה זרה* used by Rashi. As we see that later Rashi uses *מינות*, it would seem that they are interchangeable in his mind. We need not deal with the differences according to Rambam here.

⁸¹ And many times after.

⁸² See above: “The Symbolism of Man and Woman, *Chomer* and *Tzurah*, in Rambam, Plato, and Jung.”

See *Malbim* who maintains both metaphors. It would seem that some see the drive to sin in all forms as represented by this straying woman.

⁸³ Introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim* as brought above in “The Symbolism of Man and Woman, *Chomer* and *Tzurah*, in Rambam, Plato, and Jung.”

fected *chomer* that aids the perfected *tzurah*. Ralbag similarly states (*Mishlei*, *ibid.*), “This book closes with the description of the *chomer* that serves the intellect with such efficiency that it enables it to acquire completeness and it is allegorized as a female as always.” The *Midrash* (*Yalkut*, *ibid.*) explains, “A woman of valor – this is Sarah, as it is written, ‘for now I know that you are a woman of beauty’⁸⁴... ‘the heart of her husband is secure in her’ [is alluded to in] ‘that I be treated well for your sake’ and ‘booty will not be missing’ refers to Avraham, as it says, ‘and Avraham was very heavy with possessions’ and ‘she caused for him only good and no evil’ [alludes to] ‘and Avraham was treated well for her sake.’” Rambam would undoubtedly understand this *Midrash* to be equating the *chomer hamesukan* with Sarah who supports her husband Avraham in his struggle for perfection. This *Midrash*, in fact, forces us to look at the verses it quotes⁸⁵ relating to Avraham and Sarah in an allegorical fashion. Following Rambam’s approach, there is no question that *Chazal* intended us to explore the allegorical meanings of Avraham and Sarah.

Rashi, on the other hand, consistent with his approach, speaks of the allegorical meaning of the *eishes chayil* as referring to the Torah. The *Midrash*, indeed, does make the equation as well, but only with one line “*Eishes Chayil*—this is the Torah.” Rashi produces his own commentary to explain the allegorical relationship. Rashi really sees no “symbolic”⁸⁶ identification between woman and Torah, but it is merely that woman is used to allegorize the idea—a type of poetic coding. The straying woman stands for ideas and knowledge that is foreign to the Torah⁸⁷ and the loyal wife is the wisdom of the Torah. According to Rambam, this particular *midrash* probably means that the “*chayil*” element is produced in woman via the Torah—the *chomer* has been transformed by infusing it with the values of the Torah.⁸⁸ There are ramifications to these two disparate explanations, as we will see later. But even immediately we should note, that according to Rambam, the *chomer* provides the spirit’s physical needs, while according to Rashi—and the many who have followed and expanded upon

⁸⁴ See *Bereishis* 12 for all the allusions to Avraham and Sarah.

⁸⁵ And we have only quoted a few of the many found there.

⁸⁶ See the Jungian explanation to “symbolism” given above.

⁸⁷ *Avodah zarah* or *minus*.

⁸⁸ The *והוא ימשול בה* has been attained.

his commentary—learning Torah itself will deliver one’s physical needs.

Avos and Imahos

Once Rambam has introduced us to the idea of male and female as *chomer* and *tzurah*, it is impossible not to recognize it as a theme in *Chumash* and *Aggados Chazal*. In my work on *Sefer Bereishis*⁸⁹ that is based on Rambam’s teachings, as were the works of the commentators of Provence 700 years ago, I allude to this often. Here are two excerpts.

The concept of *Bnei Yisrael* as an entity consisting of the proper bond of *chomer* and *tzurah* is embodied in the relationship of the *Avos* and their wives. Since the male represents the *tzurah* and the female the *chomer*, in their marital partnership Avraham is the *tzurah* to Sarah’s *chomer*, and Yitzchak is the *tzurah* to Rivkah’s *chomer*.

It is for this reason that when the *Avos* encounter other cultures, the danger they face is that of having their wives taken away. Other ideologies are attracted to the beauty in the house of the *Avos*, for “her ways are beautiful, and all her paths are those of peace” (*Mishlei* 3:17). These people wish to adopt the ways of the *Avos* so that they may prosper, as they see Avraham and Yitzchak prosper.

However, Avraham and Yitzchak tell them of their wives, “She is my sister.” The *chomer* they are wedded to is made up of the same genetic material as the *tzurah*. It is not possible to break the bonds that Sarah and Rivkah have with their husbands. The beauty of Sarah and Rivkah is a function of their husbands’ wisdom. Only when they are under the dominion of that *tzurah* does that *chomer* exist. Only with the adoption of the laws of the Torah will any culture develop the beauty they see in Rivkah and Sarah.⁹⁰

The *Midrash* sees in the story of Yehudah and Tamar and that of Yosef and Potifar’s wife, not just a contrast, but also a similarity.

Rabbi Shmuel ben Nachman said: “...Just as Tamar acted for the Sake of Heaven, so too the wife of Potifar acted

⁸⁹ *Encountering the Creator* (Targum 2004): *Divine Providence and Prayer in the Works of Rambam*. This work is also a commentary on *Sefer Bereishis*.

⁹⁰ *Encountering the Creator*, pp. 95-96.

for the sake of Heaven. She saw in her astrological forecast that she would produce a son for Yosef, but she did not know if it would be from her or her daughter.” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 85:2)

With regard to Tamar, who acted to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *yibbum* to produce children who would maintain the name of her dead husband, *Chazal* consider it obvious that she acted with the proper motivation. As Rashi explains, she desired to have children to propagate the line of Yehudah. Whereas the wife of Yehudah was identified as a Canaanite, Tamar is not so called, and Rabbi Meir (*Bereishis Rabbah* 85:10) identifies her as a daughter of Shem. She represents the righteous remnant of the age before *avodah zarah* dominated the world.

It is surprising, however, that the Rabbis should discover this righteousness in the land of Egypt as well. Yet just as the line of *malchus Yehudah* is started via Yehudah’s union with the outsider Tamar, the line of Yosef descends from the Egyptian Osnas bas Potifar (*Sotah* 13b). Tamar’s father, Shem, is identified by *Chazal* with Malki Tzedek, the priest to G-d on High, while Osnas is named by the Torah as the daughter of “Potifar the priest of On.” Both women are daughters of men who dedicated themselves to the service of the Divine. (See *Ibn Ezra*, *Bereishis* 41:45).

Both women represent the spiritual longing within the nations of the world. Both women represent the longing of the female qualities in mankind, the *chomer*, for the masculine qualities—the *tzurah*, that exists in those in whom it could be seen that *כי ה' אתו*, “G-d is with him.” (*Bereishis* 39:3). The kings of Egypt and the Philistines, the secular rulers who aimed for material prosperity, saw the material benefits of Avraham and Yitzchak’s way of life and wished to possess it. This, we have seen, is symbolized by their attempts to take Sarah and Rivkah into their households, since material perfection is symbolized by the matriarchs.

Correspondingly, the daughters of the priests, the spiritual leaders of the gentile world, symbolize the elevated cultures that, like Shem, have abided by the seven Noachide laws and thus represent, like the *Imahos*, the transformed *chomer*, which is the *eishis chayil* of *Misblei*. This *chomer* understands that for it to survive, to have continuity, it must cling to the *tzurah* that Yosef and Yehudah possessed.

“G-d will give good to Yefes but will dwell in the tents of Shem”—the “giving good” refers to Koresh, who will decree that the *Beis HaMikdash* should be built, but nevertheless He “will dwell in the Tents of Shem.” Bar Kappara

explains that the words of Torah, spoken in the language of Yefes, will be said in the tents of Shem. (*Bereishis Rabbah* 36:8)

According to the first opinion, the nations of the world reach the level of Yefes—doing good. They will acknowledge the value of the Torah and encourage and enable *Bnei Yisrael* in their struggle to build the *Beis HaMikdash*, but they will never themselves find the *Shechinah* in their own tents. But according to Bar Kappara, the verse means that the goodness of Yefes will dwell in the tents of Shem. *Bnei Yisrael* will find within the gentile world new languages and idioms for stating the eternal truths of the Torah and will utilize the insights gained to strengthen and deepen their own understanding.

The strengths of Yehudah are such that he can bring Tamar the daughter of Shem into the tent of *Bnei Yisrael* to give birth to the ancestors of the Jewish kings. So powerful are the gifts of Yosef that he can bring even Osnas the daughter of the priest of On into the house of Yaakov. This was a power that even the *Avos* did not possess. They were all required to take wives from their own family in order to continue their line and their influence.”⁹¹

The theme that I have discussed here appears throughout *Tanach*, and *Chazal* constantly work with it. In explaining *Megillas Esther*, *Chazal* (*Megillah* 13a) insist that Esther and Mordechai were husband and wife—yet Rambam clearly interprets this not as a statement of fact⁹² but a *derash* meant to teach us how to understand the lesson of the *Megillah*. In an allegorical sense we must read the *Megillah* with the sense that Esther is the *chomer* of Israel in exile while Mordechai is her husband, the *tzurah*. Here in Israel’s exile, finally the foreign king is successful in accomplishing what he could not accomplish in the *Chumasb*—the taking of the *chomer* of Israel. Here, as in the previous cases, the king does not know the identity of the *tzurah*, from which this beautiful *chomer* comes.⁹³

⁹¹ *Encountering the Creator*, pp. 141-143.

⁹² See *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 5:2 and the *Kesef Mishneh* who makes clear that Rambam did not accept that Mordechai and Esther were husband and wife.

⁹³ I.e., does not understand that the beauty of Esther is dependent on the wisdom of Mordechai.

The *Gemara* (*Megillah* 13b) states that, in fact, Esther⁹⁴ never abandoned her marriage to Mordechai, and when she left Achashveirosh at night she would return to Mordechai. This means that Achashveirosh's male *tzurab* did not transform her—she remained constantly under the sway of Mordechai. In the end, Mordechai (*Esther* 9:4) also enters into the house of this king and rises to great influence there; i.e., the *tzurab*, the ideals of the Jewish people, will be accepted by nations of the world. Because Esther/*chomer* heeds the words of Mordechai/*tzurab*, Israel is saved and Mordechai's *tzurab* will dominate the world. This is the story of Israel's exile and eventual redemption.

It is also important to note that Rambam's interpretation of the *midrash* as being non-literal is, in fact, implied elsewhere (*Sanhedrin* 74b) in the Talmud, where in a halachic discussion the simple rendering of the *gemara* is that Esther was not married when chosen by Achashveirosh, and only for this reason could she submit to him. Other *Rishonim*, assuming that the *midrash* must be taken literally, proceed to create halachic reasons as to why she could agree to relations with him, a gentile, while being married to Mordechai. Their view of *halachab* is affected by an *aggadah*, that Rambam understood immediately to be non-literal.⁹⁵

Banning Material?

Based on the ban of 1305 and what Rashba wrote on the matter in his letters, it would seem that he would consider the above commentary nonsense, and more than that—dangerous nonsense that can lead to heretical thinking. Rabbi Vidofsky, who put out the modern version of *Minchas Kena'os*, writes in his introduction with considerable excitement about the importance of getting this material out to the Jewish public. He feels that never more than now is this book

⁹⁴ היתה באמנה אתו אמר רבה בר לימא (משמיה דרב) שהיתה עומדת מחיקו של אחשוורוש ושובלת ויושבת בחיקו של מרדכי.

⁹⁵ See *Tosfos* and *Nimukei Yosef*, *ibid.*, also the *Kesef Mishneh* in *Yesodei Ha-Torah* 5:3. Because of this *midrash*, *Rabbeinu Tam* concludes that there is no violation of the איש אסור אשת איש nor ממזרות when a Jewish wife has relations with a non-Jew.

needed.⁹⁶ That said, should such books as *Encountering the Creator* be banned? I think not. Were one to promote a ban on the use of the *chomer/tzurah* metaphor in the interpretation of *Tanach*, many a classic *sefer* would have to be pulled from the shelves of our *sefarim* stores as well.

“And he said to Sarah his wife”⁹⁷—there are two shades in the worship of the *tzaddik*. One is to serve with *ruchniyus* (spirituality), and the other is to also sanctify and purify one’s *gashmiyus* (physical being) excessively. The quality of worshipping with *ruchniyus* is called Avraham and this is from the male (דוכרא) side, while that of worshipping from the *gashmiyus* is called Sarah. Thus the meaning of “He said to Sarah his wife” addressing the female (נוקבא) side and telling her “that now I know you are a beautiful woman,” is that I have not ascended to the highest level of sanctity, for I still am drawn by physical beauty. “And they will kill me” means that if we do not check ourselves and strengthen our sanctity, then, G-d forbid, they will kill me, i.e., the *ruchniyus* force. “And you they will let live” means that the force of *gashmiyus* will have ascendancy. Therefore say “you are my sister” meaning that we should strengthen ourselves intensely in sanctity and in clinging to the Torah consistent with the verse “say to wisdom that you are my sister.”⁹⁸ “That it may be good for me,” means that because of this I shall ascend to the goodness of the highest sanctity for the force of *ruchniyus* will be dominant... And also this “my soul will live for your sake (בגללך)” —the term בגללך is related to “as the dung (הגלל) is swept away” referring to the fact that the life-force of sanctity would be injected even into the dung, i.e., the *gashmiyus*.
(*Noam Elimelech, parashas Lech Lecha*)

Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk not only equates female and male with *chomer* and *tzurah*, albeit with the terminology of *gashmiyus* and

⁹⁶ שאם הספר היה נחוצ לראשונים על אף שהם היו חזקים כארזי הלבנון. מה יאמרו דורות האחרונים שהם כעשבי הכותל... ק"ו בן בנו של ק"ו שהיה צריך לחדפיס את הספר מאז ומקדם ולהפיצו בכל תפוצות ישראל.

⁹⁷ These verses are from *Bereishis* 12.

⁹⁸ אָמַר לְחִכְמָה, אָחִי אֵת (משלי ז:ד). This verse using the feminine “sister” for wisdom would seem to pose a challenge to our analysis, but looking at the following verses “to guard you from the foreign woman,” it becomes clear that it means to say that the feminine side, i.e., *chomer*, must be imbued with wisdom.

ruchniyus, but he even goes so far as to equate Avraham and Sarah with them, just as the scholars of Provence had done 500 years earlier. Despite the influence of the *Zohar* and kabbalistic thought, the ancient philosophical/allegorical interpretation of *Tanach*, that rested heavily on the symbolism taught by Rambam, remains alive and well in Chassidic works.

Many years earlier, in the city of Prague, this metaphor of *chomer* and *tzurah* was already being used.⁹⁹ “Amon and Moav differ from all other nations since they were born from a father who cohabitated with his daughter, unlike others who are born from a wife who is *chomer* and thus the children are part *chomer* and part *tzurah*. But the children of *Lot* are viewed as if completely from the father and hence completely *tzurah*, and thus the males in which this abnormal intense *tzurah* stands out are forbidden to become part of Israel. But when the quality of *tzurah* is introduced via the female it produces leadership as is the characteristic of *tzurah*, and hence Mashiach comes from it” (*Netzach Yisrael* 32, from the *Maharal Mi’Prag*).¹⁰⁰ Rambam’s symbolism of female/male as *chomer/tzurah* was present in the abstract thinking of Maharal in the 16th century. In latter days, this abstract methodology—based to some degree upon Plato’s symbolism—has become a mainstay in interpretation amongst many in the

⁹⁹ מהר"ל, נצח ישראל, פרק ל"ב "התורה הרחיקה מואבי ועמוני מבא בקהל ישראל, אך התירה מואבית ועמונית וכאשר תבין זה תדע, כי עניין עמון ומואב ראוי לזה מצד שהיה עניין בעמון ומואב שלא היה בשאר העובדי גלולים, שהם נולדו מאב שבא על בנותיו, לא כמו כל שאר בני האדם שיש לכל אחד אשה שהיא חמרית גם כן, חלק בבן ומתוך כך אינו הכל מן האיש, וכאשר בא לוט על בנותיו נחשבים טפלים אצל האב והם ג"כ יצאו ממנו, לכך נחשב הכל מן האב. ותולדות אלו הם נוטים אחר הצורה, כי יש לאיש משפט צורה, ולפיכך נאסרו הזכרים ולא נאסרו הנקבות, כי הזכרים יש להם משפט הצורה, והצורה באומה זו יוצאת מסדר המציאות, כאשר כל האומה הזאת יצא מן האב שבא על בתו, כי הבת בטלה אצל האב וכאילו הכל היה מן אב שהוא זכר, לכך כל האומה הזאת עמון ומואב נמשכים אחר הצורה, והצורה זאת יוצאת מסדר המציאות, כי תולדות אלו אינם כמו אשר סידר השי"ת כאשר בא הכל מן האב אשר נחשב צורה, והוא צורה זרה. ולכך נאסרו הזכרים דווקא ולא הנקבות, כי הזכרים יש להם משפט הצורה, ראוי שיהיו אסורים שהם צורה זרה, שהדבר הזה זר ביותר ולא הנקבות, ומ"מ מוטבע באומה זו כח הצורה ביותר. אבל כאשר נטע בריכה זאת בישראל היה עושה פרי חדש והיה עושה שלטון כאשר ראוי אל הצורה, שהיא שולטת, והיה עושה צורה שלימה על כל הוא המשיח שהוא צורה נחשב בישראל".

¹⁰⁰ See Chaim Eisen’s article on the Maharal in *Hakirah* 4, where he contends that the Maharal is trying to write the work on *Aggadab* that Rambam decided against.

Yeshivah world.¹⁰¹

Rashba's teacher, Ramban, was not averse to this symbolism either, considering it as possibly being rooted in scientific fact.¹⁰² "According to the Greek philosophers, all the body of a fetus comes from the woman, with that which is contributed from the male being the force they call הַיּוֹלֵי which puts the *tzurah* into the *chomer*." (Ramban *Al HaTorah, Vayikra* 12:2). *Rabbeinu* Bachye (ibid.), the student of Rashba brings, with apparent approval, some of the evidence that supports this scientific theory and elaborates upon it, using it to explain how Yaakov was able to control the genetic characteristics of his flock. He tells us, with no qualms, that this is the theory of "the wise man, the head of the philosophers."¹⁰³

Aggados Chazal and Halachah

The symbolism of *chomer* and *tzurah* is so basic that we find *Chazal* using it often in the *aggados* they use to teach philosophical truths. The philosophical truths found in *aggados* are crucial and they also serve as the basis of *halachah*, for *halachah* is a reflection of the principles of Jewish philosophy. Thus the recognition of *Chazal's* methodology in their usage of the *chomer/tzurah* allegory is essential, in order that one be able to understand the teachings of the Talmud.¹⁰⁴

In the *Peirush HaMishnayos to Avos* (4:7), Rambam brings evidence to the fact that our *Chachamim* willingly accepted dire poverty in their refusal to accept financial support, from several *Aggados Chazal*. "And of Chanina ben Dosa of whom it was announced (*Taanis* 24b) [by a *bas kol*] 'the whole world is only fed because of Chanina my son, and Chanina my son suffices with a *kav* of *charuvim* from week to week.'" *Tashbetz* and *Bais Yosef* understand this as a praise of Chanina's self-imposed asceticism and therefore see no evidence here that Chanina suffered because he refused to take from others. But Rambam in fact

¹⁰¹ It was central to Rav Hutner's thought and hence central to the thinking that dominates Yeshivas Chaim Berlin. From there and from elsewhere, it has spread far and wide.

¹⁰² This same claim was made by R. Levi b. Avraham, as we noted above.

¹⁰³ Aristotle.

¹⁰⁴ In discussing Esther's marital status, we have already given one case in which understanding *aggados* affects *halachah*.

would not see such willing deprivation as praiseworthy. Such extreme asceticism is against the fundamental principle of the middle road (דרך בינוני),¹⁰⁵ and thus he finds it impossible to explain this *aggadah* in that way.

Rather, the Talmud's statement speaks about the man that Rambam has discussed in the *hakdamah* to the *Peirush haMishnayos*, who is capable of *Yedias HaShem* and for whom the whole world exists.¹⁰⁶ *Chazal* call our attention here, to the irony of his plight. The world with all its abundance only exists for the sake of the *Yodei'a Hashem* Chanina. All the materialism that makes up the physical world is only to produce Chanina, but Chanina must make do with a *keav* of carobs each week, for in his pursuit of *Yedias HaShem* he had no time to make any more money than would pay for that *keav* of carobs. Of course he contented himself with what he had—being the שמה¹⁰⁷ בחלקו¹⁰⁷ that he was and having acquired the quality of¹⁰⁸ הסתפקות, but he did not desire poverty and had he greater wealth he would have enjoyed G-d's gifts. The following stories dealing with miracles related to Chanina lead Bais Yosef¹⁰⁹ to state in his refutation of Rambam's claim, that had Chanina wished he would have acquired wealth miraculously, and thus Rambam's conclusions cannot be drawn from Chanina's poverty and clearly it was self-imposed for ascetic reasons. But of course, according to Rambam, stories of miracles are not to be taken literally. *Chazal* did not fill pages of the Talmud with fantastic stories fit for children's books. According to Rambam, Bais Yosef is missing the point.

The whole point of this *aggadah* is to give philosophical insight into the relationship with the material world that the *Yodei'a HaShem* has. The focus of all the stories is Chanina's interactions with his wife. We are dealing here with the struggle and debate within the *Yodei'a HaShem* himself. The simplest story to understand is this one:

One day the wife of R. Chanina said to him: "How long shall we yet be troubled with the want of our daily bread?" And he replied: "What can I do?" Said she: "Pray to G-d that He should give you

¹⁰⁵ See *Hilchos De'os* chapter 1, and *Shemonah Perakim*, chapter 4.

¹⁰⁶ See Kappach ed., p. 22.

¹⁰⁷ "Happy with his lot."

¹⁰⁸ Contenting oneself with the minimum needed for survival.

¹⁰⁹ *Kesef Mishneh*, *Hilchos Talmud Torah* 3:10.

something.” He accordingly went and prayed. A hand came forth and gave him a leg of a golden table. Subsequently his wife saw in a dream that all the righteous in heaven ate on golden tables having three legs, while her table only had two. Said she to Chanina: “Would you like that while everyone eats at a table with three legs that we will eat at a table with only two? Pray to G-d that the golden leg be taken back.” He prayed, and the leg was taken back. We have learned in a *beraisa* that this latter miracle was even greater than the former; for we have a tradition that it is usual for heaven to bestow but not to take back. (*Taanis* 25a)

Of course, no golden table leg ever came down from Heaven. Anyone who understands the most basic teachings of Rambam knows that the *aggadah* is teaching that the material part of Rav Chanina, his wants and emotions, rejected material wealth that was gained at the expense of spiritual growth. His physical being had become what is referred to in *Mishlei* as the *eishes chayil*—the *chomer hamesukan* that Rambam speaks of—that so longs for the spiritual (*tzurah*) to complete it, that it willingly denies itself what could easily be gained should Chanina devote more time to his physical wants.¹¹⁰

Rambam continues in his argument,¹¹¹ “But these people who deny the truth and these clear statements [of the *Mishnah*] erred and take money of people of their own will or by force, based on the stories they read in the Talmud. These stories are about disabled or elderly people who are not able to work and have no choice but to accept. What is their alternative? To die? This, the Torah did not demand of us. You will find that the story they use as proof in the interpretation of ¹¹²והיתה כאניות סוחר ממרחק תביא להמה is dealing with a disabled man who cannot work.” Rambam is referring to the following Talmudic story:

Notwithstanding that R. Elazar b. Shimon said above that he is sure all his deeds were just, he was not satisfied, and prayed for mercy from Heaven, and invoked upon himself chastisements, and became so afflicted that in the night they had to spread under him sixty felt spreadings, and in the morning they removed from him

¹¹⁰ Though the *aggadah* speaks of prayer, prayer according to Rambam works via the transformation of the person which affects his *bashgachah*. This is one of the central themes developed in *Encountering the Creator*.

¹¹¹ *Peirush HaMishnayos*, *ibid*.

¹¹² “She is like the merchant ships, from afar she brings food.”

sixty basinfuls of blood. In the morning his wife used to make for him sixty kinds of pap, which he ate, and he became well. His wife, however, would not allow him to go to the *bais midrash*, in order that he might not be troubled by the rabbis; and so he used to say every evening to his afflictions: "Come, my brothers," and in the morning: "Go away, for I do not want to be prevented from studying." One day his wife heard him call the afflictions, and she exclaimed: "You yourself bring these afflictions upon you! You have exhausted the money of my father [through your illness]." She left him and went to the house of her father. In the meantime it happened that sailors made him a present of sixty slaves, each of them holding a purse with money; and the slaves prepared for him daily the sixty kinds of pap he used to eat. One day his wife told her daughter: "Go and see what your father is doing." And she went. Her father then said to her: "Go and tell your mother that we are richer than her parents." And he applied to himself the verse (*Mishlei* 31:14): "She is become like the merchant ships, from afar doth she bring her food." Finally he ate, drank, became well, and went to the *bais midrash*, and there he was questioned about sixty kinds of blood of women, and he declared them all pure. The rabbis murmured, saying: "Is it possible that of such a number there should not be a doubtful one?" And he said: "If it is as I have decided, all of them shall bring forth male children; if not, then there shall be at least one female among them." Finally, all of the children were born males, and were named Elazar after him." (*Bava Metz'ia* 84b)

Bais Yosef joins forces with those who Rambam refers to "as people who deny the truth," and claims that this story is indeed a good source to prove that one may be supported to learn Torah. He acknowledges that Rabbi Elazar was indeed ill, but if it were not for the sake of his Torah that he was supported, what was the relevance of the *derash* he makes from the verse in *Parashas Eishes Chayil*¹¹³ in praise of Torah? If he only received these gifts from the sailors fortuitously because of the *neder tz'edakah* they had made while in danger which they then gave to him because of his need, why does he thank the Torah?¹¹⁴ Bais Yosef's argument is based on the assumption that

¹¹³ "She is become like the merchant ships."

¹¹⁴ From his question, we realize that he is not working with Rashi's premise based on a *midrash* quoted by *Tosfos* which explains that they had prayed to be saved in the merit of Rabbi Elazar. According to the *midrash* it is even clearer that his sudden wealth is due to his own

R. Elazar attributed his wealth to Torah, because he understands the metaphor of *Eishes Chayil* to be referring to the Torah. Rashi,¹¹⁵ consistent with his commentary on *Mishlei*, indeed seems to learn so as well. But as noted above, Rambam relates this woman of *Eishes Chayil* not to the Torah but to the *chomer hamesukan*, hence R. Elazar does not attribute his new wealth to his Torah study.

The *Mechaber* goes on to argue, that since it's obvious from the story that Rabbi Elazar could have removed his suffering on his own¹¹⁶ and been able to earn a livelihood, therefore we see that he has chosen to be supported by others.¹¹⁷ Of course, we have noted earlier the inherent dangers in bringing halachic proofs from the literal meaning of *aggados*. The *Maharal*¹¹⁸ already notes the ever-present number 60 cannot be taken literally—but more than this, these numbers should be a clue to us that the entire story is meant to be interpreted. Rabbi Elazar, like Rabbi Chanina, is the one person in many generations¹¹⁹ for whom the world was created. The story is a metaphor for what is going on between the two halves of Rabbi Elazar's being. His wife—his *chomer*—could not bear the deprivation that was demanded of him by his spiritual side and had abandoned him—his joy in life had disappeared and the will to live had departed. But nevertheless in his distress—at death's door¹²⁰—he is able to replenish himself and transform his *chomer* to *chomer hamesukan* as he comes to

merit—that of his Torah study.

¹¹⁵ The second explanation that Rashi gives at the end of his commentary in *Mishlei* is based on the statement in the *midrash* that the *Eishes Chayil* is an allegory for the Torah. But the *midrash* itself does not explain how to interpret the individual verses. There is no reason to believe that *Chazal* interpreted it to refer to the Torah. In fact, it would seem to mean the *חומר המתוקן* which is the physical part of man infused with the Torah. This is how we should assume Rambam interprets the *midrash* as well.

¹¹⁶ According to the narrative, he himself would bring on the suffering and remove it when it was time to study.

¹¹⁷ At this point, *Bais Yosef* also raises the issue of a gift (דורון) and argues that this onetime non-coerced show of gratitude should be no problem.

¹¹⁸ Commentary on *Aggados*. *Maharsha* also note this.

¹¹⁹ His father says בני עלייה והם מועטים, אם שניים הם אני ובני מהם. Rambam brings this in the *Hakdamah L'Peirush HaMishnayos*, p. 24.

¹²⁰ Represented by the death threat hanging over the sailors and himself.

understand that his body only has life because of its soul. The support of the sailors represents this moment of understanding. The *midrash* tells us¹²¹ that the sailors had prayed to be saved for the sake of R. Elazar. Their prayer is their acknowledgment that the only value of their life and of all their worldly endeavors is their support of this Rabbi Elazar. The physical body then rejoices in this knowledge—and finds such joy in life itself that the poverty and suffering dissipate in the mind of Rabbi Elazar and he is cured.¹²²

What does need explanation is Rambam's acknowledgment, based on this *aggadah*, that the Rabbi Elazar ben Shimons of the world will accept having their physical needs provided for by society when it is impossible for them to provide for themselves. According to the allegorical explanation we have given, we have no reason to believe that Rabbi Elazar ever took from others—but only from the physical side of his own being. Why does Rambam feel that this allegory is relevant at all to the halachic issue of taking money to support one's Torah study? Clearly, Rambam feels that a *משל* (metaphor) of *Chazal* will be framed in such a way that even in its literal reading it reflects the same Torah truth that is derived from its deeper reading. As we have explained, the *משל* reflects the principle that all the physical wealth in the world exists to provide for the *Chacham* that which he cannot provide for himself, for alone he would not be able to sustain a civilization that could make a life of study possible.¹²³ In this light, the simple reading of the *aggadah* teaches that though the world provides its riches to sustain the special person, he accepts from the world only because he needs to do so to survive.¹²⁴

The continuation of the story tells us that when he is healed, he answers all the *niddah* questions so that the male and the female parts of nature can be joined in perfect union and the world can be fruitful and multiply. This is a demonstration of how he sustains the physical world. All the children born through his aid are males, meaning that

¹²¹ See note 114.

¹²² The fact that his wife recognizes this only via her daughter's observation is reminiscent of Maharal's point (above) that the daughter, being the woman who is a product of the father (*tzurah*), is a higher form of *chomer*.

¹²³ As explained in the *hakdamah l'Peirush HaMishnayos* noted above.

¹²⁴ Similarly, R. Chanina only took the minimum needed to survive.

the *tzurah* is dominant over the *chomer* through his intervention. This, of course, is only the beginning of what the *gemara* is trying to tell us.¹²⁵ Would that we had a Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon or a Rambam to help us understand more. Would that the wise men of Provence of 1300 had left a line of successors.

It is worth noting that Rashba wrote a *sefer* explaining *Aggados Chazal*. Perhaps the controversy over how *aggados* should be interpreted was the cause for Rashba's writing of this *sefer*. Perhaps he wrote in response to the allegorical explanations of the Torah being proffered by the Catholic clergy.¹²⁶ And perhaps he saw little distinction between the interpretations of the Christians and those coming from Provence. In that work, those *Aggados* that speak of G-d are interpreted in an entirely allegorical fashion. But in *midrashim* that deal with people but that relate fantastic and supernatural events, Rashba maintains the framework of the story, and merely minimizes the supernatural element. For example, in the famous *midrash* of Og, where his size makes him capable of uprooting a mountain, Rashba says the size is an exaggeration that serves to emphasize what a formidable opponent he was, because he had earned merit for helping Avraham. What this interpretation lacks, and what will be found in Rambam and in Provence, is "symbolism." In the midrashic treatment of Og, it is clear that he represents an ancient dangerous impulse within man.¹²⁷ When the evil of the generation of the flood was destroyed, Og was the survivor who carried it with him, and only Moshe, with the Torah, was able to overcome it.

¹²⁵ See also the interpretation of Hillel's rejection of his brother's offer in *Sotah* 21a as explained in *Hakirah* 5 "Rambam and Zevulun: *Boz Yavuzu Lo.*"

¹²⁶ This is the claim made in the introduction of the Mossad HaRav Kook edition.

¹²⁷ Akin to, but not the same as the *chomer*—perhaps the urge for survival, and thus a drive that aided Avraham in his work.

The Consequences of Reinterpretation

Rav Chaim Soloveichik, *sblita*, in his essay “Rupture and Reconstruction,” notes how in the present era, the struggle of the Jew has been shaped as a war against outside influences.¹²⁸ Rashba’s metaphor of the *Ishah Zonah* as foreign influences and foreign wisdoms that lead Israel astray has become the dominant focus of those who wish to lead our generation away from temptation. The sciences taught in the universities are the embodiment of the temptress who threatens the future of Israel. But as Rabbi Soloveichik notes, in fact the ancient challenge defined by *Chazal* is the internal battle with the *yetzer hara*, that of the *tzurah* vs. *chomer*. Rambam’s metaphoric explanation of *Mishlei* has almost been forgotten, and under the sway of another interpretation¹²⁹ a fundamentally different *hashkefah* system has emerged. Only total immersion in Talmud and rejection of all foreign wisdoms is permissible. Nor is it Torah with *derech eretz* that will provide for all man’s needs, but only Torah itself.

Moreover, to the *Mashgichim* and *Roshei Yeshivah* of many of our Yeshivos, the *Ishah Zonah* of *Mishlei* must also be taken literally, and thus the answer to every calamity to befall our people is a strengthening of the strictures of *tznius*, and admonitions to our wives—this despite the fact that a generation of idealistic Bais Yaakov girls has sprung up, with higher religious standards and sensitivities than their male counterparts. According to Rambam, that this *Ishah Zonah* is the call of material want, a more apt target for the *Baalei Mussar* would be the desire for wealth that drives so many in the Orthodox community to tax evasion, fraud, and outright theft. As far as women, the key to their relationship with their husbands is that they be educated in the principles of the Torah—as the metaphor clearly tells us.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Tradition*, vol. 28, no. 4, “The thousand-year struggle of the soul with the flesh has finally come to a close ...the spiritual challenge becomes less to escape the confines of the body than to elude the air that is breathed.”

¹²⁹ Rav Soloveichik attributes the change to the change in environment to an open society from a closed one.

¹³⁰ See *Hakirah* 5, “Rambam and Zevulun: *Boz Yavuzu Lo*” where this is discussed.

Rav Yedayah's Plea

In his letter of opposition to the *cherem* of 1305, Rav Yedayah explains that the first argument for its cancellation is that it is an affront to Rambam.¹³¹

First, for the honor of the great Rabbi, רמב"ם, that his name not be profaned with the denigration of his opinions and language... especially for those who have re-dug the foundations of the halls of the Torah that had been destroyed, and reestablished the palaces that were in ruins, and filled the world with knowledge; those who were sent in their time via Divine Providence to give life to a large multitude; it is certain that we must take the utmost care about their honor. We must try with all our strength to prevent the hairs of their glory from falling to the ground... and not even a hint of dishonor should be directed at them, lest it lead to profanation of the name of G-d and his Torah in public, when his prophets and angels are shamed. Even the gentile scholars elevate the honor of the great Rabbi, רמב"ם, and raise up his books and love his wisdom, and especially that *sefer* [*Moreh Nevuchim*]. Even though he stands against them [the Christians and Moslems], this does not prevent their elite from loving him with [declarations of their] mouths and with their hearts. And despite their hatred of us, they are not ashamed to admit the truth. And out of respect for him, they even show honor to those Jews who identify with his works. How can we rise up and estrange ourselves from this honor and the source that remains to us and our Torah as protection from disrespect amongst the nations and our enemies who insult Israel and attrib-

¹³¹ תחלה לכבוד הרב הגדול ז"ל שלא יתחלל שמו בהתבזות דעותיו ולשונותיו. והנה קטני החכמים נצטוו להרבות ביקרם. ואפילו מי שנשתכח תלמודו בחייהו אין נוהגין בו מנהג בזיון, אף כי מייסדי היכלי התורה הנהרסים ומכונני ארמנותיה השוממין. והממלאים את הארץ דעה, והשלוחים בזמן מהשגחת האל בעולמו להחיות עם רב, שצריך להחמיר מהמיר בכבודם. ולהשתדל בכל עוז מהשפיל ומהפיל משערות תפארתם ארצה באחד מנקבי המשכיות. ואפילו כמלא נקב מחט סדקית בפועל או במאמר או במחשבה. פן יביא זה בודאי לחילול ה' ותורתו ברבים בהתבזות נביאיו ומלאכיו. והנה חכמי האומות אשר לא מבני ישראל המה, מגדילים כבוד הרב הגדול ז"ל ומנשאים ספריו ומחבבים חכמתו. וכל שכן הספר ההוא. ואם הוא עומד כנגדם מאוד ומקדש את השם ותורתו לעיניהם, בכל זאת לא ימנעו שרידיהם מאהוב אותו בכל פה ובכל לב, ואינם מתביישים לשנאתנו מהודות על האמת. וגם מנשאים ומנטלים היהודים לכבודו כל אשר בשם הרב וספריו ומאמריו יכנה. ואיך נעמוד אנהו ונתנכר לאותו כבוד, והעילוי הנשאר לנו ולתורתנו כסות עיניים בין האומות ובתוך האויבים המחרפים מערכות ישראל ביחסם לנו הסכלות מכל חכמה ומכל דעת אמת. ואיך יסכל ה' עצתנו לבער מקרבנו לעזרת אויבינו פליטת האמת והכבוד הנמצאת ואין חילול ה' גדול מזה.

ute to us ignorance of all knowledge and of all truth? How can G-d cause us to act foolishly, to destroy from our midst, and to the benefit of our enemies, that residue of truth and honor that has remained with us? There can be no greater profanation of the Name than this.

Rav Yedayah's plea could have been written in our own times. Rambam's rationalism and philosophical insight, which is that of the Torah and *Chazal*, stood throughout the ages as a beacon to the Western World. Today, as in days of old, the scholars of theology and philosophy remain engaged with and enthralled by the words of our master. Yet, from the "mouths and with their hearts," rabbis who are idolized in certain circles utter such phrases as "the Rambam could say it; we cannot." His teachings are to be rejected, precisely at the time they have been proven true "to the eyes of all the nations." Indeed, history repeats itself. Let us hope that Provence is poised to rise again. ❧