

# THE KUZARI

## Arguments in Defense of Judaism

By

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi

Translated and annotated by

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The Kuzari: Arguments in Defense of Judaism

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“*The Kuzari* is holy and pure. It contains the fundamental principles of Israel’s faith and the Torah.”

Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797) (*Tosefeth Ma’aseh Rav*)

## PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

*THE KUZARI* is a classic work of Jewish philosophy, completed in 1140 C.E. by celebrated Hebrew poet and philosopher **Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi**. His purpose in writing the book was to defend Judaism against the attacks of philosophers, Muslim theologians, and Karaites. I have taken liberty with the author’s original subtitle – “The Book of Refutation and Proof in Support of the Despised Faith” – substituting a more positive, if less emotive one: “Arguments in Defense of Judaism.”

The book takes the form of a dialogue between the pagan king of the Khazars – a semi-nomadic Turkic people who established their empire between the Black and Caspian Seas during the years 652-1016 – and a Jewish scholar whom the king invited for instruction in the tenets of Judaism. This aspect of the book is loosely based on the true story of the eight-century conversion of the Khazar royalty and aristocracy to Judaism.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi wrote his magnum opus in Judeo-Arabic, the Arabic dialect spoken by Jews living in the Arab world. Judeo-Arabic was used for all types of Jewish religious writings, from before Sa’adiah Gaon until after Maimonides (approximately the 8th century to the end of the 13th century).

A note about this translation: it is not a new academic translation, based on manuscripts in Judeo-Arabic. Rather, my goal was to create an easily accessible work for English-speakers, relying on earlier, respected translations. In 1905, Dr. Hartwig Hirschfeld authored a scholarly translation from Arabic to English. Unfortunately, the language of that classic work is antiquated and uninviting to the modern reader. More recently, Rabbi Yitzhak Shilat published an excellent translation – into Hebrew – entitled, *Sefer Ha-Kuzari: Precise Hebrew Translation in the Style of the Period of Its Composition* (Shilat Publications, 2010). I have based this work on

those two translations, giving preference to the latter, in accordance with the rule that “the law follows the more recent view” (הלכה כבתראי). To assist the reader in difficult spots, I have provided occasional footnotes to explain the text. But I have sought to keep the notes to a minimum, so that they will not take center stage away from the celebrated author, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi.

Chanan Morrison

24 November, 2017 / ו' כסליו תשע"ח

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## TIMELINE

c. 1070 – Yehudah HaLevi is born in Tudela, in the Christian north of Spain.

1080's – He studies in the renowned yeshiva of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi in the largely Jewish town of Lucena in southern Spain.

Late 1080's – Settles in Granada in Andalusia (Muslim Spain), under the patronage of Hebrew poet Moshe ibn Ezra.

1089 – Hebrew poet, grammarian, and Bible commentator, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, is born in Tudela. A good friend of Yehudah HaLevi, Rabbi ibn Ezra quotes him in his writings. It is likely that his son Isaac married HaLevi's daughter.

1090 – The Almoravids, fervent Muslims from Morocco, conquer Granada and exile the Jewish elite. HaLevi spends the next eight years in Lucena and Seville.

1095 – Pope Urban II calls for the capture of the Holy Land. The First Crusade ends in 1099; Jerusalem is conquered, and its Jewish and Muslim residents are slaughtered.

## THE KUZARI

- 1108 – HaLevi moves to Toledo in Christian Spain, where he opens a successful medical practice.
- 1129 – He writes an early version of *The Kuzari*.
- 1130 – He embarks on an aborted journey to the Land of Israel. HaLevi returns to Spain, relocating to Cordoba in southern Spain.
- 1138 – Moses Maimonides is born in Cordoba.
- 1140 – HaLevi completes the final version of *The Kuzari*, and he embarks on a second journey to the Land of Israel.
- May 1141 – After an eight-month stopover in Egypt, HaLevi leaves Alexandria for Acre.
- 1141 – Yehudah HaLevi dies in the Land of Israel in the Hebrew month of Av, three months after he had arrived. Thirty years later, Benjamin of Tudela reports seeing HaLevi's grave in Tiberias.
- 1167 – Yehudah ibn Tibbon prepares the first Hebrew translation of *The Kuzari*.

## RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI

**Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi**, the author of *The Kuzari* and one of the greatest Hebrew poets of all time, was born in Spain between the years 1070 and 1075. He grew up in an affluent Jewish family in the town of Tudela, in the Christian north of Spain.<sup>1</sup>

In his youth, HaLevi was sent to study in the yeshiva in Lucena in southern Spain. There he was educated in the various branches of traditional Jewish studies. Lucena, whose population was nearly entirely Jewish, hosted the academy of one of the generation's leading Talmudic scholars, Rabbi Isaac Alfasi, popularly known as the "Rif."

In Lucena, HaLevi made a lifelong friendship with Rabbi Joseph ibn Megas. Rabbi ibn Megas would later head the Lucena yeshiva after Rabbi Alfasi's death in 1103.

### Hebrew Poet in Muslim Granada

Yehudah HaLevi began to write Hebrew poetry at a young age. While still in his teens, he set out for Granada in the Muslim south for a more intellectually and artistically stimulating environment.

In the tenth century, scholar-poet Dunash ben Labrat (920-990) introduced a new style of Hebrew poetry. Dunash's poems were based on the rules of Arabic meter. There was vociferous opposition to this literary innovation, as it often leads to distortion of accurate Hebrew grammar and pronunciation.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the new style prevailed and formed the basis for all subsequent medieval Hebrew poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> For seven centuries, after the Islamic conquest of Spain in 711, the Iberian Peninsula was divided into a Christian north and a Muslim south (Andalusia). During Spain's gradual return to Christian control (the "Reconquista"), the border frequently shifted back and forth.

<sup>2</sup> Arabic prosody is based on set patterns of long and short vowels. Hebrew poets wishing to imitate this style utilize the mobile *Shva* as a short vowel. Sometimes, to fit the meter, the poet will use a resting *Shva* (which is in fact the complete absence of a vowel), or will shorten a regular vowel to a *Shva*. For instance, in Dunash's

By HaLevi's time, metered poetry was no longer a novelty. HaLevi was renowned for his exquisite Hebrew poetry, and he often used the most complicated Arabic meters. Yet HaLevi criticized this style of poetry in *The Kuzari*, lamenting that Hebrew had been unnaturally shackled by foreign meters. Like the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language was also in exile, under the rule of foreign elements.

### Successful Medical Practice in Toledo

In 1090, the Almoravids, a Berber army of Islamic zealots from North Africa, invaded Spain. After they conquered Granada, the Almoravids expelled the Jewish elite, and HaLevi left the city.

The poet wandered for several years, living in Lucena, Seville, and other towns in Spain. He made a living by writing verse for eulogies, wedding poems, and so on.

At some point, he moved to Toledo, then under Christian rule. In order to improve his financial state – probably after he married – HaLevi decided to study medicine. It was, as nowadays, a common occupation among Jews.

At the time, one became a doctor not by attending medical school but by studying Ibn Sina's *Canon of Medicine* and Arabic translations of the writings of Galen, the Greek physician whose medical theories dominated the Western and Arab worlds for close to 1,500 years. HaLevi complained that these studies left him “black with the ink of Arabic, and sunk in the slime of the Greeks' quicksand.”

In a short time, HaLevi gained a reputation as a successful physician. His medical practice grew so large that he complained of a lack of tranquility and time.

Unlike Maimonides, who saw medicine as a sacred calling, for HaLevi it was a wearisome way to make a living. And the poet was not impressed with medicine's efficacy. This most probably reflected personal experience,

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popular piyyut for the Sabbath, *Dror Yikra*, the second line begins נְעִים שְׁמֶיְכֶם (“pleasant is your name”). The poet used the word נְעִים – the construct form of the adjective “pleasant” – in order to match the meter, since the *Shva* is considered a short vowel. The correct word, however, would have been the regular form of the word, נָעִים.

after suffering the death of his own children. He wrote five moving poems on the occasion of a child's death. In one heart-wrenching poem, he describes the tragic death of a beloved daughter:

A rose, picked before her time,  
Her image will always be like a frontlet  
Before my eyes.  
How my tears flow like a raging river.  
How has a star fallen, gathered to the dust?  
How can the sun swoon in the wormy pit?  
Sheol's pangs are a turban on her head.  
My child, none can repair your decree,  
For death has separated you from me.

Only one of HaLevi's children reached adulthood, a daughter. She married the poet Isaac ben Ezra, the son of his good friend and fellow poet, famed Bible commentator Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra.<sup>3</sup> HaLevi's only grandson, also named Yehudah, was the son of his daughter and Isaac ben Ezra.

### **Love of Zion**

In 1099, the Christian army of the First Crusade conquered Jerusalem. The Crusaders massacred the Muslim and Jewish residents of Jerusalem, burned many of the Jews alive in a synagogue in the Jewish Quarter, and barred Jews from resettling in the city. This conquest in the Holy Land had been preceded by frightful pogroms in the Rhineland, where the marching Crusaders had massacred thousands of Jews.

It was at this dark time for the Jewish people that HaLevi experienced a powerful dream. It was a dream of Jerusalem. HaLevi was a Levite, and he dreamt of his own religious vocation, as a poet composing sacred poetry for the Temple service:

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra was born in 1089 (or perhaps 1092) in HaLevi's hometown of Tudela. The renowned Biblical commentator quotes Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi numerous times in his commentary to the Bible on matters of philosophy, grammar, and exegesis (e.g., Exodus 20:1, Deut. 26:17, Daniel 9:2).

My dream carried me to God's Temple,  
Where I sang His cherished service –  
The offerings and their libations,  
Encircled by heavy clouds of incense-smoke.  
I took pleasure hearing the Levites' songs,  
As they accompanied the Temple order.  
Then I awoke – and I am still with You,  
And I thanked the One to Whom gratitude belongs.

In the most famous of his “songs of Zion,” the poet wrote of his longing for Jerusalem:

My heart is in the East,  
While I am in the farthest West.  
How can I enjoy what I eat?  
How can I fulfill my vows and promises,  
When Zion lies under the ropes of Edom,<sup>4</sup>  
And I in Arab chains am bound?  
I would gladly leave the best of Spain,  
To see the dusty ruins of Jerusalem.

In 1130, HaLevi made his first attempt to reach the Holy Land. It is not known why this attempt failed, nor how far he traveled. The entire incident is shrouded in mystery. On his return to Spain, HaLevi did not return to Toledo, but moved to Muslim Cordoba.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The rabbis of the Talmud identified “Edom” with Rome and the Christian nations.

<sup>5</sup> At that point in time, Cordoba had the privilege of hosting three of the brightest stars in the history of Jewish scholarship: Rabbis **Yehudah HaLevi**, **Abraham ibn Ezra**, and **Moses Maimonides**. In 1130, both HaLevi and ibn Ezra were living in Cordoba. Maimonides was born in Cordoba near the end of HaLevi's stay there, in 1138. (Due to persecution of the fanatical Almohads, Maimonides fled Spain with his family as a ten-year-old in 1148.) HaLevi must have known Maimonides' father, Rabbi Maimon ben Joseph. Rabbi Maimon had studied at the Lucena yeshiva under HaLevi's friend Rabbi Joseph ibn Migas, and he served as a rabbinical judge in Cordoba.

## Jewish Philosopher

Near the end of his stay in Toledo, in 1129, HaLevi completed an early version of *The Kuzari*. A Karaite Jew living in Christian Spain had asked HaLevi a series of questions about his beliefs. HaLevi's response formed the initial core for this classic work of Jewish philosophy.

Unhappy with the first version, he worked on revising the book during the ten years he resided in Cordoba, from 1130 to 1140. It is assumed that the first edition dealt primarily with Karaism and its attacks on the oral traditions of Rabbinic Judaism. He later increased the book's scope to deal with challenges from other ideological opponents, especially the Arab-Aristotelian philosophers, then at the vanguard of science and theology.

## Leaving Spain

In the summer of 1140, HaLevi set sail for the East. The poet was between 65 and 70 years old, and was accompanied by his son-in-law, Isaac ben Ezra. He had completed the final version of *The Kuzari* earlier that year. For himself at least, he wished "to do away with the contradiction of daily confessing a longing and of never attempting to realize it" (Kaufmann). He bade farewell to his daughter, his beloved grandson, pupils and friends, rank and position. There was only one image in his heart: Jerusalem.

Driven by my yearning for the Living God,  
To pursue the place of my kings' thrones...  
I have left my fame to idols.<sup>6</sup>  
I exchanged my chambers for the shelter of shrubs,  
The security of bolts for a thicket of scrubs...

I have set my path in heart of the sea,  
Until I reach the footstool of my God.  
There I will pour out my soul and prayer,  
And nestle near His holy mountain.

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<sup>6</sup> Lesser poets. Based on Isaiah 42:8.

Sea travel at the time was slow and dangerous. Unable to cope with winter storms and high seas, sailing ships only undertook long voyages in the Mediterranean from late spring until mid-autumn. The voyage from Spain to Egypt took at least three months. The primitive ships of the time tended to hug to the coast, making them vulnerable to pirates.

HaLevi wrote several poems while on board, describing himself as “a prisoner of hope, sold to the sea, his spirit hostage to the winds.” His poems composed at sea are among the most beautiful of his religious lyrics. Even during the voyage, amid storms and surrounded by rough sailors, the poet was able to find peaceful trust in God.

### Stopover in Egypt

Due to the discovery of letters in the Cairo Genizah, we have a wealth of information about HaLevi’s eight-month stay in Egypt – more than any other part of his life. We know that his ship docked safely in Alexandria on September 8, 1140, a week before Rosh Hashanah. He did not continue immediately to the Holy Land. It was too late in the year to continue by sea, and the High Holidays were at hand. No longer a young man, he was exhausted and in dire need of rest after the grueling sea voyage.

Rabbi Aharon el-Ammani, a wealthy and cultivated rabbinical judge (*dayan*), persuaded the celebrated poet to extend his stay in Egypt, offering the hospitality of his spacious home in Alexandria. HaLevi stayed with Rabbi Aharon for two and a half months, regaining his health and his mental equilibrium.

Invited by the *nagid* or head of Egyptian Jewry, Shmuel ben Hananiah, HaLevi traveled to Fustat, Egypt’s commercial center, by caravan. He arrived before Hanukkah in early December. There he participated in social functions, including an official reception in his honor at the *nagid*’s residence.

HaLevi considered traveling to Palestine on a land route via the Sinai desert. This, however, was an ill-advised plan. Riding a camel at his age would be too demanding; most of the country was infested by bandits; and the southwest corridor, where he would be entering, was a war zone, as Fatamid garrisons in Ashkelon battled with Christian forces. The sea route from Alexandria to Acre was far safer. Acre was the Crusaders’ main harbor, and it was the location of the country’s largest Jewish community, about 200 Jews.



Some of his friends in Egypt, like those of Spain, advised him against traveling to the Holy Land altogether. It was a risky journey. Even if he arrived safely, there was nothing there for the celebrated poet, only a few impoverished Jews eking out a living. The Jewish community in Egypt, on the other hand was wealthy and cultured. Furthermore, according to what he had written in *The Kuzari* (II,14), Egypt was also part of the special geographical region receptive to prophecy. So why not stay in Egypt?

In a poem he composed in Fustat, HaLevi responded,

I know that the Shekhinah pitched there [in Egypt]  
Like a guest resting in the shade of an oak.  
But in Salem<sup>7</sup> and Zion, it is at home,  
For that is the place of Torah and greatness.

HaLevi booked his passage to Acre for the spring. He returned to Alexandria and boarded ship on May 7, 1141. For the first time, he was traveling alone, without his son-in-law Isaac and without his personal attendant. After waiting a week on board, the winds shifted favorably to the west. On the holiday of Shavuot, his ship set sail for the Land of Israel.

At this point, authentic records fail. It is nearly certain that the ship completed its ten-day voyage to the coast of the Holy Land. A letter from the Cairo Genizah indicates that HaLevi died in the Hebrew month of Av (July or early August that year), two or three months after sailing to Acre.

There is no reliable account of how the poet died. The book *Shalsheleth HaKabbalah* ("The Chain of Tradition," printed in Venice in 1586), quotes an old tradition that he was killed at the gates of Jerusalem:

Reaching the gates of Jerusalem, [HaLevi] rent his clothes... and recited the lament he had composed, "Zion, will you not ask?"  
An Arab horseman, stricken with envy at his religious passion, charged at him with his horse and trampled him to death.

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<sup>7</sup> Another name for Jerusalem. See Gen. 14:18.

The Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela visited the Land of Israel thirty years after HaLevi's death. He reported seeing Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi's grave in Tiberias.<sup>8</sup>

## Legacy

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi lived at the close of Andalusia's "Golden Age," which was terminated by the Almohad invasion of Spain in 1146. The Almohads enacted long-lasting anti-Jewish measures, including incidents of forced conversion to Islam. Thousands of Jews fled north to Christian Spain. Others, like the Maimonides family, fled to North Africa and Egypt.

HaLevi's poetry is largely forgotten, with the exception of his *piyyutim* that were incorporated in synagogue liturgy. The longest and most comprehensive poem is a *Kedushah*, summoning the entire universe to joyfully praise God. These poems were carried to all lands, even as far as India, and they influenced the rituals of the most distant countries. Even HaLevi's adversaries, the Karaites, incorporated some of his *piyyutim* into their prayer-book. His single most celebrated poem is "Zion, will you not ask?" It was included in the *Kinnoth* (elegies) for the Ninth of Av, the fast day of national mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

HaLevi's most important work is *The Kuzari*. He wrote this classic of Jewish thought in Judeo-Arabic, the Arabic dialect spoken by Jews living in the Arab world. Thirty years after its completion, the book was translated to Hebrew by Yehudah ibn Tibbon.<sup>9</sup> *The Kuzari* was cited frequently by Nachmanides (1194-1270) and his students. The great Rabbi Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), referred to the book as "holy and pure," and as containing "the fundamental principles of Israel's faith and the Torah."

Maimonides completed his famous philosophical text, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, fifty years after *The Kuzari* was written. *The Guide*, however, contains not a single reference to HaLevi's work. The two works take almost diametrically opposed positions to the question of philosophy and

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<sup>8</sup> The location of HaLevi's grave is no longer known. Maimonides' grave, however, is located in central Tiberias.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Tibbon's translation tends to translate literally from the Arabic. Hillel Halkin notes the sad irony that one of the great masters of the Hebrew language should be known to posterity for such awkward Hebrew prose.

Judaism. *The Guide* strives to demonstrate the compatibility of philosophy with Judaism. *The Kuzari*, on the other hand, concludes that philosophy is ultimately irrelevant to the faithful Jew.

In his biography of HaLevi, Hillel Halkin concludes that these two great Jewish thinkers are a type of litmus test. Those who identify with universal truths and the sciences will be instinctively drawn to *The Guide*. And those who look inwards, toward the special place of Torah and the Jewish people, will be drawn to *The Kuzari* of Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi.



## OVERVIEW OF *THE KUZARI*

### ESSAY ONE

The background story for *The Kuzari* takes place in the year 740 C.E., in the royal palace of Khazaria, a Turkic empire located between the Black and Caspian seas. The Khazar king<sup>10</sup> is on a spiritual journey. The king is devout in the pagan religion of the Khazars, yet he dreams repeatedly of an angel who tells him that although his intentions are pleasing to God, his actions are not. Spurred by the dream, he examines the various philosophical and religious options available to him.

The king turns first to a philosopher, who summarizes the views of Arab-Aristotelian philosophy then at the forefront of civilization and science. The philosopher explains how to become a “perfect human.” When a person develops his intellect and deepens his understanding of the universe, his intellect unites<sup>11</sup> with the “Active Intellect.” In this fashion, he attains immortality. Whereas the Prime Mover transcends any connection with the physical world, the Active Intellect is a universal Intellect “which illuminates the soul, just as light illuminates human sight” (V,12).

The king is impressed by the philosopher and his presentation. Yet he realizes that this is not what he seeks. The king believes in true dreams and human actions which God desires, whereas the philosopher states quite

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<sup>10</sup> The name of the Khazar king does not appear in *The Kuzari*. However, Joseph Khagan of the Khazars (c. 950), in his correspondence with Hasdai ibn Shaprut, identifies his devout ancestor who converted to Judaism as King Bulan. Bulan’s conversion to Judaism may have also reflected geo-political motivations. The Khazar state was under increasing pressure from Byzantine missionary activity, as well as Arab attempts to wrest control of the region. Choosing Judaism was a way to remain independent of these two major powers, while adopting an acceptable monotheistic religion. It enabled “Pax Khazarica” to provide stability in the region for 250 years.

<sup>11</sup> The idea that the perfect person unites with the Active Intellect is found in the writings of HaLevi’s contemporary, the Andalusian Arab-Aristotelian philosopher Abū Bakr ibn Bājjā (1095-1138), known by his Latin name, Avempace.

plainly that “God does not know you, much less your intentions and actions. And He certainly does not hear your prayers” (I,1).

The king then invites representatives of the two major religions, Christianity and Islam. (The philosopher’s views will only be challenged much later in the book, in sections IV,25 and V,15). The king gives short shrift to the Christian scholar, who speaks only of privately-experienced miraculous phenomena that defy logic and reason. And he rejects the Muslim’s proof of his religion, based on the Koran’s perfect language – a proof only recognizable to Arab-speakers, although the religion was supposed to spread to the entire world.

Both of these theologians referred to the universally-accepted history of the Israelites as proof that God communicates with humanity. Reluctantly, the king calls for a scholar from the Jews – a people whom he dismissively describes as “abased, few in number, and universally despised” (I,10).

The rabbi provides a brief (and not particularly inviting) outline of Jewish belief. Our faith, the rabbi explains, is based on the public miracles of the Exodus from Egypt and the Revelation at Sinai. We believe in everything contained in the Torah, he concludes laconically – “a very extensive domain.”

This abstract fails to impress the king. He asks the rabbi: Why do you speak of God as the One Who liberated you from Egypt? “Should you not have stated, Jew, that you believe in the Creator of the universe, Who organizes and governs it, the One Who created you and sustains you?” (I,12)

The rabbi responds that this is precisely the difference between a **religion based on revelation** and a religion based on logic and speculation. A religion based on revelation does not require philosophical proofs to God’s existence. Furthermore, only a religion with a tradition of Divine revelation publicly witnessed by masses – a claim that only Judaism makes – can truthfully assert that it knows the deeds that God desires. A man-made religion or a logic-based philosophy, on the other hand, will always be prone to doubts and disagreements.

The rabbi then shocks the kings with a surprising statement: the Torah only obligates the Jewish people, “the chosen of humanity.” By way of explanation, the rabbi notes the scientific classifications of mineral, plant, animal, and human. He then introduces a fifth level: that of prophets. Since

every Jew has the potential to be a prophet, this is the level of the Jewish people.<sup>12</sup>

However, the rabbi stresses that all of humanity has a common origin, as evidenced by the universally accepted seven-day week and decimal system of numbers. He seeks a balance between the unique status of Israel and the possibility for any human being to convert to Judaism – without, however, the ability to become a prophet.<sup>13</sup>

The arguments as to whether the world is eternal or was created, the rabbi notes, are evenly-balanced. Had Aristotle been aware of a reliable tradition that the world was created, he would have supported creation with at least as strong arguments as those he advanced to prove the eternity of matter. Belief in the eternity of matter, however, is not absolutely contrary to Judaism. The Biblical narrative of creation refers only to the beginning of the humanity; it does not preclude the possibility of preexistent matter. Tradition indicates that we should believe in creation. But if a person should believe that matter is eternal, this would not constitute heresy, as long as he believes in the common origins of humanity.<sup>14</sup>

At this point, the conversation turns to the very root of faith: God's involvement in our lowly world. The Divine order is visible in this world to the degree that matter is prepared to receive it. The higher the level of matter (according to the five classifications mentioned above), the greater the Divine order visible in it. Later (V,15), the rabbi will explain this by way

<sup>12</sup> The author's assertion (that only Jews have the potential to be prophets) is apparently based on the Talmudic statement that God consented to Moses' request that non-Jews should not merit prophecy (*Bava Bathra* 15). Maimonides, however, wrote that non-Jews can also be prophets (*Epistle to Yemen*). Perhaps Maimonides thought that Moses' request was only for his generation.

<sup>13</sup> The rabbi notes that converts to Judaism are not fully equal to native-born Jews in that they lack the capacity for prophecy (presumably just for the first generation). A source for this view may be found in *Kiddushin* 70b: "The Holy One only allows His Shekhinah dwell on Jewish families of distinguished lineage." Maimonides would disagree. The rabbinic tradition that the prophet Obadiah was a convert presents a difficulty to Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi's view, but that may be resolved in several ways (including the fact that not all agree that Obadiah was a convert).

<sup>14</sup> While science no longer believes that the universe is eternal, the author's approach to resolving clashes between Judaism and science is instructive

of analogy to physical light. Light is able to penetrate objects in varying degrees. It penetrates air and glass the best; polished surfaces, less so; wood, even less so; and so on.

Yet this “root of faith,” the rabbi cautions, can also be the “root of heresy.” To gain knowledge of the methods and deeds through which we can increase the Divine order in the world requires communication from God. A person who speculates what deeds are pleasing to God is like a charlatan pretending to be a doctor; he dispenses medicines without knowing their properties and effects.

The rabbi notes the sudden rise of Judaism with the exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, and the miracles in the desert – supernatural phenomena witnessed by the entire people. No one could entertain the slightest doubt, the king agrees, “that these [public] events could have been the result of magic, deception, or fantasy” (I,84). Even more importantly, the people did not hear God’s communication from individuals. They came directly from God when He communicated the Ten Commandments at Sinai.

The king then brings up the **sin of the golden calf**. That sin of idolatry, shortly after the revelation at Sinai, seems to fly in the face of the rabbi’s description of the Jewish people as “the chosen of humanity.”

The rabbi explains that the sin of the golden calf was not as serious an offence as it appears to us. Only a small minority of the people worshipped the calf,<sup>15</sup> and even they did not reject God Who took them out of Egypt. They merely sought a tangible object through which they could worship God and direct their prayers. Their sin was in devising a symbol to worship on their own initiative – like the charlatan in the pharmacy – instead of waiting for God’s instruction to build the Tabernacle.

The rabbi relates his theory that in every generation there are some people who are the essence, the “fruit,” while others are like the peel. Adam, created directly by God, was flawless in form and intellect. This perfection passed on exclusively to his son Seth, and so on down the generations, to elite individuals such as Noah and Abraham. From Abraham, it passed over to Isaac and then to Jacob. With Jacob’s children

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<sup>15</sup> Only 3,000 out of 600,000 men worshipped the idol – less than half a percent of the population.



began a new stage in the development of humanity, since all of his children were worthy of the Divine order. The entire family of Jacob was of the essence.

The king observes that Judaism's particularism is a sign of its validity. The very fact that Christianity and Islam failed to conquer the entire world discredits their claims. How could Divine assistance be connected to what was supposed to be a universal religion, yet which failed to accomplish its goal? Judaism, on the other hand, with its stipulation that the Torah only obligates the Jewish people, does not suffer from this flaw. (The rabbi will later discuss Israel's place among the nations in section II,36).

The conversation turns to a discussion of the **afterlife**, a topic featured more prominently in other religions. The rabbi contends that the sages of the Talmud spoke of the afterlife "in greater detail than is given in the more recent religions." Nonetheless, Judaism's focus is on life in this world. The prophets and the pious are able to commune with God in this life, while still attached to a physical body. This phenomenon is far more remarkable than the soul's life in the World to Come. "How can they boast of their expectations of what they will gain after death," the rabbi observes, "to those who already enjoy these rewards in life?" (I,109). This topic is taken up further in section III,21.

## ESSAY TWO

In the desolate mountains of Warsan near the sea, the king comes across a group of Jews in a hidden cave. The king converts in secret. Gradually, he reveals his Jewish faith to his countrymen and induces the rest of the Khazars to embrace Judaism. The king studies the Bible and employs the rabbi to answer his many questions on his new faith.

His first question deals with **anthropomorphic** names and descriptions that Scripture attributes to God.<sup>16</sup> The rabbi explains that names such as "Merciful," "Mighty," etc., are descriptions of God. They do not describe God's essence, but rather how His actions appear to us. God is

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<sup>16</sup> This subject was a major source of medieval Islamic polemics against Judaism. Muslim scholars wrote that Biblical descriptions of God are tainted with anthropomorphism. Maimonides also devoted the first section of *The Guide for the Perplexed* to this topic.

like a just judge, whose decisions appear merciful to those acquitted and harsh to those punished.

Actions attributed to God, such as “seeing” or “hearing” must be understood figuratively. They mean that nothing escapes God’s notice. God’s “speaking” or “writing” similarly mean that sound waves and other physical elements are formed according to His will. The rabbi notes that, while associating any aspects of corporeality to God is contrary to Judaism, it would be wrong to categorically reject the use of anthropomorphisms. Tangible images have the psychological advantage of instilling the soul with awe and reverence.

Only God’s explicit Name, the Tetragrammaton, refers to God’s essence. The terms “Creator” and “Maker” describe God’s power to create without any natural intermediaries.

The discussion turns to the special qualities of the **Land of Israel**. Why should a particular geographical area be blessed with spiritual advantages?

We know that some grapevines only thrive and produce choice grapes in certain locations. Similarly, the Jewish people only thrive and realize their spiritual/prophetic potential in their homeland, the Land of Israel. Yet, just as grapevines must be properly cultivated in order to produce their best fruit, residence in the Holy Land must be accompanied by those deeds that promote Israel’s spiritual potential – the Torah’s mitzvot.

Even the Jewish calendar is set according to the time in the Land of Israel. This leads to a lengthy discussion of the International Date Line, which the rabbi places east of China. This establishes the Land of Israel in the center of the inhabited world as known at that time.<sup>17</sup>

After hearing the rabbi quotes numerous Talmudic sources in praise of the Land of Israel, the king notes the hypocrisy of the Jews. They mention Jerusalem in their prayers, but take no practical steps to emigrate there. The rabbi does not defend his co-religionists, despite the dangerous conditions which made returning to the Land of Israel nearly impossible at that time. Instead, the rabbi concedes, “You have rebuked me severely.” We recite

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<sup>17</sup> The modern-day location of the International Date Line is also approximately the opposite side of the globe (antipodal) to Israel.

prayers of our return to the Land of Israel without thought or intention; they are merely “the chattering of the starling and the parrot” (II,24).

The rabbi explains the order of the **Temple service**, which was intended to facilitate the establishment of the Shekhinah and prophecy among the Jewish people. He compares the Temple and its vessels to the human body, and the Shekhinah to the soul which dwells within. With the Temple’s destruction, Israel lost its heart. Only with the Temple’s restoration will the Jewish people be restored. They are currently like a person who is deathly ill.

The discussion then turns to the place of the Jewish people among the nations. “Israel among the nations is like the heart among the organs of the body” (II,36). The rabbi notes that one should not expect to find hermits and ascetics in the Jewish people. The Torah opposes asceticism. We are meant to serve God with a balance of awe, love, and joy – a subject developed further in Part III.

Regarding **ritual impurity** (*tum’ah*), the rabbi suggests that it may be related to loss of life – either death itself (*tum’ath meith*), leprosy (“a leprous limb is as if dead”), or the loss of sperm, which has the potential to give life.

The essay closes with a lengthy analysis of the advantages of the **Hebrew language**. Hebrew shared the fate of the Jewish people, becoming poor and impoverished in exile. Yet it is a rich language, used to compose David’s stirring psalms and Isaiah’s eloquent speeches. According to tradition, Hebrew is the language with which God spoke to Adam and Eve. Hebrew’s cantillation notes (טעמים) provide cues that are ordinarily found only in face-to-face speech. And its phonological advantage of frequent syllabic stops facilitates better communication

### ESSAY THREE

The third essay opens with a discussion of the **hasid**, Judaism’s ideal of a saintly individual. The hasid is not an ascetic. Rather, he is a person who has complete control of his physical and mental powers. The hasid is always aware that God knows his actions, speech, and thoughts.

The rabbi describes how the hasid prays, including his mental preparations for prayer. Noting the centrality of **prayer** for the soul – “the heart and fruit of his day” – the rabbi analyses the order of the daily Jewish prayers. He uses several parables to explain the advantages of communal

prayer over private prayer, comparing it to Plato's concept of "the community portion."

After a short digression on the afterlife, the essay goes on to refute the Karaites' rejection of the **Oral Law**. The rabbi summarizes the history of the oral tradition during the Second Temple period, after the cessation of prophecy. He demonstrates how it is impossible to observe the Torah's laws without having recourse to an oral tradition. That such tradition has always existed is indicated by the very text of the Torah, whose reading requires an oral tradition, since there were no vowels and accents in the original text.

The essay concludes with a discussion of **Aggadah** – the Scriptural exegesis and non-legal passages found in the Talmud. The Sages' interpretation of verses is often distant from the verses' literal meaning, as the Sages used methods of Scriptural interpretation that have been lost to us. In addition, many of those interpretations are in fact a type of mnemonic device (*asmakhta*), meant to preserve oral traditions (and not to explain the Biblical text).

Regarding the stories and homilies found in the Talmud, many of which strike us as peculiar, the author categorizes them into several groups. Some are meant to reinforce beliefs that the Sages sought to confirm. Others describe spiritual visions and near-prophetic experiences of the Sages. Some are esoteric or mystical parables which were meant for the select few – "perhaps one in a generation." And some have no logical explanation; they were quoted by students who failed to understand the intent of their teachers, but who wished to diligently transmit everything they heard.

## ESSAY FOUR

The discussion returns to the various **names for God** found in Scripture. The most precise name, used exclusively by the Jewish people, is the Tetragrammaton. Even its letters are special – vowel-letters that are like souls, giving life to the "physical" consonants. The Tetragrammaton corresponds to God's close connection to Israel, particularly through prophecy, whereas the word *Elohim* is a universal name, corresponding to the intellectual concept of God as Creator and Prime Mover. As the king notes, in these two names we hear the difference between "the God of Abraham" and "the God of Aristotle."

All other names for God are either generic (e.g., *Elohim* and *El*) or descriptive (*Kadosh*). The name *Adonai* is used when speaking of some Divine entity which is identified with God, such as the Ark of the Covenant.

The rabbi notes the power and immediacy of a prophetic vision, which carries far greater emotional and psychological impact than intellectual proof. In a sudden flash, the prophet is exposed to “a grand and majestic image.” As a result, “awe and love are lodged in his heart for his entire life” (IV,5).

The rabbi then offers his theory as to the purpose of **Israel’s exile**. When a seed is buried in the earth, it appears to disintegrate into earth. In fact, the seed transforms the earth and water into its own nature, creating a tree and fruit. So, too, the Jewish people in exile introduced the fundamentals of Judaism and monotheism to the nations of the world. Even though they appear to reject it, “they will all be transformed into ‘fruit,’ and the ‘tree’ will become one” (IV,24).

As an example of the wisdom that the Jewish people once possessed, the rabbi provides an overview of *Sefer Yetzirah*, an ancient mystical text attributed to Abraham. *Sefer Yetzirah* calls our attention to the universe’s underlying unity, despite its multiplicity. We find parallel aspects of inner design in the dimensions of time, space, and the human soul.

The philosophers provided a different explanation for the world’s multiplicity despite a single Prime Mover, based on emanations of angels and spheres. After presenting arguments against this theory, the rabbi concludes that it is best to believe in the literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis, that God created a vast variety of creations, which He constantly sustains. The rabbi suggests that perhaps *Sefer Yetzirah* is a collection of Abraham’s speculations before God revealed Himself to him. After that revelation, Abraham abandoned these theories and only sought to fulfill God’s will.

The essay concludes with a lecture on the **scientific knowledge** of the Sages of the Talmud. This includes examples of their knowledge in the fields of astronomy, botany, biology, anatomy, and medicine.

We now possess small remnants of this scientific knowledge, isolated bits of knowledge that were tangentially preserved due to their legal (Halakhic) ramifications. The principal texts, however, were lost, together

with Israel's intellectual elite – the first components to be lost when a nation is exiled and dispersed.

## ESSAY FIVE

The king accepts the rabbi's primary argument: the highest level is pure faith, without inquiry and speculation. However, he notes, in an age when we are exposed to the foreign ideas of thinkers and scientists, we are forced to confront these intellectual challenges to our beliefs. The rabbi agrees to prove that the soul can exist outside the body and existence of the afterlife. He also agrees to reconcile human free will in a universe controlled by God.

The rabbi begins by summarizing the scientific theory of the four basic elements. Every physical object comes from a mixture of four elements: earth, water, air, fire. Objects are distinguished by the forms (*ṭẓurah*) they accept, forms which also the philosophers concede originate in the Divine order.

As a digression, the rabbi offers a commentary to Psalm 104. This psalm narrates the process of creation; it describes the design and order manifest in the universe. The psalmist's intent was to refute the views of Epicurus that the universe came into existence by chance.

After a description of the five internal faculties of the mind (based on the psychology of Ibn Sina), the author quotes the philosophers' proofs to the existence of the soul as a non-physical entity that is independent of the body. The king is impressed with the rigor and precision of this analysis.

"This is what I feared," responds the rabbi, "that you would be deceived by their views and acquiesce to them. Because they provide proofs in mathematics and logic, people rely on everything they say in physics and metaphysics, accepting every word as proven." Their skill in mathematics does not mean that their views in philosophy and metaphysics should be accepted uncritically.

The author raises numerous objections to the philosophers' theories. He questions their theory of the four elements, their explanation of creation via emanations of spheres, their proofs of the soul, and their view that the soul becomes eternal at some level of wisdom (what exactly is this level?). The philosophers excelled in mathematics and logic, about which there are no disagreements. But in their theories of metaphysics, no philosophical school agrees with another.

The king presses the rabbi to summarize the principles set out by the “Masters of Kalam,” the medieval theologians who attempted to integrate religious belief with Aristotelian philosophy. The rabbi is highly critical of their arguments. While these logical arguments are meant to help a person attain true belief, they can unintentionally generate doubt and confusion. These theologians are like an academic who specializes in poetry. He may be precise in his meter, but his poetry is a “babble of words.” The naturally gifted poet, on the other hand, may have difficulty explaining his art to others, but he “innately senses the meter and produces flawless poetry” (V,16).

Nonetheless, the rabbi presents an abstract of ten principles of Kalam. These principles attempt to prove that the world was created, and that God is eternal, not physical, omniscient, and has will.

The rabbi dislikes philosophical speculations, but even he cannot avoid it when faced with the philosophical problem of human initiative and free will in a universe controlled by God’s providence and predetermined by God’s omniscience. After noting that no one truly acts as a fatalist – everyone gathers food and makes preparations for defense – the author divides all phenomena into four categories: (1) those directly from God, (2) natural causes, (3) random events, and (4) those due to human choice. Everything, however, traces back to God in a chain of cause-and-effect.

The rabbi then offers his own set of fundamental principles of Judaism and free will:

- 1) A wise Creator created everything with a purpose and function.
- 2) The existence of intermediary causes employed by God in the world.
- 3) God provides the best possible form to every substance.
- 4) There exists a hierarchy in the world: mineral, plant, animal, human. And within humanity, followers of Torah occupy a higher level than pagans.
- 5) Rebuke, when performed properly, is always beneficial.
- 6) We have free choice to do evil or to stop doing evil.

The book’s final discussion examines the numerous factors involved in God’s judgements in this world.

The book closes with the rabbi’s announcement that he is leaving for Jerusalem. The king is saddened to see his teacher go. He raises various

objections to this decision: the Shekhinah is no longer in the Land of Israel (so there is no advantage to live there); it is dangerous to travel there; why should a person accept upon himself additional Torah obligations; and finally, since God knows your intentions, there is no need to actually move to the Land.<sup>18</sup>

The rabbi easily refutes these objections. The king, with a heavy heart, blesses the rabbi that God should watch over him and protect him in his undertaking.

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<sup>18</sup> It is not improbable that the king's objections mirror arguments raised by HaLevi's friends after the author announced his plan to set sail for the Land of Israel.



## PART TWO

- ❖ The king converts
- ❖ Attributes of God
- ❖ The Land of Israel
- ❖ The International Dateline
- ❖ The Temple Service
- ❖ Israel – the “heart” of the nations
- ❖ Asceticism
- ❖ Israel sanctifies God’s name
- ❖ Ritual purity
- ❖ Scientific wisdom in the Torah
- ❖ The superiority of the Hebrew language



1. AS IS RELATED in the history of the Khazars, the king of the Khazars then confided the secret of his recurring dream – which urged him to seek those actions that are pleasing to God – to his chief minister, in the mountains of Warsan. The king and his chief minister traveled to the desolate mountains near the sea. One night, they came across a cave where some Jews would observe the Sabbath each week. They disclosed their identity to them, accepted their religion, and were circumcised in that cave.

Then they returned to their city, observing the Jewish religion. They kept their faith a secret, however, until they discreetly disclosed the fact, little by little, to a few of their closest friends. When their numbers grew, they made the affair public and induced the rest of the Khazars to convert to the religion of the Jews. They brought scholars and books from other countries, and they studied the Torah.

Their chronicles tell of their success: how they overcame their enemies, conquering their lands and discovering great treasures; how their army expanded to hundreds of thousands; how they loved their faith and yearned so greatly for the Holy Temple that they erected a tabernacle like the one that Moses built. They also honored the born Jews [who lived among them] and were blessed through them.

The king studied the Torah and the books of the Prophets, and he took the rabbi as his teacher. He started by asking him questions on Hebrew matters. The first of these questions referred to the names and attributes [that the Torah] ascribes to God. Some of these appear to be anthropomorphic, which is unmistakably objectionable, both to reason and to the Torah.<sup>49</sup>

**2. The Rabbi:** All names of God, except the Tetragrammaton,<sup>50</sup> are attributes and descriptive qualities. They express how His creatures are affected by His decrees and measures. God is called “merciful” when He rectifies the situation of a person whom people pity due to his difficult

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<sup>49</sup> As the Torah warns, “Be very careful, since you did not see any image on the day that God spoke to you out of the fire at Horeb” (Deut. 4:15).

<sup>50</sup> The Tetragrammaton is the special name for God written with the four Hebrew letters *Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh* (abbreviated here as *Y-H-V-H*). The rabbi discusses the significance of this name at length in the beginning of the fourth essay.

plight. They attribute to God the traits of mercy and compassion, even though these qualities, to our minds, indicate an irresolute spirit and weakness of character. Such a trait is not fitting to be applied to God. Rather, He is a just Judge, decreeing the poverty of one individual and the wealth of another without any change in His nature. He is not sympathetic with one, nor angry with the other. The same is true for human judges to whom legal cases are addressed. They decide according to the law, acquitting some and convicting others.

It is only from our standpoint, as we look at God's actions, that He appears in some instances as a "merciful and compassionate God" (Exod. 34:6), and in others as "a jealous and vengeful God" (Nahum 1:2). God Himself, however, never changes from one trait to the other.

In general, we may classify all Divine attributes (except the Tetragrammaton) into three categories: *actional*, *relative*, and *negative*.

*Actional* attributes refer to actions that emanate from God by way of natural means, such as: "making poor and rich," "casting down and raising up," "merciful and compassionate," "jealous and revengeful," "strong," "almighty," and the like.

*Relative* attributes – such as "blessed," "praised," "glorified," "holy," "lofty," and "exalted" – describe how people exalt and venerate God. Although these attributes may be numerous, they do not imply any multiplicity in God and do not contradict His unity.

The *negative* attributes – such as "living," "one," "first," and "last" – are ascribed to God only to negate their opposite qualities; they are not meant in the way that we ordinarily use them. We cannot perceive something as alive unless it exhibits sensory perception and movement. God, however, is beyond this. We describe Him as "living" in order to negate the attributes of inanimate and dead, since one would think that something that does not live is dead. That conclusion, however, is not logically sound. For example, one cannot speak of time as being alive, yet it does not follow that it is dead, since its basic nature has nothing to do with either life or death. In the same way, one cannot conclude from the statement that a stone is not wise that it is foolish. A stone is too lowly to be described as wise or foolish. So, too, God's essence transcends the qualities of life and death.

Similarly, the terms "light" or "darkness" cannot be applied to God. If we were asked whether this Essence gives light or darkness, we should say "light" by way of metaphor, lest one conclude that something that does not

give light must be dark. But in fact we should acknowledge that only physical bodies are subject to light and darkness. The Divine essence is not a material body and can only correspond to the attributes of light or darkness by way of metaphor, or in order to negate an attribute indicating some deficiency.

Life and death are similarly only applicable to material bodies, and the Divine essence transcends them. However, if we were to say about God that “He is alive, but not like our state of living” – that is our true intent, since we have never comprehended any kind of life other than our own. It is as if we said, “We do not know what God is.”

The phrase “living God” (Deut. 5:22, Joshua 3:10) found in Scripture is only meant to negate any comparison to the idols of the nations, which are “dead gods,” incapable of doing anything.

In the same way, Scripture says that “[God] is one” (Deut. 6:4). This is meant to negate plurality, but not to imply any aspect of oneness as we understand it. We say something is “one” when its component parts are attached and composed of the same material, such as one bone, one sinew, one body of water, one gust of wind. We describe time in the same way, like a combined object, speaking of “one day” and “one year.” The Divine essence, however, transcends the physical qualities of combining and dividing. Thus we use the term “one” for God only to exclude plurality.

Similarly, we say that God is “first” in order to reject the idea of God coming after anything, but not to assert that He has a beginning. And “last” is meant to repudiate the idea that His existence has an end, but not to set a time limit for His existence. All these attributes do not touch on God’s essence, nor do they indicate a multiplicity.

On the other hand, those attributes that are connected with the Tetragrammaton describe His ability to create without using any natural intermediaries. For example: “Creator,” “Maker,” and “Who alone does great wonders” (Psalms 136:4), meaning that God creates by means of His intention and will alone, without any intermediary cause.

Perhaps this was God’s intention when He said, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *El Shaddai*” (Exod. 6:3). This means that God appeared to them in the form of protective power and triumph [over their enemies], as it says, “[God] allowed no one to oppress them; He reproved

kings for their sake” (Psalms 105:14).<sup>51</sup> But God did not create miracles for the Patriarchs as He did for Moses. Therefore, God said, “but My name *Y-H-V-H*, I was not known to them” (Exod. 6:3). (Read this as “*by* My name *Y-H-V-H*,” since the letter כ (the preposition “by”) in the preceding phrase “*be-El Shaddai*” also refers to this.) The wonders that God performed for Moses and the Israelites left no doubt that it was the Creator of the world Who intentionally created these things – new creations, such as the plagues of Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, the manna, and the pillar of a cloud.

God did this not because the Israelites were greater than the Patriarchs, but because they were a multitude and they entertained doubts. The Patriarchs, on the other hand, had absolute faith and purity of heart. Even if the Patriarchs had been dogged by misfortune their entire lives, their faith in God would not have weakened. Therefore, they did not require such miracles.

We also call God “wise of heart” (Job 9:4), because He is the essence of intellect. He is intellect itself; intellect is not an attribute of God.<sup>52</sup> “Mighty in strength” (ibid.), on the other hand, is one of the actional attributes.

**3. The Kuzari:** How do you explain those descriptions in the Bible that are of a more corporeal nature, describing God as seeing, hearing, speaking, writing on tablets, “descending on Mount Sinai” (Exod. 31:18), “rejoicing in His works” (Psalms 104:31), and “grieving in His heart” (Gen. 6:6)?

**4. The Rabbi:** Did I not compare God to a just judge whose character traits do not change? When a judge’s decisions lead to peoples’ triumph and

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<sup>51</sup> God protected Abraham and Sarah from Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20) and the king of Gerar (Gen. 20); and God granted Abraham victory over the four kings (Gen. 14:14-15). God protected Jacob from Laban (Gen. 31:24), and from the cities in the area of Shechem (Gen. 35:5).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Maimonides: “Regarding the Creator, may He be blessed – He, His knowledge, and His life are one from all sides and corners, in all manners of unity. ... Thus, you could say that He is the Knower, He is the Subject of knowledge, and He is the Knowledge itself. All is one” (*Mishneh Torah, Foundations of Torah* 2:13-14). See also *Guide for the Perplexed*, I,68.

success, they say that he loves them and rejoices in them. And when a judge rules that peoples' houses be demolished and their every trace be destroyed, they will describe the judge with the opposite traits, saying that he hates them and is angry with them.

Since nothing that is done or spoken escapes God's notice, we may figuratively say that God "sees" and "hears." And since the air and other elements act in accordance with His will and assume shape by His command, as did heaven and earth, we may describe God as "speaking" and "writing."

In a similar fashion, the spiritual images called "God's glory" (Exod. 16:10) were formed from the fine, spiritual material called *ruah ha-kodesh* (prophetic spirit). Metaphorically, this phenomenon was referred to as "God" in the verse, "God descended on Mount Sinai" (Exod. 19:20). We will explain this in greater detail when discussing metaphysics (IV,3).

**5. The Kuzari:** Perhaps you have justified use of these descriptions so that they do not imply any aspect of plurality [or anthropomorphism]. But how will you defend attributing will and desire to God, which the philosophers reject?<sup>53</sup>

**6. The Rabbi:** If no other objection is raised besides the concept of God's will, we will soon vindicate ourselves. We would say to the philosopher: What in your opinion causes the heavens to rotate continuously? What causes the outermost sphere to support everything, without anything holding it in place, and never deviating in its movement? What causes the Earth to be firmly suspended in the center [of the spheres] without support or mainstay? What established the order in the universe, with its quantities, qualities, and forms? You cannot avoid conceding this [underlying order and intent], and things did not create themselves or each other.

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<sup>53</sup> As the philosopher noted in his opening statement, "In the nature of God, there is neither favor nor dislike, because He transcends all desires and intentions. A desire indicates that there is something lacking in the one intending [to take some action], and that he is not complete until it is satisfied" (I,1).

This same Entity also caused the air to produce the sound of the Ten Commandments and caused the writing to be engraved on the Tablets. Call it “Will,” or “Entity,” or whatever you want.

**7. The Kuzari:** The inner meaning of God’s attributes is now clear. And I now understand the terms, “God’s glory,” “God’s angels,” and “Shekhinah.” These are names for images seen by the prophets, as are the Biblical terms, “pillar of cloud,” “consuming fire,” “cloud,” “mist,” “fire,” and “brightness.” It is comparable to what is said about sunlight in the early morning [before sunrise], in the evening, or on cloudy days: that rays of light emanate from the sun even though the sun is hidden. We say that light and rays of light come directly from the sun, but this is not accurate. Physical bodies [e.g., air particles] facing the sun are affected by the sun and reflect its light.

**8. The Rabbi:** In this way, God’s Glory may be thought of as rays of Divine light, benefiting His people in His land.

**9. The Kuzari:** You have already explained the concept of “His people,” but your reference to “His land” – a land special to God – is difficult for me to accept.

**10. The Rabbi:** It is not difficult for you to accept that a particular land may possess special qualities. You know that there are some places where special plants, minerals, and animals may be found. And there are some locations where the inhabitants are distinctive in their appearance and traits, since the soul’s perfection or deficiency is influenced by the particular mixture of the elements.

**11. The Kuzari:** And yet I never heard that the inhabitants of the Land of Israel are superior to other peoples.

**12. The Rabbi:** What about your mountain where you say that vineyards thrive? If it had not been planted with grapevines and properly cultivated, it would never have produced grapes.

The special quality belongs, first of all, to the people who are the heart and the elite of the nations, as I mentioned before. Secondly, the Land, with



its special deeds and laws,<sup>54</sup> exercises an influence. This is like the cultivation of a vineyard. In no other place will this essence succeed in cleaving to the Divine Order [and attain prophecy], just as these grapevines will only produce such excellent wine in this mountain.

**13. The Kuzari:** How could that be? From the time of Adam to Moses, were not prophetic visions granted in other places? Abraham prophesied in Ur of the Chaldeans, Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied in Babylon, and Jeremiah in Egypt.

**14. The Rabbi:** Whoever prophesied did so either in the Holy Land or concerning it. Abraham received prophecy in order to reach the Land; Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied for its sake. Ezekiel and Daniel lived during the time of the first Temple and the Shekhinah. The presence of the Shekhinah facilitates all members of the special nation who properly ready themselves to attain a prophetic state.

With regard to Adam – this was his land, and he died there. This is according to our tradition that four couples were buried in the Machpelah cave in Hebron: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

This land is described as being “in the presence of God” (Gen. 4:16), as it says, “The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it” (Deut. 11: 12). It was the first object of jealousy in history, in the rivalry between Cain and Abel. They wanted to know who would be Adam’s successor, his essence and heart, and thus inherit the Land and be attached to the Divine Order, while the other brother would be like the peel of a fruit. But Abel was killed [by Cain], and the inheritance was left abandoned without an heir. The statement that “Cain left God’s presence” (Gen. 4:16) means that Cain left the Land where they lived and became a restless wanderer. As Cain said, “Behold, You have banished me this day from the face of the earth and I will be hidden from Your face” (Gen. 5:14).

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<sup>54</sup> The Torah’s commandments include many agricultural laws that are only applicable in the Land of Israel, such as tithes, first fruits, gleanings for the poor, and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. In addition, all of the commands dealing with the Temple and its service only apply in the Land.

This is similar to what it says about Jonah: “Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from before God’s presence” (Jonah 1:3). In fact, Jonah fled from the place of prophecy. God, however, returned him to the Land of Israel from the belly of the fish and made him receive prophecy there.

When Seth was born, he was like Adam. As the verse states, “[Adam] had a son in his own likeness and form” (Gen. 5:3). Seth took Abel’s place. Thus, Adam announced, “For God has granted me another offspring, in place of Abel, whom Cain has killed” (Gen. 4:25). Seth merited the title “son of God” like Adam, and he deserved to inherit the Land, which is but one level below the Garden of Eden.

Subsequently, the Land was the object of jealousy between Isaac and Ishmael, until Ishmael was rejected as the peel. Even though God said about Ishmael, “I have blessed him; I will make him fruitful and very numerous” (Gen. 17:20), this blessing refers only to worldly success. Immediately afterward, the verse continues: “But I will establish My covenant with Isaac” (v. 21). This refers to Isaac’s connection with the Divine Order and the reward of the World to Come. Neither Ishmael nor Esau had a covenant with God, although they were otherwise prosperous.

And it was over this Land that rivalry arose between Jacob and Esau, in regard to the birthright and their father’s blessing. Esau was rejected in favor of Jacob, despite his strength and Jacob’s weakness.

As to Jeremiah’s prophecy in Egypt, he received it in the Land and for the Land’s sake.<sup>55</sup> This was also the case with the prophecies of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The Sinai and Paran Deserts are within the boundaries of the Land of Israel, since they are on this side of the Red Sea. As the verse states, “I will set your boundaries from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the desert until the river” (Exod. 23:31). “The desert” refers to the Paran Desert, “that great and fearsome wilderness” (Deut. 1:19) which forms the southern border of the Land. (And “the river” refers to the Euphrates, as it says, “The fourth river is Euphrates” (Gen. 2:14), thus designating the northern border.)

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<sup>55</sup> See also IV,3. The Sinai Desert and even parts of Egypt belong to the widest definition of the Land of Israel (as described in Exod. 23:31) and thus share the Land’s receptivity to prophecy.

The altars erected by the Patriarchs, who were answered by fire from heaven and the Divine light,<sup>56</sup> were in the Land of Israel. The Binding of Isaac took place on a desolate mountain, Mount Moriah. Not until the days of David, when Mount Moriah was inhabited – Araunah the Jebusite tilled his land there – was the secret revealed that this was the special location receptive to the Shekhinah. This [future revelation of Mount Moriah as the location of God’s Presence] is indicated by the verse, “Abraham called that place, ‘God *will* see’; as it is said to this day, ‘In God’s mountain, He will be seen’” (Gen. 22:14). In Chronicles (II 3:1) Scripture states explicitly that the Temple was built on Mount Moriah.

Undoubtedly, the places worthy of being called “the gates of heaven” are located in the Land of Israel. Do you not see that Jacob ascribed the [prophetic] vision that he saw – not to the purity of his soul, his piety, or the strength of his faith – but to the location where he experienced it. Jacob remarked in wonder, “How awe-inspiring is this place!” (Gen. 28:17). And a previous verse states that Jacob “came upon *the* place” (v. 11), i.e., the special place.

Note how Abraham was uprooted from his native land after he became suitable to cleave with the Divine Order – he was the heart of this essence. Abraham was then brought to the place where his potential could be realized. This may be compared to a farmer who comes across the trunk of a good fruit tree in a barren region. He relocates the tree to properly-tilled ground, where this species of tree grows naturally. There he nurtures the tree, transforming it from a wild root to a cultivated one, from one that bears fruit by chance to one that produces a plentiful yield.

In this way, the gift of prophecy became widespread among Abraham’s descendants in the Land of Israel. Many possessed this gift, as long as they lived in the Land and observed the instrumental prerequisites – purity, service, and offerings – especially when the Shekhinah dwelled there.

It is as if the Divine element seeks out those who are worthy of being connected with it, such as prophets and pious people, in order to be their God. This is similar to the way that powers of intellect seek out those whose nature is perfected, with a harmonious soul and character, such as the philosophers, so that its wisdom may be fully received. And like the way

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<sup>56</sup> I.e., prophecy.

that the spirit of life seeks out those beings whose natural forces are ready to receive a higher vitality, such as animals. And like the way that organic life seeks out its habitat in a properly balanced mix of elements, producing a living plant.

**15. The Kuzari:** These are general concepts of metaphysics that must be discussed in detail. But this does not concern us now. I will ask you about it later when we speak on this subject (Part Five). For now, continue your discussion on the special qualities of the Land of Israel.

**16. The Rabbi:** The Land of Israel was selected to guide the world. It was designated for the tribes of Israel from the time of the separation of languages.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the verse says, “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance [and divided all of humanity]” (Deut. 32:8). Abraham merited to cleave with the Divine Order and enter into a covenant with God only *after* he had arrived in the Land of Israel, at the time of the “Covenant of the Pieces” (Gen. 15:17).

What do you think about the confluence of the select community that deserves the title “God’s people” (Num. 11:29), dwelling in the special land called “God’s inheritance” (II Samuel 20:19), at the special times fixed by God, not merely agreed upon or based on astronomy, and therefore called “God’s holidays” (Lev. 23:2), when they observed the rules of purification and devotion, matters and acts designated by God and therefore called “God’s work” (Jer. 48:10) and “God’s service” (Num. 8:11)?

**17. The Kuzari:** At such a convergence,<sup>58</sup> God’s glory was bound to be revealed.

**18. The Rabbi:** You can see how the Land of Israel was given its own sabbaths [i.e., the Sabbatical year], as it says, “sabbath of the Land” (Lev.

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<sup>57</sup> After construction of the Tower of Babel, humanity was divided into different languages and nations (Gen. 11:1-9).

<sup>58</sup> Convergence of holiness in human soul, location, and time. The author will later discuss the three aspects of *Universe*, *Soul*, and *Year* in his explanation of *Sefer Yetzirah* (4,25).

25:6), and “The Land will observe a sabbath to God” (Lev. 25:2). It is forbidden to execute a permanent sale of the Land, as it says, “For the Land is Mine” (Lev. 25:23).

And note that God’s Sabbaths and holidays are set according to [the time in] the Land that is God’s inheritance.<sup>59</sup>

19. **The Kuzari:** Is not the day calculated as starting in China, since that country is at the eastern point of the inhabited world?



20. **The Rabbi:** Actually, the start of the Sabbath day is fixed according to Sinai [where the Israelites first observed the Sabbath], or rather Alush, where the manna first descended. Consequently, the Sabbath only begins when the sun sets in Sinai. Subsequently, the Sabbath starts by degrees westward, until [the sun sets in] the remote west, and then under the globe, and lastly in China, the eastern edge of the inhabited world. Thus the Sabbath starts in [the eastern border of] China eighteen hours after it starts in the Land of Israel.<sup>60</sup> This is because the Land of Israel is situated in the

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<sup>59</sup> I.e., the dates of the Jewish calendar depend upon the time in the Land of Israel, as the rabbi will presently explain.

<sup>60</sup> This places the International Date Line six time zones (90 degrees) east of the Land of Israel, inside China. The Chazon Ish (Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, 1878-1953) explained that the rabbi is referring to the outer eastern edge of the Asian continent. Thus all of China shares the same day as the Land of Israel, since most of the Asian continent is within six time zones east of Israel. The same is true

center of the inhabited world. Sunset in the Land of Israel concurs with midnight in China, and midday in the Land of Israel concurs with sunset in China.

This is the explanation of the system of “eighteen hours” [time zones], according to the Talmudical rule: “If the conjunction of the moon (the *molad*) takes place before midday, it is known that the new moon is visible near sunset” (*Rosh Hashanah* 20a). This rule refers to the new moon’s appearance in the Land of Israel, the place of the Torah, to which Adam was moved from the Garden of Eden at the start of the Sabbath eve. It was at that point that the calendar began, after the six days of creation, when Adam began to name the days of the week. As the world became inhabited and people joined together, they continued counting in the same way that Adam had established. This is why there is no difference among nations regarding the seven days of the week.

The week begins when it is noon for the inhabitants of the extreme west,<sup>61</sup> which is the time of sunset in the Land of Israel. It was at that hour that the first light of creation was created, and then the sun. That first light was only for a short time, and soon set, leaving the world in darkness. This established the order that night precedes day, as it says, “It was evening and it was morning” (Gen. 1:5). The Torah records the same order [with regard to Yom Kippur], “From evening to evening” (Lev. 23:32).

Do not bring arguments against me from contemporary astronomers, those thieves of knowledge – although their theft was unintentional. After the light of prophecy dimmed, they found uncertainties in their science, so they resorted to speculation and established rules based on their logic. This includes designating China as the start of the day, unlike the Torah’s view. But this disagreement is only partial, since they agree with the Torah sages

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of Australia. Japan and New Zealand, on the other hand, belong to the previous day. (Other authorities place the date line further eastward – twelve hours (180 degrees) east of Jerusalem, through the Pacific Ocean.)

<sup>61</sup> The extreme west of the known inhabited world (in the time of the author) was the western edge of Europe and Africa, nearly six hours to the west of the Land of Israel.

that the day begins in China. The only difference between us is that we put the night before the day.<sup>62</sup>

A difference of “eighteen hours” is needed as the basis for naming the days of the week. There is a separation of six hours [90 degrees] between the Land of Israel, where the days of the week were first named [at sundown], and the sun’s location [to the west] at the time when this naming began. For example, the name “Sabbath” was employed [in the Land of Israel] from the beginning of the day on which the sun began to set [below the horizon] in the extreme west. When Adam, located in the Land of Israel, saw the sun setting, he called this point in time the beginning of Sabbath. The Sabbath day continued until the sun circled back, eighteen hours later, when it was evening in the [eastern] border of China – the beginning of the Sabbath there. This point on the globe, [the eastern border of China,] was the last place for the day to be called “Sabbath.” The region after it [to its west] is only called east of the place where the days begin.<sup>63</sup>

There must be some point on the globe that is both the end of the west and the beginning of the east. This point, in relation to the Land of Israel, is the beginning of the inhabited world. This is not just the Torah’s point of view but also that of science. It would be impossible for the days of the week to be the same all over the inhabited world unless we fix some point in the world to mark the beginning of the day, and a second point next to it that will *not* be considered to its east. Then the first point will mark absolute east, and the second point will mark absolute west. Without designating this [International Date Line], the days could not have definite names, since every point on the equator can be both east and west at the same time. China would be “east” in relation to the Land of Israel, but “west” in relation to the antipodal side. The antipodal side would be “east” in relation to China but “west” in relation to [what we call] west; and the

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<sup>62</sup> All agree that the start of the day (the International Date Line) is the eastern border of China. The difference between the astronomers and the Torah is whether the day begins at sunrise or sunset.

<sup>63</sup> The eastern border of China is the last place on the globe for the day to begin. Thus it is the location of the International Date Line. The region between China and the Land of Israel is considered east of the place where the day begins – the Land of Israel.

west would be “east” in relation to the antipodal side but “west” in relation to the Land of Israel. We would then have no true east or west, no beginning or end. And we could not have universal names for the days of the week.

This system [of an International Date Line] enables us to assign universal names for the days, starting from the Land of Israel. Each naming convention, however, spreads over a certain geographical latitude [i.e., a time zone], since it is impossible to fix the horizon for every single point on Earth. Just in Jerusalem alone there are many east and west points. The east of Mount Zion, for example, is not identical to the east of the Temple; their horizons are different, even though the difference is not perceptible to the eye. And certainly there is a difference between Damascus and Jerusalem. We cannot deny that the Sabbath commences earlier in Damascus than it does in Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem it starts earlier than it does in Egypt. A certain geographical latitude must therefore be allowed.

The time zones that divide regions of the Earth in assigning the day are eighteen hours, no more and no less. The inhabitants of one longitudinal region will still call the day “Sabbath” while those of the previous region are already past it. This continues, one region after another, until eighteen hours have passed from the time when the designation of the Sabbath day began, until the sun will be in the middle of the sky in the Land of Israel.<sup>64</sup> Then that day will no longer be called “Sabbath.” No one will be left to call this day the Sabbath, and they will start using the name of the following day.

This is what is meant by the Talmudic statement, “If the lunar conjunction (the *molad*) takes place before noon, it is known that [the new moon] will be visible at sunset.” In other words: if the *molad* [the “birth” of the new moon] takes place before noon on the Sabbath in Jerusalem, it is clear that the new moon will be visible [in the eastern border of China, eighteen hours later] on the Sabbath near sunset. This is because the designation of the day as “Sabbath” is retained for eighteen hours after it is no longer called so in the place where it began, until the sun returns to the

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<sup>64</sup> When it is midday on Sunday in the Land of Israel, it will be sunset six time zones earlier in the eastern border of China – the end of the Sabbath in the last region in the world to experience the Sabbath.



middle of the sky in the Land of Israel, [half] a day and a night later. Therefore, the new moon will be visible to a person in the eastern border of China at twilight at the end of Sabbath.

This concurs with the rule of the Sages, “A night and a day [after the *molad*] are needed to establish the new month” (*Rosh Hashanah* 20b).<sup>65</sup> The name “Sabbath” has already finished all over the world and the name “Sunday” has started, even though the Land of Israel had already left the Sabbath and was in the middle of Sunday [when the Sabbath finished for every place in the world].

The intent of this rule is that the name of the day of the week should be uniform all over the world. Then the question could be put both to the inhabitants of China and the West: “On which day of the week did you celebrate the New Year?” And all would answer, for example, “On the Sabbath.” This is true even though one group had finished the holiday, while the other, according to the geographical proximity of their country to the Land of Israel, was still celebrating it. But with regard to the day of the week, both groups celebrated the holiday on the same day.

Thus, we see that determining the times of God’s Sabbaths and festivals depends on the Land that is “God’s inheritance.”

And you have already learned that the Land of Israel is called “His holy mountain” (Psalms 48:2), “His footstool” (Psalms 99:5), “the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:7), and that “The Torah shall go forth from Zion” (Isaiah 2:3). Our forefathers sought to live in the Land, even though it was in the hands of pagans. They yearned for it and some – such as Jacob and Joseph – had their bones carried to it. Moses prayed to see it, and he grieved when this was denied to him. However, in an act of kindness, God showed Moses the Land from the summit of Pisgah (Deut. 3:23-27).

The nations of the world – Persia, India, Greece, and others – asked that offerings be brought and prayers recited on their behalf in the exalted Temple. They spent their wealth at that place, even though they believed in other religions, since the true Law did not accept them. To this day, they

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<sup>65</sup> In order to establish the new month, there must be some place in the world where the entire night and day of *Rosh Hodesh* (the first of the month) will have passed after the *molad*.

honor it, even though the revealed Shekhinah no longer appears there. All nations make pilgrimages to it and desire it – except for us, due to our forced state [of exile] and punishment.

To relate everything that the Sages tell of its greatness would take a long time.

**21. The Kuzari:** Nonetheless, let me hear what you recall of [their observations of] its special qualities.

**22. The Rabbi:** One statement is: “One may force one’s entire household to ascend to the Land of Israel, but none may be forced to leave it” (*Kethuboth* 110b). If a woman refuses to ascend to the Land of Israel with her husband, they ruled that he may divorce her and she forfeits her marriage settlement (*kethubah*). On the other hand, if the husband refuses to ascend to the Land of Israel with his wife, he must divorce her and pay her marriage settlement.

They further taught:

It is preferable to dwell in the Land of Israel, even in a town inhabited mostly by non-Jews, than outside the Land, even in a town inhabited mostly by Jews. That is because a person who dwells in the Land of Israel is as though he has a God, while one who dwells outside the Land is as though he has no God. So the verse says regarding David, ‘For they have driven me out this day from abiding in God’s inheritance, saying: Go, serve other gods’ (I Samuel 26:19). This teaches you that a person who dwells outside the Land is considered as if he serves foreign gods. (*Kethuboth* 110b)<sup>66</sup>

The Sages ascribed a certain superiority to Egypt over other countries on the basis of the following *a fortiori* argument: “If it is forbidden [to leave

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<sup>66</sup> Nachmanides (1194-1270) explained that Divine providence is on a diminished level outside the Land of Israel, so that a person living outside the Land is more subject to natural forces (Lev. 18:25). The Land of Israel, on the other hand, is a land that “the eyes of God your Lord are always upon” (Deut. 11:12).

the Land of Israel] to go to Egypt, for which a covenant was made,<sup>67</sup> then it is certainly forbidden to leave to go to other countries” (*Sifrei* on Deut. 17:16).

They also taught: “To be buried in the Land of Israel is like being buried beneath the altar, [and provides a measure of atonement]” (*Kethuboth* 111a). And they praised one who lives in the Land more than one who is brought there after death: “A person who is absorbed in the Land when alive is not like one who is absorbed after death” (*ibid.*). Even more, they commented about those who could have lived in the Land but failed to do so, and instructed that their bodies be brought there after death: “While you lived, you made My inheritance an abomination; and in death, ‘you come and defile My land’ (Jer. 2:1)” (Jerusalem Talmud *Kethuboth* 12:3).

When Rabbi Hananiah was asked whether it was permitted for a certain man to go abroad to marry his brother’s widow [in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *yibbum*, levirate marriage], the rabbi objected, “His brother married a pagan woman – praised be God who caused him to die. Now this one wishes to follow him?!” (*Kethuboth* 111a)<sup>68</sup>

The Sages also prohibited selling land or the ruins of a house in the Land of Israel to a non-Jew (*Avodah Zarah* 1:8), and leaving a house in ruins in the Land. They also ruled: “Jewish courts may adjudicate civil cases involving fines only in the Land of Israel” (*Bava Kamma* 84b), “A slave may not be sold to a party outside the Land” (*Gittin* 4:6), and many similar rulings.

They noted that “The very air of the Land of Israel makes one wise” (*Bava Bathra* 158b). They expressed their love of the Land with the statement, “One who walks four cubits in the Land is assured of a place in

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<sup>67</sup> This apparently refers to the mitzvot of *brith milah* (the covenant of circumcision) and *korban pessah* (paschal lamb) which the Israelites were commanded to observe as they left Egypt. As the Midrash comments: “By the merit of the blood of circumcision and the blood of the paschal lamb you will be redeemed from Egypt” (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 28).

<sup>68</sup> The widow was in fact Jewish, otherwise there would be no question that her brother-in-law should not marry her. However, since she resided outside the Land, she was regarded like a person “who has no God.” While it is permitted to temporarily leave the Land of Israel to find a wife, Rabbi Hananiah did not approve of the brother-in-law emigrating permanently (see *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings* 5:9).

the World to Come” (*Kethuboth* 111a). And Rabbi Zeira replied to a heretic who criticized his imprudence in crossing the river without waiting for a ferry-boat, in his eagerness to enter the Land, “The place that Moses and Aaron did not merit entering – who is to say that I will merit?” (*Kethuboth* 112a)

**23. The Kuzari:** If this is true, then you are negligent in the duty set down in your Torah by not undertaking to reach that place and make it your home in life and death. You say in your prayers, “Have mercy on Zion, for it is the house of our life,” and you believe that the Shekhinah will return there. Had it no other advantage than the Shekhinah’s presence there for 900 years, that would be sufficient reason for the soul to find peace and purification there, in the same way we are purified in the places of the righteous and the prophets.<sup>69</sup> This is even more relevant in the Land of Israel, the gate of heaven.

All nations agree to this. The Christians say that the souls are gathered there, and from there are lifted up to heaven. The Muslims say that it is the place of [Mohammed’s] ascent, and from there the prophets were brought up to heaven. They say that it is the place of the resurrection of the dead.<sup>70</sup> All turn toward it in prayer and visit it in pilgrimage.

Your bowing and kneeling in its direction is either hypocritical or perfunctory. Your forefathers chose to live in the Land of Israel rather than in their own birthplaces. They preferred living there as strangers rather than as citizens in their own country. They did this even though the revealed Shekhinah did not dwell there and the country was filled with impurity and idolatry. Yet your forefathers had no other wish than to cleave to it. Even in

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<sup>69</sup> The author’s intent is not clear. Perhaps he is referring to the spiritual impact of associating with prophets and holy individuals. Or perhaps he is referring to the spiritual benefit of visiting the graves of the righteous. Thus, the Talmud notes that Caleb visited the graves of the Patriarchs in Hebron (*Sotah* 34b). (The second option more closely parallels the residual holiness left by the Shekhinah in Jerusalem.)

<sup>70</sup> The king is apparently referring to the beliefs of the Muslims; the Day of Resurrection is one of the six articles of Islamic faith. (The Jewish view that resurrection of the dead will only take place in the Land of Israel is propounded by Rabbi Elazar in *Kethuboth* 111a.)

times of scarcity and famine they would not leave, except by God's command (Gen. 46:3). And after leaving, they requested that their remains be brought back to the Land for burial.<sup>71</sup>

**24. The Rabbi:** You have rebuked me severely, king of the Khazars. This sin is what prevented the fulfillment of God's promise regarding the Second Temple, when He said, "Sing and rejoice, daughter of Zion, [for I am coming and I will dwell in your midst, says God]" (Zech. 2:14). The Divine Order would have returned to dwell in Zion as it had in the First Temple – if the Jewish people had all agreed to return to the Land. But only a minority answered the call. The majority, including the aristocracy, remained in Babylon. They accepted foreign subjection and enslavement, so long as they would not need to leave their homes and social standing.

Perhaps it is about this sin that Solomon enigmatically wrote, "I sleep, but my heart is awake" (Song of Songs 5:2-3). He referred to exile as sleep, and the continuation of prophecy among the Jewish people as wakefulness of the heart.<sup>72</sup> The verse continues, "The sound of my Beloved's knocking" – this was God's call to the Jews to return to the Land of Israel. "My head is filled with dew" alludes to the Shekhinah, emanating from the shadow of the Temple. The words, "I have already removed my robe, [how can I put it back on?]" refer to the people's lethargy in consenting to return. And the verse, "My Beloved sent His hand through the opening [of the door]," refers to Ezra, Nehemiah, and other prophets who urged the people to return to the Land – an invitation to which only some responded, an insufficient response.

In accordance with their meager response, they received an incomplete recompense. The Divine Order only provides as much as a person is prepared to receive. If it is little, then he obtains little; if it is much, he receives much. If we had been ready to meet the God of our forefathers

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<sup>71</sup> Both Jacob and Joseph requested that their remains be brought to the Land of Israel and buried there (Gen. 47:30, 50:25).

<sup>72</sup> Prophecy continued during the Babylonian exile and the first forty years of the Second Temple period (as the author will later note in III,65).

with a pure heart, we would have gained God's assistance [with great miracles] as did our forefathers in Egypt.<sup>73</sup>

When we say in our prayers, "worship at His holy mountain" (Psalms 99:9), "worship at His footstool" (Psalms 99:5), "the One Who restores His Shekhinah to Zion," and other such phrases – this is only the chattering of the starling and the parrot. We do not think what we mean by these phrases, as you correctly observe, Ruler of the Khazars.

**25. The Kuzari:** This is enough for me on this subject. Now I would like you to explain what I read about the sacrifices. It is difficult for the intellect to accept such expressions as "My offering, My bread, for My fires, My sweet fragrance" (Num. 28:2), employed in connection with the sacrifices, describing them as God's offering, His food and fragrance.

**26. The Rabbi:** Scripture's statement that the sacrifices are "for My fires" resolves all difficulty. This phrase explains that the offering, the "bread," and the "sweet fragrance" that are ascribed to God are really for His fires – i.e., for the fire that was kindled by God's command and that consumed the offerings. Afterward the *kohanim* ate the remaining portion. The purpose of this service was to create a well-ordered arrangement whereby the King should dwell [in the nation's midst], in an exalted – but not spatial – sense.

As an analogy for the Divine Order [dwelling within the nation], consider the human soul which dwells in a physical, animal-like body. If the body's natural faculties are stable, and its primary and secondary systems are functioning properly, preparing it for a level above that of the animals, then it is a fitting that the intellect should dwell in the body like a ruling monarch, guiding and instructing it. The intellect remains attached to the body as long as the body's physical order is intact. As soon as this order is lost, however, the intellect departs. A fool might imagine that the intellect requires food, drink, and fragrances, since he sees that the intellect remains

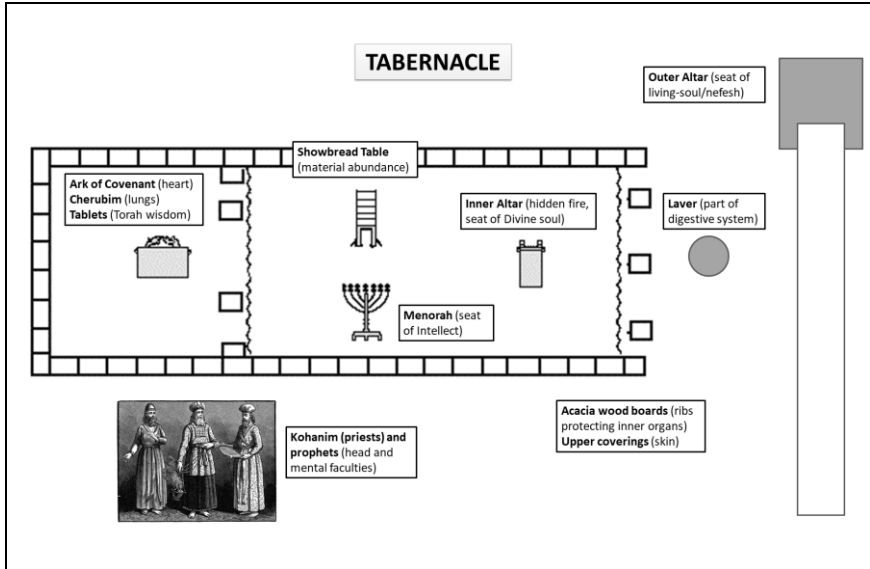
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<sup>73</sup> Had the majority of the Jewish people returned to the Land of Israel with Ezra and Nehemiah, they would have merited the restoration of prophecy and the return of the Shekhinah to the Temple. Instead, the Jews returning to Zion suffered from conflict with the Samaritans, economic difficulties, drought, and security problems.

## PART TWO

in the body only as long as these are present, and that it departs when they are lacking. This, of course, is not the case.

The Divine Order is generous, seeking to benefit all. Whenever an entity is organized and prepared to receive Its guidance, It does not withhold or cease to provide illumination, wisdom, and inspiration. If the order is disturbed, that entity will be unable to receive this light. That is its own loss. The Divine Order, however, transcends any quality of frailty or loss.<sup>74</sup>



When all aspects of the Temple service – the proceedings, the sacrifices, the incense, the songs of praise, the eating and drinking – are performed in a state of paramount purity and holiness, they can be called “the service of God” (Num. 8:11), “the bread of your God” (Lev. 21:8), and the like. These expressions indicate God’s pleasure in the harmony prevailing in the nation and priesthood. They refer to God’s acceptance, so to speak, of their offerings and to the honor that He gives them by dwelling

<sup>74</sup> If the vessel is unprepared or unable to receive the Divine light, that is not due to a weakness in the Divine light, but to the imperfect state of the vessel. By way of analogy, a broken radio receiver is unable to intercept radio waves due to its own faulty state, and not due to any weakness of the radio signal.

in their midst. God is elevated and exalted above physical pleasure in their food and drink; the food of their offerings is for their own benefit.

This is comparable to the digestive system of the stomach and liver when it functions properly. The finer parts of food go to strengthen the heart, and the finest parts go to the life-spirit.<sup>75</sup> The food sustains the heart, the spirit, and the brain, as well as the digestive organs and the other organs, which are supplied via the arteries, nerves, and veins. In short, the entire organism is nourished and becomes ready to receive the guidance of the reasoning soul – a non-material entity, close to that of the angels, “who do not dwell among people” (Daniel 2:11). The reasoning soul inhabits the body as its ruler and guide, but not in the spatial sense. It does not partake of the body’s food, since it transcends the physical.

The Divine Order only dwells in a soul that is a vessel for the intellect; and the soul must be bound to a warm, vital life-spirit. The life-spirit must in turn have some physical source to which it is attached, like a flame that is attached to the top of the wick. The heart is like the wick. It requires the flow of blood. Blood is produced by the digestive organs, so the heart requires the stomach, the liver, and their attending organs. The heart also needs the lungs, the trachea, the nose, the diaphragm, and the respiratory muscles which move the chest cavity to breathe, regulating the state of the heart between the air inhaled and the air exhaled. And for the removal of food waste, the heart needs organs to expel refuse, i.e., the excretory and urinary organs.

The body is composed of all of these component parts. It also requires organs to move from place to place, to procure its needs and flee from danger, as well as organs to bring and repel objects. Thus, it requires hands and feet.

It needs discerning “advisors” who warn against that which is to be feared and take note of that which is to be hoped for; who record and remind it what has taken place, in order to recommend caution or hope in

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<sup>75</sup> The life-spirit (*niah*) is the basic life force, common to both animals and humans. The human soul (*nefesh*) is a higher, non-material level, capable of rational thought and speech.



similar occasions in the future. These “advisors” are the visible and the hidden senses.<sup>76</sup> They reside in the head and are assisted by the heart.

The entire body is thus organized in a harmonious order, under the control of the heart, which is the primary home of the soul. And if the soul resides in the brain, then the brain is a secondary residence, through the heart.

The living, godly nation is arranged in exactly the same fashion. As Joshua announced, “With this you will know that the living God is in your midst” (3:10).<sup>77</sup> God’s will kindled the fire [on the altar] when the people found favor in His eyes – a sign that their offerings and gifts were accepted.<sup>78</sup> That is because fire is the finest and noblest element beneath the orbit of the moon. Its seat was the fat and fragrance of the sacrifices, and the smoke of the incense and the oil, since it is the nature of fire to cling to fats and oils, just as the body’s natural heat clings to the finest and richest parts of the blood.

God first commanded construction of an altar for burnt-offerings, an altar for incense, and the Menorah. Then He commanded the burnt-offerings, the incense, the Menorah oil and the anointing oil. The outer Altar of burnt-offerings was to bear the public, visible fire, whereas the inner gold Altar [for incense] was reserved for a hidden, more refined fire. The Menorah was meant to bear the light of wisdom and inspiration, and the Showbread Table was associated with material abundance and bounty. As the Sages taught, “A person who wishes to be wise should face the south [in prayer, since the Menorah was located on the south side of the

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<sup>76</sup> There are five external senses of sensory perception (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell). In addition, there are five internal senses (sensory integration, image-memory, imagining, estimation, and processing), as the author will discuss in Part Five (V,12).

<sup>77</sup> Joshua was referring to Ark of the Covenant, which would be the focus of the Israelites’ miraculous crossing of the Jordan River that day. In the author’s metaphor, the Ark is the seat of Divinity in the nation, just as the heart is the primary home for the soul in the human body.

<sup>78</sup> Fire descending from heaven to the altar is a sign of Divine acceptance, as occurred during the Tabernacle’s inauguration (Lev. 9:24) and for Elijah on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:38).

Temple]. A person who wishes to be wealthy should turn to the north [where the Showbread Table was placed]” (*Baba Bathra* 25b).

All of these were in honor of the Holy Ark and the Cherubim, which correspond to the heart and the lungs hovering over the heart.<sup>79</sup> They required vessels and serving utensils, such as the laver and its stand, tongs, firepans, dishes, spoons, bowls, pots, flesh-hooks, and so on.<sup>80</sup> The Tabernacle needed coverings to protect it: the Tabernacle covering [of woven fabric], the tent-covering [of goats hair], and the upper covering [of rare animal skins].<sup>81</sup> And it required an enclosure to protect everything: the Tabernacle court and its appurtenances.

God appointed the Levites to transport the Tabernacle because of their closeness to Him, especially after the incident of the golden calf, when “all the Levites rallied to [Moses]” (Exod. 32:26).<sup>82</sup>

God selected Elazar the *kohen*, the most respected of the tribe [of Levi], to oversee the finest and noblest objects. Thus, the verse says, “Elazar the son of Aaron the priest is responsible for the oil for the Menorah light, the incense spices, the daily meal-offering, and the anointing oil” (Num. 4:16) – the things that were associated with the fine fire and the light of wisdom and inspiration. He was also responsible for that which is even greater: the light of prophecy, attached to the Urim and Thummim.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup> The two Cherubim with their wings were positioned over the Ark, like two lungs over the heart.

<sup>80</sup> These utensils correspond to the organs in the body’s digestive system.

<sup>81</sup> The three upper coverings of the Tabernacle correspond to the skin, hair, and nails which protect the human body, or perhaps to the three layers of skin: the hypodermis, the dermis, and the epidermis.

<sup>82</sup> The entire tribe of Levites refused to worship the golden calf, and they answered Moses’ call to punish those worshipping the idol.

<sup>83</sup> The Urim and Thummim were placed in the breastplate worn by the High Priest (Exod. 28:30) and were consulted like an oracle. The High Priest would meditate on the semi-precious stones engraved with the tribes’ names that were embedded in the breastplate. The letters on the breastplate stones containing the answer would light up, and with inspired vision the High Priest combined the letters properly to obtain the answer (*Yoma* 73b).

The family of Kehath, the most respected group of Levites after Elazar, was chosen to carry the inner “organs”: the Ark, the Table, the Menorah, the Altars, and the holy vessels which served them. Regarding the Kehath family, it says, “Since they are responsible for the holiest vessels, they will carry them on their shoulders” (Num. 7:9). This is comparable to the body’s internal organs, which do not have bones to help to carry them but are borne directly by the inner forces and muscles, since these organs are attached to everything that is close to them.

A lower branch of Levites, the family of Gershon, carried the softer of the external accessories, such as the curtains surrounding the Tabernacle and the Tent of Meeting, its cover, and the animal-hide covering that was on top.<sup>84</sup>

The lowest branch of Levites, the family of Merari, carried the harder “organs”: the hooks, planks, bars, pillars, and sockets.<sup>85</sup> The last two groups of Levites were aided by wagons to transport their articles, as it says, “Two wagons [and four oxen] for the sons of Gershon... and four wagons [and eight oxen] for the sons of Merari, as appropriate for their service” (Num. 7:7-8). All of this was organized with Divine wisdom.

I do not assert that the intention of the Temple service was specifically this order that I have suggested to you. Rather, it entailed something more esoteric and loftier. It is, after all, Torah from God. Those who accept this service wholeheartedly, without intellectual inquiry, are better off than those who investigate and analyze. But for those who have already left the higher level [of unquestioning faith] to investigate the matter, it is better that they should discover in them aspects of wisdom, and not be left to false theories and doubts that lead a person astray.

**27. The Kuzari:** Rabbi, your symbolization was excellent. But you left out the head and its senses, and you did not explain the anointing oil.

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<sup>84</sup> The Gershon family of Levites corresponds to the muscles that move the skin and the softer parts of the body.

<sup>85</sup> The family of Merari corresponds to the legs of the body.

**28. The Rabbi:** Quite so. The root of all wisdom was deposited in the Ark, which corresponds to the heart. The tablets of the Ten Commandments were placed there, as well as their amplifications: the scroll of the Torah, which rested alongside of it.<sup>86</sup> As the verse states, “[Take this Torah scroll] and place it at the side of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God” (Deut. 31:26).

From there, two wisdoms emerged: the wisdom of Torah, borne by the *kohanim*,<sup>87</sup> and the wisdom of prophecy, borne by the prophets. Both groups were watchful advisors of the nation, warning the people and recording their history. Thus they represent the people’s head [and inner senses].<sup>88</sup>

**29. The Kuzari:** If so, you are nowadays a body without a head or a heart.<sup>89</sup>

**30. The Rabbi:** In fact, we are not even a body, just scattered limbs, like the dry bones that Ezekiel saw in his vision (chap. 37).

And yet, King of the Khazars, these bones retain a trace of vitality, because they were once the vessels of a living heart, head, spirit, soul, and mind. They are better than sculptured figures carved from marble and plaster. Although such sculptures are complete with heads, eyes, ears, and all their limbs, they never contained the spirit of life and they never will. They are merely imitations and not true human beings.

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<sup>86</sup> The Ten Commandments are the foundations and primary laws of the Torah; the Torah scroll (the Pentateuch) expands on these basic laws.

<sup>87</sup> The *kohanim* were responsible for teaching Torah law and passing judgment, as it says, “If you are unable to reach a decision in a case.... You must approach the Levitical *kohanim* and the judge... and they will declare to you the legal decision” (Deut. 17:8-9).

<sup>88</sup> The prophets and Torah scholars who advised the people and recorded their history correspond to the mind’s faculties of assessment, analysis, and memory. The author does not explicitly explain the function of the anointing oil in his analogy. The oil was poured over the heads of the *kohanim* and apparently represents the wisdom of the prophets and *kohanim*.

<sup>89</sup> The Jewish people nowadays lack their “head” – prophets to guide them – as well as their “heart” – the Temple, and specifically the Ark of the Covenant.

31. **The Kuzari:** It is as you say.

32. **The Rabbi:** The “dead” nations wish to be like the living nation, but they can only attain a superficial resemblance. They erected shrines to God, but no sign of God was ever seen in them. They became hermits and ascetics to acquire prophecy, but it did not come. They sinned and rebelled and were wicked, but no fire came down from heaven against them, nor a sudden pestilence, a phenomenon that would indicate that this was a punishment from God for their disobedience. Even when their “heart” – i.e., the shrine toward which they prayed – was destroyed, their situation did not change. Their status changes only according to the size of their population, their strength or weakness, their disunion or unity, due to natural or random causes.

We, on the other hand, ever since our “heart” – the Holy Temple – was destroyed, we too have been lost. When it will be restored, we too will be restored, whether we will be few or many, or in whatever situation. That is because the One Who unites us is the living God. He is our Leader, watching over us in our current state of dispersion and exile.

33. **The Kuzari:** That is a valid point. It is inconceivable that a people should undergo such dispersion and not assimilate to other nations, especially after such a lengthy period of time. Many nations that arose after the Jewish people have since disappeared without a trace. These include Edom, Moab, Ammon, Aram, the Philistines, the Chaldeans, the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks, the Brahmans, the Sabaeans,<sup>90</sup> and many others.

34. **The Rabbi:** Do not think that, although I concurred with you earlier (II,30), that I agree that we are on the level of the dead. We still maintain a connection with the Divine Order via the commandments that He provided as a link between us and Him. In particular, there is the mitzvah of circumcision (*brith milah*), which is described in the words, “My covenant will be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (Gen. 17:13), and the

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<sup>90</sup> The Sabaeans were an ancient civilization in the kingdom of Sheba (modern-day Yemen). They are mentioned in the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Job.

Sabbath, which is described as “a sign between Me and you for all generations” (Exod. 31:13).

In addition, there is God’s special covenant with the Patriarchs (*brith Avoth*), as well as the covenant of the Torah, which obligated us first at Horeb and later in the plains of Moab, accompanied by rewards and punishments, as described in the section, “When you will bear children and grandchildren...” (Deut. 4:25). And there is God’s promise, “Even if your exiles are at the end of the heavens...” (Deut. 30:4). “For the Lord Your God is a merciful God” (Deut. 4:11). And there is the passage of “There will be a time when all of these things will befall you... and you will return to the Lord your God” (Deut. 30:1,2), and the song of *Ha’azinu* (“Listen, O heavens”) (Deut. 32:1-43), and other passages [that indicate God’s connection to the Jewish people even during their exile and dispersion].

We are not like the dead, but rather like a person who is deathly ill. The physicians have given up on him, yet he hopes for a miracle, for a supernatural recovery, as it says, “Can these bones live?” (Ezek. 37:3). This is the meaning of the sublime parable of “Behold, My servant will prosper,” [which describes the Jewish people in exile], “He has no form nor nobility... like one from whom people hide their faces” (Isaiah 53:2-3). Due to his external ugliness and repulsive appearance, he is like an unclean object which people find repulsive. They [automatically] turn away from him. “He is despised and rejected by people, a man of suffering and accustomed to illness” (Isaiah 53:3).

**35. The Kuzari:** How can this be a parable for Israel? Does it not say there, “Indeed, he has borne *our* illnesses” (Isaiah 53:4)? Yet that which has befallen Israel came to pass only on account of Israel’s own sins!

**36. The Rabbi:** Israel among the nations is like the heart among the organs of the body. It is the sickest of all – and also the healthiest.

**37. The Kuzari:** Explain yourself.

**38. The Rabbi:** The heart is constantly exposed to ailments that visit it frequently – the result of anxieties and sorrows, concerns and jealousies, loathing, love, hate, and fear of danger. Its temperament changes continually, due to excessive or insufficient breathing, as well as bad food

and drink, movement and exertion, being asleep or awake. All of these affect the heart, even as the other organs are at rest.

39. **The Kuzari:** I now understand how it can be the sickest of all organs. But how can it also be the healthiest?

40. **The Rabbi:** Is it possible that the heart could suffer from an abscess, a cancerous growth, a callus, a wound, paralysis, or weakness, as is possible in other organs?

41. **The Kuzari:** That is impossible. A lesser degree of ailment would have already brought about its death. The heart is extremely sensitive, due to the purity of its blood and intensity of its spirit. The heart detects the slightest source of infection and expels it while it still can. The other organs lack this fine sensitivity, so [unhealthy] dampness can settle in long enough for illnesses to take hold.

42. **The Rabbi:** Thus, while its sensitivity causes it to be frequently ill, it is at the same time the reason why the heart is able to quickly reject these ills before they have time to take root.

43. **The Kuzari:** Quite so.

44. **The Rabbi:** The Divine Order relates to us as the soul relates to the heart. For this reason, the verse states, “Only you have I known, out of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). This refers to Israel’s frequent illness.

As regards its health, this is indicated by the statement of the Sages, “[God] forgives the sins of His people, removing their sins one by one” (from the *Sliboth* prayers, based on *Rosh Hashbanah* 17a). God does not allow our sins to accumulate, so that they will not bring about our complete destruction. This is in contrast to how He dealt with the Amorites, about whom it says, “For the iniquity of the Amorites had not yet run its course” (Gen. 15:16). God allowed the Amorites to continue sinning until the ailment of their sins destroyed them.

Just as the heart is inherently of refined matter and equilibrium, thus enabling the intellectual soul to attach itself to it, so is Israel in its innate essence. Just as the heart may be afflicted by the illnesses of other organs,

the result of the lusts of the liver, the stomach, and the testicles, due to their imbalanced temperament,<sup>91</sup> so, too, Israel is exposed to [spiritual] ailments when it imitates other nations. As the verse states, “They mingled among the nations and adopted their practices” (Psalms 106:35).

Do not consider it peculiar that the verse says regarding this phenomenon, “Indeed, he has borne our illnesses and suffered our pains” (Isaiah 54:4), [describing Israel as bearing the ills of the world]. We have become burdened by these ills, while the rest of the world enjoys peace and prosperity. The afflictions that we suffer are meant to rectify our piety, refine our purity, and remove the dross from within. Through our purification and moral repair, the Divine Order will once again dwell in the world.

As you know, the elements were meant to form inanimate objects, then plants, then animals, then human beings, and finally the elite of humanity [i.e., Israel]. Everything was designed for the sake of this elite, so that the Divine Order should inhabit it. And that elite exists for the sake of the prophets and the pious, who are the elite of the elite.

This hierarchy is alluded to in the [High Holiday] prayer. First it says, “Place Your awe, Lord our God, over *all Your works*.” Then, “Give honor to *Your people*.” And finally, “*The righteous* will see and rejoice” – they who are the elite of the elite.

**45. The Kuzari:** You have presented your analogy [of Israel to a heart] well enough. But [if Israel is in fact the spiritual elite], I would expect to see more hermits and ascetics among you than among other nations.

**46. The Rabbi:** I regret that you have forgotten the fundamental principles which I presented to you and to which you assented. Did we not agree that a person can only approach God through those deeds that He commanded? Do you think that this closeness can be gained by submission, humility, and the like?

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<sup>91</sup> In medieval medicine, anger was attributed to an imbalance in the liver. The stomach’s desires can lead to gluttony, and those of the testicles, to promiscuity.



47. **The Kuzari:** Certainly, together with righteous conduct. I believe I read so in your books, in statements such as: “What does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God” (Deut. 10:12), “What does the Lord require of you? Only to act justly and love kindness, [and walk humbly]” (Micah 6:8), and many other such passages.

48. **The Rabbi:** These verses refer to the rational laws. The rational laws are the fundamentals and prerequisites for the Divine Torah, which they precede in nature and time. They are indispensable in the administration of all human societies. Even a gang of thieves must have some form of justice among them, if their confederacy is to last.

When Israel’s rebellion had reached a state where they disregarded the rational and societal laws – which are indispensable for society, just as the natural activities of eating, drinking, exercise, rest, sleeping, and waking are essential for the individual – while they still observed the Temple service and other non-rational, Divine laws, God [lowered His expectations and] was satisfied with less from them. They were told: “If only you would keep the basic laws which even the lowliest and most primitive societies obey, such as justice, helping others, and recognizing God’s kindness!”

The Divine Torah cannot be fulfilled without prior observance of the societal and rational laws. Rational law demands justice and acknowledgment of God’s kindness. What do those who have lost this have to do with offerings to God, the Sabbath, circumcision, and so on, which logic neither demands nor rejects? These laws were given specifically to Israel, in addition to the rational laws, in order to provide them with the benefit of [connecting with] the Divine Order. The Israelites did not know why they were commanded to observe these commandments, just as they did not know how God’s Glory descended in their midst and His fire consumed their offerings, how they could hear God’s speech at Sinai, and every other [supernatural] event that they experienced – phenomena that logic would refuse to accept, were they not authenticated by visual evidence and irrefutable testimony.

It was in this context that they were told, “What does the Lord your God require of you?” (Deut. 10:12), and “Add your burnt-offerings... [for I did not speak with your forefathers... concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices. But this I did command them, saying: Obey Me, so that I will be your God and you will be My people]” (Jer. 7:21), and similar verses. Does

it make sense that a Jew could limit himself to upholding justice and acts of kindness, while discarding observance of circumcision, the Sabbath, and other commandments, and still prosper spiritually?

**49. The Kuzari:** After what you said previously, I should think not.

In the opinion of philosophers, however, one may be pious without worrying about which path one takes to approach God, whether as a Jew, as a Christian, or by way of a path of one's own invention. But then we have returned to a religion based on reasoning, speculation and philosophizing. According to this approach, each person should follow and believe in a religion dictated by his own speculation – and that is illogical.

**50. The Rabbi:** The Divine Torah does not impose asceticism on us.<sup>92</sup> Rather, it enjoins us to navigate a balanced path. We should provide every mental and physical faculty its due portion, but without excess, since excess in one area will come at the expense of another. For example, an individual who overindulges his physical desires will blunt his mental faculties, and vice versa. And a person who is overly argumentative will suppress other traits.

Prolonged fasting is not an act of piety for a person whose physical desires are subdued and who is weak in body. On the contrary, for such a person, pleasure in eating is a compensating precaution [to guard his health]. Neither is limiting one's financial means an act of piety, if wealth may be easily gained in a lawful way and its acquisition will not interfere with the study of wisdom and the performance of good deeds. This is especially true for a person who has a household and children to support, and who wishes to use his wealth for the sake of heaven. On the contrary, it is more proper for him to accumulate wealth.

In general, our Torah balances between the traits of awe, love, and joy. A person can draw near to God with each of them. Your humble submission on a fast day does not make you any closer to God than your joy on the Sabbath and festivals, if that joy comes from holy intentions and a pure heart. Just as prayer requires intention and a focused heart, so does

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<sup>92</sup> The rabbi is now responding to the king's question posed before (2:45), "I would expect to see more hermits and ascetics among you."

joy in God's laws and commands require intention and a focused heart. A person needs to rejoice in the mitzvah itself out of love for the One Who commanded it. When you see how God has singled you out, as if you are His guest and He has invited to His table to enjoy His beneficence, you will thank God, privately and publicly. And if your emotions should lead you so far as to sing and dance, due to your joy in the mitzvah, then that song and that dance is a holy service and a bond of closeness between you and the Divine Order.

Our Torah did not leave these matters undefined but set down precise measures for them, since it is beyond the ability of flesh and blood to apportion the benefits of each faculty of soul and body in its correct measure. The Torah establishes the correct balance between rest and exertion. It determines how much the earth should produce until resting during the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, the tithes a person should give from its produce, and so on.

God commanded the cessation of labor on the Sabbath and holidays, as well as in working the land [during the Sabbatical year] – all of this in remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt and in commemoration of the creation of the world. These two events – [the Exodus and creation] – are connected, because they are both the outcome of God's will and not the result of random or natural phenomena. As the verse states, "Ask now of times long past... Did ever a people hear God speaking [out of fire, as you have]? Has God ever done miracles, [extracting one nation out of another nation... as God did for you]?" (Deut. 4:32-34).

Observance of the Sabbath acknowledges God's existence – an acknowledgment expressed in deed. A person who observes the Sabbath because the work of creation was completed on that day has undoubtedly affirmed his belief in the creation. And a person who believes in creation believes in the Creator. A person who does not believe in it, on the other hand, is susceptible to doubting God's eternity and the existence of the world's Creator. In this way, observance of the Sabbath brings a person closer to God than monastic seclusion and asceticism do.

See how the Divine Order became attached to Abraham, and afterward to His select community and to the Holy Land. This Divine Order guarded them step by step, watching over their descendants so that none would be lost, bringing them to the most sheltered of places [i.e., the land of Goshen in Egypt], the best and most bountiful, causing them to multiply in a

wondrous fashion, until they were relocated and settled in the land suitable for their special qualities.

God is therefore called “God of Abraham” (Psalms 47:10), “God of the Land” (I Kings 17:26), “the One dwelling between the cherubim” (I Samuel 4:4), “the One dwelling in Zion” (Psalms 9:12), “the One abiding in Jerusalem” (Psalms 135:21). Scripture compares these places to heaven, as it says, “the One dwelling in heaven” (Psalms 123:1). God’s light is revealed in these locations as it is revealed in heaven – but only via the nation that is suitable to receive this light. God emanates His light on them, and this is called God’s “love.” This is the intent of the passage composed for us, which we have been enjoined to believe, praise and be thankful for, in the daily prayer *Ahavath Olam* – “With an eternal love, You have loved us” – so that we will impress in our minds that this [special connection with God] was initiated by God, not by us.

For example, we do not say that an animal created itself, but that God formed and fashioned it, having found matter suitable for that form. In the same way, it was God Who hastened and initiated our Exodus from Egypt so that we would be His subjects and He would be our King. As He said, “I am the Lord your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt in order to be your God” (Num. 15:41). And even more: God proclaimed, “O Israel, through you I will be glorified” (Isaiah 49:3).

**51. The Kuzari:** This verse seems to go too far; it is overbold in claiming that the Creator can be glorified through mortal man.

**52. The Rabbi:** Would you find this less strange if it were said with regard to the creation of the sun?

**53. The Kuzari:** Certainly, due the sun’s extensive impact. Secondary to God, the sun is the cause of existence. The sun determines night and day, and the seasons of the year; minerals, metals, plants, and animals exist through its instrumentality. Its clear light enables sight and the visible shades of light. How could the creation of such an entity *not* be a source of glory to its Maker for us humans?

**54. The Rabbi:** But is not the light of the intellect more refined and loftier than visible light? Were not the inhabitants of the world – except for the

select few mentioned earlier – blind and in error prior to the advent of the Jewish people? One group taught that there is no Creator, claiming that no part of the world is more suitable to have been created than being creator, since the universe is eternal. Another group claimed that the celestial sphere is eternal and created everything, and so they worshipped it. Others asserted that fire is the essence of light and its powerful, remarkable activity – therefore, fire should be worshipped, and the soul is composed of fire. Other sects worshipped other objects, such as the sun, the moon, the stars, or shapes of animals which correspond to the constellations of the celestial sphere. Others worshipped their kings or their sages.

They all agreed, however, that no supernatural influence or outcome is visible in the world. Even the philosophers, who, with their careful inquiry and lucid reasoning, acknowledge a unique and unparalleled Prime Cause, nonetheless posit that this Prime Cause exercises no influence on the world, and certainly not on any individual. The philosophers elevate the Prime Cause beyond knowledge of individuals, and all the more so that it is beyond effecting a change in them.

This situation continued until the community of Israel was purified and prepared for the Divine light to dwell on it, to be worthy of miracles and supernatural phenomena for its sake. Then it was visibly evident that the world has a King Who watches over it and directs it, Who knows both great and small, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. The hearts of all peoples began to draw closer to the truth, and all who came after this could not break away from Israel's [monotheistic] principles. So that today everyone acknowledges that God is eternal and that the world was created. And their proof is the Israelites and all that was done for them and what happened to them.

**55. The Kuzari:** This is truly a great honor [for Israel] and a captivating explanation. It is rightly written, "To make for Himself an everlasting name" (Isaiah 63:12), "You made for Yourself a name as of this day" (Neh. 9:10), and "[So that you will have] praise, fame, and glory" (Deut. 26:19).

**56. The Rabbi:** Did you not see how David introduces his praise for the Torah by first describing the sun in "The heavens declare God's glory" (Psalm 19)? He describes how far-reaching the sun's light is, how pure its body, how straight its path, and how beautiful its appearance. This is

immediately followed by the words, “God’s Torah is perfect, restoring the soul” (ver. 7). It is as if he is saying: Do not be amazed by these descriptions of the sun, because the Torah is even more prominent, more resplendent, more celebrated, more exalted, and more beneficial.

And without the Jewish people, there would be no Torah. They did not receive their special status due to Moses; Moses received his special status due to them. God’s love was for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He selected Moses as an instrument to deliver His benefit to them. We are not called “the nation of Moses,” but “the nation of God,” as it says: “God’s people” (Num. 11:29), and “the people of the God of Abraham” (Psalms 47:10).

A show of well-chosen words, dramatically raising one’s eyebrows, shutting one’s eyes while praying and entreating, theatrical gestures and speeches – behind which there are no deeds – none of these prove [a connection to] the Divine Order. Rather, it is indicated by pure intentions that are substantiated by actions – actions that, by their very nature, are difficult to do and yet are done with the utmost zeal and love. It is to be found, for example, in a person who makes a pilgrimage to the “chosen place” [the Temple in Jerusalem] three times a year, despite the effort and expense, with the greatest joy and delight. Or in a person who distributes the first tithe (*ma’aseir risbon*), the second tithe (*ma’aseir sheini*), and the tithe for the poor (*ma’aseir ani*); in a person who brings the *olath re’iyah* offering when visiting the Temple; in a person who renounces his harvest during the Sabbatical and Jubilee years; in a person who incurs expenses for observing the Sabbath and festivals, and who abstains from working on those days; in a person who offers the first fruits (*bikkurim*), the firstborn animals (*b’khoroth*), the priests’ emoluments (*mathenoth kehunah*), the first shearing (*reishith ha-geiz*), and the first of the dough (*hafrashath hallah*). All of this, in addition to bringing vow offerings, voluntary offerings, offerings that one must bring for intentional and unintentional sins, peace offerings (*shelamim*), and offerings due to contact with ritual impurity, childbirth, abnormal discharges (*zivah*), leprosy (*tzara’ath*), and many other situations.

All of these are commanded by God and are not based on human reasoning or speculation. It is impossible for human logic to estimate their order and measure without concern that some miscalculation should result.

It is as if God assessed the Jewish people and measured them, as well as the harvests of the Land of Israel, its crops and livestock.<sup>93</sup> He assessed the tribe of Levi and commanded these levels [of tithes] while they were still in the desert, knowing that, as long as this proportion was kept, Israel would retain its wealth and the Levites [supported by these tithes] would not be in want. No tribe or family could be reduced to abject poverty, because God ordained that in the Jubilee year all property reverts back to its original ownership during the first year of distributing the Land of Israel [in the time of Joshua].

The details of these and other regulations would fill volumes. A person who examines them carefully will realize that they are not of human origin. Praised be the One Who organized them. “He did not do this for any [other] nation; they do not know His laws” (Psalms 147:20). This arrangement lasted during the periods of both Temples, for about 1,300 years. Had the nation kept to the straight path, it would have continued for all times.

**57. The Kuzari:** You are currently in confusion about those heavy duties.<sup>94</sup> What nation could observe this system of laws?

**58. The Rabbi:** Only a nation whose Guardian and vigilant Penalizer is in its midst – i.e., the Shekhinah. Consider Joshua’s final speech to the nation: “You cannot [fully] serve God, for He is a holy God... [Who will not ignore your transgressions and sins]” (Joshua 24:19). That was true, even though Joshua’s community was so pious that, out of a population of over 600,000, only one [Achan] violated the ban against taking the spoils of Jericho. Nonetheless, punishment followed immediately. That was also the case with Miriam, who was afflicted with leprosy [for speaking against Moses] (Num. 12:10), as well the punishment of Uzzah (II Samuel 6), the case of Nadav and Abihu (Lev. 10), and the incident of the people of Beth

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<sup>93</sup> The Torah’s system of agricultural tithes which went to the Levites indicates a Divine foreknowledge of the needs of the Levites as well as the amounts of produce each year.

<sup>94</sup> After centuries of exile, many of the details of Temple offerings, tithes, and other laws observed only in the Land of Israel are unclear to us.

Shemesh who were punished because they had “looked into the Ark of God” (I Samuel 6:19).

One of the wonders of the Shekhinah was that God’s displeasure for certain transgressions was revealed [by way of leprous marks] on the walls of their houses and on their clothes; and for more grievous sins, it appeared on their bodies, in varying degrees of severity. The *kohanim* were appointed to master this unique wisdom. They needed to determine when these marks were Divine punishments and therefore confine the patient for weeks, like Miriam’s confinement (Num. 12:10), and when it was simply a natural ailment, either worsening or healing. This is a wondrous science, concerning which God admonished, “Be careful with regard to the plague of leprosy; be very careful to do all that the Levitical priests decide for you” (Deut. 24:8).

**59. The Kuzari:** Do you have a satisfactory explanation for this subject [of ritual impurity]?

**60. The Rabbi:** I have already told you that our intellect is unable to grasp the Divine Order. It is best not to attempt to give reasons for profound matters such as these.

However, I take the liberty of suggesting – without claiming that this is the true reason – that impurity from leprosy and bodily discharges may be related to the ritual contamination by corpses (*tum’ath ba-meith*). Death is the greatest loss, and a leprous limb is as if dead.

The same is true for lost sperm, as it was endowed with potential living spirit, capable of producing human life. Its loss is the opposite of the essence of life and spirit. Due to its fine nature, this loss is only felt by highly sensitive spirits and noble souls who cleave to the Divine, to prophecy, or to true visions and revelations.

Some individuals experience melancholy when they have not purified themselves from a state of impurity. It has been demonstrated that their touch can ruin sensitive objects, such as flowers and wine. Most of us are affected by proximity to dead bodies and graves. Our minds are temporarily disoriented when we find ourselves in a house where a corpse is lying. Those of a coarser character, however, remain unaffected.

We see the same phenomenon with intellectual pursuits. Those who seek purity of thought in philosophic studies or purity of soul in prayer and



communion with God will notice the detrimental effect of heavy foods and excessive eating and drinking. They will also find that preoccupation with women, associating with scoffers, and engaging in songs of love and jests will impair their pursuits.

**61. The Kuzari:** This explains to me why this particular excess of bodily fluid – seminal discharges – contaminates, even though it is wholly spirit, whereas urine and feces do not, despite their repulsive odor, appearance, and quantity.

But I still lack an explanation for leprosy (*tzara'ath*) appearing in clothing and houses.

**62. The Rabbi:** As I already mentioned, this phenomenon was the result of the special qualities of the Shekhinah. The Shekhinah dwelled in the Jewish people like the spirit of life dwelling in the human body. It granted them a Divine life-force, bestowing nobility, beauty, and splendor to their souls, bodies, appearance, and dwellings. When the Shekhinah departed from them, their wisdom diminished, their bodies deteriorated, and their beauty faded.

The effect of the departure of the Shekhinah's light was noticeable in each individual, just as one may see the sudden withdrawal of a person's spirit due to fright or anxiety, which makes an impact on the body. One may find black or green marks on women and on youths who venture out at night, the result of their delicate constitution; they attribute this to demons. Sometimes, experiencing such a frightening event, or witnessing someone dead or killed, will bring about physical or mental illness that is difficult to heal.

**63. The Kuzari:** I see that your Torah incorporates all sorts of profound and wonderful knowledge that is not found in other religious codes.

**64. The Rabbi:** Even more than that. The sages of the Sanhedrin court were instructed not to let any area of science – whether real, imagined, or sociological – escape their knowledge. This even included occultism, as well as the study of all languages. How could it be possible to always find seventy scholars of this caliber unless the study of sciences was widespread among the nation? If one scholar died, another commanding the same level

of erudition succeeded him. It could not be otherwise, since all branches of knowledge are required for the application of Torah law.

For example, the natural sciences of agriculture are needed to identify plants that have been crossbred (*kilayim*) and in order to be careful with the produce of the Sabbatical year and of newly-planted fruit trees (*orlah*). Specialized knowledge is needed to distinguish between various species of plants, so that they will remain the way they were created, and one species will not be mixed with another. For example, is *chondros* [a coarsely ground wheat] a kind of barley? Is rye a kind of wheat? Is cauliflower a kind of cabbage? One must also know the strength of their roots, how far the roots spread in the ground, what remains the following year and what does not, so that one will know how much distance to place between each species, in terms of both area and time.

One must be able to distinguish between various species of animals for the same reason [i.e., the prohibition of crossbreeding]. And one must know which animals are venomous [thus rendering their victims not kosher], and which are not.

One must also know which injuries to an animal [are fatal and] make it not kosher (*treifah*). This branch of knowledge is even more detailed than Aristotle's writings on the subject of fatal injuries, as it is needed to prevent people from eating carrion. The little that we retain of this knowledge is enough to make one marvel at the Sage's expertise.

In addition, one must have knowledge of physical blemishes that disqualify a *kohen* from participating in the Temple service, as well as blemishes that disqualify an animal from being offered as a sacrifice. And one must be able to identify the various kinds of male and female discharges and menstrual cycles. Human beings could not attain knowledge of these matters by study alone, without Divine assistance.

The same is true for astronomical knowledge of the spheres and their orbits, of which the Jewish calendar [which reconciles the solar and lunar cycles] is one product. The excellence of the calculation of this calendar is well known; it is universally accepted among the Jewish people, who are weak in matter but strong in spirit. Could it be otherwise? Because of their small numbers, despised status, and dispersion, they are hardly noticed among the nations. Yet these remnants of Divine Law bind the Jews together into one unified group.

One of the Torah's most amazing features is the Jewish calendar, which is based on the duration of the lunar month, a calculation handed down from the House of David.<sup>95</sup> Although a millennium and several centuries have passed since then, no mistake has been found in it, whereas the calendars of Greek astronomers and others have become prone to errors. They are forced to make corrections and additions after every century, while our calendar is free from error, since it rests on prophetic tradition.<sup>96</sup> Had there been the slightest flaw in a basic rule, there would be discrepancies between the calculated time of the new moon and when it becomes visible, leading to an embarrassing situation. In the same manner, our sages undoubtedly knew the duration of the orbits of the sun and the other stars.

Regarding music: picture a nation that honors this art, dedicating its elite – the Levites – to music. The Levites would engage in song in the holy Temple at special times. They had no need to seek a livelihood, since they were supported by tithes. Their sole occupation was music. This art was highly regarded, as it should be when it is not degraded or neglected. The people involved in music were of the highest lineage and purest nature; David and Samuel were among its great masters. Do you think that they knew music well or not?

**65. The Kuzari:** There can be no doubt that their art reached its most perfect state and inspired the listeners' souls. As they say, music has the power to transform a soul from one emotional state to its opposite. It is impossible that music nowadays should retain that lofty state. It has

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<sup>95</sup> "Rabban Gamaliel [died c. 110 CE] said to them: I have it on the authority of my grandfather's house that the renewal of the moon takes place after not less than 29½ days, plus 2/3 of an hour and 73 parts of an hour" (*Rosh Hashanah* 25a). This ancient calculation of the synodic month duration is remarkably accurate, only 0.456 seconds more than the value obtained by NASA using space-based measurements.

<sup>96</sup> The Julian calendar, introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE, designated a year as 365.25 days. The actual solar year, however, is about 11 minutes shorter, resulting in a discrepancy of nearly a day each century. The Julian calendar was only corrected in 1582 CE (five centuries after *The Kuzari* was written) with the introduction of the Gregorian calendar.

deteriorated and is produced by servants and the basest of individuals. Truly, rabbi, music has fallen from its high station, just as you have fallen, despite your former greatness.

**66. The Rabbi:** And what is your opinion of Solomon's intellectual accomplishments? Did he not, with the assistance of Divine, intellectual, and natural gifts, speak on all branches of knowledge? People from around the world, even as far as India, came to Solomon to learn his wisdom.

The foundations and general principles of all sciences were copied from us: first, by the Chaldeans, then the Persians and Medians who copied from them, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. Due to the passage of time and numerous intermediaries, people forgot that these sciences were originally in Hebrew, as they were copied from Greek and Latin texts.

Hebrew, however, retains its superiority, both with regard to the language itself and with regard to those matters that it incorporates.

**67. The Kuzari:** Is it true that Hebrew is superior to other languages? Do we not see with our own eyes that other languages are more sophisticated and richer?

**68. The Rabbi:** The Hebrew language shared the fate of its bearers – it became impoverished with their impoverishment, and it deteriorated with their deterioration. But both tradition and logic indicate that it is the noblest of tongues.

According to our tradition, Hebrew is the language in which God revealed Himself to Adam and Eve, and the language in which they conversed. This is demonstrated by the derivation of the name *Adam* from the Hebrew word *adamah* ("earth"); *ishah* ("woman") from *ish* ("man"); *Hava* ("Eve") from *hayy* ("life"); *Cain* from *canithi*, ("I have acquired"); *Seth* from *shath* ("He has provided"); and *Noah* from *ye-nahmeinu* ("he will comfort us"). The Torah testifies to this universally accepted tradition of etymologies, which goes back to Eber, Noah, and Adam.

Hebrew was the language of Eber, after whom it was called "Hebrew," because he was the one who retained it after the time of the splitting of nations and the division of languages (Gen. 11). Abraham spoke Aramaic in Ur of the Chaldeans, since Aramaic was the language of the Chaldeans. Abraham employed Hebrew as a special, holy language, whereas Aramaic

spherical motions]. They decided that each celestial motion is produced by a distinct cause. And their analysis led them to conclude that these movements are willed [by the spheres]; they are not involuntary or natural. Each movement, therefore, must originate with a soul. Each soul must have an intellect, and this intellect is an incorporeal angel. The philosophers called these intellects “gods,” “angels,” “secondary causes,” and other such names. And the final level, the one closest to us, is the Active Intellect. They thought that this Active Intellect guides our lowly world. After that comes the potential intellect, then the soul, nature, the natural and animal forces, and the forces of each organ.

All of these ideas are fine distinctions. They are useful to sharpen the mind – but not to attain the truth. Those who are seduced by them are ultimately heretics.

And we may disregard the “proof-text” of the Karaites. They concluded from David’s last will to his son, “And you, Solomon my son: know the God of your father and serve Him” (I Chron. 28:9), that only *after* one has a proper knowledge of God is one obligated to serve Him. Yet the true meaning of the verse is that David was exhorting his son to accept his father’s and ancestors’ belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Whose providence was with them and Who fulfilled His promises to them by multiplying their descendants, giving them the Land of Israel, causing His Shekhinah to dwell among them, and so on. This meaning of the verb “to know” also appears in the verses, “[False] gods that they did not know” (Deut. 29:25), and “[false gods] that you did not know” (Deut. 11:28). It does not refer to knowing their true essence; rather, that you never experienced these false gods as the cause of good or misfortune. Therefore, there is no reason to pray to them or revere them.<sup>338</sup>

22. **The rabbi** then decided to leave the land of the Khazars and make his way to Jerusalem. The king, however, was reluctant to let him go.

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<sup>338</sup> David’s instruction to his son to “know the God of your father” does not refer to a philosophical knowledge of God’s true essence – a knowledge that is beyond human ability. Rather, it means that one should recognize God’s providence and protection of the Jewish people throughout history.

**The king said:** What do you seek in the Land of Israel nowadays, when the Shekhinah is not there? If your intentions are pure and your desire is strong, you can be close to God in any location. Why endanger yourself by traveling through deserts and seas and among various peoples?

**23. The Rabbi responded:** It is the *revealed* Shekhinah that is gone [from the Land of Israel]. It is only experienced by a prophet or a favored community in that special place. This is the future phenomenon which we await. As the verse says, “With their own eyes, they will see when God returns to Zion” (Isaiah 52:8). And as we say in our prayers, “May our eyes see Your return to Your abode, to Zion.”

However, the hidden, spiritual Shekhinah accompanies every faithful Jew of virtuous deeds and a pure heart, devoted to the God of Israel. The Land of Israel is especially chosen by the God of Israel; only there can our acts of devotion be truly complete. Also, many of the Torah’s laws do not apply to those residing outside the Land of Israel.<sup>339</sup> Our intentions will be refined and our hearts will be pure only in those places that we believe are special to God. This would be the case even if that belief was only imagined or symbolic – all the more so when it is true, as I explained earlier (II,12-18). Thus, our longing for these holy places is awakened, and our devotion is purified.

This is certainly true for those who set out from distance lands; and even more so when they seek to atone for past transgressions. Nowadays, it is not possible to bring the offerings ordained by God for every type of intentional and unintentional sin. Therefore, we must be content with the teaching of the Sages: “Exile atones for sins” (*Sanhedrin* 37b). That principle is especially true if exile brings one to God’s chosen place.

Regarding the danger [that you mentioned] of traveling through deserts and seas [to reach the Holy Land] – that does not fall under the category of “You shall not test God” (Deut. 6:16). It is an acceptable risk, like the risk

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<sup>339</sup> Torah commandments that can only be observed in the Land of Israel include the agricultural laws, such as tithes (*terumoth* and *ma’aseroth*) and the Sabbatical year (*Shemittah*); laws connected to the functioning of the Sanhedrin; and laws related to the Temple service.

undertaken when traveling with merchandise in the hope of gaining profit.<sup>340</sup>

And even if a person places himself in greater danger than a merchant [when traveling to the Land of Israel], due to his yearning and hope of obtaining forgiveness, he is justified in endangering himself – if he has made a reckoning of his soul, is thankful and satisfied for his past life, and has dedicated the rest of his days to fulfill God's will. He may then brave the danger. If God should save him, he will praise and thank Him. And should he die at God's hands due to his sins, he will accept [God's justice] and have faith that his death has atoned for his many sins.

In my opinion, this is better than those who endanger their lives in war to gain fame for courage and victory, or to acquire great spoils. And the danger is less than that of those who march into battle to gain the rewards of a religious war.<sup>341</sup>

**24. The Kuzari:** I am accustomed to seeing you as one who loves freedom. But now I see that you are seeking additional servitude – additional religious duties that you will be required to observe in the Land of Israel, laws that you are not obligated to observe here.

**25. The Rabbi:** It is true that I seek freedom – from the service of many. If I attempted to fulfill all of their wishes, I would never succeed, even if I tried to do so my entire life. And even if I did succeed, it would not benefit me. I refer to serving people and courting their favor.

I prefer to seek the service of One. His favor is obtained with little effort, yet it provides benefits in this world and the next. I refer to fulfilling

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<sup>340</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> century rabbi of Safed, Rabbi Moses ben Joseph di Trani (known as the “Mabit”), similarly ruled that traveling to the Land of Israel is not considered recklessly endangering one's life if merchants regularly travel there for business purposes (vol. II, responsum 216).

<sup>341</sup> The author, who lived during the time of the First Crusade, is referring to the religious wars of the Christians and Muslims.

God's favor. His service is true freedom, and submission to Him is true honor.<sup>342</sup>

**26. The Kuzari:** If you sincerely believe in all that you say, then God knows your intentions. Good intentions are special to God, Who knows what is in the heart and before Whom all secrets are revealed. [Why then is it necessary to actually go to the Holy Land?]

**27. The Rabbi:** Your point is only relevant when it is impossible to take action. However, human beings are free in their will and actions, and we are held accountable if we do not seek actual reward for the sake of actual deeds.

This is why the verse says, "When you will blow an alarm with trumpets, you will be remembered before the Lord your God... and these [blows] will be a remembrance for you [before God]" (Num. 10:9-10). It also speaks of "A remembrance through blowing" (Lev. 23:24). It is not that God needs to be reminded or awakened. Our actions, however, must be complete so that we will deserve recompense. So, too, matters of prayer should be recited in the best possible way, as entreaties and supplications.<sup>343</sup> When both intention and action are executed properly, they are rewarded. In human terminology – for "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings" (*Berakboth* 31b) – this is called causing God to "remember" us. If, however, our deeds lack intention, or our intention lacks deeds, then our efforts are deficient.

This is not the case in a situation when it is impossible to act. Then our intentions and our regret that we could not take action are somewhat beneficial. For example, we apologize [for our inability to serve God in the Temple] in prayers such as, "On account of our sins, we were exiled from

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<sup>342</sup> Cf. *Avoth* 6:2: "The only free person is one who occupies himself in Torah study." Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) wrote in a similar vein: "A person who is true to his inner self is free; but a person whose entire life is merely a stage for what is proper in the eyes of others – he is a slave" (*Olath Re'iyah* vol. II, p. 244)

<sup>343</sup> Prayer should be recited with intent and feeling (*kavannah*), and not just to fulfill a religious duty. So taught Rabbi Eliezer: "If a person makes his prayers a fixed task, they are not [genuine] supplications" (Mishnah *Berakboth* 4:3).



our land, [and we cannot ascend and bow down before You]” (from the *Mussaf* prayer).

Similarly, there is a reward for those who are aroused to love that holy place. This love advances the anticipated goal. As the verse says, “You will arise and have compassion on Zion, because the time to favor her, the appointed time, has come. For Your servants desire her stones and favor her dust” (Psalms 102: 14-15). This means that Jerusalem will be rebuilt when the Jewish people yearn for it with the highest yearning, so that they even favor her stones and dust.

**28. The Kuzari:** If this is so, it would be wrong to hold you back. On the contrary, it is praiseworthy to help you. May God assist you and be your Protector and Guard [in your journey to the Holy Land]. May God watch over you favorably in His kindness and peace