

Maharal's Be'er ha-Golah and His Revolution in Aggadic Scholarship — in Their Context and on His Terms

By: CHAIM EISEN

Approaching Aggadah

In the realm of classic Jewish thought, Rabbi Yehudah Liva ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague, was a solitary revolutionary, especially in the elucidation of Aggadah, the nonlegal components of the Talmud and Midrash. On the one hand, he belonged to no well-defined school, and his mentors' identities remain a mystery. On the other hand, despite founding a *yeshivah* in Prague and teaching several of the following generation's preeminent scholars, his legacy included no immediate disciples who emulated or disseminated his unique approach to Jewish thought. Even his many books on the subject appear to have sunk into obscurity after his death (in 1609), none of them reprinted for almost two centuries.¹ His monumental *Hiddushei*

1. For example, *Tiferet Yisra'el* and *Neẓah Yisra'el* (NY), first published in 1599, were Maharal's first major works to be reprinted, in 1793. *Gevurot ha-Shem* (GHS), first released in 1582, was reissued only in 1796. *Ner Mizvab* and *Or Hadaash*, which appeared initially in 1600, were reprinted in 1798. The first edition of *Be'er ha-Golah* (BHG), in 1598, was followed by a second in 1804. All his other major works were reissued even later,

The author lectures at the Seymour J. Abrams Orthodox Union Jerusalem World Center (formerly, the OU-NCSY Israel Center). For over twenty-four years, he has taught at various *yeshivot* in Israel and lectured extensively on Jewish thought and Jewish philosophy throughout both Israel and the US. He also served as a Torah lecturer in the IDF Rabbinat Torah Lecture Corps (reserves) for over sixteen years. In addition, he was founding editor of the OU journal *Jewish Thought* and has written and edited numerous essays in these fields.

Aggadot languished as a lost and manifestly incomplete manuscript, until its discovery and release — in four volumes — only half a century ago.²

Yet, our generation has witnessed a meteoric and unprecedented rise in Maharal's popularity, particularly since the publication over thirty years ago of the first complete and revised edition of his principal writings.³ Today, both reissues of these works and secondary scholarship based upon them continue apace. His impact, once questionable, now seems inestimable. Nonetheless, Maharal continues to elude even learned Jews, most of whom still deem his insights inscrutable.

As in general scholarship, understanding the historic roles of the giants of Jewish scholarship demands first evaluating their broader historical context. Paradoxically, this is all the more imperative to appreciate those revolutionary thinkers — like Maharal — whose contributions constituted a significant departure from their predecessors'. Ironically, perhaps the most important key in classic Jewish literature to unlocking Maharal's extraordinary legacy is a book that was ... never written.

In his Mishnah commentary, Rambam mentions “a composition in which I shall assemble all the expositions that are found in the Talmud and elsewhere and explain and clarify them.”⁴ Subsequently, he refers to both this “book of commentary on the

including *Netivot Olam*, in 1809, and *Derekh ha-Hayyim*, in 1833. Ironically, *Gur Aryeh (GA)*, his first (and probably most famous) published work, from 1578, was not reprinted until 1815.

2. *Hiddushei Aggadot (HA)* was printed, based upon a manuscript found in the Bodleian Library of Oxford University, by L. Honig & Sons Ltd., in London (1960-62). It was independently released in Jerusalem at approximately the same time.
3. *Kol Sifrei Maharal mi-Prague* was printed in eighteen volumes, by Yahadut Publishers in Benei Berak (1972). This included a photo-offset of the (incomplete) twelve-volume edition of *Kol Sifrei Maharal mi-Prague*, printed by L. Honig & Sons Ltd. in London (1955-64).
4. Rambam, Introduction to Perek Helek, ch. 4, p. 133. (All chapter and page references to Rambam's Introduction to the Mishnah, Introduction to Perek Helek, and Introduction to Avot are from *Hakdamot le-Perush ha-Mishnah*, ed. Mordekhai Dov Rabinowitz, volume 18 of the Rambam La-Am edition [Jerusalem, 1961].)

expositions” of the Sages and a “book on prophecy,” testifying concerning the latter “that I am engaged in [writing] it.”⁵ He mentions it twice more,⁶ and then — silence.

Approximately twenty years after Rambam completed his Mishnah commentary⁷ (source of all the above citations), one final reference to the two anticipated treatises appears:

We had promised in the Commentary on the *Mishnah* that we would explain strange subjects in the “Book of Prophecy” and in the “Book of Correspondence” — the latter being a book in which we promised to explain all the difficult passages in the *Midrashim* where the external sense manifestly contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible. They are all parables. However, when, many years ago, we began these books and composed a part of them, our beginning to explain matters in this way did not commend itself to us. For we saw that if we should adhere to parables and to concealment of what ought to be concealed, we would not be deviating from the primary purpose. We would, as it were, have replaced one individual by another of the same species. If, on the other hand, we explained what ought to be explained, it would be unsuitable for the vulgar among the people. Now it was to the vulgar that we wanted to explain the import of the *Midrashim* and the external meanings of prophecy.... In view of these considerations, we have given up composing these two books in the way in which they were begun.⁸

R. Avraham ben Rambam tersely summarizes his father’s decision in a homiletical inversion of a verse from Exodus (34:30):

-
5. Ibid., ch. 5, *Yesod* 7, p. 142. Earlier, in his *Introduction to the Mishnah*, ch. 2, p. 19, he had introduced his designated book on prophecy, hoping that “God will assist us regarding it, with what is fitting to compose in this matter.”
 6. See Rambam, *Introduction to Avot*, ch. 1, p. 162, and ch. 7, p. 200.
 7. Rambam (ca. 1138-1204) completed his commentary on the Mishnah in 1168. He completed *Moreh ha-Nevoḥim* (*Guide of the Perplexed*) between 1185 and 1190.
 8. Rambam, *Moreh ha-Nevoḥim*, “Introduction to the First Part,” pp. 9-10. (All translations of and page references to the *Moreh* are from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines [Chicago, 1963]).

“Mosheh was afraid to approach it — as he stated in the beginning of the *Moreh*.”⁹

For us, Rambam’s missing masterpieces remain a gaping void, irrevocably beyond our reach. Yet, in a sense, perhaps no description of Maharal’s vast literary legacy is more apt than as actualizing the mission Rambam designated for his unwritten “Book of Correspondence.” Citations from talmudic and midrashic expositions — cast characteristically in a new and original light — saturate nearly every page of Maharal’s many volumes. While he grappled explicitly and repeatedly with reservations similar to those that dissuaded Rambam from his project, Maharal bequeathed to us a trove unparalleled in its scope. We should examine the circumstances that prompted Maharal to address us so eloquently and prolifically, where Rambam felt compelled to remain silent. In doing so, we may distinguish the aspects of Maharal’s approach that diverge from Rambam’s, even as, in others, he followed overtly in Rambam’s footsteps.

The World of Aggadah — Changing Attitudes in Changing Times

In the halakhic domain of talmudic literature, a staggering wealth of systematic analyses and codifications emerged during the medieval period of the *rishonim* (early rabbinical commentators). These classics remain the foundation of all serious talmudic erudition. Astoundingly, there was little simultaneous, parallel development in the realm of Aggadah. With some notable exceptions,¹⁰ this vast

9. R. Avraham ben Rambam, *Ma’amar al Odot Derashot Ḥazal*.

10. We do not intend here to belittle the significance of earlier contributions to the study of Aggadah. In deference to some of the more prominent exceptions from the period that anteceded the one under discussion here, a brief survey is in order. See n. 11, below, for further evaluation of the compositions in this list. See also the text and nn. 35, 39, and 42-63, below, for additional relevant citations that pertain to the *ge’onim* R. Sa’adyah, R. Sherira, R. Shemu’el bar Ḥofni, and R. Hai, as well as R. Shemu’el ha-Naggid, R. Nissim ben Ya’akov, R. Avraham ibn Ezra, Rambam, Radak, R. Yehi’el of Paris, R. Yeshayah

di Trani II, and R. Menachem ha-Me'iri, in addition to several of those listed here, below.

We should first note R. Yehudah ha-Levi (ca. 1074-ca. 1141), who addresses the difficulties of Midrash and Aggadah in his philosophical magnum opus, *Sefer ha-Kuzari* (at the end of its third unit, 3:68-73). On the one hand, the agenda and tone introducing the subject are overtly polemical and apologetic, undoubtedly reflecting the historical context of the work he titled “*A Book of Response and Support on Behalf of the Disgraced Faith*.” On the other hand, he characteristically provides a framework that stands independently of the objections that elicited it. Specifically, he was probably the first to devise a typology of *aggadot* (ibid. 3:73), albeit briefly. See also n. 50, below.

Expanding on this approach is the aforementioned *Ma'amar al Odot Derashot Hazal*, by R. Avraham ben Rambam (1186-1237). Granted, it is not a systematic commentary on Aggadah, much less a comprehensive one. However, it does provide a far more particularized typology of the forms taken by the Sages’ “*derashot*” (expositions) and “*ma'asiyyot*” (tales), subdividing these respectively into five and four categories (see n. 53, below). He was probably the first to formulate this sort of methodological approach to Aggadah in such detail.

R. Avraham's contemporaries R. Ezra ben Shelomoh (d. 1238 or 1245) and R. Azri'el ben Menaḥem (ca. 1160-ca. 1238) of Gerona produced probably the oldest systematic commentaries on *aggadot*. Fragments of R. Ezra's commentary appear (unattributed) in *Likkutei Shikhḥab u-Pe'ab*, published by R. Avraham ben Yehudah Elmaleh in Ferrara (1556). R. Ezra's *Perush le-Shir ha-Shirim*, commonly but erroneously attributed to Ramban, also features significant aggadic discussions. A critical edition of R. Azri'el's commentary, which represents a revision and, partly, an expansion of R. Ezra's and comprises partial commentaries on tractates *Berakhot*, *Ta'anit*, *Megillah*, and *Hagigah* and miscellaneous additional *aggadot*, was published by Yeshayah Tishby in Jerusalem (1945). The two works' obscurity is unfortunate; R. Ezra and R. Azri'el were among the foremost disciples of R. Yizḥak *Sagei Nebor* (ca. 1160-ca. 1235). The latter, son of Ra'avad of Posquieres, Provence, was the leading kabbalist of his generation. R. Ezra and R. Azri'el, who were among the first to disseminate kabbalistic teachings in Spain, are widely conjectured to have been Ramban's mentors in esoterica.

Although Ramban (1194-1270) himself did not dedicate any of his major works to elucidating Aggadah per se, aggadic interpretation was crucial to his agenda in several scholarly enterprises. This is clearly a major innovation of his Torah commentary. The “*Sha'ar ha-Gemul*”

section of his *Torat ha-Adam* is even more replete with aggadic and midrashic citations pertaining to the subject of reward and punishment in this world and beyond. The historic impact of these famous compositions is inestimable. See also nn. 55 and 59, below.

R. Yizḥak ben Yedayah, who appears to have been a younger contemporary of Ramban, from Provence, produced an exceptionally detailed and voluminous commentary on talmudic Aggadah, named *Ḥibbur ha-Talmud Bavli*. R. Ya'akov ibn Ḥaviv cites him by name, in the latter's *Ha-Kotev* commentary on his *Ein Ya'akov*, *Berakhot* 55b, § 123, and 64a, § 147. Although his first citation states that R. Yizḥak commented on “aggadot in a few tractates,” cross-references in the single extant manuscript (which is 163 folios long, comprising his commentary on *Avot* and selections from tractates *Sanhedrin*, *Makkot*, *Shevu'ot*, *Avodah Zarah*, and *Horayot*) attest to at least partial additional commentaries on tractates *Berakhot*, *Shabbat*, *Eruvin*, *Pesahim*, *Yoma*, *Rosh ha-Shanah*, *Ta'anit*, *Megillah*, *Ḥagigah*, *Ketubbot*, *Sotah*, *Bava Batra*, and *Ḥullin*, as well. Conceivably, this may have been a singular case of a comprehensive medieval aggadic commentary on all the tractates of the Talmud Bavli. Similarly, the one fragmentary manuscript of R. Yizḥak's midrashic commentary (which is 100 folios long, from the beginning and end of *Leviticus Rabbah* and the first part of *Numbers Rabbah*, until the beginning of chapter 13) contains cross-references to several passages in a lost commentary on *Genesis Rabbah*. This raises the possibility that his may have been the first comprehensive commentary on all the components of *Midrash Rabbah*. See Marc Saperstein's detailed analysis of R. Yizḥak's compositions, in *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980). Saperstein extrapolates from the existing manuscripts that the complete *Ḥibbur ha-Talmud Bavli* may have spanned 700-1000 folios (*ibid.*, p. 21) and the complete commentary on *Midrash Rabbah* may have run through 1000 folios (*ibid.*, p. 22). See n. 11, below, regarding the uniqueness of R. Yizḥak's legacy.

In the following generation, R. Hillel ben Shemu'el (“of Verona,” ca. 1220-ca. 1295) formulated *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh*, a treatise whose two parts deal respectively with the nature of the soul and the intellect and with reward and punishment (reflecting the influence of Ramban's “*Sha'ar ha-Gemul*”; see above). Written in 1288-91, it was first published from an imperfect manuscript by Shelomoh (Zalman) Ḥayyim Halberstam in Lyck (1874). A critical edition was issued by Joseph B. Sermoneta in Jerusalem (1981). The second part includes a sixfold subdivision of “all the words” of the Sages (s.v. “*Ziyyun Shen?*”; ed. Halberstam, pp. 25a-

26b; ed. Sermoneta, pp. 180-91), reminiscent of the typology advanced by R. Avraham ben Rambam, in his *Ma'amar al Odot Derashot Hazal* (see above), and likely reflecting the influence of both him and his father. R. Hillel's system is a significant alternative to the methodological approach to Aggadah of R. Avraham. See nn. 56 and 72, below. Tantalizingly, he also refers in *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh* to "the book I composed called *Ma'amar ha-Darban*" (ed. Halberstam, pp. 26a-26b; ed. Sermoneta, p. 191), which appears in context to have been an otherwise unknown commentary on *aggadot*. It is probably not the only such work from this period to be lost.

In the same generation, R. Todros ben Yosef ha-Levi Abbulafia (ca. 1220-98), one of its foremost kabbalists, wrote his kabbalistic magnum opus, *Oẓar ha-Kavod*. In part, it is a summary of R. Ezra and R. Azri'el of Gerona's aggadic commentaries (see above). Ironically, like these, *Oẓar ha-Kavod* languished in obscurity for centuries. An incomplete edition was first printed in 1808; the complete manuscript was only published over seventy years later by R. Ya'akov Shapira of Mezhirech in Warsaw (1879). The latter comprises partial commentaries on tractates *Berakhot*, *Shabbat*, *Erubin*, *Pesahim*, *Sukkah*, *Rosh ha-Shanah*, *Ta'anit*, *Megillah*, *Hagigah*, *Yevamot*, *Ketubbot*, *Gittin*, *Sotah*, *Kiddushin*, and *Hullin*.

Also of the generation following Ramban, Rashba (1235-1310) — among Ramban's outstanding disciples — produced his *Perushei ha-Haggadot*, comprising commentaries on some of the *aggadot* in tractates *Berakhot*, *Ta'anit*, *Megillah*, *Nedarim*, *Bava Batra*, *Avodah Zarah*, and *Hullin*. Many early commentators cite this well-known work — including Rashba's students R. Yehoshua ibn Shu'iv, in his *Derashot*, and R. Baḥyai ben Asher, in his Torah commentary; as well as R. Me'ir ben Yizḥak Aldabi, in his *Shevilei Emunah*, and R. Shem Tov ibn Shapirut, in his *Pardes Rimmonim* (see below). R. Yizḥak Abarbanel regarded it as the first systematic commentary of note on talmudic Aggadah. It was first published, albeit incompletely and with many revisions, in R. Ya'akov ibn Ḥaviv's *Ha-Kotev* commentary on his *Ein Ya'akov* (see the text below).

Rashba's student R. Baḥyai ben Asher, in his famous Torah commentary, highlights "the way of the Midrash" as the second of the commentary's four principal modalities (together with the "ways" of the "plain meaning," "intellect," and "Kabbalah"). Although "the way of the Midrash" occasionally introduces homiletic interpretations conforming to midrashic style but not deriving from midrashic literature, that corpus clearly underlies the overwhelming majority of

the comments presented as midrashic. Likewise, his encyclopedic work on ethics, *Kad ha-Kemah*, is replete with midrashic citations.

Additional noteworthy commentaries on Aggadah from the thirteenth century C.E. appear in the polemical Provençal works *Milhemet Mizvab* (especially its fourth section), by R. Me'ir ben Shimon of Narbonne (ca. 1190-1263), and *Sefer Pe'ab*, by R. Mosheh ben Shemu'el ibn Tibbon (ca. 1200-ca. 1283). Both treatises interpret *aggadot* that the Church had appropriated to denigrate Judaism. Also warranting mention are the Provençal scholars R. Levi ben Avraham ben Hayyim (ca. 1245-ca. 1315), whose encyclopedic *Livyat Hen* often cites *aggadot* and in particular includes (as Part II ["Bo'az"], Treatise 2, Part 2) a section, "*Sba'ar ha-Aggadah*," on aggadic interpretation, and R. Yedayah ben Avraham ha-Penini Bedersi (ca. 1270-ca. 1340), whose apologetic *Iggeret Hitnazzelut* to Rashba includes important aggadic elucidations and whose *Perush ha-Midrashim* was among the first commentaries on all the components of *Midrash Rabbah* as well as parts of other midrashic works (respectively, *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Sifrei*, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*, *Midrash Nehamot*, *Midrash Tebillim*, and *Midrash Rut*). R. Yedayah's *Iggeret Hitnazzelut* also includes a typology of aggadic literature, subdividing "the *haggadot* and everything from among the many stories in the Talmud and in the Midrashot" into four categories. His *Perush ha-Midrashim* is cited by — among others — R. Yizhak Abarbanel in his various works and R. Shemu'el Yaffeh Ashkenazi in his *Yefeh To'ar* commentary on *Midrash Rabbah* and his *Yefeh Mareh* commentary on the Talmud Yerushalmi (see the text below).

Several later authors cannot escape notice. R. Nissim Gerondi (Ran, ca. 1310-ca. 1375) expounded upon many passages from the Midrash and Aggadah in his renowned *Derashot* (see also n. 72, below). R. Yosef ben Shalom ("ha-Arokh") Ashkenazi (early fourteenth century) wrote a kabbalistic commentary on *Genesis Rabbah*, first published from manuscript by Moshe Hallamish in Jerusalem (1984). R. Yizhak Abo'ab (late fourteenth century) wrote the immensely popular *Menorat ha-Ma'or*, a structured aggadic compilation drawn principally from the Talmud (see n. 46, below), to chart a course for the reader's moral refinement. During the same period, R. Shem Tov ibn Shapprut produced his *Pardes Rimmonim al Haggadot ha-Talmud* commentary on Aggadah, with partial commentaries on tractates *Berakhot*, *Shabbat*, *Eruvin*, *Pesahim*, *Yoma*, *Sukkah*, *Rosh ha-Shanah*, *Ta'anit*, *Megillah*, *Hagigah*, *Yevamot*, *Ketubbot*, *Nedarim*, *Gittin*, *Sotah*, *Kiddushin*, *Bava Kamma*, *Bava Mezi'a*, *Bava Batra*, *Sanhedrin*, *Makkot*, *Avodah Zarah*, *Horayot*, *Menahot*, *Hullin*, *Me'ilah*, and *Niddah*. R. Yizhak ben Mosheh Aramah (ca. 1420-94) incorporated

corpus eluded comprehensive treatment until the early period of the *aḥaronim* (later rabbinical commentators) — particularly, from the sixteenth century C.E. and on.¹¹ No less remarkable was the apparent

many aggadic interpretations into the philosophical investigations and expositions of his widely acclaimed *Akedat Yizḥak* on the Torah. R. Yizḥak Abarbanel (1437-1508), heavily influenced by the latter, frequently grappled with *aggadot* in his various works; his eschatological *Yesḥu'ot Meshiho*, in particular, analyzes both relevant passages from the Midrash and Aggadah and a variety of earlier rabbinical approaches to them (see nn. 60-62, below). Although, a generation later, R. Me'ir ben Yeḥezke ben Gabbai (1480-aft. 1539) focused primarily on kabbalistic sources in his *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, he also cited and explained inter alia many midrashic and aggadic passages (see nn. 16 and 97, below).

Many of the compositions listed above are described and excerpted by Jacob Elbaum, in *Leḥavin Divrei Ḥakhamim: Miḥar Divrei Mavo la-Aggadah ve-la-Midrash mi-sbel Ḥakhmei Yemei ha-Beinayim* (Jerusalem, 2000).

11. The assertion that Aggadah eluded comprehensive treatment until the early period of the *aḥaronim* obviously demands clarification, given the compositions cited in n. 10, above. Inevitably, this is a question of definitions. However, we contend that, with one possible exception, none of those works can be construed as a comprehensive treatment of Aggadah — an apt description specifically for compilations of the *aḥaronim*.

This is most conspicuously the case in those compositions that serve more as introductions to Aggadah than commentaries on it. R. Avraham ben Rambam's *Ma'amar al Odot Derashot Ḥazal* obviously constitutes a case in point. While the author maps out a methodological approach to Aggadah, he makes no attempt to apply it in a systematic commentary. The same is clearly true of R. Yehudah ha-Levi's terse treatment of *aggadot*, in *Sefer ha-Kuzari* 3:73; R. Hillel ben Shemu'el's agenda, in the typology he provides in *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh*; and R. Yedayah ha-Penini's typology, in his *Iggeret Hitnaẓẓelut*.

Most of the other works cited above, while significant commentaries in their own right, cannot be considered treatments of Aggadah per se at all. Ramban's Torah commentary and "*Sha'ar ha-Gemul*" illustrate this category well. While their importance can hardly be overstated, in both, treatment of Aggadah is subordinated to the author's primary agenda. We encounter Ramban as Torah commentator, as exegete, as theologian, as philosopher, and as kabbalist, but we do not essentially

meet Ramban qua aggadic explicator, even where such explications emerge incidentally from his writings. The same conclusion manifestly applies to the expositions presented by R. Hillel, in his *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh*; R. Bah'yi, in his Torah commentary and in his ethical treatise *Kad ha-Kemah*; Ran, in his *Derashot*; R. Yizhak Aramah, in his *Akedat Yizhak*; R. Yizhak Abarbanel, in his various commentaries and even more so in his eschatological *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*; and R. Me'ir ben Gabbai, in his *Avodat ha-Kodesh*. This observation does not diminish the importance of these works for earnest students of aggadic literature. It does, however, have implications for understanding the historical development of interest in, and concentration on, Aggadah. Obviously, this is also true of the polemical *Millemet Miz'vah*, by R. Me'ir of Narbonne, and *Sefer Pe'ah*, by R. Mosheh ibn Tibbon — neither of which was ever published — as well as R. Yedayah's apologetic *Iggeret Hitnazze'elut*. In these, the use of *aggadot* is inevitably means to a distinct end. In a different vein, the same is true of R. Yizhak Abo'ab's *Menorat ha-Ma'or*. While it is arranged as an encyclopedic aggadic compilation, nevertheless, the author's aforementioned agenda (to chart a course for his readers' moral refinement) dictates its structure. Furthermore, since the primary objective is gleaned practical guidance from the material cited, he offers little substantive interpretation of *aggadot* per se.

Finally, considering even those works that were intended as direct commentaries on Aggadah (let alone the aforementioned, which were not), nearly all fall far short of a scale that could be remotely described as comprehensive. The commentaries of R. Ezra and R. Azri'el, while undeniably seminal, dramatize this observation. The latter's — which, as noted above, represents a revision and, partly, an expansion of the former's — is still extremely limited in scope. Commenting on little more than four tractates, the published text itself runs a mere 57 pages (most of which are largely filled with Tishby's extensive footnotes). Although R. Todros Abbulafia's *Ozar ha-Kavod* largely subsumes R. Ezra's and R. Azri'el's commentaries, it still pertains to only 15 tractates, and the complete published text extends to just 60 pages. Even Rashba's renowned *Perushei ha-Haggadot*, recently reprinted by R. Aryeh Leib Feldman in Jerusalem (1991), comments on but seven tractates and runs merely 126 pages (again, largely filled with footnotes). Similarly, although R. Shem Tov ibn Shaprut's *Pardes Rimmonim*, printed by R. Shelomoh Yizhak Yerushalmi Ashkenazi in Sabbioneta (1554), comprises a relatively impressive 27 tractates, the entire commentary runs only 98 pages. (The comments on several tractates are less than two pages long.) As for R. Levi ben Avraham's *Livyat Hen*,

most (including “*Sha‘ar ha-Aggadah*”) was never published and survives as a single incomplete manuscript. (The only significant part of *Livyat Hen* that was printed is “*Ma‘aseh Be-Reshit*” — Part II [“*Bo‘az*”], Treatise 1, Part 3, of *Livyat Hen* — published by Howard Kreisel in Jerusalem [2004].)

Likewise, in the midrashic domain, despite the extraordinary breadth of R. Yedayah ha-Penini’s *Perush ha-Midrashim*, it is quite scant. The apparently most complete existing manuscript (JTS No. 4902) is but 165 folios (including the comments on *Midrash Rabbah*, *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Sifrei*, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer*, *Midrash Nehamot*, *Midrash Tehillim*, and *Midrash Rut*). Moreover, although several later authors cite the commentary (see n. 10, above), little was ever printed. The only published portions are commentaries on *Midrash Tehillim*, on 37 psalms from among Psalms chs. 1 through 109, by R. Avraham ben Shelomoh Akarah in Venice, under the title “*Lesbon Zabav*” (1599), reprinted by R. Shelomoh Buber in Cracow (1891); on part of *Genesis Rabbah*, by Dr. Marcus Salom Krüger in Frankfurt am Main (1854); and on *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer*, on 15 of its 54 chapters, by R. Yonatan Bleier in Jerusalem (2005). Predictably, the printed commentary on *Midrash Tehillim* is slight (ed. Akara, 29 pages; ed. Buber, 26 pages), as is the printed commentary on *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer* (12 pages). The printed edition of *Genesis Rabbah*, which is a mere 64 pages and reaches only the middle of *Gen. Rabbah* 12:8, features only four paragraph-long comments by R. Yedayah (under the name ibn Bonet) — on *Gen. Rabbah* 9:5, 9:9, 11:7, and 12:6. Similarly, despite the far greater extent of R. Yosef Ashkenazi’s recently published commentary (see n. 10, above) on *Genesis Rabbah* (247 pages, each of its 35 chapters focusing on a midrashic passage), it is hardly comprehensive. All the selections are from just the first 29 (out of 100) chapters of the Midrash, and even these are excerpted only briefly and intermittently.

The one possible exception to this evaluation is R. Yizhak ben Yedayah, whose *Hibbur ha-Talmud Bavli* on talmudic Aggadah and commentary on the Midrash may have been both voluminous and comprehensive (see n. 10, above). Apart from the inherent uncertainty of such speculation, however, two related facts appear trenchant in considering this “the exception that proves the rule”: Only a small fraction of the original *Hibbur ha-Talmud Bavli* and commentary on the Midrash seem to have survived, as unique manuscript fragments, and even the vast majority of these manuscripts is still unpublished. From *Hibbur ha-Talmud Bavli*, just the commentaries on *Avot* and *Horayot* have been printed, both within the past forty years. (The former was

published — although attributed erroneously to R. Yedayah ha-Penini — by M.Sh. Kasher and Y.Y. Blacherowitz in Jerusalem, in *Perushei Rishonim le-Masekhet Avot* [1974], pp. 49-74. The latter was included by D. Genhovsky in Jerusalem, in his *Oẓar ha-Perushim al Masekhet Horayot* [1969], pp. 12-15.) Within the last thirty years, Marc Saperstein published several passages from the commentary on the Midrash, in “The Earliest Commentary on the *Midrash Rabbah*,” Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 283-306. Granted, the loss of most of the original manuscripts and the obscurity of the remainder are interrelated; both may simply reflect the vagaries of history, especially for documents that significantly antedated the printing press. However, we should note that most of the aggadic commentaries listed above share a similar plight, in varying degrees. R. Azri’el’s commentary was first published in 1945, R. Todros Abbulafia’s complete *Oẓar ha-Kavod* in 1879, and R. Yosef Ashkenazi’s commentary on *Genesis Rabbah* in 1984. Of R. Yedayah ha-Penini’s *Perush ha-Midrashim*, only the short section on *Midrash Tehillim* was printed before 1854; the first significant part of R. Levi ben Avraham’s *Livyat Hen* to be printed was published in 2004, and his “*Sha’ar ha-Aggadah*” has never been published at all. Although R. Shem Tov ibn Shapprut’s *Pardes Rimmonim* was printed in 1554 — and again three centuries later in Zhitomir (1866) — it can hardly be described as well known. (Most bibliographical references to “*Pardes Rimmonim*” are to an unrelated work by the outstanding kabbalist R. Mosheh ben Ya’akov Cordovero, published in Cracow [1592] and several times afterward.)

Apparently, apart from limited scholarly engagement in Aggadah, there was also relatively little general interest in such scholarship — even to the extent it existed — to justify its publication or even its preservation. The contrast to the halakhic domain of talmudic literature, in which so staggering a wealth of systematic analyses and codifications from the medieval period *did* proliferate and *did* reach us, is glaring. We contend that the foregoing justifies the conclusion posited in the text, that engagement in Aggadah from the sixteenth century and on was on a qualitatively different scale than in earlier periods.

In the end, we should note that R. Yizhak ben Yedayah in particular would have undoubtedly intended his work to realize Rambam’s mission for the unwritten “Book of Correspondence” — especially given the Maimonidean philosophical approach evinced by his surviving writings. If, as Saperstein conjectures, *Hibbur ha-Talmud Bavli* and the commentary on the Midrash were completed, they surely were

surge of interest in Aggadah at that time. The three most historically consequential systematic attempts to encompass and elucidate the aggadic sections of the Talmud were produced in disparate locations over little more than a century: from *Ein Ya'akov*, by R. Ya'akov ibn Ḥaviv and his son R. Levi (Ralbah), in Salonika (1516 and on), to *Ḥiddushei Aggadat Maharsha*, by R. Shemu'el Eli'ezer ben Yehudah ha-Levi Edels, in Ostrog, formerly in Poland (1631). Chronologically in between, Maharal's literary enterprise, excluding halakhic writings and posthumous publications, comprised over a dozen works over more than two decades, mostly in Prague (1578-1600). Historically, these books mark a watershed in aggadic scholarship.¹² Granted, historical impact, however great, is a woefully imprecise gauge of intrinsic worth. Nonetheless, especially given the relative dearth and obscurity of medieval compositions in Aggadah,¹¹ this yardstick does provide insight into long-range scholarly predilections that may reflect the intellectual climate of the time. Significantly, two of the most important commentaries on *Midrash Rabbah* also appeared at approximately the same time: *Mattenot Kehunnah*, a ubiquitous companion to the Midrash for elucidating its plain meaning, by R. Yissakhar Berman ben Naftali ha-Kohen Ashkenazi, in Sczebrzeszyn, Poland (1584), and *Yefeh To'ar*, *Yefeh Anaf*, and *Yefeh Kol*, components of the monumental commentary of R. Shemu'el Yaffeh ben Yizḥak Ashkenazi, in Constantinople (1597 and on). The latter also wrote *Yefeh Mareh* (1587), on the *aggadot* of the Talmud Yerushalmi. It is

the first books to actualize that mission. Given the unfortunate fate that befell them and other contemporaneous compositions, that role would remain effectively unfilled for three more centuries.

12. Furthermore, at least two additional noteworthy (albeit less known) authors in the domain of Aggadah were also active during this period. R. David ben Menasheh Darshan (b. ca. 1527) published two short compositions on aggadic expositions, "*Shir ha-Ma'alot le-David*," in Cracow (1571), and "*Ketav Hitnaẓẓelut la-Darshanim*," in Lublin (1574). R. Ya'akov ben Yizḥak Luzzato published *Kaftor va-Perah*, also known as *Yashresh Ya'akov*, in Basle (1581) — reissued as *Keballat Ya'akov*, in Salonika (1584) — a polemical defense of *aggadot* Christian censors attacked as anti-Christian, explicating them according to Rashi, the Tosafists, Rashba, and Ran. A better known contemporary, R. Mosheh Alshekh (ca. 1508-ca. 1593), composed a commentary on *Genesis Rabbah*, but it was never published and subsequently lost.

particularly noteworthy that Maharal, R. Yissakhar Berman, and Maharsha all hailed from Ashkenazi Jewry, which — before *Torat ha-Olah*, the philosophical magnum opus of R. Mosheh Isserles (Rema), printed in Prague (1570) — had contributed almost nothing to the development of classic Jewish thought.¹³

Some of the factors precipitating this transformation are readily discernible. The advent of the printing press with movable type in midfifteenth century Europe facilitated the spread of talmudic and midrashic literature there, also among those for whom the texts' apparent ratiocinative deficiencies demanded convincing resolutions. This was especially true of newly printed midrashic works, fraught with philosophical difficulties, which may have hitherto been (perhaps conveniently) inaccessible but had suddenly become unavoidable.¹⁴ Conversely, the rising tide of kabbalistic scholarship

13. Note that by “classic Jewish thought” we intend in particular the philosophical enterprise and responses to it. In this sense, our observation that medieval Ashkenazi Jewry had contributed almost nothing to the development of classic Jewish thought is a veritable truism. Most of the classics of Greek philosophy were translated into Arabic during the ninth and tenth centuries. Rationalist philosophy's infiltration into, and its eventual ascendancy in, much of the medieval Muslim world imposed upon Judaism (and Islam) new challenges that had never been explicitly, systematically addressed (except perhaps to a degree by Philo of Alexandria). Although we contend that all authentically Jewish responses to these challenges were based upon biblical, talmudic, and midrashic literature, the formulations themselves were perforce innovative. Thus, neoclassical rationalism was a major factor in the great blossoming of classic Jewish philosophy, which took place in the medieval, Arabic-speaking world, from R. Sa'adyah Ga'on (882-942) and on. This modality typified Spain and neighboring Provence and persisted even after the Christian conquest, but it was fundamentally alien to the Ashkenazi world. Obviously, this is not intended to depreciate the prodigious contributions of Ashkenazi Jewry in other arenas of Torah scholarship.

14. For example, at the beginning of the period under discussion, the so-called *Midrash Rabbah* on the Torah was first published in Constantinople (1512). It was reprinted, together with *midrashim* on the five *megillot*, in Venice (1545). During the same period, the so-called *Midrash Tanhuma* was first published in Constantinople (1522). It was reprinted in Mantua (1563) and Venice (1565).

focused attention upon Midrash and Aggadah specifically as means to elucidating nonrational, esoteric truths. *Zohar* refers to “Derashah” and “Aggadah” as prerequisites of apprehending the Torah’s “*razin setimin*,” its concealed mysteries.¹⁵ Expressed by the early sixteenth century kabbalist R. Me’ir ben Gabbai, “Through books of Aggadah, the scholar will apprehend the secrets of the Torah and divinity.”¹⁶ On a more prosaic level, printing facilitated the rapid dissemination of many older works that were replete with aggadic and midrashic citations, undoubtedly stimulating further study of their sources. For example, the early sixteenth century saw the first printed editions in Constantinople of R. Baḥyai ben Asher’s *Kad ha-Kemah* (1515), R. Nissim Gerondi’s (Ran’s) *Derashot* (1533), and R. Yiḥyah Abo’ab’s *Menorat ha-Ma’or* (1514). During the same period, R. Yehudah ha-Levi’s *Sefer ha-Kuzari* was first printed in Fano (1506), R. Yiḥyah Aramah’s *Akedat Yiḥyah* in Salonika (1522), and R. Me’ir ben Gabbai’s *Avodat ha-Kodesh* in Mantua (1545). Indeed, one can hardly overstate the impact on later scholarship in Aggadah of the publication of *Ein Ya’akov* itself.

Yet, on a deeper plane, winds of change, whipped up by the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, were sweeping across Europe — surely abetted by the printing press as well. While the limits of this essay preclude investigating their diverse effects, some obvious repercussions relate directly to Aggadah. In the wake of the

15. *Zohar*, II, 99a. In this well-known passage, Torah is figuratively portrayed as a beloved woman, beckoning her lover and incrementally revealing herself to him: First, she speaks on his level from behind a concealing curtain, corresponding to the level of “Derashah” (expositions), and afterward through a thin interposing veil, at the level of “Aggadah.” *Zohar* continues, “Once he has grown accustomed to her, she reveals herself to him face to face and relates to him all her concealed mysteries and all the concealed ways, which were hidden in her heart from primeval days. Thus, he becomes a complete human being and a definite master of Torah, the master of the house, to whom all her secrets are revealed and from whom nothing is distanced or covered” (ibid., II, 99a-99b).

16. R. Me’ir ben Gabbai, *Avodat ha-Kodesh* 3:24. As noted in the text below, the book was published around the beginning of the period under discussion. See also n. 10, above. Note that Maharal cites *Avodat ha-Kodesh* reverently, by its alternate title, *Marot Elokim*. See n. 97, below.

Renaissance, the rising tide of humanism clearly piqued interest in those nonlegal components of the Talmud that most resonate with the unquantified and unfettered spiritual world of the individual. Simultaneously, an increasingly universalistic and cosmopolitan world highlighted disdainfully the putative pettiness and parochialism that seemed especially rampant in Aggadah. Concomitantly, a mounting preoccupation with human reasoning helped to undermine the authority of tradition in general. More specifically, the Reformation exacerbated or engendered skepticism regarding hitherto unquestioned tenets of faith, rendering woefully inadequate a simplistic agenda of merely mastering the technicalities of cryptic *aggadot* — and mandating a more philosophically satisfying understanding. The cataclysmic expulsions of Spanish and Portuguese Jewry some years earlier (1492 and 1497, respectively) — not only exacting horrific suffering and loss of life but also obliterating many of the foremost centers of Jewish scholarship — had undoubtedly already provided a destabilizing impetus for such uncertainties. Ironically, the improved sociopolitical status of much of Central European Jewry augmented all these trends — particularly in Bohemia, during the relatively progressive reign of Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia Rudolf II (1576-1611). For better and for worse, the consequently enhanced tolerance for, and diminished insularity of, the Jewish community sharpened intellectual challenges that demanded a cogent response.

On a more invidious plane, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, in denouncing the Reformation's supposed heretical and "Judaizing" tendencies, especially excoriated the Talmud and its study. After the Ecumenical Council of Trent (begun in 1545), the Church's attitude worsened precipitously, culminating in papal burning of all copies of the Talmud and many other sacred texts found in Rome's environs (1553) — and a papal bull instigating other European rulers to follow suit (1554). In the caustic climate that ensued, Jews were forced to permit thorough censorship of all talmudic passages judged "offensive," and the Talmud itself was included in the first *Index Expurgatorius* (1559). Although analyzing Catholic treatment of the Talmud is beyond the scope of this essay, the role of Aggadah deserves specific mention. On the one hand, its excoriation was surely nothing new. From the charges submitted to the pope by an apostate Jew (Nicholas Donin, in 1236) that precipitated the first "official" burning of the Talmud (in Paris, in

1242), to the Counter-Reformers' allegations three centuries later, attacks on *aggadot* routinely figured prominently. On the other hand, the stakes in the interim had risen menacingly. The noted historian Dr. Mordekhai Breuer observes:

The burning of the Talmud in Rome (1553) was preceded by a campaign of propaganda and calumny, focused upon the "enigmatic legends," namely, *aggadot* *Ḥazal*, whose simple meaning is intolerable to rational, God-fearing people. Indeed, in contemporaneous Jewish accounts that chronicle the burning of the Talmud, the issue of the *aggadot* is conspicuous, in the expression, "And they burned the Talmud and the *aggadot*." It appears that, together with volumes of the Talmud, they burned and confiscated in particular printed editions of the Midrashim that had only recently been published.¹⁷

Evidently, a heightened interest in aggadic passages was neither peculiarly Jewish nor necessarily positive.

Moreover, exploiting abstruse *aggadot* to discredit the Talmud served the Church in more than one way. Providing a pretext for renewed suppression of Judaism and oppression of its adherents conformed to the Counter-Reformers' policy of reasserting hegemony by stifling opposition generally. Yet, ironically, harnessing the very skepticism that may be attributed to the Reformation, prospective proselytizers perceived in the cryptic world of Aggadah an opportunity — advancing their mission to convert the Jews. Dr. Breuer comments, "This agitation and confusion concerning the issue of the *aggadot* exposed what appeared to the eyes of the Christian scholars (with the guidance of apostate Jews) as a breach in the wall of Jewish faith, and they stormed this breach triumphantly."¹⁸

In this increasingly polemical climate, Maharal deemed Rambam's approach, in abandoning his "Book of Correspondence," no longer appropriate. Specifically, Rambam had determined that his

17. Mordekhai Breuer, "Vikuḥo shel Maharal mi-Prague im ha-Nozerim: Mabbat Ḥadash al Sefer Be'er ha-Golah," *Asif: Mi-Peri ha-Et ve-ha-Et* (Jerusalem, 1999), p. 130.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

intended book's dangers outweighed the risks of silence. After all, in the worst case, "if ... a perfect man of [intellectual] virtue should engage in speculation on [those expositions and] ... take[s] the speeches in question in their external sense and, in so doing, think[s] ill of their author and regard[s] him as an ignoramus — *in this there is nothing that would upset the foundations of belief.*"¹⁹ On the one hand, Maharal, in *Be'er ha-Golah*, reverently cites Rambam's considerations, introducing him as "the great rabbi — who was filled like the sea with wisdom in all natural, theological, and scholastic disciplines."²⁰ On the other hand, Maharal felt that circumstances compelled him to decide differently, lest incredulous readers of Aggadah spurn much more than the tales themselves: "Doubters will not heed these words, and they still rise forcefully to dissent. Therefore, it is fitting further to clarify honest judgment, through clear testimony ... to quiet the complaints through clear words."²⁰ To appreciate Maharal's agenda in *Be'er ha-Golah*, we should probe the source of these "complaints."

-
19. *Moreh*, "Introduction to the First Part," p. 10 (emphasis added). Note by comparison that an analogous scorn for the words of the prophets obviously *would* "upset the foundations of belief," given the foundational status Rambam accords to belief in prophecy. (See *Introduction to Perek Helek*, ch. 5, *Yesod* 6, pp. 139-40, and *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:1 and *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:8.) This may explain why, in contrast to his complete abandonment of his intended "Book of Correspondence," Rambam only partially suspended his projected "Book of Prophecy": "With regard to the meaning of prophecy, the exposition of its various degrees, and the elucidation of the parables occurring in the prophetic books, another manner of explanation [distinct from that designated for the unwritten book] is used in this Treatise" (*Moreh*, loc. cit.). We may surmise that Rambam alludes here to his extended discussion of prophecy in the *Moreh*, especially the last seventeen chapters of the second unit (2:32-48), or to various additional clarifications scattered throughout the *Moreh*. He provided no comparable surrogate for the missing "Book of Correspondence." See the text below for further elaboration on this distinction.
20. Maharal, *BHG, Be'er* 4, p. 49. (All page references to *BHG* and Maharal's other works are from the standard edition of L. Honig & Sons Ltd. in London [1955-64] and Yahadut Publishers in Benei Berak [1972], referenced in n. 3, above.) See also the text, and compare nn. 95-96, below.

The Polemic of *Be'er ha-Golah* — Identifying Maharal's Adversaries

Focusing on compositions, not composers, Maharal presents his rivals' arguments in *Be'er ha-Golah* anonymously. He directly names only one: In two later volumes, he refers to "Azaryah me-ha-Adomim [= de Rossi], who expanded his tongue against words of the Sages in his book, which is filled with blasphemies," adding that "we already rebutted his words in the composition *Be'er ha-Golah*."²¹ Indeed, somewhat less than half of the sixth "*Be'er*" comprises Maharal's polemic against de Rossi, with an extraordinary introduction: "It would have been appropriate to conclude our words, *had not a book composed by one of the members of our nation reached our hands* ... a man who knew not to understand words of the Sages, even one of their small statements, much less the great ones, much less their profound statements."²² Maharal cites explicitly²³ — and refutes — chapters 11, 12, 15, 16, and 17 of *Imrei Binah*, the third and most significant part of de Rossi's controversial magnum opus, *Me'or Einayim*.

Yet, perhaps we can indirectly glean some specificity regarding Maharal's other principal opponents from his description of de Rossi as "one of the members *of our nation*." By implication, Dr. Breuer deduces that the arguments countered in the rest of *Be'er ha-Golah* originated elsewhere.²⁴ Furthermore, he comments, "The list of *aggadot* that Maharal explicates in his work [*Be'er ha-Golah*] corresponds to a very high degree to the lists arrayed by Catholic priests and apostate Jews, from the days of the disputation of R. Yehi'el in Paris (1240) to the days of the burning of the Talmud in Rome and afterward.... The highest degree of likeness in the selection of aggadic passages of the Talmud is revealed precisely in connection with the burning of the Talmud in Italy, through a comparison of *Be'er ha-Golah* with a Christian pamphlet in manuscript.... In any case, we have neither seen nor heard of any

21. Maharal, NY, ch. 5, p. 35, and *HA* on *Gittin* 56b (II, 108). See also *HA* on *Gittin* 57b (II, 117).

22. *BHG*, *Be'er* 6, pp. 126-27.

23. See *ibid.*, pp. 127, 132, 133, 137, and 136, respectively.

24. See Breuer, p. 136.

other composition by a Jewish author in that generation that Maharal might have intended in referring to statements he found ‘recorded’ and ‘written.’”²⁵

Moreover, in his introduction to *Be'er ha-Golah*, Maharal states:

It is unnecessary to warn the scholars of Yisra'el in this generation of this [humility in confronting the Sages' words], for they all are careful to the utmost; for the words of the earlier [Sages] are [like] Sinai... However, recently, there came within the gates of the Talmud — whose gates are truly locked before anyone who does not know its premises — those who passed from gate to gate. And — in their opinion that they had grasped all its coffers and seen all the treasures and found within it matters that it is appropriate to reject — they therefore spread a slanderous report about the Talmud that they had explored.²⁶

Evidently, the new foe is not from among “the scholars of Yisra'el.” Although we might construe this statement’s subject in isolation as unlearned Jews, elsewhere, Maharal rebuts a challenge “that, we found, *both earlier and later scholars of the nations* would ask.”²⁷ In addition, most of the final “*Be'er*” is manifestly an apologetic refutation of non-Jewish accusations concerning the Sages’ attitude toward non-Jews and their governments.²⁸ Nor are Maharal’s other elucidations intended only for Jews. Before one, he declares, “I shall not be quiet, until I have made their righteousness shine; *so all the nations of the earth will know* that the thoughts of the early Sages are not like the thoughts of [ordinary] people.”²⁹ Before another, he prays, “Where we have elaborated excessively, [may God] Blessed be He atone for us; *for our intention is to show the nations* a little of the honor

25. Ibid., pp. 134-37. Even a cursory review of R. Yeḥi'el of Paris’s disputation reveals an uncanny correlation between the objections to the Talmud presented to R. Yeḥi'el and those to which Maharal replies in *BHG*.

26. *BHG*, “Author’s Introduction,” p. 11.

27. Ibid., *Be'er* 5, p. 88.

28. See *ibid.*, *Be'er* 7, pp. 144-51.

29. Ibid., *Be'er* 2, p. 24.

and glory of the Sages.”³⁰ Repeatedly, he describes his mission, “*to show all the nations how great words of the Sages are.*”³¹

These citations do not imply that Maharal directed *Be'er ha-Golah's* polemic exclusively or even predominantly at the Church per se. Apart from the obvious observation that, written in Hebrew, *Be'er ha-Golah* was intended for an overwhelmingly Jewish readership, such a simplistic conclusion ignores the complexities of that very audience. As discussed above, skeptical questioning of Aggadah originated in diverse quarters and under disparate influences. Undeniably, however, the new objections were mainly generated externally — and Maharal formulated his answers accordingly. Furthermore, he clearly appreciated that the stakes were not merely intellectual. A cogent resolution of aggadic difficulties might spell the difference between spiritual life and death — especially in places like cosmopolitan Prague, for thinking people caught in the crosswinds of the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Ironically, it is not surprising in this light that, as the Renaissance abated and Jewish scholarship became increasingly insular once more, Maharal's extraordinary legacy faded almost entirely from view. Ultimately, the realization that Maharal was reacting to stimuli arising far from Jewish precincts is not of merely historical interest, since Maharal's abiding prominence among our greatest thinkers, particularly in the realm of Aggadah, is not limited to either history or academics. It surely enables us better to understand the current resurgence of interest in Maharal, as many strata of religious Jewry reemerge from relative isolation to confront the challenges of the world at large. Moreover, it equips us to grasp the extent of Maharal's revolution in the world of Aggadah and Jewish thought — and its relevance to us.

30. *Ibid.*, *Be'er* 4, p. 55.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 59. Likewise, he excuses himself, “While these matters are profound and awesome, nevertheless, *so all the nations of the earth will know* how far they have stretched forth their hand, we shall reveal a finger's worth and conceal what is possible” (*ibid.*, p. 60). And, conversely, he avers, “Were it not to prevent people who are unworthy to explain the secrets of wisdom from abusing them, it would be appropriate to add to these words, *so all the nations of the earth will know* that there is no wisdom other than the wisdom [of the Sages]” (*ibid.*, *Be'er* 5, p. 95).

Most immediately, recognizing an external impetus for Maharal's innovative formulations empowers us to frame a central question we must address in the forthcoming. On the one hand, this recognition *per se* does not dictate that his formulations themselves were foreign or merely apologetic, let alone detached from his antecedents in Jewish tradition. On the other hand, whence their indisputable novelty? This is the dialectic we must explore: To what extent should we regard Maharal's approach as fundamentally revolutionary and discontinuous with his predecessors — and, conversely, to what extent is he essentially their extension, recasting their venerable precedents in unprecedented ways?

Divergence — Maharal's Revolution and the Authority and Significance of Aggadah

As noted above, few systematic treatments of aggadic literature predate the sixteenth century. But this was hardly the result of oversight. On the contrary, a vast array of references to Aggadah, stretching from the post-talmudic period of the *ge'onim* through that of the *rishonim*, thoroughly clarifies attitudes toward Aggadah of the rabbis at the time.

Recall that Rambam justifies abandoning his “Book of Correspondence,” because, even if one explains talmudic expositions “in their external sense and, in so doing, think[s] ill of their author and regard[s] him as an ignoramus — *in this there is nothing that would upset the foundations of belief.*”¹⁹ We should emphasize that Rambam unambiguously considers such irreverence despicable; elsewhere,³² he deems its proponents more foolish than those who defend a facile interpretation of such expositions out of a misguided allegiance to the Sages. Evidently, though, it is critical to distinguish between viewpoints that are merely stupid and contemptible and those “*that would upset the foundations of belief.*” Only subscribing to the latter category is grounds for severance of one's bond with God and Yisra'el and forfeiture of one's share in the World to Come. While Rambam certainly relegates wholesale rejection of Aggadah to the

32. See *Introduction to Perek Helek*, ch. 2, p. 120. See also *Introduction to the Mishnah*, ch. 7, p. 71, and *Moreh* 3:43, p. 573.

former category — even branding those who uphold it “accursed”³³ for having misjudged the Sages — he apparently does not ascribe it to the latter. Lest this contention be misconstrued, we must further stress that Rambam formulated his “Thirteen Foundations” of Jewish belief as prerequisites of inclusion “in the community of Yisra’el and ... a share in the World to Come.”³⁴ He obviously does not intend to negate the authority of aggadic statements with halakhic ramifications, such as those articulating fundamental doctrines. Nevertheless, despite this crucial caveat, Rambam clearly does not accord to Aggadah in general the status of dogma.³⁵

33. Introduction to Perek Helek, loc. cit.

34. Ibid., Conclusion, pp. 148-49. See also *Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Teshuvah* 3:6-8.

35. See also *Moreh* 3:43, p. 573, in which Rambam posits that aggadic expositions have “the status of poetical conceits; they are not meant to bring out the meaning of the text in question.” (His son, R. Avraham, employs a similar formulation; see n. 53, below.) He also refers derisively to those “ignoramuses” who think that such expositions are “the true meaning of the [biblical] text and that the *Midrashim* have the same status as the traditional legal decisions” (ibid.). He emphasizes this disparity — and the lack of a binding tradition underlying the former — at the end of his *Mishneh Torah* as well, in warning against a preoccupation with eschatology: “The Sages have no received tradition in these matters except [as they deduce] based upon the [Scriptural] verses, and they therefore have disputes in these matters. And in any case, neither these matters’ order of actualization nor their details are a dogma of the religion. And a person should never occupy oneself with words of the *haggadot* nor prolong [engagement] in the *midrashot* that are stated in these issues and the like nor consider them fundamental. For they engender neither reverence nor love [of God]” (*Hilkebot Melakhim* 12:2). He further elaborated on this divergence in a responsum, regarding “words of Aggadah”: “Are they words of tradition or rational arguments? Rather, everyone ponders their meaning, according to what appears to him in it, and it contains neither words of tradition nor [instruction concerning] what is forbidden or permitted nor any of the laws” (*Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. Yehoshua Blau [Jerusalem, 1958-61], II, 739 [Response 458, to R. Pinehas ha-Dayyan]; also in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Itzhak Shailat [Jerusalem, 1995], II, 461). See also n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

Moreover, stressing the distinction between practical Halakhah and the nonlegal domain of Aggadah, Rambam echoes almost verbatim R. Shemu'el ha-Naggid's observation (in the latter's *Mevo ha-Talmud*, s.v. "Ve-Teyunta"; see n. 48, below): "[In] any dispute among the Sages that does not lead to deed but pertains only to believing something, there is no basis for ruling Halakhah like one [side] among them" (commentary on *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:3; see also his commentary on *Mishnah Shemu'ot* 1:4 and *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, "Mizvot Lo Ta'aseh," *Mizvot* 133; R. Ya'akov ibn Haviv also cites this position in Rambam's name, in R. Ya'akov's *Ha-Kotev* commentary on his *Ein Ya'akov*, *Megillah* 2b, § 1). In addition, in the aforementioned responsum, he also reaffirmed a principle previously articulated by the *ge'onim* R. Sa'adyah, R. Sherira, and R. Hai, as well as R. Avraham ibn Ezra (see nn. 42-43 and 51, below), "One does not raise difficulties in Haggadah." He quotes this statement in the *Moreh*, in anticipation of subtle logical inconsistencies "in the *Midrashim* and the *Haggadot*" that may elude satisfactory resolution (*Moreh*, "Introduction," p. 20). Furthermore, in the same responsum, he explicitly ascribed this assessment to all words of Aggadah and Midrash, "whether they are written in the Talmud or written in books of Midrash or written in books of Aggadah." (Regarding this ruling, see also R. Sa'adyah Ga'on's tacit equation, in R. Yehudah ben Barzilai of Barcelona's commentary on *Sefer ha-Yezirah*, of "haggadot that exist in the Talmud and elsewhere," quoted in n. 42, below. Ramban implicitly adopts this approach as well, in his *Ma'amar ha-Vikuah*, cited in n. 59, below. Compare R. Hai Ga'on's statement, in R. Avraham ben Yizhak of Narbonne's *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, "that all that is fixed in the Talmud is more clarified than that which is not fixed in it," quoted in the text and n. 46, below.)

Thus, Rambam felt empowered to write, in his famous epistle against astrology to the scholars of Montpellier (commonly but erroneously labeled as an epistle to the scholars of Marseilles), "I know it is possible that you will seek and find words of individuals from among the scholars of truth, our Rabbis, peace be upon them, in the Talmud and in the Mishnah and in the Midrashot, that indicate that at the time of a person's birth the stars caused such and such. This should not be difficult in your eyes; for it is improper that we should abandon operative Halakhah and go about [seeking] objections and resolutions. And likewise, it is inappropriate for a person to abandon words of sense, whose proofs have already been verified, and empty one's hands of them, and rely upon the words of a [solitary] individual from among the Sages, peace be upon them, when it is possible that something was

Rambam's assessment is not unique. Granted, some eminent *risbonim*, especially among Ashkenazi scholars³⁶ — significantly, Tosafists R. Shimshon of Sens³⁷ and R. Mosheh Tako of Regensburg³⁸ — seem to advocate an uncompromising literalism in

overlooked by him at that time or that those words contain an allusion or [that] he said them at the moment [based upon] an incident that took place” (*Iggerot ha-Rambam*, II, 488). He expressed the same approach in his responsum regarding free will: “And anyone who abandons the matters that we explained, which are constructed upon foundations of the world, and goes and searches in a *haggadah* or in a *midrash* or in the words of one of the *ge'onim* of blessed memory, until he finds a word through whose plain meaning he will refute our words, which are words of sense and understanding — is but knowingly committing suicide [lit. destroying himself]. And it is sufficient [punishment] for him what he does [thereby] to his own soul” (*Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, II, 715-16 [Response 436, to Ovadyah the proselyte]; also in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, I, 236-37). Rambam did affirm in the following passage (loc. cit.) that the Sages' words, properly understood on a deeper level, in fact pose no contradiction to his position. Nevertheless, he clearly did not regard himself as necessarily beholden to their nonhalakhic statements. All these sources reaffirm our conclusion that Rambam does not accord to Aggadah in general the status of dogma.

36. R. Yizhak Abarbanel, in his *Yeshu'ot Meshiho* (Koenigsberg, 1861), Part 2, *Iyyun* 2, ch. 1, p. 39b, refers to the “way of plain meaning” as the “way of the Ashkenazim in understanding the *aggadot* and their meanings.” He comments that he regards this approach as “insufficient and incorrect.”

37. See R. Shimshon ben Avraham of Sens (ca. 1150-ca. 1230), “Epistle II on Revival of the Dead,” cited in *Iggerot ha-Ramah*, ed. Yehezkel Silber (Jerusalem, 2000), p. 19.

38. See R. Mosheh ben Hisdai Tako of Regensburg (d. ca. 1230), *Ketav Tamim*.

Although *Ketav Tamim* was quoted in contemporaneous Ashkenazi literature, only one fragment has survived, comprising the end of its second part and the beginning of its third. It was published by Refa'el Kircheim, in *Oẓar Nehmad*, 3 (Vienna, 1860), 58-99. It is unique in medieval Jewish literature in its unqualified acceptance of all talmudic *aggadot* as *literally* true — which effectively mandated rejecting the positions of almost all R. Mosheh's predecessors, from R. Sa'adyah Ga'on and on. Indeed, the latter was his main target. R. Mosheh brands him inter alia “impoverished in the mind [Heb. *ani be-da'at*]” (ibid., p.

Aggadah. But Rambam's repudiation of literalism is rooted in the earlier writings of the *ge'onim* R. Sa'adyah, R. Sherira, R. Shemu'el bar Ḥofni, and R. Hai, as well as R. Ḥananel ben Ḥushi'el, R. Nissim ben Ya'akov, and R. Yehudah ha-Levi. Moreover, many later *rishonim*, including R. David Kimḥi (Radak), R. Avraham ben Rambam, Ramban, R. Hillel ben Shemu'el ("of Verona"), Rashba, R. Yeshayah di Trani II, R. Menaḥem ha-Me'iri, Ritva, R. Baḥyai ben Asher, Ran, R. Yizḥak Aramah, R. Yizḥak Abarbanel, and R. Me'ir ben Gabbai, embrace the same course in varying degrees.³⁹ Even Ra'avad, who criticizes Rambam's figurative understanding of talmudic statements

70), for his nonliteral interpretation of the *aggadah* presented in *Avodah Zarah* 3b. He also assailed R. Avraham ibn Ezra, Rambam, and R. Yehudah he-Ḥasid. His reactionary perspective can perhaps best be summarized by his conclusion, "It is not for us to abandon the Torah's language and our Rabbis' words and seize innovations recently come" (*ibid.*).

Although it is difficult to discern any direct results of R. Mosheh's polemics, R. Yosef Ashkenazi (1525-77) expressed a similar outlook three centuries later. He mainly attacked R. Avraham ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ralbag, and R. Yosef Albo, also railing against R. Sa'adyah Ga'on, R. Baḥyai ibn Pakudah, R. Azri'el of Gerona, Radak, Ramban, R. Yonah Gerondi, Rashba, R. Baḥyai ben Asher, R. Yizḥak Yisra'eli, R. Shem Tov ibn Shapprut, R. Yizḥak Aramah, R. Yizḥak Abarbanel, and R. Me'ir ben Gabbai. He articulated his opinions in polemical debates in Prague and Poznan (ca. 1559) with R. Avraham ben Shabbetai Sheftel ha-Levi Horowitz (ca. 1550-1615) and in a sixty-chapter book, completed in 1565 but never published.

Jacob Elbaum discusses R. Mosheh Tako, R. Yosef Ashkenazi, and the fierce reactions to their attitudes, at length, in *Lehavin Divrei Hakhamim, Sha'ar* 4, ch. 11, pp. 225-51. Apart from the widespread opposition their reactionary stances provoked, it is instructive to consider the breadth of earlier "mainstream" views — ranging from rationalist philosophers to kabbalists — they were forced to repudiate. Evidently, the nonliteral approach to Aggadah had already permeated virtually every stratum of normative Jewish scholarship.

39. Among lesser-known commentators, we should add R. Yizḥak ben Yedayah, R. Me'ir of Narbonne, R. Mosheh ibn Tibbon, R. Levi ben Avraham, R. Yedayah ha-Penini, and R. Shem Tov ibn Shapprut, all of whom explicitly affirm a nonliteralist, interpretive course. See n. 10, above, for a more detailed description of each.

regarding the World to Come,⁴⁰ laments the problem of *aggadot* that, read superficially, “confound the minds.”⁴¹

Yet, our principal focus is not upon mere issues of interpretation; Rambam’s thesis presumes the *nondogmatic* standing of aggadic statements. We must concede that this position, however ostensibly shocking to us, is veritably axiomatic to the *ge'onim* and *rishonim*. From R. Sa'adyah Ga'on, who asserts, “One neither relies upon nor cites as proof any of the words of Aggadah,”⁴² it is virtually ubiquitous. R. Sherira Ga'on reiterates the same principle, with greater elaboration.⁴³ Although R. Hai Ga'on appears to espouse a

40. See Ra'avad (ca. 1125-98), *Hassagot on Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:2 and 8:4.

41. *Hassagot on Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:7. See also R. Yosef Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* 1:2, for a variant version of Ra'avad's comment.

42. R. Aharon ben Meshullam of Lunel, “Epistle on Revival of the Dead” (cited in *Iggerot ha-Ramah* [ed. Silber], p. 10, and *Oẓar ha-Ge'onim* [OHG], ed. Binyamin Menasheh Lewin [Jerusalem, 1928-43], “*Milu'im al Hagigah*,” p. 65), quoting “the *ge'onim* Rabbi Sa'adyah and Rabbi Hai.” See also R. Yehudah ben Barzilai of Barcelona, commentary on *Sefer ha-Yeẓirah*, quoting R. Sa'adyah (882-942): “The Rabbis said that one does not raise difficulties in words of *haggadot* that exist in the Talmud and elsewhere” (ibid., p. 41; cited in OHG, “*Perushim al Berakhot* 59a,” § 271, p. 91, n. 10, and “*Teshuvot al Pesahim* 50a,” § 170, p. 71, n. 3). This may be the first appearance of this often-quoted principle. See n. 35, above, and nn. 43 and 51, below. (Regarding the equation of “*haggadot* that exist in the Talmud and elsewhere,” see also Rambam’s responsum, grouping together *aggadot* that “are written in the Talmud or written in books of Midrash or written in books of Aggadah,” quoted in n. 35, above. In addition, see Ramban’s *Ma'amar ha-Vikuah*, cited in n. 59, below, which implicitly adopts this approach as well. Compare R. Hai Ga'on’s statement, in R. Avraham ben Yizhak’s *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, “that all that is fixed in the Talmud is more clarified than that which is not fixed in it,” quoted in the text and n. 46, below.) In addition, see *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim*, ed. Avraham Eliyyahu Harkavy (Berlin, 1887), §§ 9 and 353. See also OHG, “*Milu'im al Hagigah*,” p. 65, quoting R. Sa'adyah’s reiteration of nonreliance upon Aggadah in affirming the nonbinding status of *Seder Olam*, an apparently historical record. Compare Ramban’s evaluation of *Seder Olam*, in n. 55, below.

43. See R. Avraham ben Yizhak of Narbonne, *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, II, “*Hilkhot Sefer Torah*,” 60a, ed. Zevi Binyamin Auerbach (1869), p. 47, and ed.

relatively conservative perspective — at least, compared with his father-in-law, R. Shemu’el bar Ḥofni, whose philosophy was more radically rationalist⁴⁴ — the distinction is at most quantitative.

Shalom and Ḥanokh Albeck (1935-38), pp. 157-58: “Said Mar [Rabbi] Sherira: ‘Those statements that derive from [biblical] verses and are called “Midrash” and “Aggadah” are *umdana*.’... And, therefore, we do not rely upon words of Aggadah.” See also *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, loc. cit., ed. Albeck, p. 158, n. 11; R. Yizhak Abo’ab, *Menorat ha-Ma’or*, Introduction, quoting “Rabbi Sherira Ga’on”; *OHG*, “*Teshuvot al Megillah 31b*,” § 247, p. 66, and “*Perushim al Hagigah 14a*,” § 68, p. 60; and *Tekufat ha-Ge’onim ve-Sifrutah*, ed. Simḥah Assaf [Jerusalem, 1955], p. 244. See the text below for explication of this position of R. Sherira (ca. 906-1006). In addition, see *OHG*, “*Teshuvot al Pesahim 50a*,” § 170, pp. 70-71, quoting R. Sherira and R. Hai, “These all are *midrashot* and *aggadot*, and one does not raise difficulties over them; for the Rabbis taught: One does not raise difficulties in Haggadah. And this biblical passage has other resolutions.” See also *Toratan shel Rišbonim*, ed. Ḥayyim M. Horowitz (Frankfurt am Main, 1881), II, § 12, p. 45, and *OHG*, loc. cit., n. 3, quoting R. Sherira and R. Hai, and “*Teshuvot al Ta’anit 4a*,” § 5, p. 6, that “one does not raise difficulties in Haggadah.” See also additional citations of this principle, in nn. 35 and 42, above, and n. 51, below. In addition, see *OHG*, “*Teshuvot al Kiddushin 49a*,” § 295, p. 129, and § 296, p. 131, quoting R. Sherira and R. Hai, regarding the nonbinding nature of nonlegal midrashic interpretation of biblical verses. This stance has significant implications for later biblical exegesis; see nn. 51-52, 59, and 62, below. See also n. 47, below, for additional sources for R. Hai’s position. In addition, see n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

44. See R. Ya’akov ibn Ḥaviv, *Ha-Kotev* commentary on *Ein Ya’akov*, *Hagigah 14b*, § 11, quoting R. Hai Ga’on regarding “Mar Rabbi Shemu’el Ga’on,” as “denying any [talmudic] tale [in] which it is said that a miracle was done for the righteous.” See also *Teshuvot ha-Ge’onim*, ed. Ya’akov Musafia (Lyck, 1864), § 99, p. 31b, and *OHG*, “*Teshuvot al Hagigah 14b*,” § 20, p. 15. In addition, see R. Yehudah ben Bilam of Toledo, commentary on Sam. I, ch. 28 (cited in *OHG*, “*Teshuvot al Hagigah 4b*,” § 5, p. 4), quoting “Rabbi Shemu’el ben Ḥofni Ga’on,” that “if the words of the ancient [Sages] contradict the intellect, we are not obliged to accept them.” R. Hai Ga’on (cited in *OHG*, “*Teshuvot al Hagigah 4b*,” § 4, pp. 2-4), Radak (commentary on Sam. I 28:24), R. Yizhak Aramah (*Akedat Yizhak*, ch. 65), and R. Yizhak Abarbanel

(commentary on Sam. I 28:8) all present R. Shemu'el's position and objections to it.

Similarly, in his commentary on Deut. 32:51, R. Shemu'el (d. 1013) writes, "The Master of the worlds Who knows the hidden secrets [of the future] is alone in this knowledge of His. No one will know them other than He — or whoever to whom, from among His prophets and messengers, He will make them known. And we shall already know [a priori] the negation of the words of anyone who glorifies himself in [possession of] this knowledge through any other course. And God, may He be exalted, already said to the king of Egypt, 'Where are they, then, your wise men, that they might tell you now and know what the God [of Hosts has purposed regarding Egypt]?' (Isa. 19:12). And it is impossible for us to believe in the veracity of a matter for whose negation there are corroborations, only because some of the ancient [Sages] said it. Indeed, it is necessary that we contemplate the matter with our intellect. If a proof may be found for its veracity, we shall accept it. If there comes corroboration for its possibility, we shall believe in it as something possible. And if it is found to be impossible, we shall regard it as impossible" (*Perush ha-Torah le-Rabbi Shemu'el ben Hofni*, ed. Aaron Greenbaum [Jerusalem, 1979], p. 520; see also *Oẓar ha-Ge'onim le-Sanbedrin*, ed. Hayyim Zevi Taubes [Jerusalem, 1966], pp. 546-47). The specific context of R. Shemu'el's remarks is his implicit rejection of the *aggadot* concerning Mosheh's birth that appear variously in *Sotah* 12b, *Sanhedrin* 101b, *Ex. Rabbah* 1:18 and 1:24, *Tanḥuma Va-Yakbel* 4, and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* 48.

R. Shemu'el was also the first to write an introduction to the Talmud, summarizing (in Arabic) its underlying principles. Although early scholars mentioned it, only fragments have been recovered. R. Shemu'el ha-Naggid, living a generation later, used this work in his own *Mevo ha-Talmud* (see n. 48, below). In particular, R. Shemu'el ben Hofni's *Introduction to Knowledge of the Mishnah and the Talmud* is the source of the famous definition of Aggadah that appears in R. Shemu'el ha-Naggid's *Mevo ha-Talmud*, s.v. "*Ve-Haggadah*": "Aggadah is every explanation that comes in the Talmud regarding any matter that is not a *miẓvah*. This is Aggadah; and you should learn from it only what arises in the mind.... What [the Sages] interpreted in [Scriptural] verses is [for] each one according to what occurred to him and what he saw in his mind. And according to what arises in the mind from these interpretations, one learns it; and one does not rely upon the rest." See also *Tekufat ha-Ge'onim ve-Sifrutab*, p. 283, quoting an epistle by R. Shemu'el, poetically portraying "the words of the *baggadot*" as "refuse

Despite substantive disagreements with R. Shemu'el, R. Hai never discounts his predecessor's opinions as doctrinally illegitimate or essentially unacceptable.⁴⁵ Furthermore, while R. Hai distinguishes "the Aggadah and the Midrash that are written in the Talmud" from "that which is not,"⁴⁶ he affirms the nonbinding nature of Aggadah

[Heb. *pesolet*],” compared to the “fine flour [Heb. *solet*]” of “*halakhot* and *shemu'ot*.” In addition, see n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

45. See *Ha-Kotev* on *Ein Ya'akov* and *OHG*, loc. cit., quoting R. Hai Ga'on regarding R. Shemu'el.

46. *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, loc. cit. (ed. Auerbach, p. 47; ed. Albeck, p. 158), quoting “Mar Rabbi Hai,” “that all that is fixed in the Talmud is more clarified than that which is not fixed in it.” See also *Menorat ha-Ma'or*, loc. cit., quoting “Rabbi Hai Ga'on,” and *OHG*, “*Perushim al Haggigah* 14a,” § 69, p. 60. Note that a partial precedent for this dichotomy may be deduced from R. Sa'adyah Ga'on's comment that there was no consensus among the Sages regarding the authenticity of the esoteric and profoundly anthropomorphic *Shi'ur Komah*, “because it is neither in the Mishnah nor in the Talmud, and we have no way through which it may be clarified to us if it is the words of R. Yishma'el or not” (*OHG*, “*Teshuvot al Berakhot* 7a,” § 29, p. 17).

In contrast, however, see R. Sa'adyah's tacit equation, in R. Yehudah ben Barzilai of Barcelona's commentary on *Sefer ha-Yeẓirah*, of “*haggadot* that exist in the Talmud and elsewhere” (*ibid.*, p. 41), quoted in n. 42, above. Likewise, although Rambam vehemently branded *Shi'ur Komah* a forgery (*Teshuvot ha-Rambam* [ed. Blau], I, 200-1 [Response 117 to R. Sa'adyah ben Berakhot]), he refused to discriminate in general between *aggadot* that “are written in the Talmud or written in books of Midrash or written in books of Aggadah” (*ibid.*, II, 739 [Response 458, to R. Pinehas ha-Dayyan]; also in *Iggerot ha-Rambam* [ed. Shailat], II, 461). He regarded none as binding or even theoretically superior. See n. 35, above. Ramban implicitly adopts this approach as well, in his *Ma'amar ha-Vikuaḥ*, cited in n. 59, below.

R. Yehudah of Barcelona himself, however, draws the same distinction as R. Hai: “The Haggadah that is in the Talmud is most rigorous of all, since it was clarified and mentioned in the Talmud” (commentary on *Sefer ha-Yeẓirah*, p. 89). So does R. Mosheh Tako, in *Ketav Tamim*, in comparing *Shi'ur Komah* with “our Talmud [Bavli] ... the Talmud Yerushalmi and ... the major Midrashim” (*ibid.*, pp. 61-62), and also distinguishing other midrashic works, such as *Midrash Mishlei*, from “the *aggadot* of our Talmud, upon which we rely” (*ibid.*, p. 63).

regardless, so even recondite talmudic *aggadot* may operatively be ignored.⁴⁷ This attitude reverberates among the *rishonim* as well,

Differentiating between the Talmud and other works was also explicitly the reason R. Yizhak Abo'ab quoted R. Hai's statement, in his introduction to *Menorat ha-Ma'or* (loc. cit.). After citing him, R. Yizhak comments, "Therefore, from the Midrashot that are not written in the Talmud, I have taken hold of [only] a few matters that are most necessary for the purpose of the composition [*Menorat ha-Ma'or*]. And of the Midrash that I found written in the Talmud I have taken hold and not let go — except in a few matters that I saw no benefit to mention in this composition" (ibid.). In addition, see R. Yizhak Abarbanel's comparison, in *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, Part 2, Introduction, p. 17a, of the status of statements in "the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi" with those in "*Sifra* and *Sifrei* and *Tosefta*, *Tanbuma* and *Mekhilta* and [*Midrash*] *Rabbot* and *Hazita* [i.e., *Song. Rabbah*] and *Rabbati* and *Midrash Tehillim*" (quoted in n. 61, below).

47. See *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, loc. cit., quoting "Mar Rabbi Hai," that "one should not rely upon Aggadah and Midrash, *even though they are written in the Talmud*, if they are unattuned or erroneous. For our principle is: One does not rely upon the Aggadah. Rather, what is fixed in the Talmud, [in] which we find [the means] to remove its error and reinforce it — we should do so; for, if it had no basis, it would not have been fixed in the Talmud. And what we do not find a way to clear of its error — becomes like matters that [do] not [accord with the] Halakhah. [With] what is not fixed in the Talmud, we need not [do even] this much. Rather, one ponders it; if it is correct and becoming, one expounds it and teaches it; and, if not, we pay it no attention." See also *Menorat ha-Ma'or* and *OHG*, loc. cit. In addition, see *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim* (ed. Musafia), § 98, p. 30a, where R. Hai (939-1038) reaffirms the principle that "one does not rely upon words of Aggadah." See also *OHG*, "*Perushim al Berakhot* 59a," § 271, p. 91, and "*Teshuvot al Berakhot* 59a," § 357, pp. 130-31, and *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim ha-Hadasot*, ed. Immanu'el, § 157. In addition, see Rashba, *Perushei ha-Haggadot*, and *Ha-Kotev on Ein Ya'akov*, *Berakhot* 59a, § 127, quoting R. Hai Ga'on and R. Nissim ben Ya'akov (see n. 49, below). See also *OHG*, "*Perushim al Hagigah* 14a," § 67, pp. 59-60, quoting "Rabbi Hai Ga'on," commenting "that words of Aggadah are not like a tradition; rather, everyone expounds what arises in his heart — like 'it is possible' and 'one may say' — not a decisive statement. Therefore, one does not rely upon them." Note that many responsa of R. Sherira Ga'on were written with, or by, his son R. Hai; see also the sources cited in n. 43, above.

including — before Rambam — R. Shemu’el ha-Naggid,⁴⁸ R. Nissim ben Ya’akov,⁴⁹ R. Yehudah ha-Levi,⁵⁰ and R. Avraham ibn Ezra.⁵¹

-
48. See R. Shemu’el ha-Naggid (993-1055/6), *Mevo ha-Talmud*, s.v. “*Ve-Haggadah*.” Based upon R. Shemu’el ben Hofni’s *Introduction to Knowledge of the Mishnah and the Talmud* (see n. 44, above), R. Shemu’el ha-Naggid defines Aggadah as “every explanation that comes in the Talmud regarding any matter that is not a *mizvah*. This is Aggadah; and you should learn from it only what arises in the mind.... What [the Sages] interpreted in [Scriptural] verses is [for] each one according to what occurred to him and what he saw in his mind. And according to what arises in the mind from these interpretations, one learns it; and one does not rely upon the rest.” In addition, see *ibid.*, s.v. “*Ve-Teywta,*” where R. Shemu’el concludes, “[In] any dispute in which the dispute did not mandate a deed but rather an idea alone, we shall not circumscribe the Halakhah in it like so and so [i.e., one side].” See also Rambam’s presentation of this position, in n. 35, above. In addition, see n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.
49. See *Ha-Kotev* on *Ein Ya’akov*, loc. cit., quoting R. Nissim ben Ya’akov (ca. 990-1062) — and R. Hai Ga’on (see n. 47, above) — that “the Sages say, one does not rely upon words of Aggadah.” See also Rashba, *Perushei ha-Haggadot*, loc. cit. See the text below for greater elaboration on R. Nissim’s position.
50. See R. Yehudah ha-Levi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari* 3:73 (end). R. Yehudah ha-Levi concedes that there are talmudic statements he cannot adequately explain, which should be regarded as “mundane chat of the Sages” (*Sukkah* 21b and *Avodah Zarah* 19b) — qualifying, however, that “all this is only in matters in which there are no [halakhic ramifications regarding what is] permitted and forbidden.” See also n. 10, above, for further elaboration regarding R. Yehudah ha-Levi. In addition, see n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.
51. See R. Avraham ibn Ezra’s introduction to his commentary on the Torah, especially s.v. “*Ha-Derekh ha-Revi’it*.” R. Avraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164) begins his introduction with the observation that “Torah commentators go in [any of] five ways” (the fifth of which he embraces). The fourth, “the way of *derash*,” is fraught with difficulties, because there are so many disparate motives for different and often mutually exclusive expositions. After citing a bewildering succession of examples, he concludes, “And, in the end, there is no end to *derash*.” We should stress his emphasis that we *are* beholden to *derash* for the

Subsequent generations reaffirmed it repeatedly, notably Radak,⁵² R. Avraham ben Rambam,⁵³ R. Yehi'el of Paris,⁵⁴ Ramban,⁵⁵ R. Hillel

determination of Halakhah (s.v. “*Ha-Derekh ba-Sheniyyal*” and throughout his commentary). Nevertheless, his readiness to disregard the Sages’ expositions in deference to his own understanding in nonlegal contexts is among his renowned commentary’s most salient aspects. Significantly, in his *Perush ha-Kaẓar* on Ex. 2:10, he concludes, “And, in the end, the *ge’onim* said regarding *derash*, ‘one does not raise difficulties in it or from it.’” For additional citations of this principle, see nn. 35 and 42-43, above. We should note further his implicit reliance upon the principle already articulated by R. Sherira Ga’on and R. Hai Ga’on, regarding the nonbinding nature of nonlegal midrashic interpretation of biblical verses. See n. 43, above. See also n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

52. R. David Kimḥi (ca. 1160-ca. 1235), throughout his biblical commentaries, strove to follow R. Avraham ibn Ezra’s methodology in focusing on the text’s plain meaning. Although, unlike the latter, he generally presents the Sages’ expositions as well, he clearly does not treat them as a canon. In innumerable cases, the *midrashim* that he quotes represent just one possible understanding among several of the verse under scrutiny — and not necessarily the most plausible. We reiterate that tacit justification for such an approach can be found in the principle already articulated by R. Sherira Ga’on and R. Hai Ga’on, regarding the nonbinding nature of nonlegal midrashic interpretation of biblical verses. See n. 43, above. See also n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.
53. See R. Avraham ben Rambam, *Ma’amar al Odot Derashot Ḥaẓal*. Like his father (see n. 35, above), R. Avraham, in categorizing the Sages’ “*derashot*” (expositions), views many as “poetic devices, not that their sayer believed that the meaning of that verse was the meaning of that exposition, God forbid!” (s.v. “*Ha-belek ha-revi’i, she-omer oto be-perush pesukim*”). In addition, like his father, R. Avraham concludes that expositions “that do not pertain to any of the principles of belief or laws of the Torah are not [based upon] a tradition in the hands [of the Sages]. Rather, there are those [stated] according to the mind’s determination, and there are those that are appropriate and acceptable in the manner of poetic devices” (ibid.). After relegating several apparently historical expositions in the Talmud and Midrash to this domain, he adds, “It is plausible that most of the expositions that are found in the words [of the Sages] of blessed memory are of this

ben Shemu'el,⁵⁶ and R. Menaḥem ha-Me'iri.⁵⁷ Especially germane is

category; for this is the truth, to which only the mistaken or foolish will object. For this category of [the Sages'] words is subdivided into as many parts as the ideas [they address]; like the variety of opinions of poets, so these expositions are diverse, commensurate with the variety of opinions of the sayers and their wisdom" (ibid.). See also n. 10, above, for further elaboration regarding R. Avraham ben Rambam. In addition, see n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

54. See R. Yeḥi'el ben Yosef of Paris (d. ca. 1265), *Sefer ha-Vikuaḥ*. In the disputation of Paris with the apostate Nicholas Donin (in 1240), R. Yeḥi'el distinguishes between "Talmud," referring to halakhic instruction, in which he believes unreservedly, and "words of Aggadah, to draw the heart of man," regarding which he declares, "If you desire — believe them; and if you do not desire — do not believe them, for no law is determined based upon them." We should stress that he appends to this statement his conviction "that the Sages of the Talmud wrote nothing that was not honest and true; [their words] are exalted and wondrous to their hearers." Again, an earnest affirmation of the greatness of Aggadah does not correlate with an insistence upon its doctrinal significance. See also n. 58, below, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.
55. See Ramban, *Hiddushim* on *Yevamot* 61b, s.v. "Ein Betulah," and his commentary on Ex. 12:40 and 12:42, in all of which he dismisses the historicity of *Seder Olam* as nonbinding. Compare R. Sa'adyah Ga'on's evaluation of *Seder Olam*, in n. 42, above. In addition, see Ramban's Torah commentary and his *Ma'amar ha-Vikuaḥ*, cited in the text and n. 59, below. See also n. 10, above, for further elaboration regarding Ramban.
56. As noted above (n. 10), R. Hillel ben Shemu'el ("of Verona") included in his *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh*, Part 2, a sixfold subdivision of "all the words" of the Sages (s.v. "Ziyyun Shen"; ed. Halberstam, pp. 25a-26b; ed. Sermoneta, pp. 180-91). He insisted upon a literal reading of the first and sixth categories (see n. 72, below) and inclined toward such an understanding of the fourth category. However, he rejected outright such a facile view of the second and third categories, corresponding respectively to allegories and quasi-prophetic visions. Of particular significance here, however, is his characterization of the fifth category, "like words of humor." Under this heading, he placed strange stories that he regarded as intended to shock and cheer the audience. Stating that "there are many of these in the Talmud," he

Ramban's ruling at the disputation of Barcelona, regarding all *nonhalakhic* midrashic literature,⁵⁸ echoing R. Yehi'el⁵⁴ almost verbatim: “[If] one believes in it — good; and [if] one does not believe in it — this will not harm [him].”⁵⁹ Clearly, he denies this corpus canonical

stressed that this section, too, is useful — in providing relief and good cheer, prerequisites of sound minds and penetrating study. He also included in this group “words of remedies” (i.e., talmudic medical suggestions) and “words of exaggeration” (i.e., ‘tall tales’), concluding that “these matters are not worthy of a category being designated for them” (ed. Halberstam, p. 26a; ed. Sermoneta, p. 189). On the one hand, R. Hillel carefully avoids negating these statements’ utility, in advancing their readers’ physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. On the other hand, he manifestly voids their “truth value” on both actual and allegorical levels. Furthermore, he provides no definitive criteria for determining whether a given *aggadah* should be relegated to this or another category. In any case, his formulation is obviously irreconcilable with ascribing to Aggadah in general the status of dogma. See n. 72, below, for further elaboration regarding R. Hillel’s position on this subject.

57. See R. Menaḥem ha-Me’iri (1249-1316), *Beit ha-Behirah* on *Shabbat* 55a, s.v. “*Me-Ikkarei ha-Dat*.” Inter alia, ha-Me’iri stresses that “the principles of belief do not depend upon corroboration from the plain meaning of biblical passages and *aggadot*.” See also *Beit ha-Behirah* on *Hullin* 105a, s.v. “*Ve-Yesh Hōlekim*.”
58. The disparity between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature has been reiterated repeatedly in the foregoing. See nn. 35, 43-44, 48, and 50-54, above. See also nn. 59, 62, and 72, below. On at least a tactical plane, in the fifteenth century, R. Ḥayyim ben Yehudah ibn Musa (ca. 1380-1460) stressed a similar distinction in his polemical guidebook, *Magen va-Romah*, in proposing rules to which Jews ought to adhere in polemical debates with Christians, like Ramban’s disputation. This differentiation is also crucial to Azaryah de Rossi’s thesis in *Me’or Einayim*. See the text and n. 65, below.
59. Ramban, *Ma’amar ha-Vikuaḥ*, § 39 (in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. R. Ḥayyim Dov Chavel [Jerusalem, 1963-64], I, 308). In the disputation of Barcelona with the apostate Pablo Christiani (in 1263), Ramban differentiates between the Bible and the halakhic aspects of the Talmud — both of which we believe unreservedly — and nonhalakhic Midrash and Aggadah, which he explains respectively as “sermons” and “tales.” Both of the latter do not obligate us and are included in the assessment quoted here in the text. Ramban had earlier distinguished between

ranking. We should stress that even R. Yizhak Abarbanel, who, in his

regarding an *aggadah* as “not true” and believing that “it has another meaning from among the secrets of the Sages” (ibid., § 22 [p. 306]) — considering both options acceptable. This undermines interpreting the license he gives here “not [to] believe in” Aggadah as referring exclusively to seeking “another meaning.” Note further that the specific *aggadah* that elicited Ramban’s comment appears in both the Midrash (see *Lam. Rabbah* 1:51, *Lam. Zuta* 2:2, and *Midrash Eikvah* 1:14) and the Talmud (see *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 2:4). Implicitly, Ramban’s denial of dogmatic status applies to *aggadot* recorded in the Talmud, as well. (Regarding the status of talmudic Aggadah relative to other aggadic literature, see also R. Sa’adyah Ga’on’s tacit equation, in R. Yehudah ben Barzilai of Barcelona’s commentary on *Sefer ha-Yezirah*, of “*haggadot* that exist in the Talmud and elsewhere,” quoted in n. 42, above. In addition, see Rambam’s responsum, grouping together *aggadot* that “are written in the Talmud or written in books of Midrash or written in books of Aggadah,” quoted in n. 35, above. Compare R. Hai Ga’on’s statement, in R. Avraham ben Yizhak’s *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, “that all that is fixed in the Talmud is more clarified than that which is not fixed in it,” quoted in the text and n. 46, above.) Moreover, considering that Ramban presents these statements, unqualified, in *Ma’amar ha-Vikuaḥ* — written in Hebrew, for a Jewish audience — it appears highly implausible that he would have employed them only tactically, without sincerely believing them.

Significantly, in Ramban’s Torah commentary, he presents Rashi as his role model for impugning the authority of Midrash and Aggadah: “Since Rashi critically scrutinizes in [various] places the *midrashim* of the *aggadot* and strives [upon deeming them insufficient] to explain the plain meaning of the Bible, he has authorized us to do so; for there are ‘seventy facets’ to the Torah (*Num. Rabbah* 13:15 and *Otiyyot de-Rabbi Akiva, Alef*), and there are many opposing *midrashim* in the Sages’ words” (commentary on Gen. 8:4). This attitude permeates Ramban’s commentary; see also n. 55, above. As we have noted, tacit justification for such an approach can be found in the principle already articulated by R. Sherira Ga’on and R. Hai Ga’on, regarding the nonbinding nature of nonlegal midrashic interpretation of biblical verses. (See n. 43, above.) Note, however, by contrast, that Ramban does qualify this authorization of disbelief when an *aggadah* has halakhic ramifications. See his *Torat ha-Adam*, “*Sha’ar ha-Gemul*” (in *Kitvei Ramban* [ed. Chavel], II, 285). See also n. 58, above, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

Yeshu'ot Meshiho, criticizes Ramban's statement,⁶⁰ appears to demur primarily for tactical reasons.⁶¹ Elsewhere in his writings, he, too,

60. See R. Yizhak Abarbanel, *Yeshu'ot Meshiho* (Koenigsberg, 1861), Part 2, Introduction, pp. 17a-17b. In addition, see Part 2, *Iyyun* 2, ch. 1, p. 39b, where he specifically criticizes Ramban's treatment of the *aggadah* regarding which Ramban asserted, "I do not believe in this *haggadah*" (*Ma'amar ha-Vikuah*, § 20 [I, 306]; see also *ibid.*, § 22 [p. 306], § 30 [p. 307], and § 39 [p. 308]). Abarbanel elaborated at length on no fewer than ten distinct lessons to be gleaned from an allegorical understanding of the passage. See *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, Part 2, *Iyyun* 2, ch. 1, pp. 40a-42a.

61. In *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, Part 2, Introduction, p. 17a, Abarbanel lists six types of *derashot* that do not obligate us. Although formally he presents these according to the approach of unnamed commentators who are "many and honorable," his conclusion seems incontrovertible: "It is thus explained to you that there come in the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi matters that one is not obliged to believe, inasmuch as they are from one of these types. And all the more so [in cases] like *Sifra* and *Sifrei* and *Tosefta*, *Tanhuma* and *Mekhilta* and [Midrash] *Rabbot* and *Hazita* [i.e., *Song. Rabbab*] and *Rabbati* and *Midrash Tebillim* [see n. 46, above] and the rest of the compositions and groups of compositions whose creators are unmentioned or whose adapters we do not recognize as being men of truth or of what character: It is not [possible] to examine their words except according to the matter of the exposition — whether it is correct or not. And thus, one who does not believe their words not only will not be a denier of any root or premise [of belief] but will not [even] be held in the class of one who disputes words of the Sages." Granted, after citing Ramban as an exemplar of this position, Abarbanel states, "In my eyes, this is an unpaved path." However, his objections are essentially tactical: Given the greatness of the Sages, denying any of their words is liable to lead to a "loosening of the belt, to dispute words of the Sages" in general, and, as a result, "the name of Heaven will be profaned" (*ibid.*). This appears to be more a practical mandate than a substantive one. Although Abarbanel argues that all six types of *derashot* can nonetheless be deemed formally believable, the formalism itself sounds stilted, and his conclusion is far from adamant: "In the end, it is appropriate that one who says 'I am for God' and is called by the name of Yisra'el should accept the words of our Sages" (*ibid.*, p. 17b). This is a far cry from the sort of categorical imperative one would expect for dogma. Indeed, given that Abarbanel

seems willing to consider the status of Aggadah equivocal.⁶² Indeed, according to R. Yeshayah di Trani II, this conclusion is practically explicit in the Talmud Yerushalmi.⁶³

explicitly cites Ramban as prototypical for the antidogmatic viewpoint, it would be veritably unthinkable for him to conclude that it is heretical.

62. In practice, any student of Abarbanel's Bible commentary can testify that he is among the most innovative commentators and clearly does not regard himself as bound by talmudic and midrashic dicta. Consider, for example, his extraordinary presentation of the incident of King David with Bat-sheva (see his commentary on Sam. II 11, s.v. "*Parashah Tishab-Asar*"). Additional examples abound throughout his commentary. As we have noted, tacit justification for such an approach can be found in the principle already articulated by R. Sherira Ga'on and R. Hai Ga'on, regarding the nonbinding nature of nonlegal midrashic interpretation of biblical verses. See n. 43, above. See also n. 58, above, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

Consider also Abarbanel's introduction to and agenda in *Ateret Zekenim* (Warsaw, 1894), written, in effect, to defend the elders of Yisra'el described in Ex. 24:9-11 from the attacks of various *midrashim*. (See *Ex. Rabbah* 3:1 and 45:5, *Lev. Rabbah* 20:10, *Num. Rabbah* 2:25 and 15:24, *Tanḥuma Aḥarei* 6 and *Beha'alotekha* 16, and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 27:9.) He describes these attacks as "slander" (Introduction, 1a) and resolves to right what he views as an historic, exegetical wrong. Furthermore, he stresses that his defense is "neither by might nor by power of tradition, but by my spirit and what I have attained through understanding the plain meaning of the Scriptures as they are" (*ibid.*, 1b). Moreover, he adds, "If the opinion of the detractors of [what the elders] apprehended were [based upon] a tradition in their hands, a patrimony, and from God — I would place my hand to my mouth, I would keep a curb upon my mouth; for God had spoken. But the early Sages each turned to his own way in this matter; there are those who expound it for praise, and there are those who expound it for shame, each [expounding it according to] what is upright in his eyes, with rational argument prevailing through the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of knowledge of the plain meaning of the Scriptures. Therefore, I said, 'They do not possess the chains of tradition, and the gates of response to their words are not locked'" (*ibid.*, 1b-2a). This statement will surely suffice to dispel any doubts that Abarbanel did not consider all aggadic and midrashic literature binding. See also n. 10, above, for further elaboration regarding Abarbanel.

This survey enables us to grasp both Maharal's uncompromising opposition to *Me'or Einayim* and the magnitude of his revolution in the world of Aggadah. De Rossi certainly reckoned himself a religious scholar and was at least partially shocked by the controversy roused in much of the Jewish world by his work (most of which abated after publication of his apologetic *Mazref la-Kesef*).⁶⁴ Moreover, he clearly saw himself as following in his predecessors' footsteps — in both professing unwavering allegiance to the divinity of the Sages' tradition in Halakhah and compromising their authority elsewhere.⁵⁸ He cites approvingly the *ge'onim* R. Sherira and R. Hai, as well as R. Nissim ben Ya'akov, R. Yehudah ha-Levi, Rambam, Ramban, and R. Yeshayah di Trani II, regarding the nonobligatory status of *aggadot*.⁶⁵ He names also Rashba and Ritva, as supporting a

63. See *Yerushalmi Nazir* 7:2, according to R. Yeshayah di Trani II (d. ca. 1280), quoted by R. Yehoshua Bo'az ben Shimon Barukh, in *Shiltei ha-Gibborim* on Rif, *Avodah Zarah* 20a (6a, n. 1): "Are the *midrashot* matters of faith!? [Rather,] expound them, and receive reward [for your efforts]." From this, R. Yeshayah concludes "that the Sages did not say the *midrashim* as a matter of belief and principle, rather to increase dimensions of understanding the Bible and to expound it in every sense." (However, compare the somewhat variant reading, in extant versions of the *Yerushalmi*.)

In addition, see *Yerushalmi Pe'ab* 2:4 and *Yerushalmi Hagigah* 1:8, that "one does not learn [Halakhah] from ... the *aggadot*." See the text below for further discussion of this statement. Consider also the more extreme attitude toward Aggadah ascribed by the *Yerushalmi* to the talmudic sage R. Ze'ira, who branded aggadic works "books of divination," "from which we understand nothing" definitive — urging his preeminent disciple, R. Yirmeyah, to avoid them altogether in favor of halakhic study (*Yerushalmi Ma'aserot* 3:4). The many other equivocal assessments of Aggadah, throughout talmudic literature, are beyond the scope of our discussion.

64. See Yehudah David Eisenstein, "*Azaryah min ha-Adomim*," in *Ozar Yisra'el* (New York, 1906-13), VIII, 50.

65. See Azaryah de Rossi (ca. 1511-ca. 1578), *Me'or Einayim*, I, 13, 202, 204-7, 210-11, and 234, and II, 336, etc. (All page references to *ME* are from the standard edition edited by David Cassel [Vilna, 1864-66].)

Consider, in particular, the title line of *Imrei Binah*, ch. 27: "An apology on behalf of our Sages, even if it is posited that in the stories of certain deeds *that do not pertain to the laws of the Torah* they did not apprehend the

nonliteral approach to aggadic explication. Most of all, in Rambam's reference to his "Book of Correspondence," de Rossi saw a license, if not a summons. He educed even stronger support for his enterprise in Rambam's adjacent appraisal of "all the difficult passages in the *Midrashim* where the external sense manifestly contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible" as "all parables."⁸ Yet, undoubtedly these venerable precedents only amplified Maharal's concern about *Me'or Einayim's* impact on unwitting readers unable to discern the chaff among the wheat. Furthermore, we should recall the historical circumstances that prompted not only Maharal's but also de Rossi's efforts. While current events impelled both to write what each essentially viewed as heir to the unwritten "Book of Correspondence," their paths to a common goal could hardly have been more divergent. Dr. Breuer observes, "Maharal's wrath was directed against him, precisely because de Rossi, like Maharal, sought to defend the Talmud; but his defensive strategy was the opposite of Maharal's: While Maharal sought to exalt the importance of the *aggadot* through spiritual interpretation, de Rossi weakened their force and degraded their standing by highlighting their character as nonbinding literary material."⁶⁶

Maharal's reaction to de Rossi's citation of R. Sherira Ga'on is a dramatic case in point. De Rossi tenders a veritably unimpeachable basis for his thesis — "Said Mar [Rabbi] Sherira: "Those statements that derive from [biblical] verses and are called "Midrash" and "Aggadah" are *umdana*"⁴³ — understanding "*umdana*" to denote an unproven supposition or guess.⁶⁷ Maharal, evidently without access to the original quotation, questions "if Rabbi Sherira Ga'on wrote these words."⁶⁸ More importantly, while provisionally granting the source's authenticity, he rejects de Rossi's explanation of "*umdana*," proposing that contextually it means "mandated by rational argument," as

truth [of those deeds] and did not relate it to us" (*ME*, II, 264). As noted above (see n. 58), the qualification that under discussion were only "stories of certain deeds *that do not pertain to the laws of the Torah*" was undoubtedly crucial to de Rossi as well.

66. Breuer, p. 137.

67. Compare the Mishnah's use of the same root — "*me-omed u-mi-shemu'ab*" — meaning, "based upon *supposition* or upon hearsay" (*Sanhedrin* 4:5).

68. *BHG*, *Be'er* 6, p. 134.

opposed to tenuous derivations based upon Scriptural allusion alone.⁶⁸ On the one hand, buttressing Maharal's position, the original assessment relates directly only to midrashic and aggadic expositions on biblical verses, and its applicability to the rest of midrashic and aggadic literature is ambiguous. On the other hand, analysis of the entire passage quoted in R. Avraham ben Yizhak of Narbonne's *Sefer ha-Eshkol*⁴³ (apparently, unavailable to Maharal) forces the determination that de Rossi's rendition of "*umdana*" is correct. R. Sherira proceeds to list illustrative examples of midrashic statements that are, or are not, historically corroborated — deeming the latter the majority. He concludes, echoing the verdict of R. Sa'adyah,⁴² "And, therefore, we do not rely upon words of Aggadah."⁴³ As noted above, this evaluation is unexceptional; R. Hai Ga'on,⁴⁷ R. Shemu'el ha-Naggid,⁴⁸ and R. Nissim ben Ya'akov⁴⁹ repeat it almost verbatim, in similar contexts — apart from many parallel formulations by later authors. Maharal, in contrast, quoting R. Nissim's reiteration of this statement, reads it — based upon "some [unnamed] commentators" — as repudiating reliance upon the *plain* meaning of Aggadah, in lieu of a more profound message.⁶⁹ Likewise, Maharal presents the Talmud Yerushalmi's dictum that "one does not learn [Halakhah] from ... the *aggadot*"⁷⁰ as expressing the realization that, contrary to Halakhah, Aggadah comprises wisdom on a plane that is not condensed into practice. "But," he concludes, "one who says that the *aggadot* are not words of Torah like the rest of the Torah that was said at Sinai has no share in the World to Come.... All words of Aggadah are the wisdom of the Torah."⁷¹ This is an extraordinary statement. Given the foregoing, we must concede that the gamut of the *ge'onim* and *rishonim* listed above would dispute Maharal's explications of both not relying on Aggadah and not learning Halakhah from it. Moreover, even among advocates of literalism, Maharal's severity seems sharply divergent from earlier sources. To the best of my knowledge, no one before him ascribed to *aggadot* per se the status of dogma to an extent that would equate their disavowal with forfeiture

69. Ibid., pp. 134-35.

70. Yerushalmi Pe'ah 2:4 and Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:8.

71. BHG, *Be'er* 6, p. 135.

of everlasting life.⁷² That so much of later Jewish thought accepted

72. To appreciate the extent to which Maharal's statement is unprecedented, it is instructive to consider two earlier sources that ostensibly do provide him with a precedent for his ruling. We therefore present the following statements of R. Hillel ben Shemu'el ("of Verona") and R. Nissim Gerondi (Ran; ca. 1290-1380). In particular, we consider the differences between their formulations and his.

As noted above (nn. 10 and 56), R. Hillel included in his *Taḡmulei ha-Nefesh*, Part 2, a sixfold subdivision of "all the words" of the Sages (s.v. "*Ziyyun Shen?*"; ed. Halberstam, pp. 25a-26b; ed. Sermoneta, pp. 180-91). We discussed his portrayal of the fifth category in n. 56, above. The first and sixth categories, in both of which R. Hillel insists upon a literal reading, demand our attention here.

Specifically, regarding the expositions in the first category, R. Hillel states, "Anyone who has thoughts of doubt regarding them, to understand them not according to their plain meaning and their interpretation as the Rabbis of blessed memory interpreted them, is an utter sectarian and heretic and 'cuts off the shoots' [Heb. *min gamur ve-appikoros u-mekazzeḥ bi-neti'ot*] and has no share toward the World to Come" (ed. Halberstam, p. 25a; ed. Sermoneta, p. 182). However, while R. Hillel's verdict is similar to Maharal's, its context is not. Specifically, the first category comprises "interpretations of Torah and words of the scribes *that contain miḥyot*" (ibid.). For this reason, R. Hillel mandated that "all these [expositions] are as their plain meaning. And every member of Yisra'el is obliged to accept them as they are stated and in the language in which [the Sages], peace be upon them, stated them, without detracting or adding" (ibid.). Far from providing a precedent for Maharal's statement, this category confirms the dichotomy we have observed repeatedly between legal statements that are binding and nonlegal statements that are not. See also n. 58, above, regarding the differentiation between halakhic and nonhalakhic literature.

The issue underlying the sixth category is subtler. Here, too, R. Hillel's verdict is severe: "Anyone who denies these matters or mocks them is a heretic [Heb. *appikoros*], because they are all true" (ed. Halberstam, p. 26a; ed. Sermoneta, p. 190). The context, however, is not legal: "The sixth section is the story of miracles and wonders that the Holy One Blessed be He would do through the righteous sages. This is as we have found for some of our Rabbis, the Sages of the Talmud, who [were able to] 'punish and kill' and 'vivify the dead' and bring down rains and temporarily produce a mountain — or that it would appear as if a mountain was produced there.... These are wondrous deeds, done by

the power of God, Blessed be He, in honor of the righteous. These we should all believe as their plain meaning [indicates] and as they are written" (ibid.). Clearly, this category's significance lies not in an intrinsic need to believe its contents literally but in the importance of affirming our belief in divine providence. Thus, R. Hillel qualified his mandate, insisting that one believe these stories only "on the condition that the miracle that negated the natural order had to be done when it was done: either for the purpose of the rescue of the generation or to impose reverence of the righteous upon their contemporaries so that [the latter] would not disobey them or to exact vengeance [on behalf] of the righteous from the wicked or to do the will of the righteous in an appropriate matter. But to believe that these wonders took place in vain and for no purpose, as if occurring incidentally, without any of the benefits or needs that I mentioned or something similar to them, is not mandated but is rather folly. And regarding one who believes that, it is said, 'A fool believes everything' (Prov. 14:15)." R. Hillel's criteria seem, at least to a degree, inescapably subjective. Depending upon one's evaluation of the circumstances, a given phenomenon might be relegated to the "words of exaggeration" of the fifth category (see n. 56, above) — with no intrinsic truth-value at all — or to the unimpeachable, providential miracles of the sixth category. We submit that this ambiguity is not accidental. After all, if the foundational premise that underlies this category is essentially belief in divine providence, the particular elements that summon that belief are far less consequential than the fact that there exist events that summon it. Obviously, then, we cannot construe R. Hillel's statements to provide a precedent for Maharal's sweepingly inclusive verdict regarding belief in "the *aggadot*" in general.

The other source to evaluate as a potential precedent for Maharal's pronouncement is Ran's *Derashot*. Ran states, in the alternative version of *Derush* 5, "As we were commanded to follow the consensus [of the Sages] in the laws of the Torah, so we were commanded to [follow] everything they say to us from the aspect of tradition [Heb. *al z'ad ha-kabbalah*], from among ideas and *midrashim* of [Scriptural] verses, whether that statement is a *miẓvah* or not. A Jew who deviates from their words — even in that which does not pertain to explaining *miẓvot* — is a heretic [Heb. *appikoros*] and has no share toward the World to Come." On the one hand, Ran's declaration here is clearly more far-reaching than his predecessors. On the other hand, even if this statement may have indirectly inspired Maharal, he significantly surpassed it. Specifically, however inclusive the statement may be, it still

Maharal's views on these topics as axiomatic⁷³ testifies to the enduring scope of his revolution in addressing aggadic literature. Ironically, however, while this revolution constituted a break with earlier perspectives on Aggadah, it sprang almost inexorably from Maharal's unique approach to aggadic elucidation — which, in turn, bears the clearest imprint of his predecessors, especially Rambam.

Convergence — Maharal in the Footsteps of Rambam (and Others)

On the one hand, the newness of Maharal's treatment of *aggadot* echoed the new world in which he lived. Specifically, the unprecedented gravity with which he related to Aggadah undoubtedly reflected his appreciation that — particularly for thinking people in places like cosmopolitan, Renaissance Prague — cogently resolving

limits its scope to “everything they say to us from the aspect of tradition.” This inescapably self-referential qualification remains, withal, a veritable tautology, for one who rejects such words “disdains the word of God, may He be Blessed, since he does not believe those whom he is commanded to believe” (ibid.). The foundational premise here is belief that God established a mechanism through which to reveal His will to the world. It therefore pertains to both halakhic and nonhalakhic domains that are “from the aspect of tradition.” But the very stipulation of the condition (irrespective of its precise definition) surely presumes that not everything the Sages said is included.

Herein lies the uniqueness of Maharal's statement: It is completely unqualified. If “one who says that the *aggadot* are not words of Torah like the rest of the Torah that was said at Sinai has no share in the World to Come,” then belief in Aggadah qua Aggadah has become a foundational premise itself. That assertion, we believe, is fundamentally without precedent.

73. See, for example, R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, *Kovez Iggerot Hazon Ish*, I, 15. R. Karelitz deems “casting doubt regarding the words of our Sages of blessed memory, either in Halakhah or in Aggadah,” tantamount to “blasphemy” and considers one “tending toward” this view “like an apostate [Heb. *kofer*].” I am unaware of any precedent — before Maharal's aforementioned assessment — that would justify applying this judgment to all *aggadot* without qualification. I respectfully reiterate that this position seems irreconcilable with that of all the *ge'onim* and *rishonim* cited above.

aggadic difficulties might spell the difference between spiritual life and death. For many incredulous readers, his uncompromising dedication to Aggadah may have been critical. More subtly, much of his writing style and presentation seems genuinely attuned to their needs. On the other hand, we could hardly justify so radical an innovation in the attitude toward *aggadot*, based upon temporal expediency. Furthermore, the historic significance of Maharal's approach to aggadic scholarship belies any reductionist attempt to judge it as only an artifact of historical circumstances. While we may discern in such circumstances impetus and inspiration, we must look more deeply to espy Maharal's underlying sources. Finally, given the profound depths of Maharal's conviction, it would be woefully facile to regard it as merely the consequence of a tactical move (however noble) on behalf of his troubled coreligionists.

Rather, considering his prodigious scholarly enterprise in the domain of Aggadah, it would have been almost inconceivable for Maharal to deal with his subject less deferentially. Indeed, the most extraordinary aspect of Maharal's approach to *aggadot* may well be his inexhaustible capacity to pay attention to details and, in so doing, leave no stone unturned in meticulously dissecting the Sages' words. Obviously, such an attitude is predicated first upon taking those words with utmost seriousness. Thus, perhaps most famously in this vein, Maharal — who was also an accomplished mathematician — developed a dazzlingly complex system to clarify the symbolisms of numbers mentioned even cursorily in aggadic parables. This numerical analysis is predominantly Maharal's invention; very little has antecedents in earlier works. The same applies to the allegorical meanings Maharal ascribes so frequently to ostensibly mundane terms throughout aggadic literature. Such a reading of *aggadot*, far from excusing flippancy, virtually presumes the salience of the tale's every nuance and militates against trivializing any detail.

In this light, we can appreciate what goaded Maharal to launch arguably his most scathing attack against *Me'or Einayim*, concerning the “*yattush*” (a mosquito or gnat) that, according to a well-known *aggadah*, killed Titus. The Talmud vividly depicts the divine retribution for Titus's brazen blasphemy after destroying the Temple:

A *yattush* came and entered his nose and bored in his brain seven years.... It was learnt [in the Baraita]; said R. Pinhas

ben Arova: I was among the great men of Rome, and, when [Titus] died, they split open his head and found in it the likeness of a swallow weighing two *sela'im*. In [another] *mishnah* [in the Baraita] it was learnt: [The *yattush* was] the likeness of a year-old pigeon weighing two *litrin*. Said Abbayei: We hold [a tradition that] its mouth was of copper and its talons were of iron.⁷⁴

Obvious biomedical and even physical impossibilities abound in a superficial understanding of this story. De Rossi (whose ancestors, according to family legend, were among the captives Titus brought to Rome from Jerusalem) predictably questioned the historicity of the “*yattush*.” Apart from scientific implausibility,⁷⁵ he cites discrepancies between the talmudic and various midrashic versions of the tale⁷⁶ and, in addition, non-Jewish sources that blame Titus’s death on either malarial fever or deliberate poisoning.⁷⁷ He deems himself authorized and even obliged to consider these sources, given the intrinsically nonbinding (i.e., nonhalakhic) status of aggadic material,⁶⁵ such as this story. While recognizing that some scholars demand reading the rabbinical tradition literally nonetheless, he focuses on the sincere believer whose reasoning prevents him from doing so — who, “upon hearing the words of this curse of Titus or any statement like it ... will be stupefied and devastated; for he will be unable to command his spirit to believe it.”⁷⁸ To such readers, he

74. *Gittin* 56b. A somewhat variant version of the story is recounted in *Gen. Rabbah* 10:7, *Lev. Rabbah* 22:3, *Eccles. Rabbah* 5:8 (4), *Tanpuma Hukkat* 1, and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* 49. See also *Num. Rabbah* 18:22.

75. See *ME*, I, 214 ff. Note that De Rossi devotes chapter 16 of *Imrei Binah* to this *aggadah*, entitling it, “On the tale of the ‘*yattush*’ that entered the nose of Titus, which is recounted by our Rabbis.”

76. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 217. De Rossi dramatically addresses the reader, “I have now put my case to one who drinks thirstily our Sages’ words and [also] ‘is drawn by human intellect’ — as expressed by the aforementioned rabbi [Rambam] — ‘to dwell in its sanctuary’ (cf. *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, “Introduction to the First Part,” p. 5; de Rossi quotes the original Hebrew translation of the *Moreh*, by R. Shemu’el ibn Tibbon), lest, upon hearing the words of this curse of Titus or any statement like it, he will be stupefied and devastated; for he will be unable to command

declares, “Our Sages, who are truly wise, despite knowing clearly that this tale [of Titus] never was at all or did not [take place] in the manner [in] which they recounted it, did not refrain from drawing and illustrating it with outstanding detail, as if it was, and was made, in accordance with everything that came forth from their mouths.”⁷⁹

his spirit to believe it.” Apart from explicitly citing Rambam, de Rossi’s focus upon those who are “drawn by human intellect” manifestly resonates with Rambam’s statement, at the end of his testamentary “Instruction with Respect to this Treatise” (i.e., to the *Moreh*), pp. 16-17: “To sum up: I am the man who when the concern pressed him and his way was straitened and he could find no other device by which to teach a demonstrated truth other than by giving satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses — I am he who prefers to address that single man by himself, and I do not heed the blame of those many creatures. For I claim to liberate that virtuous one from that into which he has sunk, and I shall guide him in his perplexity until he becomes perfect and he finds rest.”

79. *ME*, loc. cit. Note that, despite the notoriety of de Rossi’s use of the word “invention [Heb. *hamza’ab*],” he was not the first to employ it in describing *aggadot* and likely did not even innovate the usage independently. In the fifteenth century, both R. Yehudah ben Yehi’el Messer Leon, in his *Nofet Zufim*, and R. Yehudah (ben R. Yizhak) Abarbanel (ca. 1460-ca. 1535), in his *Dialoghi di Amore (Siphot al ha-Ahavah)*, invoked “*hamza’ab*” in their descriptions of *aggadot*. De Rossi was familiar with both authors and their works and may even have alluded to them in his work.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that, while it seems unlikely that R. Samson Raphael Hirsch was familiar with either *Me’or Einayim* or the opposition it roused, he, too, employs an almost identical characterization of *aggadot*. Corresponding on the subject (in Hebrew) with R. Pinhas Mosheh Elhanan Wechsler (in 1876), R. Hirsch writes, “It is possible that some of [the stories in the Talmud and Midrash] were stated only in the manner of rhetorical invention [Heb. *hamza’at melizab*], for some ethical or educational goal. And even if one says that the [apparently historical] stories of Avraham’s life with Terah and Nimrod in Ur Kasdim were a rhetorical invention — [we] should not reject [that position] with two hands” (quoted by Mordekhai Breuer, “*Ma’amar ha-Rav S.R. Hirsch z.z.l. al Aggadot Hazal*,” *Ha-Ma’ayan*, 16, No. 2 [Tevet 5736], 14). R. Hirsch saw a precedent for his assertion in the opinion quoted in the Talmud that the story of Job “was a parable”

Thus, he concludes, he is “empowered and entitled to state that [Titus’s] story was only an invention [Heb. *hamẓa’ah*] and a sort of teaching practiced by the perfect in knowledge [i.e., the Sages], to establish in the hearts of the masses that our Lord is great and mighty in power to requite insurgents against Him — in particular, any arrogant miscreant — with recompense and punishment, through even the smallest of His creations. And with great wisdom they assigned this invention ... to the wicked one ... Titus.”⁷⁹ Supporting such contrivance, he invokes the Talmud’s dictum that “a person is permitted to alter [truth] for the sake of peace”⁸⁰ — its most exalted application being restoring peace “between us and our Father in Heaven.”⁸¹

Inevitably, Maharal, was incensed by de Rossi’s audacity in effectively dismissing talmudic accounts as historically false. The term “invention,” which plays so central a role in the latter’s presentation, was especially provocative. Thus, Maharal exclaims, “This man in his foolishness ascribes to words of the Sages various imaginings to seduce the masses, as you see in his stating that they are ‘an invention’ and device to seduce the masses. And all of these are only words of mockery!”⁸² As for de Rossi’s professed faithfulness to Jewish tradition, Maharal was dismayed that anyone subscribing to “the religion of the Torah of Mosheh” could even articulate such a thesis.⁸³ Yet, lest we erroneously equate Maharal’s unqualified allegiance to the Sages with advocacy of superficial literalism, we should stress that he evidently believed no more than de Rossi in a tangible, bird-like, semi-metallic “*yattush*.” On the contrary, he emphasizes at the outset, in general, “that words of the Sages are not history books in which authors record events that took place.”⁸⁴

(*Bava Batra* 15a; see Rambam’s comment on this passage, *Moreh* 3:22, p. 486).

80. *Yevamot* 65b. See also *Bava Mezi’a* 87a; *Kallah Rabbati* 10:1; *Derekh Erez Zuta*, *Perek ha-Shalom*; *Sifrei* on *Num.* 6:26; *Gen. Rabbah* 48:18 and 100:8; *Lev. Rabbah* 9:9; *Num. Rabbah* 11:7; *Deut. Rabbah* 5:14; *Tanḥuma Toledot* 1, *Va-Yehi* 17, *Z av* 7, and *Shofetim* 18; and *Pesikta Rabbati Hosafah* 3:7.

81. *ME*, I, 218.

82. *BHG*, *Be’er* 6, p. 134.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

Thus, in discussing Titus's fate, Maharal stresses that the Sages' lessons "were not [concerning] physical matters and, therefore, were called 'words of wisdom,' for they exclusively [address] intellectual matters ... [pertaining to] the essence of the subject, with no involvement in physical, exoteric matters."⁸⁵ "The truth," to Maharal, is that, "since every animal has a unique essence ... the *essence* of the *yattush* entered [Titus's] nose and acted upon him."⁸³ Elsewhere, more explicitly, he clarifies, "There is no need to say that this was an actual, physical *yattush*."⁸⁶ Rather, "This was the power of a *yattush*, abstracted from physicality, and this power acted *as if* it were an actual *yattush*."⁸⁷ Thus, Maharal explains the Talmud's portrayal of the eventual dimensions, accouterments, and even weight of the "*yattush*" as reflecting — in detail — the deadly power it allegorically represented, in delivering Titus's just deserts.⁸⁸ However, the crucial distinction between his interpretation and de Rossi's, Maharal contends, is that his neither "diverges from the plain meaning of words of the Sages" — nor regards their words as expressed merely "in the manner of invention."⁸⁹ Instead, to Maharal, once the reader understands the allegory, "all the words are utterly according to their plain meaning, without any interpretation," the *aggadah* comprising "great and profound wisdom, and each and every utterance in it is secrets of wisdom."⁸⁹ This is the case, he emphasizes, irrespective of whether, simultaneously, Titus may have externally appeared to "die of some illness."⁹⁰

85. Ibid., p. 137. See also pp. 138-39. In addition, see NY, ch. 5, p. 35. See also *HA* on *Avodah Zarah* 10a (IV, 35), where Maharal provides an analogous characterization of the Sages' words.

86. *HA* on *Gittin* 56b (II, 108).

87. NY, loc. cit. Likewise, Maharal explains that the "copper" and "iron" were the abstracted "power" symbolized by them — "*not* that it was physical copper" and iron — which were allegorically ascribed to the "mouth" and "talons" (ibid.). Indeed, he stresses, "there is no need to explicate [the iron and copper] literally, for nature does not exist thus" (ibid. and *HA*, loc. cit.).

88. See *BHG*, *Be'er* 6, pp. 137-39. See also NY, ch. 5, pp. 34-35, and *HA*, loc. cit.

89. *BHG*, *Be'er* 6, p. 138.

90. Ibid., p. 139. See also *HA* on *Avodah Zarah* 10a (IV, 35), where Maharal invokes a similar dichotomy. We may better clarify the implication here

The difference between Maharal's abstractions and de Rossi's inventions may be subtle, but it is definitely not merely semantic nor exclusively local. Maharal's treatment of Titus's "*yattush*" epitomizes far more than his outrage with de Rossi. It exemplifies an approach that, while unparalleled and revolutionary in its scope, follows conceptually from that of the *ge'onim* and the *risbonim* noted above. Most of all, one cannot fail to hear an echo of Rambam's agenda in his "Book of Correspondence," affirming that "all the difficult passages in the *Midrashim* where the external sense manifestly contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible ... *are all parables.*"⁸ Indeed, Maharal, not only in his propensity to cast apparently historical aggadic tales as abstractions, is manifestly beholden to Rambam for much more than a general *weltanschauung*. More than any other classic of Jewish thought, Rambam's *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* established the centrality of symbolism and metaphor in explicating not only *aggadot* but also the prophets' parables⁹¹ and even certain aspects of the Torah.⁹² Although his method was anteceded

of parallel but distinct planes of reality, through a comment by R. Yizhak Hutner. Regarding an analogous dichotomy established by Maharal (in the latter's *GHS*, ch. 17, pp. 79-80), concerning the ostensibly irreconcilable literal and midrashic meanings of a passage in the Torah, R. Hutner explains, "The intention of the holy words of Maharal is that, since [God] 'gazed into the Torah and created the world' (*Gen. Rabbah* 1:1,8 and 64:8, *Ex. Rabbah* 47:4, *Lev. Rabbah* 35:4, *Tanḥuma Be-Reshit* 1, *Tanḥuma* [Buber] *Be-Reshit* 5 and *Va-Yeshev* 4, *Tanna de-Bei Eliyyahu Rabba* 31:14, and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* 3), necessarily, all the 'seventy facets' of the Torah (*Num. Rabbah* 13:15 and *Otiyyot de-Rabbi Akiva, Alef*) correspond to [diverse] worlds. And each of the 'facets' of the Torah reveals its corresponding facet in [those] worlds. And, therefore, what is revealed in the Torah through the facet of the literal meaning is a literal event in the world of literalism. And what is revealed in the Torah through the facet of *remez* [i.e., symbolic allusion] is a *remez* event in the world of *remez*. And the same rule and principle apply in all the 'seventy facets' of the Torah" (*Pahad Yizhak*, "Pesah," *Ma'amar* 52:3 [p. 147]). Thus, an event that should be understood allegorically, while true in its own realm, will remain unobservable to denizens of the world of literalism. See also n. 92, below.

91. See especially *Moreh* 2:29, 2:46-48, 3:1-7, and 3:22-23, and see n. 93, below.

92. See especially *ibid.* 2:29-30 and 2:42, and see n. 93, below.

It is instructive to consider Maharal's position vis-à-vis a tacit dispute between Rambam and Ramban relating to nonliteral (more precisely, nonphysical) interpretation of the Torah's account of Gan Eden. Rambam posits that "not everything mentioned in the Torah concerning the *Account of the Beginning* is to be taken in its external sense as the vulgar imagine" (*Moreh* 2:29, p. 346). He clearly applies this assessment to the story of Adam and Havah in Gan Eden (*ibid.* 2:30). For example, he favorably cites inter alia a *midrash* (*Gen. Rabbah* 16:4) on Adam's placement in Gan Eden as meaning "not ... that He took him away from one place and put him in another, but that He raised the rank of his existence among the existents that come into being and pass away and established him in a certain state" (*Moreh* 2:30, p. 357) — indicating that the narrative can be understood in an entirely incorporeal sense.

In contrast, Ramban, on the one hand, likewise views the Torah's description of Gan Eden as alluding to "secrets [that] are transcendent and exalted" (commentary on Gen. 3:22). On the other hand, he stresses that "Gan Eden is *on earth*, and in it is 'the tree of life' (Gen. 2:9 and 3:22, 24) and 'the tree of knowledge' (*ibid.* 2:9,17), and from it the river goes forth and 'parts [...] into four streams' (*ibid.* 2:10) *that are visible to us*" (commentary on Gen. 3:22). Resolving this paradox, he affirms that "as they are [physical entities] on earth, so there are in the heavens [i.e., the spiritual realm] entities that are thus called [i.e., that correspond to those in the terrestrial realm]" (*ibid.*). He develops this dualism at length, concerning Gan Eden's physical details, alluding to "secrets [that] are transcendent and exalted," and Adam's sin, perpetrated "with the fruit of 'the tree of knowledge' below and above," in both terrestrial and transcendent domains. Thus, Ramban concludes, "All these matters are double; the revealed and concealed in them are [both] true" (*ibid.*). He expands on this theme considerably in his discussion of Gan Eden in "*Sha'ar ha-Gemul*" (*Torat ha-Adam*, "*Sha'ar ha-Gemul*," in *Kitvei Ramban* [ed. Chavel], II, 295-98). In particular, he lauds (*ibid.*, p. 297) the lyric comment of R. Avraham ibn Ezra: "Regarding 'the tree of knowledge,' there is a pleasant secret; also, the matters are true like their literal meaning" (Introduction to ibn Ezra's commentary on the Torah, s.v. "*Ha-Derekh ha-Shelishit*"; see also his commentary on Gen. 3:24 and his "*Shittah Aheret*" commentary on Gen. 3:21).

Significantly, although Ramban's dualistic perspective resonates with the kabbalistic approach (see, for example, *Midrash ha-Ne'elam on Hayyei Sarah*, 125a), Maharal apparently avoids it. For Maharal, the "fruits of

by *ge'onim* and earlier *risbonim*, Rambam arguably surpassed them all in establishing a system — structuring most of the *Moreh's* first unit and more⁹³ as a veritable glossary for allegorical elucidation of the Bible. This is the legacy (that Maharal felt de Rossi had hijacked) to which Maharal demonstratively bound himself, in invoking “the great rabbi — who was filled like the sea with wisdom in all natural, theological, and scholastic disciplines — being the Rambam.”⁹⁴ It is noteworthy that, of the *risbonim* cited by name in Maharal's writings, only Rashi and Ramban appear more frequently than Rambam. Excluding Maharal's *Gur Aryeh* supercommentary on Rashi's Torah commentary (which often inevitably presents Ramban's objections to Rashi), mention of Rambam is more common than anyone other than Rashi.⁹⁴ We quoted above Maharal's reference to Rambam in *Be'er ha-*

Gan Eden” have nothing “in common with matters that are for us now,” pertaining rather to “a reality that utterly transcends these days” (*GA* on Gen. 1:21, § 52). As such, he portrays them (*ibid.*) as analogous to the equally incorporeal “feast” of the “*liyatan*,” vouchsafed “for the righteous, for the future [world] to come” (*Bava Batra* 74b-75a; see also *Lev. Rabbah* 13:3; *Tanḥuma Va-Yikra* 8, *Shemini* 7, *Re'eh* 6, and *Nizḥavim* 4; and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* 10). Elsewhere, he comments more vehemently, “No one in the world who has wisdom and understanding will say that the fruits of Gan Eden were like the fruits that are with us.... *It is impossible that the fruits of Gan Eden were physical; rather, they were nonphysical*” (*HLA* on *Bava Batra* 74b [III, 104; see also *ibid.*, p. 105]).

In a sense, Maharal is simply echoing Rambam, who relates explicitly to the future “feast” of the righteous as a “parable” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Teshuvah* 8:4). On the one hand, it is crucial for us to appreciate how beholden Maharal was to this approach, even in interpreting a passage in the Torah. In this light, we can better understand Maharal's readiness to cast apparently historical aggadic tales as incorporeal abstractions. Still, on the other hand, a facile equation between Maharal's allegorical abstractions and Maimonidean parables is misleading. See the text and n. 90, above, for additional clarification of Maharal's approach. See also the text below for further elaboration on, and qualification of, Maharal's allegiance to Rambam versus Ramban.

93. See *Moreh* 1:1-30, 1:37-49, 1:64-67, 1:70, and 2:6.

94. Rashi's unique status in Maharal's works deserves separate treatment. Even apart from *GA*, often one senses that Maharal, in citing Rashi, regards him as more a mouthpiece of the Sages and a conduit of talmudic and midrashic literature than “merely” one of the early

Golah as “the great rabbi.” Maharal, in his vast literary legacy, accords that appellation to only two others: “the *great rabbi*, over all the great later rabbis, Rabbi [Yizḥak] Alfasi *z.l.*,”⁹⁵ and “the *great rabbi* Ramban *z.l.*, the divine kabbalist to whom alone were revealed the enigmas of wisdom and the secrets of the Torah.”⁹⁶ Irrespective of other significant influences on Maharal, clearly Rambam’s impact can hardly be overstated.

Perhaps even more importantly, Rambam and other early *risbonim* formulated a lexicon of Jewish philosophical discourse, based upon classical rationalist philosophy. Through the seminal Hebrew translations of R. Yehudah ibn Tibbon, his son R. Shemu’el, his grandson R. Mosheh, and others, this became a fundamental starting point for all later Jewish philosophers — Maharal included. His works, in particular, are replete with terms to which he implicitly applies philosophical definitions similar (if not always identical) to those employed by Rambam. These terms — and, by extension, Maharal’s true intent — will perforce remain impenetrable to anyone unfamiliar with Maimonidean philosophy and syntax. Ironically, many of those enthusiastically embracing Maharal today maintain an unabashedly deliberate ignorance of Rambam’s system and especially his *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, evidently without recognizing the extent to which they thereby condemn themselves to ignorance of Maharal as well. In the preface of a recently published, popular book purporting to present “patterns” in Maharal’s “thought,” its author recounts, “When I wanted to study a philosophical Jewish text, Maharal was

risbonim. His name appears over 2,800 times in Maharal — almost 400 times, excluding *GA*. By contrast, Ramban is mentioned over 550 times, of which over 100 are outside *GA*; Rambam is cited over 160 times, including over 120 outside *GA*. The other *risbonim* whose names are relatively prominent in Maharal’s works are R. Avraham ibn Ezra (over 80 times, almost half outside *GA*), Rosh (over 80 times, almost all outside *GA*), R. Yizḥak Alfasi (over 70 times, almost all outside *GA*; see also the text and n. 95, below), and Rashbam (over 40 times, almost all outside *GA*). These results were tallied through the DBS database of all of Maharal’s writings in Jewish thought.

95. *BHG*, *Be'er* 7, p. 142. See also *GA* on Num. 28:15, § 11, where Maharal also applies the title “great rabbi” to R. Yizḥak Alfasi.

96. *BHG*, *Be'er* 2, p. 34. See also *GHS*, ch. 7, p. 42, and *Tiferet Yisra'el*, ch. 6, p. 22, where Maharal also applies the title “great rabbi” to Ramban.

the natural choice. About three years ago a friend and I initiated a learning session to study *Tiferes Yisrael*, one of the Maharal's most famous books." Good intentions notwithstanding, how sad to attempt not only to learn but even to teach Maharal's profound ideas, without having mastered their prerequisites in the principal classics of Rambam and other major *rishonim*! While Maharal was indisputably a revolutionary, we can properly appreciate that revolution only in its broader context.

Balance — Maharal in His Context *and* on His Terms

The regularity and gravity with which Maharal explicitly and implicitly invokes Rambam and Maimonidean concepts in general obviously imply reverence. Nevertheless, to avoid a misleading imbalance, we must concede that reverence does not necessarily equate with agreement; the foregoing notwithstanding, Maharal is definitely not a "simple" Maimonidean. Rambam's system, on manifold levels, serves as Maharal's conceptual starting point, yet it is certainly not his sole — or even primary — conclusion. Indeed, on the one hand, Maharal's frequent quotations from *Moreh ha-Nevochim* leave no doubt regarding his mastery of, and respect for, Rambam's philosophy as a crucial approach with which to reckon. (For example, of six references to the *Moreh* in *Be'er ha-Golah*, only one is — respectfully — critical.) On the other hand, although the overwhelming majority of these citations are supportive, many introduce foundational issues of dispute. Maharal is almost invariably deferential when he rejects Rambam's position, but this respect in no way mitigates his vehemence.

Perhaps more illuminating, of approximately fifty references in Maharal's works to (rationalist) "philosophers," virtually all are pejorative, particularly when he contrasts their views with those of the "kabbalists." We noted earlier that one of the conspicuous factors precipitating the remarkable surge of interest in Aggadah during the sixteenth century was the rising tide of kabbalistic scholarship. The kabbalists focused attention upon Midrash and Aggadah specifically as means to elucidating esoteric truths. In this vein, it is germane to recall Maharal's great reverence for "the great rabbi Ramban *z.l.*, the divine kabbalist to whom alone were revealed the enigmas of wisdom and the secrets of the Torah."⁹⁶ Even if Maharal deemed himself more *beholden* to Rambam's philosophical system, he unquestionably considered

himself more *allied* with the kabbalistic perspective of Ramban. While he explicitly quotes from *Zohar* fewer than twenty times and hardly ever names earlier kabbalists, esoteric ideas clearly inform much of his thought and his explanations of exoteric *midrashim* and *aggadot*. We should stress that Maharal did not innovate the use of kabbalistic doctrines in the elucidation of talmudic and midrashic passages. Ramban's Torah commentary provides ample precedent for such a course — and, in its wake, among others, Rashba's *Perushei ha-Haggadot* and the medieval Torah commentaries of R. Menahem Recanati and R. Bahyay ben Asher, as well as R. Me'ir ben Gabbai's *Avodat ha-Kodesh*.⁹⁷ Rather, whereas the earlier rabbis often, in effect, rendered exoteric passages esoteric by subjecting them to an overtly kabbalistic interpretation, Maharal in a sense accomplished the opposite. His language and arguments are predominantly evocative of rationalist, philosophical discourse; nevertheless, his agenda, however veiled, is often esoteric. For the earnest student, this “hidden agenda,” straddling the divide between rationalist philosophy and classic Kabbalah, is arguably among the most frustrating obstacles to grasping Maharal's approach fully.

Still, this format is undoubtedly intentional. The sources upon which Maharal drew — ranging from rationalist philosophy to the concealed mysteries of Kabbalah — were all well established before him. It is the singular manner in which he accommodated and coordinated them all that is so novel and original. He effectively initiated a genre of traditional scholarship that continues to this day, popularizing esoteric kabbalistic ideas within mainstream expositions of exoteric Jewish thought. Perhaps, given the externally generated skepticism besetting the Jews of Renaissance Prague and elsewhere, he realized that any presentation not couched in philosophical, or at

97. See *GHS*, ch. 68, p. 315, where Maharal cites *Avodat ha-Kodesh* by its alternate title, *Marot Elokim*. See also n. 16, above.

We should also note additional medieval precedents for the use of kabbalistic doctrines in the elucidation of talmudic and midrashic passages: for example, R. Ezra and R. Azri'el of Gerona's commentaries on *Aggadah*, R. Todros Abbulafia's *Ozar ha-Kavod*, R. Yehoshua ibn Shu'iv's *Derashot*, and R. Yosef Ashkenazi's kabbalistic commentary on *Genesis Rabbah* — all of which we introduced in n. 10, above. However, the extent to which Maharal would have had access to — or awareness of — these works is unclear.

least semirational, terms would be to no avail. One senses, however, that, despite its tactical brilliance, Maharal's synthetic approach was not a mere device. The well-worn dichotomy between philosophical and kabbalistic approaches to Aggadah fades in Maharal's works — as, more generally, does the usually inescapable disparity between “internal” and “external” stimuli. The impetus for Maharal's lifelong project of aggadic explication came primarily from without — both the challenges and opportunities afforded by Renaissance humanism and universality. Appreciating these external circumstances, however, is neither more nor less indispensable to understanding his *weltanschauung* than mastering the source material that informs his work, drawn from the wellsprings within.

Maharal's negative attitude toward the rationalist “philosophers” is the inevitable rejection of what he viewed as a reductionist tendentiousness that misses, and fails to integrate, a larger picture. Likewise, his repudiation of de Rossi's method reflects his perception of this divergence between them: that de Rossi responded *only* to objections from outside, without subsuming them in an inclusive system coming forth essentially from inside. In effect, his evaluation of both the “philosophers” and de Rossi is a corollary of the extent to which Maharal *did* struggle to attain such an all-encompassing integration. Conversely, his admittedly unprecedented severity, in equating the disavowal of *aggadot* with forfeiture of everlasting life, is no less inexorable a consequence of the expansive system he developed. For Maharal, trivializing *anything* — let alone any nuance of the Sages' words, in Aggadah or elsewhere — was unthinkable: “*All* words of Aggadah are the wisdom of the Torah.”⁷¹ This extraordinary thinker sincerely strove to embrace the gamut of scholarship — halakhic and aggadic, esoteric and exoteric, kabbalistic and philosophical, even Jewish and secular. He succeeded in incorporating all of them, intertwined and interdependent, in the unique, holistic legacy he bequeathed to us. No wonder that, despite *Be'er ha-Golah's* apologetic dimension, his analyses resonate with a palpable authenticity that often eludes similarly polemical works, which frequently ring hollow. No wonder, too, that, through Maharal, we may descry vistas that would have otherwise escaped our notice — and may even have eluded all his predecessors.

Only in this light, we may begin to comprehend Maharal's revolutionary approach to Aggadah in particular and his revolution in Jewish thought in general. The very term “revolution” presumes a

discontinuity, and, indeed, as we noted at the outset, his approach followed no well-defined school, and its very complexity defies facile categorization. Maharal certainly never shrank from controversial innovation. Yet, even discontinuity has a context. It is impossible to fathom his revolution in Aggadah without understanding the extent to which he is — and is not — in consonance with his predecessors. Tragically, some circles nowadays study Maharal in isolation, in ignorance of, or antipathy toward, the vast enterprise of classic Jewish philosophy that commenced six centuries earlier. One suspects that they fail not only to grasp his writings but to appreciate the very foundation and premise of his work. Contrary to that fashion, we contend that his very novelty can be comprehended only by diligently studying his compositions, *both* in their broader context *and*, concomitantly, on his terms.

R. Avraham Yizhak ha-Kohen Kook — one of the foremost students of Maharal in the last century — aptly expressed this fundamental dialectic:

Every book, when it is by itself, reveals only a limited and small part of emotion or intellect. And to know its true value is possible only when one finds the nexus between it and the whole. And, most of all, the asset and completeness [of one book] will be discerned when the fullness of one important book is conjoined with another that appears to stand in opposition to it. For only this opposition, when reaching a state of adhesion, precipitates completeness; for the one complements the other. We need to put our hearts to this matter when we speak of our esoteric books. For only then may Judaism be revealed in its completeness — if we gaze upon each and every book as upon the stones of a great palace, in which they all conjoin to one giant and perfect edifice. For even though there are in Judaism diverse aspects, it is truly one unit; “these and those are the words of the Living God.”⁹⁸ Only

98. Eruvin 13b, Gittin 6b, Yerushalmi Berakhot 1:4, Yerushalmi Yevamot 1:6, Yerushalmi Sotah 3:4, and Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1:1.

then, may the influence of those books precipitate their munificent blessing.⁹⁹

Unfortunately, as he noted elsewhere, “Only exceptional individuals have adapted themselves to the broad and true conception, that not only can the entire world endure solely through the expansiveness that encompasses all the branches of abstract knowledge and feeling, but even each component can be understood satisfactorily solely through the collaboration of all the different and apparently remote aspects. And only thus shall the throne of the kingdom of ideas be readied.”¹⁰⁰ May we, by applying ourselves to studying both Maharal and his manifold antecedents throughout classic Jewish thought, advance that goal’s actualization. ❧

99. R. Avraham Yizhak ha-Kohen Kook, “*Telamim*,” pp. 38 ff., quoted by R. Mosheh Zevi Neria, *Mishnat ha-Rav* (Jerusalem, 1936), pp. 91-94, and in *Ma’amarei ha-Ra’ayah* (Jerusalem, 1984) I, 11-13.

100. R. Avraham Yizhak ha-Kohen Kook, “*Avodat Elokim*,” in *Ikvei ha-Zon* (Jerusalem, 1906), p. 143.