

Abraham ibn Ezra: On Seeing God's Back

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In his first chapter of *Yesod Mora*, Ibn Ezra comments on the difficulty of unraveling the words of the prophets: “We [at times] grope walls as the blind do. One commentator offers one interpretation and another, a different one.”¹ The same may be said of Ibn Ezra’s own comments to Scripture. The latter is especially true for the philosophical parts of his commentaries where, as Julius Guttmann notes, “he strives for enigmatic brevity, leaving it to the reader to guess rather than understand their playful allusiveness... In a way, his veiled language is the expression most adequate to the esoteric quality of his thought.”² Dov Schwartz similarly comments: “Ibn Ezra’s enigmatic style does not seem to permit an unambiguous interpretation.”³

The first part of an excursus inserted by Ibn Ezra to his comments to Ex. 33:21 opening with “Abraham the Author says” is one of a number of such cases.⁴ It contains allusions to medieval philosophy, to astrology and according to some, to mystical concepts. Ibn Ezra employs such

¹ See *The Secret of the Torah: A Translation of Abraham ibn Ezra’s Sefer Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Ha-Torah*, translated and annotated by H. Norman Strickman (New Jersey, 1995) p. 17; henceforth, *The Secret of the Torah*. Also see R. *Avraham ibn Ezra, Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Torah* by Joseph Cohen and Uriel Simon (Ramat Gan, 2007) p. 76; henceforth *Yesod Mora*.

² Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York, 1964) p. 118.

³ Dov Schwartz, *Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Boston, 2005) p. 21.

⁴ This section was probably written independently of I.E.’s long Commentary on Exodus and later inserted there. The Section is also found with some variants in abridged form in the *Yesod Mora* 12:3, p. 176–179 and in abridged form in I.E.’s short commentary (henceforth S.C.) on Exodus 33:18. What we note here also applies to S.C. Ex. 33:21 and *Yesod Mora* 12:3.

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terms as *Yotzer Be-Reshit* (creator of the beginning); *Sar ha-Panim* (prince of the face); *Sar ha-Ko'ach* (prince of power); the *Po'el* (the Worker) and the *Kavod* (the Glory). He notes that Man moves towards the face; the body which is on high moves towards the right and that “God is all, with the all, in the all.”

The commentaries differ as to what these terms mean and how we should interpret them.

Ex. 33:18 tells us that Moses asked God: “Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory (Ex. 33:18).” God then responded: “Thou canst not see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.” However, God offered Moses the next best thing: He told him: “Behold, there is a place by Me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock. And it shall come to pass, while My glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with My hand until I have passed by. And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back; but My face shall not be seen” (Ex. 33:21–23). Moses’ question and God’s answer troubled the medieval Jewish Bible commentators. They insisted that God is incorporeal and has no face or back. Yet here Scripture speaks of God having both a face and a back.

In the first section of his comments opening with “Abraham the author says,” Ibn Ezra seeks to explain what Scripture means by “thou shalt see My back.” Ibn Ezra’s explanation is unclear. The commentaries differ as to what he means. His explanation requires explanation. I will first quote Ibn Ezra’s comments and then do my best to explain them. Alternate interpretations will in most instances be noted in the footnotes.

Ibn Ezra prefaces his comments on “thou shalt see my back” with a number of comments on God’s relationship to the world.

Abraham the author states: I have previously explained that the name of God which is written but not pronounced is a proper name. This proper name refers to the Glory.

If you add up all the letters of God’s proper name you get seventy-two. The sages therefore said that it is God’s explicit name.

If you add the square of one, the first number, to the square of five, the true middle number, you will get the numerical equivalent of God’s name. This is also true regarding the five moving stars.

When you add up the letters that make up the words that one enunciates in sounding half of God’s name you will also get the numerical equivalent of God’s name.

When you add up the squares of the first four square numbers you get the numerical equivalent of half of God’s name.

When you multiply the first half of God’s name by the second half of God’s name you get the square of the odd numbers.

When you subtract the square of the first letter of God’s name from the sum of the squares of each of the first two letters of God’s name, the

remainder will be the equivalent to the cube of the second letter of God's name.

If you subtract the square of each one the first two letters of God's name from the square of the first three letters of God's name, the remainder will be equivalent to the cube of the third letter of God's name. The glorious God is similar to the number one which stands by itself and has no need for any number before it.

If you consider the role that the number one plays in a sum of numbers, you will discover that one is the first of all the numbers in any sum, and that all sums consist of ones. God similarly is the One who is all...

The One has no image. He encompasses all the images, for they all come from Him.

The heavenly bodies, namely the lights and the stars, have no front or back. This is certainly the case with man's supernal soul. It is similarly so with those who serve on high and beyond a shadow of a doubt the case with the Most High.

There is a vertical line between the two points. The point closest to the Worker is known as the prince of the face and the prince of power. The point which lies on the opposite end of the line marks the end of power. Man moves towards the face.

The body which is on high moves towards the right.

Plants grow upward.

Moses was able to know by the eye of his heart⁵ how created beings are connected to the creator of the world. This is called [seeing] "the back" (v. 23).⁶

It is the nature of the glory that no created being may have the power to know this. This is the meaning of for man shall not see Me and live (Ex. 33:20). This is so because man's soul is in a body.

After an intelligent person dies, his soul reaches a very high state. It is a state which it could not reach while the individual was alive. Moses turned into one who knows things via the whole. God therefore told Moses, I know thee by name (v. 12), for only God knows the individuals and their components from the point of view of the whole.

Man is the most important being on the earth; hence the form of the Cherubim. Israel is the most important type of human being; hence the statement regarding the knot of the *Tefillin*.⁷

⁵ To intellectually perceive.

⁶ Translated according to the interpretation of Isaac Meijler, *Ezra Le-Havin*, (Lanivitz, 1895) p. 84.

⁷ According to the Talmud (*Berakhot* 7b), when God told Moses that he would see God's back, He meant that Moses would see the knot of God's head Tefillin, that is placed on the back of the head.

The *Shi'ur Komah*⁸ clearly⁹ writes that God created all corporeal beings and all beings more glorious than corporeal beings. [He also created] the accidents [which] are of less significance than the corporeal beings. Furthermore, Rabbi Ishmael says: Whoever knows the measure of the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* (the Creator of the Beginning) is assured of a place in the world to come. I and Rabbi Akiba vouch for this. This is the meaning of Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Gen.1:26).

Ibn Ezra was of the opinion that certain Talmudic terms are in reality figures of speech for philosophical, metaphysical or astrological concepts.¹⁰ For example, Ibn Ezra interprets the Talmudic Aggada concerning the dangers presented by the demon Agrat the daughter of Machlat¹¹ as pertaining to the evil influence that Saturn exerts on Wednesday night.¹² He similarly explains that the Aggada reporting that the moon spoke evil of the sun¹³ is linked to the science of astronomy.¹⁴ He clearly states his position when speaking of the soul. According to Ibn Ezra there are three powers in the human body: *nefesh*, *ru'ach* and *neshamah*. Ibn Ezra says that if one wishes, he may refer to these powers as souls and speak of three souls in the body.¹⁵ Souls imply spiritual being with a persona. Powers are impersonal forces or drives. Nevertheless, Ibn Ezra does not mind interchanging souls and powers. We may rewrite Ibn Ezra's comments on Agrat the daughter of Machlat as follows: Saturn presents a danger on

⁸ *The Measurement of Stature*, a mystical work giving the dimensions of God. Most scholars believe it to have been composed in the Geonic period. However, Saul Lieberman believes it to be a Tannaitic Midrash. See Gershom G. Shalom, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960), Appendix D. Maimonides did not consider the *Shiur Komah* to be authoritative. "I never ever believed it came from the rabbis... It is nothing more than a forgery by the Greek *darshanim*. It would be best to destroy the work as it is nothing but idolatry" (*Teshuvot HaRambam* 117, p. 200). Also see Michal Gavin, *Kotzke* blog March 13 2016: "Rabbi Moshe Narboni and Yehuda Halevi defended the *Shiur Komah* maintaining it was not to be taken literally but rather as an allegory" (ibid). Also see Israel Levin, *Abraham Ibn Ezra: Reader* (Hebrew) (Israel, 1985) p. 195, note 31.

⁹ Hebrew *la-kehen*. *La-kehen* literally means, therefore. However, I.E. uses it in the sense of in truth, that is, truly, certainly.

¹⁰ Maimonides did the same. He explained that the Talmudic term *ma'aseh be-reshit* refers to the physical sciences and *ma'aseh merkavah* to metaphysics. Maimonides' *Introduction to the Guide*.

¹¹ *Pessachim* 112b.

¹² *The Secret of the Torah*, 1: 6, p. 23; *Yesod Mora*, 1:6, p. 81.

¹³ *Chulin* 60b.

¹⁴ *The Secret of the Torah*, 1: 6, p. 23; *Yesod Mora*, 1:6, p.81.

¹⁵ *The Secret of the Torah*, 7:4, p. 26; *Yesod Mora*, 7:4, p. 81.

Wednesday nights. If you wish you may refer to Saturn as the demon Agrat the daughter of Machlat. Ibn Ezra's comments on Ex. 33:21 should be interpreted in light of the above. When Ibn Ezra speaks of the *Sar Ha-Panim*, the *Sar Ha-Ko'ach*, the *Po'el*, and the back of God he is employing aggadic or mystical terms for philosophic concepts

I.E.'s comments on Exodus 33:21 should be interpreted in light of the above.

Ibn Ezra's comments on Moses seeing God's back opens with an explanation of the name of God. Ibn Ezra writes:

Abraham the author states: I have previously explained¹⁶ that the name of God which is written but not pronounced¹⁷ is a proper name.¹⁸ This proper name refers to the Glory (*Kavod*).¹⁹

Moses asked God: "Show me, I pray Thee, Thy Glory" (v. 19). According to Ibn Ezra Thy Glory²⁰ refers to God Himself and not to anything created by God.²¹ Thus just as the name YHV-H stands only for God, similarly does the *Kavod* (the Glory). Ibn Ezra notes that the *Kavod* in verse 19 stands for God because he held that the term *Kavod* has many meanings. It can refer to the soul, the angelic world, God's power or an angel embodying Gods power.²² Hence he points out that here it refers to YHV-H.

If you add up all the letters of God's proper name²³ you get seventy-two.²⁴ The sages therefore said that it²⁵ is God's explicit name.

¹⁶ I.E. on 3:15. The note might also refer to I.E.'s *Sefer Ha-Shem*. I.E. quotes this work in his comments on Ex. 12:6.

¹⁷ The name YHV-H. This name is never sounded. The name Adonai takes its place.

¹⁸ It is not an adjective like Kel, Shakkai, or Elokim.

¹⁹ To YHV-H Himself and not to any attribute.

²⁰ In verse 19.

²¹ Contra Rabbi Sa'adyah Gaon and Yehuda Ha-Levi who believe "the glory" refers to a light or a form created by God to represent Him. See *Sefer Ha-Emunot Ve-Hade'ot*; 2:10; *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 4:3.

²² H. Kreiscl. On the term KOL in Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Revue des Études Juives*, Vol. 153 (1994), p. 56.

²³ YHV-H.

²⁴ If you spell out God's name as follows: Y, YH, YHV, YHV-H you get 72, that is 10+15+21+26 = 72.

²⁵ The 72-letter name of God, God's personal name.

If one wants to refer to YHV-H, he can say that he is referring to the 72 letter name of God. The one who hears this will know that the reference is to YHV-H and not to Elokim, Shakkai, Kel or any other names of God.

If you add the square of one,²⁶ the first number, to the square of five, the true middle number,²⁷ you will get the numerical equivalent of God's name.²⁸ This is also true regarding the five moving stars.²⁹

One of the concepts that Ibn Ezra puts forth in his writings is the idea that God's influence permeates the world. Ibn Ezra thus notes that there is a correlation between God's name and the working of the universe. For example, the name YHV-H which is numerically equivalent to 26 is connected to the 26 possible conjunctions of the five visible planets. He similarly notes that there are 120 possible conjunctions of the planets plus the sun and moon. These 120 conjunctions, as we shall see, corresponded to the sum of the two-letter name of God. This is no mere coincidence. It shows that God directs the working of the heavenly bodies. Ibn Ezra goes on to point out additional interesting mathematical aspects to God's name. However, he does not explain their significance.

When you add up the letters that one names when spelling half of the letters that make up God's name,³⁰ you will also get the numerical equivalent of God's name.³¹ When you add up the squares of the first four

²⁶ The number that is the foundation of all numbers.

²⁷ The middle or center is a very important place. See I.E. on *Kobelet* 7:19: "The most important parts of anything are the head, the middle and the end." I.E. believes that the number 1 is not to be counted as a number, for it is the basis of all numbers. Thus we really have 9 basic numbers. In such a listing of numbers 5 is midpoint between the first number counted and nine that is 1-4; 5; 6-9. The idea that 10 is not counted among the numbers was put forward by the Pythagoreans. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 14a, 1087b. See Levin, p. 404 endnote.

²⁸ Thus 1 squared plus 5 squared stand for God's name.

²⁹ The five visible planets are Saturn, Jupiter, Mercury, Venus and Mars. These were the only planets known to medieval man. If you square 1 and you square the number of visible planets you get 26. The five visible planets are in conjunction with each other in 26 ways. For these conjunctions see Krinsky note 146. I.E.'s point is that there is a connection between God's personal name YHV-H and the working of the planets.

³⁰ Yah is spelled *yod, heb*. God's full name is YHV-H. If one is asked what letters spell half of God's name, he will respond *yod heb*. *Yod* is spelled *yod, vav dalet*. *Heb* is spelled *heb, aleph*.

³¹ *Yod, vav, dalet, heb, and aleph* come to 26. Thus the name *Yah*, the shortened form of YHV-H, is also connected to the conjunction of the five visible planets. See note 33.

even numbers³² you get the numerical equivalent of half of God's name.³³ When you multiply the first half of God's name³⁴ by the second half of God's name³⁵ you get the square of the odd numbers.³⁶ When you subtract the square of the first letter of God's name³⁷ from the sum of the squares of each of the first two letters of God's name,³⁸ the remainder will be the equivalent to the cube of the second letter of God's name.³⁹ If you subtract the square of each one the first two letters of God's name⁴⁰ from the square of the first three letters of God's name⁴¹ the remainder⁴² will be equivalent to the cube of the third letter of God's name.⁴³

There is not only a correlation between God's name and the working of the universe but there is a correlation between God and the number one.

The glorious God is similar to the number One which stands by itself and has no need for any number before it. If you consider the role that the number One plays in a sum of numbers, you will discover that one is the first of all the numbers in any sum, and that all sums consist of ones. God similarly is the One who is all.⁴⁴

³² The respective squares of 2, 4, 6, 8 are 4, 16, 36, and 64. The latter comes to 120.

³³ *Yah* spelled *yod heb* comes to 15. If you add up all the numbers from 1 to 15 (1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+14+15) you get 120. The name *Yah* is connected to the hundred and twenty possible conjunctions of the five visible planets plus the sun and moon.

³⁴ *Yod heb*, that is 15.

³⁵ *Vav, heb*, that is, 11. Multiplying 15 by 11=165.

³⁶ The odd numbers are 1, 3, 5, 7, 9. Their squares, 1+9+25+49+81=165. There is thus a correlation between the numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 and God's name.

³⁷ *Yod*. *Yod* (10) squared =100.

³⁸ *Yod* and *heb*. *Yod* squared = 100. *Heb* squared = 25. 100+25=125.

³⁹ The *heb* (5). *Heb* cubed =125. There is thus a connection between the *Yod* and the *Yod Heb* in God's name.

⁴⁰ *Yod* and *Heb*. *Yod* squared = 100. *Heb* squared = 25. 100+25=125.

⁴¹ *Yod, heb, vav, Yod, heb, vav* = 21. 21 squared = 441. 441 - 225 = 216.

⁴² 216.

⁴³ *Vav*. *Vav* cubed = 216. There is thus a connection between YH and YHV.

⁴⁴ See Ibn Gabirol's the Royal crown: "Thou art One, the first of every number, and the foundation of every structure." See Selected Religious Poems of Solomon ibn Gabirol tr. by Israel Zangwill, 1923, Chap. 2.

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/sig/index.htm>. For the possible influence of Ibn Gabirol on Ibn Ezra, see H. Kreisler. On the term *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra see: "A Reappraisal," *Journal: Revue des Études Juives*, Volume: 153, pp. 37-38.

Ibn Ezra seems to be advocating pantheism. In fact, this is the way that Spinoza read him. Many moderns accept Spinoza's assertion. Thus Richard Scheindlin's comments that Ibn Ezra seems to have crossed "the boundary of pantheism" in his composition *Achalay Yikon*.⁴⁵ Leon Weinberg similarly notes: "In describing the nature of God, Ibn Ezra's choice of words border on pantheism."⁴⁶ Likewise, Michael Linetsky writes that Nachman Krochmal, David Rosin, and Isaac Husik all "saw actual pantheism in Ibn Ezra's philosophical scheme, the latter two associating it with the theory of emanation."⁴⁷ Similarly, Michal Satlow notes that "Ibn Ezra at times leaned toward a neo-platonic pantheism believing that the created cosmos is in fact composed of emanations of the Divine."⁴⁸ Stephen Wylen believes that Ibn Ezra's statement to the effect that God is the one, God is creator of all and that God is all (Gen. 1:26) is "apparently referring to the pantheistic doctrine that all that exists is a part of God." He even suggests that Ibn Ezra had an influence on Spinoza's belief in pantheism.⁴⁹ Not only academic types see a connection between Ibn Ezra and pantheism. Rabbi Nehemiah Sheinfeld, a contemporary charedi living in Bnei Berak, draws a parallel between what Ibn Ezra wrote and the teachings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The latter taught: "Only God exists.... Aside from Him, there is no existence; All things and bodies contain God's life force, which brings them into being and makes possible their existence."⁵⁰ However, it should be noted that a close reading of all the relevant texts of Ibn Ezra shows that this is not necessarily the case.

Ibn Ezra compares God's influence to that of the sun's rays.⁵¹ The sun's rays come from the sun, but they are not identical with the sun. Ibn Ezra to Gen. 1:26 says that God is all. However, in his comments on Ex. 33:21, Ibn Ezra speaks of God as "the all, in the all and with the all." "In the all and with the all" seems to be explaining "the all." Ibn Ezra seems

⁴⁵ Raymond P. Scheindlin, *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel, and the Soul*. (Phil., 1991) p. 224.

⁴⁶ Leon J. Weinberg, *Twilight of a Golden Age: Selected Poems of Abraham Ibn Ezra*, 1997, p. 30.

⁴⁷ Michael Linetsky, *Philosophy of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (based on all of his works)*, <https://www.academia.edu/3789602/> p. 31.

⁴⁸ Michael Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice* (Columbia University Press, 2006) p. 213.

⁴⁹ Stephyn Wylen, *The Seventy Faces of Torah: The Jewish Way of Reading the Sacred Scriptures* (Paulist Press, May 2, 2005) p. 146.

⁵⁰ See Rabbi Nehemiah Sheinfeld, *Da'at Ezra, Be-Reshit* (Israel 2010) p. 30. Also see *Likkutei Amarim Tanya: Sha'ar Ha-Yichud Ve-Ha-Emunah* (NY: Kehot, 1985) chap. 6, p. 161.

⁵¹ *The Secret of the Torah* 12:3, p. 178; *Yesod Mora*, p. 208-209.

to be saying that God is called “the all” because His manifestation is with all and in all, not that all things are God, for otherwise why add “in the all and with the all” after “the all.” Furthermore, Ibn Ezra compares man’s soul to God. He says that just as God is incorporeal and fills the universe so does the soul which is incorporeal fill the body which is corporeal (I.E. to Gen. 1:26). Ibn Ezra did not believe that the soul and body are identical. Neither did he believe that God and the world are identical.

Be the above as it may, Ibn Ezra’s statement that “The glorious God is similar to the number One which stands by itself and has no need for any number before it” illustrates the idea that the world comes from God either by creation or by emanation.⁵² God stands by himself. He is not dependent on any being that came before Him. However, the world is dependent upon God, for it came from God. All numbers have a number before them. For example: if a person says I have five books, then what he is in effect saying is I have one book, two books, three books, four books, five books. However, the number one does not have any number before it. It stands by itself.⁵³ Similarly, God stands by himself. He is not dependent on any being that came before Him. However, the world is dependent upon God, for it came from God.

The parallel between creation and the numbers has in it another implication. If all existence starts with the number One and proceeds from there, then it should theoretically be possible to go back to the number One from any number that follows it. In other words it should be possible for man to return to his source or to come close to it.⁵⁴

Ibn Ezra notes that God has no image because he will soon go on to say that “thou shalt see my back” is not to be taken literally. In fact, Ibn Ezra clearly states, “Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory” (v. 18) does not refer to seeing with the eyes and that “before thy face” [in “I will make all My goodness pass before thy face” (v. 20)] means the inner face. It refers to the face of the heart.⁵⁵

⁵² Yitzchak Meijller, *Ezra Le-Havin* (Lanivitz 1895) p. 84.

⁵³ “Ibn Ezra, attempting to elucidate the Divine act of creation, the act incomprehensible to human minds, has recourse now to Logic, now to Mathematics. In Arithmetic, the unity, the source of the indefinite series of numbers, is represented as that series itself in potentia, and is said to also be contained in each single number, as without it no number can be imagined.” Michael Friedlander, *Essays on the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra*, <https://archive.org/details/essaysonwritings04frieuoft>. p. 21.

⁵⁴ I.E. will soon return to this idea in his statement “that there is a line between the two points.”

⁵⁵ Intellectually.

Ibn Ezra's statement that God encompasses all the images reflects the platonic teaching concerning the world of ideas. According to Ibn Ezra, God's mind contains all images and forms.⁵⁶ They all have their origin in God. However, He has no form. If He did He would be like them. Ibn Ezra next writes:

The heavenly bodies, namely the lights and the stars, have no [physical] face or back. This is certainly the case with man's supernal soul. It is similarly so with those who serve on high⁵⁷ and beyond a shadow of a doubt the case with the most high.

Ibn Ezra is using the terms "face and back" in a literal sense. Ibn Ezra's comments thus make it clear that God's back in verse 23 cannot refer to a physical back. Ibn Ezra then drops the issue of God's back and proceeds to discuss how a person can connect to God.

There is a vertical line between the two points. The point closest to the *Po'el* (worker) is known as the *Sar Ha-Panim* (prince of the face) and *Sar*

⁵⁶ "The relation between God, the ideals, and the material world has its analogy, in Logic, in the relation between the genera, species and individual; the genera not only contain, but are in fact the totality of all the species and individua; ... and the characteristics of the former appear also in the latter." Friedlander, p. 21.

⁵⁷ The angels.

Ha-Ko'ach (the prince of power).⁵⁸ The point which lies on the opposite end of the line marks the end of power.⁵⁹

It is unclear what the *Po'el* (the worker), and the *Sar Ha-Panim* (prince of the face) and *Sar Ha-Ko'ach* (the prince of power), refer to. In Jewish mystical writings the *Sar Ha-Panim* relates to a major angel.⁶⁰ Some texts identify him with the angel Metatron who in some mystical texts is referred to as the “small YHV-H.”⁶¹ I noted earlier that Ibn Ezra gave philosophical meaning to rabbinic terms. I believe that the same is the case here. *Po'el* refers to God, the “Worker” of the universe,⁶² the one who

⁵⁸ It appears that the *Sar Ha-Panim* (prince of the face) and *Sar Ha-Ko'ach* (the prince of power) refer to same entity. However, there are those who maintain that the *Sar Ha-Panim* refers to the tenth sphere and the *Sar Ha-Koach* refers to the ninth sphere, (Levin p. 195). Be it as it may, the ninth sphere encompasses all spheres beneath it, propels them and keeps the world going. Ibn Gabirol describes this sphere in the following way:

O Lord, who shall search out Thy profundities?
For Thou hast set apart above the sphere of the constellations
The sphere that is ninth in order.
That encompasseth all the spheres and their creatures,
Wherein they are closed up,
Which driveth all the stars of heaven and their planets
From the east to the west in the might of its movement.
Once a day it bows down in the west to the King who enthroned it,
And all the creatures of the universe in its midst are as a grain of mustard
in the vast ocean
From the mighty vastness of its breadth.
Yet all this and its greatness are accounted as nothing and naught
By the side of the greatness of its Creator and King,
And all its sublimities and grandeur
Are vain and void in comparison with Him.

“The Royal Crown,” *Selected Religious Poems of Solomon ibn Gabirol*, tr. by Israel Zangwill, (1923) at sacred-texts.com, chap. 24.

⁵⁹ Roth notes: This [from “There is a vertical line” until “plants grow upward”] is one of the most difficult statements found anywhere in Ibn ‘Ezra’s writings. See Norman Roth, *Two Notes On Ibn Ezra: “Three Worlds” and “Ladder Of Knowledge.”* https://www.academia.edu/11313322/Ibn_Ezra_Three_Worlds_and_Ladder_of_Knowledge p. 81; note 10.

⁶⁰ *The angel who sees God's face*, Israel Levin; *Abraham Ibn Ezra: Reader* (Hebrew), (Israel, 1985) p. 195.

⁶¹ Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tzaratza; “Mekor Chayim” in *Otzar Mefareshe Ha-Torah*, a reprint of *Margoliat Tuvab*, (Israel, 1973) p. 84. Henceforth, *Otzar Mefareshe Ha-Torah*.

⁶² Israel Levin; *Abraham Ibn Ezra Reader* (Hebrew) (Israel, 1985) p. 195. See also, A. Weiser, *Exodus* 33:21 (Vol. 2, p. 216), fn. 77. The vertical line extending from

keeps the world working.⁶³ The *Sar Ha-Panim* refers to the first intelligence⁶⁴ the *galgal ha-sekbel* (the sphere of Intelligence) the tenth sphere which encircles the nine other spheres. This sphere is the highest sphere and it was the first entity in the cosmological chain created by God or emanated from God.⁶⁵ It is directly under God's influence. It is thus said to face God.⁶⁶ Hence its name *Sar Ha-panim*. It is God's instrument in

the *Sar Ha-Panim* to the *Sof Ha-Ko'ach* refers to the influences of this intelligence upon what happens on earth. R. Shmuel Motot, *Otzar Me'afeshe Ha-Torah*, p. 84.

⁶³ Cf. Maimonides: *Yesodei HaTorah* 1:5 “[The] God of the world... controls the sphere with infinite and unbounded power. This power continues without interruption, because the sphere is constantly revolving, and it is impossible for it to revolve without someone causing it to revolve. That one is He, blessed be He, who causes it to revolve without a hand or any other corporeal dimension.”

⁶⁴ Levine, p. 195. I.E. speaks of 10 spheres in his comments on Ex. 3:15; Ps. 8:4, *Yesod Mora* 11:11. At other times he leaves out the tenth sphere and speaks of nine spheres. See Shlomo Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham ibn Ezra's Thought* (Hebrew), (Israel: Bar Ilan University, 1999) pp. 138-139; Also see, Yosef Kohen, *Haguto Ha-Filosofit shel R Avraham ibn Ezra* (Israel, 1996) pp. 76–84. It is possible that I.E. occasionally speaks of nine spheres because of the very special status of the tenth sphere, which is “totally holy.” See I.E. on Ex. 3:15.

⁶⁵ Kreisel p. 30.

⁶⁶ Rabbi Shelomoh ibn Gabirol describes the *galgal ha-sekbel* (the sphere of Intelligence) as follows:

Who shall understand the mysteries of Thy creations?
For Thou hast exalted above—the ninth sphere the sphere of Intelligence.
It is the Temple confronting us,
The tenth that shall be sacred to the Lord,
It is the Sphere transcending height,
To which conception cannot reach,
And there stands the veiled palanquin of Thy glory.
From the silver of Truth hast Thou cast it,
And of the gold of Reason hast Thou wrought its arms,
And on a pillar of Righteousness set its cushions
And from Thy power is its existence,
And from and toward Thee its yearning,
And unto Thee shall be its desire.

“The Royal Crown” in *Selected Religious Poems of Solomon ibn Gabirol*, tr. by Israel Zangwill (1923) at sacred-texts.com. Chap. 23. This sphere is known as the *Kisse Ha-Kavod* (Divine Throne) (I.E. on Ex. 3:15). The *Kisse Ha-Kavod* receives the Divine Influence and disperses it to the whole world in accordance with God's will. The vertical line extending from the *Sar Ha-Panim* to the *Sof Ha-Ko'ach* refers to the influences of this intelligence upon what happens on earth. R. Shmuel Motot, *Otzar Me'afeshe Ha-Torah*, p. 84. It should be noted that R. Shmuel Motot identifies the *Sar Ha-Panim* with the *sekbel ha-po'el* which propels the tenth sphere.

governing the universe.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Ibn Ezra refers to it as the *Kisse Ha-Kavod*.⁶⁸ “The point that lies on the opposite end of the line marks the end of power,” means there is a direct line between the first intellect called the *Sar Ha-Panim* that extends all the way down to man’s mind which is referred to as the end of power.⁶⁹

Man moves towards the face.⁷⁰

Man’s goal in life is to develop his soul so that it approaches the face of God. If he does so, his soul may reach the top of the earlier mentioned line and join the world soul in the tenth sphere.

The body which is elevated moves towards the right.

The human body, which stands erect and is elevated above all other beings on earth, moves towards God and aims at ending up at the right hand of God. Compare such verses as, “Sit at My right hand” (Ps. 101:1);

However, the *sekhel ha'poel* (the active intellect) refers not to the first intellect but to the active intellect which is located under the lunar sphere. Hence it appears that R. Motot is here using the term *sekhel ha-poel* for the first intellect rather than for the active intellect. See E.R. Wolfson, “God, the Demiurge and the Intellect: on the usage of the word ‘kol’ in Abraham Ibn Ezra,” *Revue des études juives*, 1990 (henceforth Wolfson) fn. 15, 58. Also see “Pirush Motot” in *Otzar Mefareshe Ha-Tora*, p. 84.

⁶⁷ See Norbert Samuelson, “Jewish Philosophy: An Historical Introduction” (London 2006) p. 196.

⁶⁸ I.E. on Ex 3:15.

⁶⁹ Wolfson p. 99; similarly, Weiser. According to A. Weiser, the image of a vertical line connecting the *Sar Ha-Panim* to the end of power alludes to the ability of a human being who lives in the lowest world (the end of power) to reach an angelic state, to become a *Sar Ha-Panim*, to become one who “sees God” by developing his mind step by step. A variant of this interpretation is: there is a direct line between the first intellect called the *Sar Ha-Panim* that extends all the way down to the earth which is referred to as the end of power. In other words, the *Sar Ha-Panim* is God’s instrument in governing the world. See Simon, Uriel, *Yesod Mora*, p. 208. Others identify the *Sar Ha-Panim* with the active intellect. See n. 68.

⁷⁰ The Hebrew reads: *u-te'nu'at ha-adam le-fanim*. Most of the commentaries render this, man moves forward. However, I believe that the context suggests that we render it, man moves towards the face (of God), that is, man’s soul moves towards God. See Norman Roth, “Two Notes on Ibn Ezra: ‘Three Worlds’ and ‘Ladder Of Knowledge’,” *Iberia Judaica* VII (2015) p. 81. Also see Krinsky, “Yahel Ohr” in *Mechokekei Yehudah* n. 182 who explains it this way.

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty” (Ibid. 91:1).⁷¹

Plants grow upward.

Ibn Ezra apparently wants to point out that the desire to grow and develop is implanted in nature, for even plants have a “desire” to rise above the earth.⁷²

After this introduction Ibn Ezra arrives at his goal, the interpretation of: “Thou shalt see my back.”

Moses was able to know and perceive intellectually how human beings cleave to the *Yotzer Be-Reshit*, which is called [clinging to] “the back” (v. 23).⁷³

There is a difference of opinion among the commentaries as to what Ibn Ezra means by *Yotzer Be-Reshit*. The term *Yotzer Be-Reshit* literary means “the Creator of the beginning.” In normative Rabbinic literature *Yotzer Be-Reshit* refers to God. We thus read in the *Aleinu* prayer: “It is our duty to utter praises to the Lord of All and to ascribe greatness to the *Yotzer Be-Reshit*.” We similarly bow in the Amidah and give thanks to the *Yotzer Be-Reshit*. In the *Hekhalot* literature the term *Yotzer Be-Reshit* applies to an angel created or emanated from God. This angel was God’s instrument in the creation of the world and remains His instrument in governing the world.⁷⁴

According to Joseph Dan, R. Yehuda He-Hasid believed that Ibn Ezra identified the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* with a spiritual entity called the *Kavod*,

⁷¹ Roth renders, “The body which is high moves towards the right” as: “the supernal body which is on high is on the right side of God.” He does not explain what he means by the “supernal body.” I assume that Roth means that an ideal form of man is at God’s right. See Roth, p. 81. Levine believes that the reference is to the motion of the sphere in which the fixed stars are embedded (the eighth sphere) and to the motion of the spheres of the planets. They appear to move left to right to one facing north. Thus the stars and planets move toward the right hand of God, if we picture God as sitting above the heavens. See Levine p. 195.

⁷² This interpretation is based on Weiser’s comments. Roth renders this line as follows: “and all that grows in the ‘upper’ (world).” He explains the latter as follows: “apparently the ‘forms’ which direct the nature of living things in the ‘lower’ or physical world.”

⁷³ The manner of clinging to God is called clinging to God’s back

⁷⁴ See Joseph Dan, “Anfi’el, Metatron and the Yotzer Bereshit,” *Tarbitz*, 1980, pp. 447–457; *Chasidut Ashkenaz Be-Toledot Ha-Machashava Ha-Yehudit, Misrad Ha-Bitachon-Israel*, 1992, p. 216, n. 15.

the Glory.⁷⁵ The *Kavod* emanated from God and is the instrument through which God rules the world.⁷⁶ The top of the *Kavod* “cleaves” or is “connected” to God and thereby receives God’s power. The bottom of the

⁷⁵ See Joseph Dan, *Chasidut Ashkenaz Be-Toledot Ha-Machshava Ha-Yebudit* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1968) pp. 129–143; Joseph Dan, “R. Yehudah He-Hasid,” (Mercaz Shazar, 1966) pp. 122–123; and Joseph Dan, “Chasidut Ashkenaz,” pp. 19–24. Yosef Yitzchak Lifshitz traces Dan’s connection of this belief to R. Yehudah He-Chasid. He believes it to be a belief held by some of the Chasidei Ashkenaz, but not Rabbi Yehudah He-Chasid. The latter believes that the prophets experience mental visions; they do not see physical events. See Yosef Yitzchak Lifshitz, *Echad Be-Khol Dimyonot: One God; Many Images* (Israel: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 2015) pp. 68–72.

⁷⁶ E.R. Wolfson takes this a step further. He is of the opinion that Ibn Ezra believes that the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* refers to an Intellect-Demiurge below God. See E. Wolfson, *God, the Demiurge, and the Intellect*. Elliot Wolfson argues that the term *kol* (all) in the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra has two meanings: the totality of beings, and the hypostasis of the Intellect. This intellect comprises within itself all things, and serves as the Demiurge. The latter meaning comes to replace, rather than complement, the generally accepted interpretation of this term as an epithet for God. Wolfson brings a vast array of arguments—historical, textual, and conceptual—in support of his interpretation. He traces the use of the term *kol* as an epithet for the Intellect beneath the One in the writings of Plotinus and Proclus (which were translated into Arabic and left a sharp impress upon Islamic philosophical thought). He brings a number of ontological schemes prior to Ibn Ezra that posit an Intellect-Demiurge beneath God. He carefully analyzes passages in Ibn Ezra’s writings in which the term *kol* or the term *Yotzer Be-Reishit* (Creator of the beginning) appears, as well as passages containing a number of other relevant terms. He attempts to show that these epithets refer not to God but to the Active (or Universal) Intellect, also identified by Ibn Ezra with the angel Metatron. Wolfson points out that the term *kol* bears some similarity to the term *al-'aql al-kulli* (Universal Intellect) that appears in the writings of a number of Ibn Ezra’s predecessors, including Avicenna who also uses the term *'aql al-kull* (Intellect of the world). “Abstract of: On the Term Kol in Abraham Ibn Ezra: A Reappraisal. Kreisel,” *H. Revue des Études Juives*, 1994, p. 29. This is a very interesting point. However, it is subject to refutation. If I.E. believed in the existence of a demiurge, then he believed in what the Rabbis of the Talmud called “two powers.” In other words, he was not a monotheist. He was a secret heretic. Some Rabbis like Rabbi Moshe Taku, Ramban and Abravanel accused Ibn Ezra of holding unacceptable beliefs. However, no one accused Ibn Ezra of not being a monotheist. Kabbalists were accused of harboring heretical beliefs regarding God’s unity. But Ibn Ezra was never accused of believing in two powers. It is very unlikely that Wolfson discovered in Ibn Ezra what some of Ibn Ezra’s greatest critics such as Rabbi Moshe Taku, Ramban, Abravanel, and Rabbi Solomon Luria did not. I believe that Wolfson’s interpretation is ingenious, but incorrect. Hayyim Kreisel similarly notes: Ibn Ezra maintains that

Kavod faces the world and transmits God's directives to it.⁷⁷ When prophets see visions, they see the glory of God, that is, visions that originate in the side of the glory that faces the earth.

Some commentators identified the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* with the active intellect.⁷⁸ Others identified the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* with the first intellect.⁷⁹ Still others identified the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* with the totality of being from the upper sphere until the center of the earth.⁸⁰

However, it appears that Ibn Ezra uses the term *Yotzer Be-Reshit* for God. Thus in commenting upon "and they saw the God of Israel" (Ex. 24:10), Ibn Ezra writes in his short commentary: "The meaning of the God of Israel is the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* in whose hands are the souls of all life. The intelligent will understand."⁸¹

all existence, whether corporeal or incorporeal, "God alone created." (Ex. 25:40). Thus while Ibn Ezra accepts the notion of heavenly intermediaries, he rejects in an unambiguous manner the notion that any intermediary is the Creator. "On the Term Kol in Abraham Ibn Ezra: A Reappraisal," *Revue des Études Juives*, 1994. See also, Roth, p. 88, n. 21: "I do not agree with Wolfson that Ibn Ezra believed in a 'Demiurge' below God..."

⁷⁷ R. Yehuda Ha-Chasid claims that Moses requested to see the top of the *Kavod* (the face of the *kavod*) but God told Moses that he can see only that part of the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* that faces the world (the back) but not the part of the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* that faces God. See Joseph Dan, *Torat Ha-Sod Shel Chasidei Ashkenaz* (Jerusalem 1968) p. 129; Joseph Dan, R. Yehuda He-Hasid (Jerusalem 2006) pp. 122-123 and Dan Yosef, *Iyunim Be-Sifrut Chasidut Ashkenaz* (Israel, 1975) pp. 169-171; and Yosef Yitzchak Lifshitz, *Echad Be-Khol Dimyonot: One God; Many Images*, (Israel: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 2015) pp. 68-72.

⁷⁸ See *The Commentary of Mordechai ben Eliezer Komtiyano* on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra's *Yesod Mora*, Annotated Critical Edition by Dov Schwartz (Bar Ilan U. Press, 2010) p. 190.

⁷⁹ See Wolfson, p. 42.

⁸⁰ See Rabbi Shemu'el Tzartzah, *Otzar Mefareshe Ha-Torah*, p. 85, n. 82. According to these interpretations I.E.'s statement is: Moses was able to know and perceive intellectually how human beings cleave to the *Yotzer Be-Reshit*, which (the *Yotzer Be-Reshit*) is called "the back."

⁸¹ Wolfson (p. 80) believes that "The intelligent will understand" refers to I.E.'s belief that the God of Israel refers to the demigod. If we had proof that Ibn Ezra believed in a demigod, then one could conceivably offer this interpretation. However, there is no clear and undisputable evidence that Ibn Ezra had such a belief. Hence, this interpretation must be rejected. What I.E. might mean is that while God revealed himself to Israel at Sinai as the Lord who took Israel out of Egypt, he now revealed himself as the *Yotzer Be-Reshit*, the creator of the world. Ibn Ezra comments thus because he earlier explained that God revealed himself to Israel as their liberator but not as the creator of the world because only the elite could fully conceive God as creator, whereas they all experienced liberation

Furthermore, in Ibn Ezra's Short Commentary to Exodus 34:18 he explains that "And the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face" (Ex. 24:11) refers to the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* speaking to Moses and not to an angel speaking to Moses.

It is clear that Ibn Ezra used the appellation *Yotzer Be-Reshit* when he referred to God as the Creator and maintainer of the world.⁸² Until this very day observant Jews daily pray, "Blessed be He who spoke, and the world came in to being; blessed be He. Blessed be He who created the universe (*oseh Be-Reshit*)."⁸³

Seeing God's back means knowing⁸⁴ the system of the universe by which God the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* governs the world.⁸⁵ It means knowing "the categorical knowledge of the things made out of the four elements,

from Egypt. Ibn Ezra now says that God revealed Himself to the elite of Israel as creator, for by studying creation we come to know God. See I.E. on Ex. 23:1, p. 132 in the Weiser edition. Kreisel explains that the "intelligent will understand" means that the intelligent will understand that the vision seen by Moses is the same as the vision seen by Ezekiel.

⁸² Weiser, p. 408, n. 14.

⁸³ *Oseh Be-Reshit* is a variant of *Yotzer Be-Reshit*.

⁸⁴ Moses Maimonides offers a similar interpretation of "And thou shalt see my back." Maimonides writes: "And thou shalt see my back (*ahorai*) means thou shalt perceive that which follows me, i.e., all things created by me. Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, tr. M. Friedländer (1904), at sacred-texts.com. *Guide* 1:38 p. 54. "God promised to show Moses the whole creation, concerning which it has been stated, "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen. I: 31); when I say "to show him the whole creation," I mean to imply that God promised to make him comprehend the nature of all things, their relation to each other, and the way they are governed by God both in reference to the universe as a whole and to each creature in particular. This knowledge is referred to when we are told of Moses, "he is firmly established in all mine house" (Num. 12:7); that is, "his knowledge of all the creatures in My universe is correct and firmly established," for false opinions are not firmly established. Consequently, the knowledge of the works of God is the knowledge of His attributes, by which He can be known. That God promised Moses to give him a knowledge of His works may be inferred from the circumstance that God taught him such attributes as refer exclusively to His works, viz., "merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness," etc. (Ex. 34:6). "It is therefore clear that the ways which Moses wished to know, and which God taught him, are the actions emanating from God." (Ibid. *Guide* 1:54; p. 75.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

the knowledge of the spheres, the throne of glory,⁸⁶ [and] the secret of the chariot.”⁸⁷

It is the nature of the Glory that no created being has the power to know this.⁸⁸ This is the meaning of “for man shall not see Me and live.” (Ex. 33:20)

The term “Glory” (*Kavod*) like the term “Elokim” is a word that can have more than one meaning. It may apply to a spiritual element created by God, or to God himself. Here it applies to God.⁸⁹

After an intelligent person dies, his soul reaches a very high stage, It is a state which it could not reach while the individual was alive. Moses turned into one who⁹⁰ knows things via the whole.⁹¹ Therefore God told Moses, I know thee by name (v. 12), for only God knows the individuals and their components from the point of view of the whole.⁹²

A human being’s soul is permanently united with the world soul⁹³ upon death. This is the ultimate place for the fully developed soul. The soul there gains knowledge of the “whole” which it could not while alive, for the body prevents this from happening. However, Moses was able to receive this knowledge while alive.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ See I.E. on Ex. 3:15.

⁸⁷ For the Secret of the Chariot see I.E. on Ex. 24:10.

⁸⁸ To know God’s glory, that is, to see God’s glory. See Krinsky; Weiser.

⁸⁹ *Secret of the Torah*, p. 143; *Yesod Mora* 10:2.

⁹⁰ While yet alive.

⁹¹ Like God.

⁹² Ibn Ezra believes that there is a basic difference between man’s knowledge and God’s knowledge. Man knows only the particular. God knows the whole, that is, “God knows the individuals and their components from the point of view of the whole.” But now Moses had this power.

⁹³ Located in the upper sphere. See I.E. on Ps. 22:22: “The meaning of *mine only one* (v. 21) is, my soul. The soul is referred to in this manner because the soul of every person is unique and apart in its body from the soul of all. When it separates itself from its body it joins the all.” See also I.E. on Ps. 49:16: The meaning of “for He shall receive me” is that the soul of the psalmist will cleave to the upper soul which is the soul of heaven. See also Gen. 25:8: When it (the soul) separates from the body, the glory (the soul) is gathered to its people. See also Husik. [According to I.E.] “The acquired Intellect... is immortal and becomes one with the world soul of which it is a part.” Isaac A Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1916) p. 196.

⁹⁴ “He, blessed be He, revealed to Moses matters which no other man had known before him—nor would ever know afterward,” Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhbot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:10.

Ibn Ezra's statement that "God knows the individuals and their components from the point of view of the whole" is very enigmatic. Julius Guttmann explains that Ibn Ezra believed that God's knowledge extends "only to the general essence, flowing from God, which governs all substances; the particular... [is] included in this knowledge only insofar as it ...[is] a link within this chain of formal causality."⁹⁵

Nahmanides accused Ibn Ezra of "pleasing himself with the brood of aliens" (Isaiah 26),⁹⁶ that is, of following non-Jewish thinkers. It is interesting that he did not accuse Ibn Ezra of heresy. In fact his criticism of Ibn Ezra is quite mild compared with his censure of what he said regarding some ideas expressed by Maimonides in his *Guide*, namely, that one is not permitted to listen to them nor believe in them for they contradict the Torah.⁹⁷ Rabbi Chasdai Crescas,⁹⁸ Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak Kook⁹⁹ and others similarly pointed out the problematic nature of I.E.'s comment.¹⁰⁰

Israel Drazin claims that "Ibn Ezra denied divine knowledge of human thoughts and actions." He writes in his commentary to Genesis 18:21: "For it is the truth that the All¹⁰¹ knows every particular¹⁰² in a general manner, but not in a particular manner," meaning, God knows only the laws of nature that God created, but not how humans use them.¹⁰³ If Ibn Ezra really believed what Drazin attributes to him would he have said: "There is no doubt that the revered God knows the whole and the particulars. The whole is the soul of all life that animates all created beings. The particulars refer to each one of the species. The particulars also refer to each and every individual creature of the species, for they are all the work of His hands. However, the knowledge of each individual be he righteous or wicked is by way of the whole."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁵ Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) pp. 119-120.

⁹⁶ Nahmanides on Gen. 20:18.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 18:1.

⁹⁸ *Or Adonai*, Chapter 2.

⁹⁹ *Orot Ha-Kodesh, Musar Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 11 (Jerusalem, 1990) p. 439.

¹⁰⁰ See Krinsky, *Chumash, Mechokeke Yebudah* (NY: Reinman Seforim Center, 1975) on Gen. 18:21.

¹⁰¹ Namely, God.

¹⁰² Only.

¹⁰³ Israel Drazin, *Review of Strickman and Silvers' translation of: Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*, December 22, 2013, Amazon website.

¹⁰⁴ Psalms 1:4.

Ibn Ezra believes that God's knowledge is different from human knowledge.¹⁰⁵ He does not deny that God knows the individual. God knows the whole. We can compare God's knowledge to that of a skilled farmer who plants a seed and knows exactly how it will grow. He looks at the seed and "sees" its branches, its fruit, its height and its ultimate demise. Moses was granted this way of knowing things. Hence God told him, I know thee by name. I know you as a specific individual, not only as part of the whole.¹⁰⁶ Ibn Ezra elsewhere writes: "Moses... cleaved to the All, therefore God used him as an instrument in creating new signs and wonders."¹⁰⁷ Hence he was able to perform the miracles reported in Scripture.

Man is the most important being on the earth. Hence the form of the Cherubim. Israel is the most important type of human being. Hence the statement regarding the knot of the *Tefillin*.

The Bible speaks of God in human terms, that is, when the bible wants to picture God it portrays Him as a human being. It does not describe Him as an animal. It pictures God in human terms because "Man is the most important being on the earth." Ibn Ezra brings up the issue of Scripture speaking of God in human terms because verse 23 speaks of God's face and God's back. Scripture tells us that God sits or rides on the Cherubim.¹⁰⁸ The Book of Ezekiel relates that the cherubim had the form of human beings.¹⁰⁹ Thus we are permitted to employ human forms when speaking of spiritual entities.

Israel is the most important type of human being.¹¹⁰ Hence the statement regarding the knot of the *Tefillin*. According to the Talmud, when God told Moses that he would see God's back, He meant that Moses would see the knot of God's head, *Tefillin* which is placed on the back of

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Ezra does not explain how God knows the individual via the whole. He probably believed that it cannot be explained. However, it is so. We should compare it to the question of free will versus God's knowledge of the future. They apparently contradict each other. Maimonides "solves" the problem by saying that they are both true and that God's knowledge is different from man's knowledge. It does not solve the problem. However, we accept both as true. Ibn Ezra probably had a similar idea regarding God's knowledge of the individual and His knowledge of the whole.

¹⁰⁶ Weiser on Ex. 33:21, notes 86–89.

¹⁰⁷ I.E., *Short Commentary* to Ex. 33:12.

¹⁰⁸ Ps. 18:10.

¹⁰⁹ Ezek. 1:5.

¹¹⁰ For Israel is the instrument that God employed to teach the world of His existence. I.E. might be reflecting R. Judah Ha-Levi. See *Kuzari* 1:26.

the head.¹¹¹ The straps extending from God's *Tefillin* teach the concept that God's providence extends throughout the world. Moses' vision of the back of God's *Tefillin* is another way of saying that Moses was shown the system employed by God in governing the world.¹¹²

The *Shiur Komah*¹¹³ therefore writes that God created all corporeal beings¹¹⁴ and all beings more glorious than corporeal beings.¹¹⁵ [He also created] the accidents which are of less significance than the corporeal beings.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, Rabbi Ishmael says, "Whoever knows the measure of the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* is assured of a place in the world to come. I and Rabbi Akiba vouch for this."¹¹⁷ This is the meaning of Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Gen. 1:26).¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ *Berakbot* 7a.

¹¹² R. Shmuel Tzartzah, *Mekor Chayyim*, *Shemot* 33:21; *Otzar Mefareshei Ha-Torah*, p. 84b, n. 72.

¹¹³ *The Measurement of Stature*. A mystical work giving the dimensions of God. Most scholars believe it to have been composed in the Geonic period. However, Saul Lieberman believes it to be a Tannaitic Midrash. See Gershom G. Shalom, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, New York 1960, Appendix D. Maimonides did not consider the *Shiur Komah* to be a canonical work. He writes: "I never thought that this came from the Sages. Heaven forbid our assuming that this kind of thing derives from their hands! Rather, it is undoubtedly no more than the work of a Byzantine preacher. All in all, it would be a highly meritorious deed to snuff out this book and to destroy all memory of it." ("Shi'ur Komah: The Mystical Shape of the Godhead" www.ma.huji.ac.il/~kazhdan/Shneider/.../Shi'ur%20Komah.pdf, p. 37; *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. J. Blau (Jerusalem, 1957), §117, vol. I, pp. 200-201). Also see Israel Levin, *Abraham Ibn Ezra: Reader* (Hebrew) (Israel, 1985) p. 195, n. 31.

¹¹⁴ That is, since everything is connected to God, the *Shi'ur Komah* notes that God created all corporeal beings and all beings more glorious than corporeal beings. [He also created] the accidents that are of less significance than the corporeal beings.

¹¹⁵ The angels.

¹¹⁶ See I.E. on Ps. 2:4: "God created all matter...and the forms. The forms consist of the accidents...."

¹¹⁷ See *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 7. *Yesod Mora* 1:1: "Man's soul is unique. When given by God, it is like a tablet set before a scribe. When God's writing—which consists of the categorical knowledge of the things made out of the four elements, the knowledge of the spheres, the throne of glory, the secret of the chariot, and the knowledge of the Most High—is inscribed upon this tablet, the soul cleaves to God the Glorious while it is yet in man, and also afterwards when its power is removed from the body which is its place [here on earth]."

¹¹⁸ Let us make man in our image, after our likeness means: Let us make man who can become like us, in that he will understand how the world works.

The statement “Whoever knows the measure of the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* is assured of a place in the world to come” is a very problematic statement. If taken literally it teaches that God is physical and has a body that can be measured. In fact Maimonides suggested that the *Shiur Komah* be burnt.¹¹⁹ It is clear that I.E. did not take the above literally. According to Ibn Ezra the meaning of “whoever knows the measure of the *Yotzer Be-Reshit* is assured of a place in the world to come” means: whoever knows the greatness of God as expressed in His creations is assured of a place in the world to come. In other words the one who knows “the categories that the things made out of the four elements fall into—the knowledge of the spheres, the throne of glory, the secret of the chariot and the knowledge of the Most High”¹²⁰—is assured of a place in the world to come.

Conclusion:

Ibn Ezra’s comments on Ex. 33:21 are hard to fathom. This has resulted in sharp differences in interpreting what he wrote. Some commentators interpret his exegetical notes philosophically and others as alluding to mysteries.

However, its basic message can be ascertained. Ibn Ezra believes that Scripture’s account of Moses’ request to see God’s face and God’s answer that he can see His back are not to be taken literally. Moses asked to fully know God in “the face of his heart.”¹²¹ He did not actually ask to see Him physically. Moses was told that his request could not be fulfilled. However, he was told that man can come to know God by studying the works of God. This Moses did. He came to know the ways that God employs in governing His world. He mastered mathematics,¹²² geometry,¹²³ physics, astronomy,¹²⁴ logic¹²⁵ and the psychology of the soul.¹²⁶ He knew the workings of the spheres,¹²⁷ the secrets of the throne of glory and the chariot.¹²⁸ He thus came to know God. ❧

¹¹⁹ See note 119.

¹²⁰ *Secret of the Torah*, p. 143; *Yesod Mora* 10:2.

¹²¹ “‘Show me Thy Glory’ (v. 18) does not refer to seeing with the eyes. Before thy face (v. 19) means your inner face, that is, the face of the heart.” I.E. on 33:21.

¹²² *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 20; *Yesod Mora* 1:4.

¹²³ *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 21; *Yesod Mora* 1:5.

¹²⁴ *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 21; *Yesod Mora* 1:5.

¹²⁵ *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 21; *Yesod Mora* 1:5.

¹²⁶ *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 22; *Yesod Mora* 1:5.

¹²⁷ *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 21; *Yesod Mora* 1:5.

¹²⁸ *The Secret of the Torah*, p. 143; *Yesod Mora* 10:2.