

Ignoring the Writing on the Wall: Semiology vs. Metaphysics

By: ABE HALEVY FAUR

Astronomical Miscellanea

An amateur astronomer sitting atop a Sedona, Arizona canyon aims his telescope into the moonless night sky, perusing different celestial objects, while reviewing a detailed star map. He comes across an asteroid-like object, one which had not previously been identified on NASA's asteroid list. Intrigued by this discovery, our young astronomer contacts NASA, and while they confirm that this is indeed a newly discovered object, careful calculations put the Earth directly in its trajectory, with an impact date of only a couple of weeks away. The day of impact arrives. Concern about where it will land is replaced with awe, as the object methodically slows down upon entering the atmosphere, eventually coming to a gentle landing on the Great Lawn of New York's Central Park. Scientists become increasingly intrigued when they find a pentagonal object lined with various orthographic markings on the outside, and a hollow inside. Investigations proceed immediately as to the physical and chemical composition of this object, leading to the discovery of new metallic alloys and opening the gates for advance studies in the quantum properties of these new metallic alloys. Scientists the world over are beside themselves in glee as the Periodic Table is expanded to include newly discovered elements, while universities worldwide open new courses based upon the scientific discoveries deriving from this object. Long thin probes prod its hollow inte-

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- This article is dedicated to the loving memory of my father, Rabbi, Dr. José Faur, זצ"ל, who taught me Torah all of my life, who continues to teach me Torah after his passing through the numerous articles, books and private notes he left behind, and whose timeless wisdom allowed me to conceptualize this article.

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rior, revealing geometrical markings, patterns and symbols, as well as calligraphic ambigrammatic designs, all quickly explained away as the effects of corrosive forces from the long journey. Eventually, this stone, now affectionately called the “Philosopher’s Stone,” is placed down the block on display in the Hayden Planetarium of the NY Museum of Natural History. And so ends the attempt of an advanced alien species to communicate with the human race. The purposes of this communication, and the messages contained in the Philosopher’s Stone will never be known, because 99% of all scientists derisively criticized anyone who dared suggest that the symbols were meant to be read, branding them as modern-day heretics for their unscientific thinking. The only thing that is important is that scientists determined that the markings and letters covering the exterior and interior of the Philosopher’s Stone were unimportant in comparison to the far more important task of studying the material from which the stone is made. To ensure that this narrative dominates public discourse and interest, as a public service, and with a view to promote democratic ideals, Twitter, Facebook and Google all agree to shut down the accounts of dissenting voices, eventually waging a monopolistic attack on other media that dare violate democratic conventions by giving a voice to nonconventional opinions.

To Be or Not to Be—Is It Really the Question?

Metaphysics, which is the branch of philosophy that studies the essence and reality of things, seeks to answer questions about how the world is. To quote William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, “to be or not to be, that is the question.” For the Greek mind, “the world is eternal. It can have no goal; it can only be.”¹ This ontological perspective focuses on the existence of things, especially (but not only) on objects and their properties. Accordingly, classical Greek philosophers (and to a great extent, today’s modern scientific community) are often concerned with the nature of reality, what is really real, the composition of things, physical properties, and those universal principles that define fundamental beingness.

This metaphysical outlook is related to a particular mythological outlook, on the one hand, and an anti-text / anti-semiology perspective, on the other hand. Mythologically, the Greeks conceived of gods who had fantastic powers: the thunderbolts of Zeus, the great bow and arrows of Artemis, and the speed of Hermes. These gods all exist in the realm of

¹ Kostas Papaioannou, “Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos,” *Diogenes* 25 (1959): 9, quoted in José Faur, *Golden Doves and Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), xxii.

nature and beingness; they share a common sphere of existence with humans while, admittedly, they perform impressive feats that mere mortals cannot. Notwithstanding their powers, as pointed out by Hakkham José Faur, “None of them, however, could either write or read: the Greek gods were illiterate. Indeed, the Muses could inspire the poets, but neither they nor the poets they inspired could express their thoughts in writing.”² Such debility was not due to a lack of teachers or a poor education. Rather, it was intentional, and is related to the attitudes of the Greeks towards writing and reading. Specifically, for the Greeks, oral communication was the best way to deliver a message clearly and precisely, while the written text was considered to be a falsified version of the spoken word, distorting meaning. “It is *logos* and not writing that exists at the heart of democratic Athens’s self-definition and the good speaker—not the writer—who keeps popular government on course.”³ Good citizens of Athens recognized “the alien character of writing, its necessary exclusion from the lives of right-minded citizens.”⁴ To be sure, at the political level, there was a certain ambivalence in the Greek attitude towards writing, in that equality under the law required a written legal code that was visible to the public. Thus, while writing was viewed as a tool that served democratic political objectives, a necessary evil of sorts, necessary for the publication of laws essential to establish an egalitarian society, the Greeks also recognized

the association between writing, totalitarianism and imperialistic aggression. . .whereby a dominant power asserts its rights of ownership over the man and land it would possess, both at home and abroad.⁵

Hence, writing enabled totalitarianism, since despots would write laws, which were used to abuse its citizenry and suck away its wealth.

At the philosophical level, the disdain for the written text is best expressed by Socrates, who says to Phaedrus,

even the best of writings are but a reminiscence of what we know, and that only in principles of justice and goodness and nobility taught and communicated orally . . . is there clearness and perfection.⁶

² Faur, José. “God As a Writer: Omnipresence and the Art of Dissimulation.” *Religion and Intellectual Life*, vol. 6 (1989), p. 31.

³ Steiner, Deborah Tarn. *The Tyrant’s Writ* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 8–9.

⁶ Jowett, Benjamin. *The Dialogues of Plato in Five Volumes*. (Oxford University Press, 1982). Vol. 1, p. 278.

Ominously, Socrates warns that writing is but a reminiscence through which

you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.⁷

As pointed out by Jorge Louis Borges (1899–1986), because of the hostile attitudes towards the written text, “Pythagoras did not leave a single written line.”⁸ As expressed by Plato, “books are like statues: they may seem alive, but when you ask them something, they do not reply.”⁹

The Greek disdain towards the written text, being as it were an imperfect replication of truth, is an extension of their attitude towards the ontological world, searching always for *the* real objective truth, which as discussed below, is obscured by the opaque written word.

Let us understand this more deeply. In metaphysical realism, “whatever exists does so, and has the properties and relations it does, independently of deriving its existence or nature from being thought of or experienced.”¹⁰ Hence, for truths to exist, you do not need thinkers to experience them. Plato’s introduction of abstract objects or ideal forms leads from metaphysical realism to mathematical realism. This further developed into ethical realism,¹¹ which posits an existent morality out there, existing firmly and independently of any human mind or written text.¹² Accordingly, metaphysical reality could best be apprehended by the mind, uncluttered by the lifeless words of a written composition, which stubbornly stay on the page and refuse to leave. Once the metaphysical truth is apprehended, the words serve no further purpose, and they should then disappear. Since this is only possible in speech, writing is an impediment to knowledge.

Greek antipathy towards the written word requires one to accept that the ultimate meaning of a text is grounded on authorial intent. If this is the case, once the author’s intent is known, those stubborn written words serve no further purpose and actually obfuscate matters. In contrast to a

⁷ Ibid, p. 275.

⁸ Borges, Jorge Luis. *Seven Nights* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1984), p. 96.

⁹ Quoted *ibid*.

¹⁰ Laird Addis, Greg Jesson, Erwin Tegtmeier (eds.), *Ontology and Analysis: Essays and Recollections about Gustav Bergmann* (Walter de Gruyter, 2007), p. 107.

¹¹ Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_realism#cite_note-10.

¹² Perhaps in a future study, I will examine the influence of Greek ethical realism on Jewish scholarship.

written text, oral communication is composed of words that conveniently exist just long enough for the hearer to get the message. Spoken words carry the thought of the speaker, reach the listener, thusly penetrating his mind, then quickly disappearing, they leave behind only the speaker's ideas, which have now been deposited into the mind of the listener.

The Torah View of Text as the Source of Knowledge

In contrast to the Greek philosophers and modern-day scientists, who perceive of the Universe in metaphysical terms, and who, at least in the case of the Greeks, viewed the written text as some sort of counterfeit impeding true knowledge, for the Hebrews, "meaning, signification, etc., are inseparable from text. Judaism does not recognize an a-textual problem: meaning is a function of text."¹³ When the rabbis would discuss even the most abstract philosophical concepts, they would point to how such concepts derive from the text of the bible. Hence, Maimonides (1138–1204) sets forth the intellectual axioms of Judaism by relating them to specific verses in the bible. When describing the supreme level of God's existence,¹⁴ Maimonides brings the verse, "God, our Lord is veritable!"¹⁵ When describing God's dominion over His creations,¹⁶ Maimonides brings the verse, "I am God your Lord!"¹⁷ When rejecting anthropomorphism,¹⁸ Maimonides brings numerous verses, mixed with textual analysis, to support this axiom.¹⁹ Part I of Maimonides's *Guide to the Perplexed* contains an analysis of the semantic and lexical fields of numerous words and of corresponding verses,²⁰ thusly setting the groundwork for related deep philosophical discussions, indicating that even the most abstract and esoteric ideas are grounded in the written text of the bible.

Similarly, rabbinic thought is set forth in the midrash literature, in which the biblical text is an essential aspect of the various ideas under discussion. Indeed, it is usually the text that generates the ideas and not the other way around. This is because for "Judaism, writing borders on

¹³ *Golden Doves and Silver Dots*, p. xxvii.

¹⁴ *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-Torah*, I, 2.

¹⁵ Jer. 10:10.

¹⁶ *Yesodei ha-Torah*, I, 3.

¹⁷ Ex 20:2.

¹⁸ *Yesodei ha-Torah*, I, 6.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*

²⁰ Maimonides, R. Moses, *Dalalat al-Ha'irin*. Ed. Issachar Joel and Solomon Munk (Jerusalem, 1931). Hebrew translation: *Moreh ha-Nebukhim*, ed. and trans. R. Joseph Qafih (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1973).

the realm of the sacred. It is not merely an instrument for memorization, it generates meaning.”²¹ In describing the idea of the Pentateuch being a sacred text, Borges states:

“The idea is this: The Pentateuch, the Torah, is a sacred book. An infinite intelligence has condescended to the human task of producing a book.... In that book, nothing can be accidental. (In human writing there is always something accidental.)”²²

Therefore, every word contains meaning, every letter must be examined for purpose, and even the crowns of the letters can insinuate numerous *halakhot*, which in turn can regulate human conduct and behavior. R. ‘Akiba would “on every single crown, hang batches and batches of law.” For the Western mind, the idea of any text being analyzed and scrutinized in this way, to generate new meanings—some of which then attain the status of law—appears bizarre.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that rabbinic knowledge, whether legal, political, esoteric, or historical, is almost always expressed in and through the biblical text. In fact, the Talmud and the various *Midrash Halakha* compendia on the *Humash* present detailed analyses of thousands of verses and the meanings as well as laws that are learnt from these verses. A few examples are in order. In the field of history, a Talmudic analysis of the years leading up to and following the destruction of the first commonwealth²³ provides a detailed explanation of two verses, one in Jeremiah²⁴ and the second in Daniel,²⁵ as a basis for the historical conclusions presented by the Talmudic text. In the field of political science, the Talmud alludes to the political structures and hierarchies of the nations,²⁶ reporting an incident between Bar Sheshakh, a Persian government minister, and Raba (c. 280–352 CE), one of the great Talmudic authorities. The discussion concludes by bringing various verses²⁷ that illustrate the political science lessons learnt from the reported incident. Similarly, in the field of esoterica and Jewish philosophy, Tractate *Hagigah* is

²¹ “God As a Writer: Omnipresence and the Art of Dissimulation,” p. 34.

²² *Seven Nights*, p. 98.

²³ *Megillah* 11b.

²⁴ 29:10.

²⁵ 9:2.

²⁶ The story of Bar Sheshakh, the Persian government official, is reported in *Avodah Zarah* 65a. Cf. the outstanding political analysis of this Talmudic story in José Faur, “Of Cultural Intimidation and Other Miscellanea: Bar-Sheshakh vs. Raba,” in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, vol 5 (2002), pp. 34–50.

²⁷ Ps. 45:10 and Is. 64:3.

filled with the textual analysis of verses contained in the biblical text, while abstract philosophy is almost entirely absent from any such discussions.²⁸ In the field of Jewish law, expressing halakhah through verses is ubiquitous and is one of the primary functions of certain kinds of rabbinic literature.²⁹

Based upon the above, we may conclude that while Greek ontological truths are out there ready to be discerned by the Greek philosopher, Hebrew textual truths are available to be read by any literate Jew. While the Greeks emphasize the abstract idea, the Jews emphasize the written text. The preceding is significant inasmuch as it results in diametrically opposed world views: the Greek focus on ideas that need to be apprehended in a metaphysical sense, in opposition to the Hebrew study of texts that need to be interpreted, in a semiological sense.

The Ultimate Grounds of Truth

The divergent attitudes of Hebrews and Greeks towards ontology and text reflect divergent attitudes towards what is the ultimate ground of truth. For the Greeks, truth is already out there, waiting to be discovered by a logical thinking mind. The Greek word used to express truth or disclosure is *aletheia*. Let us consider this word more closely. It literally means the state of not being hidden, or of being self-evident. The semantic connotation of this word is factuality or reality. This suggests that factual reality is self-evident, and merely needs to be discovered, or revealed. Such reality exists ontologically and independently of the observer. Heidegger relates but does not equate *aletheia* with truth: “*Aletheia*, disclosure regarded as the opening of presence, is not yet truth. Is *aletheia* then less than truth? Or is it more...?”³⁰ For Heidegger, the presence of the truth is arguably greater than the truth being perceived. This means that truth, existing ontic-ontologically, may be superior to an ontological truth being observed and understood by an observer. Similarly, “To raise the question of *aletheia*, of disclosure as such, is not the same as raising the question of truth. For this reason, it was inadequate and misleading to call *aletheia*, in the sense of opening, truth.”³¹ For Heidegger, truth is much like Snow

²⁸ See, especially, the Talmudic discussions contained in the second chapter of tractate *Haggah*.

²⁹ For example, cf. the *Mekhilta*, the *Sifra* and the *Sifre*.

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 69, translation amended. Cited in Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future* (Boston: MIT Press, 2006), p. 189.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

White after biting the witch's poisoned apple, existing as she then does in a static state of unchanging beauty, possibly (but not necessarily) waiting for true love's kiss to awaken her.

In Talmudic thinking, the truth cannot be discovered or un-covered. Rather, it begins with a text and a text requires a reader to decode and interpret it. Hence, the reader is not a passive participant but rather "the reader acts as a writer and becomes finally the text itself: it is a creative and dynamic process."³² The reader becomes "the text itself" in the sense that meaning is generated by the conjunction of text and reader. As the Talmud states, "At the beginning [the Torah] is called on the name of the Lord, but at the end it will be called on his [the student's] name."³³ Initially, the text of the Torah is superior to the reader/student, and for this reason, the Talmud states that those who stand up in honor of scholars who study Torah, "how much more should they stand up for the actual Torah scroll!"³⁴ Subsequently, after the reader/student has read the text of the Torah and generated an interpretation of the text, he then becomes greater than the Torah scroll. "How ignorant are those that stand up in honor of the Torah scroll but do not stand up for a great individual."³⁵ It follows, then, that for the Hebrews, truth does not exist outside the context of text. Moreover, the truth is not hidden somewhere under the words, but rather it is generated by the reader, who interprets the words by combining them together, forming new oppositions and relationships resulting in new interpretations and insights.

Impotent Reading

Aletheia and Greek metaphysics are analogous to the literary theory that says that reading a literary work based on authorial intent can result in an objective understanding of the text. What is important is that the author had a specific thing in his mind, and it is this specific thing which is transformed into words that are then laid down in a textual format. The goal of reading this text is to use its words to reach this specific thing. Hence, the words are tools used to reach the mind of the author. By uncovering the text from the intended thing, the words become marginal as one now has direct access to the author's mind. Emphasis on authorial intent implies that the author stands in a privileged position to interpret his work, since the author best knows what the intended thing is.

³² "God As a Writer: Omnipresence and the Art of Dissimulation," p. 34.

³³ *Avodah Zarah* 19a.

³⁴ *Kiddushin* 33b.

³⁵ *Makkot* 22b. The source for this idea is contained in "God As a Writer: Omnipresence and the Art of Dissimulation," p. 35.

A good reader, then, would be one who tries to understand the author, precedes to read the text from the author's perspective, and thusly reveals the objective truth intended by the author. It would be instructive to consider how using authorial intent to understand a literary piece would play out: to *really* understand a literary piece, it would be helpful to learn the author's biography, language, culture, particular beliefs, etc.—in short, to get into the mind of the author—and then read the piece through the mind of the author. Only by reading the text through the mind of the author can the truth that was in the mind of the author be fully revealed. This is precisely what happens in Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*." The protagonist of the story, one Pierre Menard, embarks on a literary project, the goal of which is for Menard to write Cervantes's *Don Quixote* all over again. Menard's initial goal is not to merely copy *Don Quixote* but rather to write the original *Don Quixote*, by becoming Cervantes, by learning seventeenth-century Spanish, by learning what Cervantes may have learnt, all in the hope of being able to create *Don Quixote ab initio*. The project meets with limited success, in that Menard actually succeeds in writing two and a half chapters of *Don Quixote* (which are identical in every detail to Cervantes' version). However, Menard's preoccupation with authorial intent results in an impotent type of knowledge so that there can be no progress. Therefore, twentieth-century Menard ultimately succeeds in recreating the original *Don Quixote* (at least partially)—a feat accomplished more fully by Cervantes centuries earlier.

New criticism (from the Post-World War I era) argued that authorial intent is irrelevant to understanding a work of literature and was opposed to the critical practice of bringing historical or biographical data to bear on the interpretation of a literary work. Wimsatt (1907–1975) and Beardsley (1915–1985) wrote that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art."³⁶ Hence, the author of a literary piece cannot be reconstructed from it, and therefore, details of the author's "mind" or intent are extraneous.

Similarly, the rabbis taught that the Torah can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. On the verse, "seventy shekels of the shekel used in the *kodesh*,"³⁷ the Midrash says: "Why [seventy]? Just like the sum of wine is

³⁶ Wimsatt, William K. and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *Seewanee Review*, vol. 54 (1946): 468–488. Revised and republished in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (University Press of Kentucky, 1954), 3–18.

³⁷ Numbers 7:13.

seventy,³⁸ so also the Torah has seventy faces.” By comparing the Torah to wine, the rabbis meant to indicate that the same way wine ages and obtains new and subtle flavors, so also the Torah, with time, obtains new meanings and interpretations.³⁹ Authorial intent cannot be the correct measure of interpretation since the original wine is never as rich or developed as the aged wine. Hence, with every serious reader, the Torah becomes richer and more beautiful. *The Golden Doves*⁴⁰ quotes the following teaching of the rabbis, which bears upon the polysemic nature of the Torah:

A single verse may unfold into many senses, but a single sense may not unfold from two verses. [Someone] from the school of R. Ismael transmitted: “[Is not my word like fire, said the Lord] and like a hammer that shatters the rock?” (Jer. 23:29). Just as each blow of a hammer strikes forth many sparks, so a single verse unfolds into many senses.⁴¹

For the rabbis, every Jewish reader of the Torah, acting within the perimeters of the Oral Law and the Covenant entered into at Sinai, has a right to read and interpret the verses of the Torah, in new and hitherto unforeseen ways. This suggests an infinite (but emphatically not a total) variety of readings. In the words of Hakham Faur:

The *derashah* serves to express these variations. To begin with, the *derashah* implies a denial of a supreme reading, of a supreme synthesis capable of concentrating all shades of emotion and meaning.⁴²

Hence, like wine properly aged in French oak barrels, the verses of the Torah become richer and more appealing with the passage of time, as the reading public generates new and ever deeper meanings from the text.

The Divine Wisdom

King Solomon describes wisdom as follows: “Wisdoms [*sic*] built her home and has hewn her seven pillars.”⁴³ Wisdom “built her home,” means that wisdom itself is the ultimate context of wisdom. In other words, wisdom is an independent system, not relying on anything else, as there is nothing above wisdom that conditions or affects it. Significantly, the divine wisdom is seminal, so that this home becomes a place where new wisdom grows, in the language of King Solomon, it “has hewn her seven

³⁸ The Hebrew word for wine is יַיִן, which has a *gematria* of seventy.

³⁹ *Midrash Rabbah* 13:16.

⁴⁰ P. xiii.

⁴¹ *Sanhedrin* 34a.

⁴² *Golden Doves and Silver Dots*, p. xviii.

⁴³ Pr. 9:1.

pillars.” Hence, wisdom is self-contained and self-generating. Like a tree, it produces fruits spontaneously, but unlike a tree, it does not require a particular context to thrive. Consider an orchard that contains rows of nicely lined fruit trees, growing at the proper spacing from each other, and producing beautiful fruits. The orchard is alive, and self-generating, but it is not self-contained, since it requires external circumstances to thrive such as proper irrigation, particular weather conditions, rich soil, and the presence of bees or other pollinating insects. In contrast to this orchard, King Solomon views divine wisdom as creating its own context, wisdom “built *her* [emphasis added] home.” Like the orchard, wisdom’s home is fruitful, as it “has hewn her seven pillars,” which are the foundations of further intellectual systems and disciplines, such as mathematics, physics, music, etc. As noted, however, unlike the orchard, wisdom creates the context for its dynamic existence. This is so because wisdom preceded and existed prior to the Universe. Hence, its existence is completely independent and does not require a particular context. “God fashioned me at the beginning of His ways,” declares wisdom, “prior to any of His early actions!”⁴⁴ Before there was a cosmos, the divine wisdom existed within itself, so that the Universe became a feature of the divine wisdom and not the other way around. “I was created in the eternal past, before the beginnings of the world. Prior to the existence of space, I was shaped, before the great torrents of water.”⁴⁵ Hence, wisdom predates the very existence of space and time itself. It is worth emphasizing the following point: it is not the Universe that is the context for wisdom, but rather, it is wisdom that is the context for the Universe.

There is an amazing passage that helps us understand what King Solomon meant by wisdom’s home. In discussing Jacob’s vision of the angels ascending and descending the ladder, which is crowned with the “House of God,”⁴⁶ Philo penned the following:

Who, then, can that House be, save the Word (*Logos*) who is antecedent to all that has come into existence? The Word (*Logos*), which the Helmsman of the Universe grasps as a rudder to guide all things on their course? Even as, when He was fashioning the World, He employed it as His instrument, that the fabric of His handiwork might be without reproach.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Pr. 8:22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23–24.

⁴⁶ Gen. 28:17.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Golden Doves and Silver Dots*, p. 24. Philo, *The Migration of Abraham*, I, 6 (Loeb Classical Library), vol 4, p. 135.

Hence, the *amon* is not only the first creation, but it is the catalyst for the scientific and mathematical constructs that form the very fabric of the cosmos. To be sure, the Universe in the form created by God could only exist within these scientific and mathematical constructs.

In contrast to the divine wisdom, the Greek *logos* exists within and is subsumed by an eternal universe. “In Platonic thought *logos* is metaphysical; it ‘gathers,’ it synthesizes and organizes according to a pre-established order.”⁴⁸ From this perspective, the *logos* represents the nature of the Universe, or as some would put it, the soul of the Universe. Ultimately, the Greek *logos* is subservient to and somehow located within this eternal Universe.

To understand this matter more fully, the Aramaic word for *logos* is *memra*. In discussing *memra*, Hakham Faur writes:

Similarly, the Targumic *Memra* “*Word*” is a semiological, rather than a metaphysical, entity. *Memra* does not function according to some pre-established order: it *establishes* the order. More precisely, it is the actual manifestation of God... *Memra* expresses speech as a dynamic, active force manifesting God’s activities in the realm of both spiritual and natural phenomena.⁴⁹

Hence, the divine wisdom not only stands supremely above the cosmos, always governing it, establishing vectors and outcomes, it also has a semiological function; it is speech at its most fundamental level. However, it is not the oral speech of the Greeks, which disappears after having served its merely communicative role. The speech of God, the *memra* of the Targum, is actually a kind of writing or mega-text, permanently and dynamically presenting itself, always ready to be read and interpreted by new readers, who are invited to criticize the writer and seek revisions to the story. To highlight the interaction between Writer and reader, the Torah relates that when God was angered at the sin of the Golden Calf, he asks Moses’s consent to “destroy them [i.e., the Jewish nation], and make you into a great nation!”⁵⁰ Recognizing that the Universe is God’s great book (thus highlighting the semiological essence of the *logos*) Moses disapprovingly demands that God change the story; otherwise, says Moses, “erase me, please, from the book that You have written!”⁵¹ This is remarkable. The semiological view of the Universe not only places God as an author, but as an author seeking His reader’s approval, even willing to re-write the plot line to satisfy their preferences!

⁴⁸ *Golden Doves and Silver Dots*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ex. 32:10.

⁵¹ Ex. 32:32.

A Deeper Understanding of the Divine Wisdom

Significantly, King Solomon not only describes the relationship between the Universe and the divine wisdom, with the latter being the context for the former, he also describes the relationship between God and the divine wisdom. In King Solomon's words, wisdom declares: "I was His [i.e., God's] *amon* [i.e., apprentice], and I was His daily merriment, playing before Him at all times."⁵² The divine wisdom is God's apprentice, created before Creation, for God's merriment. King Solomon's brilliant allegory comparing the *logos*/speech of God to an apprentice that gives his mentor joy insinuates a fundamental principle. Creation *ex nihilo* commenced with the *amon* solely for His joy or merriment. This means that there is nothing about God that requires either the *amon*/divine wisdom, or the subsequent development of the Universe. It was done for the sake of enjoyment.

The verse continues with the *amon* declaring that, "I was a source of daily delight." The Hebrew word used for delight is *sha'ashou'im*. The word *sha'ashou'im* refers to the special delight that a father attains when he interacts playfully with his young boy, as in the verse, "What a precious son Ephra'im was to Me. Nay! He was a child of *sha'ashou'im*!"⁵³ R. David Qimhi (1160–1235) explains *sha'ashou'im* to refer to the special pleasure that a father attains from interacting playfully with his beloved son. Thus, God's joy in creating and interacting with the *amon* is not a necessity for God. It is for pure joy.

To be precise, the Universe exists solely because of God's speech/*amon*. "With the words of God, the heavens were created," says the Psalmist.⁵⁴ However, this is a one-way road. The Universe only exists and only could exist because God wrote the Universe into existence. On the other hand, God's existence does not require the Universe and is not affected by its presence. To quote Maimonides (1135–1204),

all of the existences in the heavens, earth and in between, exist only by virtue of His lofty existence. If one were to speculate that He does not exist, then nothing else could exist. If one were to speculate that none of the existences (other than Him) exist, then He alone will exist, and He will not be annulled with their annulment. This is because all of the existences depend on Him, and He, blessed He be, does not depend on them or on any of them.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 8:30.

⁵³ Jer. 31:20.

⁵⁴ Ps. 33:6.

⁵⁵ *Mishneh Torah, H. Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:1–2.

“With the words of God, the heavens were created,”⁵⁶ also highlights the semiological function of the *amon*. The relationship between God and the *amon* is parallel to the relationship between a writer and his writing. To appreciate this, consider a craftsman. For example, a watchmaker can fashion a physical watch with his hands using delicate tools, while a carpenter can craft a wooden armoire with his hands using a different set of tools. In both cases, there is an ontological and causal relationship between the craftsman, the tools used, and the products created. In contrast, the author of a written text exists independently of the written word. Shakespeare was well aware of what was happening in *Hamlet*, but Shakespeare’s existence was separate from and independent of *Hamlet*’s existence. There is no ontological relationship between the words written by an author and the author, since the author exists in a realm that is independent of the text. Similarly, there is no ontological relationship between God and His speech/*logos/amon* or the Universe that develops with this speech. Because we humans are created within this cosmos, all we can know clearly are those words, which are visible in the creations we discern. Just like an author remains hidden from the characters created in his story, God, *ad intra*, is eternally hidden from His creations. Thus, when Moses asks to “behold God’s glory,”⁵⁷ God replies that no “human can behold me and live!”⁵⁸

Because of this, the *amon* acts independently of God, mirthfully following it owns internal mechanisms while God merrily beholds the *amon*’s machinations. God’s merriment is essential: this means that the *amon* acts independently of God, so that surprising outcomes of the *amon*’s mirth, as in any whimsical story, are viewed with joyful merriment.

Finding the Creator

As discussed above, from the rabbinic perspective, the world out there, the cosmos, from the great superclusters of galaxies to the infinitesimally small quarks and muons, are all but passages in a great book written by the Creator. Unlike the Greek gods who were illiterate, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a Writer. As a corollary, for the Hebrews, the ultimate truth is not a static ontic-ontological reality, but rather a mega-

⁵⁶ Ps. 33:6.

⁵⁷ Ex. 33:19.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 20.

text, generating meaning with every new interaction of the observer/reader and the observed/text.⁵⁹ The Universe without an observer to interact with it is like a blank mirror with no looking back. The presence of the observer not only brings the mirror into the consciousness of the observer, but actually changes the mirror in a way that reflects the observer looking back at it.

For many years, modern rabbis and scientists have been debating whether the world is created or came into being by some accident. I do not discount the importance of such debates. Indeed, the “fine-tuning” of the Universe discovered over the last few decades offers highly compelling evidence observable to all that the Universe is indeed created.⁶⁰

Still, I think that the arguments offered regarding the origin of the Universe, the respective proofs, and counterproofs, miss an important point. How can progress be made? We must start with a shift of perspective and emphasize new horizons. Specifically, how do we wish to view the Universe? The debates between modern rabbis and scientists invariably assume a Greek concept of the Universe. It exists; and it is out there ready to be observed. With the ontological Universe as the starting point, explanations are then offered and debated for how it came into “being.” That is after all the question, is it not?⁶¹ Scientists posit some sort of accidental “big bang” while modern rabbis argue for a planned Creation. Both start with metaphysical beingness.

Starting with metaphysical beingness is problematic, as the existence of an ontological Universe out there is, even from a scientific perspective, of dubious validity. Studies in Quantum Mechanics firmly indicate that actually, to a certain extent, the observer acts upon and changes the reality he observes.⁶² Thus, there is no bare beingness out there. What to do? The classical rabbinic starting point is to view the Universe as a semiological unit, expressing language and meaning. If this is the starting point, the debate of Creation or evolution becomes mute. A book requires an author as a painting requires a painter. The discussion then turns to a far more meaningful arena: What is He trying to tell us? What can we learn from this mega-text? This shift in perspective is both long overdue and rich with possibilities.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the interaction of the human observer of the Universe, and the “reality” of the Universe, please see my “A Rabbinic Perspective on the Double Slit Experiment,” *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, vol. 21 (2018), pp. 257–267.

⁶⁰ Cf. Martin J. Fees, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces That Share the Universe* (Great Britain: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

⁶¹ See *Hamlet*, quoted above, p. 2.

⁶² Cf. Fn. 59 above, and especially the description of the double slit experiment, pp. 263–266.

To be sure, yes, the Universe may be viewed ontologically and Shakespeare's view of what the "question" is can be a starting point. Like the scientists in the story that was related at the beginning of this study, the Philosopher's Stone may be viewed as a lifeless object expressing no meaning. With that as their starting point, scientists then proceeded to study the Philosopher's Stone, making amazing discoveries along the way. That is all wonderful, of course. But at what cost? Viewing the Philosopher's Stone as dead, obfuscates a far more wonderful discovery: messages from an advanced civilization and all that this implies. Similarly, scientists may (and actually do) choose to view the Universe as a dead stone, and in so doing, have made amazing discoveries regarding what the Universe is. This author appreciates these discoveries and would not wish that they were not made. The contrary is true. These discoveries are truly wonderful. However, every choice has its consequences. The choice was to ignore the semiological dimensions of the Universe. In so doing, scientists chose not to read the messages that the Universe expresses. By refusing to read the writing on the wall, worst yet they obfuscate the very existence of the Writer. The rabbi's choice (a far more reasonable choice in my estimation) to view the Universe semiologically, turns the world from a dead stone to a beautiful work of literature, with living stories and beautiful visions. The positive implications for humanity, the knowledge that there is a meaning to all of this, are too many and too profound to summarize in the context of a short article. Suffice it to say that it is precisely this shift from an ontological view of the Universe to a semiological view that will usher in the messianic era,⁶³ and with it the salvation of all humanity.

I want to end with the words of my father, the late Hakham José Faur, whose words, set forth below, inspired this study:

Ultimately, the whole issue as to whether there is a Creator or whether the universe simply *is* revolves on whether one wishes to regard this world in the Greek or the Hebrew fashion. Were one to consider this world as an ontological entity pointing to nothing except itself, the whole notion of a Maker is useless. On the other hand, one cannot possibly begin to decode a mark unless one presupposes that it is *significant*, that it was *intentional*. There cannot be "writing" without a "writer." The search for "meaning" and "sense," the notion that things and events have an explanation, the quest for cryptographic and hermeneutic methods that will unlock the "mysteries" of the universe—all these presuppose a cosmic book and communicative Author.⁶⁴

⁶³ This may be the subject of a future study by this author.

⁶⁴ "God As a Writer: Omnipresence and the Art of Dissimulation," p. 36.

Ultimately, the greatest author cannot compel the reader to open the front cover of a great masterpiece. Humanity may choose to leave the book closed and ignore its pages. But only for so long. The semiological view introduced by the Jewish people emphatically calls upon humanity to open the book, to enjoy its stories and paintings, and begin communicating with the Author. 