

THE "BEEF" OF RABBI JUDAH LOEW OF PRAGUE WITH NACHMANIDES ON THE MATTER OF ABRAHAM'S WIFE-SISTER RUSE, AND THE CLASH OF WORLDVIEWS BEHIND IT.

Rabbi Ian Silverman

The episode of Abraham deceiving a Pharaoh concerning Sarah's marital status in Gen. 12:10-20, when Abraham was still Abram and Sarah still known as Sarai, encountered again in Gen. 20:1-18, where Abraham deceives the King of Gerar, and again in Genesis 26:1, 6-11, where this time Isaac deceives the King of Gerar concerning the marital status of Rebecca, has troubled even the earliest readers. Compare the retelling in the Apocryphal Book of Jubilees, dated, early 2nd Century B.C.E, where that author omits any mention of deceit by either Patriarch.¹

Our concern here is the sharp dispute that emerged over centuries between two 'traditional' interpreters of this episode--Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (born in Gerona, Spain 1194, died in land of Israel 1270; known in Hebrew as Ramban, and in the Latinized form as "Nachmanides"), and Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (born in Poland around 1520; died 1609 in Prague; known in Hebrew as Moreinu HaRav Loew, or the Maharal of Prague).

We refer to 'traditional' in contrast to modern 'critical' approaches to this episode, as exemplified by E.A. Speiser and his students², as well as modern 'literary' approaches.³

¹ *Book of Jubilees*, 13:10-15, 16:10-11, and 24:8,12-13, in James Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Bible Reference Library, 1985, Vol. 2; translation and notes by DS. Wintermute.

² In his commentary on Genesis, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Bible, 1967, Speiser proposed an innovative theory based on supposed parallel texts recovered from the ancient city of Nuzi. Speiser's theory however has been refuted by subsequent studies of those Nuzi texts; see Barry Eichler, "On Reading Genesis 12:10-20" in M. Lazar, B. Eichler and J. Tigay eds., *Tehillah Le-Moshe* Festschrift for Moshe Greenberg, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997, pp. 23-38.

³ Daniel Gordis, "Wives, Lies and Sisters: The Wife/Sister Motif Revisited", *Judaism* Vol. 34, no. 3, Summer, 1985, pp. 344-359.

We likewise bypass modern 'ethical' critiques of this episode.⁴ Both Ramban and Maharal *approach* these episodes, and indeed the Pentateuch, as a seamless whole, which is a very different starting point than modern scholars.

In short, Ramban asserts that Abraham, by abandoning the land of Israel at a time of drought, deceiving Pharaoh and putting his wife in harm's way, committed a serious sin (unwittingly), which resulted in the enslavement of his descendants in Egypt, while Maharal states that the Ramban view has been so discredited by subsequent commentators that it should be excised altogether.⁵ This essay endeavors to first examine objections to Ramban's position culminating in Maharal's discrediting of it. I will then seek to understand Maharal's fuller agenda behind his unease with the very idea that Abraham might have sinned this way. Finally, I will endeavor to defend Ramban against Maharal's assertion 'historically', halachically and theologically, noting how Ramban paints a far more "activist" agenda for humanity in general, and Jews in particular, in the unfolding of the Divine plan.

COMMENT TO GEN. 12:11-13

Ramban comments on the incident related in Genesis Chapter 12, in which Abram instructs Sarai, when they come down to Egypt from Canaan due to a drought, to claim she is his sister rather than his wife. "I know what a beautiful woman you are" says Abram. "If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'she is his wife', they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive, thanks to you." Gen. 12:11-13. In the subsequent passages, Abram is enriched by the Pharaoh, God puts plagues on Pharaoh and his household, and Abram and Sarai are sent off enriched and unharmed.

The principal commentaries available to Nachmanides, namely Rashi and Ibn Ezra, don't address the morality of Abraham's deception. And Maimonides (1135-1204, born in Spain then lived in Cairo) whom Ramban greatly respected, counted this as one of

⁴ Compare, e.g., Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophic Analysis of Scriptural Narrative*, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018, esp. at pp. 130-138.

⁵ Maharal, *Geurat HaShem*, Tel Aviv: Pardes Publications, reprint of Manuscript, Chap. 9., beginning "ukevar hikshu alav kushi' yot she ne'ekar peru'sho", p.33.

the challenges that Abraham successfully passed.⁶ Still, Nachmanides doesn't shy away from faulting Abram for his behavior. Abram "committed a grievous sin, unintentionally"⁷, claims Ramban, for putting the life of his righteous wife in harm's way, and for fearing that he would be killed, as he should have had the faith that God would protect them from any injury. Further, Ramban asserts, Abram sinned even before this, for *even going down to Egypt* in a time of drought, so quickly after he had been promised by God that God would give him and his progeny the land of Canaan, and that his seed would flourish there. For these missteps, "God decrees on Abraham's descendants the exile in the land of Egypt, i.e., that the Israelites would one day be required by drought to go down to Egypt to settle there, and their wives and daughters would be at risk."⁸ His comment ends trenchantly, "...the place of the verdict will be the place of this sin and wickedness!" Something, I suspect, like "the punishment fits the crime." This unusual causation assertion by Ramban is noted by Prof. Moshe Halbertal in his recent major work on Ramban.⁹

⁶ Ramban, *Perush LeMishna*, Avot, 5:3, [available online](#). This is implied though not stated directly. Cf. also *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Melachim v' Milchamot*, Chap.9:8. It seems clear that Maimonides understands that Abraham functions with the Noachide laws 'plus' according to *Hilchot Deot 1:3*; Abraham augmented the metaphysical theological argument for one God and conveys a '*Mitzvath Avraham*' and '*Derech HaShem*' consisting of Noahide laws, Shacharit, and Milah to Isaac. Halachically, Ramban stops well short of Abraham knowing the Sinai Torah. He takes Rabbi Shimi ben Hiyya's view in TB Yoma 28b. Cf. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim v' Milchamot*, Chap. 9:3. Maimonides is not critical of Abraham, seeing him as actually 'passing the test' by way of legality. Abraham therefore can save himself, and Sarai, from a charge of possible 'adultery', by demoting her status.

⁷ Ramban contends in his *Torah Temmima Sermon* that Abraham and Isaac were not aware of the exile ramification at the time. See Dr. Miriam Sklarz, "From Divine Directive to Human Agency: Transition in the Course of Nachmanides Typological Exegesis of the Patriarchal Narratives", JSIJ 14, 2018, p.7, footnote 17. Abraham's lack of awareness of the consequences of his actions are apparent in Nachmanides' sermon *Torat Hashem Temima*: "Abraham did not realize what he was being punished for, for he repeated his actions with Abimelekh." Ramban's Commentary on the Torah (Hebrew), Deuteronomy, Y. M. Dvir ed., Jerusalem 2005, p. 511. This indicates the possible meaning of 'unintentional' *beshgaga*, i.e., that Abraham didn't understand the ramifications of his sin with Sarai for generations that followed.

⁸ Ramban, *Mikraoth Gedolot*, NY: Sinai Offset Co., 1956, comment on Gen. 12:10. For the bulk of Ramban commentary I am relying on the standard "Rabbinical Pentateuch" also known as "Mikraoth Gedoloth". All translations are mine.

⁹ Moshe Halbertal agrees with the notion that while some sages of the Midrash see these patriarchal events as parallel or metaphoric, that Ramban sees them as causative. See Moshe Halbertal, *Al Derech HaEmet--Ha Ramban u'Mesiroto shel HaMasoret*, (Jerusalem: Machon Shalom Hartman, 2006), (Hebrew) Chap.6 *Maaseh Avot Siman Le Vanim*, p. 224.

While Ramban's comment clearly is a jarring one, it is not without some precedent. Ramban makes reference to the earlier Rabbinic concept of *Maaseh Avot Siman le Banim*, i.e., "the deeds of the patriarchs are a harbinger for their descendants", in his comment directly before: "All that befell the patriarchs would befall the Israelites, as we see here that Abram went down with drought, his wife endures duress, Pharaoh is subjected to plagues and relents, and sends Abram and Sarai away with goods, with silver and gold. And so too it would be for the Israelites later on...as it says in Genesis Rabbah...Rabbi Pinchas in the name of Rabbi Oshaiah says, "The Holy One says to Abraham, go out and pave the way for your descendants, and you find that all that happens to Abraham happens to his descendants..."¹⁰

Indeed, Ramban's idea of how Abram's action would foreshadow the enslavement in Egypt is expressed more elaborately in Genesis Rabbah, 5th Century CE, where R. Pinchas in R. Oshaiah's name continues, "as Abraham said, say you are my sister not my wife, so the Egyptians will say, "take their daughters on the birthing stone and kill their sons, and as Abraham says, "they will favor me because of you, so too were the midwives disposed to do good..."¹¹ And so too, we find an echo of this in Midrash Tanchuma, written 8th Century CE, commenting on this passage, no doubt a text that also would be known to Ramban. Midrash Tanchuma teaches the following: "What happens to our patriarchs also happens to their descendants. A famine was in the land and Abraham was driven down to Egypt and so too this happened to the Israelites later. When Abram came down to Egypt the Egyptians accosted and mixed it up with him as it says, 'They saw that his wife Sarai was very beautiful'. So too, of Abraham's descendants did Pharaoh say, 'Let's outwit them as Israel will become numerous and will align themselves with our enemies and become an internal enemy and war with us.' Just as Abraham will go out and war with four kings, so there will be four kingdoms that battle with us which God who guards us shall vanquish..."¹²

Now, while neither Midrashic text says per se, as would Ramban, that the early patriarchal events were *causative* of what would then happen in that later time of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, comment on Gen. 12:10

¹¹ Ramban, Gen. 12:10

¹² Midrash *Tanchuma*, Parashat Lech Lecha 8, s.v. "vayehi raav baaretz..." (Jerusalem: Eshkol Publications, 1972) p. 60.

enslavement, they both see parallels between the dire consequences of what later happened to the Israelites in Egypt and the events in the Genesis story at hand. Thus, one midrash notes the parallel to the saving of the infant daughters and not the males, whenever a child is born to the Israelites, presumably for the pleasure of the Egyptians, as there will be no corresponding male population in the coming generation. Midrash Tanchuma notes how Abraham's wife-sister incident equates with the later depiction of the community as an attractive successful collective that spurs the new Pharaoh to act in a negative and treacherous way against it. Nonetheless, Ramban's comment brings this notion of "siman levanim", a harbinger for his descendants, to a new level of causation.

The early-medieval Commentary known as the "Lekach Tov" by Toviah ben Eliezer, commenting within the years 1097-1108 CE; born perhaps in Bulgaria, died in the Land of Israel, is likewise critical of Abraham, although it does not propose a causal relationship between Abraham's act and the enslavement of his descendants in Egypt. The Lekach Tov notes that Sarah does not approve of Abram's proposal, and indeed she refuses to take part in it.¹³ Thus Lekach Tov notes that the passage begins with "*Imri at*" i.e., you say that you are my sister, so that things will go well with me because of you"; but it ends with the fact that it was Abram, not Sarai, who does the misrepresenting. And this also, the Lekach Tov suggests, is why Abram doesn't even bother asking Sarai to misrepresent her status when they are later forced by famine to go to Avimelech, King of Gerar.¹⁴

R. Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340, Saragossa, of Ramban's key students, sixty years after Ramban, supports Ramban directly. He quotes Ramban's comment and contends that Ramban's causation theory, while indeed innovative and novel, is true. Although Bachya's version is a bit more incisive (he rephrases Ramban's key dictum as מקום החטא מקום הענש "the place of the sin will be the place of the punishment"--see further infra), Bachya

¹³ Toviah ben Eliezer, *Lekach Tov Commentary, Pisikta Zutarta*, 1st Publication, Venice: 1746, Gen. 20:12, p.11. Some medieval scholars quote this work from manuscript as early as the 12th century, however, Toviah's writings were not actually published until the 18th century. *The Chumash Commentary* was not published until even later, by Solomon Buber, 1884. Available on [WikiText in Hebrew](#). It is not clear however, that Ramban was familiar with this work. Ramban also notices this point in the next episode, and notes Sarai's independent and indomitable spirit once again in her interchange with Avimelech, in which she berates him and argues with Avimelech and will not easily forgive him. (Cf. more on this character portraiture of Sarah in Michelle Levine, *Nachmanides on Genesis* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2009), pp.191-193.

¹⁴ Tovia ben Eliezer, *Lekach Tov*, Beresheet 20, *al corchecha she lo la tovata, sheharei berishona amar imri na...vehi lo ratzta lomar*. I am grateful to Professor Ruhama Weiss for her 2016 online article, "[Akedat Sara: KesheAvraham Hikriv et Ishto](#)".

counters those who criticize Nachmanides for making Abram's journey and the incident with his wife *the cause of the enslavement*. R. Bachya notes that the Babylonian Talmud Nedarim (henceforth designated "TB") quotes an Amora who cites another deed of Abraham as causing the exile. Pointing to Abraham's query to God "במה אדע", "how shall I know [that You shall bequeath land]?" (Gen. 15:8), when He promises the land to Abraham and his progeny, the Amora asserts--- *this is the cause of the exile!* And R. Bachya takes Ramban's side further and contemporizes it to his own time. He says "and this is 'just a sin of the lips' which resulted in the exile of 430 years in Egypt! Imagine (dear reader) the sins we committed at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple when we sinned by deed, thoughts and lips by worshipping idols in the precinct? That results in 1290 years of exile!¹⁵ (Three sins each 430 years of exile). And this is the calculation of the Book of Daniel...And so says the Prophet Micah (Chap. 7) תתן אמ"ת ליעקב which hints that this will last אלף מאתיים תשעים שנה, i.e., one thousand two hundred and ninety years...(and not beyond) should we act and think virtuously."¹⁶

But aside from R. Bachya, who followed Ramban two generations later, none of the classical commentators who followed Ramban endorsed his causation approach. In fact, they were critical of it. They criticize it robustly on Halakhic and rational grounds. For example, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides or "Ralbag", born Southern France, 1288; died 1344, *and*, apparently a grandson of Ramban's!)¹⁷, while not quoting Ramban directly, discounts his claim that Abraham sinned any sin at all here, whether intentional or unintentional. He argues that Abraham implicitly knew the Halakha applicable to the case of a person put in this quandary of either having to save his own life or prevent a defiling of a woman. A husband, just as any person, is obliged to help the woman on the basis of the dictum *al taamod al dam reecha*, don't stand idly in the face of another being killed, *if he can do so*, but not when his own life is hanging in the balance.¹⁸ In such a case he would be

¹⁵ TB Nedarim 32a. Although R. Bachya mentions this rabbinic opinion as the cause of the exile, it is but one of few 'reasons' offered by various Amoraim in TB Nedarim. Other reasons noted were that Abram closed out the possibility for more converts, and/or he transformed his students into an army garrison when he fought for Lot, etc.

¹⁶ Bachya ben Asher, *Commentary on the Torah*, Genesis 12:10, Benai Brak, Avrohom Heller Publ., 1992, My translation.

¹⁷ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, entry "Nachmanides" Vol. 12, p. 776.

¹⁸ See generally, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Rotzeach 1:9- 15. This applies also to stopping attempted violations of forbidden relations and rape from transpiring just as it applies to attempted murder, cf. *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Rotzeah v' Shemirat Nefesh*, Chap. 1:10). Gersonides endorses a different causation theory for the exile -- the passage in TB Nedarim 32a (see fn. 14 supra), which

a *Chasid Shoteh*, a pious fool, because he would have been killed in the process and Sarai would still have been taken.¹⁹ Gersonides also followed the earlier lead in TB Nedarim 32 that references Abraham's questioning of his offspring's worthiness as leading to their enslavement and their eventual rescue.²⁰ According to Ralbag, Abraham has doubts about his progeny being able to sustain a covenant with God; and God first exiled the Israelites, so as to later miraculously save them; in this way the Israelites consolidate their fullest faith and perfection of heart and mind.²¹ Ralbag contends that in Gen. 15, God brings Abraham 'out from the influence of the stars' and his progeny as well.²² To Gersonides, Abraham's "Providential force upon his descendants" will not wane, but it is for reinforcement of it that they are enslaved.

Abrabanel (Don Isaac ben Judah, born in Lisbon, Portugal in 1437; fled to Toledo Spain and then to Venice, where he died in 1508) also opposed Ramban's line of thinking on this matter, although the question he frames to broach the issue is quite provocative. To Abrabanel, it defies both Halacha and rational thinking to hold our Patriarch responsible for sinful actions when he was afraid for his life. The probable reaction to Abraham's opposition to the Pharaoh's order would be execution, and if this is so, it is not required for him to intervene. Further intervention may well have been futile, as Abraham thought he would be killed, and Sarai would be taken anyway. Abrabanel compares this to Aaron's actions at the Golden Calf. Aaron had seen Hur be killed in his trying to stop the people from making the Golden Calf.²³ Aaron decided that the Israelites would still worship the

links the doubt Abram expressed to God re inheriting the land. According to Ralbag, Abraham needed a sign that the Covenant will be lasting with his descendants, which prompted God to tell him about how their ensuing enslavement and redemption would endow them with a perfection of intellect in seeing marvels and wonders. See Robert Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence, Covenant and the Chosen People* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 50-51.

¹⁹ Cf Ralbag, *Commentary on the Torah*, Parashat *Lech Lecha*, Toelet 3, copy of Venice, Bonbeirgi Press, 1543, p. 23. This he proves with other examples of pious foolishness given in TB Sotah 21 such as a person who hesitates to save a drowning woman because he is worried about being seen in public, himself semi-clothed, and the woman similarly exposed; a rather paradoxical example, since it is conveying that a man is being foolish *not to save* a woman in harm's way. Here, Ralbag is arguing that it's foolish to *try to save* a woman in harm's way.

²⁰ Ralbag's idea is that Abraham is promised by God in Gen. 15 that 'Patriarchal Providence', and the Israelites' own severity of suffering will precipitate God's redemption from Egypt, and their reception of a Torah to be practiced in their own land, earlier than decreed. See Robert Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence*, pp. 50-61, where Eisen references Gersonides *Torah Commentary*, 55 and 58.

²¹ Robert Eisen, *Gersonides* pp. 50-51

²² Midrashic understanding of Gen. 15, as found in TB Shabbat 156b.

²³ Midrash Shmot Rabba, Parashat *Ki Tisa* 48:3; TB Sanh. 7a.

idol whether or not he was killed trying to resist it, so he was better off trying to steer the worship away from idolatry to the greatest possible extent. This could not be done, had he risked his life and fallen.²⁴ And just as God doesn't hold Aaron accountable for the idolatry, so Abraham should not be blamed.²⁵

Besides Maimonides, who contends that Abram passes this test successfully as one of the ten ordeals that God places before him,²⁶ other commentators similarly believe Abraham's actions were defensible. Even if, God forbid, Sarai had been violated, Sarah and Abraham would have survived as a couple, and he would still be able to continue with his marriage with her on the basis of 'forced relations are as the ground' if a woman passively must submit in order to save her life, just as in the case of Queen Esther in her coerced relations with Ahashverus.²⁷ Other commentators after Ramban mostly implicitly reject Ramban's condemnation by arguing that Abraham was just employing a stalling tactic by claiming Sarah was his sister; that decent people would then negotiate over months with "her brother" for the proper betrothal price and conditions, and that in the interim the famine would abate and that he and Sarah would be able to move back to Canaan as an intact family.²⁸ The Zohar admits that the passage is difficult. It seems outrageous that Abram, the God-fearer and beloved of God's, would offer up his wife, and risk her safety. But it explains this behavior in this manner: Abraham didn't trust his own personal Providence as much as he did his wife's. He saw an angel guarding her who tells him "I've got her covered, and through her, you are covered". Abraham was therefore certain he

²⁴ Don Isaac Abarbanel, *Commentary on the Torah*, (Israel, Book Export Enterprises Ltd., copy of manuscript) Parashat *Lech Lecha*, p. 36.

²⁵ Although Rashi claims that the death of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu in Lev. 9:2 is the result of his involvement. Rashi, Leviticus 9:2.

²⁶ Because as a Noachide, Abraham could simply declare a divorce by fiat.

²⁷ This is the upshot of the discussion of this issue of forced sexual relations by a Gentile in the case of a married woman who submits due to fear. Cf. TB Sanhedrin 74b and the Tosefot there.

²⁸ Eichler identifies Rabbi Nissim Gerondi (Ran) mid 14th c., as the earliest commentator using this argument. Cf. Eichler, "Reading Genesis 12:10-20 in *Greenberg Festschrift* cited above, p. 25-26. According to an online lecture, by Dr. Tamar Werdiger Limmudim, Michlelet Herzog Daat, dated 3/11/2011, Luzzato, Cassuto, Abravanel and others took this position; also found in Rabbenu Alschech, *Torat Moshe Alshech HaKodesh* Facsimile of Warsaw edition, Brooklyn, Gross and Weiss, 1960, pp. 77-78. Alschech lived in Safed in the 16th century. Alschech states there, "How was Abraham to know she would be taken by Pharaoh? He had conceived of his ruse to stall for time with the common Egyptians who were showing interest".

wasn't putting his wife at risk, while at the same time he was saving himself from possible harm.²⁹

MAHARAL'S REBUKE OF RAMBAN

Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, known also as Maharal, is a critical transitional thinker, at the juncture between the medieval and modern periods of Jewish thought. His writings, which were only sparsely studied in manuscript for 200 years following his death, were published in early 1800s by Hasidic masters. Only recently have they been studied and unpacked by academic and orthodox scholarship.³⁰ Maharal is thought now to be an important link between the medieval mystical tradition and early Hasidism.³¹ For instance, he was one of the first sages to apply the Zohar Godhead Sefirotic system to the intrapsychic world of the individual.³² Maharal is emphatically opposed to Ramban's comment. Rabbi Loew scathingly says, in Chapter 9 of *Gevurat HaShem*, that previous commentators' critiques are grounds for this Ramban commentary to be uprooted altogether.³³ He argues that it defies logic that Abraham would repeat the same behavior with Avimelech if he had understood that his initial behavior with this wife sister ruse might lead to future enslavement.³⁴

²⁹ *Zohar, Metzora*, 51a. This is the proof text to which *Divrei Shaul* aka Joseph Shaul Nathanson, Polish Rabbi and Posek, 1800-1875, points, so as to resolve the difficulty between Maharal and Ramban on this matter of wife sister. Print edition by Machon Chochmath Shlomo, Lemberg: 1885. Available online at HebrewBooks.org. The question the Zohar asks, he argues, is the source of Ramban's contention that Abram sinned unwittingly, but the answer positions Abram as acting as he did because of his own sense that he doesn't merit a miracle as much as Sarai does. That reasoning flies in the face of what Ramban says Abram's sins were in Gen. 12.

³⁰ *The Maharal His Life and Works*. Such as a large 2 volume compendium of the Maharal's work by Rabbi Yehoshua Hartman, *Gevurot Hashem*, vol 1 and 2, Machon Yerushalayim Eds., with annotated notes by Hartman. Additionally, an extensive survey of his work is offered in a volume by my teacher Rabbi Byron Sherwin (Zal), *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent: The Life and Works of Judah Loew of Prague*, London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982. Hereafter referenced as "Sherwin." See also Meir Seidler, ed., *Rabbinic Theology and Jewish Intellectual History: The Great Rabbi Loew of Prague*, NY: Routledge, 2013.

³¹ Sherwin, pp. 52-53; considered a father of Hasidism by both Rabbi A.I. Kook and Dr. Gershom Scholem.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131, also pp. 138-140 where Sherwin explores his influence on his disciple Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz in his development along with Cordovero's idea, with which Loew was acquainted, of the soul being a part of God, *chelek HaShem meMaal*, as well as his influence on a scion R. Schneer Zalman of Liadi in his development of the concept of bitul HaYesh, of 'cleaving' as a result of the disciplined lessening and eradication of the ego. The Maharal also contended, earlier than any sage, for the notion that Devekut could be an individual's process achieved by piety, humility, learning and intentional prayer and not only a communal one. He therefore deserves some credit for this aspect of Hasidism, which helped neutralize collective messianic efforts such as those that would follow shortly after his death.

³³ Maharal, *Gevurot HaShem*, Tel Aviv: Pardes Publications, copy of early Monograph, Chap. 9, p. 33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.33.

Maharal doesn't go further into why he so rejects the thinking of Ramban here, but this essay will show that it flows from broader premises in Maharal's philosophy.

A key, I suggest, is Maharal's belief that Abraham is a Torah Scholar, a Gadol baTorah. It is not right to criticize Abraham, who internally knew all of the Torah³⁵ and who was the spiritual foundation of the world, and, indeed, a cause for its creation.³⁶ For Maharal, the text in Gen. 12 might not fully express Abram's full fear when he goes down to Egypt, but that fear is evident when Abraham employs a similar wife/sister ruse when another famine forces Abraham to go to Gerar in Gen. 20.³⁷ In Abraham's explanation a few chapters later to Avimelech, the king of Gerar, Abraham speaks of his perception that in leaving the protections of the land of Israel, he will encounter communities that have "no fear of God". This phrase alludes to societies that are essentially murderous and dominating of the powerless.³⁸ Further, we learn '*lo somchim al HaNes*',³⁹ a person should not wait for Divine intervention in cases where his life is at risk.⁴⁰ Rather he or she must take prudent action to avoid risk.

Importantly, while Maharal believes in the idea of "מעשה אבות, the deeds of the Patriarchs are signs for their descendants", he understands it in a wholly different way. The key lies in Maharal's understanding of history as a cycle of recurring events leading in due course to a redemptive time of unity and attachment to God. Maharal's view is that the enslavement and the ensuing exodus, exile and Redemption, are cyclical in a mundane world which emanated from God, a wholly spiritual realm. In time, reality moves, with fits and starts, toward resolution. Since Exile begins with Creation, in which God brings matter into being from within Himself, the mundane realm is always in cosmic tension with both its spiritual and physical aspect.⁴¹ God utilizes instruments of mediation which raise reality toward holiness, and in time move Exile and Redemption successively more toward full unification. This is what he understands as "Devekut", a spiritual unity and merger between God and humanity.⁴² Enslavement and redemption are part of the larger Messianic drama. Abraham embeds his revolutionary monotheism and his compassion and hospitality in a brutal and polytheistic environment, and gains traction toward dispelling the darkness. So too, the Israelites

³⁵ Maharal, *Tiferet Israel*, Chap. 19.

³⁶ *Gevurot HaShem*. Thus, states the text, "Abraham is a new reality, "a new 'light' for a world in darkness, a new form for the substrate in which he emerges". Cf. Chapter 5 bottom right, p. 22.

³⁷ Gen. 20.

³⁸ Cf. Exodus 1:21 Midwives, in contrast, were "Yirei Elokim". This characterization is also used in reference to Amalek, a vicious people, who are sociopathic to the core, Dt. 25:18-19.

³⁹ TB Pesachim 50b, TB Taan 20b, TB Ket. 61b: "One should by no means incur perils while relying for safety upon the occurrence of a miracle."

⁴⁰ Radak, or Rabbi David Kimchi, of Narbonne France, 1160-1253, in his commentary, also stresses this point that even righteous persons shouldn't "rely on miracles."

⁴¹ Sherwin, p. 142.

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 143-44.

would be embedded in Egypt, subjected to darkness, defilement, and enslavement, before emerging as the counter force leading to a new reality, a new Creation from the midst of chaos.⁴³ Thus, the Israelite experience echoes that of Abraham's. Maharal rejects, however, the notion of Abram's actions here *being the cause* of exile and enslavement.⁴⁴ It is in this way Maharal understands the adage, *Maaseh Avot Siman Le Vanim*.

Although Maharal generally revered Ramban, a sage who predated him by three centuries, he did not see the 'historical origins' of Israel in a similar way. Maharal understood Abraham as a "pillar of the world" who was instructed about all the details of the oral law as well as all of the written law.⁴⁵ Abraham, in being given the specific mitzvah of "Milah" or, circumcision, the removal of the foreskin, was actually receiving far more. He was chosen for his entire person being *uncovered and allowed to kiss the "Higher Wisdom"*. *It was in this fashion that he knew the entire Torah, Oral and Written, intuitively.*⁴⁶ He intuited it fully and directly from On High, *meruach Ha'elyon*, while his progeny would learn it from him, not God directly, which explains why his immediate descendants had less than full knowledge. This is how Maharal explains the passage in which God tells Isaac, *"Ekev ki...Abraham was great because he heard My voice and kept My provisions, My statutes, My commandments and My Torahs."*⁴⁷

For Maharal, Abraham's role and function had been essentially, to represent a *second* "creation" this time around, emerging from the chaos, the *tohu va vohu*, of Ur Casdim,

⁴³ *Gevurot Hashem*, Chap. 5 beginning, p. 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Chap. 9 beginning, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Maharal, *Tiferet Israel*, Chap. 19 discusses this concept in the context of Abraham's fulfillment of the Covenant of Circumcision. Maharal extends the imagery of Milah, reinforcing view that Abraham's act of submitting his entire being, laid bare, is done in order to expose his pure soul. Abraham's entire soul is peeled open and connected to the "Higher Wisdom." From this unique vantage point, Abraham was cued into, and performed, all of the mitzvot of the oral and written Torah even before it was written. (Lecture given by Rabbi Uri Amos Sherki from Machon Meir, video recording online: [סדרה תפארת ישראל - מכון מאיר](#) את כל התורה אברהם אבינו קיים. אבינו לאברהם מילה מצוות כ- פרק יט - כולה

⁴⁶ Maharal borrows this from the Talmudic Midrash, TB Yoma 28b.

⁴⁷ Genesis 26:5. While the Maharal asserts that this fullest knowledge was revealed to Abraham through the mitzvah of circumcision, Maharal may be suggesting that Abraham gained his fully uncovered Torah knowledge in stages, and that he had been developing his spiritual calling to the one true God from a very young age. *Ekev ki shama et koli* is understood by some to be telling us how many years this spiritual awareness gripped Abraham. The phrase *Ekev* equals 172 in Hebrew numerology. TB Nedarim 32a. For Maharal, though, this *was evidence of God calling him, more than it was Abraham's own self-discovery.*

Gen. 11:31, the heart of idolatry and barbarism. Abraham's role was a conduit between the natural and the meta-Natural. He was the vehicle through which these two formerly antithetical and divided phenomena were able to be brought together.⁴⁸ His knowledge of Torah was thus unassailable, and his morality was the polar opposite of the moral turpitude into which he was born. God placed him in the world to transform it to wholeness with the help of Divine agency and his own innate sensibility.⁴⁹ Reading between the lines, the reader concludes that such an individual, with such inner wisdom and piety, would not commit such a great sin, as described by Ramban, intentionally or unintentionally.

Maharal's concern is not with our actions, it's with our faith. Our merit is less in bold actions that we undertake by our own resolve; it's an acceptance that we are vessels of God-- instruments, if you will-- for the unfolding of the Divine will. It is for this reason that Maharal is uncomfortable with locating the enslavement in a specific action Abraham takes-- or for that matter, actions of any other biblical figures. Rejecting Ramban's theory of the basis for the enslavement, because of the fact that Abraham and Isaac repeat this wife-sister ruse, Maharal also rejects other 'reasons' mentioned in the Talmud as supposedly causative of the enslavement in Egypt, such as the selling of Joseph to Egypt and the idea of Yissurim shel Ahava, 'sufferings of love'.⁵⁰

Yet, even Maharal does link the enslavement in Egypt to a doubt that Abraham expresses early in the process of sojourn in Canaan, and the ongoing dialogue he has with God. Maharal refers to R. Shmuel's opinion in TB Nedarim, that because Abraham says, "Ba meh Eda?", how do I know my offspring will inherit, God decrees that enslavement.⁵¹ Maharal adopts this 'sin of the heart' as the source of the enslavement; contending that Abraham's lack of *full certainty* was the cause. Whereas the Amora in the Talmudic discussion there claims Abraham's relevant doubt was his questioning of God's assurance that he, Abraham, would receive the land.⁵² Maharal, ironically, takes Gersonides'

⁴⁸ *Tiferet Israel*, Warsaw, R. Isaac Balaban Press, 1871, Chap. 19.

⁴⁹ Sherwin, *Mystical Dissent...*, Chap. "Jew and Gentile", pp. 84-5. Maharal, *Gevurat Hashem*, Tel Aviv: Pardes, Reprint of Manuscript. Chap. 5, beginning p.21. Also, "Netzach Israel", pp. 68-72.

⁵⁰ Cf. TB Nedarim 32a. *Gevurot HaShem*, Chap. 9.

⁵¹ Gen. 15:8. Which view R. Bachya mentions, and which Ralbag prefers, as state above.

⁵² Cf. Rashi and Tosefot, Nedarim 32a sv. *Hifriz midato al Midat Hashem* "His own estimation (of doubt) overcame God's estimation."

approach, contending it was Abraham's uncertainty in God's promise of bestowing the land *permanently to his offspring*.⁵³ Maharal contends that Abraham was certain that God will bestow the land to him; the Patriarch only doubted that his offspring will continue to merit it as an inheritance.⁵⁴ In asking for a sign that his progeny *will remain* as heirs of the land of Canaan, Abraham shows a momentary doubt of his progeny's merit. For Maharal, Abraham's sin involves *a state of mind that entertains doubt* either in God's capacity to deliver indefinitely, or in his own progeny's qualities or merit. In response, God tells Abraham that his people's faith shall be forged in suffering, rescue, miracle and covenant, so as to generate a meta-rational faith in God in them.⁵⁵

In Maharal's view, it is therefore *not a particular action* of Abraham's that sets the ball rolling for enslavement; rather, it's this sin of doubt, not in God *per se*, but in the future merit of his progeny to retain their providential relationship with God.⁵⁶ Drawing on Midrashic statements that make the case that Abraham worried about the merit of his offspring, Maharal contends that God tells him that the covenant is neither contingent nor conditional.⁵⁷ But at the same time God also tells Abraham that *there will be a process by which his descendants' faith shall be baked into them as well*.⁵⁸ Enslavement shall transpire for

⁵³ This may be coincidental, as Maharal may or may not have been familiar with Gersonides' view on this point, although, in general, he was very suspicious of Gersonides' philosophical contentions. See Sherwin, pp. 181-183.

⁵⁴ *Gevurot HaShem*, p.33-34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Chap. 9, pp.33-35.

⁵⁶ Nachmanides significantly makes the argument that Abraham *did not sin* in this case because he was worried about his descendants' worthiness and not God's power to deliver the land, and just wanted assurance that they would retain this collective providence. God tells them they will have a temple in which to give sacrifices, so as to atone for any potential sin and remain in God's grace. Therefore, what for Maharal was the sin that caused the enslavement of generation to come, was, in Ramban's mind, simply an understandable worry for the patriarch.

⁵⁷ Sherwin, pp.86-87, p. 144.

⁵⁸ Cf. Chap. 9, *Gevurot HaShem*, p. 34.: "Our sages teach that God brought his progeny there to suffer in exile so that they would acquire a reinforced faith when they saw the wonders and miracles and plagues, *that they would know God's love and His omniscience always*." There are two aspects in regard to faith. The first is holding onto belief even in times of hardship. The other is the suspension of the rational element altogether, which allows a person to fully and completely have trust in God. This is the reason the sages said, 'better the person who responds heartily amen than the person who says the bracha' because the latter is anchored in knowledge and the former suspends his rational and responds fully from faith. In a sense this is what happens at the Sea of Reeds when it says, 'and the people believed in God and in His servant Moses'. In spite of objective reality, in the face of the raging waters, and the Egyptians fast-approaching, they believed. This is when the "Ruah Hakodesh", this trait of utter orientation to God over man, embraced them. Abraham, in the moment he said 'ba ma eda,' did not have this meta-rational depth of faith, for which exile was declared, so that his

the purpose of *molding* the people. Suffering, and a process of faith even in the midst of that suffering, shall shape his descendants, not for the rewarding of one generation at a later time; *yisurim shel ahava* can only be for the particular generation that suffers, but rather as a character forging mechanism.⁵⁹ And at the time of rescue with plagues and wonders, and with the affirmation of faith at the Sea of Reeds, the people *shall be endowed with a further gift of certainty of faith*.⁶⁰ That shall be followed by even a stronger infusion of attachment to their God at Sinai.⁶¹ Persecution and suffering engenders God's Divine grace, which combines with renewed affirmation of faith.⁶² Such an experience of God's people makes their covenant irrevocable, 'a fact of reality', and the purpose for which the cosmos was fashioned.⁶³ The bond cannot be severed. And the collective act of suffering and election molds this People into its distinctive character, which is unique and noble beyond any nation.⁶⁴ Just as Abraham needed to be forged perhaps by the furnace of wandering and expectation,⁶⁵ before being fully infused with "Upper Wisdom of Torah" and full understanding at the time of Mila,⁶⁶ so too, shall the Israelites, as a result of wonders, miracles and the reception of Torah, *be overtaken by an intimate trust and knowledge*. Further, for Maharal, the Torah and the cult of the Temple instructed by Torah, bridge the divide between matter and form, between physicality and spirituality. Torah and worship help attach the People to their God, who chose them at the dawning of Creation from among the 70 nations.⁶⁷ Through this "Divine Grace" Israel is *fully endowed with higher faith and*

descendants could reclaim it." *Geurot HaShem*, pp.34-36. Sherwin mentions Maharal contending that this is the sin of Abram's that leads to his exile, but he doesn't develop it further. I believe it is more of Abraham's "chutzpadick" challenge to God to assure him that his progeny's faith will stay unflinching and reinforced, as was Abraham's. Cf. pages 140-41. Given the statement from *Geurot HaShem* just quoted, it's his asking for proof of his progeny's merit.

⁵⁹ Sherwin, pp.142-144.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.145. While redemption in Egypt is partially due to collective affirmation of faith even in dire straits, this faith is not sufficient in and of itself. It must be accompanied by an act of Divine grace; a bestowing of providential protection and love.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-48.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88; *Ohr Hadash*, p. 174.

⁶⁶ Maharal, *Tiferet Israel*, Chap. 19.

⁶⁷ And this is why their 'enslavement' could not begin until they had seventy souls in Egypt, as per the Covenant of Pieces which said, "Also the "nation" which enslaves them". Gen. 15:14. They could not be enslaved by a nation until they became a nation as per Deut. 32:8, in which God proclaims he: "fashioned the nations, according to the number of Israel." Cf. *Gur Aryeh*, p. 33.

understanding by means of rescue from Exile, redemption and Revelation.⁶⁸ In this sense, מעשה אבות סימן לבנים, what happens in Abraham's case, is repeated by his descendants.

Maharal's view of Cardinal Sin is the lack of full faith in God; it is the grounds of every exile.⁶⁹ It happened in antediluvian times and in Noachide times. It happened in Abraham's time, in a period of rampant self-adulation and paganism, until Abram emerged chosen by Divine Grace and spiritually endowed to be a pillar of faith and Torah. But exile is once again dictated for Abraham's moment of doubt. This faltering trust in God would again rear its ugly head after in the next reincarnation of anti-thesis, thesis and synthesis, in the case of Israel's redemption through grace, from the darkness of Egypt. Redemption is delayed for the desert generation that would wander in the desert and die there as a result of their doubt at the time of the spies.⁷⁰ It would grip Israel again in the exile of Babylon, and still grips us in the exile of Rome/Christendom.⁷¹ A longer and more painful exile will always be at the hands of a 'contradictory opposite'. Two contradictory opposites cannot be ascendant at the same time. In his own time, R. Loew excoriated the scholars of his day to eschew the trappings of philosophy which, in his view, has so led the Jewish people toward doubt, assimilation and heresy. The failure of faith, and the unwillingness to embrace mystical tradition, *the meta-rational over the rational*, is condemning us still. In this sense Abraham is a paradigmatic figure, and his experience is a sign for Israel.⁷²

Therefore, for Maharal, "*the story* of the patriarchs will be mirrored in their descendants", but it is not that *deeds* of Abraham *cause* future experience by specific actions

⁶⁸ Deuteronomy 4 comes to mind, which also reminds us of the midrashic explanations of how Abraham is launched out of Ur of Chaldees from the furnace of Nimrod. See TB Pesachim 118b, also Midrash Genesis Rabbah 44:13. Here it seems that Maharal may be feeding off the idea first introduced by Gersonides: that it wasn't just the sacrifices that would save the progeny of Abraham in their eternal covenant, it was their inheritance of Higher Wisdom. In witnessing the events of rescue and redemption from Egypt, and in receiving the Torah from the mouth of God, they achieve a higher wisdom, and intellectual perfection. Except in the case of Maharal: it isn't chiefly intellectual wisdom, but rather, an achievement of *Devekut*, a mystical attachment with the Sefira of Chochma, of "Wisdom" in the Godhead itself, by living a life of selfless commitment to Mitzvoth. Although a kind of collective "cleaving" could happen in this life, it is not of the same quality as the cleaving after the transformative time of Messianic redemption. Cf. Sherwin pp. 134-140.

⁶⁹ Sherwin, pp. 141-142.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-152.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

he took. It is rather the dynamic of Abraham's faith. There is a fall out as a result of momentary doubt, this 'sin' of mind and heart. In the case of the first Patriarch, who is the foundation and root of what transpires, the root will have implications eventually for its branches.⁷³ Israel in Egypt was yet a *third incarnation of 'creation out of inchoateness'*, this time, to transform the world from the moral and spiritual void of Pharaoh's Egypt.⁷⁴ The first time was Creation itself, which resolved with chaos, and so it was with Abraham in Chaldea who emerged a monotheist spreading light upon darkness; and so it was with Israel in Pharaoh's Egypt. This process will continue, according to Maharal, through four more empires which God holds up to Abraham as though with a mirror into the future.⁷⁵ It progresses to this day, in which fullest spiritual perfection can result, e.g. fullest attachment to the Godhead. Creation began as a process of emanation and estrangement from spiritual perfection when matter flew out of form which flew out of spirit. The process will move always inexorably with fits and starts towards a final reunification.⁷⁶ Devekut, "cleaving", the unification and the resolution of the opposites, works its way from body to soul. In the first phase, the physical biological aspect of humans, is enjoined by the mitzvot of Man to God, and the mitzvot of physical restraint (mikvah, kashrut etc.) and all mitzvot in mundane living. The level of body must be supplemented for the achievement of "devekut", a full fusion with the Godhead, through the mitzvah of love of God and *tefilah shel lev*, that is, a giving *over of all ego* in prayer and study.⁷⁷ A battle exists between polarities, good and bad, matter and form, defilement and purity, finite and infinite, ethics and immorality, ego and selflessness, errant belief and faith. All of these polarities must be overcome in their encounter, with the help of the 'Divine element in things' that makes for unity.

Maharal therefore dismisses the Ramban's assertion that the enslavement in Egypt was caused by Abraham's actions in the case of Sarai. Maharal equally rejects other Talmudic suggestions, such as that it was Abraham's making his disciples into soldiers or the brothers selling Joseph to Egypt, as causing the exile to Egypt.⁷⁸ All of these events

⁷³ Maharal, *Gevurot Hashem*, pp. 33-34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Chap. 5, p. 21.

⁷⁵ *Gur Aryeh*, Chap. 9, Sherwin pp. 149-152.

⁷⁶ Sherwin, pp. 110-111.

⁷⁷ In this way, Loew anticipates, and perhaps, is a model for early Hasidism. See Sherwin, pp. 133-136.

⁷⁸ TB Nedarim 34, cf. Maharal, *Gevurot HaShem*, Chap. 8, p.28. Although he does give a nod to the reason for enslavement being Abraham's making his 'students into soldiers', exile will not befall 'form', those intellectually and spiritually oriented to God alone, but it may well befall 'matter'; those

were *pretexts* that brought them down to Egypt. Sages prior were confusing cause and effect. These happenings *were caused by God's overarching design for eventual spiritual unification with His Chosen people which required bringing them down in the first place to be subjugated, so as to grow Israel into a nation of full faith which was promised in the Covenant of the Pieces, not the other way around.*⁷⁹

Interestingly, Maharal rejects Ramban's earlier comment that Abraham's faith in our instance was weak, which is also part of Ramban's "unintentional great sin". "How could Abraham not have trusted that God would have rescued him in a time of drought in the land of Canaan?" Ramban asks.⁸⁰ Ramban intimates that Abraham should have stayed in Canaan, and this was part of the reason he faces such a tortuous choice with his wife's predicament in Egypt in the first place.⁸¹ Contrastingly, in this instance, Maharal asserts that Ramban is erring greatly, for isn't Abraham "the rock and our foundation of faith"?⁸² Maharal argues that this designation is solely because *of his unwavering faith in God*. Here, Maharal claims that Abram left the land of Canaan out of concern for starving, and then, being out from the land in which he felt full protection, he tried to contend with Sarai's moment of peril in a practical way which would be the least hazardous. In sum, while Maharal vigorously criticizes Ramban, Maharal himself endorses a position linking the status of Abraham's belief to the enslavement. Perhaps the very vigor of Maharal's criticism lies in how close his view might appear, from our perspective, to that of Nachmanides'--the narcissism of small differences.

working for generals with human calculations. Cf. *Gevurot Hashem*, p. 33. Having said this though, he returns to Abraham's momentary doubt of 'ba meh eda' with much fuller conviction, as being the reason for the enslavement.

⁷⁹ Maharal, *Gevurot HaShem*, Chap. 9 p. 33. This spiritual perfection was no doubt the "great acquisition", not gold and silver, with which God would bring them out of Egypt.

⁸⁰If he composed his commentary in the last years of his life, during which he settled in the radically undeveloped and inhospitable land of Israel (see below), this "lack of faith" may have a personal resonance for Ramban. He perhaps felt that the vast majority of Jews in his day also were expressing a failure of faith and nerve.

⁸¹ Ramban, *Perush LaTorah Mikraoth Gedolot*, Gen. Chap. 12:10 s.v., *veDa*.

⁸²Maharal, *Gevurot HaShem*, Chap. 7. See too, the reference to Abraham as "rock" ("look at the rock from which you were hewn and the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and Sarah your mother how I called and blessed and made numerous". Isaiah, 51:1-2 This also convinces Maharal that Abraham had a *special endowment* of spirituality given to him to begin with in God's selection of him for His purposes of unity with humanity, even before the fullest efflux of divine wisdom during the Covenant of Circumcision.

Nevertheless, Maharal's objection is deeper, as his concern is Abraham's faith not his "action" triggering the exile. Tellingly, Maharal sees Abraham as having been selected *not on merit*, but rather *by Divine Grace* to be the lynchpin transition between exile, estrangement from the Divine and redemption.⁸³ He de-emphasizes the multiple contentions of the Midrash about Abraham smashing idols, emerging unscathed from Nimrod's furnace for his iconoclastic Monotheism, and midrashim that see him developing his monotheistic beliefs on his own at the tender age of three.⁸⁴ Maharal doesn't make use of the early Torah narrative, even of Sodom and Gemorrah, in which God describes Abraham meritoriously as a "*metzaveh Tezedaka u'mishpat*", someone with an implicit sense of justice and righteousness,⁸⁵ on a higher moral level than Noach who walks before God.⁸⁶ Rather, Maharal argues that Abraham is introduced in the biblical text as having *no particular merit*: he was *chosen by God by Divine Grace, developed and infused with spiritual capacities*.⁸⁷ Abraham, before Circumcision, represents perfection of body for the infusion of soul. Isaac is pure soul, and Jacob and the Jewish people after are the synthesis.⁸⁸ But Abraham is more at circumcision, as described by Maharal in his work *Tiferet Israel*: as a direct vessel *infused* with the Higher Wisdom of complete Torah.⁸⁹ Bold action never seems to be in the repertoire of Abraham. One wonders where Abraham's free will and personal ambitions are. In Maharal's view, he is not a pioneer of our religion and People, striking out on his own. He is a man sent by God on a mission, divinely launched into the process, endowed with Torah, a devoted servant of God's, tasked with the daunting objective of uniting, or at least bridging, earth and heaven.

Maharal is very deferential to Ramban as a great sage of the past.⁹⁰ However, for all these reasons --the irrationality of why, if Abram's actions here generated the punishment of 430 years, Abraham does it again; Ramban's lessening of Abraham's Torah stature by assuming he sins gravely and unknowingly; Maharal's understanding of the

⁸³ Sherwin, p. 144.

⁸⁴*Ibid*, pp. 143-144. cf. TB Berachot 5a, Midrash Rabba "Ekev Shama BeKoli" Parashat Hayye Sarah.

⁸⁵Cf. Gen. 18:19

⁸⁶Levi Yitshak of Berdichev, *Kedushat Levi* Jerusalem: *Torat HaNetzach*, 1958, pp. 9-10, comparing Noach and Abraham; Genesis, Chap. 19.

⁸⁷Sherwin, p. 144, *Tifferet Israel*, Chap. 19.

⁸⁸Byron Sherwin, p. 114.

⁸⁹Maharal, *Tifferet Israel*, Chap. 19.

⁹⁰Maharal speaks of him as a Torah and Kabbalistic master, quoting him in *Beer Hagolah* and *Hiddushei Aggadot*. He also refers to both Ramban and Bachya in his elucidations of Devekut. Cf. Sherwin, p. 49, and footnote 75.

sin of exile being anchored to uncertain faith rather than actions; Ramban's failure to see the gravity of danger facing Abram; and Ramban's failure to understand Exile as an overarching Divine design of an evolving Divine *endowment of collective faith in his progeny* - Maharal asserts that Ramban's commentary *in this matter* surely should be stricken.

AFTERMATH OF MAHARAL'S VEHEMENT REJECTION

The case that Maharal makes against Ramban was more aggressive than that of the more deferential deflections of his predecessors. In contrast to their reservations, his condemnation is dismissive of the opinion. This has colored subsequent appraisals of this comment in the traditional world and cast Ramban's comments as incorrect and even suspect. For instance, the esteemed 20th century Posek and Torah commentator, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, frames the situation in an opposite light to the Zohar. The issue is not who can generate the miracle, it's what one must do when a practical solution is available so not as to 'depend on a miracle'. Rabbi Feinstein makes the point that the narrative tells us how Abraham (and Isaac) adopted this wife sister ruse consistently, to indicate that this was the 'normal way' that any prudent person would act in order to save his life. Lying to avoid being killed, or positioning Sarah and Rebecca as a sister, would be a 'natural' strategy to embark upon in order to avoid grave danger. A person *should* act this way rather than asking, or waiting, for a miracle in the course of doing something chivalrous, as there was a pragmatic remedy at hand, or so Abraham, and Isaac, too, understood. Praying and hoping for miracles is warranted only when natural means for a desired result are impossible.⁹¹

Feinstein even goes as far as saying that a zealous student either confused or forged what it was that Ramban said, as a great Torah master like Ramban could never have said the words that were now attributed to him.⁹²

IN DEFENSE OF RAMBAN'S CRITICISM OF ABRAM

A. RAMBAN'S COMMENTARY TO GEN. 12:10-13 IS ACCURATE

⁹¹Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Darash Moshe*, Parashat Vayera, Gen. 12, p. 10. (Hebrew Edition)

⁹²R. Feinstein follows Maharal in fully rejecting Ramban's position. He adds to the rejection by speculating that it was an error in transmission by later, misguided (at best), students. Further, Feinstein contends in *Darash Moshe*, that Abram's actions were actually progressive for his time, since he consults with his wife--which was a quantum leap from the marital laws of the time.

Perhaps R. Feinstein may have a leg to stand on, in that the phrasing of Ramban's comment on Gen. 12:10 is less than elegant and might be a bit jumbled. In our text, Ramban notes במקום המשפט שם הרשע והחטא meaning, "in the place of the judgment this would be where the sin and wickedness will be". This phrase might have better been phrased במקום החטא meaning, in the place of the sin, i.e., Abram's sin, so will be the verdict of enslavement down the road for his descendants. Indeed, in the quotations of the Ramban in both Bachya and Abrabanel, their phrasing is different. Bachya directly quotes Ramban as במקום החטא שמה הענש meaning "in the place of the sin that is the punishment". Further, since R. Bachya is a disciple of a disciple of the Ramban, his mentor was Rabbi Shlomo Ben Adret, Rashba for short, Ramban's exemplary student, Bachya indeed may have been expressing Ramban's intent. Abrabanel states the idea as על זה החטא נגזר גלות מצרים which, even if a paraphrasing, conveys the idea more clearly. An early Ramban manuscript presents the phrase as מקום המשפט מקום החטא, omitting the word רשע. That squares better with the manner in which Bachya quotes him. However, there is a good basis for Ramban's convoluted phrasing, as he utilizes the biblical phrase found in Kohelet מקום המשפט⁹³ הרשע Still, it seems that, in spite of these re-phrasings and alternate references to sin and wickedness, Ramban indeed held this viewpoint. And an examination of manuscripts has *not* revealed that Ramban updated or changed this viewpoint.⁹⁴

Additionally, if Ramban's comment was a scribal error of transmission, as Feinstein charged, we would probably see less of a problem for the Ramban in his discussion of Gen. 20, in the next segment at Gerar, where Abraham misrepresents his wife as his sister once again. Here too, however, Nachmanides is critical. "What does it matter if Abraham was technically correct in his wife being a relative or not, when he almost causes a great sin against Sarah?" he asks.⁹⁵ If Ramban is continuing his criticism in a similar context, it seems unlikely that what Ramban said initially was an 'errant transmission' of a student. For all these reasons, it seems certain that Ramban said this.

⁹³Ecclesiastes 3:17. Found in the Chavel commentary critical footnotes, *Perush L' Ramban Mosad HaRav Kook*, Beresheet 12:10

⁹⁴See AlHaTorah.org. Updates to Ramban's Torah Commentary based on manuscripts (list of Ramban's personal later updates throughout the commentary provided by Chavel) as seen in six manuscripts. The Chavel Commentary in *Perush L' Ramban, Mosad HaRav Kook*, Beresheet 12:10 establishes both the words בשגגה (unintentionally) and, במקום המשפט שם החטא והרשע reflect the earlier manuscripts of Ramban accurately.

⁹⁵Ramban, Chap. 20:12.

One might also question the self-consistency of Ramban's criticism of Abram in Gen 12:10. Elsewhere, Ramban wonders why, all of the sudden, after all of his travels with Sarah in a land not his own, he starts using the ruse of wife-sister in Egypt. Why not even when he left Mesopotamia for Canaan? Ramban muses: indeed it was the case, that Abraham used this same ruse in all of his travels since leaving Haran,⁹⁶ but the Torah omits these episodes because nothing transpired that was eventful as a result.⁹⁷ Given this different angle in his own commentary, one wonders how Ramban can think that *just because in Egypt Abram was undone by this strategy (i.e., it doesn't get them out of a bind but instead puts Sarai in harm's way)* that he could all of the sudden consider that Abram had committed a 'great sin' unintentionally. Was it a great sin because *it was a miscalculation* and it didn't work this time? Why was it not a great sin from the very beginning? How could both of Ramban's contentions (elsewhere the ruse was useful and here it was immoral) be true? Interestingly, none of the commentators who are critical of Ramban raise this point, although from his phrasing in Darash Moshe, this may indeed have been bothering R. Feinstein. Still, even with this contradictory messaging, there cannot be any doubt that in Ramban's eyes, Abram's ruse was a great sin since it put his pious wife in harm's way. This is the face value of his words, and he never updated them or retracted them.

Further, there are other contexts where it appears Rabbi Feinstein sometimes asserted errors of transmission to dismiss statements by sages that didn't fit parameters of his ideologically consistent view. A good example of this is found in his insistence that every letter of the Torah was transmitted by God directly to Moses, and that statements to the contrary found in Avot D' Rabbi Natan,⁹⁸ (an elaboration to Pirkei Avot, compiled perhaps in 700-900 CE) and in the commentary of Rabbi Judah HaHasid,⁹⁹ (Regensburg,

⁹⁶See Ramban's Commentary in Gen. 20, in which he explains this to Abimelech. (Gen. 20:12)

⁹⁷Ramban, Gen 12:11-13. I am grateful to Michelle Levine's work for pointing this out. Michelle Levine. *Nachmanides on Genesis: Art of Biblical Portraiture* Providence RI: Brown University Press, 2009, pp. 182-184.

⁹⁸*Avot D Rabbi Natan* 34:4 claims the dots over certain letters in the Torah signal that Ezra, in copying the Torah, was not certain if they were exactly correct.

⁹⁹*Commentary of Yehuda HaHasid* Num. 21:17 and Dt. 2:5, *Perush HaTorah L'Ra'v Yehudah HaHasid* Jerusalem, Mahadurah Langau, 1975, which he attributes to his father, who considered the passages of "before a King reigned in Israel" (Num. 36:31), as inserted after the fact to explain who it was that Israel was able to encamp and leave in Etzion Gaver, where Etzion Gaver was said to be part of Edom, and Israel wasn't allowed into Edom in their wandering (Num. 20:21). His answer is that

1150-1217, leader of the mystical movement known as Hasidei Ashkenaz) must be fraudulent, and inserted by errant and even wicked students. Rav Feinstein also condemns the work of R. Menachem Zioni (late 14th cent. CE, Speyer) for quoting these interpretations; and Feinstein even says he has never heard of Zioni. To which Rabbi Menashe Klein (a sainted contemporary sage, 1924-2011) defends Rav Zioni as a guide to many *Acharonim* (Rabbinic sages post- 15th century) both in Kabbala and Halacha, and contends *that the Teshuva of Rav Feinstein must itself be a forgery* by students after R. Feinstein's death, since he, R. Feinstein, would certainly have heard of and studied the authoritative Rav Menachem Zioni.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, we attribute R. Feinstein's attack on Ramban as thus misplaced, and a result of R. Feinstein's (or his students) tendency to call into question the legitimacy of a line or comment in an otherwise recognized work, rather than to admit that there is a spectrum of views in the religious literature, on even fundamental issues.

"HISTORICAL" REASONS FOR RAMBAN'S OPINION

As noted above, the Ralbag Abarbanel commentaries relied upon by Maharal, who accepted that Abraham knew the entire written and oral law, excused Abraham's conduct by pointing to a defense of 'necessity in face of peril' as developed in Rabbinic law. Ramban entertained, in contrast to the Maharal and others, the perception that Abraham, while being expert in intricacies of forbidden "foreign worship", and in the metaphysical proofs of one God, did *not* have a granularly developed oral or even written law to work with, in other areas such as the laws of *Shemirat Hanefesh*, guarding life. For him, the Sinaitic Torah was still inchoate or at least unavailable.¹⁰¹ In his comment of God's description to Isaac of

Etzion Gaver became a holding of Edom afterward with the union of a King of Edom marrying Mahatabel bat Matred (Num. 36:39), and this explains how it was that Solomon visited Etzion Gaver in Edom. Before this time it had not been part of Edom cf. Chronicles II, 8:17. Also Yehuda HaHasid relates an additional interpretation from his father that the truncated song of the well in Numbers 21:17 is just a small part of the song, which had been removed from the Chumash in the time of the Davidic scribal court, and placed in Psalms (Ps. 136).

¹⁰⁰Cf. this controversy in the *Teshuvot of Menashe Klein*, Shealoth ooTeshuvot, Section 12:214), and Igroth Moshe, *Yoreh Deah* 3:114.

¹⁰¹ I do not know if Ramban affirmed the Midrashic idea that the Torah was in the possession of the angels for hundreds of generations even before the creation. Cf. TB Shabbat 88b-89a. Professor Menachem Kellner argues that these Primordial Torah and our Patriarchs having access to it go hand in hand), but I am not sure one necessarily follows the other. God could be waiting to give it to our ancestors, or any people that freely choose the Divine Human relationship in a collective covenant.

Abraham's capacities "of keeping my provisions my statutes and my doctrines", Ramban rejects Midrashic views that Abraham intuited all of the Torah both oral and written. He points to counter examples, such as the episodes in which Jacob marries two sisters in violation of Leviticus, where Moses puts up pillars, and where Amram, Moses' father, marries his aunt. Ramban likewise rejects the Midrashic excuse that they engaged in these things 'outside of Torah law'-- *outside* of the land of Israel, only, or that Moses and his pillars was a case of an instruction for 'the hour'. While Ramban may have accepted *the small possibility* of total Torah knowledge before it had been articulated at Sinai, he is far more comfortable with the alternative conception that Torah Revelation was *evolving* in the Patriarchal times--being developed by the schools of Shem and Eber and so forth.¹⁰² His conception of this development echoes that of Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah, who tells us that Abraham, while being complete in the area of monotheistic belief, was still studying

Kellner expresses the opinion that Ramban was of the opinion that Abraham followed the entire written and oral Torah; he equates his view with Yehudah HaLevi and Rashi in this matter, but I do not read Ramban's comment in regard to Gen 26 in this way. Ramban gives credence to the "opinion" of our ancient sages who express this view, but also expresses the problems with it, namely the many violations of the Torah of Jacob and Moses, Amram's marrying an aunt, two sisters, and putting up pillars; all clear violations of the written Torah. He is solidly of the view, as well, that Rabbinic Midrash need not be taken literally. Barcelona Disputation, Para. 39. Ramban comes to a compromise idea that Abraham *may have intuited all of the Torah*, but that he followed it voluntarily and not out of obligation. This idea of "intuited Torah" is very different from God endowing Abraham with Torah knowledge as Maharal contends. It implies Abraham's innate sensibility to Torah wisdom. At the end, Ramban points out the "plain sense" of the passage, which was that Abram's 'two Torahs' meant in this context 1) the new doctrine of circumcision and 2) the doctrine of the laws of Noach. He also infers Abram's practice of Shabbat, Justice and Righteousness, tithes and secondary Noachide laws having to do with prohibited sexual relations. He also mentions the Talmudic notion for his metaphysical prowess in regard to the prohibitions and parameters of idol worship and Abraham's having composed 400 chapters on Avodah Zara. I propose that on this matter Ramban may have been in Maimonides' corner. Cf. *Mikraoth Gedolot*, Ramban Chap. 26:5.

Cf. Kellner's essay in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, Kanarfogel and Sokolow, eds. NY: Yeshiva University Press, 2010, pp. 35-40. on their divide in terms of Torah and the Cosmos.

¹⁰²There are many attestations in the Midrashic literature that the Patriarchs were schooled in the "Yeshivot" of Shem and Eber, descendants of Noach and forebears of Abraham. In fact, according to Midrash, Shem and Eber were the ones that buried Abraham in the Cave of Machpelah. Cf. for instance *Genesis Rabba* 62:6, 63:6, 67:8, 85:12; for the contention that they led the bier of Abraham's and found proper site for his burial. We also see mentions of the phrase "*mitzvotai ve toratai*" in Exodus where it is clear that it cannot be referring to the full Sinaitic written and oral Torahs. Cf. Ex. 13:28, 18:16, for instance, where it cannot mean the Sinai doctrines, but rather, a smaller subset of the law given to the Israelites *before* they reach Sinai. Although some may contend that the passage in Ex. 18 might have been after the Sinai Revelation. On this see Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*, Jerusalem/New York: Moznaim Publishing Corp., 1982.

in the schools of Shem and Eber, which were schools of evolving but incomplete Torah.¹⁰³ Nachmanides understands the literal meaning of this phrase "be-torotai" was that Abraham's knowledge was limited to an expertise on the prohibitions of idol worship, the expanded notions of the laws of Noah in the areas of prohibited sexual relations, knowledge of tithes, the importance of living a balance of justice and compassion, Brith Milah, and the Sabbath as a day that commemorates the founding of the world. Accordingly, Abraham's Torah knowledge was incomplete, and evolving,¹⁰⁴ and that even if he had an intuitive grasp of the Torah, Abraham adhered to it not out of 'duty' but rather voluntarily.¹⁰⁵ For Ramban, Abraham's evolving Torah knowledge was still not an excuse for a meta-halachic moral value of protecting one's wife rather than putting her in harm's way.¹⁰⁶ It was an act of courage and decency which Abraham failed to fulfill. Sometimes bold actions are required of us, and when we fail to do so, opportunities are squandered.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodah Zarah* 1:2. The thrust of the study was metaphysical understanding of the falsehood of idolatry and the truth of monotheism, and the role of Abraham in popularizing, and elaborating upon this theistic message. Maharal, as we have seen, had another solution, specifically that Abraham wasn't among the Patriarchs who acted against the Torah, because he knew it implicitly, having received it from "Higher Heavenly Wisdom" through the Covenant of Milah.

¹⁰⁴There is a long tradition of controversy in the writings of the ancient rabbis as to whether or not the patriarchs were Noachides 'plus', or pre-Sinaitic Israelites. This subject is explored in an online article by Joseph P. Shultz. Support for the Maharal's contention of intuitive knowledge on Oral and Written Law can be seen in *Mishnah Kiddushim* 4:4, *Tos. Kiddushin* 5:21, and *Genesis Rabba* 49:2, 65:13. Support for Ramban's gradualist rationalist discovery of the commandments can be seen in the writings of Philo and Josephus, and in Rabbi Shimi ben Hiyya's view in TB Yoma 28b, in which he argues that Gen 26:5 means the Noachide Laws, Circumcision, and being just and compassionate.

¹⁰⁵Cf. Ramban in his understanding of Gen. 26:5.

¹⁰⁶Cf. Ramban Gen. 26:5 in which he posits that Abraham's "mitzvotai" would be specifically in matters that are of a conventional nature "that don't need granular legality, such as *manslaughter* and *theft*."

¹⁰⁷I suggest that Ramban, being keyed deeply into matters of Halacha, would not have suggested Abram "had committed a great sin", if Ramban himself didn't hold a different Halachic view in regard to Abram's conduct at a "time of perceived peril." There are certainly some authorities who feel the mitzvah of 'al taamod' or 'don't stand idly by', exempts a witnessing individual from *directly* intervening if there is perceived personal risk. Maimonides, Rif, and Rosh all follow this notion that intervention is not needed if self-endangerment is a possibility. However, Ramban was aware of other views, such as those of Resh Lakish, who held that one *should* imperil oneself if it was *likely* that another would be killed. Cf. Resh Lakish's view in the 'matter of a person needing to be surrendered or the other dying', which required that the person surrendered to an enemy be someone the enemy specifies, but only *if previously convicted for a capital crime*. Otherwise, all must risk their own lives rather than surrender another person, cf. Sanhedrin 73a; TJ Trumoth 46b, *Tosefta Terumot* Chap. 7:20, although the moderating opinions are presented as well. In Rabbi Yehuda's case a person selected by the enemy may be given up only if the enemy has breached the walls of the city. In Rabbi Yochanan's opinion, even a random person designated by the enemy may be surrendered.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIVERGENCES BETWEEN RAMBAN AND MAHARAL

I suggest that the key factor merging both Ramban's unusual criticism of Abraham, and Maharal's unusual criticism of Ramban, is not just their concern with the character of Abraham, but rather with their very different understandings of the process that leads to redemption. A key point is that Ramban feels an effect on later generations, not just in Abraham's conduct and decisions, but also in the conduct and decisions of Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. Abraham and Sarah, by sending Hagar and Ishmael away in such a brusque and brutal fashion, created the ripple effect whereby the descendants of Ishmael,

Maimonides curiously sides with Resh Lakesh's view that risking one's own life for another in this case is required cf. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodai Torah, Chap. 5:5*. Cf. discussion in Basil Herring, *Jewish Ethics and Halakhah for Our Time*, NY, Yeshiva University Press, 1989, Vol. 2, p.19-20. Further, Herring discusses the position of Radbaz, aka Rabbi David Ben Zimra, born 1479 in Spain, so an early contemporary of Maharal, which is that a person may worthily take a risk on behalf of the other person endangered, if the chance of risk is less than 50/50. Only if a person risks beyond a 50/50 chance of harm to self, is he considered a fool. Cf. Radbaz, 627, 218, as understood in Herring, p. 27. Cf. also Radbaz's difficult hypothetical that a person may even worthily sacrifice a limb to save another person from dying, if that is the proposition of a sadistic enemy, if the bystander is certain that it will not be life threatening! Most severed limbs however bring blood loss, and the possibility of dying, and in this case, it would be forbidden, and that person who does it is a 'pious fool'. The difference in the second case, choosing away from risk, even if negligible, is that the danger encountered is not merely a potential, only presenting in the future, if at all, but rather, that danger is present from the start. See Radbaz, *Responsum 1052*, as cited by Dr. J.D Kunin, "The Search for Organs: Halachic Perspectives on Altruistic giving and the selling of Organs", online at jme.bmj.com, and analysis by Dr. Michael Vigoda in "Organ Donation from Living Donors and its Commercial Aspects" (Hebrew) *Daat.act.il*, Vol. 18:3-4, Jan. 2003. Moreover, Ramban may have felt that Abraham, being a Navi (a prophet), needn't have worried terribly about being harmed, and could, in fact, 'rely on a miracle'. Cf. Gen. 20:7, in regard to Avimelech, where God tells Avimelech that Abraham's prayer could either save or kill him. Ramban may have had in mind that God had just promised Abraham that 'those that curse him shall be cursed' Gen. 12:3. Note the biblical understanding of the skill of the Navi to himself *perform signs and wonders*, even for the wrong reasons Dt.13:2. While *lo somchim al HaNes*, the prohibition that 'we not rely on miracles', used by commentators criticizing Ramban's contention of Abraham's sin, applies in Ramban's day and age, miracles happening to help biblical persons *may have been accepted as far more possible*. TB Berachot 4a, Sanh. 94b. Rape and incest are equated with 'saving life' in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Rotzeah v' Shemirat Nefesh, Chap. 1:10 and 1:14*, and thus would apply as a mitzvah of "lo tidom al dam reacha", etc. And this doesn't even begin to address the other Halachic issues that involve honoring one's wife more than oneself. Cf. TB Yevamot 62b, and Rabba's point in Yalkut Shimoni 68b to Bnai Hozah, stating: "the extent you honor your wife is the extent to which you find blessing."

the Moslem empire, brusquely and at times brutally treat the Jews in their midst.¹⁰⁸ In Ramban's mind, Isaac's actions and his need to leave to Gerar are a harbinger of the second Exile, following the destruction of the First Temple. The first exile, by Ramban's count, e.g. the enslavement in Egypt, was caused by Abraham's descent to Egypt and his sin involving his wife Sarah. Jacob's exile to flee his brother Esau's wrath was a harbinger of the third Exile, following the Roman destruction of Judaea and the Second Temple. Jacob's conduct with his brother Esau, in sending him offerings and seeking to appease him (Gen. 32), is expressed in the very exile with Rome in which we still find ourselves.¹⁰⁹ Although in some instances,¹¹⁰ the modern scholar Dr. Miriam Sklarz contends that their actions were often unconscious in causing these things,¹¹¹ there are other instances, as in the case of Jacob and Moses, where their actions were conscious acts.¹¹² Thus, on the one hand, when Isaac digs the well at Rechovoth and names it, this *alludes* to a third Holy Temple that will be established in the future.¹¹³ And when Jacob places a space between his messengers presenting appeasing gifts to Esau *that leads* to there being periods of calm between heavy taxation and/or persecution in our third Exile.¹¹⁴ But Jacob's action in conquering Shechem by sword shall one day help Menashe and Ephraim procure Judaea and Samaria in the conquest, as Jacob himself expresses on his death bed blessing to Joseph.¹¹⁵ And Moses'

¹⁰⁸Ramban, Gen. 16:6. Noted in Dr. Miriam Sklarz, "From Divine Directive to Human Legacy; Transition in the Course of Nachmanides Typological Exegesis of the Patriarchal Narratives", JSIJ 14, 2018, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, p. 3, where Dr. Miriam Sklarz explores these various acts of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as both alluding to, and actively shaping, later generational outcomes for the Jewish People, citing Ramban's sermon, "Torah HaShem Temmima", pp. 3-9. See additionally, her article in The Journal of Jewish Studies, "Nachmanides' Typological Interpretation of the Encounter Between Abraham and Malchizedek", Gen. 18-20, JJS Vol. 70 No. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 68-82, in which she points out Nachmanides' view that the four Kings also represent the four empires that conquered Israel: Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Greco-Roman, as well as the varying exiles among them, citing Nachmanides, Gen.12:6, and, better even, Gen. 14:1. For Isaac, see Nachmanides, Gen. 26:1. For Jacob, see Nachmanides, Gen. 32:17.

¹¹⁰Ramban, Gen. 26:20, p. 33. Isaac's actions at Rechovot and the well allude to a third temple eventually. See Dr. Sklarz, "From Divine Directive...", p. 7.

¹¹¹In his Sermon, "Torat HaShem Temima", Nachmanides makes the case that because Abraham didn't know he was being punished for his actions with Sarai, he repeats them again with Avimelech. See Dr. Sklarz, "From Divine Directive...", p. 7.

¹¹²Dr. Sklarz attributes such 'unawareness' for patriarchal actions of Abraham and Isaac, while the patriarchal actions of Jacob and Moses are treated as more conscious. See Dr. Sklarz, "From Divine Directive ...pp. 3., 12. Regardless, the acts of these figures are consequential.

¹¹³See Dr. Sklarz, "From Divine Directive..." p. 7. Cf. Ramban, Gen. 26:20, 34.

¹¹⁴Ramban, Gen. 32:17, and Sklarz, "From Divine Directive..." p.6.

¹¹⁵See Dr. Sklarz's distinction between 'Talismanic action' and 'concrete action' in regard to the actions of our Patriarchal ancestors, "From Divine Directive...", pp. 7-10.

holding his hands up for the purpose of the Israelites needing to look heavenward, was also a conscious action which paved the way for Israel's spiritual power endowing her physical prowess, without which, victory over Esau's descendants would be impossible, as Esau had been blessed with the power of the sword.¹¹⁶ As Ramban understands Genesis as a *Sefer Yetzirat Olam*, the book of Creation in its entirety, he carries this further in the actions of the patriarchs and matriarchs as being formative of the Jewish nation in the same way the first earlier stories set the tone for all humanity. Indeed, in a sense, it appears for the Ramban, that Abram's actions with his wife Sarai echo the events of the first sin of Eve and Adam's in the garden.¹¹⁷ This "original" albeit unintended sin 'tarnishes' his descendants, so as to require the purging of enslavement.

And yet for Ramban, there must be room for individual action, to change the course of our future. After all, Abraham was not forced to do what he did with Sarai, any more than the first couple was forced to sin in the garden. It was his own misdeed and his own bad decision. Thus, the Israelites' righteous choice of receiving the Torah, and especially the women's loyalty to God in receiving it first,¹¹⁸ in their refusal to contribute to the golden calf with their gold,¹¹⁹ in a sense 'undoes' and repairs this primordial tarnishing of humanity in Eden.¹²⁰ So too, at the very same time, the virtuous actions of Israel and especially Israelite women at the same time, undo this 'bad start' in Gen. 12:11

¹¹⁶Cf. Ex. 18:11-13, as cited by Dr. Sklarz, "From Divine Directive...", p. 12. Cf. Isaac's blessing, Gen 27:40 "...an upon your sword shall you live..."

¹¹⁷Moshe Halbertal notes that Ramban saw the Patriarch stories setting the tone for the future experience of Israel in very much the same way Genesis garden story provides a blemish for all of humanity to overcome. See Ramban's comment on Exodus 12, *HaHodesh Hazeh Lachem*, in which he makes the claim that this is the reason that the Torah starts with creation and not with the first mitzvah given to the Jewish People as a collective. The entire Torah is meta-story about the damaging alienation caused by human sin, and the consequent alienation, and eclipse of humanity's bonded connection to God, and through it, God's alienation and disconnection with Himself. See Moshe Halbertal, *Al Derech HaEmet*, Jerusalem, Shalom Hartman Institute Press, 2006, pp. 226-234.

¹¹⁸Cf. Rashi, Ex. 19:3.

¹¹⁹There is no direct argument given by Ramban here that the women refused, but in my opinion it's evident when he alludes to it in the next portion. Cf. Ex. 32:2 where it appears the women refused, and Ramban's reflection of this in his comment on Ex. 35:22, noting that the women still had their gold because they refused to contribute to the golden calf.

¹²⁰Cf. *Nachalat Zvi Hirsh Commentary*, Parashat Yitro sv. Ko tomar le Beit Yaacov, who brings down this Kabbalistic idea. Ramban explores the women's particular dispensing of the evil inclination in their fashioning the layer out of the mirrors they used to beautify themselves when creating families in Egyptian slavery. Cf. Ramban, Gen. 38:8, on this point. Cf. this theme is explored elsewhere in *Nachalat Zvi*, *Vayakhel*, s.v., *Vayavou Haanashim al HaNashim*, i.e., and the men came upon the women for gold for the Tabernacle.

at the nation's origins. This later collective action by the Israelites, especially the women, resets the shaky course for the Jewish nation launched by Abraham's unintentional sin. It seems that just as there are sins of action that lead to exile and suffering, there are also actions of central figures, and actions the group as a whole could take, to repair and to reset a damaged spiritual level.

To take another example: while Ramban was a believer in the various "constraints" of periods of exile and redemption as seen in the Book of Daniel, and as understood in terms of a new millennium beginning in the Jewish equivalent to 1241 CE, still, he advocates taking concrete actions within these constraints.

We see this play out forcefully in Ramban's treatment of Joseph while wallowing in the dungeon. Joseph analyzes dreams in accordance to each person's destined blessing, that is, each individual's personal aspirations to fulfill them.¹²¹ The modern scholar Dr. Shmuel Loboschitz, in elaborating on Ramban's position, contends that for Ramban, this meant that Joseph took into account, when interpreting the dreams of others, his own objectives.¹²² Joseph understood in the dungeon, that to fulfill his dreams of his brothers coming and bowing before him, that they had to find him first.¹²³ He also saw in Pharaoh a ruler whose desire was to consolidate his power and expand his wealth and influence even beyond Egypt. He, therefore, in hearing Pharaoh's dream, volunteered himself to be the one who would administer Egypt.¹²⁴ As Ramban puts it, he saw in Pharaoh a man of large appetite for power, and so Joseph's plan to expand Pharaoh's wealth through the control of the distribution network of feeding the entire Mediterranean basin would appeal to his ambitions.¹²⁵ Joseph understood that, in proposing all manner of maximizing crops through full hilt production and fertilization, he would appear wise. Loboschitz even infers agricultural savvy to Joseph in knowing that the overproduction would exhaust the

¹²¹Ramban, Genesis Chap. 42 s.v. *Ish kechalomo patar otam*. i.e. every man according to his dreams, did he interpret.

¹²²Shmuel Loboschitz, 2007 online lecture 789. Available through [Bar Ilan University Judaic Department website](#).

¹²³Ramban, *Miketz*, Genesis 41:22.

¹²⁴Cf. Ramban, Gen. 41:33, where Joseph tells Pharaoh of fertilizers, pesticides, mold prevention, distribution apparatus, etc., impressing upon Pharaoh, Joseph's own competency to accomplish this project... "What wise man doesn't have eyes in his head!?"

¹²⁵Ramban, Gen 41:33

land, thus ensuring a drought!¹²⁶ All of this would assure that his brothers would come to him in order to bow down to him, thus fulfilling his dreams. Finally, Joseph would patiently continue to engineer his destiny being fulfilled, as he envisioned it in his dreams, by his ruse of his brothers being spies.¹²⁷ For miracles to fully unfold, and dreams, patient planning, maneuvering and engineering *from below* is necessary.¹²⁸ God's plans don't just unfold. They need intentional and pragmatic actions below. In Ramban's ideas, that further acts of our later ancestors resulted in the exile to Babylon, and in his time, the exile of Rome as well, and that there are also *purposeful* actions these figures can take even within decreed exilic times to alter and soften negative consequences into positive ones.

Thus, Ramban's understanding is in clear contrast to Maharal's. Unlike in the schema of the Maharal, God cannot necessarily foretell the future and the state of human affairs. He does not mold Human history into the shape of His vision controlling all of its contours, as the Maharal seems to argue. In a way the opposite is true. Human history needs to be fed into an ongoing algorithm of God's reengagement with Himself and with his Chosen People. Perhaps God knows the infinite ramifications made possible by our choices, but he cannot know our future choices.¹²⁹ Reality is dependent on the actions that our primary ancestors took,¹³⁰ but also, to a degree, the actions of every individual. What

¹²⁶Referencing *Tosefta* here, in which Sforno points out that full hilt production and non-rotation of crops etc., assures the exhaustion of the land. *Tosefta*, Leiberman ed. Baba Metzia 9.7

¹²⁷Ramban, Gen. 42:9. Ramban differs from Rashi in the thought that his dreams *were being fulfilled*. Instead arguing *they weren't being fulfilled*, because Benjamin was missing, and therefore, he would need to patiently *orchestrate from below what God intended from above*.

¹²⁸Loboschitz, online lesson 789, Bar Ilan University BIU, Judaic Department, 2007, p. 3.

¹²⁹This is a famous divergence between Maimonides and Gersonides in their philosophical treatment of the seeming contradiction of Free Will, and at the same time, God's omniscience. Maimonides held that God's foreknowledge is a mystery and a function of his Being, being comprised of Past, Present and Future simultaneously. To Ralbag, God knows all the potential ramifications for any choice a person makes and resets the infinite ramifications in each and every choice. To him, this is the infinite foreknowledge that God has, that therefore never determines free will. Cf. Louis Jacobs, "Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will", *Conservative Judaism* 34,1, Sept. Oct. 1980, pp.4-16.

¹²⁹ Dr. Sklarz contends that Ramban linked Genesis and Exodus, in the sense that the actions of the Patriarchs shaped and created the later nation of Israel, in much the same way God shapes and creates the Universe. Cf. Sklarz, "Nachmanides on the Structure of the Pentateuch in Light of the Christian Polemic", *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2019, pp.295-296. Of course, one might argue that their actions make exile inexorable until a certain time, see discussion of Bachya and Genesis 42:2 above.

¹³⁰Dr. Sklarz contends that Ramban linked Genesis and Exodus, in the sense that the actions of the Patriarchs shaped and created the later nation of Israel, in much the same way God shapes and creates the Universe. Cf. Sklarz, "Nachmanides on the Structure of the Pentateuch in Light of the

happens from Above is largely shaped by what happens below. We have an active role in our fate, and the capacity to harness, through our resourcefulness, protective forces and even miracles from above.¹³¹

RAMBAN'S ALIYAH TO ERETZ ISRAEL

It may well be that Ramban in his own actions challenged cycles of exile and historic millenarian ideas. He may have sought to 'push' the hand of the Messiah in real time. He participated in debates against Christian antagonists. He was acutely aware of the passage of the fifth millennium in the year 1240 and that the Jubilee after it in 1290 was thought by some to mark the birth pangs of redemption.¹³² He no doubt also believed the unfolding of redemption's endpoint from the words of the Book of Daniel. But Nachmanides was action oriented in creating, and not just accepting a locked-in reality. He is critical of Jacob and his brothers *staying* in Egypt beyond the drought, and he is also critical of the Jews in Roman times for in many ways trapping themselves in an endless exile in which they were dying as a nation. While the Maharal argues that God chose Abraham as the progenitor of His people not for his internal merit but as an act of grace, Nachmanides claims that Abraham had great merit in coming to the land of Israel on his own initiative even before he was told to go there by God. He returns back to bid adieu to his father, but Terah doesn't die in Haran until five years later. Abram then is called by God a second time prior to his father's death.¹³³ Following this narrative, Abram thus catches God's eye by *his own* initiative. Cycles and decrees of exile are not necessarily inexorable. They are malleable, and choices made by generations matter because God is responsive to His people's righteousness, humility and suffering.¹³⁴

Christian Polemic", *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2019, pp.295-296. Of course, one might argue that their actions make exile inexorable until a certain time, but, see discussion of Bachya and Genesis 42:2 above.

¹³¹This latter concept is spoken of in the Zohar, particularly in the case of the Israelites in leaving Egypt by their making a sacrifice of a lamb on the constellatory time of worship, and in putting blood on doorposts for the Egyptians to see etc. Human agency is also robustly argued in the splitting of the sea of reeds there as well, see *Nachalat Zvi*, *parashat beshalach*, s.v., *az yashir Moshe*, as well as *Nachalat Zvi* s.v.. *oonegatem ba mezuzah oovemashkoff*. *Parashat Bo*, pp. 162-163.

¹³²Moshe Halbertal, *Ibid.*, Chap. 6, pp. 212-214.

¹³³This is implied in Ramban's accounting of understanding the 430 years of settlement from the time of the Covenant of *Brith bein Habetarim* Gen. 15:13, even though Abraham left for Canaan on God's command at age 75, and Isaac was born to him at age 100.

¹³⁴Cf. Ramban, Ex. 2:25.

It was in 1267 CE, at the age of 72, that Ramban made Aliyah to Eretz Israel. Finding almost no active Jewish life, he quickly set up funding, schools, and synagogues at the same time that he worked feverishly to complete his great Torah commentary. Ramban famously authored a code that numbered Aliyah to Eretz Israel *as a mitzvah even while in the midst of exile*. To him, the mitzvah of Aliyah was certainly in force for every Jew in the sense of yearning for conquest of the land. But it was also a requirement for every Jew to settle the land, irrespective of being politically dominant. This was in opposition to many authorities who did not number it among the 613 mitzvot, and who claimed it was only in force at the time of the Holy Temple, or such time as there was sovereignty.¹³⁵ And Ramban's zeal spilled out in his commentary as well, which he penned in the last years of his life while settling in the land of Israel.¹³⁶ He knew the urgency of acting in the moment to help *bring about a different reality* than the one passively inherited. Ramban contends that it is in the hands of every Jew to make certain that beyond the biblically determined exile end points,¹³⁷ redemption comes, and it *is not held up* by our further failure to live by Torah

¹³⁵Ramban, *Hasagot on Sefer Hamitzvot LeRambam*. See also, the conclusion of Rav Shaul Israeli in "Eretz Hemda". Among the authorities who ruled otherwise were Rashi and Rambam. There were many who took Ramban to task for 'pushing the hand of the Messiah' These sources provided thanks to Hayyim Rivlin, "Torat Israel be Mishnat Ha Ramban" Daat: Atar Limudai Yahadut ve Ruah, 1968, p. 5-6. Online printing.

¹³⁶Lev 18:25 s.v., *ve avadetem mehera* "...and you shall be exiled quickly from the land I gave you", to tell them that I have given you mitzvot to keep you loyal to it so you will come back to it uncontaminated. "As a king", says Ramban, "who exiles his recalcitrant queen to her father's home but tells her to keep on her jewelry he gave her, so that when she returns she will not have consorted with another, so we were given tefillin and mezuzot to keep us loyal and at the ready." Lev. 26:32 s.v., *ve shammemu aleha kol oiveha* "the land will destroy enemies that inhabit it" in which Ramban makes the point that the land is an eternal yearning for the nation for which it has been matched from time immemorial. He points out the failure of the two faiths, the Crusading Christians and the conquering Moslems to actually make the land fertile. Even though these 'conquerors' claim that Israel has been rejected and scorned by God, and *they* have replaced the Jewish people, the land of Israel is in ruins-- and remains so, unresponsive to their every effort. See also Ramban on Nu 9:1, in which he instructs that Pesach was allowed in the second year, even though the Israelites had sinned the sin of the Golden Idol, but Pesach was not allowed after the second year for the duration of the wandering because of the spies: *not being willing to settle the land was worse than idol worship*. See also Ramban on Num. 33:53, in which he exhorts "*bo oreshu et Haaretz*" "come and inherit the land" applies at all times and even when we are in exile.

¹³⁷Calculations determined in the book of Daniel Chap. 12, and Micah Chap. 7, arriving at a period of 1290 years from the time of the destruction of the Temple. Cf. for instance Bachya ben Asher, *Sefer Bachya Ibn Asher al HaTorah*, Lech Lecha, Chap. 12 s.v., *oolefi Daat Razal*, Bnai Brak: Avraham HaLevi Heller, 1992, p. 101.

precepts and values.¹³⁸ Further, our suffering and our plaintive plea to God endears us to a God in eclipse, creating the breakthrough in God Himself, separated from His Shekinah, accelerating Divine reunification.¹³⁹ In this regard, Nachmanides references the parable of R. Nachunya Ben HaKaneh, who says it's like a king who has righteous children by a beautiful wife, but they go far from this path and the king resents them and their mother who bore them. When the sons return in righteousness, the King begins to love his queen again and in the "time getting close, His anger is transformed to affection and compassion toward her." In this view, *people's actions on behalf of concrete reality of national existence, as well as Torah mitzvot, are crucial in causing the unification of the Holy One and Shekinah, which affects God's intensity of affection and the providential outcome.*¹⁴⁰

What we decide below helps steer a response from Heaven above. And this may well apply not only to Abraham and our patriarchs, but to each and every one of us. Ramban's point of view seems to be more a matter of individual autonomy than the world view of Maharal, who sees God as far more in control of the flow of history and human affairs. In the mind of the latter, a transcendent inexorable God determines, as an act of grace, that the progeny of Abraham and Sarah will need to experience a 'smelting process' of suffering and challenge, in order to be forged into the nation that He envisioned, a people worthy of receiving and performing the Mitzvot of His Torah. Even Abraham endures a smelting process, after all, when in Ur Kasdim, he defies Nimrod, refusing to bow down to natural elements, and surviving that hot furnace, an act that cements his place in the world as Monotheism's champion. God not only rewards Abraham's faith by reducing the heat of Nimrod's flames that Abraham might survive the suffering, but also bestows and infuses Abraham with a perfect intuitive Torah. So too, for Maharal, God's intent is to forge the Israelites into a nation through enduring the hot furnace of

¹³⁸Strangely, I did not see reference being made to even stronger statements in the Talmud by R. Alexandri in R. Yehoshua ben Levi's name that the passage in Isaiah (49:7) *be Ita Achishena* that these two things "I shall speed it (Redemption)" and "in its time" contradict. If the redemption comes in its time how can be quicker? "If Israel merits," says R. Alexandri, "it comes *before its time* and if Israel does not do that which is meritorious and remains passive, it will come in its time". Put another way: if Israel repents, acts meritoriously, and so forth, the Redemption will be brought with heavenly speed, if not the Messiah shall come on a slow donkey. If Israel truly hears the call of God, *God's Messiah will come today* not sometime in the future. TB Sanhedrin 97-98. Ramban makes use of this Isaiah conundrum in Ex. 12, s.v. *Ki Leil Shimurim Hu LaShem*, but only to argue that God is voiding 'additional' time accrued to the exile since the allotted time of 400 years. This knocking on the door of redemption, however, may be what Ramban believed.

¹³⁹Ramban, Ex. 2:25, s.v. *Vayedah Elokim*. Ramban refers to Sefer Bahir, in which this idea of God's sefirotic structure is broached.

¹⁴⁰ Ramban, Ex. 12:40 s.v., *Moshav Benai Israel*.

enslavement.¹⁴¹ Events happen in the mundane world in any number of ways prior to Israel's descent into Egyptian enslavement and eventual rescue, *so as to fulfill* God's purposes for us. Thus, for Maharal, God is far more in control of everything that happens. The driving force behind human history is the Divine will. Such a top down view imposes a passive role upon the people of Israel, whose mission it is to become the select nation, a nation that will emerge from chaos and darkness, and provide a spiritual counterpoint, so as to bring an advanced reality into human civilization.¹⁴²

Ramban, whatever differences he had with Maimonides, accepted his activist account of Abraham's *heroic* life. Providential forces unfold *because* of Abraham's actions. Abraham chose God, Abraham did the doing, the composing, the disputing, the smashing of idols, the metaphysical philosophical work, and the setting the table for Divine covenant; and it was the responsibility of the Jewish people to seize these metaphysical ideas and tenaciously refine them so as to hold on to this favored relationship. Abraham also made mistakes, and took the wrong paths, but learned from them. Unlike Maharal's conception, God was not just smelting and fashioning Abraham and the Israelites by Divine Grace into a people who deserved to receive and to advocate the laws of the Torah. Abraham was honing his own soul through learning in the schools of Shem and Eber, through promulgating, formulating and expanding his metaphysics and theology, by winning adherents, by paying a personal price, and learning from mistakes he made with Sarah,¹⁴³ and by following his own moral compass in the tests that he faced. His actions

¹⁴¹Although I have not read Maharal explicitly saying this, I have deduced from the affinity of Dt. 4:20 to Midrash Genesis Rabba 38:11, and Maharal focuses on this event in Abraham's life as a launching point for his becoming a Monotheistic metaphysician redeeming the world around him. Cf. Sherwin, p. 88. See footnote 26 citing *Ohr Hadash-Ner Mitzvah*, Bnei Brak, 1972, reprint of Prague 1600 manuscript, p. 174.

¹⁴²Maharal, *Gevurot HaShem*, Chap. 9. To be fair to Maharal, he too, was concerned with the here and now, and he also had a notion of stirring the Above from below. And Sherwin gives Maharal a pivotal place in the origins of Hasidism and the revamping and reorientation of Jewish Pedagogy. But his was a social dissent that emphasized the failures of the contemporary Rabbinate to stir the people to observance and to Judaic knowledge and to win them back to more Torah centered life than the life they were leading. His messianic anticipation was far less, in that he thought it was being slowed and put further off by the failures of 'communal cohesion'. Devekut and reconciliation with the "form" Spiritual, and "matter" body, were far away. Cf. Sherwin in final Chapter, "Mystical Theology and Social Reform", pp. 161-184.

¹⁴³Although Ramban's concern seems to be the fallout of this ruse with future generations, there is also a personal price that Abraham pays. Midrash tells us the wife sister ruse led to Hagar being "paid" to Sarai by Pharaoh. Whether or not Ramban accepted this, Ramban tells us that the acquisition of Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden, led to Ishmael's claim of inheritance, which led to

and decisions, right and wrong, along with the other foremost biblical figures, and along with each Jew in every generation, determine our status as a people with God, and the shape of our present and future.¹⁴⁴

Further, for Ramban, *Devekut*, or reconciliation with God, is possible for a searching scholar and mystic through the knowledge they master, even in this lifetime, by strenuous efforts and philosophical and intellectual prowess they generate.¹⁴⁵ We can get to attachment with God *through our own intellect, our own choices in spiritual quest in life*. For Maharal, a person could not cleave to God except through prayer and faith; philosophy and rationality were dangerous, actuating an assault on the meta-rational sacred texts that must, as oral transmission directly from Sinai, not be diminished.¹⁴⁶ Ramban punctuates this activist stance with assertions that all Jews contribute to the present and future by practicing mitzvot, acting kindly with one another, engineering one's dreams in accordance with their character and aspiration, and by putting facts on the ground during their lives. It's important to engineer reality, and it's important to work autonomously,

his and his mother's estrangement from his father and their banishment; which led to Ishmael's and Hagar's brutal treatment at the hands of Sarah, who banished Hagar for claiming she was the 'righteous woman' and not Sarah, as she had become pregnant easily, and then later wanted to kill Ishmael for being a servant showing brazenness and contempt to his masters, and Abraham's tribulation and capitulation to send him away with his mother in the wilderness; which led to the sometimes brutal treatment of the Jews at the hands of the Moslems. See Ramban, Gen. 16:4; Gen. 16:6; Gen. 21:9.

¹⁴⁴Kellner, *ibid.*, who contrasts in this regard, the Maimonidean view with views reflected in Rashi, pp. 51-53. The democratization of the actions each of us take is emphasized to an even greater extent in Ramban's disciple's disciple, R. Bachya ben Asher. Cf. his comments on Gen. 12:10.

¹⁴⁵Ramban, Dt. 11:22. In this commentary it is both their deeds and their thought process that must cleave tenaciously so as attach itself to God's Shechinah. Whereas for Maharal, although learning and erudition were desiderata, they were not sufficient. The two primary characteristics were the cultivation of humility and 'the loss of self' through repentance and the intentionality of deep prayer and contemplation. These were more passive attributes, no doubt, than the active pursuit of knowledge and philosophical prowess. Cf. Sherwin, pp. 131-137. See also, p. 138, where Sherwin traces Maharal's understanding of *Devekut* to earlier efforts of Ramban and Bachya to identify the cultivated soul as resonating and linking with *Chochma* and *Binah*.

¹⁴⁶Sherwin, pp. 56-66., which chronicles Maharal's sustained assault on philosophy and rationalism, which were beginning to assert themselves in the early renaissance in the works of Azariah Dei Rossi. He also indirectly attacks the likes of Rambam and Gersonides for their philosophic writings, which cast ancient rabbinic homiletics as unproven and less than credible. Maharal exhibits hostility to those who assert their own empirical thought processes over even the least tenable claims in the aggadic oeuvre. For Maharal, the fact that they were oral traditions from the Divine mouth meant that they had a meta-rational value and meaning.

even "pushing the coming of the Messiah" by risks and choices that we take to build our present.

CONCLUSION

The dispute in the commentary on Abraham's conduct, that pits Maharal against the earlier Ramban view on this matter, is a result of a divergence of world views. The Ramban sees Abraham as the first Jew, with revolutionary ideas about Monotheism and against paganism, but still evolving his way beyond the Noachide legal practice. Maharal posits Abraham as the rock and foundation of Judaism, fully formed in Torah wisdom both oral and written endowed by Heaven. Ramban sees in the wife-sister episodes a misstep on Abraham's part that has serious ramifications for his descendants, whose experience will involve a sojourn into Egypt for rations in a drought, just like Abraham did before us, that will result in entrapment, exploitation, enslavement and suffering. Maharal also holds to the idea of the "actions of forebears are signs for the descendants", but not in the sense of their actions being causative. His view is that God has parallel purposes for the Jewish People through time. Maharal posits a God that has a grand design that sets the agenda for human history and progress. God is in control of everything. Human history is the mere detail of how it all gets accomplished. Ramban sees a reactive engaged God, who resets His plans through generations and centuries, if need be, due to human shortcoming or because of bold human initiative, as well as other extraneous realities of human history not anticipated (for instance the unforeseen brutality of the Egyptians). Maharal seems inflexible, rejecting any finding of fault with Abraham's conduct; he is, after all, the rock and the cornerstone of Judaism, the 'quarry from whom all Jews are fashioned'. Ramban, while respecting Abraham's metaphysical boldness and breadth, still is willing to see him as a flawed human being, a ben Noah, in process, who learns and grows from his mistakes.

I personally find much that can be admired about the view of Ramban. His ideas of the dynamic engagement of God and humanity summon us to take bold action and to be partners in creation with the Divine. Reality, the future, and the alignment of the Godhead itself are shaped by decisions and actions in the present. God's vision, although long term, is pliant; and God necessarily works with the heroism and the aspiration for what is right and good on the earthly plane, in every age. Miracle and blessing are generated far more from below than from above. Ramban's invitation to the Jewish

community and his human society is to do what is 'right and just' so as to end the exile in a matter of decades. He accentuates action so as to fulfill faith, rather than relying on faith to bring about a desired result. He pushes Aliyah, arguing that it was required even in times when it might not seem ripe. His warning is that human failures and sins have ripple effects into the future that can derail good outcomes. God is urgently waiting for human deeds and for righteousness to shape a new and better reality.

I suggest that we have seen this in our day, with the establishment of Jewish institutions of learning, of prayer, of healing and of social justice in the course of Jewish American life. And we have seen its miraculous stirring from below in the last hundred years, in the making of a sovereign Jewish nation state. Prayer and patience did not build a Jewish State, though at times it had a helpful role. The State of Israel would never have come to be without the facts on the ground, created by secular and religious Jews of every stripe and creed, engaging in heroic acts, science, agronomy, industry, technology and nation building in real time.

And I have trepidation for the 'full throttle' efforts of Ashkenazic Medieval scholarship, which sought to make the Judaism into a hermetically sealed organism largely controlled, steered and infused by God. For Maharal, Abraham was infused with Torah-true Judaism, which would in time be the basis of a collective covenant at Sinai, with a people infused with faith by their experience of slavery and exodus. The Jewish people would carry this "yoke of heaven" unchanged through the centuries. God is in full control of human history and the arc of cosmic and Jewish redemption. Humanity on the whole plays a bit part.

There is a legend told involving the Maharal and the Emperor Rudolf II, the ruler of Moravia at the time. Impressed with Maharal's magical mystical skills, but skeptical of his contention that there was no such thing as free will, the King, in the presence of the renowned astronomer Tycho Brahe, constructed a fence with two doors and defied Rabbi Loew to write down in advance which door he would enter. Maharal jotted down his answer and the king proceeded to come through the wall (using a battering ram, I guess) on the other side of the room. "See" the king said, "there *is* such a thing as 'free will'!" Unfazed, Maharal, the man of God, unrolled his answer, which stated presciently Rudolph

It would come through the wall.¹⁴⁷ It is the stuff of legend, perhaps, but it summarizes well Maharal's concept of a hermetically sealed relationship between God and humanity. Nothing surprises God in His omniscience. There cannot really be unadulterated free will. While I suppose that some persons find comfort in "God is in complete control", such ideas lead to sometimes scary notions. I recall the argument, for instance, found in an early Kabbalist text, as to why judicial courts who wrongly execute someone due to false

witnesses are not allowed to execute the false witnesses after the fact of an execution, only before the fact. Why? Because if a person is executed, it must be that God wanted this person *executed* for something hidden that he or she had done. That person was therefore *a Gavra katila* a dead man walking!¹⁴⁸

I much prefer that God is *not* in full control...Coincidence, misfortune and happenstance, are at times random and unfair.¹⁴⁹ When that happens, God grieves along with us. He created the cosmos so as to challenge humanity and to be positively *surprised* by us. Such notions of "God is always in control", no matter how tragic an event, too easily leads to patronizing viewpoints, to dangerous passivity and, when bad things happen, to spiritual despair. They take people *out of their own agency* in correcting injustice and in building a new reality. They take people out of their dance with humanity at large, and with the Divine.

In contrast, the dynamic engagement of God with human choice, and His adjusting His reality to it, whether positive or negative, addresses every individual with a compelling urgency: will your actions have positive ripple effects across your community, your society, and into the future? Will you join with Me in fashioning creation? Will you in your actions and choices help make redemption happen more speedily? Or will you choose badly, choosing to remain passive, and instead of helping to repair the broken things around you, taking the attitude that "God shall provide" or worse, whatever "happens was meant to happen?" Ramban believed bad choices could have ripple effects for centuries. If dynamic engagement is the conclusion for us in our contemporary time,

¹⁴⁷Presumably, Maharal was also pointing out he was in touch with a Higher Wisdom. Sherwin, p.17

¹⁴⁸ R. Menachem Recanati, living in Italy 1223-1290, in his Commentary, as related in *Nachalat Zvi*, Parashat Shoftim, p. 492. An opinion the Nachalat Zvi concurs with, sadly.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. my article in Conservative Judaism, "Coincidence, Fate Happenstance in Rabbinic and Medieval Sources", Vol. 60 No. 4, Summer 2008, pp. 31-49.

then this unsettling incident concerning Abram and Sarai (and the dispute about it) can teach us and can guide us in our life choices and journey. It may just have a positive ripple effect in the lives we make.

Ian Silverman received his ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1988. He received a Doctorate of Jewish Studies from the Spertus Institute in Chicago IL in 2002. He has served in pulpits in NJ and Pennsylvania. For the last 17 years, he has served as rabbi of the East Northport Jewish Center, a Conservative Synagogue, on Long Island.