A STUDY OF GERSONIDES
IN HIS PROPER PERSPECTIVE

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TO MY PARENTS

PREFACE

It is not without due reverence for the fathers of the *Jüdische Wissenschaftslehre* that I venture to restate Jewish philosophy in terms different from theirs. I do not mean to underestimate their Herculean achievement, but cannot help feeling that unless we rid ourselves of the preconceived notions with which they approached the subject, their labor would become barren.

In an article entitled "A Reinterpretation of Jewish Philosophy" (*Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XIV, No. 7, 1917) I tried to point out the reasons which have led me to take issue with the various characterizations of medieval Jewish philosophy. The point of view I have there advocated, namely, that we view Jewish philosophy as a Jewish expression, is the one here applied in the study of Gersonides, and is the special aim of this monograph. We can best account for the deep-rooted fallacy that there is no Jewish philosophy proper, when we bear in mind that the study of Jewish philosophy started in the nineteenth century, at the time of the Jewish eman-

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

cipation,—a movement characterized by a desire for self-obliteration. This desire was carried back to history. The same impulse denied the national existence as well as its intellectual reflection in abstract thought. As a sequel to the belief that there were only Jewish individuals but no Jewish people, came the belief that there were only individual Jewish philosophers, but no Jewish philosophy. This view also explains the fact which is otherwise inexplicable, that although a great number of monographs have been written on individual Jewish philosophers, there are comparatively few complete historical presentations.

I have written this monograph under the guidance of Dean Frederick J. E. Woodbridge of Columbia University, to whom I am indebted for a number of invaluable suggestions, both as regards content and form. I have also found help in his "Purpose of History" and in Professor John Dewey's "Reconstruction in Philosophy," even though these works do not bear directly on the subject. I am also indebted to Professor Dewey for helpful advice and criticism. I take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to these two men who have been a great source of inspiration to me.

PREFACE

To my father, Rabbi Chajim Hirschensohn, I am under obligation for the help he has given me with the reading of Gersonides, and to my husband, Mr. I. S. Adlerblum, for never failing aid and encouragement.

N. H. A.

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>Page</i> v
<i>Chapter I.</i> Introduction—A Perspective for the Study of Jewish Phil- osophy	<i>Page</i> 1
<i>Chapter II.</i> Gersonides—His Life and Works	<i>Page</i> 22
<i>Chapter III.</i> Gersonides as a Scholastic .	<i>Page</i> 55
<i>Chapter IV.</i> Gersonides in His Proper Perspective Setting . .	<i>Page</i> 74
<i>Chapter V.</i> List of Gersonides' Works .	<i>Page</i> 127
<i>Chapter VI.</i> Bibliography	<i>Page</i> 131

CHAPTER I—INTRODUCTION

A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE STUDY OF JEWISH PHILOSOPHY ¹

JEWISH philosophy has been little understood, not so much because of its depths and intricacies, as because it has been studied in a wrong perspective. The point of view has been either what it has given to, or what it has taken from, the outer world and not what it has been intrinsically in itself. It is the aim of this chapter to show that these two aspects have not been grasped in their true relationship to the Jewish organic life. As a result, the perspective of Jewish thought has presented a distorted picture. (I) The Jewish contribution to Christianity on the one hand, and the Jewish intellectual assimilation on the other, have been taken as the focal centers, when in reality, these are the most sterile aspects of the history of Jewish development. (II) The tendency of the historians has been to bend the individual traits of the Jewish philosophers toward the centers of

¹ Reprinted with permission from the *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. XX, No. 17. (August 16, 1923.)

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

gravitation of the outer world, when in fact these traits assume a meaning only when bent toward their own Jewish center of gravity. I shall limit myself here to these two illustrations, even though there are many more to prove how little the historians have succeeded in penetrating into the inner thought of the Jewish people.

(I)

Judaism is at its best within its enclosed boundaries, in the land of milk and honey, where the mountains dance like rams and the Jordan flows out of reverence for God. It is because Judaism can develop only within its own setting, that its exponents have always been opposed to proselytism. Judaism, incorporated into the larger cosmos, ceases to be Judaism. It has never been within its scope to be a torch-bearer of religion. Judah Halevi (eleventh and twelfth centuries) who best typifies the Jewish genius, explains to the king of the Khazars, who is desirous of becoming a Jew, that the Jewish laws and precepts were meant only for the Jewish people; and that the same laws practiced by non-Jews would not earn them the same reward. "The Jewish God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who brought

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

the Jews out of Egypt and led them to the promised land," where each man lived under his vine and under his fig tree. The highest self-realization within its own center sums up the Jewish ideal.

Important as was the Jewish contribution to Christian philosophy, it has, none-the-less, been much overrated. It is surprising that the parental relation between Jewish and Christian thought has not been grasped in its many-sidedness. What seems to have been overlooked is the fact that in the very inheritance bequeathed by Judaism to Christianity lay also an inhibitive force making for the twisting of Christian development, the hindrance of its natural course, whether that course would have been for the better or the worse. Our oversensitiveness to filial duty and gratitude has often prevented us from realizing that beyond a certain point, the parent is a hindering rather than a developing power in the life of a child. The inherited Jewish notions were like heavy weights on the wings of Christianity, which in spite of its protest, carried along the Jewish germ. And the burden of carrying within itself something incompatible with itself must have been no mean difficulty for Christianity. Perhaps

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

this was the cause of its many dilemmas. It worked under the heavy task of evolving ideals out of principles which were latently alien to those ideals. Its Catholicism, its yearning for the beyond, its sentimental morality, have been the enlargement of, or the reaction against, the so-called Jewish tribal feeling, the Jewish clinging to the soil, and the Jewish sterner morality. But these incompatible Jewish principles could not be thoroughly transcended. The Christian universal brotherhood is none-the-less tinged with the Jewish idea of selection, as witness the notion of grace, the privilege of the chosen ones, *etc.* The yearning for infinity is none-the-less confined to the sphere of paradise, just as the Jewish yearning is localized within the soil of Palestine. Christianity with its kingdom of heaven as the future needed for its background the vast infinity rather than the secluded soil of a secluded people. Hence Christianity is at its best when it forsakes its Jewish origin² and soars in its yearning for the invisible beauties beyond the horizon. The relation between Judaism and Christianity, even

² The *De Imitatione Christi* by Thomas à Kempis, is one of the most beautiful expressions of Christianity, and this work bears the Jewish stamp least.

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

though an organic one in appearance, is none-the-less an outward one. For, in their quintessence, in what is respectively their very best, these two great philosophies differ from each other. And it is because we inferred from the one to the other, that we got a distorted idea of their interrelation. We can no more read Christianity in terms of Jewish thought, or *vice versa*, than we can read French out of a Spanish book because both have the same alphabetical characters. A great many Jewish concepts likewise lose their genuine meaning if we read into them the usual Christian connotations. Such terms as *faith*, *salvation*, *chosen people*, and many others, imply historical conceptions altogether different from what we are wont to read into them. Jewish faith, for instance, is not a mystical feeling. It is not a blind reliance on an invisible hand. It is less a theological faith and more the faith of the scientist, a faith in the working scheme of life, the normal life. Hence, faith could go hand in hand with science, with history, and with the process of evolution. Indeed, Jewish religion, if it could be defined, would be defined as a kind of history conscious of its own process, and its God the *élan vital* of this national history. This intense national feeling wrought

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

out into a cult or religion is not similar to what we call tribal feeling, nor is it a "Deutschland über Alles," nor is it even patriotism. The concept of a "chosen people" is the corner stone of Jewish thought, art, religion, and life. It is the dynamic force of Jewish history. It is not Hegel's *Idea* toward which history evolves, but it is the *élan vital* which gave life to a struggling people, yearning to live a life of its own, a life different from that of its neighbors. This inner yearning for individuality assumes a different form with every stage of Jewish development; but it always forms the thread of continuity in the flowing change.

Because the historian has lost sight of this thread, he missed the protractor whereby to measure the various Jewish relationships. These appear more and more confused the moment we decentralize Jewish thought from its historical setting. Owing to a certain anomaly in Jewish thought, which will be discussed later, one reaches different conclusions when traveling from the circumference to the center, from those reached by the opposite approach. The development of medieval Jewish thought can from the one point of view be construed into a submerged aspect of

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

general scholasticism, and from the other it can be shown that it is an entity in itself bearing the same relation to scholasticism as one complete circle does to another, and not as a segment to the whole.

The first view is the one generally adopted by the historians, because they inferred from parts to the whole and often also concluded by analogy from the outer world to the Jewish world. But when Jewish thought is grasped from within and judged in its entirety instead of in dissected parts, it is very evident that it can be identified neither with Greek nor with general medieval philosophy. The Jewish people has its own peculiar reactions, which reactions can be understood only if grasped in themselves, and not by analogy from similar reactions by the outward world. For instance, medieval Christian and Jewish philosophers alike revered the Greek masters. And yet the transposition of Greek thought into the Jewish field effected no deep transformation; while Christianity, even though originally diverging from Greek thought, in the process of conquering it unconsciously assimilated it, and the two became amalgamated and fused into one. The medieval Christian attitude towards Greek philosophy was an

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

inner reaction growing from within, while the Jewish relation to the outside world was like that of an island to an ocean. The Greek waves overflowed the Jewish island, but the current was a mere outward one, and was not assimilated. The Greek problems were taken up by the Jewish medieval philosophers, who went even further than the Christian scholastics in the acceptance of their solutions. The methods of procedure and the form were borrowed in their entirety. The vocabulary became a Hebraized Greek or Latin. Even the tables of contents of the works of a Jewish scholastic did not differ much from that of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. However, in spite of all this, there is a clear division between the Jewish and the Greek strata; the form is Greek, but the inner emotion is Jewish. While scholasticism is the genuine essence of medieval Christian thought, it is something rather superimposed from without on Jewish philosophy.

Jewish medieval philosophy can not be classed with general scholasticism, as the historians are wont to do, both on account of its tradition and its own mode of thinking. The *Weltanschauung* through the Bible, usually regarded as a common denominator of medieval philosophies, is in

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

itself a differentiating factor. The outlook on life, inherited respectively from the Old and New Testaments can not but have a different keynote. The Old Testament is the spontaneous expression of the joy of life; the New Testament transcends this life of which it rather despairs, and voices the joy of life in the world to come. Hence a philosophy evolved out of the Old Testament is bound to deal more with palpable existence, and that evolved out of the New Testament would bear a tendency for the beyond. The works of Augustin, Aquinas, and à Kempis all converge towards the future bliss for which this world is mostly a preparation. The Jewish scholastics need the future world more as a continuation of the present too short one, to perpetuate the knowledge and experience here acquired.³ Dante, the scholastic poet *par excellence* finds his God in the beauties of paradise; the Jewish poet Judah Halevi extols his God in the natural beauties of Palestine. Both the Jewish and Christian medieval philosophies have the past as their background. But this past is not an identical one com-

³ This idea is implied in the discussions of immortality by Jewish philosophers and is particularly noted in the chapter on "Immortality" in Gersonides' *Milhamoth*.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

mon to both. For medieval Christian philosophy it is a transcendental past, almost an imaginary one, vague, extensive, including as its own that of the Hebrews, Greeks, and heathens. The Jewish past is a more concrete one, centralized and localized. It is its own national self and past national life as crystallized in the Bible and in the Talmud that made up the content-matter of Jewish metaphysics. Hence, medieval Jewish thought is centripetal, unfolding upon its own self, and enclosing itself within its four walls. It is the conscious rumination of its historical past combined with a desperate attempt to crystallize the Jewish spirit, life, and tradition. The medieval period is the age of Rashi, who made the Bible a living institution. It is the age of the compilation of the codes which standardized Jewish life. And even though scholasticism in general might also be a crystallization process, Jewish and Christian scholasticism differ from each other at their very root, and are antipodic in their respective tendencies. It is inherent in Christian scholasticism to expand itself, to radiate its ideals, to embrace the whole world, to assimilate as well as recreate it. Catholicism, universalism, seem to have been the aim of medieval Christianity. In Dante, Beatrice, the loved one,

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

becomes universal theology. In Judah Halevi, the loved one becomes Zion, the city of Jerusalem. Palestine is as much a part of Halevi's metaphysics, as are time and space of Aristotle's. Christian scholasticism seems to be the harmonious blending into one of a multitude of heterogeneous elements. Jewish scholasticism, on the other hand, is *an anomalous juxtaposition of its own essence with a form incompatible with that very essence*. Underneath this alien form, which is usually taken for the whole, there is a restless inward life, which crystallizes the past into the present and allows from the outside only *that which is entirely alien to itself, but not that which would become fused into this crystallization*.

The bitter medieval attack on Maimonides is an illustration of this point. Maimonides was not more radical than his predecessors.⁴ He did not even permit himself to go as far as his successor Gersonides in certain respects. But the attack was centered around Maimonides because he was the only one who tried, though without full success, to bring about the fusion between the more com-

⁴ The nature of Maimonides' radicalism will be discussed in Ch. IV.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

patible Jewish and non-Jewish principles of philosophy. This attempt was not in accordance with the Jewish spirit, which, while permitting the borrowing of even the whole, would not allow the slightest attempt at fusion. Another striking illustration of this peculiarity is the double personality of the great Jewish philosopher known to the Jews as Gabirol, and who was known to the scholastics as an entirely different person by the name of Avicebron. If it were not for Munk's discovery of the identity of the two, there would not have been even today an attempt to unite into one system the philosophy of Gabirol and that of Avicebron. Ibn Gabirol was not attacked at all by the Jews for having borrowed a whole system of philosophy, but he would not have been tolerated had he made any attempts to fuse some of it into his philosophical poems. His philosophy was forgotten among the Jews, while his poems were incorporated into the synagogue. This duality of thought in Gabirol's various works must not be confused with Averroes' doctrine of the two truths. The Jewish thinkers, like the scholastics, were struggling for but one truth. It was, however, hard for them to reach that truth and be readily appeased by it, because, unlike the schol-

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

astics, the Jewish philosophers were not men of the church. The Rabbis of the strictly synagogue type bothered little with philosophical speculations, and dealt more with halachic literature. The philosophers were the discontented ones, the perplexed, the radicals of the people. But Jewish radicalism is different from the usual connotation of the term. It is not an attempt at an enfranchisement from the group consciousness, but rather a reinforcement of it by an enlarged content. It is this struggle between enlarging the circle on the one hand, and the jealous care of having nothing within the circle superimposed from without,—it is this which constitutes the essence of Jewish scholasticism.

(II)

However, the usual tableau made of Jewish medieval philosophy has been a stereotyped view of how Saadia grapples with the semi-unknown Platonic-Aristotelian principles, how Maimonides accepts them, how Gersonides exalts them, and how Crescas fights them. This optical illusion of Jewish thought has its root in a wrong direction of the line of vision. Had the panorama been viewed from the Jewish center, the flowing life of

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

the people could not have been thus stereotyped into a fixed mold, into an effigy of a pseudo-Aristotle or a pseudo-Plato. The virtual image would have been of the genuine Jewish expressions, of the inner agitations of a struggling people's mind. We should have seen the inner struggles of a Saadia between the old and the new beliefs; the apprehension of Bahya to see the outer life encroach upon the inner life, the duties of the *precepts* upon the *duties of the heart*. We should have seen the struggle of Ibn Ezra between accepted tradition and freedom of thought; the attempt of Judah Halevi to nationalize the intellectual life; the striving of Maimonides to subjugate emotional Judaism to rational Judaism; the innovation of Gersonides of weighing tradition against science.

It is pitiful how some historians have found it worth their while to spend a lifetime amidst dusty, effaced manuscripts, for a mere glimpse of what they thought to be another form of the Greek panorama, another kind of an optical mirror of Greek thought, another combination of Greek with something else of a negligible quantity. The mere study of Avicenna and Averroes would have been sufficient for the Jewish and Arabic

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

versions of the Greek. As to a complete picture of scholasticism, the Jewish philosophers could not add much to Augustin, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus. Even though it is claimed by some that the scholastic method originated with the Jewish and Arabic philosophers, it bloomed none-the-less into its highest development in Aquinas and not in Maimonides.

To take a concrete example, the philosophy of Gersonides, the Jewish scholastic *par excellence* (1288–1344), is far less interesting for its scholastic elements, than for its other features. But the chief phase of Gersonides which has attracted the historians is his discussion of Alexander, Themistius, and Averroes, which could not possibly have excelled Averroes himself, who was his main source of Greek philosophy. As great a scholar as Joel devotes the greater part of his short essay on Gersonides to an analysis of these discussions, and leaves Gersonides' philosophy proper in the background. And yet Gersonides should rank among the unique figures who leave their impress on history. He stands out as a prominent figure in the middle ages because of his striving for progress, his fervor for original contributions, his independence of spirit, his rebellion against authority,

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

and his scientific interpretation of nature. These features must, of course, have been noticed by the historians, but in their summaries they do not seem to have allowed for the reflection of these features in Gersonides' philosophy. As a scholar of Greek or pseudo-Greek philosophy, Gersonides is of little interest to the modern student who has full access to the original sources. What would make the study of the same Gersonides interesting and worth while, would be to seek in his abstract thinking for the reflection of those striking features which both identify him with his Jewish stem, and at the same time distinguish him from the Jewish and non-Jewish characteristics of his age.

At a time when all scholastics, Christian, Arabic, and Jewish, take great pains to assure us that they did not, Heaven forbid, add anything of their own, Gersonides offers a prayer of thanks at the end of each chapter for the help God gave him in bringing to light something heretofore unknown and unthought of. In a period when authority reigns supreme, Gersonides declares the new the test of the old, science the verifier of tradition. The Bible and Aristotle are sources of truth in so far as they coincide with the latest

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

scientific conclusions. Many, says Gersonides, will attribute to presumption our investigation about matters in which our predecessors have failed . . . on the ground that if a solution were possible it would not have been ignored by them who were far superior to us. But this is a very weak argument. It does not follow that because it was ignored by the predecessors, it should also remain hidden from successive generations. Time plays a rôle in the discovery of truth. Otherwise no mortal would be attempting scientific researches except what he would learn from his ancestors. Then there would be no science at all, and this is ridiculous. Many, no doubt, will discard my investigations because they may find them strange with their fixed ideas derived not through scientific experience, but by heritage. But if we really have discovered something new, unknown to our predecessors, then the fault-finding with me by these routine people is equivalent to praise. The blame would be only if our work is a failure in itself. . . . Let not the reader imagine that our investigations are determined by the Torah, unless the truth itself coincides with the latter. . . . If the scientific researches had brought us to results different

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

from those reached by the Torah, we should not have been hindered on account of the Torah to divulge the truth about them. The Torah is not a code compelling us to believe falsehoods. We have to accept the truths as they come from scientific experience. If they happen to diverge from the apparent meaning of the Torah, it is necessary to explain the latter in a way that would make it agree with them.⁵ I have quoted the above passage at some length because this Jewish scholastic makes it the introduction to his work. With such a keynote, the author could not possibly have been satisfied with merely reproducing Alexander, Themistius, and Averroes, as our historians are wont to believe. Instead, what a different perspective we would have, if we sought in him the center of gravity for the essence of Jewish scholasticism and its relation to Christian scholasticism, rather than painfully gather all the general scholastic elements, in order to class him either with Aristotle or with Plato. How pertinent it would have been to search instead to what degree he has indeed estranged himself from, or

⁵ Introduction to *Milhamoth*. We shall make clear in Ch. IV how Gersonides finds the truth both in science and in the Torah.

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

approached himself to, the teachings of the Torah. For these simultaneous forward and backward movements are the essential expressions of scholasticism which is primarily an attempt at an adjustment between the past and the present, or still more, an instinctive desire to reintegrate the whole past into the present.

It is from the Jewish angle that Jewish scholasticism should have been studied. In the typical Jewish philosophers we could find the essence of Judaism; in those who are less typically Jewish and who approach more the outer environment, we could trace the inner struggles, the methods of adjustment, and the peculiar nature of medieval Jewish philosophy which might be termed scholasticism on account of its apparent earmarks characteristic of the age, but it is a scholasticism of a specific kind.

Jewish philosophy even in its scholastic essence is not the mirror of the outer world, nor a fertile field for foreign crops. It is a philosophy of its own self, reflecting the consciousness of individuality and of the continuity of the national self. It is the consciousness, *not* the self-analysis, of the permanent ego within the flow of change. It is a symbolic naturalism, or a naturalistic symbolism.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

Nature and morality become fused into one. The good, the beautiful, the healthy, the religious symbol, are all one and the same. The hygienic laws become laws of nature and the divine. The social laws become the laws of God, and God is but an invisible form of the continuity of the national history. Maimonides starts his metaphysics, *Guide for the Perplexed*, with metaphysical definitions of the laws and precepts of the Torah. Judah Halevi starts with a survey of Jewish history from the exodus from Egypt to the entrance into the promised land. Ibn Ezra seeks in the hidden meanings of the Bible the secrets of nature, and the Kabbalists decipher in the characters of the Hebrew alphabet the construction of the universe. Such an intense reflection of the intense inner group life could have had little to do, in spite of its outward appearance, with the Greek Alpha Beta, with the Olympus, with the Greek tragedy of fate, irony of life, or gladness of heart. It reflects its own different joys. It is the joy of spiritual communion with human spiritual strivings; the joy of seeing God in the little blade of grass, and in the invisible poetry of the soul. It has its own view of life, which is the search of the spiritual within the world of reality.

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

It reflects its own mode of living, which is the projection of the spiritual into the physical expressions of life.* It has, therefore, its own mode of thinking, which is the intellectualization of the national emotional content. A striking illustration of the emotional content of Jewish thought is the fact that the most genuinely Jewish philosopher, Judah Halevi, was also the greatest Jewish poet. His poetry was but the emotional expression of Jewish nationalism. So also Gabirol was both a poet and a philosopher. The spirit of his philosophy did not always coincide with that of his poetry, but the part of his philosophy which was genuinely Jewish was but a metaphysical expression of his poetry.

To conclude, it is only when we get the proper perspective that we can penetrate into Jewish thought. But if we view it merely with a Greek or scholastic interest, its study is a waste of time and energy. Moreover, Jewish philosophy is most tedious and distasteful to the modern mind, if we persist in the historical fallacy of seeking in the past searchlights for the present. It seems to be

* This is the real meaning of the multiplicity of the Jewish precepts and of the innumerable prayers which permeate the minutest details of life.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

one of the ironies of history that light should have been sought so much in an obscure corner of the world. The study of Jewish philosophers is worth while only if we bring them into relief with the organic life of their people, view them as Jewish exponents, and search behind their personal idiosyncrasies for the individual characteristics of their race. The perspective of the inner workings and strivings of thoughts peculiar to each age and nation is of permanent interest. This constitutes the immortal part of history and gives the natural coloring to the life we left behind us. History in general would not be so distorted if we looked upon it less as a storehouse of knowledge for the solution of our problems, and more as an epic poem, a form of art, portraying life in its various costumes. And in the picture of the past, the history of Jewish thought is related to the rest, as one planet to another. Even though the constituents might be alike, the perspectives differ, and every star adds to the beauty of the sky.

CHAPTER II—GERSONIDES

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

OF all Jewish philosophers, Gersonides is the one in whom scholasticism reached its highest articulation. We are here treating of Gersonides *only in so far as a study of him would illustrate our chief contentions*. Even with scholasticism at its best, a reversing of the historical method is bound to yield more fruitful results. It is therefore our aim to seek for the Jewish element underneath the scholastic garb, rather than for scholasticism in itself. An account of Gersonides' life and work will make us better understand his mental and emotional struggles. The gist of his metaphysics contained in Chapter III of this monograph, will reproduce to us the scholastic world with which he had to grapple. Into his Jewish world we can enter only indirectly, since the Jewish marks are not on the surface, and it is no easy task to disentangle the Jewish from the non-Jewish elements in the course of philosophical development. However, by a comparison with Judah Halevi, in whom ancient Jewish thought

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

remained unalloyed, we may succeed in determining Gersonides' radius within the Jewish circle. As we shall later see, Judah Halevi's philosophy is a translation of Jewish life into thought terms, a blending of the content of history with that of metaphysics. A diagram constructed on the basis of Halevi's philosophy might help determine the degree of Jewishness in each medieval Jewish philosopher.

Even though we know little of Gersonides' life, a picture of it, inadequate as it may be, will help us penetrate better into his abstract metaphysics. When it comes to a philosopher whose contribution has already been incorporated in human thought we cannot read him with the same eagerness as we would one of our moderns, unless there is awakened in us an emotional interest in the personality of the author, in his strivings and yearnings, to a point where our attention is absorbed even in what has become irrelevant to our present mode of thinking. As soon as we transport ourselves into the respective worlds of our philosophers, those things which appear irrelevant loom up before us as living realities in the drama of thought. The Intelligibles, the Active Intellect, the separate Intelligences, and the

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

spheres above were more thrilling to the scholastics than the dramatic incidents of here below.

De Rossi,¹ Steinschneider,² Munk,³ and Renan,⁴ tried to make out a biography of Gersonides from scanty references, both in the author's own writings and in those of his contemporaries. Munk thought that the dates of Gersonides' life were not ascertainable. Renan, basing his conclusion on a series of deductions, states that Gersonides must have been born in 1288 and that he died in 1344.⁵ The author of the *Sefer Ha-Johsin* (*Book of Genealogy*) quotes the astronomer David Poel, who in his astronomical tables of 1361 refers to Gersonides as dead already. On the other hand,

¹ *Dizionario* I, pp. 126 ff.

² *Ersch and Gruber Encyclopedia*, Section II, Part 43, pp. 295-300

³ *Mélanges de philosophie juive et arabe*, Paris, 1859, pp. 497-501.

⁴ Renan-Neubauer: *Les écrivains juifs français du XIV^e siècle* pp. 240-298.

⁵ Renan quotes Bartolucci as fixing the dates of Gersonides at 1290-1370, and de Rossi, at 1288-1370. The date of his birth, 1288, has generally been inferred from a reference by the author himself. In a MS. on arithmetic, he mentions that he finished that piece of work in Nissan 5081, (March 31, 1321), at the age of 32. Hence 1288 has been accepted as the recognized date of his birth. This assumption is in harmony also with the dates of his other works. Renan dismisses Zakkuto's assertion of 1370 as the time of Gersonides' death. (*Op. Cit.* pp. 245-6.)

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

it is certain that in 1343 Gersonides was still alive, as he completed then his manuscript *De Numeris Harmonicis*.

His Hebrew name was *Levi ben Gershon* or *Gershon*. In his biblical commentaries as well as in most of the books where mention is made of him, he is referred to as *Levi ben Gershon*. But in his own introduction to the *Milhamoth*, as well as in a Hebrew work entitled *Sha'arei Zion* by Isaac Lattes, the name appears as *Levi ben Gershon*. In the rabbinical literature, he is referred to as *Gershuni* or *R'l'b'g* (*Ralbag*), the latter being the initials of *Rabenu Levi ben Gershon*. He was also surnamed *Ari*, meaning *lion*, because of his great mental acumen. In medieval Latin works, he is referred to as *Leo Hebraeus* or *Maestro Leon de Bagnols*, because he originated from Bagnols, France.*

Bartolucci speaks of him as having been born in

* Bagnols was part of the ancient county of Orange, now the Department of Gard. The county then belonged to the Counts of Provence, who were at the same time kings of Naples. The reigning count was Robert of Anjou. He encouraged translations of philosophical, astronomical and mathematical works, and made great use of Jewish scholars for the purpose. There is no evidence that Gersonides worked directly for Robert, but it is certain that his reputation extended to the Popes of Avignon. (Renan-Neubauer: *Op. Cit.*)

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Spain. But this is such an erroneous statement that the scholars did not deem it necessary even to refute it. It has been established beyond doubt that Gersonides was born in Bagnols, died in Perpignan and spent his days between Orange and Avignon where the Jews seem to have lived under greater tolerance than in Provence proper. However, from allusions in his writings, it seems that he was lacking the necessary tranquillity of mind. He writes somewhere that he could not go on with his writings "on account of the calamities of the times which interfered with clear thinking." In a manuscript of his biblical commentaries he mentions that he did not have a Bible at his command, and in a remark written in 1338 he says that he could not revise his commentary on the Pentateuch, as there was no copy of the Talmud available at Avignon.

Renan directs attention to a few allusions made by Gersonides to some historical facts of the time, such as, *e.g.*, the feud between Colonna and Orsini, and the practice of flagellation.

Gersonides was a physician by profession. We also know that he was married, and came from a family of great learning. In his biblical commentaries he often quotes his father who seems to

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

have been a great scholar,⁷ and he also mentions a certain Rabbi Levi Ha-Cohen as his grandfather, probably his mother's father, known as R. Levi ben Chayim Ha-Cohen of Villefranche.⁸ The latter is the one whom Ibn Adrath persecuted for commenting on the Torah in an allegorical and philosophical manner. Perhaps, it was on account of him that the ban was launched by Ibn Adrath and other Barcelonean scholars against the study of philosophy, Greek literature and secular sciences, except medicine, before the age of twenty-five. On the other hand, Jacob ben Makir and one hundred other scholars of the Provence launched a counter ban against those who would

⁷ According to the Book of Genealogy and the author of *Seder Ha-Doroth*, Gersonides' father is identified with R. Gerson B. Solomon of Catalonia, author of *Sha'ar Ha-Shomayim* and son-in-law of Nachmanides. But this is doubtful, since Gersonides mentions neither this book nor the name of Nachmanides.

⁸ Renan throws doubt upon this relationship on the ground that Zemach Duran who mentions the fact that his grandfather, Levi Ha-Cohen, was also the grandfather of Gersonides, does not add that this R. Levi Ha-Cohen was also the author of the *Livyath Hen*. Hence, Renan concludes that Gersonides' grandfather was not the R. Levi Ha-Cohen of Villefranche, who is known as the author of the *Livyath Hen*. But this does not seem to be sufficient ground on which to raise this question. It is a fact that this R. Levi Ha-Cohen composed many works which he kept away from the public.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

refrain from teaching science to their sons. It was but natural, therefore, that Gersonides' father, who was the son-in-law of the persecuted Ha-Cohen, should have been more mindful of the ban against the non-teaching of science, than of the ban condemning the teaching of it. Gersonides must have been introduced to the sciences long before the age of twenty-five, for at 20 he had already gathered material for most of his works.⁹

Gersonides was an exceptionally rapid writer. It took him but seven days¹⁰ to write the fourteen chapters of the third section of the fifth part of his chief work, the *Milhamoth*. In one month, he wrote the twenty chapters of the first section of the sixth part. Another seven days saw the completion of the second section of the sixth part, consisting of fourteen chapters. The commentaries on Numeri and Deuteronomy took him one month each, as did his commentary on the book of Samuel, and the books of Ezra, Nehemiah,

⁹ It appears that he worked out the substance of all his books simultaneously. That is why he so frequently makes cross-references from one work to another. The various dates he assigns to his works probably refer to their final arrangement. See the end of the first part of Book VI of *Milhamoth*.

¹⁰ From the 25th Kislev to the 2nd Tebeth, 5089 (1328).

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

and the two Chronicles. Regarding the book of Numeri, he writes, "We have completed it in a very short time, without books at our disposal and there will be need of revision." This shows that he required less even than a month's time for the completion of this commentary.

Gersonides' literary activity covers a period of twenty-three years. He started his chief philosophical work, the *Milhamoth*, about the year 1317 as can be inferred from his closing words at the end of Part I of Book 6.

An idea of the fertility and versatility of the author's mind can be gained from the list of his writings given in chapter V of this monograph. The list of his works comprises logic, metaphysics, psychology, physiology, commentaries on Averroes, mathematics, physics, meteorology, talmudic treatises, biblical commentaries, and astronomy.

Gersonides distinguished himself not only in philosophy, but also in astronomy. It is in his astronomy that one has to seek for the completion of his metaphysics. He was renowned in his time as the most famous astronomer, on whose hypotheses other astronomers based their further investigations. He corrected the astronomical hypotheses of his predecessors, and made interesting

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

investigations about the heavenly bodies and their orbits. He also invented an instrument with which to fix the situation of the stars with greater exactitude. Pope Clement VI ordered a Latin translation of his chapter describing this instrument. This translation was made in 1342, during Gersonides' lifetime. Subsequently, in 1377, his whole work on astronomy was translated into Latin.²¹ Keppler made attempts to obtain a copy. At the request of Jewish and Christian scholars, Gersonides composed astronomical tables which were highly praised by Pico de Mirandola. Moses Ferussol Botarel commented on these tables.

It must have been his interest in astronomy that led Gersonides to philosophy. His first philosophical essay was on the question of the creation and the eternity of the world. Even though he incorporated this essay as the final chapter of his *Milhamoth*, he had written it ten years before conceiving his masterwork. His investigation on the constitution of the world must have led him into a further research of the relation of this world,—primarily the astronomic world, the planets, the active intellect,—to man,

²¹ This has been published in part by Prince Boncompagni in *Atti dell' Accademia dei Nuovi Lincei*, 1863, pp. 741 ff.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

as well as their common inter-relations with God.

Aristotle, through the medium of Averroes, was of great help to him. Gersonides approaches Aristotle with impartial scrutiny. Before Gersonides, Aristotle met with either strong opponents or blind followers among the Jews. But in Gersonides are combined the faithful scholar as well as the keen critic. He admires Aristotle, accepts his premises, but works out his own conclusions. History cites Ibn Daud as the first Jewish Aristotelian; Maimonides as the one who adapted Aristotle to Judaism; Hillel de Verona as the first who reached Aristotle through Latin channels; and Gersonides as the most faithful follower of Aristotle. Indeed, at *prima facie*, he is a stauncher Aristotelian than Maimonides, who did not always dare face the ultimate conclusions. But in spite of this Aristotelian garb, Gersonides' philosophy is as far from Aristotelianism as it is from Platonism. But his insight into Aristotle is deeper than that of his predecessors, because he was careful to get a more correct version of Aristotle, by checking up the various commentators. Though he had no knowledge, or at best a limited knowledge of Latin and Arabic, he often discovered both errors of expression and misinterpreta-

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

tion in the Aristotelian commentators. Hillel de Verona had already before Gersonides attempted to analyze and discuss the Aristotelian vocabulary. But his chief aim in this was to ply Aristotle to his own views. In Gersonides the motive was only the discovery of the objective scientific truth.

The study of Aristotle led Gersonides to his work on metaphysics. He started with supercommentaries to all of Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle. Then he sought to supplement and reconstruct Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* in the light of these commentaries.¹² Once he started on this task, the scope of his work became enlarged. He was not satisfied to rely on Averroes alone, but studied the other Aristotelian commentators as well. He weighs every argument; tests its logical consistency; discusses the *pros* and *cons*, and cites as many philosophical opinions as he finds available. He writes that when we understand the inner reasonings of the argument, we

¹² Although Maimonides may have known Averroes, for they lived in the same city, he makes no mention of him in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. Alexander, Themistius and particularly Avicenna were his Aristotelian guides. It is very possible that Maimonides' masterpiece was completed before he learned of Averroes, and he was already too old, or too busy to reconstruct his work in the light of Averroes.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

shall better be able to judge of its veracity.¹³ In matters so difficult as to baffle a satisfactory solution, his method is to eliminate the most erroneous opinion. He thus hopes ultimately to arrive at the right solution. And so Gersonides becomes engrossed in a multitude of arguments to such an extent that the reader is at a loss to discover the author's own thread of thought amidst this labyrinth.

Gersonides' chief work in philosophy is the *Milhamoth Adonai** (*Wars of the Lord*) but the thoughts expressed in his biblical commentaries must also be taken into account. The *Milhamoth* is divided into six books, treating of the following subjects:

Book I—*Immortality*: Psychology and immortality of the soul; the hylic, the acquired, and the active intellect; the relation of the active intellect to the human intellect; reconciliation of philosophical conclusions with the biblical and talmudic views. (Chapters 1–14.)

¹³ Bk. I, ch. 2, p. 13.

*Text references in this monograph are to the Leipzig edition of the *Milhamoth*, published 1866.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Book II—*Dreams, Divination and Prophecy:*

The psychology of prescience and its relation to the contingent. (Chapters 1-8.)

Book III—*Of God's Knowledge:* The well known dilemma of God's knowledge and the question of freedom. (Chapters 1-6.)

Book IV—*Of Providence:* The nature of providence and its relation to God's knowledge. (Chapters 1-7.)

Book V—*The Heavenly Bodies:* A study of the intelligibles, of the divine attributes, and of the rôle of the active intellect in the sublunary world. (Part I, omitted from this edition, 136 chapters; Part II, 9 chapters; Part III, 14 chapters.)

Book VI—*The Creation of the World:* Time, space, motion, potentiality, actuality, eternity, as well as other problems of medieval metaphysics. (Part I, 29 chapters.) The relation of his philosophical views on

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

creation to the story of Genesis;
miracles and their relation to
prophecy. (Part II, 14 chapters.)

Gersonides does not enter into an investigation about the existence of God, nor into the essence and content of this concept, such as unity or negation of matter. This subject was much discussed by Gersonides' predecessors. It is possible that he didn't touch upon it, either because he thought that Maimonides had exhausted the subject, or because he feared to apply his usual method of treating a subject which required the citation of proofs for the negative as well as for the affirmative side. And Maimonides had declared that the negative thought of the existence of God must not even enter one's mind.¹⁴ It is true that Bahya Ibn Pakuda, Maimonides and other Jewish philosophers, as well as Thomas Aquinas and the Christian scholastics did not evade the subject. But their religious piety was never questioned; while the family of Gersonides, even back to his grandfather, was regarded with suspicion in this regard, because they were avowed champions of scientific research.

¹⁴Commentary on the Mishna, Tractate *Sanhedrin*, chapter 10, Mishna I, and *Yesode Torah*, sections 1-4.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Gersonides also omits discussing in his *Milhamoth* the questions of revelation and resurrection, because, presumably, these rest entirely on faith, and are not amenable to scientific investigation and proof. Their affirmation or negation depend entirely on an interpretation of the meaning of passages in the Torah, the Prophets and the Rabbis. They do not properly belong in the realm of metaphysical investigation. Gersonides refers us for these questions to his biblical commentaries. In his *Milhamoth* he treats only of those principles of faith which lend themselves to scientific treatment.

At the time when Gersonides started his speculations, medieval philosophy had reached its maturity. The material was there; the problems had been formulated. The work of the philosophers consisted in their weaving of the material, or in their solutions of the problems. But Gersonides did not content himself merely with following the footsteps of his predecessors. Although in appearance the mold of his work seems to be the same as that of the others, his philosophy may be said to mark an epoch in medieval intellectual history. In its scholastic aspect it is a forerunner

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

of Spinoza, and in its Jewish aspect it points towards a beginning of Bible criticism.

In psychology, too, Gersonides marks a distinct advance over his Jewish contemporaries. With them, the desire was not so much to know the inherent nature of the soul, as the theological curiosity of what the soul was and what would become of it. They touched on psychology only in so far as it involved the study of immortality. The psychology of the intellect was undertaken from the standpoint of the immortality of the intellect. Those who were interested to extend immortality to the whole of psychic life carried their psychological investigations a step further. But the science of psychology *per se* did not interest the Jewish philosophers.

The first Jewish Aristotelian, Abraham Ibn Daud (ca. 1110-1180) devoted only two chapters of his philosophical work *Emunah Ramah* (*Exalted Faith*) to what he called the science of the soul. He lays down certain principles regarding the soul, and finds in them a support for the theory of the existence of the Separate Intelligences. He regards these intelligences as the necessary intermediaries between God and material substance.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

From Maimonides we have only incomplete fragments on psychology embodied in his morals of the soul. This is found in the *Eight Chapters* comprising the introduction to his commentary on the *Tractate Abboth*, (*Ethics of the Fathers*). Elsewhere he seems to have dealt more directly with the nature, essence and functions of the soul. But the only part of that work extant is in a quotation by Gerson ben Solomon in Chapter XI of his *Shaar Ha-Shomayim*. It is possible that this quotation as well as the introduction to *Abboth* were originally a single treatise on psychology. But when Maimonides thought of prefacing it as an introduction to *Abboth*, he left out such subjects as the psychology of prophecy, and such part as borders on physiology,—topics which have no bearing on the *Tractate Abboth*. In this connection, the following excerpt from Maimonides' *Introduction* is significant. "I have brought here from the study of the soul as much as was necessary for our purpose."

Shem Tob ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (13th century) attempted to collect the various opinions of Jewish philosophers on the soul. It is a mere collection. The compiler made no attempt to make a critical analysis of the opinions quoted.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

The most complete Jewish work on psychology prior to Gersonides is the *Tagmule Ha-Nefesh* (*Rewards of the Soul*) of Hillel ben Samuel de Verona (1220-1295). It is hard to determine whether Gersonides saw this book or not. The two authors approach each other in logical arrangement, but they differ in their opinions.

With Gersonides, the study of psychic activities assumes a far greater importance than with his predecessors. He devotes the whole of the first book of the *Milhamoth* to the study of the soul, and even submits prophecy and the nature of God's knowledge to a psychological analysis.

His scientific temperament, acute logical mind and independence of spirit led Gersonides to transcend his own time. He felt the dawn of science and was transported by it. He felt such great joy at inventing an astronomical instrument that he composed a poem in honor of the event. He believed sincerely that the questions with which he concerned himself were of the utmost importance, and that their solution would be a great factor in human happiness. Similarly, he dreaded an erroneous solution on the ground that it would estrange man from real happiness.¹⁵

¹⁵ Introduction, pp. 6 and 2.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

The chief motive which prompted him to compose his philosophical work was the desire to remove the obstacles from the path of those interested in these important questions.³⁶ For this reason, Gersonides was happy with his *Milhamoth* and proud of it. He writes: "It must not be overlooked by those interested in our words that this book contains nothing which is not scientific. To eliminate all doubt, we have also cited and discussed various views, after thorough investigation. We have also solved many points of general interest in science, as will be clear to any one who knows the difficulties connected with them."

Gersonides stresses the importance of the science of Astronomy. He writes a whole chapter in praise of Part V of *Milhamoth* dealing with this science. Astronomy is superior to all sciences. "The end of scientific research is the knowledge of the science of the stars."³⁷ It would be unjust to assume that Gersonides praised his treatment of astronomy out of vanity and boastfulness. It was rather because of his joy at contributing to human progress. Judah Messer Leon (1450-1490) did

³⁶ Introduction, p. 6.

³⁷ Book V, Part 3, Chapter 14.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

him an injustice in accusing him of conceit.¹⁸ Gersonides himself speaks of conceit as a very bad trait. In his commentary on Daniel IV, 27, he states that Nebuchadnezzar was changed to a beast in punishment for his conceit. "It is not worthy of a man to boast of his comprehension and achievements, or to think that he has acquired much knowledge. One should be conscious of one's deficiencies, as such a state of mind is an incentive for the striving after perfection."¹⁹

THE STYLE OF THE MILHAMOTH

The style of Gersonides' writings varies with the nature of their contents. His biblical commentaries have a pleasant style, attractive and easy to grasp. Writers on the history of Jewish literature familiar only with his commentaries, have inferred that in his metaphysics, his style is of the same nature. But this is not the fact. His profuse ramifications into lengthy *pro* and *con* arguments, throw the reader into confusion, and make it difficult to discover the bases and axes

¹⁸ In his treatise on Judah Messer Leon, Professor Isaac Husik proves that Messer Leon referred to Gersonides when he alluded to "the wise in his own eyes."

¹⁹ Commentary Deuteronomy, Ch. 4.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

around which his arguments turn. His meaning in certain passages becomes apparent only after laborious analysis. Gersonides' contemporaries often mistook for his own the thoughts of others which he tried to discuss, and they made such views the basis of criticism against him. With all that, however, his style is simple, concise and logical. It is not the attractive style of Halevi's *Alkhazari*, nor of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, but it has qualities of strength and frankness and a conscious attempt at clearness. He writes in his introduction that he has used neither rhetorical nor deep and obscure language. "The depth of the meaning is sufficient, and one should not add the difficulty of language to that of the subject. The logic of the arrangement and of the language must be apparent. If this method is not followed, the authors lose the aim of their writings, and thereby render harder things which are easy in themselves. Not only are such writers of no help to those interested in their subjects, but they throw the reader into greater confusion. Through their lack of order and obscurity of language, they add mystery and deepen misunderstanding. However, sometimes the author might endeavor purposely to make himself clear to a few only, in the

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

fear that the deeper meaning of his words might be misconstrued by the cruder mind of the masses.²⁰ On the other hand, sometimes an author resorts to this subterfuge in order to hide an inherent shortcoming in the treatment of his theme by trying to hide it in deep language, flowery style and dragging in a number of other themes.²¹ In this manner the reader will attribute the difficulties to his own inability to understand, and the author's shortcomings will be hidden." But, continues Gersonides, his aim in this book is just the contrary. He wants to have order and make use of a simple, clear style; clarify and not let depth of language and bad order hide the weakness of the meaning. (p. 8.)

However, in spite of his consciousness of the importance of simplicity and order in style, his work does not bear out his intentions in this respect. He goes back and forth from one subject to another. Before completing a topic under discussion, he starts a new subject and then reverts to the old. Not all of his views on a given subject

²⁰ Gersonides may have reference here to the secrets of Ibn Ezra.

²¹ Almost the identical criticism is made by Maimonides in his *Guide*, Pt. I, Ch. 74 against the Mutakallimin. It is possible that also Gersonides had them in mind.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

are contained in the particular part or chapter dealing with the theme. For example, the Active Intellect is treated in Part I of the *Milhamoth*; but for the completion of this topic we must go to Book V where he discusses the heavenly bodies and their prime movers. Gersonides must have felt that the execution of his work fell short of his ideal, for he found it desirable to give in his introduction, (pp. 7-9), a kind of key to the principles of logical sequence that he followed. He enumerates seven principles of precedence:

- (1) Premises before conclusions.
- (2) The general before the particular.
- (3) The easily understood before the more difficult.
- (4) The sequence of number, both ordinal and quantitative; for example, the discussion of the triangle should precede that of the quadrangle, *etc.*
- (5) Where two or more conclusions follow from one principle, the more obvious conclusion should precede the less obvious.
- (6) The refutation of a conflicting opinion should precede the proof of the acceptable opinion.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

- (7) Where the writer's views differ from the accepted notions of the reader, the topics of lesser divergence should be discussed before those of greater divergence, so as to keep the interest of the reader and to prepare him gradually for a change in his notions. Gersonides adds also about the need of short summaries as the work progresses.

THE OPPOSITION TO GERSONIDES

At a time when a new idea was looked upon with suspicion and regarded as heresy, when the controversy about Maimonides had not yet lost its bitterness, it was but natural that Gersonides, too, should be the object of attacks. It is even surprising that the opposition was not more vehement than it actually was. The explanation may be sought in the fact that in Gersonides' time, philosophy began to be less in vogue. His talmudical writings may have attracted more attention among the contemporary Rabbis, and may have warded off the suspicions of heresy arising from a reading of his philosophical works. This probably was the reason why he encountered no opposition from such renowned talmudical

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

authorities as the disciples of Ibn Adrath, whose opposition to philosophy was almost fanatical. It should be noted, however, that their fight was not so much against philosophy *per se*, as against the allegorical interpretation of the Torah which the medieval philosophers introduced. The conservatives feared that the Jewish philosophers meant to rob the Torah of its original meaning, and uproot the *halachic* and historical principles of Judaism. But they could not suspect Gersonides of such motives, since he himself objected to allegorical interpretations wherever the scriptures were not allegorical in themselves. The excellent moral lessons and practical laws and suggestions that he deduced from every biblical story and incident were sufficient proof for them of his profound understanding of the spirit of the Bible and of the Talmud.

But if Gersonides met with no opposition from the talmudists, he was not spared by the philosophers. Already in his lifetime he was attacked by Samuel ben Judah ben Mesulam of Marseilles.

The greatest opponent of Gersonides was Crescas (1340-1410). The chief aim of his *Or Adonai* was to criticize Gersonides' philosophy; but once started, he extended his criticism also

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

against Maimonides, the other scholastics, as well as against Aristotle himself. However, although Crescas appears as the critic of Gersonides, as a matter of fact, he appropriated Gersonides' thoughts. At *prima facie* Gersonides appears a most faithful follower of Aristotle, and Crescas chose to present him as such. A closer study, however, shows that while Gersonides starts with Aristotelian premises, he reaches different conclusions. But Crescas chooses to lay stress on the apparent meaning of Gersonides' words, while appropriating as his own Gersonides' deeper and truer meaning. Crescas uses Gersonides' own thoughts to criticize his alleged interpretation of Gersonides.

One is rather puzzled as to the cause which could have led Crescas to such plagiarism. He was known as a righteous man and was greatly beloved. He was a Court favorite even in the reign of John I. when Jewish persecutions were renewed. Nothing but a religious motive could have been responsible for such diplomacy on the part of Crescas. It seems that medieval scholars would leave all scruples behind them when it came to religion. Crescas must have been alarmed by Gersonides' free conceptions of miracles and

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

of creation. He probably feared that with his great talmudic learning, Gersonides would win the people over to his views. Therefore he must have been anxious to destroy Gersonides' authority at all costs.

It is rather surprising that the historians looked upon Crescas as the antipode of Gersonides when at bottom the two systems stand so closely together. Their closeness might have come nearer to the surface had an attempt been made to get at the heart of these respective philosophies instead of merely analyzing them. That Crescas borrowed from Gersonides is testified to by his frequent inconsistencies on the one hand, and by his points in common with Gersonides on the other. Crescas appropriates Gersonides' premises and arguments, but arbitrarily rejects his conclusions whenever they are not sufficiently orthodox.

A number of inconsistencies which we meet in Crescas could be traced to this cause. Take, for instance, Crescas' discussion of the unity of God. Crescas posits the infinite potency of God, hence he must reject the possibility of the existence of another God. If there were two Gods, they would limit each other. Yet, Crescas tells us that it is

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

still possible that there should be a second God who is not active. But a passive God contradicts Crescas' own conception of God, who possesses infinite potency. That other being which is neither active nor potential could not at all be explained in Crescas' scheme of the universe. But by a passive God, Crescas had in mind Gersonides' primary eternal matter which occupies such a great place in Gersonides' system. When it comes to the attributes of God,—such a vital item of scholasticism,—Crescas again contradicts himself because he refutes Gersonides in appearance, but in reality holds on to Gersonides' views. He defends Maimonides' homonymy theory which is so opposed to that of Gersonides, and at the same time he appropriates Gersonides' theory of attributes, namely that attributes are a relation of degree,—that of priority and posteriority. Inconsistently with Crescas' chief original contribution—the autonomy of morality—he makes morality preparatory to the happiness of the soul. The happiness of the soul is the supreme end in Gersonides, and Crescas combats it in some other connection. Crescas' conclusion in favor of creation is most inconsistent with his premises and analysis of the problem, which closely approaches

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

that of Gersonides. Gersonides does not shrink from the logical conclusion of his premises, and declares himself in favor of eternity.

Many are the points of similarity between Crescas and Gersonides, but we shall mention only a few. Crescas' conception of God as the cause and law of all beings is literally taken from Gersonides. Crescas' criticism of the current view of emanation, his theory of attributes, and his solution of the problem of prescience are all taken from Gersonides. In his discussion of knowledge and prescience, Crescas follows Gersonides even in the order and logical arrangement. A digression used by Gersonides regarding the conception of the particular is textually copied by Crescas who substitutes merely the word "matter" for "sense". In Gersonides this digression occurs in his first objection against the current theory of God's knowledge; in Crescas we meet with the same digression in his third objection.²² The same distinction that Gersonides makes between the act of knowledge in God, and the process of knowledge in man is also adopted by Crescas. They both maintain that God's knowledge is

²² Compare *Or Adonai*, Book II with *Milhamoth* III, Ch. 4, p. 141.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

prior, and ours is derivative. Through the knowledge of God known existing things have acquired their existence. God knows through the general order of things, the law of which is in Himself. Crescas' reckoning the natural laws as a part of providence, his theory of reward and punishment as a cause and effect necessity, are all taken from Gersonides. Even what is considered to be Crescas' chief contribution, namely his theory of freedom and necessity, is also Gersonidian. Both Gersonides and Crescas maintain that from the aspect of general order, events are determined. But from the aspect of human choice they are indeterminate. In Gersonides' scheme of the universe even human freedom is guided by the general order so that all should lead to the ultimate perfection.

These similarities as well as many others are too fundamental and could not be taken for mere coincidences or for current thoughts of the time. There are many indications pointing to Crescas' adoption of Gersonides' system, even though we may remain ignorant of the reasons which brought Crescas to attack Gersonides on the one hand, and on the other to embody his fundamental views in his own system.

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Through Crescas' influence, a few others rose against Gersonides. Among them was the great talmudist Isaac ben Shesheth of Saragossa. He speaks, however, of Gersonides in a respectful manner, and mentions him as a great talmudic scholar who has made fine commentaries on the Torah and the Prophets. He writes: "Although Gersonides followed in the path of Maimonides, the many sciences turned him away from the true path. He contradicted the opinions of our venerated Moses in certain subjects, such, *e.g.*, as God's knowledge as related to future possibilities. About the miracle of Joshua he wrote things which are forbidden to be heard. In the same vein he wrote about immortality, providence and theodicy. And now, if these two kings (Maimonides and Gersonides) did not step on firm ground, their glory will abide with them. They are to be reckoned among the great ones of the world. But how could we expect a safe footing, we who, *etc.*" These are very mild words, and they show that in spite of all his love for Crescas, Bar Shesheth meant less to enter into war on Gersonides than to warn against philosophy in general. If he had been more in earnest to enter into controversy, this great talmudic scholar would have referred

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

to Gersonides' theories with more precision and not in such a vague manner. For he is very accurate and precise in his talmudic and other discussions.

Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) complains that Gersonides should not have spoken so openly of his free views. Merely to listen to them is a sin, and how much more sinful is it to believe in them. Isaac ben Moses Arama (1420-1494) in his *Akedath Yizhak*, though agreeing with Gersonides on immortality, criticizes his views on God's knowledge, providence, and creation. He twists the title of Gersonides' work "Wars of the Lord" into "Wars against the Lord."

Shem Tob ben Joseph Ibn Shem Tob (15th Century), author of *Emunot*, characterizes Gersonides as stupid for styling as prophets the angels that appeared to Abraham. He also attacked the other Jewish philosophers, such as Maimonides and Ibn Ezra. He merely repeats Crescas' words, without even understanding them. He was not taken seriously, however. One writer, Alashkar, calls Shem Tob a fool for speaking disrespectfully of the great ones of Israel.

In the 17th Century, Manasseh ben Israel

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

seemed to have felt quite upset by Gersonides' philosophy. He expressed himself vehemently even against Isaac Arama for agreeing with Gersonides on immortality. He writes: "Would to God that such views had not been written, and that they should not come into the community of Israel." (*Nishmath Hayim*, II, Ch. 2.)

But if Gersonides had opponents, he also had staunch admirers who tried to refute the criticisms against him. These defenders, moreover, were among the greatest Jewish scholars.

Isaac Lattes (14th Century) in his preface to *Scha'are Zion* (MS.) speaks of Gersonides as the great prince "our master." He writes, "Gersonides does not have his equal in the world. He has commented on the Bible most profoundly, and has enlightened the world by his science, and especially by his famous work *Milhamoth*, the great value of which can be appreciated only by the initiated."

Simon ben Zemach Duran (1361-1444) at the age of seventy-six and a half, wrote a book "*Or Ha-Hayim*" (*Light of Life*) in which he refutes all of Crescas' criticisms against Gersonides. He divided his work into fifty-five chapters,

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

but the book has never been printed, and no manuscripts of it are known to be extant.

Even as late as the 19th Century we find an attempt to defend Gersonides. The Kabbalist Abraham Shalom ben Israel in his *Neve Shalom* (*Peaceful Habitations*) attacks Crescas for having criticized the two great Jewish philosophers Maimonides and Gersonides. However, this author is not always in full sympathy with Gersonides' radical views.

A more detailed discussion of the criticisms against Gersonides would carry us beyond the scope of this monograph. We have merely referred to them here in so far as they helped us bring Gersonides' personality into relief.

CHAPTER III

GERSONIDES AS A SCHOLASTIC

GERSONIDES' philosophy is an attempt at constructing the world through the physics and astronomy then available, with the underlying hope of discovering that the indisputable truth of the present also lay hidden in the past. His system is not formulated, but scattered piecemeal through his writings. Interspersed in his discussions of Aristotle's commentators, there pierce through his own opinions which, if pasted together, would give us a picture of his world. This world is the reflection of a scholastic prism, and the reproduction of it would be no more than an additional colour to the endless kaleidoscope of philosophy.

The basis of Gersonides' metaphysics is Platonic and the structure is Aristotelian. According to Gersonides, there are two eternal existences. The one existence is infinite and of the highest perfection, which we term God. In Him are the ground and order of perfection of all beings throughout all generations. He is the only funda-

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

mental Being, (essential existence). The rest of existences acquired existence from Him, and are but a faint copy of Him. The attribute "existence" is predicated of God and the other beings in the relation of priority and posteriority.

The second eternity is finite, without any attribute of perfection whatever. It is so imperfect that it is devoid even of the ordinary dimensions.¹ However, it has one redeeming feature, namely the possibility of perfecting itself within a certain degree² through the aid of the perfect existence.³ And on the other hand, among the infinite number of perfections of the perfect being is his inherent goodness to perfect and complete the imperfect⁴ to the highest extent, comporting with the latter's capacity.⁵ And upon the varying degree of this receiving capacity, God classified this "imperfect existence" into three parts out of

¹ This characterization of primary matter so fundamentally different from the respective conceptions of primary matter by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, marks the fundamental distinction between Gersonides' conception of the world and that of those philosophers.

² It is on account of its limitations of perfection that it is finite.

³ *Milhamoth*, Book VI, Part I, Ch. 18, p. 373.

⁴ *Ibid* and Book V, Part III, Ch. 12, p. 284.

⁵ Book VI, Part I, Ch. 18, p. 377.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

which he created the world. To two of those parts He gave the form of dimension and of motion and they thus became the hylic matter. One of these two parts is that which the Greeks called the *hyle* and it has constituted the low matter of the sublunary world. God has infused into it the possibility of receiving all kinds of forms. He invested it with the fundamental elements and gave to these the power of combination.⁶ The other part of the matter, God made most wonderfully pure and it constitutes the heavenly body. Therein God created the stars and the spheres that move them; and this motion produces the power of combination in the sublunary world. As a consequence to motion was created time which is an incident attached to motion.⁷ The heavenly body would never cease to exist⁸ because it does not contain within itself

⁶ Book VI, Part I, Ch. 17, p. 367.

⁷ Book VI, Part I, Ch. 20, pp. 381-3.

⁸ Gersonides opposes Aristotle's theory that "whatever comes into being perishes," and he tries to refute it in various passages of the *Milhamoth* and particularly dwells upon it in Book VI, Part I, Ch. 27. He writes, "It is surprising that this was overlooked by the philosopher whose wisdom was so great. And it is not right to attribute to him an oversight on such an open subject. I therefore think that the philosopher himself must have already imagined that this proposition does not lead to the truth, at least he had no proof that whatever comes into being ceases to be." *Ibid* p. 408.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

the cause of perishment, namely the combination of struggling opposites.⁹

As to the third part, the existence which has not been perfected, God put it between one sphere and the other, so that the motion of one sphere should not penetrate into the motion of another.¹⁰ The spheres which are already endowed with dimensions cannot penetrate into this formless matter.

Furthermore God has caused to emanate some of His perfection on the heavenly bodies and made them to be living intelligences¹¹ that have a perfect knowledge of themselves and of their effects. And having a perfect knowledge of themselves, they necessarily know that they are caused by a being more perfect than themselves.¹²

The highest perfection into which the two parts of the primary matter have the capacity to evolve is the intelligibles. These are the universal nature of all existing things. The universal nature of the heavenly bodies is the motion of each sphere according to its particular nature, the effects resulting from it, the comprehension of itself and

⁹ Book VI, Part I, Ch. 16, p. 359.

¹⁰ Book V, Part II, Ch. 2, p. 193.

¹¹ Book V, Part III, Ch. 6, p. 263.

¹² Book V, Part III, Ch. 7, pp. 268-9.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

its effects. The universals of the sublunary matter are the many universals which we know and comprehend in all the existences. All these universals within the existing sensuous things¹³ are intelligibles which have an existence in themselves.¹⁴ And by themselves they are substances, separate intelligences which have emanated from the real perfection.¹⁵ In the heavenly bodies these universals are the movers of the spheres; here below they are the universals which have emanated from the heavenly movers. The latter effectuate all the natural effects of the sublunary world through a desire implanted in them by God to reproduce each its own respective share of the perfection arranged in God's mind.¹⁶

These intelligibles contribute to form the monistic system of the world. On the one hand the

¹³ Book I, Ch. 10, p. 69.

¹⁴ Gersonides' view on this point differs both from Aristotle and Plato. He does not believe with Aristotle that the genus and the other universals are merely ideas of the mind and not outside of it. Nor does he agree with Plato that the essential of existence is only genus and that the particular individuals are merely copied shadows of the genus. According to Gersonides, both the universals and the particulars have a real existence. The universal has an existence *per se* within the particular.

¹⁵ Book I, chapter 10, page 79.

¹⁶ Book V, Part III, Ch. 11, p. 278, Ch. 12, p. 284.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

intelligibles appear to us many and separate according to the various conceptions, but on the other, they unite and form the order of perfection of here below, for all the intelligibles help each other and form each other's perfection. The more they unite, the more they perfect themselves by approaching nearer to the perfect existence wherein all the perfections are united into one infinite perfection.¹⁷

All the universals here below unite into one perfection termed the "Active Intellect." The content of the Active Intellect is the unification of all the sublunary universals in so far as they form a unity.¹⁸ This is why the Active Intellect is the order and ground of all the perfections of here below in so far as the matter here below is capable of perfecting itself. In the Active Intellect must be the order and law of all the perfections of here below, also some of the perfection of the heavenly bodies, and of all the spheres in so far as they affect the nature of the things below and become united into one with all the other perfections. In this respect the Active Intellect stands above the movers of the spheres even though it emanated

¹⁷ *Ibid* and Book I, Ch. 6, p. 40.

¹⁸ Book I, Ch. 6, p. 40.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

from them. For the movers of the spheres are each but the respective universal of its particular sphere and each conceives only itself and what is emanated from itself on the sublunary matter,²⁰ while the Active Intellect contains whatever is emanated by all the spheres and the combination of the various effects upon the sublunary world.²⁰ That is why Aristotle calls the Active Intellect the soul that has been emanated out of the spheres.²¹ The Active Intellect also gives the forms to all sublunary things,²² and preserves their existence in various ways.²³

Another function of the Active Intellect is its important role in the act of human knowledge. It helps us to bring out all the intelligibles from potentiality into actuality.²⁴ The main task of knowledge is to find in every particular its uni-

²⁰ Gersonides' opinion on this subject differs from that of the early philosophers who maintain that the movers of the spheres are emanated one from the other until the highest one which is emanated from God Himself. According to Gersonides all the spheres are direct emanates from God and one has no connection with the other. This view refutes a great deal the Kabalistic theory of the emanation of the *Sephiroth*.

²⁰ Book I, Ch. 7, p. 50.

²¹ *Ibid* Ch. 6, pp. 41-3.

²² Book V, Part 3, Ch. 13, p. 287.

²³ Book II, Ch. 2, p. 95 and Book I, Ch. 7, p. 50.

²⁴ Book I, Ch. 6, p. 46.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

versal which unites several particulars into one. And the more our knowledge progresses, the more we discover the unity between the universals themselves. If one had the possibility of comprehending all the universals of here below in their completeness, one would see them all united into one; and this constitutes the Active Intellect.²⁵ The universals are but intelligibles, and the Active Intellect is the intelligible of all the sub-lunary existences, that is, therein all the intelligibles, after completing each other, form a unity. This could be compared, for instance, to the construction of a house wherein the various processes, such as wood-cutting, stone-cutting, *etc.*, all unite for the fundamental work, namely, the construction of the house. The house, which is the culmination of all these works, is in the mind of the architect who controls all those subordinate processes until they become coordinated into a house.²⁶ If the intelligibles would not unite or supplement each other until they reach one perfection, our hylic intellect would not be able by itself to conceive any intelligible at all, and it would remain in a mere state of potentiality without ever

²⁵ Book I, Ch. 12, p. 86.

²⁶ Book I, Ch. 6, p. 37.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

becoming actual. It is only the acquired intellect that, through the connection of intelligibles, abstracts the universal from the particulars and comprehends them.²⁷

The Active Intellect plays the same rôle in prophecy, dreams and divination as in knowledge. Just as with the help of the Active Intellect, our intellect passes from potentiality to actuality, so also the instincts of the soul, the feelings and the imagination, through the help of the Active Intellect, comprehend the future and the mysterious.²⁸

In turn, all the intelligibles which are in the Active Intellect as well as in the other heavenly spheres unite into an eternal unity in the mind of God, the perfect eternity.²⁹ Hence Gersonides' opinion is that all resides within God. He

²⁷ Book I, Ch. 11, p. 82; Book III, Ch. 5, p. 147.

²⁸ Book II, Ch. 3, p. 98.

²⁹ Gersonides' conception of the separate intelligences, of the movers of the spheres and of the Active Intellect differs from that of the other medieval philosophers. It also differs from that of the Kabbalists even though he expresses himself in a similar language. According to the other philosophers the separate intelligences are a world distinct from our world of concepts. While according to Gersonides, these separate intelligences are the very intelligibles and the universals of existence itself. In their perfection they are infinite, and they unite into one in the mind of God. And God's power is equal in all of them, and one part does not emanate from the other. (Book V, Part III, Chapter 11, p. 277.)

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

expresses it in a still stronger language. "God is the law of all intelligibles. He is their order and system. He arranged and ordered them all."³⁰ He is the intelligible of all the existences."³¹ In other words, the latter are part of His content. But they form His content only through their unification, that is, they complete each other and become one in God.³² But in their existence they are emanated from God. Nor are the intelligibles a complete unity in their act of conceiving. For their conception is composed of their perfect self-conception, of what is emanated from them, as well as of the imperfect conception of their cause. Such is not the case with the process of God's conceiving. He is the perfect unity, conceiving only Himself, and what emanates from Him, as He has no cause above Him.³³

Human perfection, according to Gersonides, consists not in conceiving the separate intelligences and the Active Intellect. This is impossible for man to conceive. But genuine perfection lies in the comprehension of existence and in the better understanding of the unity of intelligibles.

³⁰ Book III, Ch. 1, p. 121.

³¹ Book V, Part III, Ch. 12, p. 280.

³² Book V, Part III, Chapter 5, p. 258.

³³ Book V, Part III, Ch. 7, p. 269.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

The more intelligibles we acquire, the more we approach their unity through the acquired intellect.³⁴ But man is an inherently defective being, and he cannot comprehend the universal of anything without the intermediary of the senses which put before him the sensuous perceptions. Hence we can reckon it as a perfection for man if he at least realizes that through the process of comprehension he abstracts the universal from the sensuous perceptions. For the sensuous perceptions originate in the inherent defectiveness of matter which is incapable of carrying its perfection to the extent of becoming a full intelligible. It is only capable to receive this definite measure from the universal. But it is within this matter that the perfect, genuine and infinite universal lies. The latter attempts to perfect even that very matter to the extent of the matter's capacity. In comprehending the universal, one approaches a knowledge similar to that of God. For, God comprehends the universal of the things. The sensuous things do not belong to the definition of knowledge; they have not attained such grade.³⁵ Man needs the senses only for their presentation

³⁴ Book I, Ch. 13, p. 90.

³⁵ Book I, Ch. 6, p. 46 ff.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

of things to the mind, so that the latter should abstract the universal. God's knowledge does not require the intermediary of the senses. He does not acquire His knowledge from the existences; the latter acquire their existence from God.³⁶ He comprehends all the existences. For, every intelligible and every intellect include the act of comprehension, the more so God who is the intellect—the intelligible—of the whole of existence.

Through the very act of comprehension, the universal nature of comprehension which is inherent in man passes from potentiality into actuality; it enters into the height of perfection. It joins with the perfection of the Active Intellect, and joins with the perfection of God in whom all the intelligibles unite into one. Through this process the potential intellect passes into the acquired intellect which constitutes the immortality and eternity of the soul, because the universals are eternal. The supreme beatitude, however, lies not only in the eternity, but in the unique delight which the soul experiences during comprehension.³⁷

The question of freedom and necessity is also

³⁶ Book III, Ch. 5, p. 148.

³⁷ Book I, Ch. 13, p. 90.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

interconnected with the order of the intelligibles. It is Gersonides' opinion that a certain order is prescribed even for the things that happen by mere accident.³⁸ For all things that happen in the world, whether they are essential or accidental, must all come through their respective causes arranged in the system and law of things in the mind of the Active Intellect, in the organized nature of the spheres, and in the unification of all in God's mind. But two factors, the two forces of the world, namely God and man, have each according to their respective capacity the power of transforming the necessary into the possible. They can change everything that has been arranged. Through the intelligibles all things become necessary, but through the freedom which is inherent in the universal nature of man the necessary things may become possible.³⁹ Even this very possibility is recorded within the system of intelligibles in the mind of God.

The power of possibility is allowed in the order of perfection so that everything should finally come back to the unifying perfection which unites all into one.⁴⁰

³⁸ Book II, Ch. 2, p. 95.

³⁹ Book II, Ch. 2, p. 96.

⁴⁰ Book III, Ch. 5, p. 148.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

On account of the coexistence of possibility and necessity as well as on account of Providence which takes care that the whole of existence should reach its perfection and that nothing should be omitted, there must necessarily exist the power of prophecy in nature. It is necessary that man should be notified of the arrangement of future events with their respective causes, so as to be able to control them for his good.⁴¹ The knowledge of the future comes either through an instinctive feeling,⁴² or through a strong imagination,⁴³ or through intellectual conception reached either by a natural⁴⁴ or supernatural calculation. The imagination or the intellect might be endowed with an additional power of conceiving the future results of most remote causes,⁴⁵ and thus know them beforehand. Prophecy belongs to the same category as knowledge. Knowledge as well as prophecy are an emanation from God, from the ground of intelligibles arranged in God's mind. The emanation takes place through the

⁴¹ Book III, Ch. 5, p. 148.

⁴² Book II, Ch. 4, pp. 103-4.

⁴³ Book II, Ch. 6, p. 109.

⁴⁴ Book II, Ch. 4, p. 102.

⁴⁵ Book II, Ch. 2, p. 94, and Ch. 6. pp. 106-7.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

Active Intellect⁴⁶ in which are all the systems of here below. The phenomenon of prophecy is but the act of knowing and discovering in a miraculously rapid way chains of events which in the natural course would have required much thought and a number of years in time.

The existence of miracles in the scheme of the universe is also for the sake of hastening the natural course of events, when God finds it necessary and wills it so. A miracle happens when there is need of hastening the natural things so that they should come into being suddenly in a short time instead of in the thousands of years required by a natural development.⁴⁷

Gersonides' theory of God's attributes differs from that of his contemporaries. He agrees with them that much that is said of God in prophetic literature and in man's language is said by way of homonymy. But he does not look upon the attributes as absolute homonyms. According to Gersonides, the attributes are applied to God by way of priority and posteriority. That is, the same attribute we possess is but a small quantity of the perfection we have acquired from God, in

⁴⁶ Book II, Ch. 3, p. 98.

⁴⁷ Book VI, Part II, Ch. 12, p. 459.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

whom it is in its highest excellence. For, in God it has its real existence, while in us it is derivative.⁴⁸ This relation of priority and posteriority refers to attributes of perfection only. But those which mark defectiveness, such as eating, sleeping, and the like, have no relation whatever to God. On the other hand, Gersonides claims that if we explain God's attributes by way of homonymy, there is no reason why we should not attribute to Him attributes of defectiveness as well, and say they are by way of homonymy.⁴⁹

Gersonides' predominant view of religion is its function as a civil code which code we must observe for the sake of the community peace. If man were given permission to diverge from the creed in what seems to him conflicting with science, then there would be fight and confusion among the believers.⁵⁰ However, should one know how to reconcile faith and science and interpret the creed through science, it is his duty to spread his opinion among the believers so as to be of use to them. It is not worthy of one who acquires some scientific fact not to spread it among his

⁴⁸ Book III, Ch. 3, pp. 134-136.

⁴⁹ Book III, Ch. 3, p. 134.

⁵⁰ Book I, Ch. 14, p. 91.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

fellow men.⁵¹ This would not imply a divergence from the creed, but it is rather a means of preserving it in a way that would make it acceptable to the scientists also.

The *Milhamoth* raises a number of other metaphysical questions, more or less in line with the general current of the time. However, more than any other scholastic, Gersonides made a decided attempt to weave a metaphysics of his own. In his last book he devotes a whole chapter to point out that each of his investigations was either not treated at all, or was treated inadequately by his predecessors, Maimonides included.⁵² But to us who can no longer appreciate shades of distinction in medieval thought, Gersonides' technical system is but an agglomeration of scholastic ideas, a mixture of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, a mere fruitless variation of Averroism. It is the substitution of one mosaic for another, but it always remains a medieval mosaic, a pre-Copernican conception of the world, which could not escape any more than the others, from crumbling under the Copernican blow. The intellectual variation between the medieval systems is

⁵¹ Preface, p. 5.

⁵² Book VI, Part I, chapter 29, pp. 416-417.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

so slight that an exposition of one of them is like an exposition of the others. No medieval thinker would consider himself a philosopher unless his technical thinking hinged upon the problems evolved out of pseudo-Aristotelianism or Platonism. It is not in the heart of the systems, it is in the digressions, that we have to seek for the personal ideas of medieval philosophers. It is particularly so in the case of Arabic and Jewish thinkers. Their genuine philosophy has to be sifted through their dispersed writings, as it is usually intermingled with historical and literary themes.

In itself, the study of philosophical discussions interwoven with Jewish theology and Jewish history is less interesting even than the gleaning of Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic thoughts in medieval writers. But these insipid subjects assume new life when interrelated with the history of the people whose intellectual and emotional strivings they mirror. Old systems of philosophy are worth unearthing only if we can reintegrate in them the emotional content. Materials of old edifices could not serve much for the construction of new ones. But the antiquities in themselves are beautiful to behold.

GIST OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

We have, in this chapter, artificially abstracted Gersonides' metaphysics from the interwoven Jewish themes for the purpose of making it more apparent that through such a method we not only get a distorted view of the philosopher, but that we do not even enrich our historical heirloom. Even though Gersonides' system bears signs of originality, and may have been an outstanding edifice in its time, it is not of interest when divested of its Jewish element. Had we adopted the usual method of procedure our task would have ended with the above gist of Gersonides' metaphysics. But his very philosophizing starts then only when he brings his ready made adopted metaphysical system *vis à vis* the emotional and intellectual content of Judaism. A picture of Gersonides must be taken in the Jewish environment, in the synagogue, and not in the church or in the Greek pantheon. To appraise a Jewish philosopher merely as a scholastic is substituting a skeleton for a living organism.

CHAPTER IV

GERSONIDES IN HIS PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

THIS chapter is an attempt to reproduce the Jewish atmosphere with which Gersonides was surrounded and to see to what extent he remained within it, or enfranchised himself from it. One could not possibly speak of Christian scholasticism without having before one's eyes a panorama of the architecture of the church, the spirit within its walls and the barbaric world with which it had to contend. Likewise one could not get a complete picture of a Jewish philosopher without setting him in the medieval ghetto where he was enclosed by both physical and spiritual fences. This very enclosure created a *ghetto-anschauung* of its own, which translated itself into viewing and interpreting life in terms of the Jewish past. Because this outlook has not been crystallized in a technical mold, it has escaped the notice of the historians. But the Jewish veins run through the systems of Jewish philosophers like the grains in a marble, even though it is not so

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

easy to discern them on the surface. What makes it difficult to distinguish the Jewish stream is the lack of a norm whereby we could clearly characterize what is distinctly Jewish in its nature. Opinions as to what is Jewish thought are greatly at variance. Some identify it with legalism; others with transcendentalism; others with mysticism, pantheism, spiritualism, materialism, rationalism, *etc.* But Judaism is none of these, or it may be said to be all of these which form inseparable aspects of its organic whole.

Our attempt at drawing the Jewish setting would have been a presumptuous, as well as an impossible task, were it not for Judah Halevi, who painted it in a few strokes, most unawares. The problem, therefore, resolves itself into the following steps: (I) To bring out Halevi's picture in relief so that its faithfulness may become more apparent. This involves a double process of proving (a) that Halevi's philosophy is the genuinely Jewish one, and (b) that the genuine Jewish thought is reflected in his *Kitab Alkhazari*. That we are not moving in a circle, and that a proper grasp of Halevi will give us a clue for the understanding of Jewish thought, will be seen later in our discussions. (II) To place Gersonides

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

vis à vis Halevi, whom we shall use as our standard for measuring Gersonides' oscillations, his mental struggles, the extent to which he either carried or shook off the Jewish emotional load of which the *Kitab Alkhazari* is such a faithful mirror. The common denominator between these two philosophers of such opposite types would be an additional sign-post for our orientation in Jewish philosophy. (III) To project Jewish scholasticism on a Jewish plane. For the completion of our sketch it would be necessary to establish not only the point of connection between Gersonides and ancient Jewish thought, but also his relative place in scholasticism, evaluated, however, not through external relationships but through inner intersections. (IV) To peruse Gersonides in the light of Jewish problems and thus gain a better understanding of the philosophy of his *Milhamoth*. (V) To ascertain, in the course of our research, what distinguishes Jewish philosophers *qua* Jewish.

These are but some of the delineations which may help one retrace the architecture of the medieval Jewish edifice.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

(I)

Just as one could see Greek life palpitating through the pages of the Iliad, so one could note Jewish life flowing through the metaphysics of Judah Halevi. In him we find the blending of the emotional and intellectual currents of Judaism. The Jewish stream runs undisturbed; it is not hidden. We find in him explicitly that which runs tacitly throughout all the Jewish philosophers, including the extreme rationalists, Maimonides and Gersonides. His philosophy is the crystallization of Jewish life, the mirror of genuine Jewish thought, such as it is at bottom in the Bible, the *Halacha*, the *Midrashim*, the liturgy, the national literature, the historical epics, etc. Had he been envisaged by the historians from the proper angle, a mere reference to him would have been sufficient for our purpose.¹ But

¹ The works on Halevi are listed in our bibliography. (See Chapter VI). A discussion of them would not advance us in our theme, since we approach Halevi from a different point of view. Neumark departs from the other writers, in seeking for the philosophical principles in the *Alkhazari*. But he does violence to Halevi by trying to explain away his nationalism which is the very core of his philosophy. It is completely misinterpreting Halevi to claim, as Neumark does, that his "aim is to show the intention of Judaism to become a universal religion." Every page of the *Alkhazari* vibrates with national

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

the historians in their account of Halevi's metaphysical work—the *Kitab Alkhazari*—consider the bulk of it as rather irrelevant. Their chief interest is in the last chapter, where he hastily, though keenly, discusses Ibn Sina's philosophy of the soul. It is not in his chapter on Ibn Sina, but in what is considered the insignificant part of his book that we hope to get our bearings. Even on the subject of the immortality of the soul, it would be better to refer for Halevi's opinions to those so-called irrelevant parts.

feelings and with the consciousness of a spiritual isolation. It is the unique privilege of Israel to practice the commands of God; the same laws practiced by other nations would not earn them the same reward. For, according to Halevi, the precepts are an organic part of the Jewish tradition which is lived by the Jew alone. "We do not allow anyone who embraces our religion theoretically by means of a word alone, to take equal rank with ourselves. . . . The convert must adopt our mode of life entirely. . . . Those, however, who become Jews do not take equal rank with born Israelites, who are especially privileged to attain to prophecy, whilst the former can only achieve something by learning from them, and can only become pious and learned, but never prophets." (Page 79; see also page 47). "Moses invited only *his* people and those of his own tongue to accept his law." (Page 73. See also other passages on that page). These and numerous other passages fully indicate Halevi's pronounced conviction that the peculiar characteristic of the Torah is of such a nature that it could be maintained only by one people, chosen by God. "If there were no Israelites, there would be no Torah."

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

The historians have found the prototype of Halevi in the Arabic philosopher Algazali, because Algazali, too, attacked the philosophers and propounded the mysticism of the Sufis. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of Algazali's philosophy, but our gist of Halevi will prove in itself that such could not have been the philosophy of an Arabic thinker. The similarity between the two is merely an outward one. Algazali's philosophy is based on a religious mysticism, while Halevi's is the expression of a poetical nationalism. Both his philosophy and his poetry are the expression of the genuine Jewish soul. He is universally recognized as the greatest Jewish poet, who expressed the national aspirations and yearnings. A great number of his poems are incorporated in the liturgy. It was not Algazali but the inner yearnings of the nation, that were the source of inspiration to Judah Halevi, as well as to the other Jewish philosophers. Halevi's philosophy has not been given by the historians its due rank, because it could be classed neither with Aristotelianism nor with Platonism. Maimonides (1135-1204) is generally regarded as the greatest towering Jewish figure of the middle ages, Gersonides as his equal, Saadia

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

(892-942) as the founder of rationalism, Bahya as the moralist, and Crescas as the original philosopher who gave the death blow to medieval Aristotelianism. Halevi is not classed among these great figures, but, properly understood, he would have been reckoned as the greatest of them all, both as a philosopher and as a Jewish philosopher.

As a philosopher, Halevi stands apart from those of his time. He had a keen philosophical insight, an excellent understanding of Aristotle as far as Aristotle could be known in the 11th century, and was thoroughly familiar with the current philosophy of his time. He seems to have foreshadowed somehow present-day thought in his fight against speculation, in his insistence upon experience, in his emphasis upon the organic relation between thought and action, in his allowance for the irrational, and in the clearness with which he pointed out the self-contradiction of a religious philosophy. Philosophy and religion, he says, stand in two totally distinct spheres of thought and fulfill two distinct functions. Philosophy has no right to deal with God, with faith and with religion. Its domain lies in the natural sciences. But it is distinguished from any particular science

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

and superior to it because it is the science of sciences. Halevi raised his voice against speculation and insisted upon experience as the ultimate test, at a time when speculation reigned supreme, when philosophizing was synonymous with speculating. He even spoke against the current astronomical notions, heavenly movers, *etc.* He may be said to have been the James of his time. He writes, "Do not be enticed by the wisdom of the Greeks which bears only fair blossoms but no fruit." It is fruits, consequences, facts, values, which are of importance to Halevi. "If thou wouldst endeavor to confirm or refute these views logically, life would be spent in vain." (p. 270.)* His arguments against speculation run in the same vein as those of Locke and James, but more so in the Bergson fashion. Speculation does not touch the bottom nor the width of life.²

Halevi's aversion to speculation reflects the

* The Halevi references are to the *Al Khazari*, English translation by Hartwig Hirschfeld, London, 1906.

² The quotations in themselves would not be sufficiently intelligible to the reader because they are taken from a setting and a language so different from the modern one. See pages 162, 163, 183, 199, 207, 210, 213, 217, 248, 268-270, 271-274. If we substitute in these pages the terms "action" for "command," and "life" for "God" we do no violence to the implied meaning of the author.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

Jewish philosophical temper which is best expressed by the following words of Ben Sirach: "Search not what is too high for thee, nor examine what is beyond thy grasp; endeavor not to know what is hidden, nor investigate what is concealed from thee; study what is within thy mastery, but meddle not with that which is secret."³ The Bible and the Talmud place no faith in speculation as the road to truth. Commands, *i.e.* actions, lead to the ways of God, *i.e.*, to the ultimate truth. The Jewish emphasis on facts, actions, commands, so strongly felt by Halevi, forms, as we shall later see, a strong counterweight in Gersonides' speculative system.

There are several points raised by Halevi in his *Kitab Alkhazari* which are still of interest today. He shows faith in human nature: Adam was not the source of sin, but of perfection. He has a healthy conception of life. You must serve God in joy not in sadness, in society not in seclusion.⁴ He focuses attention on the present world,

³ This quotation is taken from the introduction to the English translation of *Alkhazari* by Hirschfeld, who quoted it in a different connection.

⁴ "The divine law imposes no asceticism on us. It rather desires that we should keep the equipoise, and grant every mental and physical faculty its due, as much as it can bear,

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

minimizes the Mohammedan sensual conception of immortality, and above all finds fault with the abstractness of philosophy. God must be experienced. "As it is written, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good.' " (Psalm XXXIV 9.)

We cannot here dwell on the many salient points of Halevi's general philosophy, for we are dealing with Halevi in so far only as we can get through him a glimpse of the Jewish background, in which Gersonides found himself. With a Jewish silhouette before us, we shall better realize on the one hand that, appearances notwithstanding, Gersonides is not outside the Jewish frame, and on the other, that the Jewish picture cannot fit in with the general medieval one.

In focusing our attention on certain points of the *Alkazar* which have escaped notice because they were presented in the form of history

without overburdening one faculty at the expense of another. . . . Prolonged fasting is no act of piety. . . . Neither is diminution of wealth an act of piety, if it is gained in a lawful way, and if its acquisition does not interfere with study and good works, especially for him who has a household and children. . . . Thy contrition on a fast day does not bring thee nearer to God than thy joy on the Sabbath and holy days, if it is the outcome of a devout heart." (p. 113.) "The observance of the Sabbath is therefore nearer to God than the monastic retirement of ascetics." (p. 114.)

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

rather than of metaphysics, we may hope to get at the bottom of Jewish philosophy and reproduce that which Halevi so strongly felt, but thought it best to convey through images and illustrations. These were taken for poetical metaphors, for rambling historical discussions, instead of for the expression of his innermost thoughts, of the philosophy which he so passionately propounded. His method of philosophizing through historical discussions and historical illustrations might be distasteful to the modern mind, but ought not to be more revolting than the opposite extreme of philosophizing through geometry.

The historical setting which Halevi gives to his metaphysics is an inherent part of it. It is not a form of style, nor an imitation of Plato's dialogues. The conversion of the king of the Khazars to Judaism, after his study of the three religions, is a fitting starting point. If not with this, Halevi would have started with some other historical premise, such as the exodus from Egypt, or the story of Abraham. We would maintain that Halevi was less concerned with proclaiming the triumph of Judaism, than with finding out its historical content. The drama starts with the perturbed soul of the king of the Khazars who

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

dreamt that his way of thinking was agreeable to God, but not his way of acting, and he was commanded in the same dream to seek the God-pleasing work. The perplexed king finds himself in the presence of three religions, each as good as the other, each with the same intention, each with the same God. Khazari replies to the philosopher: "Thy words are convincing, yet they do not correspond to what I wish to find. I know already that my soul is pure and that my actions are calculated to gain the favor of God. To all this I received the answer that this way of action does *not* find favor though the intention does. There must no doubt be a way of acting, pleasing by its very nature." (p. 39.) The search therefore is for that "way of acting" which Halevi finds neither in Christianity, nor in Mohammedanism, and we would say not even in Judaism as it is commonly understood, *i.e.* not in Jewish theology, but in its historical process, where there is a consummation of intention and action, and where "the way of acting" is thus "pleasing by its very nature."

It is important to notice,—because it is not a mere incident, but the inherent expression of ancient Jewish thought, as well as the keynote

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

of Halevi's philosophy,—that Halevi starts and ends his work with emphasis on the correlation of intention and practice.⁵ Gersonides too was prompted to write his ethical work *Toaliyoth*, that the beneficial teachings of the biblical narratives might be applied in daily life. The greatest number of Jewish *Midrashim* would bear out the fact that Jewish ethics makes no artificial abstraction between intention and action, but views them as an organic whole. Even God Himself is named according to His deeds. When He judges the creatures He is *Elohim*; when He is engaged in war He is *Zebaoth*, etc. (See *Exodus Rabba*, 36.) The Jewish religious principles are inherent in the daily observances of life and not superimposed upon them. That Halevi considers this unbroken organic process as fundamental to Judaism, could be seen from the vast amount of space

⁵ To quote at random "And God did prove Abraham in order to render his theoretical obedience practical, and let it be the cause of his prosperity." (p. 282.)—"He deserves blame who does not look for visible reward for visible work." . . . (pp. 294-295.) "If thou bringest intention and action to perfection thou mayest expect reward . . . If the action is minus the intention, or the intention minus the action, the expectation (for reward) is lost, except in impossible things." . . . "Jerusalem can only be rebuilt when Israel yearns for it to such an extent as to embrace her stones and dust." (p. 295.) "A pure mind illustrated by corresponding action." (p. 117).

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

he devotes to the interpretation of Jewish observances. The *Halacha* edifice, on the other hand, testifies to the correctness of Halevi's point of view. The historians could not but miss the core of Halevi's philosophy, since they did not realize whereon he laid his stress. Yet the dramatic plot of the *Alkhazari* clearly indicates that the chief problem carries within itself another one just as vital, namely, the relation of intention and action, of thinking and living. Witness the double climax, the conversion of the king and the still more dramatic one, the sailing of the rabbi for Palestine. Since Palestine is the source of all knowledge, one must go to live there and *live* Palestine.

The key to Halevi's as well as to what we call Jewish philosophy is the explicit assumption in Halevi (when he is properly understood), and the underlying one in Gersonides and in the other Jewish philosophers that *philosophy is Jewish history*. Not that Jewish philosophy is a philosophy of history, but *Jewish history is philosophy and philosophy is Jewish history*. This will be made clearer through our analysis of Halevi. To imply such an identity on the part of the Jewish philosophers who have not ex-

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

pressed it so themselves, might appear a bold statement. But Halevi will bear us out. We could not have possibly thought of this peculiar medieval Jewish characteristic, had it not been for Halevi who propounds it so intensely, even though not in such a clear manner.

For Halevi you would have to *live* Jewish history in order to reach a complete life and thus become a philosopher. For Gersonides too, you could not possibly grasp the full content of the Active Intellect and become a philosopher without the help of the Torah. One could assume that for Halevi the Jew must have been born a philosopher, since his experience, *i.e.*, his race experience, is what Halevi would term philosophy. The Jew must have inherited his philosophy just as he inherited his ancestry, his land, his language, and his Torah. By philosophy, Halevi does not have in mind the speculative one. Speculative philosophy may be helpful "as regards human wisdom,"* but the depths of life can be grasped only through intuition which Halevi terms prophecy. Hence prophecy, (*i.e.*, intuition,) is the only

*"As Socrates said: O, my people, I do not deny your knowledge of the gods, but I confess I do not understand it. As for me, I am only wise in human matters." (p. 272.)

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

real philosophy. One can legitimately assume that such is Halevi's opinion from the manner in which he alludes to prophecy. His definition of philosophy greatly approaches the Bergsonian intuition. This intuition has been developed by a single race which has this prerogative over the others, just as man is endowed with reason over the animal, and the animal kingdom over the vegetable or mineral. In the historical illustrations which Halevi brings one can read that this intuition was gained through a deep race experience, an experience which touched the bottom of life. Such an instance would be revelation,—the fusion of God, *i.e.*, the source of life, with His people. Since prophecy has ceased our present knowledge can be deducted only from past Jewish tradition. Hence if you want to philosophize,—such would certainly have been Halevi's advice,—study the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the exodus from Egypt, the dramatic scene on Mt. Sinai, the manna in the desert, the building of the Temple, the choice of God's dwelling, the land which He chose for His cosmic experiment, *etc.* These are the premises from which Halevi starts. They cannot be denied since they are ultimate facts of experience. The exodus from

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

Egypt, the wars between Israel and its enemies are the best proof of God's omnipotence. Jeroboam's worship of idols or other sins of Israel are best evidence of man's freedom. "Evidence of it, [*i.e.*, of the divine wisdom *versus* the mechanistic conception of the world] is to be found in the children of Israel, for whose sake changes in nature were wrought as well as new things created." (pp. 251-252.) We can safely assume that Halevi considers the historic traditions, revelation, the covenant of God with His people as the premises, the primary stuff of experience out of which thinking proceeds. Hence with him thinking becomes possible only when we assume as our first axioms the election of Israel and the knitting of God's fate with that of Israel and its land.

Halevi seems to be so fully convinced that philosophy must be interwoven with Jewish tradition that he cannot imagine the Greeks possibly capable of philosophizing. They must have borrowed their philosophy from the Jews. "There is an excuse for the philosophers. Being Grecians, science and religion did not come to them as *inheritances*. They belong to the descendants of Japheth who inhabited the north, whilst that

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

knowledge coming from Adam and supported by divine influence, is only to be found among the progeny of Shem, who represented the successors of Noah, and constituted, as it were, his essence. This knowledge has always been connected with this essence and will always remain so. The Greeks only received it when they became powerful, from Persia. The Persians had it from the Chaldeans. It was only then that the famous Greek philosophers arose, but as soon as Rome assumed political leadership, they produced no philosophy worthy of the name." (p. 53.) However, they were great men for having reached what they did without the help of traditional revelation. But they could be no more than mere reasoners and speculators. They were compelled to speculate because they inherited neither tradition nor revelation. "Aristotle exerted his mind because he had no tradition from any reliable source at his disposal. He meditated on the beginning and end of the world, but found as much difficulty in the theory of a beginning, as in that of eternity. Finally, these abstract speculations which made for eternity prevailed, and he found no reason to inquire into the chronology or derivation of those who lived before him. Had

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

he lived among a people with well authenticated and generally acknowledged traditions, he would have applied his deductions and arguments to establish the theory of creation, however difficult, instead of eternity which is even much more difficult to accept." (pp. 53-54.)

With all this, however, it may be maintained that the attitude of Halevi and of Gersonides is not particularly a Jewish one, but the general religious attitude, such as that of any scholastic. But we have tried to point out that theology was not the keynote of Halevi's *Alkhazari*, contrary to what the historians have asserted. Theology was not his prime interest, nor was it the chief interest of Gersonides and the other medieval Jewish philosophers.⁷ They would agree with the philosopher of Halevi's dialogue, who says to the king of the Khazars: From a philosophical point of view, all religions are equal, and you can even invent one if you need it as a controlling force for the government of your people. (p. 38). Even though Halevi is at odds with the philosopher, it is his opinion none-the-less that is voiced in the above utterance, as well as in that of the

⁷ See my article in the *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XIV, No. 7, 1917, pp. 184 ff.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

islamic doctor who says, all theologies are equally good. All "acknowledge the unity and eternity of God, and that all men are derived from Adam and Noah" (p. 42.) Halevi's interest is more in the differentiating character of religions, in the series of events out of which religion evolves. He believes that certain events supposed to have occurred for the good of society and the individual make such a deep impression upon our soul that a religious feeling evolves. The characteristic religion of each nation is but the recognition of a different series of events supposed to have occurred for their own good. Jewish religion, according to Halevi, is a code regulating our life so as to adjust our behavior to the historic traditions. We have seen above (p. 72) that Gersonides, too, looks upon the precepts of faith as a civil code. But for Gersonides they must primarily be preserved for the sake of civil peace; for Halevi, in order to keep alive tradition. With the Jew the emphasis is less on religion, and more on the various aspects of his historic traditions, and on the Bible not as it is, but as lived and interpreted by his ancestors. Scholasticism has no ancestry; but the medieval Jew is wrapped in the life of his forefathers. He exists among the nations because

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

of the merit of his fathers, because of the revelation they have experienced, the traditions they handed down, because of the prophecy among them, the sacrifices on the Temple's altar, *etc.*

Even the term "Revelation" has a different meaning with the scholastic than when referred to by Halevi, Gersonides or any Jewish philosopher. For the theologian revelation bespeaks an act of grace on the part of God who revealed Himself to the human race once on Mt. Sinai, and another time through Jesus. The content of this revelation is in the Bible. Revelation however was not the premise out of which the Christian scholastic evolved his philosophy. There was a dualism; on the one hand the truth revealed through revelation, and on the other, that revealed through philosophy. Both truths had to harmonize and become one. Revelation was rather the goal of philosophy; the teachings of philosophy had to lead to revelation. But for Halevi, as well as for Gersonides, philosophy need not lead to revelation, even though it proceeds from it, as we have noticed before. Philosophy may reach its own conclusions. "Heaven forbid that there should be anything in the Bible to contradict that which is manifest or proved." (p. 54.) Gersonides

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

uses the same language: "Heaven forbid that the Torah should contain anything against reason or sense." Besides, with Halevi and the Jewish philosophers Revelation was not an act of grace, but the knitting together of the history of God with that of Israel. Revelation was but a sequence to the Exodus from Egypt,⁸ and a reaffirmation of the selection of Israel which logically is prior even to the creation of the world.⁹ Denying God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage, the death of their tormentors, and the capture of their goods and chattels, would be even worse than denying the existence of God. (p. 60.) The story of the desert and the manna is also irrefutable—a thing which occurred to 600,000 people for forty years.¹⁰ To the Jew these and the subsequent historical events are continuous phases

⁸ "The law was given to us because He led us out of Egypt and remained attached to us." . . . (p. 47.)

⁹ "The whole evolution took place for the sake of this essence, in order that the divine influence should inhabit it." . . . (p. 110.)

¹⁰ The act of revelation "is to be compared to the first act of creation. The belief in the law connected with those scenes is as firmly established in the mind as the belief in the creation of the world, and that He created it in the same manner in which He, as is known, created the two tablets, the manna and other things." (p. 63.)

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

of God's Revelation. The cosmic story is fused with the story of Israel.

Halevi's naïvete and childish faith in the interweaving of God with his people might appear ludicrous to us, but it becomes rather touching when one penetrates the spirit of it. It was not the conceit of an individual, nor the pride of a nation, but the emotional conviction that a partnership with God on the one hand, and a re-enforced spiritual isolation on the other, would bring one nearer to the depths of life. Nachmanides, (1195-1270), a typical Jewish thinker, also neglected by the historians, fears the philosophers primarily because their teachings might lead to a denial of the past and a despair of the future.¹¹

(II)

Gersonides, on the other hand, takes great pains to transcend his Jewish past while philosophizing. He looks upon life as a logical problem to be solved by mere reasoning and speculation. Prophecy, he says, is far below wisdom, since in prophecy you reach the truth without knowing the rea-

¹¹For an excellent study of Nachmanides see Schechter's *Studies in Judaism*, First Series, pp. 99-141.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

sons and arguments. The highest kind of knowledge is the syllogistic one. With such divergent philosophies, Gersonides and Halevi should have been the antipodes of each other. Indeed, at first glance they are wide apart. Halevi starts with historical, while Gersonides starts with metaphysical assumptions. Halevi hates Greek philosophy; Gersonides is not only a strong admirer of Aristotle, but also a lover of Greek. Halevi is a poet,—the nation's lyre,—immortalizing the nation's joys and sorrows; Gersonides is an extreme intellectualist, who grants immortality to the intellect only. Halevi makes God the supreme national being, the God who took Israel out of Egypt and showed them His wonders, while Gersonides judaizes the Greek, or rather the Aristotelian God. But the Jewish outlook forces itself upon Gersonides and tempers his intellectualism to such an extent, that we can approach him to Judah Halevi more than to Plato or Aristotle.

In spite of Gersonides' conscious efforts to be objective, in him too we can trace, in a lesser degree though, that very philosophy which is so grossly and naïvely propounded by Halevi. Intellectually Gersonides may have made some progress towards enfranchisement, but not so emo-

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

tionally. He may be a Greek or scholastic when he deals with the remote intelligibles, but in the grasp of life he is primarily Jewish. Witness the fact that his great work on ethics,—*Toaliyoth*—for which he was more famous in his time than for his *Milhamoth*, is based not on his metaphysics, but on the biblical narratives. While Halevi, as we have seen, blends his intellectual and emotional content, Gersonides suppresses the latter. But it is none the less there and it tinges his philosophical attitude. With all his intellectualism, Gersonides shows a passionate love for biblical facts. Real ideas, he says, must follow existence. We must not deny existence,—(he means the facts related in the Bible),—in order to persist in the ideas we have of things. Only the concept which obtains the sanction of experience,—(meaning biblical experience),—is the searched for truth. After seeking in the Bible all the proofs which could bear favorably on his theory he seals his chapters with the prayer: "The Lord be blessed, I have verified my theory through facts." Like Halevi, Gersonides weaves his metaphysical theories with the contents of Jewish history. He shares Halevi's belief in the ultimateness of the Jewish race experience, and accepts

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

the chain of Jewish traditions as the premise of thought. In the moments when he forgets his Active Intellect, Gersonides speaks of the exodus from Egypt, of the precepts of the Torah, and of Jewish historical events in the same vein as Halevi.

But with Halevi you can sense the truth of Jewish history and tradition through intuition. With Gersonides you must reach the truth through reasoning, speculation and logic. The truth,—namely, the spirit of Jewish history,—is alike for both. But the one takes it as a matter of fact which requires no reasoning, while the other reasons it out. The results are not so far apart, since Gersonides' reasoning starts with certain premises taken for granted. The difference, however, makes of Judah Halevi the typical Jewish philosopher, and of Gersonides the typical scholastic. Judah Halevi was prompted to philosophize merely to convince the reader that there was no other philosophy than the Jewish philosophy, a philosophy derived from Jewish experience, testified to by the whole race, by the prophets, and by the very presence of God in their midst. Any other philosophy must either approach the Jewish philosophy, or it is no philosophy at

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

all. But Gersonides, Maimonides and all the Jewish scholastics had to philosophize in order to appease the troubles of the perplexed. Halevi's facts were to Gersonides real truths, experienced by a race selected by God as the manifestation of His presence in the world. But the facts in themselves were not sufficient for the philosophical interpretation of the world. They even obscured the intellectual horizon. Gersonides could not share Halevi's peace of mind, nor could he, like Plato, do away with obstructing facts and relegate them to the realm of phenomena. The path to truth seems to be blocked; in the attempt to hew a road we see scholasticism in its workings.

(III)

The philosophical systems of the Jewish scholastics vary with the respective conflicts arising from within Judaism. We cannot assume with the historians that throughout the medieval period the system of Judaism was the same for all, without any individual variation. The rational Judaism of Saadia is distinct from the spiritual Judaism of Bahya; the national and historical Judaism of Halevi differs from the static Judaism of Maimonides; and the emotional

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

Judaism of Nachmanides is different from the intellectual Judaism of Gersonides. And such Jewish philosophers as Israeli and Gabirol who did not take a definite attitude towards Judaism, or did not distinguish themselves by some great *Halachic* work, were neglected or forgotten, even though they equaled in rank the foremost scholastics.

In addition to the scholastic problem of faith and reason, the Bible and Aristotle, there is the *cult of the Jewish law* which plays a far greater rôle than the other two factors in the philosophizing of the Jew. For, the nature of his philosophy is greatly determined by what in his eyes would strengthen *the fence around the law*. Theologically, the Christian and Jewish thinkers joined hands together, and Maimonides found a satisfactory solution which was followed by Alexander of Hales, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. But it was not faith or dogmas that bothered Gersonides and the other Jewish scholastics. No cosmological principle could disturb their religion. It made no vital difference to Halevi, Maimonides and Gersonides whether the world was eternal or created. We can reason one way or the other. Mysteries upon which the Torah

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

did not clearly express itself are of no great value to human perfection. To the medieval Jew the knowledge of the essence of God was less important than the knowledge of His laws as manifested in the Torah and in the Talmud. It is through the laws of the Talmud that we have to seek for an interpretation of the laws of nature. Hence Maimonides, the philosopher, writes first of all his talmudic code, the *Yad Hahazaka*, where he classifies and analyzes the talmudic laws. Gersonides writes on the roots and principles of the talmudic precepts. Maimonides feels it such an impelling duty to explain the allegories of the *Midrashim*, that in his commentary on the Mishnah he promises to write a work on the subject, entitled, *Sefer Ha-Sheva'ah* (The Book of Reconciliation). It would instruct us upon the nature of man and his relation to the world, as viewed through the *Midrashim*. For the Jewish scholastic it was not so much the problem of Plato or Aristotle *versus* the Bible, but the problem of the physical world, such as is grasped through science and interpreted by Plato or Aristotle, *versus* the spiritual world within the fence of the law. The continual attempt to adjust the two, to interrelate them,

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

and the effort to keep the spiritual world intact not at the expense of the truth, form the dramatic struggle of Jewish scholasticism. The philosophical variations in which these struggles crystallize themselves, together with the care of safeguarding Judaism, form the history of Jewish scholasticism, with Philo at the beginning and Gersonides and Crescas at the end of the chain.

As Jewish scholasticism has not been viewed in the light of a triangular problem, a brief survey of it, with the emphasis on the cult of the law, will help us get a better understanding of Gersonides and his struggles. On the other hand, in following Gersonides in his struggles, in his mode of approach to Judaism, in the motive of his work, in his problems and solutions, we may get a better glimpse into Jewish scholasticism and realize that it had too many problems of its own to be perturbed by those of the outer world. The Jewish philosopher starts philosophizing not because of the riddles of the world, nor because of the Greek stimulus,—as is usually believed,—but because of a certain awakening on his part that science runs ahead of his traditions, that philosophical solutions must be sought prospectively instead of retrospectively. The

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

impetus given to Jewish philosophy was not the contact with another people, but a disturbance in the equilibrium of the Jewish past. The past cannot be reintegrated into the present. This disequilibrium may be the result of outward contact, but the impetus to philosophizing however is the disequilibrium in itself, and not the outward contact, as historians are wont to assume.

Jewish scholasticism could be traced as far back as Philo, (early 1st century), even though Philo could not be reckoned as a Jewish philosopher, as he knew little of Jewish thought and tradition, and was more Greek than Jewish. But internal struggles about the cult of the law start in his time. Hence the need of self-analysis, which at the same time leads to reflection upon the world outside the fence of the law. Philo was the exponent of those who started to feel discrepancies between their inner Jewish world and the outer Greek one.

Saadia, (892-942), the first Jewish philosopher, witnessed the internal conflict between Karaite and Rabbinite, which centered about the problem of tradition. His chief aim seems to have been to safeguard Judaism from an inner split. The various philosophical schools in Islam,

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

the *Kadariya*, the *Mutazila*, and the *Ashariya* were both a help and a menace to his purpose. Hence he wrote his "*Beliefs and Opinions*" with the triple purpose of fighting on the one hand the Arabic school wherever it was necessary from a Jewish point of view; of applying some of their teachings to Judaism; but above all to put an end to the inner strife.

The author of the "*Duties of the Heart*", Bahya Ibn Pakuda, (11th century) a *Dayan*, i.e., a judge of the Jewish community, was impressed by the comparative laxity in the observance of the precepts. He sought means of strengthening them and therefore urged the purification of observances with emphasis on "the duties of the heart."

Like Halevi, the famous poet and philosopher Solomon Ibn Gabirol (11th century) betrays no mental struggle while philosophizing. But unlike Halevi, he does not unify Judaism and philosophy *per se*. It seems as if he looked upon them as two different realms without any basis for unification. But this is so un-Jewish that Ibn Daud, author of "*Emunah Ramah*" (*The Exalted Faith*), the precursor of Maimonides, criticizes

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

Gabirol very severely for not having taken a Jewish attitude in philosophizing.

The real Jewish scholastic struggle starts with Abraham Ibn Daud (12th century) the first Jewish Aristotelian. This is the time when the study of philosophy is thought to be injurious to Judaism. Hence Ibn Daud's attempt to show that an investigation of the principles of the Jewish religion would strengthen it, and that it could even stand the application of Aristotelian principles.

Maimonides and Gersonides are the two most prominent philosophers who grapple with Aristotle, but their respective methods and their struggles are of a different nature. In bringing out the difference between the two, we may be able to see more clearly the struggles of Gersonides. We venture that Maimonides felt as though theology was a superimposed structure on Judaism. The heart of Judaism is the *Yad Hahazaka*, the "Powerful Hand," wherein he tried to strengthen the talmudic law by clarifying and codifying it. This is binding on all. But theology is a different one for the man of reason and for the masses. Anthropomorphism is a necessary expression for the masses, to whom the Torah has

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

to yield in appearance. But in reality the Torah whispered to the wise, and pointed toward a purified rational conception of the world, even such as the greatest rationalist, Aristotle, conceived it. Give to the masses what they require, namely all the inconsistencies of theology, such as God knows the contingent, the particulars; God is omniscient and man is free. But hint to the wise that "God's ways are not our ways;" that the attributes which we attribute to God are only by way of homonymy. In a most hidden manner, beswearing the reader not to divulge whatever he gets out of him, Maimonides attempts on the one hand to put the law on its own strength, and on the other to abstract theology from it. Once abstracted from the law, no harm could issue if we amalgamate that theology with Aristotle, in the hope of reaching the absolute truth. The bitter fights against Maimonides sufficiently testify that such method of procedure runs counter to the Jewish spirit.

Gersonides must have felt that Jewish theology could not be torn away from tradition, from the laws and from historical experiences. He had a keener historical sense than Maimonides who was amazed at the fact that the Torah polluted its pages with the narratives of war. He is more

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

radical than Maimonides in his theological views, but does not do away with scriptures so readily as Maimonides. In appearance Maimonides sacrifices scientific investigation to the exigencies of the Bible. He rejects the theory of eternity, while Gersonides upholds it. But Maimonides relegates to the unknowable whatever interferes with his scientific theories, while Gersonides looks upon tradition as an organic part of the scientific explanation of the world. He makes a serious attempt at establishing a science of the Torah which will both help towards the interpretation of the world, and also avoid quarrels and arguments among the believers. He turns towards the sciences of the day for help and guidance in his Jewish task. A study of Averroes convinced him that the government of the sublunary world was relegated to the Active Intellect. The logical consequence would then be an Aristotelian God. But it is not so easy to have an Aristotelian God take the Jews out of Egypt and share the joys and sorrows of their national life. Gersonides' Active Intellect stands like an opaque wall between God and the chosen people. In his attempts at piercing this opaqueness on the one hand, and in intellectualizing Jewish life on the other; in the

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

struggle between his quasi-mechanistic conception of the world and his spiritual heritage which tended in another direction, we see the culmination of Jewish scholasticism.

(IV)

It was a Jewish concern that led Gersonides to his metaphysical investigations. When torn from its Jewish *motif*, the chief aim of Gersonides' *Milhamoth* is lost sight of. Owing to his predominant discussions of pseudo-Greek philosophy, he was taken for an Aristotelian with no other aim than that of following Aristotle. If it were merely a matter of gathering his words and summing them up without searching for the guiding thread, one could easily overlook his other phases and take him for an Aristotelian. But we would be missing thereby the angle from which to envisage him. It is true that he wanted to introduce Aristotle into Judaism. But he turned to Aristotle in the hope of finding a solution to some of the perplexities arising from his Judaism.

Gersonides himself did not state explicitly what his aim was. It is extremely difficult to disentangle in him the relevant from the irrelevant. However, amidst his deluge of thoughts there is

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

running a central idea which is underneath the surface. From the title Gersonides chose for his work, we ought to infer what was uppermost in the author's mind. At first, the title "*Wars of the Lord*" does not seem congruent with the body of the book. A discussion of philosophical problems is not the "wars of the Lord." But that his title is an organic part of the work, and not a mere whim of the author, could be seen by unifying the various thoughts on the theme running through his introduction. In the first sentence he tells us that he is dealing in this book with most precious questions, on which depends man's intellectual success. He concludes the introduction,—(the few pages following this statement are merely a reference to style and form),—with the assertion that previous discussions of the subject by the ancients, (*i.e.*, by both scientists and interpreters of the Torah), were all erroneous. He has found it out after most careful investigation and reasoning. On a previous page, he assures us that his is the correct view because he has examined every part of the subjects in question most minutely. What on the previous page would give an impression of presumption and boastfulness, becomes now clear to us. His is the correct view

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

because it has *the double verification of science and the Torah*. He does not state this explicitly, but it is at the bottom of his thought. Following the statement that previous views are all erroneous, he tells us, "and since it happens with this that whatever has been explained to us through science is the opinion of the Torah, therefore we have called this '*The Wars of the Lord*.' " For, in fighting erroneous opinions of predecessors, he fought the battles of the Lord. Then Gersonides goes on, "Let not the reader think that it is the Torah that has been leading and determining us . . . unless the truth itself was so." When Gersonides' motive reveals itself to us, the reading of his work becomes easier and more enlightening. We begin to understand, for instance, why at times he tells us that science must be put above the teachings of the Torah, and at other times that the Torah must have the upper hand on science. Critics of Gersonides have gathered one or the other set of statements, according as they wanted to prove him a liberal or an orthodox. In reality Gersonides pronounces the two diametrically opposite statements in one breath. When we enter into his attitude of mind we realize why they do not appear contradictory

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

in his eyes. "The Torah does not force us to believe an untruth" is continually repeated by Gersonides. But the full meaning is not grasped unless we realize that he at the same time means that *the truth is contained in it*,—one must seek it until it is discovered. This is the keynote to Gersonides' philosophy, namely, that science, the theoretical explanation of the world, and the Torah, the experience of the Jewish people,—both reveal at bottom the same truth through a different language. The truth of the Torah needs for its realization to be both experienced by the Jewish people and to be verified by science. Science is the key to the Torah. On the other hand the Torah being the ground whereby man is led to his highest perfection, it must help him also to reach the truth in deep subjects which are very hard to grasp.¹² If such is the nature of the Torah, it is self-understood that it would not lead us to believe what is not true. The truth of the Torah and that of science are exactly on the same level, and are not complete unless verified by each other. They stand in the same relation as sense-experience to reason.

Gersonides must have found his conclusion

¹² Milhamoth, Book VI, Pt. 2, Ch. 1, p. 419.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

more satisfactory than those reached by his two masters Averroes and Maimonides. It saved him from Averroes' double truths of faith and reason, and from the double one of Maimonides, that of God and that of man,—a distinction which Gersonides so hated. He approaches Halevi in so far as the motive is concerned. Both wanted to establish the identity of Jewish history and philosophy, but their divergent views of history led them as far apart as Jewish scholasticism is from ancient Hebrew thought. The beloved of the Song of Songs, vibrating with life and the love of life, is for Gersonides but the symbol of the Active Intellect. Halevi turns the Bible into a dynamic resort of self-consciousness. Gersonides makes it an intellectual synthesis, a universal objective intellect, a palpable mirror of what medieval philosophy termed the Active Intellect. For Gersonides, history is more or less of a static absolute. Its unfolding process is but the concretization of the Active Intellect into individual events. Torah and Active Intellect are interchangeable terms. You study the nature of the one, and you know also that of the other. From the events in Jewish history you learn the rôle of the Active Intellect in prophecy, miracles, and

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

providence. These in turn receive new light through a better penetration of the Active Intellect.

The problem for Gersonides becomes, What are those Jewish events? We cannot take them as they are, because the Torah is unfathomable. Interpretation of the Torah is necessary, because with the progress of time every age gets a better understanding of the words underneath which lies the eternal truth. Time and science are great factors for a better understanding of the Torah. The Israelites of the time of Moses were not philosophers.²³ The Talmudists, Gersonides believed, had a far better understanding than their predecessors, but they could not have reached perfection, (presumably because they did not have the help of Aristotle). Neither the Active Intellect nor the Torah could be conceived in their entirety. But with every truth we acquire we come nearer to them. In order to completely conceive the Active Intellect, one has to conceive all the sciences and the whole of existence. It is likewise impossible to have a perfect scientific conception of all that is contained in the Torah.

²³ Commentary on the Torah.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

"We know a little of it, and ignore much."²⁴ Like the Active Intellect wherein all sciences and intelligibles are contained, the Torah too, is the source of all truths. It is the imperfection of our intellect that keeps us from understanding the real truth contained in the Torah. In practical matters for the guidance of social life, the Torah has been most explicit. It gave us 613 commandments. The Torah did not extend its scheme of positive and negative commandments to the higher moral regions, for fear that the difficulty of living up to those higher ideals would lighten the importance of the other commandments in the eyes of the people. But the Torah, says Gersonides, has stimulated us towards this higher sphere of life through its narratives of the perfect conduct of the famous ones. Such narratives purport to lead us in the footsteps of the great ones and make us follow their actions. And the narratives of the hideous actions with the evil consequences which usually follow from them, aim to make us flee from such actions ourselves. Gersonides carried on the work of the Torah in the ethical sphere by writing his book *Toaliyoth*.

But the great difficulty,—and for an intellec-

²⁴ See his introduction to the commentary on the Torah.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

tualist like Gersonides this is the most important of all,—is to find an intellectual norm for the search of the theoretical truth. One gathers from Gersonides that he feels that it is as difficult to discover the truth contained in the Torah as it is to find it in the metaphysical world. He is quite aware of the fact that unless we have a guiding thread, we can no more discover the truth in the Torah than we can in the world we live in. But once we have started on the right path, the Torah can serve as a test for our speculations, and the latter can verify the Torah. It is only when one has verified the other, that we are on the road to truth. When the results of science do not coincide with the Torah, the fault lies with our understanding. Both ends must be verified. We have to think over our speculations, reject the opinions of preceding philosophers as well as of preceding interpreters of the Torah, reason as hard as we can, weigh all arguments *pro* and *con*, forget the Torah during our reasoning process, and come back to it for reinforcement. Through such double process a successful solution will be reached. It is interesting to note that Gersonides uses the word "successful" instead of "harmonious". *Harmony* implies a mutual adjustment,

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

while the term *success* implies complete redintegration. From the tacit assumption of his problem, Gersonides' task becomes a double one. On the one hand he has to study science *per se*, and on the other the Bible, the Talmud, the *Midrashim*,—the whole of the Jewish heritage.

One can see throughout the *Milhamoth* attempts of Gersonides both to improve on the science of his day, and to redefine Judaism. He ventured, as we have already mentioned, his own hypothesis in astronomy, and would not accept the philosophical opinions of his predecessors without the minutest scrutiny. Great as Aristotle was in his eyes, he criticized him on a number of points. For instance, he found fault with him regarding his mechanical proof of the existence of God. He also combated him on the questions of time and motion, proving that both were finite and not infinite.

The method used by Gersonides for redefining Judaism is the same artificial scholastic one which robs scriptures of their spontaneous vibration, of their naïve, enchanted life, in order to discover in them the scientific truths of the time. It matters little whether or not Moses and the prophets aimed at that particular meaning, or whether they

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

even knew of it. The essential is that the divine ground of the Torah and of the prophets embraces all true ideas. However, Gersonides did not follow the allegorical method of medieval times. He used allegory only when the subject would lend itself to it. He inferred no allegory from literal meanings. He criticizes Maimonides and others for interpreting the names of Eve, Cain, Abel and Seth as merely allegorical. He says that many great scholars have erred in it and have lost thereby the meaning of the Torah. It is not worthy of any one to take the words of the Torah for a picture unless the scriptural passage in itself would point to a symbol.¹⁵ The serpent, the tree of knowledge, the garden of Eden, all these Gersonides explains as allegorical, because they are so in their very nature. He also objects to reading Greek ideas into the Bible. If those ideas are the ultimate truth, the Torah would not force us to believe an untruth. Nor does he find it necessary to give different interpretations to the words, as did Maimonides. If you look for the real meaning, truth will be discovered. Gersonides had greater difficulty than the others in tracing his

¹⁵ Biblical commentary on the explanation of the Garden of Eden.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

ideas in the Bible, on account of his intellectual honesty and his radical ideas, and above all on account of his theory of the Active Intellect. However, he does not, like Ibn Ezra, cloak his thoughts in a mysterious garb, and contrary to Maimonides, he insists that it is one's duty to impart the truth. He does not shrink from facing it, and expresses his views frankly and fearlessly. For instance, the ground and order of his Active Intellect allows no room for miracles, but the Bible records them. Hence Gersonides admits on the one hand their existence, as a record of sense or race experience; but on the other hand he fearlessly puts miracles in the same class as natural phenomena. The glory of God manifests itself more in the permanent regularity of nature than in its sudden changes. Miracles serve merely as a verification of the true prophet. But the greater the prophet, the more the miraculous manifestation approaches that of a natural phenomenon. Gersonides takes up all the miracles in the Scriptures and analyzes them in a way to show their approaches to natural phenomena. The rainbow is a natural phenomenon. The confusion of languages in Babel is a most desirable social phenomenon. The pillar of salt in the destruc-

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

tion of Sodom refers to Sodom and not to Lot's wife. The crossing of the Red Sea was connected with the course of the tides. And so he goes on with all the other miracles. He also attempts to prove that the biblical references to the angels are allusions to prophets and not to supernatural beings. At times he explains them away as a vision of prophecy, a dream while awake, a faculty of the soul, *etc.*

In his interpretation of Judaism, Gersonides is often carried away from the Jewish stream, more on account of his intellectualism than because of his radicalism or cosmology. His conception of the Active Intellect as the ground and order of the sublunary world, even though not of Jewish growth, is not totally estranged from Jewish reflective thinking. From the way the terms "*Ruah Hakodesh*" (*Holy Spirit*) and "*Shechina*" have been used in some rabbinical passages, one can see the assumption of "an active penetrating spirit or principle in the universe holding all its parts in order and symmetry. While being a manifestation or reflection of the Deity, it is not the Deity Himself."¹⁶ This principle was not hypos-

¹⁶ Such is the description of *Shechina* by J. Abelson in his book, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature*, London, 1912.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

tatized, but it was easy for an intellectualist like Gersonides to erect it into his Active Intellect. The word *Shechina* is derived from *shachan*, which means to dwell. It seems to have originated not from the perplexing problem of the relation of God to the laws of the universe. It was the relation of God to His people that preoccupied the Rabbis of old. Wherever the term *Shechina* is found in the *Targumim* or in talmudic literature, it is always in the sense of God's dwelling house, the abiding of God in a certain spot of the Holy Land. Gradually, however, the term *Shechina* transcended its own meaning, and stood, even though in a vague form, for the ground and system of laws. Notions of divine immanence such as are held by Gersonides are found throughout the talmudic literature. "All is in God and God is in all,"—a favorite expression in medieval liturgy,—could be traced in the *midrashic* literature in a number of forms. But to bring quotations in favor of the immanence or in favor of the transcendence of God, is to take the pebbles for the flow of the river. Transcendence and immanence are combined in the Jewish conception of God.

One does not become estranged from Judaism

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

on account of one's philosophical ideas. But an intellectual abstraction of life is not compatible with Judaism. Even though Ben Sirach and many others speak of the Torah as a divine static pattern, the Jew looks upon it not as a cosmic power, but as "a tree of life to them that grasp it." However, in spite of Gersonides' divergence from the dynamic essence of Judaism, he remains a Jewish philosopher, because the Jewish background is an inherent part of his philosophy, and the very source of his struggles.

It is true that the very definition of scholasticism lies in struggle,—the struggle between faith and reason. There can be no greater drama than the struggle which St. Augustin went through to save his soul. But Plato helped towards his salvation, just as Aristotle was of help to the church. For the Arabs the problem was simplified. They believed that Greek philosophy was as true as revelation, that there existed an *a priori* accord between that philosophy and Arabic dogma. But the conflicting emotions of the medieval Jew had a deeper root. His disturbance came from the perception of the possibility of a life different from the one with which he was so fully imbued through his precepts, prayers, festivals, *etc.* The

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

Torah would not force us to believe an untruth . . . yet the Torah itself is the truth. It was not the conflict between science and religion, theology and free thinking. Gersonides was at any time ready to sacrifice theological tenets to science. The truth must be placed above revelation, if the impossible should happen and revelation did not reveal the truth. In the abstract, Gersonides could deny miracles, creation out of nothing, God's knowledge of particulars, providence, the biblical conception of prophecy, *etc.* But what Gersonides could not deny and felt that he had to reckon with was the race experience which permeated his life. One could picture with what trepidation Gersonides made attempts to pierce through the fence. His emotional and mental struggles explain the exuberance with which he prefaces the *Milhamoth*, and the thanks he gives to God at the end of each part of his book. His joy was great at the thought that he succeeded in unifying his Jewish and philosophic outlook. His very attempts to shut off the Jewish past behind him and to view the world with the eyes of reason were made in the hope of gaining thereby a better understanding of this past.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

(V)

It is through this concern about the Jewish past that we can earmark the Jewish philosopher. For instance, Spinoza cannot be classed with Jewish philosophers, because *his concern was not the Jewish past*. Spinoza's system in itself is not alien to Jewish thought. Throughout Judaism, from its very inception, there run streams of thought akin to those of Gersonides as well as those of Spinoza. Parallels of the thoughts expressed in the *Ethica* could be traced throughout the rabbinical and Jewish medieval literature.²⁷

It was not Spinoza's ideas that estranged him from Judaism. Even his most radical ones had already been expressed before him by medieval Jewish philosophers as well as in the old rabbinical literature. The very tenets for which he was excommunicated had been maintained by Maimonides, Gersonides and Crescas. Spinoza's statement before the synod that condemned him, that angels were merely phantoms, that the soul was identified with life and consequently mortal, was but expressing Maimonides in a more explicit

²⁷ For the relation of Spinoza to Jewish Medieval Philosophy, see Joel's *Beitraege zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, Breslau, 1876.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

manner. His attributing extension to God,—another statement before the Synod,—only carried out to its logical conclusion Gersonides' and Crescas' theory of attributes. It is the *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* that runs counter to the Jewish spirit, not for the free ideas, but for a different outlook on the Jewish past. The contradictions in the Bible became for Spinoza mere contradictions, and not mysterious pointers towards the right solution. He speaks with contempt of the efforts of the Rabbis to reconcile them. He criticizes Maimonides and Gersonides for vitiating the scriptural meaning by infusing ideas which to them appeared true. Herein Spinoza, even though of Jewish birth and training, ceases to be a Jew in the traditional sense of the word. He does not realize that Jewish life lay not in the Bible, but in that very interpretation of it. From the point of view of Jewish history Spinoza's importance lies not in his *Ethica*, but in his *Tractatus* which substitutes Bible criticism for biblical interpretation. This explains the great animosity against him. His disturbance to Jewish tradition was like that of Galileo and Copernicus to medieval scholasticism.

That the animosity against Spinoza was due

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

to his displacing Jewish tradition rather than to his pantheism, can be seen from the contrasting fate of the founder of *Hassidism*, Israel Baal Shem Tob, (1700-1776), whose thoughts, if formulated into a system, would have been identical with Spinoza's. The Spinozism of Baal Shem Tob has been erected into a religious cult by his followers. No one, not even the opponents of *Hassidism*, would dare maintain that the philosophy of Baal Shem Tob is not part and parcel of Judaism. But Baal Shem Tob was a *Jewish* Spinoza. His was a Jewish Spinozism; *i.e.*, his Spinozistic philosophy was primarily a tool for the deciphering of Jewish life. Joy, quietude, love of God, were for him essentials for a perfect *Jewish* life. The Jewishness could not be dissociated from his conception of life in general. God and life are manifested through the Torah and the old rabbinical interpretation. Objection may be raised to classing Baal Shem Tob with Spinoza, when the latter is identified with irreligion, and the former with the highest form of mystical religion. The stress which Baal Shem Tob lays upon prayers, the miracles which he is reputed to have performed, his conception of the Deity, could be cited as sufficient proof of the disparity

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE SETTING

between him and Spinoza. But by prayers Baal Shem Tob means a kind of fusion with God, in which man forgets his wishes, his needs, and loses even consciousness of his very existence.

To enter into a discussion of Baal Shem Tob would carry us beyond the scope of our work.²⁸ Our aim here is not to seek for a comparison between Baal Shem Tob and Spinoza, but merely to point out that with the same philosophy maintained by both, the one was regarded as a saint, and the other was excommunicated. Spinoza was persecuted because in eliminating tradition as a source of knowledge, he undermined the very roots of Jewish philosophy. Baal Shem Tob in his criticism of the past turned towards that past for the betterment of the present.

To conclude, what we term Jewish philosophy cannot be torn from the Jewish emotional content, because this content is the very object of Jewish philosophy. History, philosophy, theology, all become fused into one. Theology, too, is but the national history in another form. It is not the history of God, but the history of God in fellowship with Israel.

²⁸ For a study of Baal Shem Tob see Schechter's illuminating essay *The Chassidim* in his "Studies of Judaism," First Series, pages 1-45.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

The above discussions do not imply that one born a Jew could not philosophize without prejudice. We need not seek for the Jewish element in Spinoza, Solomon Maimon, Ferdinand Lassalle, or Bergson, but only in those philosophers in whom the Jewish past forms an integral part of their philosophizing. We have been dealing here not with philosophy as such, but with Jewish philosophy of the medieval ages, at a time when Christian philosophy was bound up with the church, and Jewish philosophy with the national content.

CHAPTER V

LIST OF GERSONIDES' WORKS

A COMPLETE list of Gersonides' writings is given by Steinschneider and by Renan. As their works are easily accessible, I have not given here the catalogue numbers of the manuscripts and the libraries where they are to be found. My aim here is to point out Gersonides' fertility of mind.

Renan lists the following writings of Gersonides, most of them in MS. form.¹

1. *Commentary on the 13 Principles of R. Ishmael.*
These are logical principles laid down by the *Tanai* for expounding the Torah. Renan is somewhat in doubt about the authorship of these commentaries, but attributes them none-the-less to Gersonides. This work was probably intended by the author as an introduction to the Commentary on the Talmud.
2. *Mehokek Sephun:* This is an epistle explaining the *Agadic* passages of chapter 5 of the *Tractate Baba Bathra* of the Babylonian Talmud. Gersonides' authorship of this work also is somewhat in doubt.

¹ Les écrivains juifs français du XIV^e siècle, pp. 252, ff.

A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

3. Renan also lists three works of a liturgical nature, but as their authorship is somewhat in doubt, I do not mention them here.
4. *Sepher Ha-Hekesh Ha-Yashar*: (The book of syllogisms). In this book Gersonides examines the inexact reasoning he met in Averroes' interpretation of the second analytics of Aristotle. This treatise was written in 1319, and is one of Gersonides' first philosophical productions.
5. *Ma'ase Hosheb*, or *Ma'ase Mispar*: A treatise on Arithmetic, 1321. The first part deals also with general principles, and is based on Euclid books 7, 8, and 9.
6. Commentary on the Introduction and books 1, 3, 4, and 5 of Euclid.
7. Explanation of Averroes' Resumé of the Physics of Aristotle, June 1321.
8. Explanation of Averroes' Middle Commentary on the Physics, July 1321.
9. Explanation of the Resumé of the Treatise of Generation and Destruction, September, 1321.
10. Explanation of the Resumé of the Treatise of the Heavens, September 1321.
11. Explanation of the Treatise of Meteors, December, 1321.
12. Explanation of Averroes' Middle Commentaries on the *Organum* in 4 parts, the first three of which were translated into Latin by Jacob Mantino and published in Vol. I of the Venice edition of the Works of Aristotle. Gersonides wrote this work in February-March, 1323.

LIST OF HIS WORKS

13. Commentary on First Discourse of Averroes.
14. Notes on the Commentary upon Books XI to XIX of Aristotle's Treatise on Animals. January 1323.
15. Commentary on Averroes' Resumé of the Book of the Soul, November 1323.
16. Commentary on Averroes' Resumé of Aristotle's *De Sensu et Sensibili*. February 1324.
17. Commentary on some letters of Averroes relating to the union of the separate intellect with man.
18. Commentary on the Middle Commentary of Averroes relative to the Metaphysics. (This work is not extant, but is cited in the Milhamoth and in the Commentary on Ecclesiastics.)
19. Commentary on the Book of Plants.
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 - Samuel—January, 1338.
 - Proverbs—April, 1338.
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A STUDY OF GERSONIDES

(There are no known commentaries of Gersonides on the later prophets and on the Psalms.)

21. *Toaliyoth Midotiyoth*: Moral lessons drawn from the Bible.
22. Astronomical Tables: These are found in the fifth part of the *Milhamoth*, but they are also found as separate treatises in several manuscripts.
23. *Milhamoth Adonai*, or *Milhamoth Ha-Shem*: (Wars of the Lord). This book was begun towards the end of 1316 or in the beginning of 1317, and finished on January 8th, 1329.

CHAPTER VI

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