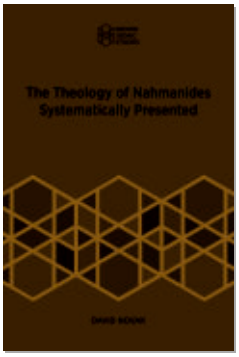
# Introduction

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# Introduction

1. *Rabbi Moses ben Nahman Gerondi*

Rabbi Moses ben Nahman Gerondi is known in Hebrew literature by his acronym Ramban. But to modern readers of European languages he is Nahmanides, and to his Spanish contemporaries he was Bonastruc da Porta. Each of his names tells something about his career. As Rabbi Moses ben Nahman Gerondi he was the most influential rabbinical leader of the Jews of Spain in his time. As the Ramban he has been a mainstay of Jewish thought throughout the centuries since his death. As Nahmanides he is gaining increasing recognition among students of Western religious thought. And as Bonastruc da Porta he played a central role in the complex relations between Spanish Jewry and the Christian society in which they lived.

Nahmanides was born in 1194 in Gerona, a small but culturally vital Jewish community near Barcelona, the capital of Aragon. He was descended from an aristocratic rabbinical family and was educated in Talmud and Kabbalah by leading scholars. Achieving a reputation as a brilliant rabbinic scholar at a very young age, he was widely consulted on halakhic and theological questions, and his introduction of the works of the tosafists of Northern France into the curriculum of his academy revolutionized Talmudic scholarship by synthesizing Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions. His endorsement of Kabbalah, which was just beginning to emerge in Spain in his day, enhanced its respectability and broadened its audience. In the controversy over Maimonides' theological works in the first third of the thirteenth century, his efforts toward a compromise helped to preserve the access of traditional Jews to these works and fostered the integration we now take for granted of the thought of Maimonides into the generally conservative canon of Rabbinic literature.

After beginning his career in Gerona, Nahmanides served as the chief rabbinical authority of Catalonia. Although earning his living as a physician, he was a highly effective rabbi, teaching advanced students, deciding

questions of Halakhah and social policy, preaching, and publishing a large body of work. As the leading Jewish scholar in Northern Spain, he was summoned in 1263 by King James of Aragon to dispute publicly with Pablo Christiani, a Jewish apostate who had become a Dominican friar. The topic was a dangerous one: the messiahship of Jesus. The disputation, held in the presence of the king and his court before an audience filled with dignitaries, took place in July in Barcelona. Its outcome was awaited anxiously by both Jews and Christians.

Astoundingly, the King deemed Nahmanides' defense of the Jewish refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah as more convincing than Christiani's arguments. But the victory was pyrrhic. Strong pressures from the Dominicans forced Nahmanides to leave Aragon, and finally in 1267 he emigrated to the Land of Israel. He landed in Acre and soon settled in Jerusalem. As in Spain, he soon attracted many students, and his influence once again became widespread. He devoted the last years of his life to rebuilding the tiny and demoralized Jewish community of the Land into a center of higher Jewish learning.

Before his death in 1270, he completed his great life's work, the *Commentary on the Torah*, tying together the many strands of thought begun in his earlier works. Although this *magnum opus* contains a wealth of literary, exegetical, halakhic, historical and philological material, its theology gives it its profundity and its most abiding interest for Jewish thought and for the larger world.

## 2. *The Reasons for the Commandments*

We discover the heart of Nahmanides' theology in his theory of the commandments.[6] The need for the text of the Torah to be as normative as possible is the main incentive for *derash*, the method developed by the rabbis for unlocking the deeper and wider meaning of the text of Scripture. This method has been used for discovery both of the more precise norms governing action (*Halakhah*) and of the less precise norms guiding thought (*Aggadah*).[7] Inevitably, the search for deeper and wider norms involves the search for the underlying purposes of the Torah, *ta'amei ha-mitsvot*, the "reasons for the commandments." For if the commandments are to be expanded, an orderly elaboration requires some sense of the purposes the divine Lawgiver intended by them.[8] Indeed, the search for the reasons of the commandments is an objective counterpart of the subjective requirement that one who performs a commandment do so with proper intention (*kavvanah*).

*Kavvanah* operates on two levels. The first is the intention of fulfilling a divine commandment; this is called *kavvanah le-mitsvah*).[9] It is because the intention at this level is general that the same formula is used in the benediction required at the performance of most positive commandments:

"who sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to —." What is intended is obedience to the will of God, irrespective of the specific commandment. A deeper level of *kavvanah* makes reference to the specific purpose of *this* commandment and focuses on how one comes closer to God by performing this specific act. This is called "the intention of the heart," *kavvanat ha-lev*.[10] It requires our apprehension, however limited, of the wisdom of God. It is in pursuing this deeper *kavvanah* that the search for the reasons of the commandments finds a more spiritual motivation than sheer intellectual curiosity.

It is the proper intention of the heart that distinguishes authentic religious actions from what my late revered teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, following up on a central theme of Bahya Ibn Paquda's, called "religious behaviorism".[11] Thus, when questioning why the Torah needs a general commandment "you shall be holy" (Lev. 19:2), inasmuch as all the commandments are designed to make us holy, Nahmanides makes the striking observation that one can "be a wretch within the parameters of what the Torah permits" (*naval bi-rshut ha-Torah*).[12] The mere observance of the legalities does not insure one of becoming a holy person, which is the ultimate purpose of the commandments.

Nahmanides is not arguing, of course, that holiness can be attained without observing the Torah.[13] The specific obligations of the Law are indispensable for the human fulfillment that it intends.[14] Yet the requirement of *kavvanah* indicates that the Torah is concerned with much more than behavioral observance. In fact, in this particular passage, Nahmanides shows how the intention of holiness should lead one to do more than the letter of the law requires.

The rationalist Jewish theology of the Middle Ages, especially when influenced by Aristotelian teleology, provided a stimulus and a method to the search for the reasons of the commandments. It assumed that there are always purposes both in nature and in human activities. Thus Maimonides saw all of the commandments as seeking the improvement of the body and society (*tiqqun ha-guf*) or the improvement of the soul (*tiqqun ha-nefesh*).[15] In the third section of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, he argued that the reasons for all the specific commandments could be located under these general rubrics.

Impressive as this method of inquiry can be intellectually, it bears with it some religious dangers. For example, in the *Guide* Maimonides emphasizes the filthy conditions in which pigs live, making pork a food unwholesome for the body.[16] But the same reason might be used to avoid the prohibition, if one could show that it is possible to raise pigs hygienically. If the prohibition serves some mere natural need, that need might be met without, say, avoiding pork. Similarly, when the reason for a commandment is taken to be the improvement of the soul. If, for example, the purpose of the commandment to study the Torah is to apprehend metaphysical truths which can be apprehended, in principle, by anyone of moral probity and intellectu-

al ability, what prevents general metaphysics from displacing the study of the Torah as the highest human activity?[17]

Maimonides clearly emphasized the authority of the commandments regardless of one's apprehension of their reasons.[18] Still, there were religious concerns about the practical neglect of the commandments to which his philosophical approach could (and probably did) lend itself. Such concerns led the rabbis of Northern France actually to ban the study of Maimonides' theological writings. The "Maimonidean Controversy" that ensued, came to a head in 1232, the rabbinic world seemingly polarized between pro and anti-Maimonists.[19] The thirty-eight year old Nahmanides, already a halakhic authority respected in all quarters of the Jewish world, attempted a compromise.

Although himself concerned about the dangers of a philosophical approach to the commandments, Nahmanides defended Maimonides, arguing that his rationalist theology was not intended for the masses of faithful Jews, but only for those who had been exposed to philosophy and so required philosophical justifications as a condition of their own religious stability.[20] Nahmanides clearly agreed with Maimonides that there are reasons for all the commandments. He differed with him, and with all other rationalist Jewish theologians, in his insistence that the reasons for the commandments are not grounded in metaphysics but in uniquely Jewish facts.[21] The project of eliciting these foundations is carried forward in all his writings and becomes the major theme of his crowning achievement, the *Commentary on the Torah*, which he began in Spain before his exile and completed not long before his death in the Land of Israel in 1270.

### 3. *Commandments Based on Nature and Reason*

Some scholars have assumed that Nahmanides' opposition to Greek metaphysics, especially that of Aristotle, means that he could not accept the reality of any natural order. Since the ideas of natural order and universally valid human reason are correlative, it would seem that rejection of nature immediately leads to rejection of reason. So it is concluded that Nahmanides was an "anti-rationalist."[22] But Nahmanides did not reject a natural order or universal human reason.[23] What he did reject was the assumption of some theologians that nature/reason must be constituted according to the categories of Aristotle. His main objection to Aristotle and his Jewish followers was that they assumed that the natural order is all-encompassing and that universal reason suffices for our knowledge of all things, including God. Aristotle and the Jewish Aristotelians seemed to leave no room for creation or revelation, at least as Nahmanides understood these doctrines.

For Nahmanides, rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics did not lead to the rejection of nature or to anti-rationalism but to a more circumscribed conception of the range of nature and scope of reason. In some ways

Nahmanides was more rationalist than Maimonides. Operating within a more limited range, he could more easily demonstrate the truth of reason's claims. This difference is notable in regard to commandments governing interhuman relationships (*bayn adam le-ḥavero*).

The advantages of Nahmanides' approach are manifest, for example, if we compare his treatment of the Seven Noahide Commandments with that of Maimonides. The Noahide Commandments are those laws which the rabbis considered binding on all humankind, the "sons of Noah."[24] These laws, prohibiting murder, incest and robbery, among other crimes, are acknowledged in virtually all societies and are readily seen as requirements of reason. Many Jewish theologians call them rational commandments (*mitsvot sikhliyot*).[25] They belong to what later Jewish thinkers (following Stoic and Christian philosophers) identified as natural law.[26]

In a famous passage in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides states that anyone who accepts these laws only by dint of ordinary reason (*hekhrea ha-da'at*) is not deemed worthy of the bliss of the world-to-come, in which "the pious of the nations of the world" are assured a share.[27] In his earlier *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides seems to reject the very concept of "rational commandments."[28] Some scholars see in these two passages a rejection of any natural law morality. But a better argument can be made that Maimonides was in fact rejecting only a natural law morality not grounded in adequate understanding of the true metaphysical constitution of nature.[29] He was rejecting the religious soundness (although not, perhaps, the political usefulness) of norms discovered or invented by prudence rather than by insight about God and the universe.

According to this approach, the only truly adequate morality is one whose metaphysical grounds are sound and properly understood, and the only truly effective metaphysics is one whose moral consequences are sound and properly understood. For Maimonides there is a strong rational connection between metaphysics and morals.[30] Metaphysics is the deepest ground of morality. It is what makes morality natural rather than merely human legislation. And morality is the most useful fruit of metaphysics. Without morality, metaphysics has no practical or political influence. Without metaphysics, morality has no universal foundation. Thus, in Maimonides' view, metaphysics is more than just theoretical; and morality is more than just practical. The two are linked by reason, and so discoverable from one another by proper use of reason.

Nahmanides did not see any such rational connection between metaphysics and morality. Indeed, his theology leaves hardly any place for metaphysics. The deepest truths about the universe are reached only via revelation. The moral norms evident to reason are those required by any society to fulfill the basic needs of its members for a just and stable order. Ultimately, of course, such a morality must be included in the revealed law. But revelation comes at unique historical junctures, not through constant natural processes, so it cannot function as a rational ground for morality.

Revelation is not, like reason, the discovery of the constant order of the universe. So reason, for Nahmanides, cannot bridge the gap between revelation and morality, as it can bridge the gap between metaphysics and morality for Maimonides.

Yet, as a result of this sundering of metaphysics from morality, the rationality of natural morality is heightened, not lessened in Nahmanides' theology. Maimonides seems to require profound metaphysical insight before the most elemental moral truths acquire their full significance. For Nahmanides, whatever morality humans can learn for themselves is much more directly known. Thus Nahmanides comments, fairly typically:

> Violence is robbery and oppression... for violence is a sin, as is known and universally accepted (*ve-ha-mefursam*).... the reason is that its prohibition is a rational obligation (*mitsvah muskelet*), for which there is no need for a prophet to give a commandment.[31]

Nahmanides accepts the legitimacy of natural law on the interhuman level. But such morality and revelation are not located on the same plane. Morality comes *from* humans (at least in its most elemental manifestations). Revelation comes *to* them. Before Sinai, Nahmanides argues,

> You find that the patriarchs and prophets conducted themselves in an evidently moral manner (*derekh 'erets*).... and inference *a fortiori*, if the patriarchs and the prophets who came to do God's will conducted themselves in an evidently moral manner, how much more so should ordinary people![32]

Morality does not itself lead to revelation, although it is a precondition for it. Morality will not anticipate in any detail either the event of revelation or its rich content.

### 4. *Commandments Based on History*

Those commandments whose reasons seem evident are called *mishpatim*, "judgments." Their locus is the relationship among human beings in daily life. But for Nahmanides the realm of nature (including our political nature) is not where the true relationship between God and human beings is to be found. Nature, as philosophically or scientifically conceived, is a constant order; it does not admit of innovation. But the most elemental fact about God to be recognized by his creatures is that God is the Creator; the universe is the result of his absolutely free act. God can intervene in his universe at any time, regardless of the familiar order of nature. That order is only *usual*. It has no inherent or intrinsic necessity.

This anti-metaphysical point, made by Nahmanides in the thirteenth century was made by David Hume with a different intent in the eighteenth.[33] It is to teach us that the natural order has no ultimate necessity that the Torah places such stress on miracles. For it is through miracles, especially those of a spectacular kind (*nissim mefursamim*), that God demonstrates his power over the universe he created.[34]

Yet these spectacular miracles occurred centuries ago, and even then they were performed rarely. What connection does the ordinary Jew have with such great events? How do they become a personal experience and so impart an appreciation of God's creative power and providence? Nahmanides sees the Torah's solution to this problem in those commandments called *'edot*, "testimonies," commandments based on history. Glossing the commandment that the Exodus "be a sign upon your hand and a symbol between your eyes, for with a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt" (Exod. 13:16), which rabbinic tradition saw as mandating the regular wearing of *tefillin*, Nahmanides writes:

> This is because God does not perform a sign (*'ot*) and demonstration (*mofet*) in every generation, to be seen by every evildoer and denier (*kofer*). Rather, he commands us continually to perform a memorial (*zikaron*) and sign of what our eyes saw.[35]

Nahmanides here voices a participatory view of history. This perspective, which he often restates, contrasts sharply with the more familiar, illustrative view of history. Our social sciences, modelling themselves on the natural sciences, typically seek regularities in human behavior and attempt to see all events as examplars of constant processes. History thus becomes a gathering of data from the past to broaden the number of examples that illustrate various specific principles. Interest in the past is governed by the interests of the present and their projection into the future.[36]

Nahmanides' view of history reflects a much more ancient assumption. Human life in the present, including all the normal processes of human behavior, derives its meaning from great events in the past. The task of history is not to incorporate the events of the past into perennial patterns discernable in the present and projected into the future but to see the processes of the present as marks and symbols of the great events of the past.[37] For Jews, this incorporation of the present into the past is the function of those commandments that symbolically reenact the great (and rare) past events.

Emphasizing our symbolic participation in the great events when God made himself so powerfully manifest to the people of Israel, Nahmanides indicates that this participation is not just passively experienced. It requires the determination to act with an openness to the divine presence when and where it has revealed itself. God does not perform his mighty acts routinely,

lest we become passive spectators rather than active participants. For those who deny God's providential power, even regular performance of miracles and signs would be wasted. Obstinacy would block their message.[38] But, for those who have an underlying propensity for faith, the activation of that propensity demands symbolic participation.

It is with such themes in mind that Nahmanides writes about Abraham's "trial," stressing the importance of action rather than mere passive good will:

> A trial (*nisayon*) is called by this name because of the one who is tried. But the one who tries him, may He be exalted, commands it in order to bring matter from potentiality to actuality, so that the one tried may receive the reward action deserves, not just the reward for having a good heart... and so indeed it is with all the trials in the Torah. They are for the good of the one who is tried."[39]

Like the commandments based on nature (*mishpatim*), the historically based commandments (*'edot*) fulfill human needs. The *mishpatim* fulfill the needs of humans in their relations with one another in society; the *'edot* fulfill the needs of humans in their relationship with God in history.[40] Ordinary people need to share in the experience of the spectacular public miracles of history, either directly or symbolically, in order to appreciate God's transcendence of the natural order and their own capacity for transcending it, even if only partially.

Among Nahmanides' predecessors, his rather empirical view of nature comes closest to the view of Saadiah Gaon (d. 942). His view of history and its significance comes closest to that of Judah Halevi (d. 1140), whose influence he acknowledged.[41]

### 5. *The Metasocial/Metahistorical Commandments and Kabbalah*

The commandments of the Torah designated as *huqqim*, "statutes," have always posed a special challenge to those who are committed to the view that all the commandments of the Torah have reasons. For these commandments seem to be arbitrary expressions of God's will. As one seminal midrash put it, God in effect says to the people of Israel, "I have enacted a statute (*huqqah haqqaqti*), I have decreed a decree (*gezerah gazarti*), and you are not permitted to transgress my decrees!"[42] This is stated in the context of a discussion of the institution in the Torah generally acknowledged as the most enigmatic, the rite of the Red Heifer (Numbers 19:1-22). Yet the midrash here seems to regard the ritual as paradigmatic of all the Torah's commandments.

Another midrash seems similarly to generalize from the pattern of the *huqqim* and announce that all the commandments were given only to test

human acceptance of God's will:[43] The rabbis picture Satan and the nations of the world taunting the Jewish people for their tenacious fidelity to these mysterious commandments.[44] Such passages clearly place the burden of proof on those who affirm that all the commandments of the Torah do have reasons, however obscure. Rationalists are challenged to suggest at least some plausible reasons for the more problematic *huqqim* or else acknowledge that all the commandments are in essence divine decrees, and that even when there do seem to be reasons, these are at best surmisals or rationales, rather than primary groundings of God's true intent.[45]

But Maimonides and Nahmanides, both committed to the thesis that there are reasons for all the commandments, developed their own distinctive means of explaining the more difficult commandments of the Torah. It is at this level of exegetical challenge that their fundamental theological differences become most apparent. Indeed, it is against the background of Maimonides' treatment of these commandments that Nahmanides' position emerges most clearly by the contrast.

For Maimonides, truth and goodness are discovered through political science, physical science, or metaphysics.[46] His theology gives primacy to those commandments whose purposes are most evident to human reason: those that order society toward the good (*mishpatim*) or the mind toward the true (*de'ot*). The historical commandments (*'edot*) are set within this basic context. Thus observance of the Sabbath and festivals serves the political purpose of promoting fellowship through common leisure and celebration, and the intellectual purpose of signalling truths about the creation of the cosmos.[47] History, as a locus of God's revelation through unique events, is not an immediate consideration.[48]

Thus, for example, the Sabbath is instituted for the sake of remembering that "you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you forth from there" (Deut. 5:15). But Maimonides stresses the Sabbath's universal significance: practically in fulfilling the physical need for rest; intellectually, in fulfilling the spiritual need to affirm God's creation of the universe.[49] Maimonides does invoke history when explaining some of the *huqqim*. He sees them as reactions to idolatry in ancient times.[50] Thus he gives two reasons for the prohibition of eating meat cooked in milk. First, he reasons that the high fat content of such food is unhealthful. Second, he surmises that cooking a kid in its dam's milk might well have been a pagan rite which the Torah did not want Israelites to imitate in any way.[51] As for the question why a reaction to a vanished pagan rite should remain normative, it should be remembered that Maimonides saw the propensity to idolatry as perennial. So even prohibitions of particular temporal manifestations of idolatry still serve to emphasize the importance of perpetual diligence against this ever virulent spiritual disease.[52]

For Maimonides, then, the rationally evident commandments are primary; the explicitly historical commandments are, in effect, dehistoricized; and the mysterious *huqqim* are seen as reactions to historical circumstances.

In his ordering of the commandments, it would seem that the *mishpatim* (political and intellectual) come first, the *'edot* second, and the *huqqim* third in importance. For Nahmanides, the order seems to be diametrically reversed. The *mishpatim* are least important, precisely because they are most universal. The *'edot* are more important, because they are more distinctive. And the *huqqim* are most important, since they are the most distinctive of all and sanctified by their very mystery.

Thus in explaining the *huqqim* Nahmanides invokes what he deems the true, deepest teaching of the Torah — Kabbalah. His reliance on Kabbalah has long been a subject of debate. Some scholars of a highly traditional cast believe that the *Zohar* is literally the work of the second-century Tanna Simeon bar Yohai. They hold that it was known immemorially and passed down hermetically by a small elite for a thousand years before its publication in the late thirteenth century. Such scholars think that Nahmanides' invocation of Kabbalah is highly selective. They hold that there is much more to his kabbalistic theology than he revealed in his writings.[53] Kabbalists often claim that the esoteric nature of Kabbalah requires such restraint. But even this view does not explain why Nahmanides invokes kabbalistic doctrines when and where he does–why what was revealed to kabbalists is most frequently used to explain the reasons for the *huqqim*.

Most modern scholars accept the view of Gershom Scholem that the *Zohar* is largely the work of Rabbi Moses de Leon, who wrote after Nahmanides and was influenced by him.[54] They ascribe Nahmanides' sporadic invocations of Kabbalah to the still unsystematic nature of the tradition and regard de Leon and his successors as the true systematizers.[55] There is no evidence that Nahmanides' kabbalism was systematic.[56] Unlike the later kabbalists, from de Leon on, Nahmanides never attempted to explain everything in the Torah in the light of Kabbalah. Unlike most of them, he regularly assumed the reality of nature and history in explaining the commandments and events in the Torah. Indeed, as we have seen, his use of nature in explaining the *mishpatim* approximates Saadiah Gaon's theory of rational commandments, and in his use of history in explaining the *'edot* follows Judah Halevi's conception of unique events.

The *Zohar*, by contrast, does not effectually admit a realm of nature or a realm of history. It takes all relations to be internal to the life of God.[57] Space and time are unreal. There is no history, no nature, in the sense of a lasting created order resulting from a unique divine act.[58] God's creation is no longer transitive, its object is not clearly distinct from its subject. For the post-Nahmanidean kabbalists, the only reality separate from God is demonic (literally, *sitra ahra*, "the other side"). Relationship with this is tantamount to annihilation.[59] Thus the *Zohar* treats the Seven Noahide commandments not as rational requirements of interhuman relations but as ultimate proscriptions of separation from the divine life.[60] Their specific interhuman dimensions become incidental.

Zoharic kabbalism leaves no room for the Saadian rationalism that Nahmanides used in constituting the natural law of interhuman relations. For such rationalism assumes created space outside God, the result of God's creation as a transitive act.[61] History again, presupposes an essential distinction between space and time.[62] In the idea of nature, space and time are linked. But the idea of freedom demands their separation, lest everything be determined. When time is seen as distinct from space, it is opens up the future as a horizon of actions not determined by what already is. This opening is crucial for the emergence of personal responsibility. In Nahmanides' view of history, as in Halevi's, history is an encounter between God and his creatures.[63] The relationship is free on God's part because it is not determined by the natural order. God's miracles recapitulate the original free act of creation and reaffirm God's transcendence. And the relationship is free on the part of human beings, because our response to God's presence is not determined by nature.[64] Responding to God's holy actions, we can choose to perform holy deeds. Holiness transcends what has already been made. Thus history is a story of events rather than the record of inevitable processes. Its trajectory is towards culmination in a transcendent world-to-come. This realm is not an eternal reality already present parallel to nature for Nahmanides, as it is for Maimonides. Rather it lies in the future. It will be completely new.[65]

Historically constituted freedom, then, is a transitive, undetermined power shared by God and humanity, although the freedom of the Creator is not constrained like that of creatures. Our observance of the commandments is almost always bounded within natural limits, unlike God's performance of miracles.[66] So divine and human freedom interact in the covenantal relationship, but not symmetrically. God always retains his limitlessness. Man is always limited. Without some structure, however, divine freedom would be mere caprice; all the more so, human freedom. Caprice is freedom that intends no relationship.

The alternatives to that terrifying possibility are to constitute a realm of covenantal history between God and man, or to constitute a nature within God, into which humans can be embedded. The later kabbalists chose the second option. But as a result, spontaneity and freedom were quickly lost. The determinism of nature was now projected into the Godhead itself. Miracles became events determined by this higher, implicit nature.[67] Human good became more and more a product of divine causal power[68]; human evil, more and more an outcome of the generalized power of the demonic rather than of specific human choices.[69]

Nahmanides is not content with such an outcome. His eclectic method enables him to shift his theological ground repeatedly. At times he locates the divine-human relation between God and man. At other times, especially when explaining the *huqqim*, he locates the relation within the Godhead. This shifting prevents us from reconstructing a consistent, systematic theology for Nahmanides, as one can for Saadiah, Maimonides, or the

*Zohar*. Yet Nahmanides' use of Kabbalah is consistent with the profound conservatism of his halakhic and theological writings.[70] For the higher truths of the Kabbalah, invoked as explications of the *huqqim*, pose little threat to nature or history and do not pretend to displace the broad truth of the Torah. Kabbalah in Nahmanides will not revolutionize Jewish theology through and through. But it will allow him profoundly to explain what earlier theologies had not explained or had explained inadequately. In the process, the *huqqim* are transformed from stumbling blocks of faith to symbolic hints of God's deep mysteries.

Opening his comments on Leviticus, where the Torah deals most fully with the sacrificial system, the context for so many of the *huqqim*, Nahmanides rejects Maimonides' historicization of the Biblical cult of sacrifice. He is convinced that Maimonides has read into the Scriptural texts a thematic that is not truly there. Maimonides had said that the reason for the sacrifices is that the Egyptians and Chaldeans, in whose land Israel had dwelt, "had always worshipped cattle and sheep [and goats]... because of this He commanded them to slaughter these three species for the sake of God, in order that it be known that what they had thought was the epitome of sin is that which they should now offer to the Creator.... And so will the corrupt beliefs, which are diseases of the soul, be cured, for every disease and every sickness is only cured by its opposite. – These are his words in which he spoke at length, but they are hollow words (*divrei hav'ai*)."[71]

Nahmanides offers two alternative explanations of the significance the Torah ascribes to the sacrificial system. The first is psychological and spiritual: The sacrifices satisfy the profound human need to be reconciled with God in thought, in word, and in deed. This interpretation is immediately attractive to the imagination; it "draws the heart."[72] Yet Nahmanides follows it by alluding to the *true*, kabbalistic view, which grows from the realization that the unique name of God (YHWH) and not his lesser names is invariably the one used in connection with the sacrifices. Nahmanides' invocation of Kabbalah here as providing the truth (*ha-'emet*) does not mean that he regarded all other interpretations as false. There is a hierarchy of truth, with Kabbalah at the top. Its teaching is that human action here below, when performed properly and with proper intention (*kavvanah*), positively affects the divine life above. By arguing in this vein, Nahmanides raised what seemed a historical contingency in Maimonides to a level vital in the very life of God.

The reasons Nahmanides assigned for the *mishpatim* and *'edot* are usually grounded in human need: Human beings need laws to govern their relationships. Jews need to commemorate the great events when God's power and providence were so unmistakably manifest. But with the *huqqim*, especially the positive precepts of the Temple cult, human need is not the essential teleology at work. Commenting on the verse, "And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt to dwell (*le-shokhni*) in their midst" (Exodus 29:46), Nahmanides writes:

> There is in this passage a great mystical teaching (*sod gadol*). For according to the ostensible meaning of the text (*ke-fi peshat*) the presence of the *Shekhinah* is a mortal need (*tsorekh hedyot*), not a need of the Supernal (*tsorekh Gavoah*). But the theme is analogous to that of the verse, "O Israel, it is in you whom I glorify myself" (Isaiah 49:3).[73]

Ordinary people, who live basically within the realms of nature and history – realms separate form God's being, although not from God's power – need to see the commandments as fulfilling their ordinary human needs. Extraordinary souls, however, live essentially within the divine life, as the Temple is within the divine life. They need only to see the commandments as fulfilling divine needs, with which they are so intimately involved.

The subject of divine needs engrossed the kabbalists after Nahmanides.[74] Some even saw the emanation of the multifold world from divine oneness as resulting from God's need for an "other."[75] Nahmanides does not seem to intend so radical a suggestion, that creation is not wholly a free act. What his invocation of kabbalistic doctrine seems to mean is that *since* God has chosen to extend himself into mutiplicity, he has *thereby* made himself dependent on it, *insofar* as he is present in it. But, as the wholly transcendent Infinite (*Ayn Sof*), God is never wholly dependent on what participates in his life. For he is never wholly present in it.

In his introduction to the *Commentary on the Torah*, Nahmanides emphatically affirms the kabbalistic dictum that the Torah's sanctity reflects the fact that its words are all permutations of the names of God.[76] Thus God is present in the Torah and in that sense needs it as a person needs any vital organ. But God is always more than his names; indeed *Ayn Sof* (the "In-finite") is a negative term: Essentially God is nameless. At this level, what Nahmanides seems to mean by *divine need* is that by performing the commandments, especially the *huqqim*, at least some Jews are not just passive recipients of God's grace but active participants in the divine life. This aspect of Nahmanides' kabbalistic theology probably had a greater influence on subsequent Kabbalah than any other.[77]

One can always debate the adequacy of Nahmanides' kabbalistic interpretations of the positive *huqqim*, but they frequently offer a richer vein of interpretation than Jewish rationalism had to offer. So it is not hard to see why they were followed up much more thoroughly by later generations than were the rationalist interpretations. But Nahmanides did not limit himself to the positive *huqqim*. The negative *huqqim* also call for interpretation. Maimonides saw these as proscriptions of ancient idolatrous practices. Idolatry itself was the prime human violation of natural law, denying the manifest reality of the transcendent God. Any idolatrous act was in essence a violation of the natural order, an order not invented by human reason but discovered by it. Like the *mishpatim* and the *'edot*, then, the *huqqim* too, for Maimonides, were intelligible ultimately in terms of nature.

For Nahmanides too these prohibitions forbid the violation of an order which is not invented by human reason. But it is not an order which is discovered by human reason either. Rather, the *huqqim* often proscribe violation of the order created by God but discoverable only by revelation. Such laws are fundamentally different from the *mishpatim* or the *'edot*. Their purposes are seen only when something of the created order is revealed to us that is beyond both ordinary human reason and even extraordinary human experience. Commenting on the verse, "You shall keep my statutes (*et huqqotay*): you shall not crossbreed species" (Lev. 19:19), Nahmanides writes:

> The *huqqim* are the decree of the King (*gezerat ha-melekh*), which he decreed (*yihoq*) in his kingdom without revealing their utility (*to'eletam*) to the people... The person who crossbreeds species changes and falsifies the very work of creation, as though he thought that God did not adequately fulfill every need (*she-lo-hishleem kol tsorekh*).[78]

Crossbreeding is, in effect, a denial of the adequacy of creation. It is tampering with the created order, as though God did not satisfactorily finish his work and man could improve upon it. The proscription, then, is for the sake of affirming that God's creation is perfect, although human reason frequently does not understand how God's providence operates in creation and does in fact secure the needs of every creature. Fuller understanding of the ways of providence must await revelation of the sort that Job ultimately received from God.[79]

The prohibition against changing the created order, even to improve it, is in essence a proscription of magic. Maimonides justifies the prohibition of magic not because it is objectively efficacious in disrupting the natural order, but because it is subjectively dangerous.[80] It distorts our understanding of the true operations of nature, which are made out through scientific investigation, not superstitious opinion. Human action cannot alter the settled natural order, let alone affect the transcendent life of God. But for Nahmanides, magic is objectively efficacious. It is proscribed not because belief in it is false, but because it is an evil attempt to manipulate God for human advantage.[81] Such evil can indeed upset the order of creation, perhaps even thwarting temporarily the fulfillment of divine plans. It can never overturn God's sovereignty. But we mortals are forbidden to act as if we had control over God. As Lenn Goodman puts it, magic is proscribed by Nahmanides in much the way that children are forbidden to mock the authority of their parents. Human power is justified (and efficacious) ultimately only when it is a faithful participation in the life of God and his governance of the universe.

6. *The Primacy of Exegesis.*

Nahmanides' writings, especially his *Commentary on the Torah*, voice recurring themes that can be sytematically related. But many readers have failed to grasp his system because they expect a *wholly* kabbalistic system of theology. Not finding that, they often assume that that there is no system at all. Taking at face value Nahmanides' treatment of Kabbalah as the highest truth of the Torah, they assume that he must have regarded it as the sole truth of the Torah. But, as we have seen, he also finds in the Torah a commitment to the reality of nature and history, even if that level of truth is transcended by the Kabbalah. Kabbalah, the highest truth, does not displace all other truths but puts them in perspective. Kabbalah alone does not suffice to explain the Torah. But it is necessary, in Nahmanides' view, to any adequate theology of Judaism.

One cannot be sure why Nahmanides did not develop a more homogenous theology, like that of the *Zohar* and some subsequent kabbalists.[82] He certainly had the intellectual gifts for systematic thinking. But had he presented a strictly kabbalistic theology, the richness of his approach would have been much diminished. His eclecticism allows a diversity of the types and methods of interpretation; and it is primarily as an exegete that he is best understood. A comprehensive system would have narrowed his exegetical options.[83] As an exegete he could find levels of meaning in Scripture which may seem contradictory when arrayed side by side. But for him, evidently, the text addresses different persons in different ways simultaneously. In the end, the richness of the text takes precedence to the abstract elegance of a comprehensive system.

Thus Nahmanides' theology, is more heuristic than constructive. Its purpose seems always to be to explain the text rather than simply to use it to illustrate themes the author brings to it. The fruits of his method provide all Jewish thinkers with a wealth of substantive insights into the Torah and the model of that method itself, a powerful theological hermeneutic. Where Nahmanides is systematic, his system is more hermeneutical than philosophical. In Isaiah Berlin's well known division of thinkers into hedgehogs and foxes: those who relate everything to a single central vision and those who puruse many ends, often unrelated or even contradictory,[84] Nahmanides is more the hedgehog than the fox, a more centrifugal thinker, where, say, Maimonides is more centripetal. The precedence of datum over theory, of exegesis over system is, after all, what makes one a scriptural as opposed to a systematic theologian.