God, Torah, and Israel
Abraham Joshua Heschel

Judaism is a complex structure. It can be characterized exclusively neither as a theological doctrine nor as a way of living according to the Law nor as a community. A religious Jew is a person committed to God, to his concern and teaching (Torah), who lives as part of a covenant community (Israel).

Judaism revolves around three sacred entities: God, Torah, Israel. The Jew never stands alone before God; the Torah and Israel are always with him.

God as an isolated concept may be exceedingly hidden, vague, and general. In Jewish experience the relation between God and man is established as a concrete and genuine situation in finding an answer to the questions: What are the acts and moments in which God becomes manifest to man? What are the acts and moments in which man becomes attached to God? To the Jew, the Torah is the answer.

Jewish existence is not only the adherence to particular doctrines and observances but primarily the living in the spiritual order of the Jewish people, the living in the Jews of the past and with the Jews of the present. Not only is it a certain quality in the souls of the individuals but it is primarily involvement and participation in the covenant and community of Israel.

It is more than an experience or a creed, more than the possession of psychic traits or the acceptance of theological doctrine; it is, above all, the living in a holy dimension, in a spiritual order. Our share in holiness we acquire by living in the Jewish community. What we do as individuals may be a trivial episode; what we attain as Israel causes us to grow into the infinite.

Since sanctity is associated with each of these three entities, the question arises whether they are all on the same level of holiness, whether they form part of a hierarchy, or whether a dialectic relationship among them exists that is too subtle to be stated in a simple brief statement.
Because of the power and preciousness of the three entities, there is a tendency to extol and to overstate one at the expense of the other two. Various movements in modern Judaism have tended to indulge in such extravagance.

With some degree of justification it may be said that classical Reform Judaism has concentrated on ethical monotheism as the essence of Judaism. Secular nationalism has made the peoplehood of Israel its central concern, and neo-orthodoxy, in its eagerness to defend the traditional observances, has stressed the supremacy of the Torah and Law.

The purpose of this essay is an effort to clarify the relationship of God and Torah in the light of classical rabbinic literature, and to elucidate the classical rabbinic doctrine of the interdependence of the three entities.

GOD AND TORAH

The Torah, the comprehensive name for the revealed teachings of Judaism, has been an object of love and adoration. According to the school of Rabbi Akiba, the Torah has a concrete as well as a spiritual reality; it not only exists as a book in human possession; it also exists in heaven as well as on earth. Indeed, the Hebrew term for revelation is literally "Torah from heaven."

What is the relationship of Torah and God? What does the Torah mean to Israel?

The Torah is not only identified with the divine wisdom which preceded the existence of the world; its worth surpasses the value of all things.


Two thousand years ago in Alexandria, we are told in a legend, a sage of the Greeks asked a sage of the Hebrews:

Why are you Jews so proud of your heritage? We Greeks have Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. What have you? Our sages have discovered the idea of the cosmos. What have yours done? How can you even venture to compare your intellectual heritage with ours?

"True," said the Jew, "you have discovered the cosmos. Yet what we have transcends even the mystery and vastness of the cosmos."

"What can that be?" queried the Greek.

Came the reply: "We have the Torah." 4

This legend reflects a view not foreign to hyperbolic rabbinic thought. Not only does the Torah transcend the cosmos, but "any given part of the Torah is of greater importance than the cosmos." 5

The Torah determines both the essence and the existence of the universe. When God decided to create the universe, say the rabbis, he consulted the Torah. It served as his blueprint for creation. 6 The nature of creation was determined through the Torah. Even the initial existence of the cosmos is dependent upon the Torah. "The existence of the Torah is a necessary condition for the existence of the cosmos." 7

---

4 This story is mentioned in an essay by Deissman which regretfully I cannot locate now.

5 Yerushalmi, Peah 1:1 (15c!).

6 Genesis Rabba 1:2.

7 Tankuma, Tavo 3.
How vast is the cosmos! Yet somewhere in the dimension of space lies its limit. Is there an entity without any limit? Yes, said the enthusiastic rabbis, the Torah.8

Not only was the existence of the Torah the necessary requirement for the creation of the cosmos; it is also the necessary condition for its continued existence. The world was created on approval. Unless the Torah was accepted at Sinai, the cosmos would have to be returned to chaos. There could be a cosmos only with the Torah. The absence of the Torah would imply the absence of the universe. With Torah comes the divine blessing of an ordered creation. Without it, there is danger of a return to the abyss of cosmic confusion. The Torah is the ground of all beings. The creatures of heaven and earth cannot exist without it.9

When one gives a gift in love to another, part of the giver is given with the gift. The Torah is God's gift to his creation and to his creatures. When God gives the Torah, it is as if he gives of himself.10

A parable;

Once there was a king who had an only daughter whom another king married. When the latter wished to return to his country and take his wife with him, the father said, "My daughter, whom I have given you in marriage, is my only child. My love for her is great. I cannot part from her. Yet I cannot ask you not to take her to your realm. It is now her proper home. Permit me this one request. To whatever distant place you take her now to live, always have a chamber ready for me that I may dwell with you and with her. For I can never consider really leaving my daughter!"

So said God to Israel: "I have given you a Torah from which I cannot really part. I cannot tell you not to receive it in love. Yet I request only this. Wherever you go with it, make for me a house wherein I may sojourn. As it is written: Let them

8 Genesis Rabba 10:1
9 Avodah Zarah 3b; Sanhedrin 99b
10 Exodus Rabba 33:6; see also Tanhuma, Tarumah
make me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them”  
(Exodus 25:8).\textsuperscript{11}

Is not a child both a part of and apart from its parent? So is the Torah part of and apart from God. When Israel accepts the Torah, she accepts God.

A child’s presence testifies to the life of its parent. The Torah testifies for God.

Once a king had a daughter. He built her palaces with many great halls. His decree went forth: Whosoever is granted an audience with my daughter is to be considered as being in my presence. Whosoever dares to insult my daughter, it is as if he insulted me.\textsuperscript{12}

The literary metaphors in which God's relation to the Torah is described may be compared to the rabbinic description of the relationship between the Shekinah (God's indwelling or presence) and the community of Israel. Participation in the same events links them, one to the other. It is almost as if the fate of one determined the fate of the other.

As reflections about the relationship between God and Israel develop, the interdependence of God and Israel becomes more emphatic. As the love between them intensifies, the father becomes dependent upon the daughter for love, devotion, and care. In effect, the daughter assumes the role of mother. Israel remains no longer the receptive child. God's actions are in a way determined by and dependent upon those of the child.\textsuperscript{13}

The parent bears the child. Yet elements of the parent are borne by the child. Similarly, the Torah, which comes from God, carries the presence of God within its words. Since God is the source of all wisdom, the Torah is the treasure house of all wisdom. The spirit of God hovers over the

\textsuperscript{11} Exodus Rabba 33:1; see Leviticus Rabba 30:13  
\textsuperscript{12} Tanhuma, Pekuday 4.  
\textsuperscript{13} Pesiktha de Rab Kahana 1:4; see Abraham J. Heschel, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 66 ff.
waters—these waters are the Torah. The Torah is all-inclusive. "Review its words again and again, all is contained in them."  

The child has qualities of the parent. Like God, the Torah transcends space and time. It is an element of heaven, which was put upon the earth. It is eternity perceived through the given moment. Within it dwell secrets of perfection, visions of beatitude.

Perhaps the imagery describing the Torah is too exalting and consequently, excessively audacious. Perhaps the image is too closely applied to the subject. Perhaps the Torah is identified too closely with divine wisdom, and there is a possibility of confusing the child with the parent. It is hardly acceptable, for example, to consider divine wisdom to be restricted to the Torah alone.

The tendency to assert a close identity between the Torah and God's wisdom may lead to the danger of making the Torah a substitute for God. One is tempted to understand the Torah not only as possessing a divine quality, as being saturated with divinity, but as being divinity itself, and consequently as being an object worthy of meditation and devotion in man's yearning to cleave to a higher reality than himself. In this view, divine wisdom is not only in the Torah; it is the Torah.

However, again and again we are admonished against taking a totalitarian view of the Torah. God is greater than the Torah. He who devotes himself only to Torah and does not cultivate awe of God is regarded as a failure.

Raba said:

> When man is led in for judgment in the next life, he is asked, "Did you deal honestly in business? Did you fix times for the study of the Torah? Did you engage in procreation? Did you hope for salvation? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom? Did you learn by means of deductive reasoning?"

---

14 Aboth, ch. 5, end
Even so, if 'the awe of the Lord is his treasure,' it is well. If not, it is not well."¹⁵

From this, Rabbi Joseph of Trani, a Talmudist of the latter part of the sixteenth century, concludes: The study of Torah is worthless when not accompanied by awe and fear of heaven.¹⁶

There is an often-quoted remark that God has nothing else in this world but the four cubits of the Torah's Law,¹⁷ as if the law were the only treasure cherished by God.

Other statements, however, insist: "The Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing else in his world but awe and fear of heaven."¹⁸ "The Holy One, blessed be He, has in his treasury naught except a store of awe of heaven."¹⁹

In the liturgy asking blessings for the new Hebrew month, according to the Western European Jewish ritual, we pray for both "love of Torah and awe of heaven!" One complements the other. Jewish religious consciousness must embrace both.

For all the extreme praise of the Torah, its real preciousness is not in its qualities but in the fact that the Torah is God's Torah. The Torah is not an end in itself; it is transcended by God. The purpose of giving the Torah was to sanctify God's great name.²⁰

The sanctity of the Torah is great. For example, one who leaves out or adds a letter to its text is compared to one who causes the entire world to be destroyed. Even so (says Rabbi Hiyya), it could still be asserted that it

¹⁵ *Shabbath* 31a
¹⁶ *Response of the Marharit* (Joseph of Trani), Part I, 100
¹⁷ *Berakoth* 8a
¹⁸ *Shabbath* 31b
¹⁹ *Berakoth* 33b.
²⁰ *Yalkut Shimoni, V’ethanan*, 837
is better to remove a letter of the Torah than for God's name to be publicly desecrated.  

There are three cardinal sins: idolatry, adultery, and murder. More severe than they is the sin of desecrating God's name. "God shows indulgence toward idolatry . . . adultery . . . and murder . . . but does not show indulgence to him who has profaned his name."  

There were many debates concerning the scope of the study of the Torah. When the religious obligations were listed, the study of the Torah was counted among those which have no limit to their performance. He who does more becomes more praiseworthy. After all the religious obligations had been enumerated, it was concluded that the study of the Torah is equivalent to them all.  

The ideal is study for "its own sake," meaning God's sake,, and not for the sake of the Torah. Occupation with the Torah for its sake means "Because the Lord has commanded me, and not for the purpose of gaining recognition."  

Rabbi Bannah, a Palestinian tanna of the third century, used to say:

Whoever occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake, his learning becomes an elixir of life for him . . . But whosoever occupies himself with the Torah not for its sake, it becomes for him a deadly poison.

This emphasis upon the correct motivation applies to all other commandments as well as to the study of the Torah.

An accepted statement of rabbinic tradition is that not study but the deed is the most important thing. Together with this, Rabbi Jose a

21 Yebamoth, p. 79a
22 Leviticus Rabba 22:6; Midrash Tehillim 27:2
23 Peah 1:1
24 Rashi to Taanith 7a
25 Taanith 7a; Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 306
26 Aboth 1:17
Palestinian tanna of the second century, said, "All one's deeds should be for the sake of heaven." The Mishnah, after dwelling upon all details of the sacrificial laws of animal and meal offerings, concludes with the general principle: "It is the same whether a man offers much or little, so long as he directs his heart to heaven."

The great sage Hillel was not praised for his learning alone. His greatest merit was that "all his deeds were for the sake of heaven." A favorite saying of Raba was "The goal of wisdom is repentance and good deeds ... If one does good deeds for other motives than their own sake, it were better had he not been created.

Rab, celebrated Babylonian amora and founder of the academy of Sura (died 247), said: "Always let a man be occupied with Torah and religious precepts even if not for their own sake. For observance not for their own sake will eventually become observance for their own sake."

Commenting on this, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1555-1630?) wrote: "While one is studying Torah with ulterior motives, in the course of one's study, one will learn that the tradition teaches that to act in such a way is a great sin. He then becomes encouraged to observe for the sake of the commandments themselves. However, preoccupation with the Torah because of ulterior motives is a sin in itself."

---

27 Aboth 2:12
28 Menachoth 110a
29 Betzah 16a
30 Berakoth 17a
31 Jewish teachers of the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. who produced the Gemara for the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds.
32 Pesachim 50b; Yerushalmi, Hagiga 1:7 (76c)
33 Shnei Luhoth HaBrit, p. 371b; see also Yehiel Halperin's Arche He Kinuyim, "Avodah Zarah," "All worship not performed for the sake of heaven is to be termed idolatry."
Though expressions such as "awe or fear of God," "awe of heaven," "fear of sin," are common in rabbinic literature, there is no such expression as "awe or fear of Torah." One must always live in the awe of God (Deuteronomy 6:13). To paraphrase an old rabbinic saying: One must not be in awe of the Torah but in awe of Him who gives the Torah.

In the Palestinian Talmud it is written:

Nehemiah of Emmaus, the teacher of Rabbi Akiba, who learned all the minute peculiarities and details of the methodology of rabbinic exegesis from Rabbi Akiba, once asked, "What is the meaning of the verse One should be in awe of one's God"? He said, "One must be in awe of God and his Torah."  

However, in the Babylonian Talmud, the story is reported differently:

Nehemiah of Emmaus interpreted the verse One should be in awe of one's God to mean that one would not allow the awe of God to be extended to anything other than God . . . Rabbi Akiba disagreed: The verse One must be in awe of God teaches that one should also be in awe of one's mentors.

Should one be in awe of God's temple?

The verse reads, "You shall observe my Sabbaths and be in awe of my sanctuary" (Leviticus 19:30). The word "observe" was used in relation to the sanctuary . . . As in the case of "observance" used in relation to the Sabbath, one does not revere the Sabbath but Him who commanded the observance of the Sabbath, so in the case of "awe" used in relation to the sanctuary, one is not to be in awe of the sanctuary, but Him who gave the commandment concerning the sanctuary.

Said Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres (twelfth century),

---

34 Yerushalmi, Berakoth 9:5
35 Kiddushin 57a
36 Yebamoth 6a-b; Sifre, Kedoshim 9od

Heschel’s Playlist – Lehrhaus Judaica
"One should be in awe of God while in the sanctuary. One's awe should be directed to God, not to the sanctuary." 37

To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One (Isaiah 40:25). As God transcends the world, he transcends the Torah. Many rabbinic statements express this view.

Suffice it here to note the general rule. The verse It is time for the Lord to act/They have made void thy Torah (Psalms 119:126) was interpreted to mean: It is time to act for the Lord, set aside the Torah! Sometimes one should annul parts of the Torah to act for the Lord. 38

Rabbi Joshua ben Korha insisted that one must first take upon himself the authority of God before accepting the authority of the Torah 39. The Torah is not to be understood in its own terms. Love of the Torah and awe of God are interrelated. Acts of loving-kindness and study of Torah must go together.

The Torah does not stand alone. It stands with God and with man. Love of Torah links awe of God with the individual performance of deeds of loving-kindness toward one's fellow men. The Torah is the knot wherein God and man are interlaced. However, he who accepts God's existence without accepting the authority of the Torah deviates from Judaism.

Rav Huna, Babylonian amora (ca. 216-ca. 296), said, "He who occupies himself only with the study of Torah is as if he had no God." 40

According to Rabbi Jose, "He who says he has an interest only in the Torah has no interest even in the Torah." 41

---

37 Rabbi ben David, Commentary on Sifre, ibid
38 Rashi to Berakoth 54a
39 Berakoth 2:2
40 Avodah Zarah 17b
41 Yebamoth 109b
He who suggests that the Torah has supremacy, not exceeded by any other being, and that belief in God (or attachment to Israel) is of secondary importance is guilty of extreme distortion. Though the divine is within the Torah, it also transcends the Torah. Even Moses, who received the Torah and achieved the highest level of prophetic attainment, knew that his prophetic illumination and grasp of the wisdom of God were not perfect.  

Though the Torah that Moses received is God's wisdom, it is inconceivable, scholars of later generations maintained; that the Torah he received is exactly the way it was in God's wisdom.

Perhaps Moses did not receive the whole Torah but only a small part of it, only a small part of the all-inclusive store of God's wisdom was revealed on earth. "Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world and all were given to Moses, except one."  

The Torah in our hands is some of God's wisdom but not all of his wisdom. The Torah we have is the unripened fruit of heavenly wisdom. Scripture does not capture the totality of the divine personality. God's mercy, for example, transcends all biblical statements and expectations.

They asked Wisdom: What is the punishment of the sinner? Wisdom answered: Evil pursues sinners (Proverbs 13:21).

They asked Prophecy and Prophecy answered: The soul that sins shall die (Ezekiel 18:4).

They then asked the Torah and she answered: Let him bring a guilt offering and it shall be forgiven unto him, as it says, it may be acceptable in his behalf, in expiation for him (Leviticus 1:4).

Finally, they asked the Holy One, blessed be He, who answered: Let him do repentance and it shall be forgiven unto him. For good and upright is

42 Yebamoth 49b, Rashi ad locum
43 Rosh Ha Shanah 21b.
44 Genesis Raba 17:5
the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way (toward repentance) (Psalms 25:8).\footnote{Pesiktha de Rab Kahana, ch. 38 (ed. S. Buber), p. 158b; see Solomon Schecter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology (New York, 1909), for a note on textual recensions and variants of this source, pp. 293 ff., 294, n. 1.}

A Palestinian agгадist, whose chronology is unknown, argued strenuously against the fate of bastards \textit{(Mamzer is a person born from certain forbidden relationships, or the descendant of such a person. pwp)} namely, their being excluded, according to the law, from the community:

\begin{quote}
Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them (Ecclesiastes 4:1).
\end{quote}

Daniel the Tailor interpreted the verse as applying to bastards. And behold, the tears of the oppressed. If the parents of these bastards committed transgression, why should their descendants suffer? If this man's father cohabited with a forbidden woman, what sin has his descendant committed and what concern is it of his? And there was no one to comfort them! But on the side of their oppressors there was power.

This means Israel's Great Sanhedrin who comes to them with the power derived from the Torah and removes them from the fold, in virtue of the commandment “A bastard shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 23:3). But they had no one to comfort them.

Says the Holy One, blessed be He, “It shall be my task to comfort them. Though in this world there is dross in them, in the World to Come, says Zechariah (4:2), I have seen them all of pure gold.”\footnote{Leviticus Rabba 32:8; see Ecclesiastes Rabba 4:1, and Zohar, Mishpatim, p. 113b.}
According to Nachmanides (born at Gerona, Spain, in 1194; died in Palestine about 1270), the Torah is not the all-inclusive guide to human behavior. "One can be a scoundrel within the letter of the Torah." 47

It has been said: "He who is occupied with Torah is called a King and a Leader," 48 and "He who studies Torah without ulterior motives, it is as though he built both the heavenly and the earthly Temple." 49 Nevertheless it was believed that the rewards in the afterlife extended to the pious go beyond the attainment of wisdom and study of the Torah. A favorite saying of Rab was that in the future life "the pious will sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the radiance of the divine presence." 50

He who provides God with an image ascribes to Him imperfection and negates His transcendence. To equate God with the Torah would be a grave distortion.

It is clear that the suggestion to equate the essence of God with the essence of the Torah has never even enticed the minds of the authors of the Talmud. They considered the Torah to be God's creation, His property, not His essence.

"Five possessions has the Holy One, blessed be He, specifically declared His own in His world. These are: the Torah, the sanctuary, heaven and earth, Abraham, and Israel." 51

The Torah is God's creation and His property, His wisdom and His will, but not He Himself. Just as pantheism is foreign to the rabbinic mind, so would be the identification of God with the Torah. "With respect to the Holy One, blessed be He', the world is His and the Torah is His." 52

47 Commentary on the Torah, "Kedoshim," beginning.
48 Tanhuma, "Tisah" 21.
49 Sanhedrin 99b.
50 Berakoth 17a.
51 Aboth 6:10.
52 Kiddushin 32a.
In contrast to the Muslim view of the Koran as the eternal uncreated Word, Maimonides insisted that all Jews agree, "that the Torah is a created entity," brought into being in the same manner as all other created beings.

However, in the development of Jewish mysticism we come upon one statement that seems to contradict Maimonides's observation, a statement by Rabbi Menahem Recanati (ca. 1300), for which I know no parallel in Jewish literature:

"God is incomplete without the Torah. The Torah is not something outside Him, and He is not outside the Torah. Consequently, the mystic stated that God is the Torah." 53

According to the Zohar, the Torah was emanated from divine wisdom. The Torah is connected to God: Therefore, "God is called the Torah" 54 since "the words of the Torah are in actuality the names of God." 55 Israel is the wick, the Torah the thread, and God's presence (Shekinah) is the fire. 56

These are three entities, each of which is connected to the other: God, the Torah, and Israel. "God and Israel, when together, are called one, but not when' parted." 57 Similarly, "when a man separates himself from the Torah, he separates himself from God." 58

The following statement is often quoted as having the Zohar for its source (late thirteenth century). Yet it is not found there. "The Torah, God, and

54 Zohar, Beshalach 60a.
55 Zohar, Yithro 90b.
56 Tikunai Zohar 421, 60b.
57 Zohar, Emor 93b.
58 Zohar, Vayikra 21a.
Israel are one." The citation appears first among eighteenth-century authors.59

The Torah and the world are God's possessions. The world is His, but He is not His world. The Torah is His, but He is not His Torah. The Torah is not in itself God, not His essence, but rather His wisdom and His will. Though the Torah preexisted creation, it is not an eternal existent. Israel's relationship to Torah, however, is a commitment more basic than loyalty to any particular commandment.

"Rabbi Jeremiah in the name of Rabbi Samuel bar Rabbi Isaac said: There are instances in which God excused Israel for the three cardinal sins of idolatry, adultery, and murder. Yet with regard to the sin of despising the Torah, we have no record of amnesty." How come?

Paraphrasing the words of the prophet Jeremiah (16:11), They have forsaken me and have not kept my Torah. He continued: "Would that they had forsaken me and kept my Torah."60

To regard this passage, however, as a declaration of the primary if not exclusive importance of studying Torah over concern for God is to pervert the meaning of the passage. Such perversion is made possible by overlooking the second part of the passage, which reads as follows: "since by occupying themselves with the Torah, the light which she contains would have led them back to me."61

It was not an ideal that the rabbis envisaged but a last resort. Having forsaken all commandments, if the people had at least continued to study Torah, the light of the Torah would have brought them back to God.

---

59 Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, Adir Ba-Marom, p. 61; Rabbi Hayyim of Velozhin, Nefesh Ha Hayyim, pp. 4, 11.
60 Yerushalmi, Hagigah 1:7 (76c); Ekah Rabbathi, Pesiktha 2; see also Rav in Nedarim 81a and Rabbi Jonah Gerondi quoted in the "Ran" ad locum.
61 Pesachim 50b; see Taanith 7a.
It is, therefore, a distortion to interpret this passage to mean that Torah without fear or awe of God is acceptable, as if the importance of observance outweighs the centrality of faith.

The old rabbinic view that observance of Torah even without awe and fear of heaven is acceptable proposes that observance with improper ends in mind will lead to observance with proper ends in mind. "Rabbi Judah in the name of Rab said: A man should always occupy himself with Torah and good deeds, though it is not for their own sake, for out of doing good with an ulterior motive there comes about the service of God for its own sake, without an ulterior motive." 62

Again and again we are taught that the Torah is not an end in itself. It is the gate through which one enters the court in which one finds awe of heaven. "Said Rabbi Yanni: Woe to him who has no court; woe to him who thinks the gate is the court. And Rabbi Jonathan said: Woe to those scholars who occupy themselves with Torah and have not awe of the Lord." 63

In a medieval Midrash we come upon a complaint against those saintly and righteous men whose dedication to the Torah surpasses their craving for the messianic kingdom. 64

Rabbi Solomon Alami, an ethical writer who lived in Portugal in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was an eyewitness of the persecutions of the Jews of Catalonia, Castile, and Aragon in 1391. Attempting to explain why so much suffering befell his people, he wrote:

Let us search for the source of all these trials and sufferings, and we shall find that a state of dissolution prevails in the midst of us; that an evil spirit pervades our camp, which has split us into two parties. There are those of our brethren who expend all their energies in solving talmudic problems and in writing numberless commentaries and novella dealing in minute distinctions and interpretations, full of useless

62 Yoma 72b, Rashi ad locum.
63 Shabbath 31a.
64 Pesiktha Rabbathi, ch. 34 (ed. Buber), 139a.
subtleties as thin as cobwebs. They diffuse darkness instead of light, and lower respect for the law. Others, again, clothe the Torah in strange garments, deck it with Grecian and other anti-Jewish ornaments, and endeavor to harmonize it with philosophy, which can only be detrimental to religion and lead ultimately to its decay.\textsuperscript{65}

Rabbi Jehudah Doewe ben Bezelel of Prague (died 1609) pointed to the problem involved in the exuberant love of the Torah. The scholar who while studying is passionately absorbed in the love of the Torah is unable at that very moment to experience the love of God, since it is impossible to experience two loves simultaneously.\textsuperscript{66}

The relationship between halacha and agada in Judaism is reflected in the conception of the relationship between the Torah and God. Rabbi Mordechai Joseph of Isbitsa, a major figure in the history of the Hasidic movement, offers an important insight into this problem.

It has been foretold in the Bible that someday Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah and Judah will, not harass Ephraim (Isaiah 11:13). These two types (tribes) are always in conflict. Ephraim has been appointed by God to concentrate himself on the Law and to be devoted to the commandments. This is why the prophet warns the people of Israel to observe the law strictly, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph (Amos 5:6).

Judah has been appointed to concentrate on God and to be attached to him in all his ways. Therefore Judah is not satisfied to know the mere Law but looks for God to reveal to him the depths of truth beyond the Law itself. (For it is possible in Law for a verdict to be correct according to the information which is available to the judges and yet to go against the truth. Cf. Shevout 29a, for example.) Judah refuses to be content with routine observance or perfunctory

\textsuperscript{65} Rabbi Solomon Alami; \textit{Iggereth Ha Musar}, ed. by A. M. Habermann, pp. 40 ff.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Tifereth Yisrael}, Introduction.
faith. Not content to do today what he did yesterday, he desires to find new light in His commandments every day. This insistence on fresh light sometimes drives Judah into doing actions for the sake of God which are against the strict law.

But in the future, we have been promised that Ephraim and Judah will no longer contend. God will show Ephraim that Judah’s actions, even when they go outside the limits of the law, are always for His sake and not for any impure motive, and then there will be genuine understanding and peace between them.67

According to the method of "Judah," the Torah is not an end in itself. It has been said about the First Cause—"All existents need him and he does not need any one or all of them." Such a statement is not acceptable concerning the Torah. It needs us; it is not sufficient to itself.

GOD AND ISRAEL

ACCORDING TO rabbinic legend, the prophet Elijah, who did not die but ascended to heaven, not only was active as the helper in distress but also appeared to sages and saints assisting them in solving spiritual problems. Once, we are told, the following issue was submitted to him by a sage:

Two things I love wholeheartedly: the Torah and Israel. However, I am not sure which one I love more.

The response of Elijah was:

The accepted opinion seems to suggest that the Torah is most important, as the verse reads, with regard to the Torah, The Lord made me as the beginning of his way (Proverbs 8:22). However, I think that not the Torah but Israel is most

67 Mei Ha Shiloack, Va Yeshev.
important. For the prophet has said: Israel is holy to the Lord; the first fruits of his harvest (Jeremiah 2:3).  

That which came first is to be cherished the most. Consequently, since the people Israel existed alone, first, without the Torah, it should be cherished more than the Torah. According to another source, reflecting apocalyptic thinking, Israel "existed (supernaturally) even before the world was created, as it says, "Remember thy congregation which thou hast gotten of old"- (Psalms 74:2). 

The extraordinary awareness of the endurance of Israel was expressed in an unsurpassed way by the prophet Jeremiah (31:35-37):

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day 
and the fixed order of the moon 
and the stars for light by night, 
who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— 
the Lord of hosts is his name: 
"If this fixed order departs 
from before me, says the Lord, 
then shall the descendants of Israel cease 
from being a nation before me for ever."

These extraordinary words were echoed in the statement of Rabbi Joshua ben Levian, amora of the first half of the third century, head of the school in Lydda in southern Palestine. "Israel can never die, neither in this world nor the world to come." A world without Torah would be a world without

---

68 Genesis Rabba, p. 144; Seder Elijah Rabbah, ch. 15, p. 71; see Rabbi Samuel bar Rabbi Isaac at Genesis Rabba 1:4; also Sifre Deuteronomy, Re'eh 69, 74, 138, 141—"The last is most precious," compare Mekilta of Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai, p. 31, and Genesis Rabba 78:8.

69 Tanhuma (ed. Buber), Noah 19.

70 Menachoth 53b. Maimonides, who lived in an age of severe persecutions of the Jewish people, went beyond these utterances in saying: "As it is impossible for God to cease to exist, so it is impossible for
Israel, and a world without Israel would be a world without the God of Israel.

* There is an ancient belief in Judaism that wisdom, later identified with the Torah as well as with the name of the Messiah and other entities, was created before the creation of the world. See H. A. Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Church Fathers, Vol. I (Cambridge, England, 1956)

Rabbi Simon ben Yohai of the second century said, "It is written, 'For as the days of a tree shall be the days of my people' (Isaiah 65:22). A 'tree' signifies the Torah, as it is stated, It (e.g., the Torah) is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon if (Proverbs 3:18). Now which was created for the sake of which? Was the Torah created for the sake of Israel or vice versa? Surely, the Torah was created for the sake of Israel. Thus if the Torah endures for all eternity, how much more must Israel for whose sake it was created endure for all eternity?"

Though the law demands strict observance of the latter, teleological consideration may dictate its suspension, as, for example, for the purpose of saving human life, of saving the people.

Perhaps the most striking expression of the relationship between the Torah and the people is the classical maxim by Rabbi Simeon ben Menasya, Palestinian Tanna of the second century, and contemporary of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, in his interpretation of Exodus 31:14, You shall keep Israel to be destroyed and to disappear from the world."

Iggereth Teman, ed. by A. Halkin (New York, 1952), p. 25. See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol. III, Part 3, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. P. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 218: "The Jews can be despised and hated and oppressed and persecuted and even assimilated, but they cannot really be touched; they cannot be exterminated; they cannot be destroyed. They are the only people that necessarily continue to exist, with the same certainty as that God is God."

71 Ecclesiastes Rabba 1:4,9; compare Sifre Deuteronomy, "Ekev," Piska 47.
the Sabbath therefore, for it is holy unto you. "The words 'unto you,' " he said, "imply that the Sabbath is given to you, and that you are not given to the Sabbath."72

The survival of Israel is an important consideration in dealing with the law.

Esther suggested to Mordechai: Go gather all the Jews found in Sushan and fast for my sake. Do not eat or drink for three days (4:16). This was during the month of Nissan (April). Mordechai answered Esther: "I cannot abrogate the law set down in the Scroll on Fasting in which it is written, From the first day of the month of Nissan until the eighteenth of the month one may not fast. You would break this law by insisting that we fast three days, beginning with the fourteenth?" She responded, "Are you the chief elder of Israel? Then consider, if Israel is annihilated (according to the decree of Haman), what good will God's commandments for Israel be? If there is no Israel, why should there be a Torah?" . . . And so Samuel said, Mordechai pretended he was unaware of the law and declared the fast.73

---

72 Mekilta, Ki Tissa; compare Mark 2:27.

73 Yalkut Shimoni, Esther 1056.
TORAH AND ISRAEL

It is customary to treat them as independent entities, as self-contained concepts with separate stature and independent validity. Nevertheless, these concepts are essentially related, one to the other. They are interdependent by virtue of their common source.

Saadia Gaon was correct in asserting that Israel is a people only by virtue of its Torah,\textsuperscript{74} that the only assurance for Israel's peoplehood is the Torah. On the other hand, Rabbi Halevi reminds us, "If there were no Jews, there would be no Torah.\textsuperscript{75}

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God (Isaiah 43:12). Rabbi Simon ben Yohai (second century) took the sentence to mean: If you are my witnesses, I am God; if you cease to be my witnesses, I am not God.\textsuperscript{76} This is a bold expression of the interdependence of God and Israel, a thought that occurs in various degrees of clarity in the history of Jewish theology. This particular statement maintains: If there are no witnesses, there is no God to be met. There is a mystery, an enigma, a darkness past finding out. For God to be present there have to be witnesses.\textsuperscript{77}

The essence of Judaism is the awareness of the reciprocity of God and man, of man's togetherness with Him who abides in eternal otherness. For the task of living is His and ours, and so is the responsibility. We have rights, not only obligations; our ultimate commitment is our ultimate privilege.

\textsuperscript{74} The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, Treatise III, ch. 7, tr. by Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven, 1948), p. 158.


\textsuperscript{76} Sifre Deuteronomy 346.

\textsuperscript{77} Seder Elijah Rabba, ch. 21.
In interpreting Malachi 3:18, Rabbi Aha ben Ada said: "Then will you again discern between the righteous and the wicked," meaning: "Between him who has faith and him who has not faith"; "between him that serves God and him that serves him not," meaning: "between him who serves God's need and him who does not serve God's need. One should not make of the Torah a spade with which to dig, a tool for personal use or a crown to magnify oneself."^79

His need is a self-imposed concern. God is now in need of man, because He freely made him a partner in his enterprise, "a partner in the work of creation." "From the first day of creation the Holy One, blessed be He, longed to enter into partnership with the terrestrial world" to dwell with his creatures within the terrestrial world.^80 Expounding the verse in Genesis 17:1, the Midrash remarked: "In the view of Rabbi Johanan we need His honor; in the view of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish He needs our honor."^81

"When Israel performs the will of the Omnipresent, they add strength to the heavenly power; as it is said: To God we render strength (Psalms 60:14). When, however, Israel does not perform the will of the Omnipresent, they weaken—if it is possible to say so—the great power of Him who is above; as it is written, Thou didst weaken the Rock that begot Thee (Deuteronomy 32:18)."^82

Man's relationship to God is not one of passive reliance upon His omnipotence but one of active assistance. "The impious rely on their gods ... the righteous are the support of God."^83

The patriarchs are therefore called "the chariot of the Lord."^84

---

78 Midrash Tehillim, ch. 83:2.
80 Numbers Rabba 13:6
81 Genesis Rabba, chapter 30
82 Pesikta de Rab Kahana
83 Genesis Rabba 69:3
84 Genesis Rabba 47:6
He glories in me, He delights in me;  
My crown of beauty He shall be.  
His glory rests on me, and mine on Him;  
He is near to me, when I call on Him.

"The Hymn of Glory"

To repeat, Jewish existence is not only the adherence to particular doctrines and observances but primarily the living in the spiritual order of the Jewish people, the living in the Jews of the past and with the Jews of the present.

It is not only a certain quality in the souls of the individuals; it is primarily involvement and participation in the covenant and community of Israel.

It is more than an experience or a creed, more than the possession of psychic traits or the acceptance of theological doctrine; it is, above all, the living in a holy dimension, in a spiritual order.

Our share in holiness we acquire by living within the community. What we do as individuals may be a trivial episode; what we attain as Israel causes us to grow into the infinite.