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GERSONIDES ON SONG OF SONGS

DAVID MARK WEIS

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
New York, N.Y.

March 1983

Referee: Professor Leonard S. Kravitz

DEDICATION

The process of maturation from childhood to adulthood is much like the path toward perfection. There is an order which must be followed. I could never have arrived to now had it not been for the constant love and support of my family and friends. The unquestioned love and devotion of my parents to each other and to us, their children, has always impressed me. It is with sincere respect and the deepest of affection that I thank my parents for my life. I owe, to them, all my wisdom and my every future accomplishment.

During my years at the College-Institute I have studied with some of the greatest minds in liberal Judaism. I am truly grateful for having had the opportunity to learn from them.

Dr. Leonard S. Kravitz, my dear professor and teacher, is singularly responsible for the development of my knowledge of mediaeval philosophy. It is rare to find such a brilliant mind attached to such a kind and gentle soul. I have the utmost regard for him and I will always consider him my Rabbi, my teacher, and my friend. Thank you.

And to Susan, who was present throughout the writing of this thesis, I cannot say enough. You are my love and my friend. You were always there when I needed you, and never complained when I needed to be alone. "You are beautiful, my beloved,...lovely as Jerusalem." (Song of Songs 6:4)

David Mark Weis

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I am undertaking an investigation of Levi ben Gershon's commentary of the book of Song of Songs, in hopes of finding inferences, both direct and indirect, of his mediaeval rationalist philosophy. From what I have come to know of Levi's writings and philosophy, it is apparent that I will find a number of examples of his thought. The Song of Songs is a difficult book to understand in its context as a religious document. Thus it has come to be understood by the Rabbis as a parable, a poetic dialogue between God and Israel. For the book to be conceived of as mere love poetry, with its many allusions to sexuality and fertility, was impossible for the religious community. It is my contention that such an interpretation is just as inconceivable for the philosopher. It is therefore my purpose to analyze the Gersonides' commentary in an attempt to see how the philosopher interpret's the book. Like the Rabbis, Gersonides will not be able to accept the book at face value. He will have the same impetus to explain the book differently than it would appear from the simple meaning of the text. However, Levi had a specifically individual axe to grind, completely different from the traditional interpretation.

The structure of this thesis will include a discussion of a number of facets of Ralbag's philosophy. I will begin with an introduction to the world in which Gersonides writes. No man is an island, and Levi is not an exception to

this rule. Being subject to the history and scholasticism that witnessed his birth, Levi is a product of his times, albeit a brilliant one. With this in mind, the first chapter will be concerned with a general introduction to the historical period and location of his writing. I will briefly outline the environment of the Provence region of southern France during the 13th and 14th centuries. This, to indicate the audience to which Ralbag was writing, and the forces which led to his philosophy. I will also briefly discuss some of the writings of Levi's contemporaries -- both immediately preceding and following him -- to show that he did not develop his philosophy in a vacuum. Afterward, I will give a description of the *Milhamot Hashem* (Wars of the Lord), his magnum opus, and its organization and structure. I will offer a list of the other works which are attributed to him, so as to round out a picture of the man, in general.

The second chapter of this thesis will be presented as an analysis of Levi's commentary on the Song of Songs. While I will not write a super-commentary of the entire work, I will evaluate those specific sections which give insights into his philosophy. I will show how he understands the parable of Solomon as well as how he interprets specific words, and entire sections, so as to fit into his philosophical mold. Where the Rabbis interpret the Book to be an allegory of God's relationship to Israel, the rationalist philosopher will interpret it as a parable of the road to intellectual perfection and philosophical

attainment.

This analysis will lead into the third chapter, which will be in the form of a conclusion. Ralbag's understanding of the Song of Songs is drastically different from that of traditional religious thought. I will give some key examples of this difference, so as to indicate that Ralbag is following the Rabbinic mode -- that of interpretation -- but for an entirely dissimilar purpose.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GERSONIDES

Levi ben Gershon was probably born in the town of Bagnols, in Southern France, in 1288. Born into a relatively scholarly environment, Levi soon began his studies. His father, Gershon ben Solomon, was a scholar of sorts himself. His only extant work is Sha'ar ha'Shamayim, which is probably the only one he wrote. An indication of his father's concern for philosophic thought is Levi's having been exposed to the sciences at an early age--this in direct contradiction to the ban of Solomon Ben Adret, which permitted the study of physics and metaphysics only after the age of 25. Little is known of his life, but he spent most of it in Orange, and then briefly in Avignon.[1]

While it is difficult to evaluate the circumstances of Levi's life specifically, many educated assumptions can be made by virtue of the time and place in which he lived. Life in the Provence region of southern France during the 13th and 14th centuries was quite unique in Jewish history. The trends in both scholastic and scientific inquiry no doubt had a great effect on Levi's thought and writing. The Provence region was a separate entity, politically and socially. After its incorporation into the Carolingian Empire, it was effectively cut off from contact with Moslem Spain.[2] Therefore, it was not until the 12th century that the Jews of

1. Encyclopedia Judaica, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971) s.v., "Levi Ben Gershon", v.11 p. 92.

2. Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v., "Provence" v.13 p. 1259-1264.

Provence had contact with the cultural and intellectual endeavors of their brethren to the south. With the incorporation of part of the Provence into the Catalanian region, Provençal Jews first branched out into areas of science. This was due to the contact of these Jews with the somewhat more enlightened Jews of Barcelona. With the onslaught of the Almohads into Spain, fleeing Jews entered the Provence. By the middle of the 12th century, Spanish thinkers were flooding the Provence. This historical event effectively sped up the enlightenment of the Provence. Dramatic advances in the fields of the natural sciences and philosophy quickly ensued. Provence became the melting pot for both Spanish (philosophic) thought, and Ashkenazi (halakhic) thought.[3] Many works had been translated into Hebrew from Arabic, but the Ashkenazi influence did not die. There were significant confrontations between the two methods of intellectual endeavor. It was therefore in the Provence that the Maimonist--anti-Maimonist controversies played a major role.[4] Many communities were torn apart by the mutual recriminations of heresy and naivete.

It is important to remember that the Maimonidean controversies were not conducted by people who did not know philosophy. The words of Maimonides, as well as other Neo-platonic and Aristotelian philosophers, were completely

3. Ibid., p. 1263

4. Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v., "Maimonidean Controversy", v.11 p. 745-754

understood by the Anti-Maimonists. They comprehended philosophy, and saw the danger inherent in that system. Maimonides wrote for a select audience, but writers such as, the Muslim, Averroes did not have the same restrictive concerns. When the Ibn Tibbon family translated many works of philosophy from Arabic to Hebrew, it was as if to open the proverbial Pandora's box. Thus it was that Ben Adret came out with his ban on the study of philosophy.[5] One had to be thoroughly ensconced in mainstream Jewish thought before one would be allowed to delve into the alluring, yet dangerous, world of the philosopher.

It is completely appropriate to assume that the life of Levi ben Gershon was not too greatly effected by this controversy. Although he was obviously aware of it--who could not be--it is apparent that in his circles the controversy was not prevalent. Levi did not retreat from openly expressing his thought or philosophy. After all, he wrote his works, both secular and religious, in technical but clear Hebrew. What Maimonides was hesitant to write specifically a generation earlier, Gersonides would write without any reluctance. Levi was under no duress to contain his virulently heretical philosophy; he saw no dilemma in his work. Furthermore, there were none in his immediate vicinity to object to it. While in other locales, and at later times, Levi's magnum opus 'Milhamot Hashem' would come under attack

 5. Jacob R. Marcus, The Jew in the Medieval World, (New York: Atheneum, 1977) p. 189.

by many notables, thinkers did not hesitate to borrow from his ideas.

Levi was indeed bitterly attacked for his philosophic writings by such notables as Hasdai Crescas, Abraham Shalom and Ibn Shem Tov (who renamed the Wars, Milhamot Neged Hashem--Wars Against the Lord). It is not unexpected that Levi should be criticized by writers such as these. In fact, he would expect it. After all, Levi was well aware of the nature of the controversy that he was entering into. Gersonides was one of the few thinkers to carry on the Maimonidean tradition of philosophical inquiry. By this is meant that he would not hesitate to contradict Torah (Jewish Law) wherever it was at odds with philosophy.

Truth must be brought out and placed beneath the glare of open daylight, even if it should contradict the Torah in the strongest possible manner. The Torah is no tyrannical law, which desires to force one to accept untruth as truth, on the contrary, it seeks to lead man to a true understanding of things.[6]

As Graetz suggests, nothing stopped Gersonides from his quest for Truth. He welcomed attacks against his writings as praise, saying: "If my observations are correct, then all blame leveled against me, I regard as praise." [7]

While it is apparent that some would find his writing heretical, the towns of Orange (where he spent most of his

6. Heinrich Graetz, History of the Jews, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894) v.IV p. 93.

7. Ibid., p. 92.

life), as well as Avignon (where he also lived for a time) were intrigued by his brilliance. It was not only in his immediate region that Ralbag's greatness was known, for there is extant a responsum which he wrote, and we can assume that he wrote others.[8]

There were many philosophers who wrote during the time in which Levi wrote. Although much of Levi's knowledge of Aristotle came from the Hebrew translations of the works of Averroes, it is clear that he did not limit himself to reiterating previous philosophers. With the exception of but a few philosophers of Ralbag's time, no one was writing competent original philosophy, of Levi's calibre. However, there are a few names worth mentioning. This, to illustrate not only that Levi was carrying on a philosophic tradition, but also to indicate that he was influenced, in his work, by what he read. A brief discussion of several of these philosophers is in order here.

Maimonides, of course, was a brilliant philosopher, and perhaps the first Jewish philosopher to be so bold as to write a comprehensive work of philosophy. Averroes, upon whose work Ralbag wrote an extensive commentary, was also a brilliant philosopher, but not a Jew. More so than even Maimonides, the work of Averroes intrigued and consumed Levi. It was through

8. Isaac de Lattes, She'elot v-Teshunot, 1860.

Averroes that Gersonides learned of the ancient philosophers that he used so much.[9] Philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, to name a few, fascinated Levi, he quotes them often. Averroes wrote commentaries on the works of Aristotle, and Ralbag wrote super-commentaries to these works, thereby coming to know Aristotle.[10]

There are also some philosophers contemporary to Ralbag who are worth mentioning. While none gained the great reputation which Levi did, they do indicate that there was a tendency on the part of intellectuals, of the time, to study the sciences, and philosophy. Joseph Ibn Kaspi was a contemporary of Levi, and was a prolific writer. His philosophy was much more closely aligned with that of Averroes than Gersonides, but he was no less involved in the philosophic game. In the course of his life he wrote some 30 works.[11] While he is considered to have been inconsistent, there is no denying his knowledge. He writes: "For there is no difference between us and God except in a matter of degree. The source to God is the intellect within us, because when we find that our intellect is actualized, we bring God into

9. Isaac Husik, A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy, (New York: Atheneum, 1976) p. 329.

10. Ibid., p. 329

11. Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v., "Joseph Ibn Kaspi", v.10, p. 809

our minds. God is the intellect and the intellect is God." [12], p. 98b.) This kind of notion was common among philosophers of the time, and indicates that heresy for one was not heresy for another. Kaspi did not deny the Torah, for he says: "...all the words of the Torah and the Bible are in my opinion to be accepted in their plain meaning..." [13] We must take such a statement with a grain of salt, perhaps as a disclaimer, for in light of his other statements, this is clearly not the case. In any event, the works of the men like Kaspi indicate that Ralbag was not alone in his endeavor. There were others as well, such as Isaac Pulgar of Avilla, and David Ibn Albilla. Still, none gained the renown that Levi did, neither positively or negatively.

Gersonides began the writing of *Milhamot Hashem* before the age of thirty. [14] In this volume, Levi develops his religious philosophy. While the book deals with specific areas only, in its entirety, it provides a comprehensive and detailed philosophy. The book is divided into six sections, each detailing one part of his philosophy. The first section deals with the immortality of the soul. The second reveals his thought on dreams and prophecy. The third addresses God's knowledge; the fourth, Providence; the fifth, celestial bodies, separate intellects and their relationship with God;

12. Joseph Ibn Kaspi, Amudai Kesef, (Frankfurt Am Main, 1848), p. 98b

13. Encyclopedia Judaica, op. cit., v. 10 p. 810.

14. Heinrich Graetz, op. cit., v. IV p. 92

and the sixth, the creation of the world, miracles and recognizing the true prophet. There are extant many manuscripts of the book, but only twice was it printed. The Riva di Trenta edition was published in 1560, and the Leipzig edition was published in 1863. Neither of these publications includes the rather lengthy treatise on astrology (astronomy), and in fact it was not published until several years ago.

While an examination of the philosophy contained in the work will appear throughout this thesis, a few words may be said here as to his general philosophy, and the structure of the work. Each of the six books begins by an evaluation of his predecessors, both pro and con. Levi gives the opinions of the sages, as well as philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Alexander, Themistius, Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes and, of course, Maimonides. He proceeds to show how these theories may be correct or incorrect, and then gives his own opinion. Ralbag is not concerned with necessarily paralleling his philosophy with the teachings of Torah. "The priority should be given to reason where its demands are unequivocal, for the meaning of Scriptures is not always clear and is subject to interpretation." [15] Yet he indicates his willingness to abandon his philosophy if it is shown that he is in opposition to religious teaching. [16]

15. Levi Ben Gershon, Milhamot Hashem, Introduction.

16. Ibid., I:14.

This disclaimer is given in advance, to disarm all claims of heresy. This phenomenon was seen earlier with Ibn Kaspi.

Ralbag's theory of immortality is similar to that of the Rambam. Since the Active Intellect (AI) is the only means by which one can come to know God, it is incumbent upon the rational human to attempt to actualize his passive hylic intellect. Through the study of science (natural sciences) man can come to know truth, and in so doing actualize his intellect. Since we can know of God only through the senses, i.e. inquiry, we can activate our intellects through the study of scientific inquiry. To the degree that a person is activated, comes to know the AI, it can achieve immortality. In other words, true knowledge is eternal and therefore lives on. If a person can learn truth, it is a necessity, by definition, that the knowledge remain eternal. Therefore, to the degree which a person activated his own hylic intellect, and converts to an active intellect, he achieves immortality.[17]

Prophecy is also intertwined with the AI, for we can all predict. Our ability to predict comes from our knowledge of the world. Since the world is a collection of orders, everything can be known through those orderings. In an attempt to explain the prophecy of dreams in the Bible, Levi suggests that it is possible to receive prophecy through a dream. He explains, however, that this is only accidentally

17. Ibid., I:5

correct. Since knowledge of the ordering of the universe can be achieved through study of the celestial spheres, it is possible that we can learn a truth from the AI by way of these emanations of the AI. Since the knowledge we gain from emanations does not come to us directly from the AI, it may be tainted by untruth.[18] We are affected by these stars, etc., and may by accident (not coincidence) come to know. However, to the degree that we can by-pass the emanation and go right to the source, we can know essential Truth and thereby achieve an ability to foresee. An example is the children's game of telephone. When the message starts around the circle, it is correct. As the message goes through many children (read emanations), it may begin to change. When finally the last child says the message out loud, it may have remained correct, or it may remain primarily correct, or it may be entirely incorrect. Thus would be prophecy from a dream.

Since God's knowledge must be perfect, it is, by definition, unchanging. If God knows particulars, then God's knowledge is said to change. If God knows me yesterday and today then His knowledge of me is said to have changed. Therefore, God cannot know me particularly. Levi takes this even farther than Rambam, for Rambam simply states that God's knowledge is different than ours and therefore He can know particulars. Levi denies this completely. For Ralbag, there

18. Ibid., II:1,2.

is no knowledge of particulars. The AI is aware of the order by which there was creation. In other words, God knows of everything by its essence, but not by its particulars. It can be argued that God knows me, for God must know every eventuality. It is therefore certain that God knows the eventuality which is me. It is impossible, however, that God knows me as me, rather as a necessity of the order of the universe.

Providence is closely aligned to the notions of prophecy and God's knowledge, by virtue of a definition of the AI. Providence is active in the world, but only to the degree that one is able to understand it. It does not come to a person in any direct intervention, but rather through an understanding of the ordering of the universe. To the degree that we are able to know what powers work upon the world, we are able to gain providence. If I understand that the moon affects the tide, then I will know when not to go to sleep at the shoreline. In this sense, I have received providence. The universe, which is an extension of the AI, has told me what will happen and how to be saved. It is up to me to read the message correctly and avoid what, out of necessity, will occur. If I jump from a window, I will fall. However, if I know that I will fall, then I will (or should) not jump--hence providence.

As we can see, Gersonides' philosophy flows neatly from one point to another. His understanding of creation, too, is a logical extension of his philosophy. Ralbag cannot hold

with creation-ex-nihilo, for that would deny the nature of matter as well as the nature of God. Since God cannot act in time, He would not create in time. This does not mean to say that the world is eternal, only that the matter and causes of the world are eternal. Although we see forms change, matter is neither generated nor destroyed, merely altered. Thus it is with the world, as well. While the world may not have always been, that stuff of which the world is made, always was and always will be, albeit in different form.

It is interesting to note, that Ralbag never has a section on God (either the existence or nature). It is throughout the Wars that the AI is constantly referred to and elucidated upon. We might also point out that the structure of the Wars is not exactly as one might expect. It discusses those areas that the author is concerned about. The subjects that Levi chooses to concentrate on indicate a certain method. He is writing to a distinct audience who is, at the very least, familiar with the thought of those which he analyzes (Aristotle, Plato, Averroes and Maimonides), and also find them lacking. Therefore he begins with man's relationship to God, for it is assumed that his readers also find some problems with past attempts to wrestle with the issue. The questions of prophesy, knowledge and providence are likewise important psychologically to the readers, whereas such mundane issues as creation, miracles, etc., have been dealt with ad absurdum and remain, as always, questionable. With few exceptions, every issue that Ralbag

deals with is relevant and important, both scientifically and theologically.

Although I will be concentrating, in this thesis, on Ralbag's philosophy and biblical commentary, it is useful to note that he had a magnificent reputation in other areas as well. Let us take a moment to list the other areas of his interest and expertise. In the area of philosophy, Levi wrote not only the *Milhamot Hashem*, but he wrote super-commentaries on Averroes' commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *De caelo*, *Meteorologia*, *Organon*, *De animalibus*, *De anima*, *Parva naturalia*, and upon two works that have been lost, *Metaphysics* and *De platibus*. Gersonides also wrote a book in which he corrects Aristotle's arguments found in *Posterior Analytics*, which is titled: *Sefer HaHekkeh haYashar*. His scientific works include: *Sefer ha-Mispar*, which deals with arithmetic; *De numeris harmonica*, of which only the Latin version is extant; *Commentary of the Books 1-5 of Euclid*, dealing with geometry; and his work on trigonometry known in Latin as *De sinibus, chordis et arcibus*. Among his works of a religious nature are: *Commentaries on the Torah*, *Job*, *Song of Songs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Ruth*, *Esther*, *Former Prophets*, *Proverbs*, *Daniel*, *Nehemiah*, and *Chronicles*. He also wrote a commentary on the 13 hermeneutical principles of R. Ishmael, as well as *piyyutim*, *responsa* (of which only the one mentioned earlier is extant), commentary of the aggadic passages of *Bava Batra*, and a commentary on *B'rachot*.

(although this is mentioned in his commentary on Torah, it is not extant). Levi also wrote a parody for Purim called Megillat Setarim.[19] Many of Levi's scientific works were translated to Latin by papal order, for they were of such importance. In this group is included Chapter 5 part 1 of the Wars--the section dealing with astronomy. Perhaps his greatest contribution to astronomy was his invention of the Jacob's staff, which was used to measure the angular separation of celestial bodies, and thereby a navigational device. Gersonides is also accredited with perfecting, if not inventing, the camera obscura.

19. Encyclopedia Judaica, op. cit., v. 11 p. 97.

CHAPTER TWO

ANALYSIS OF GERSONIDES' COMMENTARY TO SONG OF SONGS

PREFACE TO CHAPTER TWO

Throughout this chapter, I will be giving translations of both the text of Song of Songs, as well as Ralbag's commentary to it. These translations are my own. Since the idiomatic use of mediaeval Hebrew would not translate into idiomatic English, I have taken certain liberties with Gersonides' commentary. Although the translation may not always be precise, I never altered the meaning or the context of the commentary. I have leaned heavily on the Artscroll Tanach Series for my translation of the Song of Songs, but when I saw difficulties with Zlotowitz's translation, I deviated from it. The translations I give are as accurate as the Hebrew and the English would allow. For those who would like to check my translations with the actual text of the commentary, I am including a copy of the text at the end of in this chapter.

In the following chapter, I will give an analysis of selections from Ralbag's commentary on the Song of Songs. My purpose is not to evaluate the commentary as commentary, but rather to locate and discern his philosophy within said commentary. As I mentioned earlier, I expected to find many references to his rationalist philosophy, and indeed I have. The chapter will proceed in the same order as the commentary itself, since the nature of the work progresses with the sequence of the biblical text. As the key to understanding Levi's philosophy, and indeed his entire world view, is order, so must his commentary on Shir haShirim be understood in its order.

Introduction

In his introduction to this commentary, Levi explicitly indicates his purpose. All poems are written in the form of parable (Mashal). If this is the case, then it is not only our right, but our duty to look through the mashal and discern its true meaning. "There is no doubt that all of Solomon's poems are to direct man to the precise perfection; either to the first perfection or to the last perfection, or to both of them together." [1] The expressed purpose, therefore, of the poems of Solomon, is to lead man to

1. Levi ben Gershon, Peirush al Hamesh Megillot, (Leipzig Edition, 1863), p. 56, col. I.

perfection. Perfection for Levi is activating the intellect, as he says: "The ultimate success of the hylic intellect is the acquired intellect." [2]

Levi suggests that there are two kinds of poems, The first type gives ideas about deep and difficult matters, while the second is to guide man to love that which is proper to love, and to distance oneself from that which is proper to stay away from. [3] Gersonides believes Shir haShirim to be in both categories "The more a poem gives the idea of more glorious matters, the more it helps towards success, and therefore the more glorious it is....The more a poem guides man to search more deeply into the matter, and helps him towards success more, the more glorious it is...The poem gives the idea of the ultimate success and the path which leads man near to it" [4]

Chapter I

As Gersonides states early on in his commentary, the purpose of his work is to show "...how it is possible to arrive at perfection, and how it is possible to investigate

2. Ibid., p. 5b, col. I

3. Ibid., p. 5b, col. II.

4. Ibid., p. 5b, col. II.

the path which guides us to it, even if we are unaware, in the beginning, that it is possible to arrive to it." [5] Gersonides tells us that there are three reasons why a person might not realize that the path is there, or that it is possible to attain the direction towards perfection. The first reason is that the person thinks that it is not possible for the human intellect to be actualized. The second reason is that the person is overcome by the desires of the flesh. That is to say, that the person is so controlled by bodily pleasures and desires, that he cannot rise above them in the search for truth. The third reason is that the human senses may not be used to their fullest capacity to discern essential matters from accidental matters. [6] The senses themselves only report to the mind, which files the information and makes comparisons. If the mind makes an erroneous assumption based upon the information received by the senses, it is due to the lack of perfection on the part of the mind. "All creatures have heads F(Ba'alai hayim). To the degree that a living creature thinks with his mind, he is a thoughtful creature (Ba'al Roshi)." [7]

Our senses are not meant to deceive us in the least. They are what they are; merely tools to enable us to investigate and to attain--to the degree that is possible for

5. Ibid., 6a, col I.

6. Ibid., p. 6a, col. I.

7. Ibid., p. 6a, col. II.

us--perfection. Our task is to investigate the natural world, that which is in existence, and that must be done with our senses in conjunction with our intellect. It is the natural drives, which we have, that either lead us astray, or lead us in the proper path. For example, the sensual desire we have to eat, keeps us alive. We need food to exist. However, it is this same desire that could drive us to gluttony, and that is a waste and a distraction. Ralbag recognizes that the bodily desires, when kept in check, are the same desires which drive us towards the final perfection. "Behold, this desire is one of the tools which God, may He be praised, brings out in us, to guide us to the final perfection." [8]

This entire discussion takes place in reference to the verse: "May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine." [9] Ralbag wants to point out that Solomon is using the mouth--sense of taste--to indicate that we must begin our inquiry with our senses, and only then can we discover the path to perfection. Citing Aristotle, Ralbag says: "God, may He be praised, put within us, the human community, a greater desire to know the matters of existence than our desire for bodily pleasures, and this is the prelude

8. Ibid., p. 6b, col. II.

9. Song of Songs, 1.2

to truth." [10] Thus, although we have senses and bodily needs, our desire for knowledge is greater than our desire for pleasure. Yet, before we can know truth, we must know the nature of the world. In other words, the mention that Solomon makes of the physical senses refers to the order of knowledge. We must first know physics before we can know metaphysics.

The use of a 'kiss of the mouth' suggests a joining. This joining is said to be very strong. Levi contends that the 'kiss of the mouth' implies that we want to join with the AI, but that the AI initiates the process.

"Perhaps it says 'May he kiss me', and not 'May I kiss him', because God, may He be praised, is the Actor in this on the path to truth...And perhaps it says 'with kisses of His mouth', because a kiss on the mouth teaches of a stronger connection, because it is like a spiritual connection." [11]

The third verse speaks of oil as a perfume. When oil is poured from one container to another, its fragrance spreads and permeates the area. Levi quotes the Rambam who says that "...food and drink refer to matters of wisdom. And behold Rambam compares the gloriousness of attainment to oil which is the most glorious of liquids. And you already know the most glorious of attainments is ideas." [12] Therefore, for Levi, the oil becomes the attainment of ideas, and good oils

10. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., p. 6a, col. II.

11. Ibid., p. 71, col. II.

12. Ibid., p. 7b, col. I.

become perfect ideas. The parable tells that perfumes are good oils, because these oils permeate the air. In other words, the perfect ideas which permeate the world are compared to good oils.

As mentioned earlier, order is of prime concern to Levi, as indeed it was to all rationalist philosophers. Everything must be understood in its order, from the basic sciences, to the wonders of metaphysics. Thus Rambam writes in his Guide to the Perplexed:

I saw that your longing for mathematics was great, and hence I let you train yourself in that science, knowing where you would end. When therein you read, under my guidance, texts dealing with the art of logic, my hopes fastened upon you, and I saw that you are one worthy to have the secrets of the prophetic tradition revealed to you so that you would consider in them that which perfect men ought to consider.[13]

Just as there is order to learning, there is order to the universe.

Levi speaks specifically about order in his commentary to verse three. Before one can know God, one must know true ideas. Thus 'Your name pours forth like perfumed oil' refers to the AI. Once we tie into it and become actualized, then it pours forth and permeates our minds. Thus the text says: 'For fragrance your oils are good', before 'Your name is like oil poured forth', for we need true ideas before the AI can

13. Moses ben Maimon, Moreh Nebuchim, (Ibn Tibbon translation), p. 3a.

14. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs) p. 7b, col. 1-11.

permeate our minds.[14], p. 7b, col. I-II.)

The relationship between our hylic intellect and the AI is sequential. The stages are often dependent one upon the other. Even though we cannot tie into the AI until we actualize our hylic intellect, it is already at least partly influenced by the AI. We cannot even enter into the process without the influence of the AI.

"And perhaps the attraction to actualization, in this, is attributed to God, may He be praised, since man cannot arrive at his perfection without the influence of God, may He be praised, upon him. And furthermore, with regard to the many factors which prevent him from arriving at perfection, man needs divine help to draw him towards Him (God here meaning perfection)."[15]

Throughout the parable of Shir haShirim, the hylic intellect is placed in opposition to the remainder of the mental capacities. The hylic intellect is that which is capable of being actualized, and the remainder of the mental capacities are the negation of idea. For instance, in verse 1:5, which reads: 'I am dark yet comely', Levi remarks:

"The hylic intellect says to the rest of the mental capacities that they are dark in the beginning of the matter because they are the negation of idea, yet they are comely by virtue of the preparation which the intellect has done in order to receive all ideas..."[16]

This side, which is the intellect (at first hylic, but capable of actualization), is that part of the person which

15. Ibid., p. 7b, col. II.

16. Ibid., p. 8a col. I.

is influenced by the AI and drawn towards it through true ideas. Nevertheless, the path toward true ideas is a difficult one.

Even after the person comes to realize that there are true ideas, the path which leads to them is not readily known. The mental capacities still act to prevent its realization. The progress of a person toward perfection is impeded because he does not know what success is, and this prevents him from knowing that there is a path which leads to perfection and success." [17] Thus in reference to the verse in Shir Ha-Shirim 1:7 which says: 'Tell me, my soul's love, where will you graze...', Levi writes:

'Tell me what is the thing which my soul loves...which is to say, the success which was not known to me at the beginning of the matter. Also tell me where will you graze my soul which is to say, where will you receive food, which are ideas.' [18]

The path is hidden and requires true ideas to discover it. Although the path may be hidden in the beginning it is important to search for true ideas, for eventually this will take one to the path which leads to perfection. Thus in regards to the verse: 'Where will you rest (your flocks) at noon,' [19] Ralbag says: "the meaning of this is that with the attainment of ideas, to the degree that one is able to attain

17. Ibid., p. 8a, col. II.

18. Ibid., p. 8a, col. II - 8b, col. I.

19. Song of Songs, 1:7

them in the beginning, is the path which is walked toward perfection. Perfection comes from these ideas, which is to say, metaphysics comes from these ideas." [20]

The human is an intricate creature with bodily needs, and spiritual needs. As mentioned earlier, all of these are essential for the existence of the person. Food and drink are as necessary as true ideas, for without life, no ideas can be learned, and therefore no actualization can be achieved. It is not incongruous, then, for Gersonides to mention the use of the mental capacities in the attainment of perfection. In fact, these mental capacities are a necessary component in the attainment of perfection. They must, however, be kept in check. "And furthermore, he needs the remainder of the mental capacities to help him, in the attainment of perfection. They must completely agree to leave behind bodily pleasures and the enjoyment of them," [21] These mental capacities, as said earlier, can help to lead a man toward perfection, or they can lead him from it. Thus Levi adds, further in the commentary:

"The arrival of a person to actualization is not attributed to the AI alone, but rather the AI needs help, as said earlier, and that is the mental capacities which have agreed to curb the bodily desires so that they can guide the person to perfection. And furthermore, there is no way to arrive at even the primary ideas of the AI, without senses, the imagination (insofar as it can make comparisons and connections with other information

20. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 8b, col. I.

21. Ibid., p. 9a, col. I-II.

it has received) and the power of memory, as said before." [22]

In other words, Levi has reiterated that the human must use the totality of his mental capacities to make the jump to actualization. The AI can help, but the hylic intellect and the rest of the mental capacities must also work in conjunction with it. Just exactly how all this is possible is a difficult question. The ability to direct the mental capacities away from bodily desires and toward the attainment of perfection is not merely a matter of words, it is an entire thought process.

It is the answering of this question to which Ralbag directs the entire work.

It is the intention of this book to comment upon the way to perfection for us, and on that which is necessary for the initial attainment of how one arrives, to the degree that one is able, at the end of the matter, to the ultimate perfection. [23]

At the beginning, the question is how to use the mental capacities so that the hylic intellect can achieve its direction, but at the end, the hylic intellect must go beyond the material toward that which comes from the AI, namely metaphysics. This again is a matter of order. The order which Ralbag discusses at length is a philosophical system for the attainment of the ultimate perfection. Firstly, the mental capacities must help by eliminating the bodily desires

22. Ibid., p. 9a, col. II.

23. Ibid., p. 9a, col. II.

(those which are above and beyond its basic needs). Secondly, the hylic intellect must come to know true ideas. Thirdly, these true ideas must lead beyond the physical to the metaphysical. And, all of these are a cooperation between the AI and the powers of the human, both physical and intellectual. The parable addresses all these issues. At times the parable addresses the AI, and it is desired by the hylic intellect. At other times it addresses the hylic intellect which is desired by the rest of the mental capacities.[24] It is for the person to understand that which is being discussed in the parable; either the mental capacities or the intellect.

Toward this order, Levi comments on the verse: "A bag of myrrh is my beloved to me, lodged between my breasts." [25] To this verse, he says: "The body says to the hylic intellect, that it lies between its breasts and that the body suckles it and nourishes it until it begins toward its perfection. The intellect is similar to a bag of myrrh, for the myrrh does not give its smell until it is lighted and burned...and the myrrh needs outside help to give its smell...Thus is the hylic intellect in regard to its perfection, in the beginning of the matter, for it needs outside help to pass into actualization." [26]

24. Ibid., p. 10a, col. I.

25. Song of Songs, 1:13

26. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 9b, col. II - p. 10a, col. I.

Levi continues along the same lines, commenting on a number of verses. His purpose is to illustrate the order by which one attains perfection. Thus he says: "The hylic intellect says, in a parable; 'Behold you are beautiful, my love' (Song 1:15), meaning the beauty of the preparation of the mental capacity and the natural desire, which together with it, strives for the way to perfection." [27] And in reference to the next verse he writes: "The intellect wants it to be pretty and good and prepares it to find that which will bring it to perfection. Thus the hylic intellect will greatly desire the intellect and yearn to join with it and come to know that which will lead it to perfection." [28]

The perfection of the mental capacities depends upon the senses and on abstractions of knowledge (comparing one piece of knowledge with another). While that which is perceived by the senses is never wrong, problems arise in the abstraction of knowledge. For example, to say that all red fruits are sweet, because an apple is sweet, is a misinterpretation of information. Even though one may have seen a red apple, and it was sweet to taste, this does not necessarily mean that all red fruits will be the same. Levi warns against this type of error. Even though the senses are not in error, the abstraction made from the information is incorrect. [29] Thus

27. Ibid., p. 10a, col. I

28. Ibid., p. 10a, col. II.

29. Ibid., p. 10a, col. II.

Levi says:

The intellect needs to beware of the impediments which prevent it from attaining truth, due to incompetency, and the mistakes which occur from the abstractions of knowledge. These may cause the intermixing of accidental matters with essential matters.[30]

This warning comes to clarify the role of the senses in the quest for perfection, as well as the role of the imagination or abstraction of knowledge, which occurs in the mind itself.

Chapter II

The image portrayed in 2:3 is precisely what Levi has been hinting at throughout this commentary.

"Like an apple-tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the sons. In its shade I delighted and sat, and its fruit is sweet to my palate."(2:3) The truth is that the fruit is attributed to the intellect alone, from among the rest of the mental capacities, because the fruit, alone, returns eternally.[31]

The fruit represents the ultimate perfection hidden among the trees. The fruit is eternal--it can never be false. This verse follows verses dealing with flowers, for the flowers are encountered on the way toward perfection.

30. Ibid., p. 10a, Col. II.

31. Ibid., p. 10b, col. II.

Gersonides writes:

The flower, in general, is that which comes from the sprout before the fruit...comes out, which is the flower's purpose, in the beginning. Thus is the matter of the abstracted forms with the intellect. This is because that which the intellect attains is the fruit,...and arriving at abstract forms in the mind is the perfection which arrives before the intellect and to the rose (flower) is compared.[32]

In other words, the flower, or abstract forms, comes before the fruit, or intellect. Ralbag thus differentiates between perfections along the way--true ideas which lead to the ultimate perfection, but are not themselves this perfection--and the final perfection which is connecting into the AI and reaching actualization. He uses the parable of the flower which is the precursor to the fruit, for it suggests the identical pattern of the attainment of perfection. These ideas must come first, which are followed by perfection. His suggesting that, botanically, fruit is eternal indicates the ultimate perfection to him, for ultimate truth must, by definition, be eternal.[33]

Much in the way that the natural process of the generation of fruit requires a set order--first the sprout and then the fruit--the attainment of perfection requires this same order. The attainment of perfection requires that the person go from one level to another according to the order of wisdom. It is impossible for the fruit to precede

32. Ibid., p. 10b col. I.

33. Levi ben Gershon, Milhamot Hashem, chapter I:5

the flower, and it is likewise impossible for perfection to come before true ideas. Thus, Ralbag writes: "...they will go in the proper order, level after level, until it reaches the end." [34] This is, of course, the final perfection, or actualization.

At this point, the commentary takes a jump to the next level of inquiry. Previously, the commentary was interested in accentuating the hylic intellect over the rest of the mental capacities, in order to begin the journey toward perfection. These mental capacities must be brought under control, so as to allow the process to begin. With verse 2:8 of Shir haShirim, Ralbag takes us to the next level, which is the discernment of true ideas from false ones. In other words, we must first know that there are true ideas, then we must learn how to distinguish true ideas from false ones. It is for this purpose that Levi writes:

After the intellect has arrived at a level of competency in that which has come before in this parable, (namely the curbing of the mental capacities), behold the intellect must continue in the process of arriving at knowledge, in the discerning of truth and falsity, until the intellect will guard against mistakes which come from the abstraction of knowledge and thoughts. This must follow in the proper order in the investigation of matters of existence. [35]

This is just one more level along the way towards perfection. This level is, specifically, the understanding

34. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 11a col. II

35. Ibid., p. 11a, col. II.

of true notions regarding the matters of existence, i.e., the science of physics. The understanding of this science is needed for discerning truth, but is not, necessarily, known in the beginning of learning.. One may know that this is the path which is proper and correct, but the actual truth may not be known at first.

One who does not know how to judge between true and false ideas can never attain perfection, because they will take wrong notions and apply them to true notions and be left with a corruption of the truth. So Gersonides writes:

...it will happen the intellect which does not know how to judge between the true and the false, that it will stutter and be confused and jump from one contradiction to another, and will not apply its knowledge of one area to the rest.[36]

Further in the same paragraph, Levi will mention that the person who does not know truth from falsity cannot differentiate from that which is correct or incorrect, and between that which is substantial or insubstantial.[37] Levi is suggesting that this knowledge, between true and false, is essential to understanding the world as it is. This would follow precisely from Ralbag's philosophical system, for the world is a pattern of orders. Without the knowledge of these orders, one cannot come to perfection. Naturally, the path toward understanding the orders of the world is itself an ordered, sequential one.

36. Ibid., p. 11a, col. II.

37. Ibid., p. 12b, col. I.

The rest of Ralbag's commentary to chapter two serves only to reiterate and expand upon the notion given above. This he tells us in his discussion of verse 2:8.[38] As our understanding of truth takes us further along the path to perfection, we continually receive glimpses of that perfection. While this is fleeting and by no means the final perfection, it is a form of perfection and does serve to reinforce our quest. Ralbag likens these glimpses to the parable offered in verse 2:9, which says; "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young hart, behold he stands behind our wall looking through the windows, peering through the lattices." Although the relationship between the person and the perfection is not complete, there are these glimpses through small openings.[39]

As Ralbag compared darkness, earlier, to that which comes before comeliness--the parable for ignorance and then wisdom--here he uses the passing of winter.[40] "The intention in this is that the time has already passed (winter) when this perfection was not possible. That time was when the mental capacities were inclined toward the bodily pleasures." [41] The path toward perfection is more

38. Ibid., p. 11a, col. II.

39. Ibid., p. 11b, col. I.

40. op. cit., (Song of Songs) 2:11

41. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 11b, col. I.

intoxicating than the bodily pleasures. Once our hylic intellect is activated, even to the slightest degree, it cannot return to its earlier ways. Just as winter must give way to spring, the mental capacity must give way to the intellect. Once we come to know truth, it cannot be forgotten or ignored. Once a truth is known, it is known and is eternal. Thus Levi continues according to the parable, which he presented earlier, of the flower. The next verse (2:12) tells of the blossoming of spring, which brings flowers. Thus Gersonides says: "All of this is according to the parable, that the proper time has already come for the intellect to begin to endeavor in the making of fruit. That 'her fruit is ripened' (2:13) means that it is already going toward the directed perfection."^[42] Just as spring brings flowers, and there is no going back to winter, so too is the quest for perfection. There is no going back.

As one travels the path toward actualization, the perfections acquired along the way lead toward the next. The pattern of growth is like that of a flower, as was earlier suggested. Therefore, the parable continues and grows as our knowledge continues to grow. In reference to the verse which says: "My beloved is for me and I for him, he grazes me among the roses."^[43], Levi naturally discusses the roses. To this verse he comments:

42. Ibid., p. 11b, col. II.

43. Song of Songs 2:16

After all the impediments to perfection are removed, behold the path is nourished by the power of fruit (true ideas) which will direct the intellect. And the fruit is the abstract form which previous to this it was not possible to have.[44]

The path leads to abstract forms, but these abstract forms add one to the next. Therefore it is impossible to know these truths, these perfections, out of order. As Levi says, it is not possible to have known these abstract forms earlier. The one who travels toward perfection, learns intermediate perfections along the way. As we feed among the roses, read truths, we come to know abstract forms, which lead to other truths, until we arrive at the ultimate perfection.

The final verse of chapter two is a call toward the understanding of the many facets of learning. The verse petitions us to 'turn and be like a gazelle or a young hart upon the mountains of separation.'[45] Levi interprets the 'mountains of separation' as the separate sciences. As with everything, we must know the order. We must first know the natural sciences before we can know the supernatural ones. We must first know physics before we can know metaphysics. "And to this, they need to begin, in the investigation of earlier things, in order."[46] "And behold Solomon means in

44. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 12a col. I.

45. Song of Songs, 2:17.

46. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 12a, col. II.

his statement 'mountains of separation,' mountains of parts and abstractions, which are mathematics." [47] Yet later in the same comment, Levi refers to physics. "And behold, Solomon mentions physics in similar language, in his statement: 'I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense.' (Song 4:6)" [48] Levi is playing on the fact that both the verse here in chapter two and the verse in chapter four have the same introductory phrase: "Until the day blows and the shadows flee," Levi is suggesting that the different mountains refer to different sciences, learned in progression. These sciences must be known in order, building one upon the other. Therefore when the 'mountains of separation' are mentioned, in chapter two, Ralbag infers that it means the separate sciences.

Naturally, the knowledge of metaphysics stems from all of these disciplines. As we travel along the intellectual plane, we have a greater and greater knowledge of metaphysics. Where natural sciences are discussed as mountains in Solomon's allegory, metaphysics should not yet be mentioned in physical terms as mountains. Levi says that metaphysics is not like the natural sciences (learned by senses) and it cannot be discussed, here, in the same manner. "Metaphysics is the most of many rhetorical

47. Ibid., p. 12a, col. II.

48. Ibid., p. 12a, col. II.

possibilities, yet its letters take refuge in finite existence"[49] In other words, although it cannot be discussed in the same way as physical sciences, metaphysics can be discovered (its letters are found) in the finite, physical universe, through the study of science. Thus Ralbag concludes his commentary of chapter two as follows:

And behold Solomon compares the natural sciences in general, to mountains, since they are very high and it is not possible to climb them without great difficulty.[50]

Levi reiterates that the learning of the sciences is a difficult task, but that it is essential to discovering the world of metaphysics.

We cannot come to know metaphysics except through the finite world, the world of existence. Since all we can know is the world in which we live, and since we can only come to know it perfectly through the sciences, then it is only natural that we should come to know metaphysics also through this world and through science. Nevertheless, Levi warns us that metaphysics is not like the other sciences, and thus it is not yet mentioned as a mountain--in physical terms.

49. Ibid., p. 12a, col. II.

50. Ibid., p. 12a, col. II - p. 12b, col. I

Chapter III

Chapter three begins with a repetition of Levi's notion of order. The commentary on the first two verses both discuss order.[51] Chapter two ends with a comment on order, and thus does chapter three begin. The process must continue step by step. It is not until one recognizes the order and the progression from potential to act, that one can begin the trek to the final perfection.

The process begins, as stated earlier, with the senses. All that can be known comes firstly from the senses. Then, as more and more ideas are investigated, the mind can make abstractions of knowledge. In other words, the mind can make educated assumptions about areas that it does not have firsthand experience of, by virtue of the information it has already absorbed. These assumptions are mental abstractions. Through the study of the natural sciences, and the discipline that comes from them, we can make rather accurate abstractions. For example, I can know that a ten pound weight will fall at the same rate of descent as an eight pound weight, if I have come to know the law of gravity. This I can know, even if I have never seen a ten pound weight fall.

51. Ibid., p. 12b, col. 1.

The above mentioned level, that of abstraction, depends on the power to remember. Before one can make abstractions, one must perfect the power to remember. Thus Levi says regarding the phrase: 'I grasped him and would not let him go.'[52], that the hylic intellect "will not let ideas go until they bring it to its 'mother's house' which is the power of memory."[53] The discipline which enables a person to perfect the ability to discern and to remember comes from the proper order, and this begins with mathematics.

In order to enter into the investigation of existence, in the proper order, and to endeavor in this way, it is necessary to begin with the study of mathematics.[54]

For Mathematics gives the person the discipline and the knowledge to have ideas and to make abstractions.

The commentary on verses 3:6 through 4:6, is meant to reiterate and clarify the importance of coming to actualization in order. One must master the perfection of virtue, the perfection of testing between truth and falsity, algebra, and memory, and in this is the completion of the intellect in mathematics, for this precedes the rest of the sciences. And this is what will be elucidated until

52. Song of Songs, 3:4.

53. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 12b, col. II.

54. Ibid., p.13a, col. I.

Solomon's statement, 'Until the day blows and the shadows flee.' (4:6) [55]

Again, everything is dependent upon the proper order of attainment. Mathematics leads to physics which leads to astronomy which leads to metaphysics. [56] Levi reads all of this in verse 3:6, for the verse, he says, discusses the progression of knowledge.

Solomon begins by teaching about the perfection of attainment which comes from mathematics. 'Who is this who comes up out of the desert,' refers to mathematics because the desert is a place in which one cannot work hard. Since one does not need to endeavor a lot to arrive at the original principles it is likened to the desert. Then Solomon says: 'that he comes up directly in columns of smoke,' Since this knowledge is found only in order, and in the investigation which proceeds directly from the earlier to the latter. This is evidenced by definite proofs (which go from one point to another). Solomon says: 'perfumed with myrrh and frankincense from all the powders of the merchants,' refers to astronomy which is very closely related to physics, and this also leads to metaphysics. [57]

Levi is here playing on the fact that smoke goes straight up, and responds to the laws of nature. Responding to the part of the verse which speaks of perfume, Ralbag suggest that the smoke-- read laws of nature--is laced with perfume--read the truths of metaphysics. The intellect can know the natural

55. Ibid., p. 13a, col. II.

56. Cf. Maimonides in Moreh Nebuchim places astronomy within mathematics not physics, because he understood the celestial bodies in terms of their movements, not in terms of their effects on the world.

57. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 13a, col. II.

sciences, if it is able (properly trained), and can receive the fragrance of the perfume, which is metaphysics.

Chapter IV

The beginning of this chapter is repetitious: dealing with the parable discussed previously. This is, specifically, the order necessary for attaining perfection and actualization. The images used are that of beauty, which refers to that stage of development which comes after darkness. As was mentioned earlier, with reference to the verse, 'I am dark yet comely,'[58] darkness refers to the mental capacities before they begin toward perfection, and comely refers to the as yet undiscovered ability of the mental capacities to aid in the process of actualization. In other words, the senses are the initial tool, but until they are perfected, they can lead toward bodily pleasures rather than knowledge.[59]

Within the Song of Songs is found both the parable, and that which is allegorized. Levi suggests that verse 4:4 is according to that which is allegorized. The verse reads: 'Your neck is the Tower of David'. In other words, truth lives forever and does not bend or falter, just like the

58. Song of Songs, 1:5.

59. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 13b, col. II.

tower mentioned in the verse.

With verse 4:6, Ralbag begins discussing the next level of perfection. As stated earlier, the purpose of perfection is actualization. The person must learn truth, in order, to become actualized. The process begins with mathematics, but "...the sciences are not meant for knowledge only of themselves. Rather, they are meant to direct us to physics and to metaphysics." [60] In other words, one does not study mathematics for the purpose of learning mathematical proofs, rather in order to prepare the way for physics and then metaphysics. Metaphysics, and knowledge of it, is the way to become actualized, and knowledge of it can only come through the study of mathematics and physics, the sciences.

As one gets closer and closer to actualization, the influence of the AI upon him gets greater and greater. I said earlier, that wisdom is more intoxicating than bodily functions, and Ralbag discusses this point. The verse reads: "How fair is your love, My sister, O my bride. How much better your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than all perfumes." [61] Ralbag suggests that this is because the intellect is now approaching actualization. Remembering that wine is analogous to ideas, and perfume to the intellect, the verse shows the progression toward actualization. Not only are the correct ideas thought, but

60. Ibid., p. 14b, col. 1.

61. Song of Songs, 4:10.

the hylic intellect is well on the way toward acquiring the ultimate perfection. Thus, even though the hylic intellect is not completely actualized, Ralbag says:

to whatever degree the intellect comes to understand universal matters, and makes fruit (allegorically, acquires intellect), and is pleasing to the AI in its relationship to these matters, it is good.[62]

The final verse of chapter four is understood as reiterating everything we have done up to this point. The verse reads:

Awake O north wind and come O south. Blow upon my garden, let its spores flow out. My beloved will come to his garden and eat its precious fruit.[63]

Levi interprets this verse to be the process of actualization. The winds blow to remove all incorrect ideas, suggesting that the north represents the path to perfection, and the south represents true ideas, Ralbag says:

The hylic intellect returns to the potentially acquired intellect prepared in the proper way. The hylic intellect says: "My beloved, Come to his garden," and eat the precious fruit because the intellect will find open that which was closed.[64]

In other words, the hylic intellect is now properly prepared to enter into act. The perfection which was at first not possible is now possible. The hylic intellect is now ready

62. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 15a, col. I.

63. Song of Songs, 4:16.

64. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 15b, col. I.

to eat the fruit of actualization.

Chapter V

The intellect comes to the garden to eat of the fruit, which is to say, that it is acquiring truth.

The intellect returns, and it is already directed in the proper way, which is the attainment of the preparatory sciences, and the attainment of universal truths.[65]

The intellect can become actualized for it has been prepared. It has crossed over from potential to act. All this is according to the correct order of attainment.

"I was asleep but my heart was awake. Hark the sound of my beloved knocking. Let me in, my sister my love, my dove, my perfect one." [66] The mental capacities were dormant but the AI was constantly influencing the hylic intellect, calling it to inquiry. The potential is always present, but the physical desires can prevent one from coming to perfection. The mental capacities were dormant, not prepared for perfection, but the hylic intellect heard the call of the AI. The influence of the AI on the hylic intellect brought the mental capacities under control in order to prepare for

65. Ibid., p. 15b, col. II.

66. Song of Songs, 5:2

perfection. The verse refers to mental capacities which are asleep, the hylic intellect which is the heart that is awake, and the AI which is the power calling the hylic intellect to act. The AI is constantly calling to the hylic intellect, influencing it to seek perfection.[67] While this process is ongoing, the mental capacities often prevent the hylic intellect from receiving the influence of the AI. Thus, not everyone can become actualized, only those who can control their mental capacities.

The AI pursues the individual even into the recesses of the unprepared hylic part of the person. Ralbag suggests that the person, even when consumed by bodily desires, has within him the potential for actualization. This potential can be made to grow and wrest control away from the mental capacities (which have sought improper, physical pleasures), with the help of the AI. Thus in reference to the verse: "My beloved has sent forth his hand from the hole, and my insides stirred for him,"[68] Levi says:

The hole is the little opening (the hylic intellect) which asks for help and direction toward perfection and attainment, and away from the fulfillment of bodily pleasures.[69]

The majority of the rest of chapter five is strictly according to the parable. The verses discuss the

67. Song of Songs, 5:2.

68. Song of Songs, 5:4

69. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 16a, col. II.

attractiveness of the beloved one. The parable is couched in physical terms, but the understanding is that intellectual pursuits are preferable to bodily pleasures. The AI is allegorized as a beautiful person, bedecked with jewels and greater than the rest of the people. Ralbag says that the AI is represented as beautiful because it influences the hylic intellect and brings it to intellectual endeavors. Thus he says that these references to beauty relate to "The perfections are never revoked, and never drift away from that which is proper." [70]

Levi's comment on verse 5:14 is interesting and noteworthy. The verse reads: "His hands are of gold, his body is as shiny as ivory overlaid with sapphires." [71] Levi understands this verse to represent the many facets of reason. The hands refer to practical reason, for hands are made for physical labor. The body refers to theoretical reason, for the body houses the mind which is capable of theoretical thought. In addition, Gersonides points to the fact that the simile utilizes very hard materials to suggest the eternality of the intellect.

Behold he compares these powers--that of theoretics and praxis--to things that are difficult to destroy, to comment on the eternality of the intellect. [72]

70. Ibid., p. 16a, col. II. - 16b, col. I.

71. Song of Songs, 5:14.

72. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 16b, col. II.

The chapter ends by saying: "His mouth is most sweet, and all of him is a delight." [73] Ralbag takes this to mean that the intellect has no part which is not true. Whether it is theoretical or practical, potential or actualized, all aspects of the intellect are good. Thus he writes:

The text says that "all of him is delightful," which means that there is nothing of the intellect which is not delightful and very desirable. It is proper, therefore, that all the mental capacities should delight in the intellect and endeavor to do its work (to become actualized). [74]

Chapter VI

In response to the first verse of chapter six, Ralbag simply states that we are on the path toward perfection. "All of the mental capacities have completely subjecting themselves to intellectual endeavors." [75] With the submission of the mental capacities to intellectual matters, the person is well on the way to actualization. This chapter will proceed from this intermediate perfection to the final perfection of actualization.

As the parable unfolds, the repetition of certain words

73. Song of Songs, 5:16.

74. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 17a, col. I.

75. Ibid., p. 17a, col. I.

become indicative of greater perfections. As one reads Levi's commentary, one becomes able to surmise how he will interpret certain verses, by virtue of what he has said previously. Thus, in reference to the phrase: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine,"[76] Gersonides will say that the AI and the intellect of the person are joining in the process of actualization. The intellect and the AI combine in the work of the final perfection. Once the intellect has arrived at a proper level, it joins with the AI. Although there are still more ideas to know, the intellect is well on the way toward actualization. There are no longer any impediments to prevent the intellect from perfection.[77]

Repeating the words 'beautiful' and 'comely' again, Solomon emphasizes the beauty which comes from knowledge. As the intellect comes to know more, comes closer to the final perfection, it becomes more and more beautiful and comely. Thus Ralbag suggests that the words here have a more emphatic meaning. "This final mention of the word 'comely' is more important than the earlier ones." [78] This is because the intellect is closer to actualization and is becoming more

76. Song of Songs, 6:3.

77. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 17a, col. II.

78. Ibid., p. 17b, col. I.

beautiful, more knowledgeable. Thus, Solomon here compares its beauty to the city of Jerusalem, the most beautiful of cities.[79]

There are sixty queens, and eighty concubines, and maidens without number. One alone is my dove, my perfect one. She is the only one to her mother. Maidens saw her and acclaimed her; queens and concubines, they praised her.[80]

These verses tell of the special nature of the intellect with respect to all the rest of the mental capacities. The maidens represent all the bodily qualities, right down to the most base and corruptible. Therefore they are without number; they are so numerous. The concubines refer to those powers present in humans which can be controlled, even though they themselves are not meritorious. These powers are fewer than the bodily functions, but still more than the queens. The queens represent the mental capacities, which although they can be led astray are generally controlled by the intellect. Thus they are queens, for, though there be many, all answer to one king. The one perfect one, refers to the intellect, which stands alone. It is perfect, for it does not bow to the desires of the body. Rather, it leads the rest of the mental capacities is the quest for perfection.

79. Ibid., p. 17a, col. II - 17b, col. I.

80. Song of Songs, 6:8,9

51.

This hylic mental capacity comes from the intellect, and it is singular. It goes from the hylic level, of which the rest of the mental capacities are a part, toward the intellectual.[81]

Thus the pyramid shows the order of intellectual progression which a person needs to go through in order to reach actualization.

Verse 6:10 makes mention of the moon and the sun. These heavenly spheres are quite important to Ralbag's philosophy. So important is astronomy to Gersonides, that he designates an entire section of *Milhamot Hashem* to it. This section is so large and so technical in and of itself, that it is generally not printed in the philosophical editions of the book.[82] In reference to the use of astronomical terminology in *Shir haShirim*, Levi says:

The parable reminds us that we have already learned the difference between food and the desire to eat, between that which is learned from the sense, and the senses themselves, and between ideas and the intellect.[83]

Levi is suggesting that there is a difference between the action and that which is necessarily learned by the action. Ideas are important, but they pale in significance compared to the power of the intellect. Until ideas can be made to work for us, and together with us, they are merely individual

81. Levi ben Gershon, *op. cit.*, (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 18a, col. I.

82. Levi ben Gershon, *Milhamot Hashem*, 5:I.

83. Levi ben Gershon, *op. cit.*, (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 18a, col. II.

notions without order. This is compared to astronomy, because these heavenly bodies affect us, and until we can work with these influences, and even predict them, all our knowledge is without order.

Chapter VII

Related to the matter of immortality, Ralbag tells, in 7:2, how the acquired intellect is eternal. The verse reads: "How lovely are your steps in sandals, O daughter of nobility." [84] While sandals are made of material that is generated and then decayed, the steps toward perfection must be eternal. Levi sees the 'nobility' as the quest for perfection. True ideas must be eternally true, as stated earlier. In the sense that these ideas are true, they are eternal, and hence, exceedingly noble.

Behold, it says 'daughter of nobility' to teach about the superior matters of the intellect which are noble. And from this is explained that the acquired intellect is eternal even after the decay of the physical mind. [85]

The sandals--read body--which are the vehicle for the steps toward perfection, are subject to decay, but the knowledge acquired along the way lives on eternally. What is true is always true, thus, by definition, it is eternal.

84. Song of Songs, 7:2

85. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 19a, col. II - 19b, col. I.

Verse four is a repetition of a verse which occurred earlier in the Book. The verse appears here in a reduced form. In 4:5, the verse was: "Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle; grazing among the roses." In our verse, however, the phrase 'grazing among the roses' is deleted. Levi tells us that this is because it is no longer necessary. While before the person was in need of the flowers--read ideas--as a precursor to the fruit--read actualization, at this stage the person is already actualized to a degree and no longer needs the flowers. Thus, explains Ralbag, the phrase 'grazing among the roses' is no longer necessary.

Solomon does not mention "grazing among the roses" since there is no longer anything to attain by use of the senses, which is implied by the roses. The attainments made through the use of the flowers have become fruit.[86]

It is now apparent that the person has reached the level of attainment which leads to the ultimate perfection. Not only is the person beyond the knowledge attainable from flowers--ideas--but he has reached to the point where the influence of the AI is ever upon him. All of this had to be done according to the proper order.

The parable shows that the AI is influencing the hylic intellect...but the AI would not have been able to influence it at all, if the hylic intellect had not prepared itself in the sciences.[87]

86. Ibid., p. 19b, col. II.

87. Ibid., p. 20a, col. I.

Now the hylic intellect is aware of the influence of the AI upon it. The hylic intellect feels the influence, and desires the influence to be even greater. The hylic intellect says: "Here I am, ready and willing for the AI, and it is incumbent upon me to satisfy that which the AI desires, namely to become actualized." [88]

Chapter VIII

The final chapter is entirely dedicated to the person who has already reached actualization. This chapter assumes that the process has already been completed, and that the final perfection has been realized. With this in mind, Ralbag has given us his final discussion of perfection. "Who is this who comes up out of the desert, clinging to her beloved. Under the apple tree I woke you." [89] When this verse appeared in 3:6, it made no reference to apples, however here it refers to the final perfection and so it makes such a reference. "It begins to tell of the attainment of metaphysics, and how difficult it is to attain it." [90]

88. Ibid., p. 20b, col. I.

89. Song of Songs, 8:5.

90. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 21a, col. I.

It is not longer necessary to distinguish between the knowledge acquired by way of the senses, for the person is beyond such preliminary investigations. Thus, the intellect comes out of the desert, clinging to the AI, which provided the fruit of understanding and wisdom. This was possible even though the desert is such a destitute place, because the final perfection does not require any help from the senses. The desert is a place where no work can be done and no fruit can grow. In the physical realm this is true, but in the intellectual realm, attainment is possible even in the desert. Thus Levi tells us that the final perfection is attained without the use of the tools which we used earlier, namely the senses.

How is it possible to complete attainment in a place of wasteland, in which no work can be done? This is in respect to the other sciences, not metaphysics, because they are attained with the investigation of the senses.[91]

The metaphor of the desert has no relevance to the intellectual realm, because intellectual endeavors do not require the use of the powers of the senses.

Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon. He gave the vineyard over to guardians. Everyone would bring a thousand pieces of silver for its fruit.[92]

This verse discusses the process of actualization, once

91. Ibid., p. 21a, col. 11.

92. Song of Songs, 8:11

again. The reference to Solomon is the intellect. The intellect gives its vineyard--read perfections--over to the guards. The guards are the perceived realities, of which there are many. These perceived realities lead to the ideal realities, which come from the hylic intellect. The hylic intellect must begin its quest with the use of the senses, which perceive. Through the perfection of the sensual powers, the hylic intellect is capable of abstract thought. This is achieved by the order of ideas, which the hylic intellect must go through to reach this level. The hylic intellect must peel off the layers of perceived realities, to arrive at the ideal reality. This layer must then be pierced in order to arrive at the fruit of actualization. The reason that Solomon says that the people pay so much for the fruit is to symbolize the difficulty of the endeavor. Finally arriving at the fruit indicates the great payment in time and effort.[93]

Once the hylic intellect arrives in the garden, it has become the acquired intellect. Thus: "you who sit in the gardens, companions are attentive to your voice." [94] Once actualization is acquired, and the intellect is perfected, then it remains in the garden. Those who will follow on the trek toward perfection will listen to what is said.

They will listen to the acquired intellect in

93. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 21b, col. II - 22a, col. I.

94. Song of Songs, 8:13.

order to get from it that which they need in the sciences, for without it the AI will not be able to influence them in the proper way.[95]

The pattern is a cyclical one. We must learn from those who came before us, building upon what they have said, and adding to what they have learned.

Ralbag closes his commentary by saying that he has given to us the understanding which he believes to be true. Following his own orderly system, he has attempted to teach us so that we may follow him into the garden of true wisdom and actualization. Thus the last verse reads: "Flee, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young hart upon the mountains of spices." [96] Ralbag understands the 'mountains of spices' to be metaphysics, and he says: "Go up upon the mountains of spices, which is metaphysics, as I said earlier, and do not slacken until you reach that goal." [97] This is the most important task in the world for Levi, and the only one worth the time. Thus he has attempted to pass on his understandings to those who wait outside the garden, trying to glimpse the fruit, perhaps someday to taste its sweetness.

95. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 22a, col. II.

96. Song of Songs, 8:14

97. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 22a, col. II.

CHAPTER THREE

A COMPARISON OF THE EXEGETICAL STYLE
OF GERSONIDES AND THE RABBIS

The book of Song of Songs is certainly one of the strangest books of the Bible. The fact that it can have so diverse a meaning to those who read it, proves that it is indeed an unusual phenomenon. Taken at face value, it is vivid, symbolic love poetry. As religious literature, it must, of necessity, be interpreted creatively. As a philosophic program, it must likewise be interpreted creatively. In this chapter of my thesis, I will discuss the style of biblical exegesis utilized in the Rabbinic tradition. I will also compare this style with that used by the Ralbag. It is my contention that Levi is precisely following the accepted Rabbinic tradition, when he interprets the text of Song of Songs. Although he comes to completely disparate conclusions as to the meaning of the book, his method is precisely the same. As I said earlier, the philosopher will have the same difficulty as the theologian, when confronting the text. The graphic sexual symbolism, can no more be accepted by philosophy than it can by religion. Thus, for both disciplines, the book must be an allegory, a parable.

The Rabbinic method of textual exegesis has always allowed for creative interpretation. Although the use of the plain or simple explanation is preferred whenever possible, no commentator has refrained from the homiletical interpretation, when it was necessary. The great mediaeval commentator, Rashi, always gave a homily when he did not find the simple meaning adequate for explaining the text. The

Rabbis, by and large, agree with the sentiment, and thus it says in the Talmud: "Whoever translates a verse as it appears (without interpreting its true meaning) is an ignoramus." [1] This is not to say that the simple meaning has no validity, but the true meaning may often be hidden in some symbolic form within the verse. Thus, when it comes to the Song of Songs, the commentators saw the mentioning of physical love and sexual innuendo as symbolic of some deeper and more religiously significant meaning. Ralbag also understood the Song of Songs as symbolic of some deeper meaning, only for him it had a more philosophically significant meaning.

In order to show that both interpretations--that of the Rabbis and that of Levi--follow the same basic tradition, I will give examples from the commentary. I will choose several verses randomly to illustrate that while both schools of thought utilize the same tools--creative, allegorical interpretation--they are doing it for entirely distinct reasons. The Rabbis want to show how the poem is an allegory for the relationship between God and Israel, while Levi, the rationalist philosopher, needs to show how it is a parable of the actualization of the intellect.

In the Art Scroll Tanach Series, Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz offers an allegorical translation. The translation is suggested by the commentary of Rashi to the Song of Songs. In

1. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Kiddushin, p. 49a.

an introduction, Rabbi Nosson Scherman writes:

Song of Songs is surely a song of love, but not of one human's love for another. Our sages and commentators did not doubt for an instant that the only simple meaning is the allegorical one. The renderings and explanations of the so-called 'simple' meaning, the references to feet, thighs, watchman, daughter, sheep, and so on are intended to do no more than to clarify the vehicle of the allegory...If human beings could understand the essence of God, such feeble attempts at likening it to something in human experiences would never have been necessary. The use of the allegory in Song of Songs is itself the best indication that its true meaning is beyond the scope of human understanding. [2]

This rabbi is telling us that the book must be understood in its allegorical form, and that the allegory is used to explain God to a humanity which can only understand Him through physical terminology.

In his introduction to his commentary of Song of Songs, Ralbag also declares the the book is to be understood allegorically. "The Song of Songs gives images of deep and difficult matters by way of allegory and parable." [3] This is precisely what the Rabbis say, except that the purpose of the parables and allegory is "to guide one to the nature of the intellect and its success. And Solomon mentions that the success of the intellect is the final perfection which is the acquired intellect." [4] Thus Ralbag differs from the Rabbis

2. Meir Zlotowitz, Song of Songs, (New York: Mesorah Publications Limited, 1978), p. lx-lxi.

3. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit. (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 5b., col. I.

4. Ibid., p. 5b, col. I.

by saying that intellectual success is the key to the allegory, not the understanding of the relationship between God and Israel.

The verse, "I am black yet comely,"[5] is understood similarly by both the rabbis and the philosopher, as indicative of two aspects. For Rashi, "I am blackened by the consequence of my own deeds, but I am comely by virtue of the deeds of my forefathers." [6] Rashi understands the verse as being spoken by Israel, and suggests the rabbinic notion of the 'reward of the forefathers'. God will forgive Israel for its sins, no matter how terrible, because of the righteousness of the patriarchs. Ralbag, however, understands the verse as representing the hylic intellect and the rest of the mental capacities.

The hylic intellect says to the rest of the mental capacities that they are black because they are the negation of all ideas, but comely when they are prepared for the acceptance of ideas.[7]

Ralbag understands the hylic intellect to say that the mental capacities are black when they seek bodily pleasures, but comely when they become occupied with the gathering of true ideas. Thus the rabbis consider the sin involved with not keeping the commandments, whereas Levi is concerned with the blackness which is present due to the absence of intellectual

5. Song of Songs, 1:5

6. Meir Zlotowitz, op. cit., p. 77

7. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 8a, col. I.

pursuits.

The occurrence of an apple tree as a symbol is significant both to Rashi and to Levi. Ralbag understands the verse which reads; "Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the sons", [8] as referring to the intellect among the rest of the mental capacities. The apple tree, or more specifically the fruit itself, is the intellect. The fruit is sweet, and smells delicious, just as the intellect is desirable. More importantly, though, the fruit is eternal, because it returns to the tree every year. This fact is used by Gersonides to show that the intellect and the true ideas, which it conceives, are also eternal. The 'trees of the forest' are likewise the rest of the mental capacities, for they have no fruit and are thus not eternal. Their worth, if any, is temporal and fleeting. The bodily pleasures have no lasting value. "The truth is that the fruit is the intellect alone among the rest of the mental capacities, because the intellect alone is eternal." [9] Rashi, on the other hand, understands the apple tree to be God.

Israel responds: Just as an apple tree among fruitless trees is beloved by virtue of its excellent fruit and fragrance--so is Hashem superior to all the gods whom the heathen nations

8. Song of Songs, 2:3

9. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 16b, col. II.

foolishly serve, and which are likened to insubstantial trees.[10]

"They all handle the sword, skilled in warfare. Each has his sword on his thigh, because of fear of the night." [11] The verse is obviously full of military imagery. Physical might is one of the bodily strengths which is as repugnant to the religious as to the philosophical. In the religious world, wars have certain merit, but they are to be avoided whenever they are not necessary. In the philosophic realm, war is wasteful, both in human energy and life. It is not, therefore, unexpected that both traditions would try to explain away the image of soldiers and warfare. Despite their mutual need to remove these military allusions, they do suggest that the symbols represent completely divergent images.

The rabbis read the reference to warfare as the warfare of Torah. For this comparison, a quote from Talmud suggests that 'mighty man' is used to mean master of tradition, and 'man of war' refers to warfare of Torah (one who is knowledgeable in the argumentation used in the study of Torah). [12] The swords used by these soldiers must, of course, be for Torah, as Rashi says: "the means to assure that the Torah is not forgotten and that it is transmitted intact from one generation to the next, for fear lest Torah

10. Meir Zlotowitz, op. cit., p. 98

11. Song of Songs, 3:8

12. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Chagigah, p. 14.

be forgotten, and if it is, that trouble will befall them." [13] The warfare then becomes the battle to preserve tradition, and the tool is the study of Torah itself.

For Gersonides, however, the simile refers to a warfare completely distinct from Torah. Being skilled in warfare means that one will not make intellectual mistakes. The tools which are used in this warfare are not swords, they are, rather, the perfections one acquires with knowledge. The night that they are afraid of is a symbol for foolishness. [14] Darkness, night and blackness always refer to ignorance and folly in the philosophic system which Levi sets up in his commentary. The warfare is to prevent anything from stopping the progress on the way toward actualization, the only impediments being scientific miscalculations. Erroneous calculations lead to mistakes. The sciences and their order (the laws which make them constant), when, known, prevent the hylic intellect from making mistakes.

The traditional commentaries explain the verse; "Your two breasts are like fawns, twins of a gazelle," [15] as any

13. Meir Zlotowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 122-3.

14. Levi ben Gershon, *op. cit.*, (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 13b, col. I.

15. Song of Song, 4:5.

member of a religious pair. Rashi suggests that they are Moses and Aaron, or perhaps the two tablets of the Law. Metzudat David explains it as the King and the High Priest. And Shevach Viykar suggests that it is the written and oral Laws. The point of all of these is to show that all these things are equal one to the other, just like two breasts, of twins.[16]

Rablag does not see the significance of the images of the breasts in their being identical. For Levi, the importance lies in the breasts themselves. "Since the breasts are for nursing, they are similar to something that influences." [17] It is not the pair that matters for this comment, rather it is the function of the object. The currents of the rabbis and Levi are coming from entirely different angles, but they are, nevertheless, following the exact same Rabbinic method of commentary. The Rabbis see the identical breasts as referring to holy pairs, and Levi sees the fact that they suckle the young as representative of the AI which influences the hylic intellect, bringing it toward perfection.

Chapter seven begins with a line which both the Rabbis and Levi translate similarly, but for completely dissimilar interpretations. This usage absolutely pin-points the

16. Meir Blotowitz, op. cit., p. 131-2

17. Levi ben Geramon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 14a, col. 11.

radically diverse understanding of the text. "Turn, Turn Hashulamite (O complete one); turn, turn, that we may gaze at you." [18] Both understand "Hashulamite" in the same way, as a complete being. The Rabbis understand the word as coming from the word 'complete' or 'whole.' Thus Rashi says: "Turn away, turn away, you who are 'perfect' in your faith in God. The Midrash renders Shulamite: 'the nation which God will one day settle in an abode of 'peace;' the nation that 'completes' the stability of 'the world.' "[19] Playing on the word, the traditional commentators arrive at 'perfection' in faith to God, 'peace' which God will bring, and the 'completion' of the world. All of these refer to Israel and its special relationship both to God and to the world.

Levi also reads the word as 'completeness,' however, for him, completeness and perfection are systematically aligned with philosophical perfection, not religious perfection.

"Its desire now is for the final perfection and this is called 'shulamite', which is derived from the perfection (same root letters). And it says that she will return because she is prepared in the matter of investigation." [20]

This perfection is of the intellect for Levi, and of the soul for the Rabbis. The use of the same exact allegorical understanding, by Levi and the Rabbis, indicates that they

18. Song of Songs, 7:1.

19. Meir Zlotowitz, op. cit., p. 174

20. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 18b, col. II.

are utilizing the same method, albeit for different reasons.

A final example of this usage of the same translation of a verse will suffice to prove that they are playing the same game, except on different teams. The verse reads: "I am my beloved's and his longing is upon me." [21] Rashi understands the verse to mean: "I am my Beloved's (God's) and His longing is upon me." [22] Rashi therefore understands the verse to mean that Israel belongs to God, and that God longs for her return to Him. Actually, the meaning is probably parallel. Israel yearns for God, and God yearns for Israel. This image is reflected in the Midrash. [23]

Levi also understands the verse's translation in this way, only the beloved is not God, it is the intellect. Thus he says: "I am ready and willing for the AI, and it is incumbent upon me to satisfy that which the AI desires, namely to become actualized." [24]

As one can readily see, the method used, for the understanding of the allegory of Song of Songs, is the traditional Rabbinic method. Levi is utilizing the method that he had been taught from his youth. Now that he himself

21. Song of Songs, 7:11

22. Meir Zlotowitz, op. cit., p. 186.

23. Cf. Compare our verse in Shir haShirim Rabbah 7:11 to that of Breshit Rabbah 20:17 on Genesis 3:16

24. Levi ben Gershon, op. cit., (Commentary to Song of Songs), p. 20b, col. I.

is perfected in the philosophic understanding of the world,
he is no longer in the mainstream of Rabbinic theology.
Nevertheless, he is in the mainstream of the Rabbinic
method.

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