

## EXISTENCE AND ESCHATOLOGY IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE MAHARAL (Part I)

by RIVKA SCHATZ

The book *Neṣaḥ Yisrael*<sup>1</sup> by Rabbi Judah Loeb, known as the *MahaRaL* of Prague (d. 1609), propounds the thesis that, despite sociological, legal and economic indicators to the contrary, the Jewish people in exile is not in danger of destruction. In the course of the discussion of this problem, two inter-related ideas are presented: the starting point of the discussion in the existential reality of the Jews in Exile, and the philosophical conclusion that existence is an end in its own right. In other words, the manner of existence in the world simultaneously represents the purpose of that existence. This definition, which is at root an existential one, reflects the unique temperament or philosophy of the Maharal.

Jewish culture is rich in attempts to present the problem of the Jewish people and its uniqueness, whether by such medieval philosophers as Judah ha-Levi, apocalyptic Renaissance thinkers such as Isaac Abrabanel, or 16th-century kabbalists, such as those of the circle in Safed — each according to his own historio-philosophical, theological or political outlook; however, among none of these do

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Translation by Jonathan Chipman. Due to the unusual length of this article, we are unable to present it in its entirety in this issue. The second half will appear in *Immanuel* 15.

1. Jerusalem, 1971. All numbers in parantheses throughout this article refer to that edition.

we find a discussion of Jewish existence as such, that is, of the ontic status of that existence, out of which is developed a Messianic eschatology. Moreover, nowhere else is there an existential solution to the Jewish-Christian polemic such as found in the Maharal, which reduces all of the classical theological arguments to insignificance.

The 16th century was one which changed the map of the Jewish Diaspora. Following the expulsions from Spain and Portugal in the final years of the 15th century, new communities were created throughout the area of Ottoman rule in the East, in North Africa, in the Balkans, in Italy (both the free republic and the Papal States) and, in the latter half of the century, in the Low Countries as well. The successful return of these communities to Jewishness was threatened by their widespread dispersion, and it was this, and the fear that the dispersion would inevitably bring about their disappearance, which raised the question of their existence as identifying Jews. While this argument is not explicitly stated in any of the historical sources from the 16th century, so far as I know, the Maharal's book *Neṣaḥ Yisrael* can only be read in terms of its author's concern over the new sociological reality of the middle and end of that century. One may also discern an outside force, whose arguments he wished to refute and undermine, underlying and motivating his revival of the argument of the indestructibility of the Jewish people, and his development of existential philosophical conceptions — Christianity. At times this is explicit, taking the form of a dialogue between the Maharal and Christian scholars, while at others it is concealed and therefore stronger in rejecting the political demand of Christianity that Judaism leave the stage of history and its argument that their existential condition attests to their failure. Maharal undertakes an extraordinary effort to demolish this thesis and, to the contrary, establishes a new, positive theory of the nature of the Exile. Through the entire lengthy discussion, the question of Exile is far more central than that of redemption; that is, through the discussion of whether the Exile can exist, the philosophy of the Exile blooms.

Exile is defined in Maharal's teaching as an unnatural situation, a "departure from the natural order." Naturalness in the life of nations is determined by the criteria of natural science, which state that everything has a natural place of its own and that any departure from that place cannot long endure. "Nothing lasts permanently except for natural things, because the nature which God implants in each thing sustains it until it becomes permanent... and every dispersed thing is to be regathered (p. 9)." The phrase "dispersion" (*pizur*) is used here to describe unnatural situations, such as that of Israel in Exile, whose natural and permanent place is the Land of Israel, to which they will be ingathered in the future. But before Maharal determines the existence of these things on the basis of natural law, he asks rhetorically whether, perhaps, this natural order is disrupted as a result of the sins and transgressions of the Jewish people, for which they were exiled. He answers that the theological cause of exile cannot override the natural

laws of existence. This assumption should itself be sufficient to call our attention to the fact that this is also an answer to those non-Jews who adhere to the idea of “the sin of Israel” in order to attack ‘the remnant of their hope. But beyond this hidden polemic, the Maharal develops, from the very outset of the book, a weightier thesis which we shall discuss later as central to understanding his approach. Maharal’s real response is not in the realm of theology, as sin and wrongdoing rank relatively low for him as causes of exile: “The cause of Exile is sin, but the cause of the cause is hidden from us” (p. 11). The sin which preceded the Exile does not seem sufficient to him as its primary cause because, to use the common philosophical language of the Middle Ages, that sin was “accidental” and not part of their “essence.” Their sins were trivial in comparison to their true stature as a nation of special qualities, a chosen people. What then is the secret of the disparity between their sin and their chosenness, between the “accident” of their wrongdoing and their eternal existence? The Maharal, with amazing logic and painstaking, consistent argument, explains the Exile, not as a punishment for sin, but as a mode of existence testifying to their chosenness. Moreover, he explains the nature of this chosenness as a necessity of unshakable eschatological dimensions.

At this point, the philosophical problem is joined between the natural laws of existence and the existential character of existence. In terms of the laws of nature, the people of Israel is no different from any other people and therefore cannot live permanently under the rule of other nations in conditions unnatural to the lives of nations, generally. Therefore, they are promised the end of Exile by reason of the general laws of national existence. But their Exile existence is not only a testimony to a temporary departure from the accepted “order,” but to the principles of operation of cosmic existence as a whole, in which situations of lack must precede situations of wholeness. In other words, in a concise formulation: “Through the Exile you can comprehend the Redemption.” The principle ideas thus far may be summarized in three points: 1) Exile is an unnatural situation, so it must therefore come to an end; 2) Exile as a fact of existence testifies to the necessary Redemption; 3) Exile does not exist because of sin, but for the sake of Redemption. “Deficient” existence attests to perfect existence; this law of existence leads inescapably towards perfection. From all the above, one arrives at the necessary dialectic for the understanding of the Maharal’s system, which states that the departure from the “natural order” as a way of existence is essentially nothing more than a temporary one, demonstrating the “depth of the order” which will exist in the future. For Maharal, nothing exists beyond the “order” itself.

What I have said until now is only general, in order to point out some of the methodological and logical difficulties in understanding the general direction of his system, which I shall now analyze systematically.

## Existence as a Chosen People and Existence in Exile

The Maharal begins by defining Exile as a condition contradicting two natural laws: the law of unity and the law of national sovereignty: the former explains the unnaturalness of the Jewish dispersion, and the latter the unnaturalness of the Jewish people's subjection. He then offers a lengthy description of this abnormal existence, in the course of which he both decries and praises it, making the mystery of Exile so powerful that it becomes doubtful whether it is worth relinquishing. I know of no other book which elevates the burden of exile to such emotional heights of meaning. One finds here an uplifting of the people which cultivates their sense of unique existence or, if you prefer, a conscious rejection of the possibility of imminent redemption. No other book taught the internalization of life in a comparable manner. Thus, it is no surprise that this book was so highly praised in the courts of several Hasidic greats, such as those of Pzhysha and Kotzk. It impresses one with the suffering of exile, deepens the mystery of its existence and, at the same time, is intended to assure the regenerative powers of the people, by presenting an answer to its enemies and to those who claim that the Exile marks the end of its path. In the following chapter, we shall discuss the metaphysical dimension added to the existential claims; here, we shall attempt to understand the "naturoscopic" way of thought (if one may use such a neologism) characteristic of the Maharal, which forms the immanent basis of his existential approach.

We noted above that the "dispersion" of Israel is a basic cause for worry. Maharal soothes this anxiety with the statement that Israel retains a "force of unity and ingathering" (*Koah ahadut ve-kibus*) even in its dispersion, "for the power of unity is still present in Israel in their Exile and they are not completely divided, and through this power of unity remaining with them they shall yet be reunited" (p. 10). That is to say, the conditions of exile did not harm their sociological structure, which is capable of regeneration. "Their unifying power remains within Israel, but it is not active, but only in potential" (p. 11). "There is a force uniting Israel in their exile, and by virtue of this same force they shall return from their exile" (*Ibid.*). This is a basic naturalistic principle.

Theory states that each people derives vitality from the place where it lives, and that separation from it harms that vitality. The destruction of the Temple harmed Israel's source of vitality, raising the possibility that their lack of "place" of their own would mean their ultimate destruction. Thus, the positing of a "unifying and ingathering force" independent of place — itself a naturalistic theory — serves as an alternative to the political theory of existence. "The place is the source of survival for those whose place it is, as is shown by the word 'place' (*maqom*) which is derived from the word 'survival' (*qiyum*),<sup>2</sup> so that in leaving his place, his ex-

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2. In Hebrew, playing upon the exchange of letters, קיום-מקום.

istence is lost” (p. 121). In principle, the Land of Israel remains their place or, as he writes, “their land is still their place.” However, in exile, the need for sustenance flowing from the land to the people is transferred to the “force of unity and ingathering” which belongs to it, rather than being transferred to another place. There would seem to be a natural law that it is impossible for a given group to acclimatize to a new place after having been uprooted, but that they may adjust by transferring to a new type of natural center, even if it be only temporary. “For you must know that exile is unnatural, for it requires the unique nation to exist not in its natural place. If there is a change in the ordering of existence it is merely temporary, and in the end everything will return to its own order... But it is impossible that they should remain in another land and never return to their own land, for then they would be completely removed from their *place*, and be in another land, and there can be no greater change of the (natural) order than this” (p. 122). It is clear that the fact that they do not become “rooted” in another land itself sustains their relationship to their true and natural place. His positive interpretation of the meaning of dispersion follows from this. Dispersion, which testifies to the sociology of uprootedness, also bears evidence of the authentic, natural roots of one who fails to strike roots in the Diaspora. Had the Jews been exiled to one land rather than to “the entire world,” one might have thought that there is a substitute for Eretz-Yisrael. For this reason, the Maharal would certainly not have supported Jewish territorial concentration in the Exile, even in retrospect. He writes, “They are scattered throughout the world and have no special land of their own, but the whole world is their place... but that the Exile should exist in its own right is unseemly. Therefore, the Almighty sustains it by His own decree” (p. 122). In other words, the Exile must be preserved as an anomaly, as a departure from the normal order, and not perceived as a new order substituting for the original order of the world, as the former shall never be changed.

### **The Secret of Exile**

“One of two things must necessarily occur,” says the Maharal. “Either there shall be a return to the natural order and the Exile will be abolished or, Heaven forbid, Israel will be entirely overwhelmed!” That is, the Exile has no independent status as a long-term solution: the Exile must be terminated either by the coming of the Redemption or by the destruction of the Jewish people; in either event, permanent exile of the Jewish people is an impossibility. The regenerative forces contained within the situation of dispersion insure that the Exile will not culminate in either excessive rootedness or the disappearance of the people within it, as the solution to the Jewish problem. Were the former solution, in fact, to be the case and the Jews were to find a permanent home in Exile, this would be a sign that God had abandoned them. Yet, had it not been for the Exile they would not have survived at all! Through the logic of the unique existence of the Jewish people, a non-activistic theory of Exile and dispersion is developed, and the famous three

oaths mentioned in the Talmud (Ketubbot 111a) — that they not “rise up on (or as) a wall”,<sup>3</sup> that they not rebel against the nations, and that the nations not oppress them overly much — are explained as basic guidelines to the new norms of survival in the Exile. These three oaths — or six in the final redaction of the Talmud — made history in the controversy surrounding Zionism and the immigrations to Israel from its beginnings to the present day, so much so that the late anti-Zionist leader of the Satmar Hasidim, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, quoted this passage from the Maharal in support of his own anti-activist halakhic positions.

To return to Maharal’s interpretation of the oaths, of which three warn against the abrogation of Israel’s subjugation to the nations while three others require that they not “reveal the End”: 1) the oath that they not “rise up on (or as) a wall” is read as a prohibition against abolishing the dispersion; 2) that they not reveal the End, because there is an element of redemption in the very knowledge of the End, and it cannot be seen or prophecied before its time (this thesis is explained in the second part of this paper); 3) likewise, one is not to force the end by means of prayer, nor calculate its date, nor reveal its secrets to the nations of the world. Israel must accept the decree of exile and not violate the oaths, even if they suffer as severely as the “generation of the Destruction” (i.e., the Hadrianic persecutions of ca. 125 C.E.) and even if this entails the partial destruction of the people of Israel. From now on, their internal unity rather than their homeland is the center of their existence “for it is appropriate that a people who is the entire world should have their place in the entire world” (p. 121). One must create total isolation by means of custom, dress and diet and turn life in Exile inwards through study of Torah in the yeshivot. One must take care not to become like the nations lest “they be unworthy of separation from them” when the time comes. In other words, one must on the one hand avoid messianic speculations and, on the other hand, avoid feeling excessively at home in the surrounding society. One ought to accept the rule of the nations, and maintain a certain distance from them. In this situation, awareness of the metaphysical dimension of Jewish existence grows and becomes the essential thing. Existence becomes clearer on this basis, and the nation itself becomes defined in terms of its relationship to God. “It is necessary that there be a nation, somewhere in the world, which belongs to God” (p. 61). The interesting part of this claim is not its metaphysical consciousness, similar in principle to that of Judah ha-Levi, but the argument that this fact itself guarantees the end of the Exile, because it is unreasonable that a nation which is the “heart” of the world and first among the nations should remain in an eternal state of subjugation to other nations. The degradation of Israel, its being “low as the dust,” in his words, may prompt the thought that Israel is of little worth in the eyes of God! These are, in fact, the

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3. Used as a symbol of messianic activism.

arguments of the Christians, who have always claimed that the Exile signified the end of the election of Israel, and that the concrete conditions of their existence is a constant testimony of this.

Political and national failure always implies theological meaning of the first order. The polemic with Christianity moves the Maharal simultaneously in two directions: withdrawal from the demand to compete for success in the world; and a deepening of the thesis of the uniqueness and miraculousness of Jewish existence in general, and of their existence in Exile in particular. Even the metaphysical claim for recognition of this unique being depicts it in naturalistic and, at times, kabbalistic-magical colors, intended to insure its existence — and these are as unavoidable as the natural laws themselves.

This certainty of the eternity of Israel's existence is not grounded in Scripture and divine promises, but upon the law of existence of concealed being which fastens itself upon the entirety of Being. If its power is not described in kabbalistic-magical terms, it is done in geometrical or astrological ones — which comes to much the same thing as far as their unshakable certainty is concerned. The concealed law of eternal existence has a kabbalistic equivalent: “the Name” (*Ha-Shem*), i.e., the Divine Name proclaimed over them. The Name is the concrete formula representing this immanent lawfulness in Jewish existence, which cannot be negated unless its existence itself is nullified. “And the eternity of Israel is clear from this, for it is impossible that they should change, because Israel is the center of all existence” (p. 62). One may not ignore the force of the argument that no external conditions can touch the basis of their existence, even should the exile continue, as their existence is independent of all historical circumstances. In his words, “one cannot say that Israel will be destroyed because of the harshness of their exile.” On the contrary, were the “heaviness of Exile” able to endanger their existence, they would have long since perished, as even now “it is astonishing to all the inhabitants of the world, for it seems impossible that such a nation should exist at all!” True, this existence seems to be perpetually on the brink of oblivion, due to the many edicts, persecutions and expulsions against them, but the fact is that they are always saved by “people close to the rulers,” and this, says Maharal, is a sign that God has not abandoned them. This sensitive, realistic formula is an important polemical tool in Maharal's hands.

What is the connotation of the phrase that Israel is “the main thing in the world” (*'iqar ba-'olam*)? To the Maharal, Israel contains within itself the riddle of existence, without which the world would be a closed book. He does not refer only to its closedness to awareness, but to existence or to meaning, which are synonymous for him. In light of this, he explains the passage in the Jerusalem Talmud:

“Resh Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Yannai: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, shared His name with Israel. To what may this be compared? To a king who had a small key to a palace. He said, “If I leave the key as it is, it will get lost, so I shall attach a chain to it, so that if it is lost the chain will still be attached to me.” Thus said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Himself, “If I leave Israel among the nations they are lost, so I will attach My great Name to them.” So that, “When the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land hear of this, they will turn upon us and wipe out our very name from the earth. And what will You do about Your great name (Josh. 7:9)” which is shared with us.’” (JT, Ta’anit 2:6).

The meaning of this is as follows: This world is the palace of the king, and Israel is the key to the palace. Were Israel not to exist, then it would be as if the palace were shut, and when the palace is shut it serves no purpose and is not called a house, for it has no opening. Thus, were Israel not to exist then the palace which is this world would serve no purpose and would be closed, as if the name “palace” did not apply to it at all. For this reason, Israel is called “the small key,” for it is a small nation, but acts as the key to a great palace. As we have already explained, Israel is considered to be the form of the world. Therefore, Israel is compared to a key, because the key opens the chamber, but when there is no key the palace remains shut, and it is like an unfinished wooden vessel which is shut and has no opening and hasn’t even the form of a chamber, which is open. So were Israel to be left as it is, it would be lost among the nations, because Israel is a nation separated from all the other nations, unique unto itself, as we have explained. There is no doubt that the Israelite nation is opposed by all the other nations, and its enemies would overwhelm and destroy it while they are in Exile and under them. Therefore; God combined His name with them; that is, they cling to God, and for this reason the nations cannot overwhelm them... And it is called a chain, which is attached to the key, so that it cannot be lost... and that is why He combined His name with them, so that they not be lost among the nations. (p. 63)

God, who attends to the existence of the cosmos so that it not remain “a shapeless wooden vessel,” but a great palace and a “receiving vessel,” sends the “key” into this cosmos and ties it to Himself with an unbreakable tie — His Name which is placed upon Israel. The name is a kind of protective amulet, not only for the people of Israel in its concreteness, but for the form and meaning of the cosmos.

### **Hints of Redemption within Exile**

While the general sociological phenomenon of Exile does not describe the true status of the people of Israel, it does contain hints of power and even signs of the future redemption. According to Maharal, this is expressed during the time of prayer, which is a model for the ingathering of the dispersed and of liberation from subjection to the rule of the nations, through their accepting of the kingship of heaven. If you wish, it is a kind of redemption within exile. “When the people are gathered towards God when the community prays, this is a kind of exodus from the dispersion of Israel among the nations... For when Israel is among the nations, even if a thousand of them are together they are still ‘among the nations.’ But when they pray in community gathered together towards God this is an exodus from the domain of the nations, and an ascension from their midst towards God, and this is called ‘the redemption of Israel from amongst the nations.’ And



they are also elevated and uplifted above the nations by acts of kindness, because through them man is uplifted” (p. 64). Thus, the external rule of the nations over their lives doesn’t necessarily determine their true being and their spiritual level. Through the Torah, they escape the domination of the nations and are brought under that of God. The Torah is the medium of clinging to God: moreover, in an unprecedented manner, Maharal has transformed the people of Israel itself, as an organic body and a primary essence, into the first emanation of God. This use of the concept of primogeniture is also clearly related to the Christian-Jewish polemic concerning the son of God. On the very same theological ground, Maharal claims that Israel is the son of “the very truth of the Holy One, blessed by He, Himself,” and just as He is one, as cause, so is that which is caused one and unique, and two beings cannot exist on the same level. “This teaches that there is a complete connection, because they are emanated from His very self.” And “they cannot be removed from being sons of God, nor can this pass away or be changed, because there is nothing which connects and binds more than the connection of father and son... for the son exists through the father, and is not merely his acquisition.” As a “naturalistic” answer to Christianity, which sought to inherit the rights of Israel as firstborn, he broadens his answer to explain why it is impossible to inherit this right. The attachment of the Jewish people to God is not a private matter, nor a function of their having been the first to recognize God, but is something else entirely. It is one of the original laws of the universe or, as Maharal expresses it, “a general attachment.” “And that which is general cannot be changed.” The status of this attachment cannot be erased by sin, because sin cannot change the “general” structure of existence or, in his words, “change as a result of sin cannot be.”

The election of Israel cannot lapse because it was unconditional from its outset, nor can it be transferred to another object which sees itself as the legitimate heir of the promise to Abraham, as the promise was not made to Abraham, but to his seed, in the unequivocal sense of Israel. “Abraham was not chosen as a private individual, but the Israelite nation, which is his seed, was chosen.” This “general election” (*beḥirah kelalit*) is a natural law or, in his words, “election *per se*” (*beḥirah be-‘ešem*) and not an election by virtue of their good deeds. Maharal, by removing its ethical component, removes the theological basis of the Jewish-Christian polemic: as any polemic of this kind, which has been continuing for 1500 years, is by its very nature irresolvable, both so long as the claims of the Christians are strengthened by the lowly situation of the Jews in history, and so long as the accusation of guilt hangs over their head like a sword, wielded by the one wishing to inherit their place. The Maharal works hard to prove that the concept of “eternal covenant” indicates that the covenant has no limit or end. “This being so, why should those one or two generations who sinned be counted within the covenant, so as to nullify it for those generations of the seed of Abraham who have not yet been born?” (p. 69).

The law of the covenant is itself not determined by God's will but by the law of God's existence within Israel, and its own internal unity, necessity and naturalness such that the "general election" is not a moral value but a natural fact. "Let it be clear to you that God, who took Israel to Himself, did so not by virtue of their righteousness and good deeds, but as an act of general election. It is therefore irrelevant to say that in the absence of this cause — i.e., the righteousness of Israel — that that caused by it, namely, that they were taken by Him as His people, should also disappear... for this election was in any event not on account of any deed" (p. 70). That which is true regarding the Jewish people is also true regarding the Torah given to Israel, which is again perceived, not as a code of laws guaranteeing "good behavior" or proper ethics<sup>4</sup> nor given on condition relating to any ethical basis. Israel does not exist for the law, but the Torah is the law of her existence. This understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Torah is doubtless intended to upset the claims of the Christians who saw themselves as its heirs by virtue of the "new Testament." In Maharal's existential philosophy, there is no possibility of making a "new covenant" to replace the old, because the Torah is none other than the "order of existence," which is designed for Israel and Israel alone. The proof of this is that the Christian world does not fulfill it, in fact, because in its essential structure it is not intended for it as the order of reality. The Torah had to be given to Israel after the world was created, because it is the completion of the structure of the world. He writes: "One may not at all say that the giving of the Torah was for the benefit of Israel, in order that they might have goodness in this world and the world to come, for in that case one might argue that when Israel sinned, this Torah which was given for their benefit was taken away from them... but the giving of the Torah was a yoke upon Israel." Moreover, "This cannot be true of any other people, as you can readily see, for even though they formally accept the Torah, they are far from fulfilling it — all of which proves that the Torah is not their portion." And, "From this, it is clear that the election of Israel was required by the order of creation for the sake of the Torah, for it is impossible that the world should exist without Torah, and the Torah cannot exist except for Israel... and it is illogical to say that something which is necessary should be destroyed or negated, for if it was necessary even before it became actualized, then once it has become real one cannot say that it ought to become negated, for the reason for which Israel was elected has not changed at all... When God held the mountain over them like a bucket it was to force them to accept it, and we know that one who forces a woman cannot thereafter divorce her!" (p. 31)

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4. See my article, "The Maharal's Conception of Law as an Antithesis to Natural Law" (Heb.). *Daat* 2 (1978), pp. 147–157. An English translation of this article is to be published in the near future in *Jewish Law Annual*.

He pushes his argument to the extent of claiming that the proof that the Torah is intended only for Israel derives precisely from the fact that it was imposed upon them by force rather than by their free will or, in his words, “not on their own part, but by necessity” (p. 71). The Maharal performs an ingenious act of exegesis, which even surprised the editors of his writings, in quoting the Midrash as saying that “when Israel came to receive the Torah, He held the mountain above them like a bucket, so that they would be forced to accept the Torah.” The editors, in an understatement, comment that they do not know the source of this midrash. What they certainly knew is that there is, in fact, no midrash which speaks of the forced acceptance of the Torah as the preferred way. Maharal utilizes the law obliging the rapist to marry his victim as a model of the immanent responsibility of God to the Jewish people, having forced the Torah upon them. This is the ethics of an existentialist, who sees the eternal existence of Israel as guaranteed by the forced character of its existence. Their chosen existence is like their chosen birth; and “as their existence is required by their cause” — in his philosophical definition — their chosenness is therefore necessary, and no sin can nullify it. Just as they cannot be other than they are, so they cannot be not chosen: their existence is identical with their chosenness! In his philosophical formulation: “The effect is necessary by reason of its cause, and possible by reason of itself.” But here, not only is its existence necessary by reason of its cause, as the philosophers had thought, but also its election: “Because He — may He be praised — is a necessary cause of Israel, and there can be no cause without an effect, so God must necessarily rule over them, even if they do not wish it, because this is required by the nature of the cause and not by that of the effect, for that which exists because of the effect is subject to change, because the effect itself is subject to change. Therefore, while it is possible because of itself, it is necessary in terms of its cause” (p. 72). Their own perfection, which no sin can damage, stems from the very fact of their being the first and necessary effect, “because this nation, in its very creation, was made absolutely perfect. And pay no heed to the sins which are in them... and because of this God chose them, because it was fitting that the perfect should join with the Perfect and not leave it, while sin, which is something accidental to their essence, ought not change their election, for they were chosen because of the perfection of their being, as Israel, for in their essence they are pure of sin.” That which is accidental cannot nullify that which is essential, “for it is impossible to say that the accidental will endure eternally” (p. 73). Thus, Maharal interprets “creation in the image of God” in the sense of Israel being in the image of the “wholeness of His creation itself.” This is also the meaning of their “cleaving to Him completely,” which does not have any ethical connotation, but an existential one. Maharal does not require the concept of man cleaving to God, but that of the Jewish people clinging to Him, for he deals with the mystical existence of the Jewish people as the primary organic unity — a question that, one needn’t add, is also important within the context of the Jewish-Christian polemic. The Maharal seeks to arrive at the conclusion that only a con-

nection independent of both the free-will of God and that of Israel is a certain guarantee against its annulment. Only such a connection can be above and beyond dispute — a point which indicates, of course, how deeply the debate had penetrated. But there is no doubt that this was not only a polemical point, but was also based upon an irrational, miraculous quality to Jewish existence, overshadowing any rational arguments based upon loyalty, faith or will. Only a mysterious law as strong as existence itself could explain the survival of the people of Israel, on the one hand, and their readiness for self-sacrifice, on the other.

Self-sacrifice is explained as resulting from the natural connection of the effect to its cause, rather than as an act of free-will or rational decision: “Because Israel is not moved by its own free will at all, but by the will of the Cause, blessed be He; so they and their souls turn towards the Holy One, blessed be He. For that reason, it is unseemly that they should say ‘We shall hear!’ before ‘We shall do!’, as if this were dependent upon their minds and their wills, for it is not so at all. So how can such a connection be destroyed?” (p. 76) “Self-sacrifice” is simply that same permanent presence of the effect to its cause which, despite the philosophical language, has something of the romantic tone to it. “The ashes of Isaac which are gathered and resting upon the altar” are the permanent remembrance by means of which God remembers Israel, and this is explained as a total unity — “He isn’t separated from Him.” “Because he sacrificed himself for Him, he is always present to Him — but all these things are very deep secrets, and one may not explain any more” (p. 78). The impossibility of their destruction is based upon the secret of a unique existence which is defined as “from His own truth,” unlike other existents, which by their nature suffer loss. “But Israel, by their very own truth, exist through God, and therefore they exist and know no loss” (p. 78), and they are “a people that dwells apart.”

Gradually, one begins to feel the development of a dialectical thesis of vacillation between states of “falling” of the Jewish people and states of their total non-falling. The two together witness to their election. The “breaking” which does not break that name “readiness to fall” inspires the Maharal to claim that their falling also testifies to their chosenness — for God loves those who are low-spirited and broken-hearted — and, on the other hand, to that inner strength which testifies to their eternity, for “God relies upon the Community of Israel not to fall down altogether.” The imbalance between their outer and inner existence is described as a lack in their greatness and stature, but not as a threat to their existence itself. “But it is impossible that this lack should touch their essence” (p. 85). This claim, as well, may be connected to the belief of the Church that it is allowed to humiliate the Jews, but not to destroy them, because they are needed as living testimony of the disgrace of sin and the victory of the Church. This peculiar “Divine decree” against the Jews may have been transformed by the Maharal into a mystic hypothesis of the secret of their existence.