

RABBI YEHUDAH LOEW OF PRAGUE—THE MAHARAL

רבי יהודה ליווא מפראג—מהר"ל

born: Posen, Poland, 1525

died: Prague, Bohemia, 1609

Popularly known as the Maharal, the abbreviation of *Mōreinu Harav Loew, our teacher Rabbi Loew. Talmudist, kabbalist, philosopher.*

The Maharal was born to a distinguished family of rabbis that traced its ancestry to King David. In 1553 he was elected rabbi of Nikolsburg and the Province of Moravia, where he remained for the following twenty years. In 1573 he moved to Prague, where he opened a yeshivah and became mentor of many outstanding disciples. The most prominent among these is **Rabbi Lipmann Heller**, author of *Tosefot Yomtov* on the Mishnah. In 1592 the Maharal accepted the position of rabbi in Posen, returning to Prague in 1598 to serve as its chief rabbi. He was a prolific writer, and his works include: *Tiferet Yisrael*¹ on the greatness of Torah and mitzvot; *Netivot Olam*,² on ethics; *Be'er Hagolah*,³ a commentary on rabbinic sayings; *Netzach Yisrael*,⁴ on exile and redemption; *Or Chadash*,⁵ on the Book of Esther; *Ner Mitzvah*,⁶ on Chanukah; *Gevurot Hashem*,⁷ on the Exodus; and many others. The Maharal's works reveal his illustrious personality as a profound thinker who penetrates the mysteries of Creation and metaphysics, clothing kabbalistic themes in a philosophic garment. His unique approach to Jewish thought influenced the ideologies of Chasidism and Mussar. A staunch leader of his community, he became the hero of many legends in which he appears as the defender of Prague Jewry against all its enemies, assisted by the Golem, a robot he made and gave life to by placing sacred writings in his mouth. The Maharal's synagogue, *Altneu Schul*, still exists today and is preserved as a shrine by the Prague municipal authorities, who in 1917 erected a statue in his honor. In the Torah-observant world the Maharal lives on in his writings, which are an enduring source of wisdom and inspiration.

שאלה צג 17/1658

נסתפקתי אדם הנוצר על ידי ספר יצירה כאותה
שאמרו בסנהדרין רבא ברא גברא, וכן
העידו על זקני הגאון מוהר"ר אליהו אב"ד דק"ק
חעלם, מי מצטרף לעשרה לדברים הצריכין עשרה
כגון קדיש וקדושה, מי אמרין כיון דכתיב ונתקדשתי
בתוך בני ישראל לא מיצטרף או דילמא כיון דקיי"ל
בסנהדרין המגדל יתום בתוך ביתו מעלה עליו הכתוב
כאילו ילדו מדכתיב חמשת בני מיכל כו' וכי מיכל
ילדה והלא מירב ילדה אלא מירב ילדה ומיכל גדלה
כו', ה"נ כיון שמעשה ידיהם של צדיקים הוא הוה ליה
בכלל בני ישראל שמעשה ידיהם של צדיקים הן הן
תולדותם.

ונראה לי דכיון דאשכחן לרבי זירא דאמר מן חברייא
את תוב לעפרך הרי שהרגו, ואי סלקא דעתך
שיש בו תועלת לצרפו לעשרה לכל דבר שבקדושה לא
היה רבי זירא מעבירו מן העולם דאף שאין בו איסור
שפיכת דמים דהכי דייק קרא (אף שיש בו דרשות
אחרות) שופך דם האדם באדם דמו ישפך, דוקא אדם
הנוצר תוך אדם דהיינו עובר הנוצר במעי אמו הוא
דחייב עליה משום שפיכת דמים יצא ההוא גברא דברא
רבא שלא נעשה במעי אשה, מכל מקום כיון שיש בו
תועלת לא היה לו להעבירו מן העולם אלא ודאי שאינו
מצטרף לעשרה לכל דבר שבקדושה כן נ"ל.

צבי אשכנזי ס"ט

אך הטפשים בארצות אלו דרכיהם הפך זה מלמדים עם הנער מקרא מעט מן
הפרשה ומפסיקין ומתחילין בשבוע אחר פרשה כניה קצת מן הפרשה, ובכלות
השנה נשכחו ממנו הראשונים, ואז יחזור בשנה שניה, ומפני ששכל הנער
יותר — מלמד עמו יותר ממה שלמד עמו אשתקד, וכן שלישית ורביעית
וכמה שנים, וכאשר נעתק מן המקרא מאומה לא ישא בידו, יציאתו כביאתו...
ויש שמעתיקין אותו אל הגמרא מיד, יצפצף הנער בקול דברים בלבד, ותמננת
הפשוט לא ידע להבין אף דבר מה ממנו, ולא דמסיק ממנו כדמסיק תעלא
מבי כרבא, רק כדמסיק זכוב מאבן שיש, וכאשר יגדל הנער ואז יתגבר קצת
שכלו — מעתיק אותו אל לימוד התוספות, ובסכלות דעתו [יחשוב] כי לימוד
הגמרא וההלכה הוא הועיל לו, והאנשים האלו הוכו בסגוריהם, אין זה רק כי
שכל הנער גדל מעצמו, אבל שיהיה מוסיף בשכלו מה שהלעיטו דבר שאין
ראוי לו ואינו לפי ערך שכלו — זה אי אפשר, ואין ספק שאם היה הולך בלא
תורה והתחיל ללמוד בזמן מועט יגיע מה שעסק זה מהתחלתו ואז יעסוק
בתוספות, ומי יתן והיה לו העיקר ולא יבקש תוספות, ועוד יעלה בסולם
לדרוך במשאות שוא יגיע לריק כוחו ויכלו בהבל ימיהם ושנותם בבהלה
לעסוק בפלפול של הבל, להסביר פנים אשר לא כן, אוסף רוח בהפניו והיה
לרוח שקר בפיו, דבר זה נוהג עד שיכתוב כתובה לאשה, אז הישליך משמים
ארץ ונדמה לו כאלו חולם חלום כל ימיו, יפרוש מן התורה לגמרי, לא ישא
בידו מאומה, לא מקרא ולא משנה ולא תלמוד ולא דרך ארץ, הלא כל אדם
שיבקש כבוד קונו ודורש התורה ראוי שיהיה דוח לבו על זה.

← ס"ט אשכנזי

(4) משנה

משנה

ס"ט אשכנזי

זר אר"ה (ס"ט)

כ"ה

צ"ה

(והנהגה ע"ה)

Excerpt from *Gevurot Hashem*, Chap. 18

[Moses] looked all around, and when he saw that there was no one around, he killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand.

(Exodus 2:12)

The Maharal: *And hid his body in the sand*—Our sages comment on this passage: "The people of Israel are just like sand." Sand does not produce any sound when it is stirred. This stems from the smallness of its physical nature. The smaller the material substance of a body, the less audible it is. The same holds true for the Jewish people, who have a supernal, spiritual nature. Their true essence remains concealed and goes unnoticed. Silent like sand, they do not publicize the transcendental aspect of their being.



Excerpt from *Gevurat Hashem*, Chap. 51:
Matzah, the Unleavened Bread

On the night of Passover the Children of Israel were freed from bondage in a supernatural way, a deliverance completely devoid of any material aspect. It is to commemorate this supernatural aspect that they were commanded to eat the matzah, the unleavened bread—bread in its most simple form, devoid of any extraneous ingredients. Spiritual freedom means basic simplicity, total independence from material wants. In the same vein, Scripture relates that they "left Egypt in a rush" (Deuteronomy 16:3). This indicates that their liberation was instantaneous, without passage of time. What occurred was timeless and metaphysical. This timelessness is inherent in the matzah, a bread that comes into being virtually in an instant, without undergoing the time-consuming process of leavening.⁸

Excerpt from *Gevurot Hashem*, Chap. 46: Time, Motion, and Matter

Time and matter are two concepts that are completely interrelated. Time is essentially motion; motion is a function of matter. Thus, time, motion, and matter are an integral whole. A physical object can be defined in terms of its six surfaces: top, bottom, right, left, front, and back. There is, however, a seventh dimension—the center, which bears no relation to any of the six surfaces. It is an intangible, incorporeal entity, a point in space, having no dimensions. Time, which, as we have said, forms an integral part of physical matter, is measured by the six weekdays and the seventh day, the holy Shabbat. The six weekdays correspond to the six sides of a material object, while Shabbat represents the incorporeal center.

Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague (1512–1609), known as "Maharal miPrag"

His writings reveal a mastery of classic Jewish knowledge in rabbinics, philosophy, and Kabbalah, but he also showed extensive familiarity with current secular knowledge. The thrust of his writings was a call to cultivate inwardness in the religious life, to forge out of knowledge and ritual practice a ladder by which to ascend to God. In the exposition of these ideas he often referred to the teachings of the Kabbalah, but he had the art of transcending the esoteric linguistic symbols of the kabbalists, and distill from them lucid ideational content, charged with a noble spiritual sensibility. It is this which made him a figure of transition from the esotericism of the Kabbalah to the simple, popular mysticism one finds in Hasidism.

9. R. Yose said: Great is the rite of circumcision, for it supersedes the important commandment prescribing cessation of work on the Sabbath. R. Joshua ben Korha said: Great is the rite of circumcision for Moses was not granted one hour grace when he had neglected to circumcise his son (Ex: 4:24).

This is simple, for circumcision takes place on the eighth day, which is after the number seven, indicating the total transcendence of nature. Seven days correspond to the seven days of creation, and circumcision takes us beyond nature, and it is for this reason on the eighth day and it supersedes the Sabbath. Circumcision is a higher category than the Sabbath, for the Sabbath remains linked with the weekdays, but circumcision, which comes after seven, has no link with the weekdays. Similarly, the statement that Moses was not given one hour's grace when he neglected to circumcise his son follows from the same principle that circumcision is above time. Time is a category of life in our world, which is differentiated into the seven days of creation, as the text speaks of one day, the second day, until the completion of seven days, while circumcision is on the eighth day which is above time . . . Moreover, as we have already explained it, circumcision symbolizes the ideal form of man [in the Platonic sense, as opposed to matter] . . . and the ideal form is not subject to the relativities of time. (*ibid.*, on Nedarim 31b)

The Old Cemetery



Thick snow falls over
the Jewish cemetery in Prague:
around the dilapidated fence
The ancient city too
seems wrapped in white oblivion.

Yet, a certain unquenchable rustling
belies the midnight silence.

Prague snores peacefully tonight
under the metaphysics
of the Russian boot.

Past the stroke of midnight,
I beat the same path
my ancestors beat:
looking for some enigmatic clue,
some mark scratched in a wall:
silence.

The Jewish quarter is a museum-piece
for German tourists.
The old synagogue,
bereft of prayer,
is half-crazed from the photographer's flash.

Yet, from the heart's own perspective,
the jumbled stones
resemble houses,
tilted crazily,
and one hears a certain ancient murmur
from the rooftops:
perhaps Reb Yehūdah is telling me
to beware
of the cut-throat jealousy
that sends half my people
to doom.

They say the stones sink
further each year:
and that soon no trace at all will remain
of my people in Prague.

How greedily the grassy earth swallows the crime!

But I say:
the conscience of the wolf
is a false prophet.

Jewish souls, unlike pagan,
are not tied to stone:
each sinking inch
sees them soaring that much higher.

CHAIM FEINBERG, a native of Detroit, studies at the Bais Medrash
Yeshurun of Yeshiva Rabbi SR Hirsch, in New York.

Chaim Feinberg