

Review

The Soul of the Torah: The Kabbalistic Conception in *Tiferet Israel* by the Maharal of Prague

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Abstract

This study addresses the long-standing scholarly debate regarding the relationship between the thought of Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, known as the Maharal of Prague, 1512–1609, and the Kabbalistic tradition. While many scholars categorize the Maharal as a philosopher or suggest a stance of indifference toward Kabbalah, we argue that his conception of the Torah is fundamentally rooted in a Kabbalistic worldview. Through a meticulous textual analysis of Chapter 13 of *Tiferet Israel* a programmatic chapter featuring the work's title and its only explicit Zoharic citation—we compare his teachings with earlier authorities such as R. Moshe Cordovero and R. Isaac Arama. Our analysis demonstrates that the Maharal employs a philosophical idiom to conceal mystical foundations, envisioning the Torah as a living organism with layered dimensions—garment, body, and soul. We contend that his emphasis on *devekut* (cleaving) through Torah study shifts the focus from intellectual apprehension to a magico-spiritual attachment. These findings situate the Maharal within the concealed Kabbalistic milieu of the sixteenth century and suggest a structural synthesis between homiletic and esoteric traditions.

Keywords: Maharal of Prague; Tiferet Israel; Kabbalah; Jewish Theology; 16th-century Jewish thought; Mysticism; Torah conception

Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, known as the Maharal of Prague (1512–1609),¹ was a scholar, halakhic authority, philosopher, and communal leader. He served as rabbi of Nikolsburg, today Mikulov in the Czech Republic, and Poznań and was appointed rabbi of Prague in 1598, a position he held until his death. Scholars have discussed extensively the relationship between the Maharal's thought and the teachings of Kabbalah, focusing in particular on the kabbalistic character of his writings, the role that Kabbalah occupies in his philosophical system, and the extent to which it influenced his intellectual world. Many have noted that the Maharal made only limited use of explicit kabbalistic terminology, displaying instead a marked preference for philosophical language and a consistent resistance to conflating philosophy with Kabbalah. These features have contributed to a degree of ambiguity regarding his relationship to the kabbalistic tradition. Maharal's works were first published during his lifetime and under his supervision,² and they exerted extensive influence (Gottesdiner 2001, p. 11). Scholars have explored various aspects of his writings, including the chronology of their composition and publication (Sherwin 1982; Slae 2022, pp. 24–30), their historical context (Katz 1961; Kulka 1985, pp. 277–330; Sorotzkin 2011, pp. 201–47; Ramon 2017), and the broader contours of his thought (Neher [1991] 2003; Shatz-Uffenheimer 1978–1979, pp. 147–57; Gizbar 2007; Weinstein 1994). Comprehensive studies have also been devoted to specific themes in his writings (Gross 1974; Gross 1996; Ross 1986, pp. 81–96). At the same time, some scholars have noted the ambiguity of his



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terminology and the apparently unsystematic structure of his exposition (Jacobson 2015, p. 147, n. 1). In this article, we argue that despite the philosophical idiom of his writings, his conception of the Torah is fundamentally rooted in a kabbalistic worldview. We further suggest that chapter thirteen of his third book, *Tiferet Israel*, published in 1599,³ functions as a programmatic statement concerning the place of Kabbalah in his thought and writings, through which he reconceptualized the relationship between the inner esoteric meaning of the Torah and its external manifestations, including the role and purpose of the commandments.

Chapter thirteen marks the conclusion of a series of chapters in which the Maharal addresses the central philosophical claim that human spiritual flourishing depends on a universal and expansive contemplation of the structure of the cosmos and its overarching wisdom—that is, engagement with the ‘great matters’, in the Maharal’s words—whereas the Torah is seen as concerned solely with the particulars of earthly life, thus limiting the soul’s capacity for elevation. The Maharal accepts the premise that the Torah’s content is indeed focused on the practical aspects of worldly existence. However, he offers a deeper interpretation: the human being in this world is merely the external shadow of man’s higher, spiritual essence, and this also applies to the Torah—its engagement with material reality is but an outer garment for its divine wisdom, which originates in a higher realm. Thus, the Torah is the medium through which heavenly truths can be revealed within the earthly domain, and its study connects the individual to a transcendent, divine truth. As we will demonstrate, a close reading of this chapter—attentive to both its form and style—reveals a deep affinity between its conception of the Torah and the kabbalistic tradition. Moreover, a comparison with earlier kabbalistic sources indicates that the Maharal followed in the footsteps of the mystics who preceded him while choosing to conceal the mystical foundations of his teaching beneath the surface of his philosophical discourse.

Within the spectrum of scholarly opinions, figures such as Heinrich Graetz, Arthur Green, S. J. Rapoport, and Yosef Ben-Shlomo present the Maharal as largely disconnected from the tradition of Kabbalah (Ben-Shlomo 2015, pp. 39–40). To this group one may add Dov Schwartz, who describes the Maharal’s stance vis-à-vis Kabbalah as one of ‘indifference’ (Schwartz 2020, pp. 9–15). By contrast, others, such as Mordechai Guttman Guttsehiner, Marc B. Shapiro Boxer, and Byron Sherwin, regard the Maharal as a significant kabbalist—either as a product of the growing mystical tendencies in sixteenth-century Jewish thought coupled with the decline of Aristotelian philosophy or as a theologian whose writings reflect a distinctly mystical theology (Sherwin 1982, pp. 51–55; Bokser 1954, pp. 22–23, 193–94). Nili Weinstein, Yoram Jacobson, and Eli Gurfinkel espouse a more moderate position. They have examined the extent to which Kabbalah influenced the Maharal’s system, producing three extensive surveys that map and categorize the various scholarly positions on the matter.⁴

To illustrate the range of positions along this spectrum, we will briefly present the views of several prominent scholars. Benjamin Gross emphasizes that the Maharal draws on Kabbalah primarily as a rhetorical tool to reinforce his opposition to philosophy; however, he does not base his system directly upon it. Rather, he consistently anchors his arguments in the teachings of the Sages (Gross 1976, p. 92). Similarly, Yoram Jacobson highlights the Maharal’s fidelity to rabbinic Judaism rather than to Kabbalah in its theological sense. While the Maharal indeed employs kabbalistic content, he should not be considered a kabbalist—neither in terms of his theological premises nor any defining mystical–religious experience. In Jacobson’s view, the Maharal is a true representative and loyal interpreter of rabbinic Judaism as expressed by the sages. Nili Weinstein regards Kabbalah as a partial, but not the primary, source of authority for the Maharal. Indeed, because the Maharal views Kabbalah as a continuation of rabbinic tradition (unlike his view of philosophy), he accords

it a certain degree of privilege over philosophy, although he does not treat it as a binding system. In contrast to these views, Gershom Scholem and Rabbi Pardes stress the deep impact of Kabbalah on the Maharal, albeit in a refined and concealed form. Boaz Huss and Yehuda Liebes go further, identifying the mystical substratum of his thought. Jonathan Garb offers a unique perspective, situating the Maharal within a conceptual group to whom he refers as the “Prague Kabbalists”—a school of thought characterized by a shift in emphasis from the supernal realms to national history and the individual’s inner world. To support this view, Garb proposes expanding the definition of what constitutes kabbalistic literature. In his analysis, the Maharal exemplifies this trend. Indeed, using Jacobson’s phrase, he can be described as a ‘non-kabbalistic kabbalist’ (Garb 2016, pp. 347–83). Although difficult to define clearly, the Maharal’s thought clearly reflects many of the core features of a distinct ‘Prague Kabbalah’, and these features continued to influence Torah scholars and kabbalists in subsequent generations (Slae 2022, pp. 196–205; Schwartz 2019, pp. 15–61).

We propose examining these assumptions via a textual analysis of Chapter 13 of *Tiferet Israel*. At first glance, one might mistakenly regard this chapter as marginal or supplementary. In its opening paragraph, the Maharal reiterates a claim he developed in the preceding chapters—‘As we have said. . . the primary value lies in the Torah insofar as it is the decree of the blessed God’—and presents his goal here as merely offering further clarification. Similarly, at the end of the chapter, he appears to downplay its significance, stating: ‘The clear matter through which you know the supreme virtue of Torah study has already been explained to you, namely, that this Torah draws the human being beyond nature.’ These formulations would seem to imply that the essential argument was already presented earlier, and this chapter is merely an elaboration. Yet the chapter introduces a fundamentally new perspective on the nature of the Torah. Whereas in the preceding chapters the greatness of the Torah is portrayed as its capacity to elevate human beings beyond corporeality and align them with a higher spiritual realm, Chapter 13 presents a nearly inverse claim: the Torah descends into the material realm and clothes itself in physical garments, thereby enabling the corporeal human to cleave to the transcendent world.

In addition, this is the only chapter in the book (aside from the introduction) that contains the phrase *Tiferet Israel*—the title of the work.⁵ If we assume that the title of the book serves as a thematic key or condensed formulation of its central idea, then the fact that this phrase appears only here strongly suggests that this chapter reveals the work’s core message. Far from a marginal supplement, it thus occupies a central place in the Maharal’s theological vision.

In a highly uncharacteristic move, the Maharal includes in this chapter an extended citation from the *Zohar* (Loew 2000, pp. 202–4; Tishby 1961, vol. 2, pp. 365–75, 402–3; Halamish 1991, pp. 166–75). Even more unusually—and in stark contrast to his general exegetical method (Fuchs 2015, pp. 197–214)—he offers no commentary on the citation. Indeed, every quotation from rabbinic literature is typically followed by a detailed interpretation, often designed to reveal a deeper meaning that runs contrary to the text’s plain sense. Here, however, he refrains from any such explanation. Apart from a single remark—stating that although the passage from the *Zohar* appears to refer solely to the narrative dimension of the Torah, ‘Nevertheless, it also applies to the commandments of the Torah’, he offers no further clarification. We argue that this omission does not indicate indifference. On the contrary, it reflects the Maharal’s deliberate strategy of concealing his core teachings, to be grasped by those able to understand them. Precisely because of the centrality of this *Zoharic* passage to his thought—indeed, he builds his entire conception of Torah upon it—he chooses to cite it without commentary. In a certain sense, one might even say that the entire book functions as an extended exposition of this single passage.

Subsequently, the Maharal returns to the teachings of the sages, which, according to his interpretation, are ‘like the words of this midrash’. Yet even here, he explicates only three of the four gradations mentioned in the Zoharic section known as ‘Midrash Ha-ne’elam’. This feature becomes more striking in light of the fact that two earlier commentators—Don Isaac Abarbanel and Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak)—also chose to elaborate on only three of the four levels when discussing this same passage of the *Zohar*, as will be detailed below.

The Maharal opens the chapter by presenting the view of the philosophers, who maintain that engagement with the celestial spheres and the so-called ‘important matters’ is key to human success. He refutes their claim, arguing instead that it is the Torah—concerned with the ‘lowly and inferior’ aspects of reality—that holds true value because it is the decree of the Blessed God. In so doing, the Maharal sets divine revelation in opposition to human wisdom. He does not reject wisdom per se; indeed, he maintains that the Torah encompasses it. However, he emphasizes that its authority derives not from its intellectual content but from its nature as a revelation of the divine will as it manifests through the Torah. This rhetorical strategy recalls the esoteric style of argument employed by Judah Halevi in the *Kuzari* (Schwartz 2015, pp. 1–8): while appearing to repudiate astral magic, Halevi in fact uses that repudiation as a means of attributing it—on a higher plane—to divine wisdom (Pines 1988, pp. 511–40). Similarly, the Maharal employs philosophical motifs only to subordinate them to a theological claim: the supremacy of revealed Torah over speculative reason.

At the outset of his exposition, the Maharal employs a distinctive definition of the Torah: ‘Know that the perfect Torah also encompasses all levels of knowledge and lacks nothing whatsoever’ (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 43, col. 1). Here, the Torah is described using three attributes: it is *perfect* (*temima*), it *encompasses all levels of knowledge*, and it *lacks nothing*. In my reading, this triadic formulation is not merely rhetorical but is intended to evoke deeper layers of meaning encoded within the definition. *Tikkunei Ha-zohar* interprets the verse ‘The Torah of the Lord is perfect’ (Psalm 19:8) as referring to the ‘Torah of *atzilut*’, in contrast to the ‘Torah of *beri’ah*’ (*Tikkunei Ha-zohar*, Tikkun 22, 64a). The latter is understood as the external garment of the *shekhina* (divine presence) (*Tikkunei Ha-zohar*, Tikkun 6, 23a–b; Scholem 1965, pp. 67–69). According to this kabbalistic view, had Adam not sinned, the *shekhina* would have remained unclothed, in its pristine form. However, as a result of his sin, the *shekhina* now requires a covering, ‘like a pauper who seeks to conceal his poverty’. In this framework, one who sins is said to strip the *shekhina* of her garments, whereas one who fulfills the commandments is likened to one who clothes her, thereby enabling her presence in the world. The Maharal’s subtle references to the commandments as garments for the *shekhina* pave a way for the kabbalistic idea developed later in ‘Midrash Ha-ne’elam’. In this light, the citation from *Pirkei Avot*—‘Do not look at the vessel, but at what it contains’ (Avot 4:20)—which appears in the continuation of the passage, may also be read as an allusion to the same image. It subtly anticipates the parable in ‘Midrash Ha-ne’elam’ that likens the Torah to a vessel (a flask or jug) containing wine, which in turn symbolizes divine wisdom. This suggests that the Maharal intentionally embedded this Mishnah in his text as a literary foreshadowing, guiding the attentive reader to seek out the hidden layers of the chapter rather than settling for its overt meaning.

To articulate the multiple strata of the Torah, the Maharal proceeds to describe it as a living organism:⁶

And although, to the human eye, the words of the Torah may appear to be lowly and inferior matters, this should not be a source of wonder—for what has occurred to the Torah is akin to what has occurred to the human being. Although the human stands in the lowest realm, he possesses a soul hewn from beneath the Throne of Glory, from the highest plane, and the radiance of the

Divine Image shines upon him, which is the highest of all levels. So it is with the commandments of the Torah: although they are physical acts, they contain an inner secret that stands at the summit of the world. (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 33, col. 1)

This conception of the Torah as corresponding in terms of form to man—possessing both physical and hidden spiritual dimensions—is rooted in Kabbalistic teachings. Later in the same paragraph, the Maharal adopts a spiraling, circular style. He returns several times to the connection between man and the Torah in this world and in the World to Come, as though seeking to clarify his statements, while in truth he deepens and refines them to the extent that he contradicts his initial claim. Let us examine the sequence of assertions in this paragraph. At the outset of the discussion, the Maharal claims:

1. ‘Success lies in the apprehension of the most important beings’.
2. ‘The most important [being] is the Torah’.

From here it follows that success—that is, the eternity which is not bound by materiality⁷—is attained through the Torah.

Subsequently, he ‘adds a clarification’:

1. Man possesses a physical body and a divine soul, and, similarly, the Torah comprises physical commandments and inner secrets.
2. Man merits eternal life because he has a holy soul, and, likewise, the commandments contain sublime elements that reach all the way to the World to Come.
3. Man stands in this world, and his soul reaches the World to Come; likewise, the Torah and the commandments that man is obligated to perform pertain to matters of this world yet ultimately reach the highest realms.

Accordingly, by fulfilling the commandments, the physical human being, while living in this world, also stands in the “World to Come” and thereby attains eternal life. This explanation uproots the initial claim made at the outset of the paragraph—that success requires detachment from the material and is attainable only after death. The Maharal here presents a magico-astral worldview in a circular form. To uncover this outlook, attention must be paid to the expressions that the Maharal introduces in each repetition of the argument—phrases such as ‘holy soul’, ‘the highest realms’, and the like. Each one serves as a code that the Maharal uses to allude to the concealed intention embedded within the text. His use of circular rhetoric allows him to present the magico-astral operation while maintaining a firm connection to the simple, physical observance of the commandments. Simultaneously, even without any additional comprehension or conscious intent, these actions affect the metaphysical realm.

Discussing the value of the Torah in its revealed aspect, Jewish thinkers have discerned two primary levels: the intellectual and the moral. On the intellectual level, the Torah is the means by which human thought is aligned with truth; on the moral level, it is understood as that which awakens and directs the will toward good. The realization of these benefits depends on the individual’s understanding of the wisdom of the Torah and his identification with it. The Maharal, however, shifts the standard for determining the excellence of the Torah’s wisdom from the realm of the revealed world—even in its broadest and most inclusive sense (i.e., the “most important beings”)—to a wholly different plane: the realm of the supreme soul’s activity, described as the ‘World to Come’ and ‘eternal life’. Accordingly, he later asserts that the merit of Torah study persists ‘even if the great matters are not known to the perceiver’, because ‘everything is connected and clings to a higher apprehension, and through this there is cleaving of man at the loftier level.’ This statement, which transfers the principal realm of the Torah’s influence from the revealed and perceptible world to an internal and hidden realm, and which shifts its operation from

the domain of intellect to that of life itself—claiming that its highest merit is the cleaving—is distinctly kabbalistic in nature (Afterman 2021, pp. 99–101).

Following the opening of the chapter, which also serves as an intellectual introduction to the subsequent discussion concerning the various levels of the Torah, the Maharal presents an extended passage from the ‘Midrash Ha-ne’elam’ in Aramaic. He refers to the *Zohar* as ‘Midrash Ha-ne’elam’; notably, in two other instances in *Tiferet Israel* in which he cites this text, he simply calls it ‘Midrash’ (Loew 1969, chap. 4, p. 17, col. 2, chap. 56, p. 172, col. 1; Loew 2000, p. 883, n. 180). This identification of the *Zohar* as a Midrash reinforces its attribution to the sages of the Talmudic era (Weinstein 1994, pp. 54–57). The passage from the *Zohar* is based on a Midrash on Exodus 12:1–2: ‘And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the second year after their departure from the land of Egypt, in the first month, saying: “Let the children of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time”’. The passage preceding the section quoted by the Maharal explains that the date mentioned in the verse describes the very beginning of both the year and the month—that is, when the sun and the moon appear simultaneously, together with the giving of the commandments to Moses and, through him, to Israel. It is possible that the Maharal here hints at magico-astral significance; indeed, in his introduction, he mentions the ‘wheels’ (*galgalim*), describes the Divine Image as ‘shining’ upon man, and presents the inner secret contained in the Torah as standing ‘at the summit of the world’.

During the course of the discussion, the *Zohar* interweaves two verses from Psalms: ‘He makes His angels winds, His ministers a flaming fire’ (Psalms 104:4) and ‘I will lift up my eyes to the hills—from whence shall my help come?’ (often paraphrased as ‘I will open my eyes and behold wonders from Your Torah’, referring to Psalm 119:18) (*Zohar* III:104d). These verses serve to reinforce the *Zohar*’s assertion that the Torah is composed of interwoven revealed and hidden layers.

Midrash Ha-ne’elam diminishes the value of the literal understanding of the Torah when considered in isolation, placing great emphasis on its inner layers. It delineates four levels within the Torah: *clothing*—the narrative of the Torah; *body*—the commandments of the Torah; *soul*—*Tiferet Israel* and *Knesset Israel* when clothed in the body; and *soul to soul*—the Holy Ancient One. The Maharal qualifies and defines the physical commandments as clothing rather than as the body of the Torah itself. The notion that the *peshat* or literal level of the Torah cannot be separated from the *sod* or secret kabbalistic meaning is also well attested within the *Zohar* itself (Wolfson 1993, 1999). Following this kabbalistic framework, Maharal’s main conclusion from the Midrash’s exposition is that the Torah is a unified whole, such that grasping the clothing necessarily extends to the body, from there to the soul, and then to the soul of the soul.

Given the Maharal’s decision to cite this passage from the *Zohar*, it seems reasonable to suggest that the appearance of the phrase *Tiferet Israel*⁸ therein explicates the title of his book. In other words, through this passage from the *Zohar*, the Maharal effectively defines *Tiferet Israel*, which deals with the Torah, as the inner layer—the soul of *Knesset Israel*. Recognition of the Torah’s inner layer naturally follows from the very fact that man possesses a soul. Therefore, although the Maharal opens his book with a unit of chapters addressing the meaning of the practical commandments, here he deepens the discussion and asserts that even these commandments draw significance from the action they perform vis-à-vis the hidden and spiritual level of eternal reality rather than from their revealed and physical layer.

The Zoharic passage that includes the expression *Tiferet Israel* as a designation for the Torah serves a dual purpose: it not only characterizes the Torah in esoteric terms but also establishes an identity between the concept of the Torah and the book *Tiferet Israel* itself. In so doing, the Maharal implicitly signals that his work is not merely about the

Torah but embodies it—particularly its deeper, hidden dimensions. The depiction of the Torah in the Midrash supports the existence of an esoteric layer within *Tiferet Israel*⁹ that constitutes the primary content the Maharal seeks to convey. This level demands profound intellectual contemplation and an acknowledgment of a higher metaphysical world to which it corresponds.

The Maharal expresses the relationship between the Torah's practical revelation and its inner wisdom using the metaphor of *garment* and *body*. Yet it is crucial to note that he does not treat the garment—the practical commandments or Torah study—as a mere external shell. Rather, he likens it to a *vessel that preserves wine* (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 43, col. a): a container essential for holding and sustaining the inner content. Torah cannot be grasped without the garment; it is not simply a mode of revelation but the very instrument that upholds the Torah's existence in the world and endows it with its tangible, embodied form. Anyone who attempts to access the Torah's inner essence without its garments severs themselves from the source of life and, metaphorically, perishes (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 44, col. b). This conceptual framework affirms the Maharal's consistent movement between the exoteric and the esoteric. By grounding the Torah's inner life in the necessity of its outer form, the Maharal articulates a vision of unity between spiritual essence and practical enactment. The outer expression—*mitzvot* and study—is not subordinate to the inner dimension but integrally connected to it, forming a continuum of divine revelation in the human realm.

This vital connection between the Torah and man results from their fundamental similarity: 'What happened to man also happened to the Torah.' (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 43, col. a) Both exist in the lower realms, yet each possesses a higher soul. It is highly unusual that the Maharal chooses to explain this matter by quoting the same lengthy Aramaic source, which he refers to as 'Midrash Ha-Zohar' (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 43, col. 2–46, col. a). Beyond the specific content of the Midrash, here the Maharal makes a clear statement regarding the place of the hidden Torah in relation to the revealed Torah. The Torah is one; through engagement with its revealed aspect, a person can attain understanding in the higher world because the worlds are connected:

Although the words of the Torah appear in lowly matters, this Torah is connected to the inner aspect of the Torah; indeed, the study of the Torah in the great matters is above all other wisdoms. And even if the great matters are not known to the comprehender, the garment is close to the body, and the body is close to the soul until all is joined and cleaves in a supreme apprehension. In this, there is cleaving for man at the highest level, which is the level of the World to Come. And man learns according to the measure of man; indeed, he is also a corporeal being, yet, nonetheless, by virtue of the soul, man cleaves ever higher and higher (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 45, col. 2–46, col. a).

The Maharal describes the relationship between the revealed subjects studied in the Torah—which might appear lowly—and the inner dimension of the Torah, wherein the discussion concerns great matters. The connection between them is like that between garment and body; that is, they are so close to one another that they are joined together. This accords profound significance to studying the revealed topics in the Torah, even without understanding their inner content. The passage then concludes, stating that every person who studies Torah according to his ability connects through his soul and succeeds in cleaving to the source of the Torah, reaching the level of the World to Come. Up to this point, the Maharal spoke of performing the commandments and Torah study as influencing the person in this world; here, he relates to their influence on the soul in the World to Come, or at the level of the World to Come. According to the Maharal, this cleaving occurs simultaneously with study, not only after death.

It seems that here the Maharal establishes his fundamental approach regarding intellectual study of the Torah and engagement with hidden wisdom. Intellectual Torah study is the means to reach a state of cleaving, but it fully reveals itself in the study of *halakhah*—not in an attempt to grasp the great matters without their practical revelations.

The Maharal proceeds to cite the words of the sages regarding the virtue of reading ‘two verses of the text and one of the translation’ (*shnayim mikra ve-ehad targum*) (BT Berakhot 8a). He proposes understanding this obligation not merely as rote repetition of the Torah but rather as an encounter with its different layers. Indeed, the Maharal suggests that the various revelations of the Torah should be viewed not as separate parts but as three levels of a single perfection:¹⁰

1. The revealed Torah, which is accessible to every person.
2. The hidden Torah, which only the wise can comprehend.
3. The Torah that is incomprehensible in this world.

The Maharal notes that this gradation can be understood in two senses. The *targum* (translation) in relation to the *mikra* (biblical text) expresses the human encounter with the transcendent content of the Torah. Within this encounter, two opposing processes occur simultaneously: on the one hand, the transcendent content becomes intelligible to every person—materialized in human language; on the other hand, it reflects a dimension of thought within the human being that does not stem from the language used for physical existence. Thus, it is a revelation of the human being’s higher faculty. This duality—emerging from the connection between the human and the Torah—is itself a reflection of the encounter between the human and the Divine, which is further developed in the following chapter (Chapter 14). There, the Maharal expounds on the rabbinic description of Torah study as a *parshat derakhim* (a crossroads), defining the Torah as a *derekh*—‘the designated path that is before God’. That is, the Torah constitutes a space of activity in which the human being advances and draws closer to God.

Accordingly, the Torah is not a body of knowledge that is acquired and internalized but rather a dynamic arena of movement. This understanding further sets the Torah apart from all other branches of wisdom. The Maharal is clearly not referring to the Torah’s external or revealed dimensions but to its essential, inner nature—as he hints in his conclusion, ‘And this suffices for one who understands these things in their truth.’

In light of the threefold gradation of the Torah, the Maharal identifies three corresponding connotations of the term Torah (Loew 2000, p. 206, n. 54):

1. The instruction of commandments—akin to a king directing his people.
2. The comprehension of its inner meanings and rationales.
3. The instruction of a path—*derekh*.

According to the Maharal’s approach, we may interpret the *third path* as the point of convergence between the practical performance of the commandments and the intellectual engagement with the wisdom of the Torah—‘until he is a son of the World to Come’ (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 46, col. b), that is, a person who reveals within his life the hidden dimension and is freed from the limitations of this world. According to the Maharal, the more we engage with a seemingly ‘small matter’ (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 46, col. b), namely something concrete and practical, the greater its potential to elevate us. This idea may be better understood through the Maharal’s own metaphor of mitzvah observance as walking along a path. To walk, the feet must exert force against the ground itself. The better the friction and grip with the ground, the more stable and steady the walk. Likewise, *contact* with the practical reality required for fulfilling the commandments enables man to ascend toward the higher realms from which the Torah is hewn.

As a further hint, one cannot ignore the fact that the Maharal places the only explicit Zoharic reference in the book precisely in Chapter 13. In Kabbalistic symbolism, the number thirteen¹¹ alludes to the Divine unity (*ehad*) and to the Thirteen Attributes through which God reveals Himself to humanity. Support for this interpretation may be found in the continuation of the passage, wherein the Maharal cites a saying from *Pirkei Avot*: ‘Do not look at the vessel but at what it contains.’ (Mishnah Avot 4:20) This expression serves as a veiled reference to the thirteenth of the Thirteen Attributes—*nake lo yenake* (‘He cleanses, yet does not cleanse’)—as it appears in *Tikkunei Ha-zohar*: ‘This is what is said about *nake lo yenake*, and this refers to Metatron, about whom it is said: “Do not look at the vessel, but at what it contains”.’ (*Tikkunei Ha-zohar*, tikkun 21, 58b).

We shall now examine several interpretations of this Zoharic passage that preceded the Maharal and were likely available to him,¹² attempting to assess whether the Maharal studied the Zohar in the same manner as his predecessors and to understand why he chose to integrate it at this specific juncture in his discussion. We begin by considering the comments of R. Moshe Cordovero (Ramak), who addresses this passage in two of his works (Ben-Shlomo 1986, pp. 7–22). In *Or Ne’erav*, Cordovero interprets this passage from the Zohar as a rebuttal to “fools” who deny the existence of the esoteric dimension of Torah. To support this claim, he cites a Midrash on Proverbs that discusses one who has studied Talmud but not Kabbalah (Idel 1981, pp. 13–16).

And behold, in this teaching, we are given further instruction regarding the invalidation of the views of that sect and others like them who deny the esoteric aspect of our holy Torah. The essential conclusion we derive from it is that beyond this hidden secret, there is yet an inner within the inner, which is presently concealed even from the eyes of those who possess knowledge, and all Israel shall merit it in this world in the future. And now, my brother, tell me: one who has not contemplated the *nishmeta*—how shall he, in the future, contemplate the *nishmeta de- nishmeta*? Surely he will be found wanting in the time to come? And do not respond to me with regard to one who did not merit it, for there is a great difference between one who denies it and one who does not deny but has never seen the light in his days—and beyond both is he who has engaged in it. And the Lord is the living God and the eternal King; He judges justly, vindicates the innocent, condemns the guilty, and gives each man according to his way. We must not deny the words of our Sages in the Midrash on Proverbs, wherein they ask a person: ‘Did you contemplate the Chariot? Did you contemplate His stature?’ and so forth. To quote the text in full would make the matter heavy for us. Moreover, R. Shimon bar Yochai, may peace be upon him, elucidated this matter further in the Zohar, on the aforementioned passage, folio 149—see there. (Cordovero 1587, sct. 1b)

It is possible that the Maharal follows in the footsteps of Cordovero in his interpretation, employing this passage from the *Zohar* to establish the relationship between Torah scholars who engage in Talmudic study and the wisdom of the esoteric Torah. In so doing, he reinforces the existence of a hidden layer of interpretation in *Tiferet Israel*. In any case, the Maharal’s central and explicit critique—voiced in other writings—targeted the method of *pilpul*, an intricate dialectical analysis prevalent in his generation. This method stood in contrast to his own approach, which emphasized the study of the *Mishnah*, cultivating broad knowledge, and deriving practical halakhic rulings through talmudic analysis (Kleinberger 1962, pp. 135–42). These positions may not be contradictory but rather complementary, combining to assert that Torah scholars are obligated to engage with all dimensions of the Torah and should not privilege one aspect over another.

In *Pardes Rimmonim*, Cordovero invokes the same *Zoharic* passage to elucidate the singular status of Torah study in comparison to all other forms of wisdom:

One who does not comprehend the matters of its exegetical teachings (*derushim*) will, Heaven forbid, derive no spiritual benefit from Torah study. Such a notion is inconceivable, for the words of the Torah are assuredly restorative to the soul (*meshivat nefesh*).¹³ This is evidenced by the obligation to complete the Torah through a dual reading—twice the scriptural text and once the Targum—even in passages as seemingly insignificant as *Atarot* and *Dibon*. This clearly indicates the completeness of the Torah and that it possesses an interior essence, a hiddenness, spirituality, and vitality. Thus, R. Shimon interpreted in the portion of *Be-ha'alotkha* (*Zohar* III, 152a). (Cordovero 1996, sct. 27, chap. 1, p. 341)

Cordovero's assertion that the study of Torah possesses inherent value independent of the student's comprehension of its content—and that this serves as evidence of the existence of its concealed, inner dimension and its intrinsic connection to the revealed stratum of Torah—closely parallels the central claims in the introduction to Maharal's *Tiferet Israel* (Loew 1969, pp. 1–3). Notably, it also echoes the Maharal's conclusion concerning the essential unity of all layers of the Torah, which together constitute a single, coherent divine statement. This notion of unity is likewise expressed by Cordovero in his subsequent remarks: he emphasizes that the Torah's inner dimensions can never contradict its plain meaning because it is of divine origin. In other words, it is complete, and truth manifests in all its strata:

One who studies the Torah as though reading from a book of chronicles will undoubtedly derive no benefit from such study, and it would be fortunate were he not to incur harm thereby. Rather, when a person comes to study Torah, his intention must be to engage with divine matters—matters the profound inwardness of which remains hidden from him. In such a disposition, even the breath of Torah that emerges from his mouth is more pleasing before the Holy One, blessed be He, than the offering of a bull. And even if he comprehends only the plain meaning of the narrative, this still holds true. Indeed, this applies all the more forcefully to one who understands nothing at all due to lack of proficiency in the language or its interpretation yet still engages with Scripture itself—he, too, is granted great reward for his toil. (Cordovero 1996, p. 342)

Beyond the conceptual parallels between the conclusions drawn from the text, it is also noteworthy that Cordovero, in his commentary on the Midrash, explicitly references the term *Tiferet Israel* in relation to other *sefirot*. He writes:

Thus, according to this, the matter of the Torah is the very essence of the *sefirot*, as is explained: the body corresponds to *Malkhut*, the soul to *Tiferet*, and the soul of the soul to *Bina*. Consequently, the Torah itself is a garment for the Divine Essence, just as the *sefirot* are garments for the essence of the root that extends forth, as has been expounded in the earlier gates. And for this reason, engagement with Torah surpasses all else, as is known, aside from other reasons.

On the backdrop of this explanation, the Maharal's conspicuous omission of the term *sefirot* from his commentary on the Midrash becomes especially striking. This tendency to conceal and avoid explicit kabbalistic terminology has led to the assumption that the Maharal attributed little significance to such concepts or even opposed their use altogether (Schwartz 2020, pp. 13–15). However, the substance of his commentary suggests that such a conclusion contradicts the explicit thrust of his argument. We must therefore infer that the Maharal deliberately refrained from overt usage of kabbalistic language in an effort to reinforce the esoteric structure of the work. Concealing the kabbalistic message, together

with its simultaneous allusion—by citing the Zohar and integrating the term *Tiferet Israel* into the title of the book—guides the attentive reader toward uncovering the esoteric strata wherein the Maharal embeds his principal claims.

Later in chapter 13 of *Tiferet Israel*, we observe that the Maharal addresses only three of the four layers of Torah enumerated in the Midrash.¹⁴ A retrospective explanation for his omission of the fourth layer—*nishmeta de-nishmeta* (the soul of the soul)—may be found in the words of R. Moshe Cordovero regarding the following Midrashic passage from the Zohar.

Now, to the aforementioned three divisions, R. Shimon bar Yochai, may peace be upon him, applied the titles: Masters of Scripture, Masters of Mishnah, and Masters of Kabbalah. The first division is called *Masters of Scripture*, the second division is called *Masters of Mishnah*, and the third division is called *Masters of Kabbalah*. As for the fourth division—it is almost never found, and therefore it was not assigned a title. In its place stand the [divine] Names, their operations, and their combinations as derived from the verses, alongside the knowledge of their sources, their nourishment, and their ordering within the supernal Chariot—matters that are rarely found. The *Sefer Berit Menuha* dealt somewhat with this subject. The introduction to that level consists of the three following gates, which we shall explain one after the other: the Gate of Letters, the Gate of Vowel Points (*nekudot*), and the Gate of Cantillation Marks (*te'amim*), as shall be explained with the help of Heaven. (Cordovero 1996, p. 343)

Thus, Cordovero explains that even the formulation in the Midrash distinguishes between the first three categories—each referred to as *masters (marei)*—and the fourth category, which is not designated by that title. Cordovero attributes this difference to the exceptional rarity of the fourth level, which involves knowledge pertaining to the use of the divine Names and their intentions—knowledge that is seldom accessible. Cordovero further presents his own work, structured in three gates, as an introduction to this fourth level of the Torah. In this sense, it is possible that the Maharal likewise chose to write only about the first three levels, thereby framing them as a prelude to the fourth, which remains intentionally concealed.¹⁵

R. Isaac Arama, author of *Akedat Yitzhak* (1420–1494), also cites this same passage from the Zohar to justify his engagement with Kabbalah through the lens of the biblical verses. He views himself as continuing the intellectual legacy of both Maimonides and Nahmanides.¹⁶ After quoting the Zoharic passage, he adds:

Hear and may your soul live by the words of the mouth of a holy sage, who draws forth pearls, though his matters are exceedingly deep and his words ancient. Many an ear has searched and delved, and he has excelled in composing true and pleasant parables to open the eyes of the blind regarding the interpretations of our holy, profound, and expansive Torah: “And to lift from the frame of the human intellect—restricted by the darkness of the veil of its corporeality—to ascend from the lower level to the middle, and from the middle to the higher” (Arama 2015, Genesis, sct. 7).

Arama here identifies two types of obstacles that we may encounter when attempting to interpret the Torah: blind eyes and the confines of the human intellect, which is restricted by the darkness of its corporeal veils. The challenge of confronting these two impediments is described in the introduction to *Tiferet Israel* (Loew 1969, pp. 1–2), and it appears that the Maharal likewise recognized the difficulty inherent in explicating the Torah in this manner. The understanding that Torah study and interpretation must proceed through revelation of the concealed contents that lie beyond the revealed text enables the student to perceive what is hidden from external view while simultaneously freeing himself from the limitations of the senses, which constitute a veil before the intellect. This mode of study is

described here as an ascent through three levels. Subsequently, Arama illustrates how the verses allude to their hidden content:

And behold, the entire Book of Genesis, as it was written by our sages of blessed memory (Bereshit Rabbah, chapter 41), and as the truth reveals concerning it—although it is a narrative of events and deeds that befell all the Patriarchs, it was at times a sign for their children, both near and distant. The bondage in Egypt and the redemption therefrom were all allegories of the true redemption of the soul. Upon this foundation, Nahmanides, of blessed memory, built much of what he wrote in his deep investigations. It has already been written that the six days of Creation, together with the Sabbath, allude to the days of this world and the world to come. (Arama 2015, chp. 7, sct. 1)

The Book of Genesis recounts the stories of the patriarchs and alludes to the experiences of their direct and future descendants. The Exodus from Egypt serves as a prototype for the ultimate redemption, and the account of creation is an allusion to the days of this world and the world to come. According to these examples, it may be said that the allusions transcend the framework of time inherent in the revealed reality described by the verses, as well as the reality of the individual and the natural material reality known to the senses. Arama notes that such an interpretation of the Torah corresponds to Nahmanides' approach (Yisraeli 2026). This conceptual foundation does not permit us to view the Maharal as dissenting from the exegetical methods of the Kabbalists, such as Nahmanides. The limited instances in which the Maharal references the latter critically appear to be exceptions that do not undermine the general trend; rather, it seems that in most cases their interpretations agree, exhibiting conceptual continuity.

An examination of the writings of Cordovero and Arama regarding the Zoharic passage cited by the Maharal in chapter 13 reveals a profound conceptual affinity—both in terms of their understanding of the various layers of Torah and their view of the relationship between the revealed and concealed levels. In two separate works, Cordovero emphasizes the preeminence of the Torah as an integral whole, the unity of which derives from its divine source, thereby establishing the oneness of the Torah across all its layers—body, soul, and soul of the soul—in a manner closely resembling the conception presented by the Maharal. Arama, for his part, stresses the allegorical and metaphysical dimension of the Torah's narratives, underscoring that the Torah transcends history and breaks forth into the realm of the soul and inner redemption—an approach consonant with the Maharal's stance that, even when clothed in matter, the Torah continues to operate within a higher realm. Both highlight that it is not sufficient to adhere solely to the literal level; doing so fails to grasp the Torah's true purpose. The Torah is portrayed as a garment for hidden divine wisdom that guides the individual toward cleaving to and attaining the supernal world. The Maharal's use of this exegetical tradition—albeit in a more reserved and veiled formulation—appears to demonstrate his conceptual proximity to the Catalan Kabbalistic thought characteristic of Nahmanides' circle.

Conclusions

This article sought to propose a new reading of chapter 13 of the Maharal of Prague's *Tiferet Israel* as a key point for understanding the author's kabbalistic stance vis-à-vis the Torah. Contrary to the scholarly consensus, which views the Maharal as following a distinct philosophical tradition or as a representative of traditional Rabbinic Judaism, we have demonstrated that a meticulous examination of this chapter reveals an approach close to Kabbalah—its content, its language, and its characteristic esoteric structure. The exceptional use of a Zoharic citation, the structural analogy between man and the Torah, the emphasis on *devekut* (cleaving) as a supreme value, and the shift in emphasis from

intellectual apprehension to magical–spiritual attachment all indicate a clear kabbalistic foundation, albeit stylistically veiled.

Moreover, the placement of chapter 13 at the heart of the book, combined with the fact that it is the only chapter containing an explicit reference to the book’s title—*Tiferet Israel*—strengthens the claim that it constitutes a central ideological declaration by the Maharal regarding the essence of the Torah. Reading the chapter in light of the writings of the Maharal’s kabbalistic predecessors, such as R. Moshe Cordovero and R. Isaac Arama, highlights the conceptual proximity between them despite differences in style and language.

The article thus contributes to the scholarly discourse on two levels: first, it presents chapter 13 as a distinctive junction revealing the deep kabbalistic underpinnings of the Maharal’s thought; and, second, it proposes viewing the Maharal as part of the concealed Kabbalistic milieu of the sixteenth century—in which a mystical theology inspired by esotericism crystallized. In so doing, it paves the way for a broader inquiry into the relationship between the Maharal’s homiletic Rabbinic–theological literature and the literature of the hidden tradition, assuming a structural and conceptual synthesis between them.

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Notes

- ¹ For discussion of the year of his birth, see [Gottesdiner \(2001, p. 31\)](#), [Yudlov \(2015, p. 52\)](#), and [Neher \(\[1991\] 2003, p. 20, n. 2\)](#); originally published in French in 1991).
- ² Following scholarly consensus, we refer when necessary to the 1969 London edition of *Tiferet Yisrael* and, as needed, correct the text according to Yehoshua David Hartman’s edition. On the latest editions of the Maharal’s works, see [Gurfinkel \(2012, pp. 57–62\)](#).
- ³ Interestingly, despite its place in his writing program, it was printed after Netzah Israel, which appears fourth in the program.
- ⁴ See [Weinstein \(1994, pp. 6–9\)](#), who claims that there is a correlation between the degree of each researcher’s affinity for Kabbalah and how they perceive the Maharal as connected to it (52); [Jacobson \(2015, pp. 148–49, n. 2\)](#); and [Garfunkel \(2017, p. 253, n. 10, p. 265, n. 1\)](#).
- ⁵ In kabbalistic literature, the sefira of Tiferet represents the written Torah, and it mediates between the sefira of Hesed (lovingkindness) and the sefira of Gevura (strength/justice). See [Gekatilia \(2019, pt. 5, pp. 566–74\)](#). On the sefira of Tiferet in Sha’arei Ora and its connection to Israel, see [Dan \(2008–2020, vol. 10, pp. 167–75\)](#).
- ⁶ Such a definition is found in several kabbalistic lines of thought that preceded the Maharal; see [Scholem \(1965, pp. 44–50\)](#).
- ⁷ As the Maharal defines it according to the philosophical view: ‘As they would ask people: In what way shall man merit spiritual success through physical commandments . . . because it seemed in their opinion that he will succeed more when he gains knowledge regarding the elements and the nature of the [celestial] spheres and the separate intellects . . . and their view regarding the existence of the soul is that the intellect remains . . . after death’ ([Loew 1969, chap. 10, p. 34, col. 1](#)).
- ⁸ In the entire book, the phrase appears only here and in the introduction.

- ⁹ See Ehrlich (2020, p. 46, n. 87). He notes that this is a common benchmark in esoteric compositions and discusses its formulation, according to which an author who attributes multi-layered writing to other compositions or to the holy writings thereby testifies to the esoteric style of his own composition. See also Mahdi (1957, p. 118, n. 1) and the critique in Galston (1990, pp. 24–26).
- ¹⁰ This tripartite division is fundamental for the Maharal. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the significance that he attributes to it, and at times, it seems as though this is his sole method of explaining any subject—in the sense of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Although this formulation is drawn from the Hegelian–Marxist school, which postdates the Maharal, it accurately describes his philosophical perception, as André Neher aptly notes (Neher [1991] 2003, p. 51): ‘The Maharal’s threefold perception—according to which one should not seek the center in the second element of any given subject—calls, in fact, for a true intellectual revolution. It is the third element that stands in the breach, embodying the “Middle” with all the qualities and virtues that the Maharal’s thought attributes to this concept: a medium for communication, a balance between opposing forces, a center, organization and unification—the place where all metaphysical possibilities reside.’
- ¹¹ The Maharal’s fundamental attitude to numbers is a continuation of the kabbalistic outlook that began with Sefer Ha-yetzira, the Zohar, and Sefer Ha-temuna, through Rabbi Abraham Abulafia and others. For a thorough discussion, see Ben Harush (1998, pp. 137–55). These topics are discussed at length in Cordovero’s *Tomer Devorah* (Cordovero 1558) *Tomer Devora*, which was printed in 1558, although it is impossible to determine with certainty that the Maharal was acquainted with it.
- ¹² In accordance with his consistent method, the Maharal does not tend to quote from his sources, and he does not mention Rabbi Moses Cordovero or de Vidas or his work explicitly. However, in his commentary on the Torah, *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Efraim of Luntschitz, who served for several years as rabbi of Prague concurrently with the Maharal, includes many quotations from *Reshit Hohma* by de Vidas, Cordovero’s student. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the Maharal was acquainted with their works, particularly in light of the significant circulation of *Reshit Hohma* and the many quotations from it in later works. For an extensive and up-to-date bibliography concerning de Vidas, see Afterman (2017, p. 155, n. 1) and Pachter (2021, pp. 75–116).
- ¹³ This expression “Torah temima” also corresponds to the opening of Tiferet Israel, chapter 13.
- ¹⁴ The literal narratives and the practical commandments, the study of halakhah and musar (ethics), and mysticism (Kabbalah) (Loew 1969, chap. 13, p. 45, col. a).
- ¹⁵ So too Abravanel, in his commentary on this section of the Zohar, relates only to the first three and ignores the fourth; see (Abravanel 1862.).
- ¹⁶ For a comprehensive review of the primary sources on Arama’s life, see Wilensky (1956, p. 26, n. 30). For further details on his biography, see Wilensky (1956, pp. 26–28). Regarding the various editions, see Wilensky (1956, p. 31, n. 44). For a list of central commentaries, see Wilensky (1956, pp. 31–33).

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