

CHAPTER XXXIII

You must know that it is very injurious to begin with this branch of philosophy, viz., Metaphysics; or to explain [at first] the sense of the similes occurring in prophecies, and interpret the metaphors which are employed in historical accounts and which abound in the writings of the Prophets. On the contrary, it is necessary to initiate the young and to instruct the less intelligent according to their comprehension; those who

appear to be talented and to have capacity for the higher method of study, i.e., that based on proof and on true logical argument, should be gradually advanced towards perfection, either by tuition or by self-instruction. He, however, who begins with Metaphysics, will not only become confused in matters of religion, but will fall into complete infidelity. I compare such a person to an infant fed with wheaten bread, meat and wine; it will undoubtedly die, not because such food is naturally unfit for the human body, but because of the weakness of the child, who is unable to digest the food, and cannot derive benefit from it. The same is the case with the true principles of science. They were presented in enigmas, clad in riddles, and taught by all wise men in the most mysterious way that could be devised, not because they contain some secret evil, or are contrary to the fundamental principles of the Law (as fools think who are only philosophers in their own eyes), but because of the incapacity of man to comprehend them at the beginning of his studies: only slight allusions have been made to them to serve for the guidance of those who are capable of understanding them. These sciences were, therefore, called Mysteries (*sodoth*), and Secrets of the Law (*sitre torah*), as we shall explain.

This also is the reason why "the Torah speaks the language of man," as we have explained, for it is the object of the Torah to serve as a guide for the instruction of the young, of women, and of the common people; and as all of them are incapable to comprehend the true sense of the words, tradition was considered sufficient to convey all truths which were to be established; and as regards ideals, only such remarks were made as would lead towards a knowledge of their existence, though not to a comprehension of their true essence. When a man attains to perfection, and arrives at a knowledge of the "Secrets of the Law," either through the assistance of a teacher or by self-instruction, being led by the understanding of one part to the study of the other, he will belong to those who faithfully believe in the true principles, either because of conclusive proof, where proof is possible, or by forcible arguments, where argument is admissible; he will have a true notion of those things which he previously received in similes and metaphors, and he will fully understand their sense. We have frequently mentioned in this treatise the principle of our Sages "not to discuss the *Ma'aseh Mercabab* even in the presence of one pupil, except he be wise and intelligent; and then only the headings of the chapters are to be given to him." We must, therefore, begin with teaching these subjects according to the capacity of the pupil, and on two conditions, first, that he be wise, i.e., that he should have successfully gone through the preliminary studies, and secondly that he be intelligent, talented, clear-headed, and of quick perception, that is, "have a mind of his own" (*mebin midda'ato*), as our Sages termed it.

I will now proceed to explain the reasons why we should not instruct the multitude in pure metaphysics, or begin with describing to them the true essence of things, or with showing them that a thing must be as it is, and cannot be otherwise. This will form the subject of the next chapter; and I proceed to say—

CHAPTER XXXIV

THERE are five reasons why instruction should not begin with Metaphysics,

but should at first be restricted to pointing out what is fitted for notice and what may be made manifest to the multitude.

First Reason.—The subject itself is difficult, subtle and profound, “Far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out?” (Eccles. vii. 24). The following words of Job may be applied to it: “Whence then cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding?” (Job xxviii. 20). Instruction should not begin with abstruse and difficult subjects. In one of the similes contained in the Bible, wisdom is compared to water, and amongst other interpretations given by our Sages of this simile, occurs the following: He who can swim may bring up pearls from the depth of the sea, he who is unable to swim will be drowned, therefore only such persons as have had proper instruction should expose themselves to the risk.

Second Reason.—The intelligence of man is at first insufficient; for he is not endowed with perfection at the beginning, but at first possesses perfection only *in potentiâ*, not in fact. Thus it is said, “And man is born a wild ass” (Job xi. 12). If a man possesses a certain faculty *in potentiâ*, it does not follow that it must become in him a reality. He may possibly remain deficient either on account of some obstacle, or from want of training in practices which would turn the possibility into a reality. Thus it is distinctly stated in the Bible, “Not many are wise” (*ib.*, xxxii. 9); also our Sages say, “I noticed how few were those who attained to a higher degree of perfection” (B. T. Succah 45a). There are many things which obstruct the path to perfection, and which keep man away from it. Where can he find sufficient preparation and leisure to learn all that is necessary in order to develop that perfection which he has *in potentiâ*?

Third Reason.—The preparatory studies are of long duration, and man, in his natural desire to reach the goal, finds them frequently too wearisome, and does not wish to be troubled by them. Be convinced that, if man were able to reach the end without preparatory studies, such studies would not be preparatory but tiresome and utterly superfluous. Suppose you awaken any person, even the most simple, as if from sleep, and you say to him, Do you not desire to know what the heavens are, what is their number and their form; what beings are contained in them; what the angels are; how the creation of the whole world took place; what is its purpose, and what is the relation of its various parts to each other; what is the nature of the soul; how it enters the body; whether it has an independent existence, and if so, how it can exist independently of the body; by what means and to what purpose, and similar problems. He would undoubtedly say “Yes,” and show a natural desire for the true knowledge of these things; but he will wish to satisfy that desire and to attain to that knowledge by listening to a few words from you. Ask him to interrupt his usual pursuits for a week, till he learn all this, he would not do it, and would be satisfied and contented with imaginary and misleading notions; he would refuse to believe that there is anything which requires preparatory studies and persevering research.

You, however, know how all these subjects are connected together; for there is nothing else in existence but God and His works, the latter including all existing things besides Him; we can only obtain a knowledge of Him through His works; His works give evidence of His existence, and show what must be assumed concerning Him, that is to say, what must be attributed to Him

either affirmatively or negatively. It is thus necessary to examine all things according to their essence, to infer from every species such true and well established propositions as may assist us in the solution of metaphysical problems. Again, many propositions based on the nature of numbers and the properties of geometrical figures, are useful in examining things which must be negated in reference to God, and these negations will lead us to further inferences. **You will certainly not doubt the necessity of studying astronomy and physics, if you are desirous of comprehending the relation between the world and Providence as it is in reality,** and not according to imagination. There are also many subjects of speculation, which, though not preparing the way for metaphysics, help to train the reasoning power, enabling it to understand the nature of a proof, and to test truth by characteristics essential to it. They remove the confusion arising in the minds of most thinkers, who confound accidental with essential properties, and likewise the wrong opinions resulting therefrom. We may add, that although they do not form the basis for metaphysical research, they assist in forming a correct notion of these things, and are certainly useful in many other things connected with that discipline. Consequently he who wishes to attain to human perfection, must therefore first study Logic, next the various branches of Mathematics in their proper order, then Physics, and lastly Metaphysics. We find that many who have advanced to a certain point in the study of these disciplines become weary, and stop; that others, who are endowed with sufficient capacity, are interrupted in their studies by death, which surprises them while still engaged with the preliminary course. Now, if no knowledge whatever had been given] to us by means of tradition, and if we had not been brought to the belief in a thing through the medium of similes, we would have been bound to form a perfect notion of things with their essential characteristics, and to believe only what we could prove: a goal which could only be attained by long preparation. In such a case most people would die, without having known whether there was a God or not, much less that certain things must be asserted about Him, and other things denied as defects. From such a fate not even "one of a city or two of a family" (Jer. iii. 14) would have escaped.

As regards the privileged few, "the remnant whom the Lord calls" (Joel iii. 5), they only attain the perfection at which they aim after due preparatory labour. The necessity of such a preparation and the need of such a training for the acquisition of real knowledge, has been plainly stated by King Solomon in the following words: "If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength; and it is profitable to prepare for wisdom" (Eccles. x. 10); "Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end" (Prov. xix. 20).

There is still another urgent reason why the preliminary disciplines should be studied and understood. During the study many doubts present themselves, and the difficulties, or the objections raised against certain assertions, are soon understood, just as the demolition of a building is easier than its erection; while, on the other hand, it is impossible to prove an assertion, or to remove any doubts, without having recourse to several propositions taken from these preliminary studies. He who approaches metaphysical problems without proper preparation is like a person who journeys towards a certain place, and

on the road falls into a deep pit, out of which he cannot rise, and he must perish there ; if he had not gone forth, but had remained at home, it would have been better for him.

Solomon has expatiated in the book of Proverbs on sluggards and their indolence, by which he figuratively refers to indolence in the search after wisdom. He thus speaks of a man who desires to know the final results, but does not exert himself to understand the preliminary disciplines which lead to them, doing nothing else but desire. "The desire of the slothful killeth him ; for his hands refuse to labour. He coveteth greedily all the day long ; but the righteous giveth, and spareth not" (Prov. xxi. 25, 26) ; that is to say, if the desire killeth the slothful, it is because he neglects to seek the thing which might satisfy his desire, he does nothing but desire, and hopes to obtain a thing without using the means to reach it. It would be better for him were he without that desire. Observe how the end of the simile throws light on its beginning. It concludes with the words "but the righteous giveth, and spareth not" ; the antithesis of "righteous" and "slothful" can only be justified on the basis of our interpretation. Solomon thus indicates that only such a man is righteous who gives to everything its due portion ; that is to say, who gives to the study of a thing the whole time required for it, and does not devote any part of that time to another purpose. The passage may therefore be paraphrased thus : And the righteous man devotes his ways to wisdom, and does not withhold any of them." Comp. "Give not thy strength unto women" (Prov. xxxi. 3).

The majority of scholars, that is to say, the most famous in science, are afflicted with this failing, viz., that of hurrying at once to the final results, and of speaking about them, without treating of the preliminary disciplines. Led by folly or ambition to disregard those preparatory studies, for the attainment of which they are either incapable or too idle, some scholars endeavour to prove that these are injurious or superfluous. On reflection the truth will become obvious.

The Fourth Reason is taken from the physical constitution of man. It has been proved that moral conduct is a preparation for intellectual progress, and that only a man whose character is pure, calm and steadfast, can attain to intellectual perfection ; that is, acquire correct conceptions. Many men are naturally so constituted that all perfection is impossible ; e.g., he whose heart is very warm and is himself very powerful, is sure to be passionate, though he tries to counteract that disposition by training ; he whose testicles are warm, humid, and vigorous, and the organs connected therewith are surcharged, will not easily refrain from sin, even if he makes great efforts to restrain himself. You also find persons of great levity and rashness, whose excited manners and wild gestures prove that their constitution is in disorder, and their temperament so bad that it cannot be cured. Such persons can never attain to perfection ; it is utterly useless to occupy oneself with them on such a subject [as Metaphysics]. For this science is, as you know, different from the science of Medicine and of Geometry, and, from the reason already mentioned, it is not every person who is capable of approaching it. It is impossible for a man to study it successfully without moral preparation ; he must acquire the highest degree of uprightness and integrity, "for the froward is an abomination to the Lord, but His secret is

with the righteous" (Prov. iii. 32). Therefore it was considered inadvisable to teach it to young men; nay, it is impossible for them to comprehend it, on account of the heat of their blood and the flame of youth, which confuses their minds; that heat, which causes all the disorder, must first disappear; they must have become moderate and settled, humble in their hearts, and subdued in their temperament; only then will they be able to arrive at the highest degree of the perception of God, i.e., the study of Metaphysics, which is called *Ma'aseh Mercabab* Comp. "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart" (Ps. xxxiv. 18); "I dwell in the high and lofty place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit; to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" (Isa. lvii. 15).

Therefore the rule, "the headings of the sections may be confided to him," is further restricted in the Talmud, in the following way: The headings of the sections must only be handed down to an Ab-bet-din (President of the Court), whose heart is full of care, i.e., in whom wisdom is united with humility, meekness, and a great dread of sin. It is further stated there: "The secrets of the Law can only be communicated to a counsellor, scholar, and good orator." These qualities can only be acquired if the physical constitution of the student favour their development. You certainly know that some persons, though exceedingly able, are very weak in giving counsel, while others are ready with proper counsel and good advice in social and political matters. A person so endowed is called "counsellor" and may be unable to comprehend purely abstract notions, even such as are similar to common sense. He is unacquainted with them, and has no talent whatever for them; we apply to him the words: "Wherefore is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he hath no heart to it?" (Prov. xvii. 16). Others are intelligent and naturally clear-sighted, able to convey complicated ideas in concise and well chosen language,—such a person is called "a good orator," but he has not been engaged in the pursuit of science, or has not acquired any knowledge of it. Those who have actually acquired a knowledge of the sciences, are called "wise in arts" (or "scholars"); the Hebrew term for "wise in arts"—*hakam harashim*—has been explained in the Talmud as implying, that when such a man speaks, all become, as it were, speechless.

Now, consider how, in the writings of the Rabbis, the admission of a person into discourses on metaphysics is made dependent on distinction in social qualities, and study of philosophy, as well as on the possession of clear-sightedness, intelligence, eloquence, and ability to communicate things by slight allusions. If a person satisfies these requirements, the secrets of the Law are confided to him. In the same place we also read the following passage:—R. Jochanan said to R. Elasar, "Come, I will teach you *Ma'aseh Mercabab*." The reply was, "I am not yet old," or in other words, I have not yet become old, I still perceive in myself the hot blood and the rashness of youth. You learn from this that, in addition to the above-named good qualities, a certain age is also required. How, then, could any person speak on these metaphysical themes in the presence of ordinary people, of children, and of women!

Fifth Reason.—Man is disturbed in his intellectual occupation by the necessity of looking after the material wants of the body, especially if the

necessity of providing for wife and children be superadded ; much more so if he seeks superfluities in addition to his ordinary wants, for by custom and bad habits these become a powerful motive. Even the perfect man to whom we have referred, if too busy with these necessary things, much more so if busy with unnecessary things, and filled with a great desire for them—must weaken or altogether lose his desire for study, to which he will apply himself with interruption, lassitude, and want of attention. He will not attain to that for which he is fitted by his abilities, or he will acquire imperfect knowledge, a confused mass of true and false ideas. For these reasons it was proper that the study of Metaphysics should have been exclusively cultivated by privileged persons, and not entrusted to the common people. It is not for the beginner, and he should abstain from it, as the little child has to abstain from taking solid food and from carrying heavy weights.

CHAPTER XXXV

Do not think that what we have laid down in the preceding chapters on the importance, obscurity, and difficulty of the subject, and its unsuitableness for communication to ordinary persons, includes the doctrine of God's incorporeality and His exemption from all affections (*πάθη*). This is not the case. For in the same way as all people must be informed, and even children must be trained in the belief that God is One, and that none besides Him is to be worshipped, so must all be taught by simple authority that God is incorporeal ; that there is no similarity in any way whatsoever between Him and His creatures ; that His existence is not like the existence of His creatures, His life not like that of any living being, His wisdom not like the wisdom of the wisest of men ; and that the difference between Him and His creatures is not merely quantitative, but absolute [as between two individuals of two different classes] ; I mean to say that all must understand that our wisdom and His, or our power and His do not differ quantitatively or qualitatively, or in a similar manner ; for two things, of which the one is strong and the other weak, are necessarily similar, belong to the same class, and can be included in one definition. The same is the case with all other comparisons ; they can only be made between two things belonging to the same class, as has been shown in works on Natural Science. Anything predicated of God is totally different from our attributes ; no definition can comprehend both ; therefore His existence and that of any other being totally differ from each other, and the term existence is applied to both homonymously, as I shall explain.

This suffices for the guidance of children and of ordinary persons who must believe that there is a Being existing, perfect, incorporeal, not inherent in a body as a force in it—God, who is above all kinds of deficiency, above all affections. But the question concerning the attributes of God, their inadmissibility, and the meaning of those attributes which are ascribed to Him ; concerning the Creation, His Providence, in providing for everything ; concerning His will, His perception, His knowledge of everything ; concerning prophecy and its various degrees ; concerning the meaning of His names which imply the idea of unity, though they are more than one ; all these things are very difficult problems, the true "Secrets of the Law" the

“secrets” mentioned so frequently in the books of the Prophets, and in the words of our Teachers, the subjects of which we should only mention the headings of the chapters, as we have already stated, and only in the presence of a person satisfying the above-named conditions.

That God is incorporeal, that He cannot be compared with His creatures, that He is not subject to external influence; these are things which must be explained to every one according to his capacity, and they must be taught by way of tradition to children and women, to the stupid and ignorant, as they are taught that God is One, that He is eternal, and that He alone is to be worshipped. Without incorporeality there is no unity, for a corporeal thing is in the first case not simple, but composed of matter and form which are two separate things by definition, and secondly, as it has extension it is also divisible. When persons have received this doctrine, and have been trained in this belief, and are in consequence at a loss to reconcile it with the writings of the Prophets, the meaning of the latter must be made clear and explained to them by pointing out the homonymity and the figurative application of certain terms discussed in this part of the work. Their belief in the unity of God and in the words of the Prophets will then be a true and perfect belief.

Those who are not sufficiently intelligent to comprehend the true interpretation of these passages in the Bible, or to understand that the same term admits of two different interpretations, may simply be told that the scriptural passage is clearly understood by the wise, but that they should content themselves with knowing that God is incorporeal, that He is never subject to external influence, as passivity implies a change, while God is entirely free from all change, that He cannot be compared to anything besides Himself, that no definition includes Him together with any other being, that the words of the Prophets are true, and that difficulties met with may be explained on this principle. This may suffice for that class of persons, and it is not proper to leave them in the belief that God is corporeal, or that He has any of the properties of material objects, just as there is no need to leave them in the belief that God does not exist, that there are more Gods than one, or that any other being may be worshipped.