

Maharal's Multiple Revolutions in Aggadic Scholarship



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Maharal's Multiple Revolutions in Aggadic Scholarship

Introduction

Several years ago, Rabbi Chaim Eisen published a seminal article entitled “Maharal’s *Be’er ha-Golah* and His Revolution in Aggadic Scholarship — in Their Context and on His Terms.” A major focus of the article was to exhaustively document that whereas the Geonim and Rishonim saw Aggadata as being on a lower level than other sections of the Gemara and open to dispute, Maharal elevated Aggadata to the level of dogma. But there are other crucially important ways in which Maharal’s approach to aggadah was revolutionary. In this paper I shall briefly review R. Eisen’s discussion of one aspect of Maharal’s revolution and add some points, after which I shall discuss the other aspects. With each aspect, I shall describe Maharal’s revolution and then give one or more examples. I shall conclude the paper with exploring the ramifications of Maharal’s revolutionary approach.

I. The Elevation to Dogma

Maharal’s Revolution

R. Eisen has a superbly detailed discussion of how Maharal stood in sharp contrast to his predecessors with his elevation of aggadah to dogma. As R. Eisen notes, Maharal was not actually the first to insist on the binding authority of aggadah – much earlier figures in Ashkenaz had insisted on the literal truth of all aggadot, which by inference, means that one may not dispute the authority of the aggadot. However, by the time Maharal arrived on the scene, such views had long faded into obscurity. R. Eisen provides a long list of Geonim and Rishonim who did not see all aggadot as binding.

One could also add the even longer list of Rishonim who held that Chazal's statements about the natural world were not all correct.¹ True, Maharal does not explicitly categorically reject the idea that Chazal could ever have been mistaken in their statements about the natural world. However, from his repeated insistence that Chazal were always speaking about metaphysical rather than physical phenomena, that knowledge obtained from Torah is much more reliable than that obtained via the scientific method, and from his reinterpretations of passages in the Talmud that seem to explicitly impart such errors to Chazal, it seems clear that he held such a possibility to be unthinkable.

There is also another aspect to add to a discussion of Maharal's elevation of Aggadah. Maharal did not only make polemical statements about Aggadic material being sacrosanct. He also gave explanations which showed, at least in some cases, why he believed them to be of such status. In at least some cases, it was not merely a statement that Chazal's statements were unarguable, but also that they were of divine authority.² Maharal specifically claimed that various homiletic exegeses of Scriptural verses were not the Sages' own ideas, as Rambam claimed, but rather are God's intent.³

Example: The Peg Exegesis

One such example is his explanation of the nature of the Sages' *derashos* as applied to the commandment that soldiers should pack a peg (*yated*) in their gear. Rambam explains this as follows:

The Sages use the text of the Bible only as a kind of poetical language [for their own ideas], and do not intend thereby to give an interpretation of the text. As to the value of these Midrashic interpretations, we meet with two different opinions. For some think that the Midrash contains the real explanation of the text, whilst others, finding that it cannot be reconciled with the words quoted, reject and ridicule it. The former struggle and fight to prove and to confirm such interpretations according to their opinion, and to keep them as the real meaning of the text; they consider them in the same

¹ An extremely comprehensive list of citations can be found at <http://torahandscience.blogspot.com/-2006/04/sources-indicating-that-chazal-did-not.html>.

² On the other hand, in *Chiddushei Aggados to Shabbos* 31a, Maharal writes that those who reject the Oral Torah are not classified as heretics.

³ Elbaum, *Petichut VeHistagrut* pp. 112-113.

light as traditional laws. Neither of the two classes understood it, that our Sages employ biblical texts merely as poetical expressions, the meaning of which is clear to every reasonable reader. This style was general in ancient days; all adopted it in the same way as poets. Our Sages say, in reference to the words, “you shall have a peg (*yated*) upon your weapons” [*azenecha*, Deut. 23:14]: Do not read *azenecha*, “your weapon,” but *oznecha*, “your ear.” You are thus told, that if you hear a person uttering something disgraceful, put your fingers into your ears. Now, I wonder whether those ignorant persons believe that the author of this saying gave it as the true interpretation of the text quoted, and as the meaning of this precept: that in truth *yated*, “peg,” is used for “finger,” and *azenecha* denotes “your ear.” I cannot think that any person whose intellect is sound can admit this. The author employed the text as a beautiful poetical phrase, in teaching an excellent moral lesson, namely this: It is as bad to listen to bad language as it is to use it. This lesson is poetically connected with the above text. (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:43)

Rambam scorns those who believe that the Sages’ homiletic discourse represents the literal, straightforward interpretation of the verse. Instead, he states, the Sages simply used the verse as a hook on which to hang their interpretation. Maharal, on the other hand, introduces an intermediate position: that the homiletic discourse is indeed the intent of the Torah, but as a secondary meaning that is deliberately alluded to in the text, not the primary, straightforward meaning.

...When you investigate their words, you will find that all their words are wisdom... it is written, “and you shall have a peg on your weapons” – but why does it write it this way, it could have just written, “and you shall have a peg,” and we would certainly know that it is stuck in something? However, it comes to teach you that a person needs a cover for that which receives, namely, the ear, that no evil matter should penetrate it... and this matter is clear it is not far-fetched but appropriate and acceptable; there is no doubt that the Torah alluded to this, with hints in its terminology.... (*Be’er HaGolah, Be’er HaShlishi*)

In so doing, Maharal effectively converted something of human origin to being of divine origin. That which is of human origin can be disputed; that which is of divine origin is sacrosanct and inviolable.

II. The Nature of the Non-Straightforward Meaning

Maharal's Revolution

It is not just with regard to the status accorded to aggadah that Maharal was revolutionary. Maharal also innovated an entirely new approach to understanding the very nature of aggadah. True, Maharal was certainly far from the first to state that aggadah should not be interpreted in accordance with its straightforward meaning. But the *type* of interpretation that he ascribed to it was completely novel.

The Rishonim who took the approach that aggadah should not be interpreted in accordance with its straightforward meaning instead interpreted aggadah in a non-literal manner. They saw aggadah as being metaphor and parable. Maharal, on the other hand, saw aggadah as speaking of the spiritual inner “essence” of existence. According to Maharal, aggadah is neither a literal account of a physical reality nor a non-literal metaphor; rather, it is a *literal* account of a *metaphysical* reality.

Is there any precedent for Maharal's method of interpretation? While kabbalah introduced the idea of spiritual worlds, and of a metaphysical dimension to mitzvot, as far as I know it did not yet, by Maharal's time, apply this concept to the physical world as mentioned in the Talmud.

R. Eisen writes that Maharal followed “in the footsteps of Rambam” (p. 180) and claims that:

...Maharal, not only in his propensity to cast apparently historical aggadic tales as abstractions, is manifestly beholden to Rambam for much more than a general *weltanschauung*. More than any other classic of Jewish thought, Rambam's *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* established the centrality of symbolism and metaphor in explicating not only *aggadot* but also the prophet's parables and even certain aspects of Torah. (p. 186)

In a footnote, however, R. Eisen notes that “a facile comparison between Maharal's allegorical abstractions and Maimonidean parables is misleading.”⁴ I think that this is somewhat of an understatement. It is true that Rambam was a trailblazer in non-literal interpretations, but Maharal's method of non-literal interpretation is so fundamentally different from that of Rambam that I do not think he can be rated as following in Rambam's footsteps.

⁴ p. 188 n. 92.

Example: The Height of Moses

The Talmud (*Berachot* 54a, *Nedarim* 38a) states that Moses was ten cubits tall, which is approximately fifteen feet. Some, such as R. Nissim ben Reuven of Gerona (1290-1375), accepted this as being literally true.⁵ But for more dedicated rationalists such as Maimonides, this was impossible to accept. Maimonides does not directly address the topic of Moses, but when discussing the height of the giant Og, he brings Og's height down to about six cubits by explaining that although Scripture describes his bed as being nine cubits long, people are only two-thirds the length of their beds.⁶ Maimonides stresses that while a six-cubit height "is undoubtedly rare in the human race, it is in no way impossible." The notion that Moses, who is not rated in Scripture as being a giant, to have been nearly twice as tall Og, would certainly be unacceptable to Maimonides.

How, then, would Maimonides have understood the Talmud's account of Moses being ten cubits tall? He would undoubtedly have interpreted it similarly to Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, who insisted that it was not literal, but rather was an allegory for spiritual greatness.⁷ Moses was a giant in his spiritual stature. This great height is quantified as ten cubits due to the symbolic significance of that number; either because ten, as the base unit of the numerical system, signifies completeness, or because of some achievement of Moses involving the number ten, such as his involvement in bringing the ten plagues, receiving the ten commandments, or building the ten-cubit tall Mishkan.

In sharp contrast to this approach is that of Maharal. Maharal agrees that the Talmud's statement cannot be true in the simple, literal sense, but he explains that such seemingly impossible accounts of people's height are describing the metaphysical rather than physical reality:

Every person has two aspects: One, his physical form, which is common to the entire species... but every person also has a personal (inner metaphysical) form... Sometimes, the Sages said that so-and-so was such-and-such a height, and they attributed huge dimensions to him. This, too, is from the perspective of his inner form, even though it is cannot be actualized [in the physical world] because of the general form [of human beings], since every

⁵ Derashot haRan 5.

⁶ *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:47.

⁷ Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Bamidbar 81 (p. 107 in 1868 edition).

person is created within the framework of the laws of nature, and these dictate that a person cannot be so small or so big. (Maharal, *Be'er HaGolah*, *Be'er* 5)

Maharal explains that when the Sages described Moses as being ten cubits in height, this was not referring to his physical size but rather his inner spiritual dimensions:⁸

Know that size is [stated] according to the [spiritual] level of the thing; and therefore, you will find that the earlier generations, who had a greater spiritual level, are described as being of greater size. And in tractate Shabbos, it states that Moses was ten cubits tall; and this does not mean from the perspective of his physical body being so big... Do not under any circumstances say at all that the measurement given here is one that is empirically detectable; rather, this is as we have explained on many occasions, divorced from the physical reality, just as one finds [many] measurements that are not detectable to the senses and are only conceptual. For this itself, that the height of Moses was ten cubits, is not a physical measurement; rather, that he was suited to ten cubits' worth of perfection and spiritual elevation. (*Chiddushei Aggados* to *Bava Metzia* 84a s.v. *ve-ka'asher teida*)

According to Maharal, there is a metaphysical spiritual reality which is the source of the reality in this world. In this plane of existence, Moses really was ten cubits tall. Because the laws of nature do not permit a human to be so tall, when this spiritual genetic code was actualized in this world, Moses could not be ten physical cubits in height.

In this case, we have a way in which the difference between Maharal's approach of "literal description of metaphysical reality," and those who simply interpret statements symbolically, is brought sharply to light. Maharal adds that it would be appropriate if the physical world perfectly expressed the spiritual, but such is not the case; however, the physical world does express the spiritual world to the extent possible, and therefore Moses would have been very tall, within that which is ordinarily possible:

It states that Moses was ten cubits tall; and this does not mean from the perspective of his physical body being so big. Rather, it is due to that in accordance with the spiritual level and qualities that someone has, his body

⁸ Maharal in *Gevuros Hashem* 18 explains why Moses was ten cubits tall in a way that sounds as though he is interpreting it literally, but at the end he states that for the meaning of the concept of someone being tall, one should refer to *Be'er HaGolah* – where he explains it metaphysically.

will be synchronized accordingly... If such an amount was not to be found, it was due to the deficiencies of the body (which cannot attain such a size), but nevertheless he possessed as great a [physical] size as is possible. (Ibid.⁹)

According to Maharal, then, Moses was not fifteen feet tall, but he would have been extremely tall – the tallest man in the world, within the realm of the physically possible. Those who simply interpret the Talmud’s statement non-literally, as a metaphor alluding to Moses’ greatness, would have no need and no place for such an explanation.

III. The Extended Definition of Aggadah

Maharal’s Revolution

R. Shmuel HaNaggid defined aggadah as “anything that is not halachah.” However, this definition is too broad for our purposes. The fact is that when scholars such as Maimonides spoke about, and applied, their methodology of interpreting aggadah against its straightforward meaning, they had a particular group of statements in mind: homiletic discourses, and usually specifically those homiletic discourses that sound extremely strange if interpreted as being literally true. But for Maharal, his approach of interpreting statements as literal descriptions of a metaphysical reality was applied, and was applicable, to a much broader category of statements; indeed, there was virtually no part of the Talmud to which this could *not* theoretically be applied.¹⁰

Example #1: Discussions about Astronomy

In several places, the Talmud recounts discussions concerning astronomy; let us focus on the discussion concerning the path of the sun.

The Sages of Israel say, During the day, the sun travels below the firmament, and at night, above the firmament. And the scholars of the nations say,

⁹ Maharal states similarly in *Be’er HaGolab* 5: “And likewise, when someone has a great measurement from the point of view of his inner form, even though it is impossible that he can be so big from the point of view of the general [physical] form [of human beings], he does possess whatever increase is possible due to his inner form.”

¹⁰ An exception is that Maharal states that when the Talmud gives specific historic details, this signifies that the event is literally true; see the fourth *Be’er* of *Be’er HaGolab*. Ironically, this is a case where Rambam would *not* necessarily see it as being literally true; see his comments regarding the Book of Iyov in *The Guide for the Perplexed* 3:22.

During the day the sun travels below the firmament, and at night below the ground. Rabbi said: Their words seem more correct than ours... (Talmud, *Pesachim* 94a)

Most of the Geonim and Rishonim understood this passage in accordance with its straightforward meaning, that Rabbi concluded that the gentile scholars were correct and the Jewish scholars were mistaken. Rabbeinu Tam interprets it to mean that the arguments of the gentile scholars were more convincing, but that the truth nevertheless lay with the Jewish sages. However, all of the Geonim and Rishonim, without any exceptions whatsoever, interpreted this passage as relating a dispute about astronomy.¹¹ Maharal, on the other hand, interpreted it as referring to a dispute about metaphysical matters, in which the “firmament” represents the division between the physical and spiritual world:

The “firmament” refers to that which is the firmament for the lower regions... And now, the opinion of the Sages who said that during the day it travels below the firmament, and at night it travels above the firmament, means that during the day, the sun is found in the world, and the firmament is the beginning of the lower region, and the sun travels below the firmament during the day, together with the lower regions. But at night, the sun is separated from the world, and it is with regard to this that it says that the sun travels above the firmament – meaning, the firmament which is the beginning of the lower regions. (*Be'er HaGolah, Be'er Shishi*¹²)

There is no indication in the Talmud that this is anything other than a discussion about astronomy.¹³ Nobody before Maharal interpreted it as being anything other than this. It can perhaps be considered aggadah in the sense of not being halachah, but it is not aggadah in the sense of being a homily, parable or suchlike. But Maharal, by explaining the subject of the dispute as referring to a metaphysical

¹¹ See my paper “The Sun’s Path at Night.”

¹² In the Machon Yerushalayim/ Hartman edition, Maharal’s discussion of this topic can be found in the third section of *Be'er HaShishi*, beginning on p. 177.

¹³ Maharal rejects the straightforward understanding of the Sages’ view on the grounds that it is clearly scientifically absurd, but this is anachronistic. That which appears obviously false in one era does not necessarily appear false to people in another era. There were many intelligent people, over a long period, who believed that the world is flat, even though to later generations there appeared to be very obvious proofs that this is not the case.

reality, was able to do away with the plain meaning of the text, extending his approach that he applies to other types of aggadah.

Example #2: Halachic Discussions

Perhaps the strongest demonstration of how Maharal's unique approach can be extended is that it can even be applied to halachic matters. We find a passage in the Talmud discussing the height of Moses and other Levites which, at first glance, seems impossible to interpret as anything other than a reference to the physical reality. It begins by discussing the practical law that carrying items on Shabbos is prohibited even when done high above the ground (without putting it down):

Rabbi Elazar said: One who transfers a load [from one domain to another] at a height of more than ten handbreadths above the ground, is liable (for violating Shabbos), for thus was the carrying done by the sons of Kehath... And how do we know that this was the way in which the sons of Kehath carried? As it is written, "...surrounding the Tabernacle and the Altar" (Numbers 3:26), comparing the Altar to the Tabernacle; just as the Tabernacle was ten cubits tall, so too the Altar was ten cubits tall... and it is written, "He spread the Tent over the Tabernacle," and Rav said: "Our teacher Moses spread it out" – from here you learn that the height of the Levites was ten cubits. There is a tradition that any load that is carried with poles has one third above [the carriers' shoulders] and two thirds below. We thus find that it was [carried] well above [ten handbreadths]. (Talmud, *Shabbos* 92a)

The Talmud thereby establishes that the Altar was carried at least ten handbreadths above the ground from the fact that the Levites carrying it were ten cubits tall. There does not appear to be any way to interpret this other than as a factual statement about the height of the Levites. And indeed, many Torah scholars over history clearly understood the Talmud in this way.¹⁴

¹⁴ See, for example, *Moshav Zekeinim* to Exodus 26:1, who wonders how Aharon managed to fit inside the Tabernacle when he was wearing his turban. Bnei Yissacher, cited in R. Yisrael Berger, *Eser Tzachtzachos* (Pieterkov 1910) 8:23, states that unlike Moshe, Aharon was of regular height, which can be deduced from the requirement that there be three steps leading up to the menorah, as recorded in the Gemara (*Menachos* 29a) and Sifri (*Beha'alo-secha* 8:3). On the other hand, Maharil Diskin, Commentary to the Torah, *parashas Beha'alo-secha*, states that the steps were for future generations, and Aharon himself did not require them.

How would rationalists have dealt with this Gemara? The Talmud's account of the Levites' great height, while based on an extrapolation from Moses to the rest of the tribe, was linked with the view that the bronze Altar was ten cubits tall, which necessitated that the Levites must have been of great height for them to carry it. Yet as it turns out, while it is Rabbi Yosi's view that the altar was ten cubits tall, Rav Yehudah's view is that the bronze Altar was only three cubits tall, and thus the Levites would not have needed to be any taller than the average person in order to carry it. Yet Rambam would not have had this way out; he states that the altar was ten cubits high (*Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* 2:5). Perhaps he would have simply rejected this method of deriving the law concerning carrying on Shabbos.

But what of Maharal? Since Maharal understands that the Levites were, metaphysically speaking, ten cubits high, is this approach transferable to this case? According to Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, probably the foremost exponent of Maharal's approach today, it is.¹⁵ The halachah regarding carrying on Shabbos ten hand-breadths above the ground is learned from a calculation involving the metaphysical height of the Levites.

Conclusion

Some see Maharal's revolutionary approach to Aggadah as being a boon to the advancement of science in the Jewish world:

...Maharal's most important clarification was to disentangle natural philosophy from the assumptions and restraints of Jewish theology and Aristotelian metaphysics, and in so doing to provide an autonomous realm in which scientific pursuit could legitimately flourish. (David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery*, p. 77)

Similarly, André Neher compares Maharal to Galileo, in the latter's famous *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*.¹⁶ Galileo drew a distinction between Scripture, which teaches theological truth, and science, which teaches physical truths. Likewise, Maharal viewed Torah and science as operating in different and separate domains.

In this vein, I would like to recount what the late Rabbi Aryeh Carmell told me about a conversation that he had with Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, the primary expositor

¹⁵ Based on a conversation with Rabbi Mordecai Kornfeld, who asked Rabbi Shapiro this question at my request.

¹⁶ *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the Sixteenth Century*, p. 209.

of Maharal's thought in his generation. Rabbi Carmell had asked him what to do about all the scientific evidence that there was no global Deluge. Rabbi Hutner replied, "Explain it with the approach of Maharal." In other words, the point of the Torah's story of the Deluge is the inner message, not the historical account. It is difficult to imagine any other traditionalist Rosh Yeshivah in the haredi world being so liberal. But R. Hutner's dedication to Maharal allowed him to focus on what he considered to be the essence of the Torah's account.

Yet is it true that Maharal's approach rendered Torah as being completely detached from the physical world? As noted, Maharal held that Moshe was as tall as humanly possible. Maharal did claim that the metaphysical reality would be expressed in the physical world to the extent possible. The metaphysical reality is the source of physical phenomena. And not only does this mean that it is expressed in the physical world to some degree; it also means that those who are learned in metaphysical knowledge possess authority when making statements about the physical world.

Neher claims that, according to Maharal, "to be contemptuous of science and to make the Torah into an infallible scientific authority is to display a childish obscurantism."¹⁷ But Maharal *was* contemptuous of science. He describes astronomy as a valuable study, but qualifies this by insisting that only when based on Jewish tradition and wisdom can one hope to attain truth.¹⁸ He gives that as the explanation of the verse "for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations" (Deut. 4:6), emphasizing that without Torah, it is impossible to reach conclusions in astronomy with certainty or precision.

Neher further claims that Maharal had a positive view of Copernicus.¹⁹ Yet in describing Copernicus, Maharal relates that he overturned the work of all his predecessors, but notes that this astronomer himself admits that he is unable to resolve everything. Maharal does not express any theological objections towards heliocentrism *per se*; rather, he is disparaging towards Copernicus just as he was to all secular science. In my view Neher distorts Maharal's position, presenting him as describing science as the noble march of human thought with its ups and downs,

¹⁷ *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the Sixteenth Century*, p. 209.

¹⁸ *Netivot Olam, Netiv HaTorah* 14.

¹⁹ *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 208-10, and *Copernicus in the Hebrew Literature* p. 213.

whereas in fact Maharal's goal is to dismiss such secular endeavors as lacking any credibility.²⁰ Maharal may have provided an "autonomous realm in which scientific pursuit could legitimately flourish," but any true disciples of Maharal would not assign credibility to such scientific pursuits.

Furthermore, even if Maharal's approach grants free reign to the study of the natural sciences, it asphyxiates rational thought when applied to the study of Talmud. I cannot agree with R. Eisen's assessment that Maharal's analyses "resonate with a palpable authenticity."²¹ When considering Maharal's interpretation of various passages, such as those dealing with astronomy, it often strains credulity to imagine that the Talmud actually means what Maharal claims it to mean. There is no hint of Maharal's approach in the words of the Talmud, and not one of his predecessors interpreted it in that way.

In addition, Maharal's approach virtually forces irrational conclusions when applied to the study of Talmudic interpretation over the ages. The result of Maharal's elevation of aggadata to dogma is that the approach of most of the Rishonim and many Acharonim becomes invalid, even heretical. What, then, is one to do with all these Rishonim? For traditionalists, rating these Rishonim and Acharonim as heretics is not an option. The result can be seen in the contemporary polemical work *Chaim B'Emunasam*, which advocates Maharal's approach and endorses Maharal's claim that any other approach is unacceptable. The author is thus forced to ignore other authorities, perform extremely contrived reinterpretations of their positions, or denounce them as forgeries.²² Maharal thus forces one of the greatest revolutions in Jewish intellectual history of all time.

²⁰ Neher brings the Maharal's discussion of Copernicus and astronomy in which, according to Neher's translation, Maharal describes the "magnificent achievements" of non-Jewish scientists, whereas in fact the word "magnificent" does not appear in Maharal and is Neher's insertion.

²¹ "Maharal's *Be'er ha-Golah* and His Revolution in *Aggadic* Scholarship," p. 192.

²² See my critique "Rewriting Jewish Intellectual History."

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