

*The Teaching of R. Hasdai Crescas*

R. Hasdai Crescas's date of birth is not known. It is known that he died in Saragossa in 1412. He was the scion of a noted family of learning, the student of R. Nissim Gerondi, and a familiar of the Aragon royal court. After the riots of 1391 he was appointed supreme judge of Aragonian Jewry, and the king appointed him to rebuild the Jewish communities and organize them anew. In this way he came to lead Aragonian Jewry in one of its most difficult times. As we said, his theoretical project fit in with his efforts to unite Aragonian Jewry and strengthen its Jewish identity against the pressures and temptations of conversion.

Crescas's principal work is *The Light of the Lord*, written in Hebrew. According to the book's introduction, one should regard it as the first part of a systematic work that would parallel Maimonides's halakhic work *Mishneh Torah*. This implies that *The Light of the Lord* was meant to correspond to the first portion of the *Mishneh Torah*, namely the *Book of Knowledge*, which established in a legal manner the foundations of the Jewish religious world-view. But it is clear that Crescas did not finish this project. Except for *The Light of the Lord*, there remains only a small book called *The Refutation of the Christian Principles*. It was written in Spanish and translated into Hebrew by R. Joseph Ibn Shem Tov. Finally, a manuscript was discovered of a philosophic-halakhic work that preceded *The Light of the Lord*, and this was published by Aviezer Ravitzky under the title *Sermon on the Passover*.

*Crescas's Doctrine of Principles of Faith*

Maimonides was the first philosopher who formulated the principles of Judaism as obligatory tenets of faith contained in a legal code. However, his purpose was pedagogic, and he did not make these principles central to his system of thought. We note the changed historical circumstances that formed the background of Crescas's project. The worsening inner fragmentation and the confrontation with Christianity generated an urgent need to formulate principles that would define Judaism's essential identity and its differences with Christianity. This was no longer merely a pedagogic aid, but the foundation on which the entire world-view would be articulated. Therefore a different method was required, and a different approach to determining the principles and justifying them intellectually.

Crescas's system of principles differs from Maimonides's in that it is the starting-point of his philosophical system as well as his halakhic system. It differs also in the deductive process by which the principles are determined, as well as in their logical formulation.

### *Belief in God's Existence*

The differences with Maimonides begin with Crescas's Preface. Both in Maimonides's commentary to the Mishnah and in his *Book of Knowledge*, he started with the principle of God's existence, which he defined as the first of the 613 commandments and the first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God..." Crescas counter-argues that precisely because the belief in God's existence is the premise of all the commandments, it cannot itself be a commandment. After all, we are speaking of the commandments of God, and no one can believe that God commands anything until the person first knows with certainty that there is a God who is in a position to command him. Thus the knowledge of God's existence is the premise of all the commandments, but it is not itself a commandment.

To this, Crescas added a philosophical argument. It is impossible in principle to command someone to believe, for belief is not a matter of free choice. If one knows a truth, one is not free to deny it, and if one does not know it, one is not free to believe it. This argument applies especially to the belief in God's existence, because on the basis of knowing that God exists and commands, a person is required to accept as true whatever God, who revealed Himself to him with absolute certainty, commands him, including truths that one cannot arrive at through reason. When God commands us to believe such truths, it is the task of reason not to verify what was declared through revelation, but to interpret it to the best of our ability so that it will be consistent with our general knowledge.

Indeed, distinguishing the belief in God's existence from the other commandments of the Torah affects Crescas's relationship to philosophical speculation. If knowledge of God's existence is a prior assumption and not a commandment, it is not only permitted to analyze this proposition in order to verify it, but it is proper and necessary to do so. But after we prove God's existence, we must then accept His commandments, and they will limit our theoretical purview from that point onward. It will then be reason's task to explain what we have received as divine revelation, but the obligation is based on God's absolute

authority, and human reason is required by its own logic to submit and obey. We note that this is presented as a rational consideration, and it is perfectly legitimate for us to ask why God commands various beliefs and deeds and does not leave them to the free rational judgment of man who was created in the divine image. Any rational answer to this question must reckon with the limits of understanding and the critique of human reason. Crescas responds to this challenge as well within the framework of his proofs of God's existence. All this will be better explained farther on. At the outset of our discussion it is important to emphasize in what respects Crescas differs from the assumptions of Maimonides's doctrine of basic principles. Maimonides's pedagogical approach presents the doctrine of basic principles as a simple authoritative formula that everyone can understand, even though the common man's understanding will differ qualitatively and substantively from the philosopher's. We recall in this connection that even the simple proposition that God exists is understood differently by the philosopher than by the layperson. But Crescas assumes that every person can arrive at a correct intellectual understanding of the principle of God's existence, unity and incorporeality, and all that is entailed by this. We will show further on that in this positive conception of God's attributes he does not assume any special intellectual effort, nor does he see it as the purpose of divine worship. Thus he comes to offer the doctrine of principles as derived entirely from the teaching of the Torah based on revelation. Instead of giving a popular formulation of the conclusions of philosophy, he assigns to philosophy the secondary task of giving an explanation of the Torah's teaching.

#### *Order of Importance of the Principles*

Thus it is not by reason (which has completed its independent task by proving God's existence and determining its own limitations) that we determine what we should believe, or which articles of faith are more or less important, but by the Torah. The status of the Torah itself follows logically, in the following dogmatic outline: After we know God's existence, He reveals Himself to us in prophecy, and the Torah with all its commandments is identical with His revelation. Of course we must believe it, for it is of divine origin. But this too is not a commandment, but knowledge, for once we have understood this as factual, we cannot deny it, and it obligates us, as any fact obligates us, and we cannot ignore it without paying a severe price. But we accept this knowledge

not from rational deduction, but from direct experience that forces itself on our awareness. We note that Crescas does not deny reason's task of interpreting what the Torah commands us to believe. Thus we must determine the system of belief-principles based on the fact that the Torah that we received from Sinai is divinely commanded: we must accept as true all principles that this fact entails, and to reject as false those principles that contradict it.

Crescas's intention is clarified by the enumeration that follows. First come those principles whose denial involves denial of the Torah's status as divine revelation:

1. God's knowledge of created beings.
2. God's providence over them.
3. God's omnipotence.
4. Prophecy.
5. Human free will.
6. The purpose of the world.

The reason for these is clear. If God does not know the particulars of created beings or exercise providence over them, it is impossible that He should give them the Torah. If He is not omnipotent, it is again impossible that He exercise providence over created beings. Without prophecy, the Torah cannot be given to humankind, and if people do not have free will there is no reason to give them the Torah. The determination that there is a purpose for the world and for humanity is also a necessary assumption for the Torah's existence, for if it were not God's will to be beneficent to His creatures, He would not give them the Torah. Note, though, that the same principles that appear in Maimonides as pedagogic means to advance human beings to the end-goal of knowing God, and are therefore of secondary importance, are accorded primary significance by Crescas.

On the next rank come those principles that the Torah requires one to believe, but whose denial does not contradict the principle of a revealed Torah:

1. Creation of the world *ex nihilo*.
2. Immortality of the soul.
3. Reward and punishment.
4. Resurrection of the dead.
5. The eternity of the Torah.
6. The prophecy of Moses.

7. The priestly divination through the Urim and Thummim.
8. The Messiah.

Note that while for Maimonides the creation of the world is a foundational principle whose denial undermines the whole Torah-outlook even though it cannot be inferred infallibly from the Torah text, according to Crescas the Torah is simply a tenet that the Torah requires us to believe, for in his view the eternity of the world does not undermine the fact of revelation. The same applies to the belief in the uniqueness of Moses's prophecy, which according to Maimonides is the condition of the unique and absolute authority of the Torah. According to Crescas, it is only through the Torah that we know that Moses's prophecy was unique and that there will never be another like him. The same applies to the belief in the Messiah and the resurrection. The Torah requires them, but they are not prior conditions for the validity of the Torah.

In the end, Crescas also recognizes beliefs that have a source in the Torah, but which the Torah does not require one to believe. It seems he means to refer to beliefs that are accepted by the Jewish people, that it is possible to infer from various verses that could also be interpreted differently, so that one who denies them is not denying an unequivocal declaration of the Torah:

1. The future eternity of the world.
2. The existence of an infinity of other worlds.
3. That the heavenly bodies are living beings.
4. That the heavenly bodies influence human affairs.
5. The efficacy of amulets.
6. Demons.
7. Reincarnation.
8. The immortality of a child who dies before achieving majority.
9. Paradise and hell.

The difference between Crescas and Maimonides is all too obvious here. Along with beliefs that Maimonides adheres to, Crescas also lists some beliefs that Maimonides dismisses contemptuously, and Maimonides would certainly reject a permissive attitude toward such beliefs.

In summary, Crescas seeks to develop a theory of basic tenets of Jewish belief whose systematic validity could be determined with certainty as a necessary condition for the validity of the Torah. In addition, it would include all the beliefs that were accepted by the major sages of the people, including some contradicting opinions on matters

of legitimate controversy (of which the rabbis said, "These and those are the words of the living God"). This was an attempt to maintain a conservative religious world-view that would tolerate within its bounds disagreements that did not undermine the basis of the unity of the Jewish religion and did not transgress its proper limits.

*The Doctrine of Principles as Framework of Crescas's Thought*

This summary enables us to determine more exactly to what extent Crescas's doctrine of basic principles determines his religious thought. On the one hand, he accepts unequivocally the supra-rational authority of the Torah in all its tenets, and subordinates his philosophical thought to whatever is under the rubric of "Torah commandments," whether in thought or in deed. On the other hand, he lays out within the framework of obligatory commandments a broad area that includes various philosophical interpretations as well as debates between contradictory assertions in which philosophy is free to take various positions. We shall demonstrate that Crescas exercised the freedom of thought that he allowed within his dogmatic framework with a scientific and philosophical consistency that does not fall short of that of Maimonides in depth and originality.

This assertion will guide us through the rest of the discussion. First we will follow the reasoning that lays the foundation for Crescas's whole system of dogmatics: the proofs for the existence of God and setting the limits of human reason. Then we will depart from the dogmatic order that Crescas imposed on his exposition and we will deal with his religious philosophy systematically.

*Crescas's Theology*

Just as Crescas's doctrine of principles is conceived in opposition to Maimonides, so too his discussion of God's existence is based on opposition to Maimonides's discussion of the same issue. At the start of Part II of the *Guide*, Maimonides presents 25 premises in which he summarizes the basic principles of Aristotelian physics (adding a 26th principle of the eternity of the world, that he assumed hypothetically for the purpose of the immediate argument). On the basis of these premises he presents four proofs for the existence, unity, and eternity of God, as well as several secondary proofs for God's unity and eternity. This

presentation assumes more than meets the eye. For Maimonides, knowledge of objective truth is understood as proving the existence of the object that is defined in the concept. If the proof for the existence of God is based on Aristotelian physics, this means that the knowledge of God is a particular way of looking at physics, namely from the aspect of the transcendent cause that endows it with existence and movement. Furthermore, the entire primary discussion of God's existence, unity and eternity is based in Maimonides on his theory of divine attributes. Thus, Crescas's critique of Aristotelian physics is the opening wedge for a critique of the entire Aristotelian system as the foundation of theology. In other words, Crescas's critique of the Aristotelian physics on which Maimonides has based his thought seeks to undermine the foundation-stone of Maimonidean theology.

#### *Crescas's Critical Method*

Crescas's procedure in his critique is fundamental and exacting. First he criticizes most of the 25 premises that summarize Aristotelian physics.<sup>10</sup> In other words, he undermines the foundations of the whole Aristotelian system of physics, which Maimonides had thought to be established as absolutely certain, both physically and logically. Afterwards he directs his criticism at the proofs for God's existence that were developed on their basis, and finally at the doctrine of negative attributes that was based on those proofs. The results that he sought to achieve were the following: to undermine the scientific authority of Aristotle; to sever the connection that Maimonides had established between Aristotelian philosophy and the Torah; to define the limits of independent human reason in the domain of theology; and to establish the distinctness and superiority of the Torah's concept of God as compared with the Aristotelian conception. The last of these will be the basis of Crescas's own independent outlook.

Crescas has received special attention from recent historians of philosophy based on his criticism of Aristotelian philosophy, because in this respect it is possible to present him as one of the harbingers of the new physics developed by Galileo. This is an exaggeration, as

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<sup>10</sup> This portion of Crescas's work is available in English with commentary. See Harry A. Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, Harvard, 1957. A detailed study of the implications of this critique for the progress of Renaissance science and cosmology is found—together with additional translated excerpts—in Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*, J. C. Gieben, 1998.

we said earlier. Crescas had no intention of developing a new physical theory, and he did not base himself on observation. The brunt of his criticism was directed at the logical weak points of Aristotelian physics in order to develop a new theology, not a new physics. Therefore I will not detail his physical arguments, but I shall select the main arguments on whose basis he developed his new theology.

Crescas criticized sixteen of Maimonides's 25 premises, but there is special importance in six of these, that group around two basic ideas:

1. The question of the finitude of the universe, and the notion of infinity in general.
2. The notion of time, conceived by Aristotle as the measure of motion.

There is also significance in his comments on Aristotle's notion of matter, but his position here is ambiguous.

#### *The Existence of an Infinite Magnitude*

Against Aristotle, Crescas maintains that an infinite magnitude and an infinite number are possible, as well as an infinite material extension. It is obvious that this argument destroys the entire Aristotelian cosmology. If an infinite magnitude and the possibility of infinite bodily movement exist, then we must assume, against Aristotle, also the existence of an infinite spatial vacuum, and this destroys the Aristotelian conception of space. Instead of defining space as "the boundary of the body that encloses the enclosed body," Crescas proposes to define space as a three-dimensional continuum that precedes the bodies that exist within it. Furthermore, rejecting Aristotle's concept of space undermines the concomitant concepts of absolute "up" and "down," and with them falls the theory that each element (earth, water, air, and fire) has a natural place to which it tends to move. One must then find another explanation for the movement of bodies in space. Crescas assumes that each element has a "specific gravity" that explains their relative disposition in order from heavy to light. Such a concept permits movement of bodies in a vacuum. This assumption destroys the Aristotelian theory, and according to it, the duration of movement of bodies in space is determined by the degree of opposition of the body in which it moves. In order to avoid the absurd result that bodies might move in a vacuum in no time at all, he similarly assumes a "specific time" for each movement parallel to "specific gravity" for bodies.



*A New Concept of Time and Space*

With this argument we move to the second central idea of his criticism. Crescas refutes Aristotle's assumption that time is merely the measure of motion, and that where there is complete rest, there is no time. In Crescas's view, rest also takes place in time. But if rest has temporal duration, then the referent of time is not simply motion or rest, but both motion and rest are measured by time which is independent of both of them. What, then, does time depend on? Crescas's pre-Kantian answer was that the soul is the subject of time, and the meaning that he attributes to this will be explained later.

Crescas's presentation does not emphasize the connection between these two parts of his criticism of Aristotle's physics. But it is easy to show that there is a parallel between the new concept of space and the new concept of time. Just as space is the infinite extension in which bodies stand or move, so time is the infinite duration in which bodies are at rest or in motion. The bodies do not demarcate space, nor does their motion demarcate time, but space and time demarcate and encompass them. Space and time are the eternal conditions without which material existence cannot exist, and they are not dependent on it.

We said earlier that Crescas was not interested in developing a new physics in place of Aristotle's. The purpose of his new definitions of place and time was theological. We find a hint of this in the fact that just on these two points Crescas points to a connection between his views and certain rabbinic-midrashic ideas that pertain to theology. In connection with the notion of place as an infinite three-dimensional extension he writes:

Accordingly, since the Blessed One is the form of the entire universe, having created, individuated it, and determined it, He is figuratively called Place, as in their oft-repeated expressions, "Blessed be the Place"; "We cause thee to swear not in thy sense, but in our sense and in the sense of the Place"; "He is the Place of the world." This last metaphor is remarkably apt, for as the dimensions of the void permeate through those of the body and its fullness, so His glory, blessed be He, is present in all the parts of the world and the fullness thereof...<sup>11</sup>

In other words, there is a parallel between the relation of God to the world and the relation of space to the objects in it. And as to time,

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<sup>11</sup> *Light of the Lord*, I.2.1, Second Speculation (Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, p. 201).

he says that the separate Intelligences and God Himself have relation to time, and that is how one should apparently understand his argument that the soul is the subject of time. It is doubtful whether one can deduce from this that in Crescas's view God exists in time, just as we cannot deduce from his words about space that God exists in space. But we can deduce from here that in his view, just as God is the *substratum* of time,<sup>12</sup> He is, apparently, the substratum of space. He has a relation both to place and to time, which are the general conditions that demarcate all of existence, and this means that all the conditions of material reality—including its spatiality and its temporality—are in God and only in God, so as He is eternal they are also eternal.<sup>13</sup> The meaning of this will become clearer when we come to deal with the topic of the creation of the world.

#### *Removing Physics from the Realm of Religious Thought*

The first gain from the critique of Aristotle's physics was to undermine Aristotle's prodigious authority in medieval philosophy. All saw him as "the Philosopher" par excellence, and treated him as if he were infallible. For a Torah-true thinker interested in the exclusive authority of the Torah, this was a not negligible achievement. But after all, this was only a psychological gain. We must examine further what substantive systematic gains came with it.

In this respect it appears at first sight that Crescas reaped a poor harvest from his physical critique. To be sure, Maimonides's proofs for God's existence were proved to be flawed. Still, it was possible to prove

<sup>12</sup> "God is the substratum of time" *ha-el nosei ha-zeman*. Alternatively, that "God is the *subject* of time" or that "God supports time" (just as a certain computer mode supports color graphics and data communication). See next footnote for the subtlety and indeterminacy of Crescas's conception of the relation of God to space and time in contrast to Maimonides on the one hand and Spinoza on the other. (LL)

<sup>13</sup> The exact relation of God to the world is not to be taken for granted, especially by those of us raised on the standard medieval wholly-transcendent Thomistic-Maimonidean concept. Charles Hartshorne pointedly argued that a taxonomy of God-concept may be constructed by posing to each theological position the five questions: "Is God eternal? Is he temporal? Is he conscious? Does he know the world? Does he include the world?" Aristotle, Plotinus, Maimonides, the Zohar, Spinoza and Whitehead obviously had different answers to these questions (and where the Bible stands is a battleground for different interpretations). Crescas clearly stands historically between Maimonides and Spinoza—and (arguably) conceptually as well, as Schweid cogently points out here. (See Hartshorne & Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, Introduction (Humanity Books, 2000, p. 16) (LL)

God's existence from reason. It was still necessary to assume a first cause, even if the chain of causes was infinite. Furthermore, we saw that Crescas agreed with Maimonides that rational knowledge of God's existence was prerequisite to accepting revelation. What advantage, then, had this critique brought? Apparently none at all. True, Crescas argued further that there is no rational proof for God's uniqueness, for there may be two Gods, one active and one passive. But despite the sharpness displayed in this argument, it is pointless, especially from Crescas's standpoint. What is divine about a passive God? Nevertheless, we should moderate our complaint. Severing the Aristotelian linkage between physics and proving God's existence takes physics out of the realm of religious thought. It is important to whoever has an interest in cosmology, but it is no longer relevant to our thinking about God. For the purpose of belief in God's existence, it is sufficient for us to point to one empirical fact that nobody will contest: the physical world exists, it evolves, it changes, and it thus depends on an outside cause. Everyone can understand this with his common sense, and you need not be a scientist or a metaphysician in order to know with certainty that there is a God. In this respect, there is no difference between the philosopher and the common man on the street! Indeed, the full ramification of this conclusion will dawn on us if we remember that in Maimonides's view physics was important not only to prove God's existence, but also to approach the understanding of God's essence through human reason. A mistaken physics will certainly not bring us closer to understanding the true God!

Still, this gain is not decisive. The question is what can we know about God as philosophers, what can we know about God as recipients of a revealed tradition, and what is the relation of these two knowledges. For this problem, the critique of physics has only indirect significance, insofar as the concepts of "infinity," "space" and "time" have an influence on Crescas's notion of God. But to draw the conclusions pertaining to knowledge of God, we must reexamine Maimonides's doctrine of divine attributes on the basis of the critique of physics.

*The Source of the Difficulty: God's Joy in Creation*

In Maimonides's view, one should interpret all concrete expressions about God in the Torah allegorically. Clearly, then, if it says that God "rejoices" in His creations, this must be meant allegorically. What is joy? In the intellectual sense, joy is nothing other than the knowledge that we have arrived at true, perfect knowledge. Consciousness of the perfection we have attained is true joy. Crescas differs with this understanding, and argues: Joy is not an intellectual affair. Even when we speak of joy in knowledge, it is not part of the knowledge itself, but a feeling, a movement of the soul that accompanies knowledge. Furthermore, joy accompanies acquisition of new knowledge. Knowing what we already knew does not arouse joy in us. But God already knows everything. What, then, does God have to rejoice over? The philosophers do not have a convincing answer to this question. But the prophet intuits this divine joy, and it is the joy of God in His deeds, not in His knowledge. God loves to do good, and rejoices in the good that He does. This is God's joy. Crescas knows, to be sure, that this concept of joy as an excitation of the soul stands in contradiction to the divine incorporeality. But he has no inhibition. On the contrary. This is exactly the point at which he bursts the bounds of the philosophical conception. The fact that the philosophers cannot grasp the essence of divine joy because it is beyond reason does not bother him, but rejoices him. *This is the most important truth that prophecy grasps, and the philosopher cannot give a satisfactory account of it.* The philosophers' inability to explain it is proof of prophecy's superiority. Philosophy cannot plumb the depths of meaning of the prophetic concept of God.

We have considered the notion that the intrinsic attributes of God that we learn from the fullness of creation are the “visible surface” or symbolic expression through which the infinite divine essence is manifested.

We have also considered the notion that the philosopher, who is not privileged with revelation, grasps these attributes in their ordinary significance, but he does not grasp the divine presence through them. This confirms the guiding assumption that we have maintained throughout this discussion, that through intellectual analysis it is possible to apprehend something, but this apprehension is poor in content. In effect, the apprehension of this intrinsic attribute is but a preparatory stage, i.e. a basic orientation to the existence of the cause of created things, to which they allude. The content is the subject-matter of prophetic revelation, and what is revealed is expressed in the notion of God as rejoicing in the good, as a presence that has a supra-rational aspect, which can therefore not be plumbed by the intellect, but to which one can only turn. God is present to the prophet through the attributes, with all the infinite power of the creation, even though concentrated in a limited area, for every divine work, despite its limited scope, reveals the infinite power of the Creator. (Incidentally, one can support this understanding of Crescas’s words by comparing them with the words of his teacher, R. Nissim Gerondi, to the effect that the natural understanding of man is material, whereas the spiritual apprehension of essences is a matter of the “divine prophetic flow,” and an effect of grace that is beyond natural human comprehension.) We shall now consider the full context of Crescas’s remarks on the issue of the divine attributes, and thus we shall complete our discussion of his theology.

Immediately after his explanation of divine joy Crescas cites a familiar midrash that the rabbis told about the beginning of Abraham’s career. According to the midrashic story Abraham saw an illuminated castle and wondered, must this castle not have a governor? In other words, is it likely that such a splendid, elaborate structure filled with light should happen to be here on its own, without someone in charge who designed it, built it, and arranged its lights? This philosophical puzzlement is apparently what brought Abraham to recognize by his reason that “the castle has a governor.” But the midrash goes on: “The owner of the castle looked at him and said, ‘Leave your divinations’ behind. I am the governor of this castle.’” The expression, “leave your divinations behind” is rich in meaning. “Divinations” in the plain

sense refers to astrology, and the idolators were astrologers who saw in the stars that illuminate the world (the “castle”) expressions of divine powers. The midrash implies that only when God reveals Himself to Abraham does he arrive at the awareness that the governor of the castle expresses Himself by building the castle and illuminating it. Abstract knowledge is an achievement in its own right. Before knowing that the castle has a governor, man cannot receive revelation, but this knowledge is only preparatory, and true enlightenment comes only from direct revelation.

If we return now to Crescas’s discussion of “intrinsic attributes,” we can say that reason grasps God merely as existing, eternal, and the cause of all beings. But the prophet grasps God as a source of lovingkindness, as a loving presence, as benevolent. Kindness, love, benevolence—these bespeak a personal relation, a relation of direct involvement. Crescas’s conception of God is based on this, and this is the key to the fundamental difference between his doctrine of attributes and that of Maimonides. In Crescas’s thought, God is not the self-intellecting intellect, nor is He the unchanging eternal will that is expressed once and for all time in the moment of creation. Rather, God is the *Fountain of Life*, the infinite effluence of love that is embodied in the never-ending, daily-renewed process of creation.

We will now summarize the conclusions of the discussion on God’s existence. Crescas took the issue of God’s existence out of a legal-obligatory framework, in order to clarify that through our intellect we achieve mere knowledge, poor in content. It is necessary as preparation and transition to revelation, but by exhausting what we can know of God through intellect, we perceive its limit. The fullness of content, knowing “all the goodness” of God in the sense of revealing the inner dynamic of the divine life, is something that philosophy cannot deliver, but only prophecy. Indeed it appears that the fundamental difference between Crescas and Maimonides is revealed in the way that they understand the meaning of “all God’s goodness.” According to Maimonides, this refers to the created world, which is good, but even this plenitude of good is not itself a revelation of the divine essence. Only a supreme intellectual effort affords the prophet the possibility to infer the Supreme Cause from creation. But in Crescas’s view, “all God’s goodness” that was revealed to Moses is the inner dynamic of the divine life itself, of which the created world is only a symbolic expression—its visible surface—and this was not an intellectual effort of the prophet, but an opening which God opened to the prophet, after the prophet turned to Him in expectation.

*Creation of the World*

We will discuss the issue of creation immediately after the discussion of the attributes for systematic reasons, although this departs from the dogmatic order of Crescas's presentation in *The Light of the World*. Crescas's remarks on divine joy, kindness and love are based on the idea of creation. This is a return to the Biblical point of origin that we recognized in Saadia's philosophy, though Crescas preferred to develop his theological position by dealing critically with Maimonides and Gersonides. We will therefore begin with a review of these two positions.

*Review of Maimonides's Doctrine of Creation*

As we recall, in Maimonides's view it is impossible to prove the creation of the world philosophically. Therefore he bases the proofs for God's existence on the hypothesis of the world's eternity. To be sure, he establishes afterwards that the belief in the creation of the world *ex nihilo* is a necessary premise from the Torah's viewpoint: only on that basis are miracles possible, and only on the basis of the possibility of miracles is the Sinai revelation possible. In order to reconcile this conclusion with his reliance on Aristotelian physics, Maimonides shows that although the premise of the world's eternity is more in consonance with Aristotelian physics, it is not required, and even if we hold that the world is created, Aristotelian physics is still wholly valid. Nevertheless, as far as philosophy is concerned, we cannot prove the creation of the world, but only weigh the relative likelihood of the alternative possibilities. The eternity hypothesis is more reasonable from a physical viewpoint, and creation is more reasonable from cosmological considerations. Since the Sinai revelation is confirmed from historical testimony—the prophets, who are more authoritative than the prophets, testify to the giving of the Torah as a miraculous divine revelation with absolute certainty—it is proper to accept the notion of the creation of the world as established. But in order to eliminate all the difficulties that have been exposed from a physical standpoint, one should stipulate that the creation is a one-time phenomenon, in which hyllic matter is created, and in that act space and time are created as well. This is the manifestation of an absolute will, and one should not say that it involves any change on God's part, for change occurs in time, and “prior” to creation there was no time. Nevertheless, the fact that this determinate event occurred  $x$  years ago, neither more nor less, follows from the arbitrary element in

every voluntary choice. We cannot understand more than this, for the transition from eternity to time cannot be grasped by the finite mind. But since such an event occurred, transcending reason and nature, we may infer that other such events are possible that have the capacity to establish a new order, such as the Sinaitic revelation, which is a kind of creation, and possibly the perfected order of Messianic times and the resurrection as well.

*Review of Gersonides's Doctrine of Creation*

As we recall, Gersonides accepted Maimonides's premise that the creation of the world is a necessary condition of the Torah. However, he was not convinced by the argument that the plain sense of the Biblical text does not require creation, nor by the argument that creation cannot be proved scientifically. The fact is that Maimonides based the creation of the world on a confusion-laden argument in a matter where certainty was called for, both with respect to the idea itself and his manner of advocacy of it. In order to dispel the confusion, Gersonides tries to show that it is indeed possible to prove the creation of the world in an unequivocal scientific manner, and that in this respect the plain sense of the scriptures leads us to the scientific truth of the matter. Scientific knowledge in this view is not a finished closed book (as Maimonides thought), but it accumulates and develops over time. Indeed, for this purpose Gersonides had to criticize several Aristotelian physical premises, and in this respect he opened a pathway on which Crescas would enlarge considerably. In any case, on the basis of his critique of Aristotle's concept of time Gersonides determined that just as space is finite, so time must be finite, and in that case it follows necessarily that we should posit a beginning to time and a beginning to motion, in other words, creation. But on this point Gersonides encountered a grave difficulty. According to the Aristotelian conception it was not possible to posit a generation of something from nothing, but only a transition from a deficient (potential) state to a plenary (actual) state. The very concept of creation *ex nihilo* thus rests on an absurdity. Gersonides could not move beyond this negative judgment, because he accepted the premises of Aristotelian philosophy and strove to repair that method in a manner consistent and faithful to its basic premises. Therefore he argues: Creation is not *ex nihilo* (something from nothing) but rather the emergence of a fuller reality from a formless matter that is not (in its primordial state) capable of sustaining a form, matter that is pure



potential, incapable of actualization on its own. The act of creation is preparing that matter with the ability to receive form, and endowing it with the form itself. Only then do motion and time begin. But it is clear that Gersonides did not succeed in overcoming the Aristotelian duality of matter and form. There is something in earthly existence that is “self-caused” but is not God, even though he tried to reduce its independence of existence practically to nullity.

### *The Kabbalistic Doctrine of Creation*

We have presented the two outlooks with which Crescas contended directly. But to understand his own teaching, we must present a third view, which he also accepts in part and rejects in part, though without mentioning it explicitly. This is the kabbalistic view, which is based on the Neo-Platonic doctrine of emanation. The kabbalists turned the notion of “creation of something from nothing” on its head. For them, the “something” was the existence of this world, which is a finite, contained reality, constrained by lacks and deficiencies, which for that very reason can present a “something” to thought. The “nothing” is the infinite plenitude of God’s perfect and absolute existence, which is “nothing” in two senses. The Hebrew *ayin* (“nothingness”) is cognate with the interrogative *me-ayin* (“from whence?” but also “from nothing”), as in “From whence (= from nothing) comes the world?” It is also “nothingness” for human thought (which is incapable of grasping it). “Something from nothing” therefore refers to the emanation of the world from the infinite divine life itself, the finite and delimited manifestation of the infinite flow coming from the unfathomable divine source.

### *Crescas’s Doctrine of Creation*

We shall now consider how Crescas has constructed his own doctrine in the light of these three views. He agrees with several of Gersonides’s critical arguments against Maimonides. He is not satisfied with the notion that the adjudication between the views of creation and eternity of the world must be based merely on probability. He certainly does not agree that the literal sense of the Torah in this matter is given to diverse interpretations. Belief in creation of the world is one of those articles of faith that the Torah commands directly and explicitly. Crescas bases this belief on the Torah, as opposed to Maimonides who bases the Torah on the belief in creation. Nevertheless, in the debate between

Maimonides and Gersonides, Crescas is clearly closer to Maimonides in his overall position. He finds the notion that the world was created from formless primordial matter strange. He leans emphatically toward Maimonides's position that creation must be understood in the sense of *ex nihilo*. Since he does not accept the premise of the finitude of the universe, which was accepted by both Maimonides and Gersonides, he is not persuaded by Gersonides's argument that time, like space, must have a boundary. On the contrary, he deduces that *space must be without a boundary*, the same as time. The decisive element in the Torah's teaching, in Crescas's view, is one that Gersonides downplayed, namely the creation *from nothing*, while the notion of creation as a beginning in time had little importance for him, and on examination turned out to be misleading. For Crescas, the central idea expressed in creation *ex nihilo* was God's absolute supremacy, expressed in the core assertion that God is the sole cause for the world's existence. The assumption that there is primordial matter which is a necessary condition of creation, even if it is "matter that does not sustain its form," contradicts God's absolute supremacy over the world, and to what purpose is it then for us to conclude that the world began to exist actually exactly  $x$  years ago and not before? In this respect, it is clear then that Maimonides's solution appears preferable to Crescas than Gersonides's. His critique is directed at Maimonides's insistence that creation *ex nihilo* is conditional on the premise that time and space began at a particular origin-point prior to which there was no time or space. This Maimonidean thesis is based on Aristotelian physics, though it conflicts with Aristotle's conclusions, and this fact was the source of his credibility gap, for it appeared to the majority of Maimonides's students and critics that Maimonides's profession was insincere. Crescas's critique of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics is relevant precisely with respect to this issue.

We saw that in Crescas's view space and time are infinite, and both are supported by God. It follows from this that all of the preparation for the existence of the material world—space and time—are in God Himself and in God alone. How, then, is it possible that God's eternal will to create a world will not be fulfilled in and of itself in the infinite duration of time and the infinite extension of space? How is it possible that the infinitely great power of God will not come to fruition in the plenary possibility of space and time? It is clear from this that Maimonides's arguments concerning the arbitrary character of the volitional decision to create the world will not appear persuasive to Crescas. On the contrary: space and time are only the initial manifesta-

tion of God's inner necessity to create, for God is infinite loving power, and beneficence is His immanent teleology. It follows that what appears to Gersonides as the essential teaching of the Torah really stands in opposition to the Torah's essential teaching. Even Maimonides erred in this respect, because he was drawn to follow Aristotle's theological outlook, though inconsistently. Indeed, the world is created *ex nihilo*, but it is eternal, and its eternity consists in the fact that divine will that creates the world is eternal and manifests itself continually, creating at every instant past and present. This is the meaning of the passage in the Jewish liturgy, "Who in His goodness renews every day continually the work of creation."

*How can the Continual be Renewed?*

Seeing creation as a manifestation of the plenary power of the deity's inner life brings Crescas close to the kabbalistic outlook. The fullness of the divine "nothingness" is manifested in finite creation. Despite this, Crescas does not accept the kabbalistic doctrine of emanation, and he does not conceive creation as a continuation of the divinity's inner life, which would then be constricted and materialized by degrees in order to bring the world into being. This is because like Maimonides, Crescas insists on absolute distinction between God and the world, and on the absolute distinction between God and humanity. On this issue Crescas also agrees with Maimonides that God created the world by an act of will that calls it into being outside himself, in the manner that an artisan creates his art-work outside himself, with the difference that the artisan is dependent on external matter to implement his conception, whereas God creates matter and form together from nothing. But can nothingness (the absolute vacuum of infinite space) be the source of substance? Can nothingness be the substrate of reality? Certainly not. Therefore one must understand the expression "something from nothing" in the sense of "something after nothing." But one ought not understand the term "after" in the sense of temporal succession, because creation proceeds continually. "After" must then refer to the order of causal-ontological priority: empty space and time supported by God are causally prior to their being filled by material reality that God renews by the infinite will that renews it. How? This is indeed the divine omnipotence that human intellect does not comprehend. But it is nevertheless possible to represent it by a parable: Human speech expresses an idea that is manifested in a communicative medium outside

the person, by strength of his power of voluntary communication: the person who is communicating creates through his speech a reality that did not exist before he spoke.

*The World as Symbol of God's Internal Life*

The parable of speech (God creating the world through a commanding utterance) shows us how Crescas sees the world as a symbolic expression of God's internal life. It is a symbol not in the kabbalistic sense of an expression that reveals God Himself, but a symbol in the ordinary sense, as an expression of something by means of an external medium, just as a person concretizes his thought in a vocal utterance, which captures the essence of the thought in an external medium. In this way it is possible to say that a person encounters the world as if it were a divine utterance. The world expresses God, and it expresses Him by virtue of its being God's handiwork. The existence of the world, when it is conceived as an absolute possibility in itself but has no power of survival on its own, reveals the divine power. The teleological connection between the parts of creation—their congruence and mutually beneficial synergy—reveal or express the divine wisdom and loving-kindness. In this sense, it would seem, the perfection of the world is the “visible surface” of the divine essence, just as the visible surface of a physical entity expresses its essence. Here, then, is the verge of the distinction between prophet and philosopher—the philosopher grasps the world as existing on its own power and in its own right, not as the expression of a will and life transcending it. The philosopher does not stand in the presence of the mystery in the very fact of existence, because he does not grasp its creation from nothing. For him, existence in its perpetual continuity is not something to marvel at, but a matter of rational necessity. But for the prophet the world is a perpetual marvel, because he grasps it as the revelation of divine power and loving-kindness, which renew it continually from nothingness. In that respect, the very presence of the world for the human being is a divine revelation. The world is given to man and reveals itself to him as an eternal creation and as a divine utterance. It seems that if we seek to find the origin of this conception we must go back and look in the creation chapters of Genesis, and in the chapters of Psalms, Job, and the prophets that speak of the divine power that is manifest in creation, not as a continuation of divine life, but as a medium through which God manifests His infinite wisdom and power that transcend human understanding. The appearance of

the world as a perpetual marvel, infinitely inexplicable and an infinite kindness, are to be found in this source. God is revealed in absolute act. Certainly what distinguishes this vision from the philosopher's vision is not a new intellectual insight. The prophet does not know more than the philosopher. The prophet only directs this knowledge to its divine source through creation. This is an intuition given to a person by grace. It does not come about automatically. I hope I will not exaggerate if I say that according to Crescas the prophet, and every true believer on his own level, conceives the world's existence as a miracle that reveals the absolute power of the God who creates it, and this sets him apart from the philosopher.