The Ambiguous Attitude to Asceticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and the Case of Levi ben Avraham

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that two major considerations framed medieval Jewish philosophical approaches to asceticism. The first was a legal consideration. The fulfillment of many of the commandments precluded the adoption of an extreme ascetic regimen. The second consideration was a philosophical one. Medieval Jewish philosophical approaches to asceticism are intrinsically linked to approaches to the nature of the soul, its perfection and its final state. In Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, the goal of life was to free the rational soul from the body and its temptations in a quest for purity and conjunction with the spiritual world. This encouraged a far more ascetic lifestyle in the case of the spiritual elite than the limited constraints upon one's physical appetites imposed by the Torah. Among the earlier medieval Jewish philosophers, whose approach to the soul was basically shaped, albeit indirectly, by Platonic thought with its negative view of the body, the appreciation of more extreme forms of asceticism can be clearly detected.

Maimonides, however, is more influenced by Aristotelian thought, with its stress on the perfection of the speculative intellect, which alone survives after death. The implication of this view is that all activities ultimately are to be judged by their contribution to attaining knowledge leading to the intellectual love of God. Hence, even the intellectual elite should engage in ascetic practices only to the point where they further this end. Maimonides' apparently conflicting positions regarding asceticism essentially signal this idea. In general, Maimonides advocates satisfying the demands of the body, but no more than is necessary for its health. Even the Aristotelian "middle way" favored by the Torah, in Maimonides' view, is seen as leaning more in the direction of asceticism. The question for him is in what circumstances should one move even further in that direction, even at the expense of not fulfilling some of the Torah's commandments.

The article concludes with a look at the approach of Levi ben Abraham as reflected in his encyclopedia *Livyat Ḥen*. Levi follows in the footsteps of

Maimonides and interprets him along the aforementioned lines. He brings a wealth of material from biblical and rabbinic literature in an attempt to show that there is no conflict in any of the authoritative Jewish sources on this issue. Each of the contradictory rabbinic opinions on this subject deals with a different individual, indicating the regimen required in that one particular case. In general, Levi's encyclopedia comes to complete the Maimonidean project of presenting Judaism as being in harmony with Aristotelian philosophy. Levi's interpretation of Jewish sources on the subject of human perfection and the role asceticism plays in the attainment of this perfection nicely illustrates this point.

A

Medieval Jewish philosophical approaches to asceticism are intrinsically linked to the question of the nature of the soul, its perfection and its final state. Perhaps in no other area did ancient Greek philosophical conceptions have a greater impact on the development of Judaism, greater even than the Aristotelian philosophical notion of God's unique unity and incorporeality. While the latter notion became the foundation for medieval Jewish rationalist theology, it had little influence on Jewish *praxis*. In the case of approaches to the soul, by contrast, there was a clear and direct influence not only on such fundamental theological conceptions as reward in the World to Come, but also the importance of certain practices in this world, especially ascetic ones, in preparing the soul to attain its perfection and ultimate felicity.

Two dominant conceptions of the soul in Greek philosophy penetrated Judaism. The first was the Platonic conception that emerges from the *Phaedo*, which viewed the rational soul as a substantive immortal entity that exists independent of the body. This soul is placed in the body to animate and lead it, but often finds itself beguiled by the body and its passions. Hence, the soul that seeks purification and wisdom feels itself trapped in the body, which counters its desire for contemplation, the activity that characterizes its essential nature. It seeks to free itself from this state, or in the words of Plato:

> Surely the soul can best reflect when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain or pleasure of any kind that is, when it ignores the body and becomes as far as possible

> independent, avoiding all physical contacts and associations as much as it can, in search for reality (Phaedo 65c).[1]

In a subsequent passage, Plato reiterates this notion:

> And purification [...] consists in separating the soul as much as possible from the body and accustoming it to withdraw from all contact with the body and concentrate itself by itself, and to have its dwelling, so far as it can, both now and in the future, alone by itself, freed from the shackles of the body (*Phaedo* 67d).

Plato concludes: "The philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation of soul from body. [...] Then it is a fact, Simmias, that true philosophers make dying their profession (*Phaedo* 67e)." In the *Republic*, Plato further develops his notion of the soul by describing its tripartite division – rational, emotive and appetitive – in which the rational part is the true essence of the individual.[2] The practical consequence of this strict dualism between soul and body, in which only the rational soul is regarded as immortal, is to focus all of one's efforts on the wellbeing of the soul, more specifically, its rational part. It is easy to see how such a conception would lead one to embrace ascetic practices, with the intent of freeing the soul from physical desires that impurify it and dim the light of its true nature. To be sure, in the *Republic* Plato advocates achieving a harmonious balance between the three parts of the soul, a balance in which the rational part ensures that each part receives its proper due, thereby satisfying one's physical appetites and allowing expression to one's emotions, rather than attempting to suppress the other parts completely. But in developing this idea, Plato appears to be most concerned that the other two parts not infringe on the workings of the rational part. Rather, by submitting themselves to the rational part, they enable it to function in the best possible manner, inasmuch as the rational part is in need of their service for the period that it is

1 Translated by Hugh Tredennick, as appears in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1963), 48. For a discussion of Plato's approach to the soul, see, for example, David Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986); see also Hendrik Lorenz, "Ancient Theories of Soul," 2009, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/

2 *Republic*, Book 4.

attached to the body. Plato's approach to the soul was adopted by Philo, who very much leans towards asceticism in his philosophy.[3] Plotinus too further develops this approach, stressing the origins of the soul in the supernal world, and treating the purpose of life as one of attempting to purify the soul by the ethical and rational virtues in preparing it for its return to its source.[4] Philo was to exert a strong impact on the Church Fathers, while Plotinus was to play a crucial role in molding Islamic and Jewish philosophical and mystical theologies.

Along with the Platonic approach to the soul, the medieval world also inherited the Aristotelian approach, which like that of Plato was a dualistic one.[5] For Aristotle, however, the rational soul was not an independent substance, and certainly not immortal. Rather it was a "form" to the body's "matter."[6] Like all forms, it could only exist united with matter. Hence, with the decomposition of the body, the particular soul that was attached to it ceases to exist. For Aristotle, the actualized intellect alone – that is to say, the thought of that which exists, as abstracted from the images found in the soul – is immortal.[7] The rational soul possesses only the potential for such thought, and hence it too cannot survive at death. Later, in the thought of Alfarabi, immortality is considered to be attained only by the perfect human intellect – namely, the acquired intellect –which grasps immaterial existence.[8]

Instead of Plato's approach in which each part of the soul is given its due – that is, it is directed by the rational part to act in the most appropriate manner at the appropriate time and in the most appropriate circumstances – Aristotle's approach is based on training

3 For a discussion of asceticism in Philo's philosophy, see, for example, R.D. Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), 33-39.

4 For a discussion of Asceticism in Plotinus, see, for example, Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, translated by Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993).

5 For a discussion of Aristotle's theory of the soul, see, for example, Christopher Shields, "Aristotle's Psychology," in an article in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/. Shields brings an extensive bibliography at the end of his article.

6 *De Anima* 2.1, 412a.

7 *De Anima* 3.5, 430a.

8 For a discussion of Alfarabi's approach to the intellect and its immortality, see Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992), 44-73.

oneself in the doctrine of the mean. One is to avoid extreme traits and develop moderate ones. This is the personality that characterizes the model citizen in the ideal state. Yet, as we have seen, Plato viewed physical desires in general as dimming the light of the immortal rational soul, which is shackled by the body in its quest for purification and wisdom. This view encouraged adopting a more ascetic approach, one that greatly minimizes the activity of the emotive and appetitive parts. The Aristotelian view too suggests that the perfection of the intellect is the overarching goal of one's behavior. This entails judging all activities ultimately from the standpoint of their contribution to this goal, even if this point is not stated explicitly in Aristotle's writings.[9] According to this view, any overindulgence in physical pleasures or other passions involving the body is seen as bad because, among other things, it impedes the attainment of the truths of speculative philosophy. Nevertheless, the Aristotelian approach is hardly characterized by the negative attitude to the body marking the Platonic one. After all, even the rational soul in the Aristotelian view has no existence independent of the body. One of the faculties of the human soul is thought, but only the actualized thought of that which exists has a distinct identity. Moreover, the striving for knowledge exists in a social context, and requires a healthy and well-cared-for body. The Aristotelian approach thus leads to an ambivalent view of asceticism, and certainly does not countenance its more radical forms.

B

The strict dualism characterizing both Plato's and Aristotle's approaches to the soul have almost no parallel in the Bible. The one crucial exception is the famous verse in Ecclesiastes, one of the later biblical books: *And the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God Who gave it* (12:7). The case in rabbinic thought is more complex. Ephraim Urbach maintained that one can detect a growing influence of Greek, particularly Platonic, philosophy on rabbinic thought in the treatment of the relation between soul and body. One has only to think of the famous passage in B.T. Shabbat 152b which

9 Aristotle concludes the *Nicomachean Ethics* with a discussion in book ten of the perfection of the intellect as the human being's ultimate perfection, which clearly suggests this point.

expounds the verse in Ecclesiastes by likening the soul to precious garments that the wise carefully preserve and return them to their Maker unsullied, while the foolish soil them by wearing them to work. Nevertheless, one does not find the same sharp dichotomy between body and soul in rabbinic thought as one finds in Greek philosophy.[10] Urbach further argued, when it came to *praxis*, particularly ascetic practices, this dualistic conception appears to have exerted no impact at all on rabbinic thought. Rather, the impetus for ascetic practices in the rabbinic period was due to the fear of sin or a desire for atonement, according to the view that suffering atones for one's sins. The failed Bar-Kokhva rebellion also brought in its wake a tendency towards asceticism on the part of some of the rabbinic elite. Even in this case, the predominant rabbinic view was against ascetic practices.[11] In general, neither biblical nor rabbinic Judaism advocated asceticism as a way of life to purify the soul, in Urbach's view. Rather, they advocated strict adherence to the Torah. This law may have placed some limitations on the pleasures of the body but was far from ascetic in character. Urbach may have understated the case of Greek philosophic influence in this area. Nonetheless, the overall impression one gains from rabbinic Judaism is that he is essentially correct in his analysis. This is certainly true of the impression gained by the medieval Jewish thinkers in their consideration of the traditional sources, as we shall see below.

C

If in the rabbinic period Greek philosophic approaches to the soul, particularly the Platonic, can be discerned in Judaism, but still leave little if any impress in the realm of *praxis*, the situation changes radically in the medieval world.[12] The Platonic notion of the soul, its tripartite division, and its essential immortality, already heavily influenced Saadiah, who hardly is a Platonic thinker but whose thought reveals clear Platonic, Neoplatonic and Stoic influences. One has only to examine the tenth and final section of his treatise, *The Book*

10 For Urbach's discussion of this issue, see *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Israel Abrahams, trans. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1975), vol 1, pp. 214-254.

11 See *The Sages*, 447-448, 587.

12 The most comprehensive study of theories of the soul in early medieval Jewish philosophy remains that of Saul Horovitz, *Die Psychologie bei den jüdischen Religionsphilosophen des Mittelalters von Saadia bis Maimuni*, Breslau 1898.

of Beliefs and Opinions, to discern this influence.[13] In this section, Saadiah accepts the tripartite division of the soul, which previously in his treatise he had already treated as immortal.[14] He also adopts a positive attitude towards asceticism.[15] While his basic argument in this section is based on the Platonic view of achieving the proper balance and harmony between all the parts of the soul and their predilections or aspirations, a view that Saadiah justifies theologically by arguing that all these predilections were created by God, he still heavily favors some predilections over others - particularly those of asceticism, knowledge and worship. Consider what he has to say in regard to asceticism. After bringing many of the arguments of the proponents of asceticism, most of them focusing on the evils and transient nature of earthly existence, Saadiah concludes: "Now I considered carefully their allegations and found them to be for the most part correct."[16] Ultimately, he rejects this extreme course of action because it would mean the end of civilization and of human life if all were to practice it. It also would lead their adherents to hate the rest of humanity. He thus concludes that this trait is commendable when practiced to uphold the restraints imposed by the divine law. Yet in discussing other traits, such the inclinations to eating, drinking and sexual intercourse, Saadiah does not limit these practices only in

13 For an analysis of this section see Israel Efros, "Saadia's General Ethical Theory and Its Relation to Sufism," in *The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review*, ed. Abraham A. Neuman and Solomon Zeitlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Quarterly Review, 1967), 166-177. Saadiah discusses the reasons for the commandments in book 3 of his treatise, but without any reference there to the nature of the soul and its traits.

14 Saadiah does not regard the soul as incorporeal; only God is incorporeal in his view. Rather it is made of the purest substance, similar but even superior to that of the spheres. The soul is created simultaneously with the completion of the body. See *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 6.3. For a study of the various theories of the soul which Saadiah lists and discusses in book 6 of his treatise, see Herbert Davidson, "Saadia's List of Theories of the Soul," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1967), 75-94.

15 For a survey of different attitudes towards asceticism in medieval Jewish philosophy, particularly in the later period, see Dov Schwartz, "The Tension been Moderate Ethics and Ascetic Ethics in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in *Between Religion and Ethics*, ed. Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), 185-208 (Hebrew).

16 Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 10.4, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press 1948), 366.

respect to upholding the divine law's prohibitions in these areas. Rather, he indicates that these inclinations should be satisfied only to the extent required for one's subsistence and to produce offspring. He thereby alludes to his positive evaluation of a more ascetic lifestyle, going beyond that which the divine law demands. This is also true of his subsequent discussion of divine service. His description of those who devote themselves entirely to this activity focuses on their extremely ascetic lifestyle. While in this case too, Saadiah ultimately rejects engaging in divine service exclusively to the complete abandonment of the cultivation of the world, he nonetheless adopts a laudatory stance toward this way of life.

It is important to stress that already with Saadiah we begin to see what will become the dominant tendency in medieval Jewish thought regarding the purpose of the commandments. In one passage in his treatise Saadiah describes their ultimate purpose as purifying the soul,[17] as suggested by the previously mentioned rabbinic parable. This view lends itself to a naturalistic understanding of the purpose of the commandments. They are not simply actions commanded by God, albeit rational ones, with God maintaining a kind of check list to determine the extent to which Jews observed them or not, and then weighing their deeds on the scales of justice and bestowing the appropriate reward or punishment. This seems to be the dominant rabbinic view, as well as Saadiah's own view in most of his discussions. Rather, there is an integral connection between the actions commanded by God and their effects on the soul, which ultimately determines the final fate of the soul. This view easily leads to the conclusion that perhaps an even more rigorous regimen than that commanded by the divine law is required in the effort to purify the soul. In a crucial sense, Saadiah sets the stage for what will be the primary reason for the medieval Jewish thinker's ambiguous attitude toward ascetism. At one end lies their philosophic conception of the soul and its perfection, with the negative effect of the body and the desires it evinces in the soul serving as a stumbling block to achieving its innate perfection. At the other end lies their commitment to the divine law whose fulfilment involves marrying, having a family, feasting on holidays and being involved in the affairs of the world - activities which mitigate against an ascetic lifestyle.

17 *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 4.5.

If Saadiah leans towards advocating asceticism, Baḥya Ibn Paquda in his *Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* comes close to embracing asceticism almost completely in order to attain purity of the soul. Parts of his discussion of asceticism in the ninth section of his treatise read like a dialogue with Saadiah, addressing in part Saadiah's objections to the most extreme form of asceticism. In Baḥya's description of three levels of asceticism, he describes the highest level as consisting of those who isolate themselves completely from society, eating only what they find such as grass and leaves.[18] Like Saadiah, however, Baḥya cannot explicitly advocate this form of asceticism for it strays too far from the moderation prescribed by the Torah, which does not favor desisting from the cultivation of the world. In introducing his description of these ascetics, though, he indicates that they follow the highest form of asceticism in order to resemble the spiritual beings by abstaining from all which separates them from God. In the context of Baḥya's philosophy, there is no state more exalted than that of resembling the spiritual beings. Even the more moderate form of asceticism explicitly advocated by Baḥya, the third form, is fairly extreme. These are the ascetics who *internally* separate themselves from the world though they continue to live in society. They regard themselves as strangers in this world, detest it, and take from it even less than their sustenance. All the while they prepare for the next world and anticipate death. Physically, however, they continue to cultivate the world. This form of asceticism is regarded Baḥya as being closest to the way of the mean associated with the divine law, for it stops short of a complete physical abandonment of the world.[19] Baḥya's view that a more extreme regimen than that commanded by the divine law is required finds expression also in the preceding chapter, in which he counsels the followers of the divine law to abstain from every pleasure and bodily comfort except for what is necessary by nature, and the elimination of all else from the soul. In his view, then, the regimen the commandments impose thus is not really adequate for the spiritual

18 *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* 9.3, trans. Menahem Mansoor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 408. For a discussion of asceticism in Bahya's thought see Howard Kreisel, "Asceticism in the Thought of R. Baḥya Ibn Paquda and Maimonides," *Daat* 21 (1988): vii-xiii. See also Naḥem Ilan, "Al-I'tidal Al-Sharī'i: Another Examination of the Perception of Asceticism in the *Duties of the Heart* of Baḥya," *REJ* 164 (2005): 449-461.

19 *Duties of the Heart* 9.3, p. 409.

striving of the elite. The elite are best served by treating all pleasures permitted by the Torah as forbidden to them, even when practiced in moderation.[20]

At first blush, Halevi represents an opposing tendency to these thinkers in his condemning asceticism as running counter to demands of the divine law, and in emphasizing the role of the commandments in attaining the ideal state of the soul. He opens one of his discussions of the reasons for the commandments with a question posed by the Khazar king: why there are not more ascetics among the Jews?[21] This question offers Halevi a good way of presenting the gist of his approach. The sage is made to reply to the king:

> It is painful for me [to see] that you forgot the principles that I imparted to you and to which you agreed. Did we not agree that one cannot draw near to God except by way of the actions that God commanded? Do you think that drawing near is only by submission and humility and similar acts?[22]

Halevi goes on to explain:

> The divine law does not command asceticism, but equibalance and allotting to each faculty of the faculties of the soul and body its just portion without augmentation. For augmentation in reference to one faculty is deprivation in regard to another. One who inclines to the appetitive faculty deprives the rational faculty, and the opposite. One who inclines to the faculty of domination deprives other faculties. For this reason prolonged fasting is not service [of God] for one whose appetites are weak and whose body is feeble and frail; in this case [physical] pleasures serve as a counterbalance and safeguard. The minimization of wealth is not in the service [of God] if it comes legitimately and easily, and its acquisition does not distract from learning and [religious] practice. This is especially true of one who is head of a household with children and hopes to disburse it on what is pleasing to the will of God. On the contrary, it would

20 See also *Duties of the Heart* 3.4, p. 191.

21 *Kuzari* 2.45.

22 *Kuzari* 2.46. I have used the translation of Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 111 (with emendations).

> be preferable to augment it. In general, our Law is divided between awe, love and joy. Approach your God with each of these. Your submission on fast days does not bring you closer to God than your joy on Sabbaths and festivals, when your joy stems from thought and intent [...].[23]

In other words, God legislates the Torah in accordance with the Platonic ideal of giving each part of the soul its due, and creating a perfect harmony between the various parts in the soul's striving for conjunction with the divine world.

Yet Halevi's approach is hardly one dimensional. At times he appears to see in asceticism an even better path for one who belongs to the spiritual elite:

> [...] Verily, he would like to reach the rank of Enoch [...] or the rank of Elijah in order that he be free to isolate himself in the company of the angels. He will not feel desolate in his withdrawal and loneliness. Rather, it would be pleasant for him. He would feel desolate in a crowd due to his being deprived of gazing upon the kingdom of heaven, which absolves him from need to eat and drink. For those like him, complete isolation is proper. They even desire to die since they already attained the final end, after which there is no additional level to pursue. The philosophers too like to isolate themselves to purify their thoughts, so that they attain true conclusions from their logical reasoning [...] This is the level of Socrates.[24]

Halevi treats this state as the optimal one, though with the crucial caveat that it is appropriate only for a very select group of individuals. In the passage quoted above we also hear an echo of the Platonic idea that philosophy is a preparation for death. Halevi goes on to argue, however, that in his own period, which is characterized by a lack of wisdom and without the proper conditions to attain prophetic perfection, this behavior is exceptionally detrimental to the individual. Rather than free him from the concerns of the material world, the practice of social isolation and abstinence on the part of the imperfect individual leads him to concentrate more on worldly

23 *Kuzari* 2.50, p. 113.

24 *Kuzari* 3.1, pp. 135-136.

matters and his physical desires rather than less. For the prophetic or intellectual-spiritual elite, however, asceticism is the most appropriate form of behavior in the proper circumstances, a view reminiscent of that of Baḥya Ibn Paquda.

We can see that all of these thinkers keenly felt the tension between the way of the Torah and the way of asceticism. Yet in regarding the purification of the soul as the goal of life, they felt that the elite should not be satisfied with restricting themselves to the demands of the divine law. For them, a more stringent ascetic life style better serves their quest for spiritual perfection.

D

All these early medieval Jewish thinkers appear to share in common the Platonic/Neoplatonic view that the rational soul is by nature an immortal entity. As noted previously, the Aristotelian tradition saw only the intellect as immortal, and in the view of Alfarabi, at least in his earlier writings, only the perfect human intellect (his later view being that human immortality is impossible for everyone). Alfarabi's earlier view appears to match Maimonides' position.[25] The striving for intellectual perfection requires that ultimately all of one's activities have to be gauged from the standpoint of their contribution to this goal, which Maimonides equates with the true love of God. Maimonides makes this point explicit, that is, intellectual perfection resulting in love of God is the final purpose of all one's activities, in *Eight Chapters*, chap. 5, and in the "Laws of Character Traits" 3.2.

25 See Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press 1999), 141-146. For Alfarabi's approach to the intellect, soul and human immortality, see Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect* (above, note 8). It is not my purpose in this context to discuss the issue of the intellect and its immortality in Maimonides' thought, and the various scholarly approaches to this issue, including the one advanced by Shlomo Pines. Pines argued that Maimonides adopted Alfarabi's later position as found in his (mostly lost) *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, which denies the possibility of human immortality altogether. In my book I argue against this position. I also argue against Davidson and Alexander Altmann, who interpret Maimonides along Avicennian lines, which essentially accords immortality to the intellect that attains any intelligible. This position approaches the one later advanced by Gersonides.

The question for Maimonides remains whether ascetic practices contribute to intellectual perfection or serve as an obstacle to attaining it. His answer appears to be that it depends on the individual and the circumstances. If we understand this to be Maimonides' fundamental answer to the problem, we can better understand what appear to be glaring contradictions in his approach.[26]

Maimonides is perhaps best known in the field of ethics for introducing the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean as the view of normative Judaism. A careful reading of both *Eight Chapters* and "Laws of Character Traits," however, reveals that his view of the "mean" is not exactly what most of us would regard as the midpoint between exaggerating in the satisfaction of our physical desires and denying them. Rather the midpoint is more in the direction of asceticism. One is to satisfy these desires, in Maimonides' view, *only* to the extent of maintaining the health of the body, but no further. To be sure, both in *Eight Chapters*, chap. 4, and in "Laws of Character Traits" 3.1, he castigates the Nazirite for depriving himself of physical enjoyment that the Torah allows, and treats this as the official rabbinic view.[27] Such deprivations, he argues, are appropriate only for those who suffer a sickness of the soul in overindulging the satisfaction of one's physical desires. In other passages of the *Mishnah Torah*, however, he adopts a more unmitigatedly positive view of vows of abstinence and of the Nazirite.[28] What he appears to be arguing in this apparently contradictory stance is that the circumstances of the individual and the motivations behind asceticism are what determine whether it should be enjoined or encouraged. For most of society, asceticism hardly advances them to human perfection, since they are not by nature prepared to attain such perfection anyway. Rather it results in their being more afflicted by sicknesses of the soul, insofar as it leads

26 I have dealt with this issue in *Maimonides' Political Thought,* 175-182, and my discussion here is based on my analysis there. Numerous studies have been devoted to Maimonides' ethical approach and the doctrine of the mean. Many of them I mention in my book. For subsequent studies see in particular David Shatz, "Maimonides' Moral Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), 167-192; and Aviram Ravitzky, "The Doctrine of the Mean and Asceticism: On the Uniformity of Maimonides' Ethics," (Hebrew) *Tarbiz* 79 (2010-11): 439-469.

27 See the two opposing rabbinic opinions on this issue in B.T. Ta`anit 11a; B.T. Nedarim 10a.

28 See M.T. "Laws of Vows" 10.4; M.T. "Laws of Nezirut" 10.14.

to their thinking more, rather than less, of the physical pleasures of which they are depriving themselves - a point already made by Halevi.[29] Moreover, those from the Jewish masses – that is to say, those who do not belong to the intellectual elite – who practice asceticism, normally do so in order to ape the practices of those who are considered to be holy in Christianity and Islam. Maimonides makes this point fairly explicit in *Eight Chapters*, chap. 4. For such individuals, whom Maimonides sees as being the majority of those Jews practicing asceticism, these practices are clearly detrimental both to themselves and to their society. Hence, we can understand his polemic against them. At the same time, Maimonides hints that, for the intellectual elite, asceticism may be the better course in certain circumstances, that is, when these practices enable the individual to better contemplate the eternal truths. Hence in the "Laws of Matrimony" 15.3, Maimonides clearly approves of Ben Azzai who did not marry and contribute to the cultivation of the world, since, in his words, his soul was in complete love with the Torah.[30] Maimonides implicitly understands this to mean that Ben Azzai refrained from raising a family since it would interfere with his studies of the eternal truths. In other sections of the code, Maimonides appears to approve of the abstinence from physical desires of such individuals in general.[31] In the *Guide* Maimonides reinforces this approach. On one hand, he points out the difficulty in contemplating if one is physically sick or suffers physical deprivations, given the tie of the rational soul to the body.[32] On the other hand, he extolls abstinence for the right motive, namely to subdue one's enslavement to the pleasures of the body which interfere with intellection.[33] Even physical isolation is advocated by Maimonides, albeit within the confines of living in society.[34] This enables the elite individual to satisfy basic material needs while still avoiding contact as much as possible with others -

29 *Kuzari* 3.1.

30 See B.T. Yevamot 63b.

31 See, for example, M.T. "Laws of Study of the Torah" 3.12.

32 *Guide* 3.27.

33 *Guide* 3.33; 3.48.

34 *Guide* 3.51. Maimonides may well have been influenced by Baḥya in this view; see above. Maimonides' view of the ultimate state, not unlike the view of Baḥya, is that one engages in all one's physical activities without thinking about them at all. The intellect remains continuously focused on the contemplation of the intelligibles.

contacts which serve as an obstacle to the pursuit of perfection. In short, Maimonides essentially counsels the intellectual elite to judge all their activities by their contribution to the perfection of the intellect.

E

With this in mind, we can turn to the late 13th century Provençal Jewish thinker Levi ben Avraham and his encyclopedia, *Livyat Ḥen*.[35] The longer recension of this treatise was completed by Levi in 1295. The encyclopedia consists of two parts, the first devoted to the sciences and the second to Judaism. Most of the first part has not survived, including, unfortunately, the part on the human soul and intellect. The various sections of the part on Judaism have all survived, either in their earlier shorter recension or later longer one, or both.[36] Despite the loss of the section on the soul, one can still attain a fairly accurate view of Levi's approach to the soul from his encyclopedic poem, *Batei ha-Nephesh ve-ha-Leḥashim*.[37] Levi appears to remain faithful to Maimonides and the Aristotelian tradition in seeing only the intellect as surviving the death of the individual. This is reinforced by his treatment of the World to Come, as well as his treatment of *gehinnom*, in the section of *Livyat Ḥen* that he devotes to

35 For a description of this thinker and his encyclopedia, see Howard Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence* (Boston: Academic Studies Press 2015), 116-160.

36 The entire Jewish section of the encyclopedia has been published in four volumes. See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah* (Hebrew), ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press 2007); *Livyat Ḥen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah* (Hebrew), ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press 2014); *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of Creation* (Hebrew), ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies 2004); *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of the Chariot* (Hebrew), ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies 2013).

37 The part of the poem dealing with the intellect was published by Dov Schwartz, "The Commentary of R. Solomon ben Menaḥem to 'Batei ha-Nefesh ve-ha-Leḥashim' on the Subject of the Intellect" (Hebrew), *Kobez al Yad* 13[23] (1996): 299-330.

Jewish beliefs.[38] Parenthetically, Levi ascribes to at least some of the rabbinic sages a view of the soul that is essentially Platonic in nature, namely that the soul is a substantive entity in its own right, though he himself appears to reject this view.[39]

In the lengthy part of the encyclopedia devoted to Judaism, Levi deals with asceticism primarily in the context of his discussion of the reasons for the commandments, specifically in the chapter devoted to the laws of incest, circumcision and vows.[40] In all of his discussions Levi cites profusely from biblical and rabbinic literature. Many of discussions read like running commentaries on these sources. Insofar as his sources are full of contradictory statements on the subject of abstinence in the area of physical desires, Levi's goal in his discussion is to reconcile between them.

Levi begins his discussion by pointing out the benefit of vows of abstinence, for they accustom the person to abandon what is not absolutely necessary for the individual's existence. Certainly, one whose inclination is to indulge one's physical desires must practice abstinence to overcome it. As opposed to Maimonides' discussion in *Eight Chapters*, but similar to Maimonides' discussion in the *Guide*, Levi cites the biblical and rabbinic characterization of the Nazirite as "holy," insofar as he abstains from wine and intoxicating beverages which cause great harm to the individual.[41] Yet Levi does not ignore the opposite rabbinic view, namely that the Nazirite is labeled a "sinner" due to his abstinence from what is permitted by the Torah, the view brought by Maimonides in chapter four of *Eight Chapters*.

38 See *Livyat Ḥen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, chap. 20, pp. 161-163. Levi interprets *gehinnom* not as the opposite of the Garden of Eden but as its deprivation, in that it represents "the annihilation and deprivation of existence" (p. 161).

39 He writes there: "Some understood *gehinnom* as the elemental fire that surrounds the sphere of the moon. It prevents the soul from ascending, and it rotates it in a constant motion. For they understood that the soul was made of a fine material substance like the substance of the heavens" (p. 162). See also chap. 19, p. 160. This view of the punishment of the ignorant and non-righteous souls is reminiscent of that of Joseph Ibn Ẓaddiq in *Sefer ʻOlam Qatan*, S. Horovitz, ed. (Breslau: Druck von Th. Schatzky, 1903), 79. The notion that the matter of the soul is similar to that of the heavens is similar to the approach of Saadiah mentioned above.

40 *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, chap. 16, pp. 422-429.

41 *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 423-425.

Levi's explanation of these contrary views revolves around the generally accepted scientific idea that one's inclinations and character traits depend in large part upon one's physical disposition or temperament. Levi writes: "One who is of good temperament and not craving to satisfy one's appetites - if he refrains from meat and abstains from wine is called a 'sinner'."[42] In this view, one whose temperament is not evenly balanced, thereby leading him to excessive physical cravings, must overcome this imbalance by abstinence. Those whose temperament does not lead them to indulgence have no need for this regimen. It is the latter individual who, in becoming a Nazirite, is labeled by the sages a "sinner," by depriving himself of what is permitted and would not cause him any harm.[43]

One may justifiably conclude that this mirrors exactly Maimonides' position in *Eight Chapters*. Nonetheless, what Levi adds to the discussion is to make more explicit the physical basis for character traits and the interaction not only between actions and character traits but also between character traits and one's physical disposition, a view that Maimonides himself brings in the final chapter of *Eight Chapters* as well as in the *Guide* 3.12.[44] More important, Maimonides brings his contrary views regarding abstinence in different sources, and leaves it to his readers to reconcile his positions. Levi is precisely one of these readers. While he does not cite Maimonides explicitly in the course of his discussion of vows, though it is clear that much of his discussion is based on Maimonides, he concludes his discussion with the following statement: "What brought me to make a division and introduce conditions in regard to vows was in order that the words of the Master [i.e., Maimonides] not contradict each other."[45]

42 *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 424.

43 Levi also brings the view here that the mother's behavior at the time of her pregnancy affects the fetus's physical disposition. In this manner he explains the command to Samson's mother that she abstain from wine and why Samson was required to be a Nazarite all his life in order to preserve his strength.

44 See also the fourth reason that impedes the learning of the divine science that he brings in *Guide* 1.34. In his legal works, however, his tendency is to devalue the influence of one's physical makeup on one's character traits due to pernicious effects of this idea on the pursuit of moral virtue. This is also clear from his discussion in *Eight Chapters*, chapter 8.

45 *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, chap. 16, p. 429.

Levi also attempts to reconcile the sages' contradictory statements regarding voluntary fasts. R. Elazar labeled the person who voluntarily fasts a "sinner" while Resh Lakish labels this person a "ḥasid."[46] Levi's solution is to argue that R. Elazar deals with scholars, in whose case fasting would be harmful to their studies. Resh Lakish, on the other hand, is dealing with the non-scholar. In this case fasting would have a positive result in inducing submission to God. Again, we see that what determines whether abstinence is good or bad depends entirely on the motive behind it and the circumstances of the individual. The scholar, in Levi's interpretation of R. Elazar's view, should avoid extreme asceticism, rather than embrace it, in order to attain ultimate perfection.

The topic of asceticism is also dealt with by Levi in the context of his biblical exegesis. Levi devotes a section of his encyclopedia to the Work of Creation. As in the case of Maimonides, Levi sees the story of the Garden Eden as being primarily, if not exclusively, a philosophical allegory. Adam represents the theoretical intellect; Eve, the other parts of the soul that are attached to the body. The meaning of the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge means not to engage in satisfying physical needs more than necessary. Levi points out that only eating from the tree was forbidden, not touching of the tree. This means that satisfying one's physical needs that are required to maintain one's health and to continue the species is permitted. Eating, however, signifies engaging in the gratification of the body and enjoying what is superfluous.[47] Hence both the motives and the measure of one's actions determine whether the act is to be regarded as forbidden or not.[48] In this context Levi warns against tormenting one's body, for by weakening it one also weakens the intellect.

The three children of Adam also have allegorical significance, as Maimonides already hinted in the *Guide*.[49] Levi expands upon this suggestion. One of the interpretations he brings is that Cain is the rational power engaged in the crafts and whose task is to satisfy a person's material needs. Abel is the deliberative power whose task is

46 *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy* , 425; see B.T. Ta'anit 11a-b.

47 *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of Creation*, chap. 4, p. 105.

48 Unfortunately, Levi does not expound upon Eve's treatment of the prohibition, in her words to the serpent, as including touching (Genesis 3:3), and the implications of her addition. See *Genesis Rabbah* 19.3.

49 See *Guide* 2.30.

proper governance, while Seth is the speculative power whose task is to discover the eternal truths. He is the one who represents the *telos* of human beings.[50] Levi stresses that all these powers are necessary and should be developed in the order that the Bible presents them. In this philosophical allegory, Cain killing Abel signifies the unbridled pursuit of material goods and satisfying physical desires without succumbing to proper governance. Levi sums up this idea in a good Platonic manner by saying: "What is intended by God for the human species is that each one of these three will be exist in a fit manner."[51] Levi continues by indicating the necessity of restoring the proper balance if one of them exceeds its boundaries, particularly the faculty associated with Cain. In this vein Levi cites and explains the biblical stories involving the children of Cain, as well as numerous rabbinic midrashim on these passages.

I labeled Levi's attitude towards asceticism, as well as that of his predecessors, as an ambiguous one, but it would be better to label it a discriminating one, as is the case also with Maimonides. Ascetic practices that are more rigorous than those imposed by the Torah are necessary for everyone, but in accordance with one's individual circumstances. Ultimately in this model, what determines their practice is the extent to which they contribute to perfection, whether ethical perfection or more important, intellectual perfection, the true perfection of the human being.[52]

F

In conclusion, two major considerations framed medieval Jewish philosophic approaches to asceticism. The first one was a legal consideration mitigating against extreme forms of asceticism – the commandments of the Law of Moses. In order to fulfill many of the commandments, one could not adopt an extreme ascetic regimen. The obligation to procreate, to feast on the Sabbath and holidays, etc., all militated against such a lifestyle and created a balance between the various inclinations of the soul. The second was a philosophic consideration. The goal of life involved freeing the rational soul from

50 *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of Creation*, chap. 6, pp. 152-169.

51 *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of Creation*, 160.

52 How representative Levi's approach is of that of other Maimonidean philosophers in the Middle Ages is a question that deserves a separate study.

the body and its temptations in its quest for purity and conjunction with the spiritual world. This certainly encouraged a far more ascetic lifestyle in the case of the spiritual elite than the limited restraints upon one's physical appetites imposed by the Torah. Among the earlier medieval Jewish philosophers, whose approach to the soul was basically shaped, albeit indirectly, by Platonic thought with its negative view of the body, the appreciation of more extreme forms of asceticism can be clearly detected.

Maimonides is more influenced by Aristotelian thought, with its stress on the perfection of the speculative intellect. The implication of this view is that all activities are ultimately to be judged by their contribution to attaining knowledge leading to the intellectual love of God. Hence, even the intellectual elite are to engage in ascetic practices only to the point where they further this end. For example, one should not engage in voluntary fasting if it weakens the intellect, only when it helps to focus the intellect on the attainment of the intelligibles. Maimonides' apparently conflicting positions regarding asceticism essentially signal this point. On the one hand, God, as Maimonides notes in *Eight Chapters*, chapter 4, does not hate the body. On the other hand, "all of man's acts of disobedience and sins are consequent upon his matter," Maimonides maintains in *Guide* 3.8.[53] Hence, when the body, or more accurately, the appetites of the soul associated with it, serve more as a stumbling block to the intellect than an aid, which they often do, it is clear that suitable steps must be taken to remedy this situation. In general, Maimonides advocates satisfying the demands of the body, but no more than is necessary for its health. Even the Aristotelian "middle way" favored by the Torah, in Maimonides' view, is seen as leaning more in the direction of asceticism. The question for him is in what circumstances should one move even further in that direction, even at the expense of not fulfilling some of the Torah's commandments, as in the case of Ben Azzai who did not marry and procreate so as not to interrupt his studies.

Levi ben Abraham follows in the footsteps of Maimonides and interprets him along these very lines. While he does not add any important new insights to the subject, the significance of his discussion lies in the wealth of material he brings from biblical and

53 *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1963), 431.

rabbinic literature in an attempt to show that there is really no conflict in any of the authoritative Jewish sources on this issue. Each of what appears to be a contradictory rabbinic opinion is really dealing with different individuals, indicating the regimen required in each of their cases. In general, Levi's encyclopedia comes to complete the Maimonidean project of understanding much of Judaism as being in harmony with Aristotelian philosophy. Levi's interpretation of Jewish sources on the subject of human perfection and the role asceticism plays in the attainment of this perfection nicely illustrates this point.