

## Abstract

This thesis deals with the intellectual heritage of Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague and with his affiliation to the Kabbalah. The Kabbalah sprang up amongst Jewish scholars of 12<sup>th</sup> century Spain and reached its apex in the composition of the Zohar. This study shows the ways the Maharal used the Zohar and to what end. First chapter deals with the life and writings of the Maharal. The second summarises previous attempts to describe the Maharal's affinity for Jewish mysticism. The third chapter describes how the Zohar was written. It includes a textological comparison, which aims to find which edition or group of manuscripts of the Zohar the Maharal used. It also makes note of the special form of zoharic Aramaic that is present in the Maharal's writings. The fourth chapter raises the question of halakhic authority of the Zohar in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Three main chapters of this thesis provide analysis and commentary of chosen zoharic texts (Zohar III,152a, Zohar III,40a, Zohar I,18a a Zohar I,33b) quoted by the Maharal in his writings and with their theological reflection.

Zohar III,152a speaks about different layers of meaning implied in the text of the Torah. This chapter deals with the basic development of Jewish hermeneutics and attempts to find Maharal's place in it. His approach is a clearly defined one: in *Tiferet Jisrael* he opposes modern tendencies to lower the importance of literal meaning of Torah. By this position, he aligns himself with the hermeneutical method presented in the main corpus of the Zohar and opposes the later zoharic amendments *Tikunej Zohar* and *Raaja Mehemna*.

Zohar III,40a describes the emanation flow through *sefirot* with a special emphasis on the allegory of a wine that is according to the Talmud (Ber. 34b) preserved in the grape from six days of creation to be served to *tzaddikim* in the world to come. The Maharal uses this concept in his *Sermon on Mitzvot* and elaborates on it in his other writings. He goes against the consumption of libation wine that pervaded Moravia in his time. The Maharal strongly opposed to Moses Isserles who allowed Moravian Jews to continue in their wine drinking practice. This chapter sums up the historical development of this ban and describes the conflict that arose between the Maharal and Isserles. The Maharal elaborates on traditional arguments that forbid drinking non-Kosher wine – prevention of idolatry and prevention of interfaith marriages – and adds his own unique explanation: the Jewish nation is unique and chosen by God. Through the use of *gematria* Maharal he connects the idea of the uniqueness of the Jewish nation to wine which stands as an allegory for God's emanation. By using wine that is not fit for Jewish consumption, Jews destroy the flow of emanation and impeach the choice made by God.

Two texts Zohar I,18a and Zohar I,33b describe the second day of creation and the split of waters that occurred on that day. In the zoharic imagination, the flow of waters is compared to procreational potencies of a man. The Maharal uses this allegory and elaborates on it in *Netivot Olam*, *Be'er ha-Golah* and *Hiddushei Agadot*. In *Netivot Olam* we find one whole chapter devoted to the question of male autoeroticism. Maharal emphasizes the connection of sperm to the flow of emanation. If the sperm is not used in a proper manner and a male masturbates, this act has direct effect on higher spheres and corrupts the flow of emanation. *Sitra Achra* the demonic Other Side then easily conquers this corrupted flow.

The final chapter presents the reader with one concept that appeared as a common ground to all studied texts. The Maharal emphasizes the need to fulfill all Torah commandments. In those situations where a new emerging argumentation appears to slacken some commandment, the Maharal reaches for metaphysical concepts of the Zohar and 'builds a fence around the Torah'. For in Maharal's view, the fulfilling of the mitzvot has immediate impact on life in God's region and brings God and man closer to each other.