With the recent appearance of my edition of an early fourteenth-century Provençal rationalist commentary on the Torah written by R. Nissim of Marseilles,¹ I am left wondering whether this work can, or even should, hold more than “historical” interest to contemporary Jews. Of course this is part of a much more fundamental problem—that is, what relevance does the study of history have in matters pertaining to Orthodox belief or practice. Still, we are not dealing here with the thought of Maimonides or Nahmanides, whose views on matters of belief are still thought to carry weight in contemporary religious debates. R. Nissim was hardly a towering rabbinic figure, even in his own period. He left us only his exceptional treatise, Ma’aseh Nissim, whose views are in large measure molded by the picture of the world provided by medieval science and Aristotelian philosophy. Seen through modern eyes, one would be tempted to label him “Orthoprax”—that is, one who accepts all the commandments of the Torah as legally binding but does not believe in all the dogmas of Judaism in a literal manner. R. Nissim would doubtless have

HAIM KREISEL chairs the Goldstein-Goren Department of Jewish Thought, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. He is the author of Maimonides’ Political Thought and of numerous articles in medieval Jewish philosophy. His book Prophecy: The History of An Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy has just been released by Kluwer Academic Publishers.

HAIM KREISEL

The Torah Commentary of R. Nissim ben Mosheh of Marseilles: On a Medieval Approach to Torah u-Madda
rejected such an appellation, arguing that he understands and accepts the fundamental beliefs of Judaism in accordance with the “truth.” He would further maintain that he is no less “Orthodox” than those who accept these beliefs in accordance with a literal interpretation, as befitting their intellectual capacity. The Torah, in his view, speaks differently to each class of reader; only upon the elite reader does it shine its deeper truths. It must make compromises in light of the limited understanding of the average reader. The accounts it presents are not all literally true but nevertheless necessary in order to be effective in impressing upon the average reader the most basic truths. At the same time, it hints to the philosophic-scientific truths underlying its accounts about God, Divine activity, and God’s relationship with humanity. R. Nissim, in short, is a loyal disciple of Maimonides in this matter, though he goes much further than his master in revealing the degree to which he understands the Torah to conform to the Aristotelian picture of the world.

There are a good number of scholars who have interpreted the philosophic thought of Maimonides as essentially Aristotelian, despite the fact that he, more than anyone else, defined the doxa of Orthodoxy. It is easy to see the profound implications of this interpretation of Maimonides and why it has raised much antagonistic response, well beyond the boundaries of a purely “scholarly” debate. He is after all, one of the most important halakhic authorities of all time; hence, his ideological views cannot be dismissed by a wave of the hand. Yet when such a minor figure as R. Nissim expresses views that many Orthodox Jews today (and in his own time) would consider “heresy,” and, moreover, grounds many of them in philosophic and scientific views that long ago have been discredited, it is easy to dismiss their significance. Nevertheless, the study of even such relatively minor figures in history may provide another important perspective for viewing contemporary debates about doxa, and the problem of deciding what is “legitimate” Torah interpretation. With this in mind, I would like to express some thoughts on the import of R. Nissim’s commentary. I will start by laying down my view of the dilemma faced by many traditional Jews today, and then turn to R. Nissim’s “medieval” approach. Finally, I will discuss the problem of drawing the elusive line that separates the “permissible” interpretation from the “heretical.” The controversy over the philosophic-allegorical interpretation of the Torah in the period immediately preceding the writing of R. Nissim’s commentary, and where R. Nissim, as well as others in his philosophic circle, decided to draw the line after the controversy had (temporarily) subsided, provide us with historical insight that may well be relevant to contemporary struggles with this issue.
Perhaps the greatest challenge science poses to the modern believer is the belief in miracles—that is, Divine acts performed purposefully by God that reflect a suspension of the order of nature. For many, belief in the God of Abraham—the God who created the entire world, knows each individual, reveals the Divine Law, rewards and punishes each according to one’s actions and intentions—ultimately is rooted in the belief in miracles. Yet we do not live in an age of overt empirical signs. The numerous “concealed” miracles that are said to occur all around us every day are not sufficiently convincing to all people precisely because they do not violate the impersonal order of nature. Hence, the critical observer feels that he need not ascribe them directly to God. Believing is seeing. One sees these miracles all around, it will be said, because one believes in them. If one has trouble believing in such miracles, one simply will not see them. Nor is the claim that science cannot disprove the possibility of miracles sufficient, even with valid arguments to that effect. The “spirit” of science in our miracle-less age has planted in many individuals too strong a doubt about the possibility of miracles to be easily shaken by such arguments, let alone eliminated. As for the text of the Torah that is at the foundation of our tradition and attests to God’s creation, revelation and miracle-working powers, critical biblical scholarship has helped nurture the seeds of doubt planted by the sciences. According to the critics, the Torah too is not untouched by human hands. The history it presents reflects, for these critics, a collection of group memories. The miracles it depicts are, at best, events that happened a long time ago and were subsequently transfigured by the memories of later generations. Confronted by all these doubts, many find themselves in the position of R. Judah Halevi’s Khazar king, who exclaims: “The human mind cannot believe that God has intercourse with man, except by a miracle that changes the nature of things.” Unfortunately, the answer of Halevi’s Jewish sage to the king is no longer as convincing to people as it may once have been. While his view that Israel’s experience of the miracles of the Exodus, their hearing God’s voice at Mount Sinai, and the transmission of the account of these events in an uninterrupted chain to the present day may have assuaged the doubts of many of the medieval Jewish rationalists, too many uncertainties regarding the formation of the tradition and the nature of group memory have crept into modern thought for today’s rationalists to rest content with such answers.

Contemporary Orthodox scientists have made many attempts to show not only that modern science does not contradict Orthodox belief, but that in certain areas it even lends a great deal of support. For example,
the application of computer analysis to the text of the Torah is a relatively new area in which technology is called upon to succor belief in God’s immediate authorship of each letter of the Torah. How well contemporary attempts succeed to solve “rationally” the modern crises of faith is beyond the scope of our discussion. The crises themselves, it is important to note, do not result from simple ignorance, nor from an intellectual obduracy to believe per se what can be proven, but because it is now far more difficult to prove what should be believed. Jewish Orthodox thinkers who have essentially ignored the problems raised by the physical sciences and higher biblical criticism appear to have moved in more fruitful directions. They maintain, if only implicitly, that it is better to treat the Torah as axiomatic than to try to prove it. It is better to concentrate on the Torah as the basis for law, and for spiritual and moral values, than as an information source about the physical world. It is better to approach the Torah existentially and meta-historically than historically.

Yet we are constantly bedeviled by the need to determine the “facts” in these matters. Like some demon, this problem simply refuses to leave many of us alone and allow us to turn to more significant areas of inquiry. In discussions regarding “faith and reason,” the most prominent example of this need in the contemporary period is: How is the modern Orthodox Jew to understand the Torah’s account of creation, in light of scientific views? While we may learn innumerable timeless truths on many levels from the Torah’s description, what about the scientific accuracy of the description itself?

The notion that the world was created is currently the most accepted view in the scientific community. It has in turn given birth to many recent books on the complementary relationship between science and Judaism. Yet how many traditional Jews, whether scientists or not, harbor no doubts about the fact that God created the world in six days (or 144 hours)? How many, having been exposed to scientific opinions, are satisfied with the rejoinder to their doubts that God certainly has the power to create the world in such limited period of time (even in a fraction of a second for that matter), so why not believe He did so? As for the scientific evidence that the world is many billions of years old (if not much older than that) and that hundreds of millions of years intervened between the appearance of different forms of life on earth, how many rest content with the answer that God created the world to appear as old as it does, and as following a different order than the one depicted in the Torah, in order to test our faith. Can science prove conclusively that this suggestion is wrong? No! So why do so many traditional Jews stubborn-
ly refuse to accept this view (many even think there is something ludicrous about it)? Has the “spirit” of science infused our thinking too strongly for us to continue to accept the literal meaning of the text of the Torah? Science has made many skeptics regarding the physical picture of the world presented by the opening chapter of the Torah. Surely the doubts many entertain about the literal truth of some of the subsequent descriptions in the Torah are eminently understandable!

Of course, the Torah does not compel us to believe that “day” in the story of creation refers to a twenty-four hour period. All manner of support for the interpretation of “day” as referring a much longer period of time can, and has been, adduced (the problem of the order of creation is not as easily solved). Let us be clear, however, that this is essentially a modern reinterpretation, resulting from at least partial capitulation to scientific thinking. The talmud and classic midrashim offer no support in this matter. The Sages, debating whether the world was created in Tishrei or Nissan took the notion of “day” quite literally.3 Certainly R. Eliezer’s view that the world was created on the twenty-fifth of Elul (and the subsequent discussion in this matter) shows where he stands on the matter.4 Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, and the other classical medieval commentators give no sign of being bothered by the idea that the days of creation each lasted 24 hours. That is, the view that a day of creation is far longer than 24 hours is hardly a traditional interpretation at all.5 The Torah may not have changed, but our understanding of it certainly has.

The reinterpretation of Torah has always been the key to resolving the crises that arise when the simple meaning of the Torah conflicts with what we have become convinced is true. In this case, the new interpretation comes not to supplement the simple meaning but to replace it altogether. The allegorical interpretation is seen as the true interpretation, while the more literal readings (or prior accepted readings) are considered essentially false, though potentially containing important kernels of truth. We are not dealing here with allegorical interpretations that provide levels of understanding in addition to the literal one. Much of the history of Jewish thought focuses on the reinterpretation of the Torah in accord with the truths that one has come to hold. The great effort of the medieval Jewish philosophers, starting with R. Sa’adyah Gaon, to promulgate the idea that God is incorporeal—despite the many biblical passages to the contrary and without an unambiguous tradition to this effect—is the most blatant example of this phenomenon. Anyone who thinks that this view of God was always the traditional view has only to look at Rabad’s remarks on Maimonides’ Hilkhot
Teshuvah 3:7 to find that it was not only the ignorant masses who viewed God as corporeal. By instituting the incorporeality of God as the official view of Orthodoxy (in accordance with the Aristotelian definition of incorporeality), and by treating the belief in the corporeality of God as heresy (a belief that clearly was held by many earlier rabbinic scholars), Maimonides goes further than any other rabbinic authority in reinterpreting Jewish tradition to conform to the philosophic truths he accepts. Strictly speaking, the earlier rabbinic Jews who believed in God's corporeality should not be regarded as heretics, since the view they held was not considered heresy in their time. But we must note that with Orthodox Judaism's embrace of Maimonides' view of God's incorporeality as an ikkar, many early rabbinic Jews are viewed as having held a fundamentally false belief about God that they had regarded as true. Thus it is not only scientific conceptions that change; religious conceptions change as well. Moreover, at times, there is a crucial relation between the two. In the clash between the “simple sense” of the Torah and established rational truths, some of the greatest medieval rabbinic authorities, first and foremost Maimonides, were prepared to favor the fruits of reason. While Maimonides explicitly maintained belief in the creation of the world, he also remarks, to the ire of the traditionalists: “Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done while denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.” The truths of the Torah themselves do not always determine our beliefs, but are at times formed in accordance with our beliefs, dictating a reinterpretation of the Torah. This is not to say that no parameters are recognized. Maimonides rejects reinterpreting the Torah to accord with the Aristotelian belief that the world is without beginning, arguing in part: “The belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it... destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out.”

Once the gates of figurative interpretation are opened, however, it is no easy matter to determine at what point they should be closed. Many of those whom the traditionalists considered to have abandoned the Torah for their radical interpretations did not view themselves in
the same light. They tended to see themselves as upholding the honor of the Torah by bringing its true meaning to light. They believed that their interpretations, rather than undermine the Torah, provided it with a much firmer foundation for the intellectual elite. It would not do to argue that “majority rules” in matters of hashkafah, as often is seen to be the case in matters of halakhah. Maimonides adamantly distinguished the realm of activity from that of thought: “Every controversy among Sages that does not involve action, but concerns belief alone – there is no basis to rule that the halakhah is according to one of them.”

History shows us how flexible the realm of Jewish thought can be. Views that once met with vigorous antagonism on the part of the rabbinic authorities, have since become accepted as timeless “Orthodox” beliefs. At times, the novel and controversial eventually becomes the normative.

The medieval Jewish world is fascinating for the plethora of divergent approaches to Judaism it produced within the rabbinic world—that is, among those who remained faithful to rabbinic law while interpreting the Torah in accordance with their own views of the truth. They were not, however, “pluralistic.” Opposing views were either rejected outright as completely false, if not also “heretical,” or regarded as vastly inferior forms of truth. Yet studied from the vantage of a more liberal approach, the medieval period shows just how diverse and dynamic rabbinic thought was.

Perhaps none has gone so far in adopting the conceptual approach of the medieval Aristotelian philosophers and in reinterpreting the Torah accordingly than R. Nissim of Marseilles. R. Nissim shows how far one might reinterpret Judaism, once convinced of the essential truth of the philosophic worldview in its explanation of the physical “facts”—and still see himself as a loyal son of tradition. At the same time that R. Nissim attempts to harmonize Judaism and philosophy in understanding the Torah’s accounts involving physical reality, he moves to other planes in appreciating the Divinity and value of Torah. His major work, Ma’aseh Nissim, is in part an excursus on religious problems such as the nature of prophecy (Mosaic prophecy in particular), providence, reward and punishment, principles of the faith, and miracles. The larger part of the work is a commentary on the Torah, and its main point is to show that nothing in the Torah violates the Aristotelian worldview of the order of nature. At the same time, R. Nissim regards the Torah in its entirety as Divine, though his view of the nature of this Divinity differs from that of his more conservative contemporaries.
The Torah's account of creation, for example, is treated by R. Nissim as a description of the stages of change taking place on earth, with "day" referring to each stage in the process rather than a twenty-four hour period. By "stage," he may refer not to a temporal stage, but to a logical one, since he leans towards the Aristotelian view that the world is without beginning (God gives existence to a world that is eternal a parte ante). Thus, the planets and the stars were not created on the fourth day (or even "suspended" in the heavens on the fourth day), and the account of creation does not deal with the heavens, but with their influence on the process of the earth's "development" (not necessarily understood as temporal development), which was greater at this stage. Overall, he follows Maimonides' suggestion to look to Aristotle's Meteorology as the key to understanding many of the secrets of the account of creation.10

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is treated by R. Nissim solely as a philosophic parable. The same is true of the story of Cain and Abel. The long lives of the ancients, however, have a historical basis: they represent the span of the dynasties of these founding fathers. He does not question the historicity of the Patriarchs; the miracles associated with them are quite a different matter. The destruction of Sodom and Gemorah resulted from—an earthquake. Abraham, who foresaw it in a divinatory vision, sent word to Lot to escape, or Lot himself had an intuition that he should leave. Lot's wife turned back and returned to Sodom, becoming a victim of the destruction. As for the plagues in Egypt—all of them were natural events that were either predicted by Moses and Aaron, or were brought about by them by means of their knowledge of the workings of nature. The parting of the Sea of Reeds was also a natural event, predicted by Moses and utilized by him in order to save Israel from the Egyptians. According to R. Nissim, other "miracles" never happened in the physical world, but were seen by the prophet only in a prophetic dream or vision. The burning bush, for example, did not exist physically, nor did Balaam's talking ass. Both were products of the prophet's imagination while in the state of illumination. What is crucial in both cases is the content of the revelation, not whether the events described actually happened outside of the prophet's soul.

Even the rewards and punishments promised in the Bible are treated to naturalistic explanations in R. Nissim's commentary. They follow naturally from one's actions and the type of life one lives. One who helps the needy and treats others fairly, promotes social harmony and increases prosperity. Observing the agricultural laws is beneficial to the land and increases its productivity. The laws of kashrut prevent one from eating
unhealthy foods and preserve one’s health. R. Nissim’s main message, repeated in a variety of forms is: live a life of intellect and all that such a life entails—pursuit of the moral virtues—in a well-ordered, just society following the dictates of the Torah, and you will see how many evils are naturally avoided and how many goods are naturally attained.

As this last point indicates, R. Nissim did not write his commentary to discredit the Torah and Jewish tradition. Though he is aware that many would accuse him of being a heretic, he has no heretical motives in revealing his thoughts on these matters. As far as he is concerned, there can be no heretical “truths”; the Torah is in complete conformity with the truth. Underlying the personal, miracle-working Deity found on the surface of Scripture, and intended for the masses whose obedience depends on this view, is the impersonal God of the world order as seen by the enlightened interpreter of Scripture. The world order itself as designed by God is not a blind mechanistic one, but a “goal-oriented” one, with certain inherent values. The highest level of perfection that one attains naturally is that of prophecy, a form of intellectual illumination generally involving the imagination as well, with the prophetic mission itself being part and parcel of this phenomenon. The highest level of prophecy was that attained by Moses. For R. Nissim, that Moses received the Torah in a state of prophetic illumination, rather than by means of a created voice that dictated to him each letter of the Torah, makes the Torah no less Divine, nor its commandments any less meaningful or obligatory. The wise person who understands this truth and actively pursues intellectual and moral perfection by way of observance of the Torah is the type of individual the Torah ultimately seeks to mold. R. Nissim harbors no doubts that adherence to the letter and the spirit (as he understands it) of the Torah leads to spiritual perfection, as well as physical and social well-being. As human beings, we are committed to this pursuit. Truth is to be known because it is truth, good is to be practiced because it is good—not for the external rewards and punishments that naturally accompany these pursuits. Significantly, R. Nissim is completely unapologetic in his stance:

The women, and men following their path, observe the commandments solely with their limbs since they do not understand the reasons for the practical commandments, and for what end they were commanded. They labor to observe them scrupulously, without knowing their purpose and utility. They are like a burden-carrying mule that knows nothing of the purpose of its labors and the utility of its activity. The rationalists (mask-ilim) observe the commandments with the requisite scrupulousness
because of their purpose and utility. They observe the commandments with their limbs, and even more with their thought and heart, for every practical commandment comes either in order to teach a correct opinion or to reject a false opinion; to help a person acquire a noble quality or distance the person from an opprobrious one. Just as it happens that the masses, due to their fear, do not sin and are scrupulous in their observance since they do not know anything, it happens at times that they perform the less significant commandments, abandon the more precious ones and are lenient in their observance of the weighty ones because of their limited discernment. For this reason, people are mistaken when they judge the rationalists as not being committed to the practical commandments. They say of them that they are solely committed to rational opinions and true beliefs. In reference to the masses they say that they are the ones committed to the practical commandments and they are the pious ones (hasidim). How greatly mistaken are those who say this. For our sages have already maintained: “The ignorant one is not pious” (lo am ha-areẓ hasid).”

R. Nissim agrees that one should not go about spreading this message too openly because its effects on the masses would be detrimental. Let them keep their naive faith, for it is at least important for their obedience.

Many of these ideas are alluded to in the classical Midrash. Following Maimonides’ lead in how the Midrash is to be read, R. Nissim shows how the Sages revealed these truths in a veiled manner:

Another citation (Va-yikra Rabbah 1:7) commenting on the first verse: And He [God] called to Moses—It is written above in the section on the Tabernacle: As the Lord commanded Moses. This is analogous to a king who commanded his servant: “Build me a palace.” On each item the servant built, he would write the name of the king—on the walls, pillars and ceilings. Similarly, when the Lord said to Moses: Build me a tabernacle—on each item that he built he would write: As the Lord had commanded Moses. God said: Moses paid me the highest honor and here I am inside and he is on the outside. Call him to enter before Me inside. For this reason it is said: And He called to Moses.12

R. Nissim goes on to explain:

The Sages alluded to a great secret that is related to what we hinted in this chapter—namely, that the command in general was to the intellect of Moses. God communicated the matters in general—namely, all the commands of the Torah—to the rational faculty in order to govern the corporeal part, directing it always to the salutary, and to abolish what is harmful to the body and to the soul. And Moses would write by each detail: As the Lord commanded Moses, in order to honor God, and to
increase the significance of these matters in the eyes of the Israelites in order that they fear God and refrain from sin.\textsuperscript{13}

R. Nissim’s position is evident from these remarks and hardly requires further elaboration. But what about the midrash itself? Does it not in fact lend itself to R. Nissim’s radical interpretation? According to the Torah, God ordered all the details involved in the building of the Tabernacle. Along comes the anonymous author of the midrash and suggests that God simply ordered Moses to build a tabernacle and Moses worked out all the details himself, though crediting God with each of them. What at first glance seems to be a parable designed to show Moses’ devotion to God and the reward for his devotion, R. Nissim discovers on closer reading to be a genuine hint to Moses’ role in formulating some of the details of the Law. Many more such examples from the commentary may be adduced.

A further noteworthy point about this commentary is that it shows its author’s comfort in the world of rabbinic literature. In fact, he is far more steeped in biblical and rabbinic literature than in the philosophic literature. This enables him to produce a commentary that appears to flow from the Jewish sources and unpack their inner core. Anyone who thinks that a naturalistic model for understanding Judaism is a post-Spinoza development, or was maintained in earlier times only by those isolated heretics less familiar with the traditional literature, must consider this commentary. R. Nissim’s knowledge and love of the Torah and rabbinic literature is immense; nonetheless, he looks at this literature with the eyes of an Aristotelian thinker. For him, this does not detract one iota from the truth of Judaism, from the Torah being the Word of God, and from the binding nature of all of its commands. Rather, it provides the conceptual framework for appreciating the meaning of the Torah and the significance of its commands.

R. Nissim was not alone in his approach. In fact, he follows a Provençal tradition of radical rationalism that stems from R. Shemuel ibn Tibbon at the beginning of the thirteenth century and continued well into the fourteenth century. Like all the Provençal philosophic exegetes of the period, R. Nissim found his guide in Maimonides, and drew heavily upon the commentaries of Ibn Ezra as well. The commentators closer to his period, R. Levi b. Avraham and R. Bahya b. Asher (Rabbenu Beḥayyei), provided him with many of his exegetical remarks. We must note that the famous ban against the study of philosophy before 25, and against the allegoric interpretation of Scripture, as issued by Rashba in 1305, does not appear to have had much effect on the philosophic activi-
In the first half of the fourteenth century, this activity reaches its zenith, particularly in the works of R. Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides). Furthermore, not all of these philosophers felt on the defensive. Following in the footsteps of Maimonides, some were driven to publicize their unconventional views (going far beyond their master in this area) and were scathing in their critique of the more traditionalist camp. R. Shemuel ibn Tibbon, the Hebrew translator of *Moreh Nevukhim* at the turn of the twelfth century, writes in his own treatise:

*It is a time to act for the Lord* (Psalms 119:126)—I see that the truths that have been hidden from the time of our Prophets and Sages of the Torah are now all well known to the nations of the world. In most places, they interpret the esoteric doctrines found in the Torah, the words of the Prophets and those who speak with the Holy Spirit in accordance with these truths. Our nation is so completely ignorant of them to the point that we have become subject to their scorn as a result of our ignorance. They shame us by saying that we possess only the shells of the Prophets’ words.14

As in the case of Maimonides, the concern on the part of these thinkers is not only “what will the gentiles say.” Because of their commitment to the value of truth, as they understood it, they were engaged in an open battle for the “hearts and minds”—though not the practice—of the Jewish intellectual elite of their time. They could no longer afford to leave the stage to those who, in the words of Maimonides:

... expound matters based upon the literal meaning of the words of the Sages. The nations of the world would say if they heard them: “Surely an ignorant and foolish people is this little nation” [a play on Deut. 6:4]. Many engaged in this practice are preachers who teach the people matters that they themselves do not understand. Better that they remain silent for they do not understand. *O that you would altogether keep silent!* (Job 13:5).15

Study of R. Nissim’s commentary, and the medieval Jewish philosophic literature in general, raises the question: how diverse can modern Orthodox thought be and still maintain its identity? How far can Judaism be reinterpreted in accord with contemporary scientific views, as well as those borrowed from other academic disciplines? While those who push their interpretations of the Torah in this direction may find themselves labeled heretics by some, they may take some comfort from the study of history that they form part of a long chain of such interpretations. Their opponents may argue that such interpretations have at best been the province of a few stray sheep and have “lost out” in history to more traditional (“Torah true”) interpretations, but current proponents of interpretations that attempt to accommodate contemporary
views may counter that the “traditional” interpretations themselves have changed greatly over the years. In the process, these interpretations have incorporated more than a few medieval philosophic and scientific ideas. How vastly different would even the “traditional science” of kabbalah be without the philosophic and scientific ideas incorporated during its medieval development! Clearly the novel is not to be rejected simply because it is novel. After all, many of our “standard” interpretations started out as innovative medieval readings, more than a few of them condemned by the more conservative forces of that time. To argue that ḥadash asur min ha-Torah is to ignore the many ways in which our understanding of Torah has been modified over time. Does this mean that we should suspend condemning any novel interpretation and leave it to history “to judge”? On this issue too we may learn from the controversies surrounding philosophic-allegorical interpretations in the medieval world. In particular, let us note where the line was drawn by the most openly radical of these commentators, R. Nissim, who lived and wrote shortly after the most famous of these controversies, that which culminated in the ban of the Rashba in 1305.

Let me stress that R. Nissim does not serve us as an authority for what may be deemed permissible. The authority in defense of the study of philosophy and the use of philosophic-allegorical interpretations of the Bible, as well as Midrash, remains Maimonides, the dominant authority for R. Nissim himself. For this reason, the controversy remains: to what degree did Maimonides agree with the Aristotelian worldview and reinterpret Judaism accordingly? The French rabbis in the first half of the thirteenth century banned the Guide of the Perplexed and even the Book of Knowledge for the controversial views these works present. According to one account from this period (written by a protagonist of Maimonides), the opponents of these works even had them burned in public. By the end of the thirteenth century, however, none among Maimonides’ staunchest critics would dream of making such public moves (some circles, even to the present, privately continue to ban the reading of the Guide). Maimonides had become too lofty a figure. Instead, both sides appealed to his teachings in defense of their view where the line is to be drawn. R. Nissim serves as an example of how far the group of radical rationalists to which he belonged were prepared to go in their reinterpretation of the Torah, while still considering themselves to be loyal rabbinic Jews. A study of their writings also enables us to see what views they continued to share with their traditionalist opponents.
When first looking at the history of this issue, one is struck by the bitter controversies of the Middle Ages. Moreover, in some of these controversies, the charges of today are the same as those of yesteryear. Neither side succeeded in convincing the other of its stance, and anyone who thought to find resolution of the matter in the past is sure to be disappointed. One camp bans the reading of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. The other camp not only continues to study the work in public, but also issues counterbans against the first camp. One camp condemns philosophic-allegorical interpretations, and the other camp continues to engage in them with no attempt to hide the fact or to apologize for it. One camp’s “heresy” is the other camp’s “Torah Truth.” One camp sees itself as upholding the honor of the Torah, while the other camp views the former as displaying tremendous ignorance and shaming the Torah in the process, if not worse. There was no clear-cut resolution to these differences, nor could there be. The rabbis drew the line of what views were worthy or were permissible differently, in accord with their understanding of truth, of how best to defend and preserve the honor of the Torah, and of the social-cultural situation of their Jewish community. The “philosophic” camp saw no reason to defer to their opponents, though they probably would not have denied that the greater Talmud scholars were among them. On this issue too they could find support in the words of Maimonides, who did not hide his negative opinion of most of the rabbinic scholars of his generation due to their ignorance of the truths of philosophy.17

What did the opponents of the philosophic camp view as the main issues involved? In the literature of the controversies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Jewish philosophers are accused of placing Aristotle above the Torah. They are charged with denying Divine will, and in consequence, God’s creation *ex nihilo* of the world and God’s performance of miracles. The same is true of the rabbinic views of final reward, and the corporeal forms it assumes. The accounts in the Torah they are said to treat as allegories; consequently, they reject their historicity. They are accused even of turning the commandments into allegories, instead of actions that one is obligated to perform. In the eyes of the traditionalists, all these deviations constituted heresy. In the apologetic literature of the philosophic camp, generally written by the more moderate Jewish philosophers, the tendency was to counter many of these charges by arguing that they were not true, excepting perhaps a few heretical thinkers who cut themselves off from Judaism. R. Nissim gives us a clearer view of how the more radical Jewish philosophers who
regarded themselves as loyal, observant Jews actually thought about these points.

R. Nissim denies neither Divine will nor creation. Yet his “Divine will” does not mean the changing will of a personal God, and “creation” does not preclude a world that always existed. Rather, God’s unchanging will is thought to give continuous existence to a world that always has been. God does not intervene in nature or history, though this should not lead to the conclusion that nature is not perfectly planned by God. Nor should one deduce that history is completely “blind,” with everything left completely to chance. Values and purpose are built into nature, and they are found in the narrative of the Torah as well. The view that some of the accounts in the Torah are allegorical, without being historical as well—for example, the Garden of Eden—does not make them less truthful. The lessons they are designed to impart are far more important than the question of their historical veracity. Some of the biblical stories, including the Binding of Isaac, are regarded as occurring in a vision of prophecy rather than in external reality, but are no less significant to one who possesses proper understanding. The Torah in all its details is perfect and “Divine,” in R. Nissim’s view, though he does not view God as personally and directly communicating every word. The Bible and the Sages of the Talmud all attempted to educate the masses of Jews in accord with their limited intelligence, those who could appreciate only the corporeal as real, and those who are cowed into obedience only by belief in a personal deity who literally watches one’s every move. The general populace is not prepared to perform the good for its own sake or to view reward and punishment as natural consequences of the way one leads one’s life. R. Nissim regards all the commandments as actions incumbent upon every Jew to perform, and, moreover, reflective of Divine wisdom. On this point, there is no difference between him and the opponents of philosophy, though his understanding of the reasons for the commandments is far different from theirs. In short, and perhaps most importantly, R. Nissim writes his radical treatise from the perspective that one must interpret the Torah differently from the common perception of the less wise precisely because the Torah is completely true. Nor does he present his interpretation as “new.” As with Maimonides and his followers in general, R. Nissim maintains that the talmudic Sages, the keepers of the Oral Law, secretly shared this approach and communicated it by means of midrashim. He saw himself as part of a historical chain of possessors of truth beginning with Abraham and including the prophets and Sages, but interrupted in the Middle Ages and only reestablished by Maimonides.
(and Ibn Ezra). The treatises of gentile philosophers aided these thinkers in “rediscovering” the truths underlying the tradition, and they made no secret of this fact. Yet the origins of this assistance in itself was hardly a valid reason for categorically rejecting the views they found there. Rather, each carefully argued view must be analyzed and judged on its own merits, independent of its source. As Maimonides indicates in the introduction to Eight Chapters: “Know the truth from whoever utters it.”

What conclusions then may be drawn from this in addressing our contemporary situation? Perhaps none. Leaving aside the question of rabbinic authority, which R. Nissim (and his Provençal circle of radical rationalists) lacked, R. Nissim also operated in a far different intellectual universe from the current arena. His issues may not be our issues. Nevertheless, R. Nissim’s commentary, based though it is upon his particular view of God and the world, raises the question of the outer parameters, or limits, of philosophically and scientifically driven interpretations of the Bible in any generation. How does one determine those limits? Where should the enterprise of harmonizing Torah and madda via reinterpretation stop? While the specific approach of R. Nissim may be rejected, the questions it raises remain for many Jews a matter of more than historical interest.

NOTES

3. Rosh Hashanah 10b.
5. R. Menahem Kasher does bring a relatively obscure medieval midrash that appears in one of the manuscripts of Mosheh Ha-Darshan’s Bereshit Rabbati (but does not appear in our printed texts) that interprets “day” of creation as a thousand years. See Kasher, Torah Shelemah, vol. 1 (New York, 1949), 94, n.448 (I am indebted to David Shatz for pointing out this reference). While the notion that God’s “day” is a thousand years, based on Psalms 90:4, occurs in other contexts of medieval exegesis, this is the only place of which I know that it is introduced in expounding the creation story. This interpretation, however, left no impress on the most famous medieval commentaries. It is not clear what considerations motivated it, or whether it in fact belongs to the original version of the compilation or was introduced by a later copyist.
7. Ibid., p. 328.
8. Commentary on Sanhedrin 10:3 (translation is my own).
10. See Guide of the Perplexed 2:30. Ibn Ezra, too, was seen by R. Nissim, and by many in his circle, as restricting the story of creation to an account of the process of development of the earth, and not the creation of the heavenly bodies.
12. Ibid. 177-8.
13. Ibid. 178.
16. Joseph Sarachek’s Faith and Reason: The Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides (New York, 1935) remains a useful though dated survey of the controversies over Maimonides’ philosophy in Provence and Spain and the issues involved. More recent scholarship has helped to clarify the picture considerably. Of particular importance are studies by Daniel J. Silver, Joseph Shatzmiller, Abraham Halkin, Frank Talmage, and more recently the studies on the Meiri (who was a “moderate” rationalist) by Gregg Stern and Moshe Halbertal. It is not my purpose here, however, to present a more up-to-date scholarly account of the controversies, or of the literature dealing with them. I wish only to point out some of the basic views that emerge from the writings of detractors and defenders of philosophy and the use of philosophical allegory in the interpretation of the Torah. The most important primary sources regarding the controversies are: Iggerot Kena’ot in: Koveẓ Teshuvot ha-Rambam, ed. A. Lichtenberg (Leipzig, 1859); Kevuzat Miktavim, ed. S.J. Halberstam (Bamberg, 1875); and Abba Mari ben Joseph, Minḥat Kena’ot, ed. H.Z. Dimitrovsky (Jerusalem, 1990). My subsequent discussion is based on these sources.
17. See, for example, Maimonides’ remarks in Guide 2:6, and towards the beginning of the Treatise on Resurrection. Maimonides graphically illustrates his stance in his famous parable of the king in Guide 3:51.