CHAPTER FIVE

EPHRAIM DISCOVERS PHILOSOPHY
(GLEANINGS OF EPHRAIM—1590)

Are not Ephraim’s gleanings better than Abiezer’s vintage? (Judges 8:2)

Unriddling Another Preface

In 1590, Ephraim published his second book, Gleanings of Ephraim, a collection of sermons for Jewish holidays and life-cycle events (weddings, circumcisions, and a funeral). Like most such books of the period, it begins with a preface in a florid, allusive style, midway between prose and poetry. In that elegant medium, the author coyly alludes to events and preoccupations in his recent life in passages such as:

And this is the teaching of the gift-offering1 which was brought to us from our sister Wisdom, the sister of Pleasantness, and the name of her brother is: He Will Be Brought As A Gift to the reverence which shall rise upon the head of those who revere the Lord, who have a name and hand upon the throne of Yah, to sit on the seat of God in the heart of the sea of wisdom in which the righteous enjoys safety everlasting, not singed even when they walk in the midst of fire nor shall rivers drown them even when they come like a straitened stream they shall not cause straitening to Ephraim.

[stanza skipped]

And this is the teaching of what arises on his mind2 saying, why are we sitting here many days

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1 Allusion to Leviticus 6:7: “And this is the torah (law/teaching) of the minhah (gift or meal offering).”
2 Alluding to Leviticus 6:2, the law of the burnt-offering which “goes up” in smoke. Ephraim stretches olah to the more general sense of “rise up, come to mind.” Torat Ha-Olah is the Hebrew title of Isserles’ work, The Law of the Sacred Offering.
while our brethren the house of Israel, are they not feeding in a land not theirs?
We remember the care through which we have passed amidst other cares—
This is many days we have cared about our redemption and our soul’s liberation…

Ve-zot torat ha-olah… (“This is the teaching of what [a]rises”) This punning reference (coupled with the “gift of wisdom” in the previous stanza) is as close as Ephraim will get to telling his readers: “I have just been reading Isserles’s *Law of the Sacred Offering*, and have discovered from it the profound truths of Maimonidean philosophy.” (The substantive evidence for this interpretation is found elsewhere in the book, especially in the first four sermons of Part II, as we shall see.) Ephraim is only slightly more open and communicative later in the preface, when he says:

Did you not know—have you not heard—what happened to the sages of philosophy, who sank in the mighty waters and brought up a potsherd in their hand, failing dismally in the matter of God’s existence? If that is the case, then by this plea every thinking person may exempt himself from treasure-hunting amid the deep dark depths of secret mysteries!

However, our rabbis have already refuted this view by saying, “The work is not yours to complete, but you are not free to desist from it.” For every industrious thinking person is obligated to search in every hole and cranny, as far as his intellect can reach, and that is sufficient, and the rest he can leave to another. Indeed, if inquiry is based on the conjecture of reason alone, there may happen to the inquirer what happened to others, so that if one comes and builds a tower with its top in the heavens, and sets its foundations on the conjecture of his reason, suddenly there comes another man after him and topples it from its pedestal, knocking down wall and tower and all. “When the foundation is destroyed, what has the righteous accomplished?” (Psalm. 11:3) “[Unless the Lord builds a house,] its builders labor in vain on it.” (Psalm. 127:1) For who knows if the first opinion was correct, or the second?

In that case, the only good thing is for a person to rely on true tradition, and to inquire, where are the scriptural sources and traditions which will testify and tell the reliable testimony of the Lord concerning God’s existence and all the principles of doctrine of our Torah, and of all the

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3 There is a colloquially newsy, headline-hawking quality to this passage. The value of the novel has had its attraction in every age, but it has become increasingly prominent since the Renaissance. Before the advent of periodical journals, preachers were often the bearers of important news.