

Trust, Hope, and Fortitude as Theological Virtues in Joseph Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*

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Abstract

Joseph Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* was one of the most popular Jewish works of the later Middle Ages. This article shows how in this work, Albo uniquely adopts, develops, and theologizes the ethical categories of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, such as happiness, friendship, and the virtues, in order to strengthen the commitment of his Jewish followers who were being induced to convert to Christianity. His objective was to convince the Jews that they must remain loyal to their faith, notwithstanding the worldly benefits that they might accrue by becoming Christians. Albo proceeds by arguing that the relationship between God and Israel represents the highest form of loving relationship based on utility, pleasure, and goodness, but that it is ultimately one that is reasonless from God's perspective. Hence, it is an enduring relationship that cannot be undone, as avowed in the biblical covenant between God and Israel, promising eternal happiness that transcends the limited worldly happiness of human flourishing. While the moral virtues are necessary for human flourishing and are perfected and applied to particulars by the Torah in a manner that cannot be achieved by the human intellect alone, the sustainability of the covenant requires a supplementary set of theological virtues. For Albo, the theological virtues of trust, hope, and fortitude are necessary for the maintenance of the covenant and the Torah, especially during times of adversity. All three traits bolster the Jewish people's ability to withstand societal and religious pressures to abandon Judaism in times of duress.

Introduction

Joseph Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (*Book of Roots* or *Book of Principles*) was one of the most popular Jewish works of the later Middle Ages.¹ It laid

¹ Joseph Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (*Book of Principles*), trans. Isaac Husik (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1929–1930).

out the structure of Jewish beliefs in a rational and accessible manner that allowed Jews to defend their religious commitments when under pressure to convert to Christianity during the fifteenth century. Much of the scholarship on Albo has dismissed this book as a work of popular theology that merely repeats and synthesizes the arguments of earlier Jewish philosophers in a more simplified form.² I want to argue instead that there is an innovative thread that runs through the work. This becomes evident in the way that Albo uniquely adopts and develops the ethical categories of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, such as happiness, friendship, and the virtues, with the larger purpose of defining the religious project of the Torah.³ Yet Albo is different from earlier Jewish interpreters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, such as Maimonides, Gersonides and Ibn Kaspi, in that he reads the work through the prism of Crescas' more conservative theology whereby God is understood as knowing *all* particulars as particulars and is directly involved in the activities of human life.⁴

² The unoriginality of Albo's thought is the dominant view in the scholarship. See for example: Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. iv (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894), 239-240; Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism: The History of Jewish philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 275; Isaac Husik, *A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1966), 406-407; Eliezer Schweid, *The Classic Jewish Philosophers: From Saadia Through the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 424; Haim Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 487. Though, recent work has challenged this assumption. See for example: Dror Ehrlich, *The Thought of R. Joseph Albo: Esoteric Writing in the Late Middle Ages* (Givat Shmuel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009) and Shira Weiss, *Joseph Albo on Free Choice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was the central text on ethics for Jews and Christians in the late Middle Ages. Samuel ben Judah of Marseille's translated Averroes' *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* into Hebrew in the early 1320s and the *Nicomachean Ethics* was translated into Hebrew from the Latin translation of Robert Grosseteste by Meir Alguades in the early fifteenth century in Spain. For an overview of the reception of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the Middle Ages, see George Wieland, "The Reception and Interpretation of Aristotle's *Ethics*," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, eds. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 662-668.

⁴ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 23 (IV 3): "God's knowledge, being infinite, embraces everything that happens in the world without necessitating change in God, and without destroying the category of the contingent... God's knowledge embraces everything that happens in the world, and that nothing happens by accident without being known in advance."

Historical context plays an important role in understanding Albo's broader intention. It was at this time that some Jewish theologians suspected that the Aristotelian worldview had the negative affect of weakening the popular commitment to religious and communal loyalty when Jews were under pressure to convert to Christianity.⁵ If religion, according to Aristotelian philosophers, is just a means to perfecting one's moral virtues and obtaining intellectual knowledge, and there is no promise of providential reward and punishment for one's religious actions, what advantage is there for the average person to continue practicing a persecuted religion? A Jewish convert to Christianity in the fifteenth century would have likely believed that he could live a life of safety, morality, and enlightenment better as a Christian in Spain than as a Jew. This is especially true if the outcome of Aristotelian philosophy is to see all religion as inherently utilitarian. One can find an example of such a critique in Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov's *Sefer ha-Emunot* (*Book of Beliefs*) where he explains the common reasoning advanced for Jewish conversion to Christianity as thinking that

it is a vain thing to hold that the soul will be rewarded for its good deeds and punished for its evildoing, or to have faith in Paradise and Hell and the great day of Judgment and the Resurrection of the dead, or to cherish any hope for the body once the soul has departed, for what is it then but a stinking carcass? Nor is the wise man better off than the fool, or the righteous different from the wicked, for what shall their intellect avail them if it remains with the corpse that is

⁵ Ben Zion Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain from the Late 14th Century to the Early 16th Century According to Contemporary Hebrew Sources* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 111-120. Some scholars have questioned the extent to which philosophy and philosophers had an impact on the decision of Jews to convert to Christianity, since there were many philosophers who were part of the polemic with Christianity in the fifteenth century and thus against conversion. See: Daniel J. Lasker, "Averroistic Trends in Jewish-Christian Polemics in the Late Middle Ages," *Speculum* 55 (1980), 294-304, and *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2007); and Shalom Sadik, "When Maimonideans and Kabbalists Convert to Christianity," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 24 (2017), 145-167. My argument here, however, is not trying to prove or disprove historically the extent to which Aristotelian philosophy was the dominant cause leading to conversion, but merely to show to what extent this premise is central to Albo's theology and perception of the threat.

trodden underfoot? Equally it follows that of the righteous man, who strives after justice all his life but whose intellect is not actualized so that it might become, along with the other actualized intellects from among the various nations, one of the Intelligences, nothing remains [after death]; whereas the evildoer, if his wickedness, no matter how great its extent, does not keep him from intellection, so that he acquires true knowledge in spite of it, he, regardless of his bad qualities, cannot be prevented [from surviving].⁶

One possible reaction would be to reject philosophy and the thinking life, considering there to be a choice between philosophic atheism and blind religious obedience. But Albo takes a different approach that recognizes the potential dangers of philosophy as a vehicle leading to the abandonment of Judaism in favor of Christianity, while still speaking in the universal language of philosophy. Instead of rejecting the intellect and its relationship to religion, viewing it as a threat to the Jewish religion, Albo instead adopts the universal categories of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to show that these ideas are best used for the defense of the Torah and the Jewish people, and indeed are best realized within Jewish tradition.

In this light, I am going to discuss how Albo reinterprets two central ideas from the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the purpose of defending Judaism. First, Albo takes Aristotle's discussion of friendship and applies it to the loving bond between God and Israel, and in doing so defines the covenantal relationship portrayed in the Torah as the highest form of friendship. Second, Albo describes the Torah as the means for delineating how to practically apply the moral virtues outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, such as courage and moderation, while also supplying a set of higher theological virtues--trust (*bitaḥon*), hope (*tikvah*) and fortitude (*savlanut*)-- for maintaining the covenantal friendship between the Jewish people and God. The moral virtues prepare one for worldly happiness, while the theological virtues prepare one for spiritual happiness.

⁶ Quotation from Isaac Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol ii (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 235.

Friendship and the Covenant (*Brit*) between God and Israel

One of the pinnacles of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the rich discussion of friendship (*philia*) in Books 8-9. Aristotle explores the psychology of what motivates human relationships and creates categories for these different types of friendships under the tripartite division of the useful, the pleasurable, and the good.⁷ He also differentiates between relationships based in equality, where each party is equally contributing what is useful, pleasurable, and good, and those based in inequality, where one party is proportionally contributing more, due to an imbalance in status or power, such as between a monarch and the people he rules, or between a parent and child.⁸

Albo adopts these categories in *Ikkarim* III 35-37 from Aristotle to describe the relationship between God and Israel as described in the Torah. In addition, it should be noted that here Albo is also influenced by Crescas who describes God as the ultimate lover, and ranked love over intellect as the highest goal of the Torah.⁹ According to Albo, the love between God and Israel is an example of an unequal relationship, since God has infinitely more power than human beings. Yet he submits that God does not desire human beings to attempt to repay what He gives them. He compares this imbalance to the loving relationship between a parent and child, pointing out that the gift of existence that a parent gives a child is impossible to be repaid or completely equalized.¹⁰ As Albo articulates it, "God supplies the wants of mankind, and all that He expects from them is to do honor to His name."¹¹ This form of loving relationship is expressed in the Bible

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 165-170 (8.2-8.4).

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 174-175, 181-183 (8.7, 8.12).

⁹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 316-351 (III 35-37) and Ḥasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord (Or Hashem)*, trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 117-119 (I 3.5) and 215-225 (II 6.1). See: Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Ḥasdai Crescas* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 98-118.

¹⁰ Aristotle uses the parental analogy to make the point that in the parent-child relationship, the love of the parent for the child will always be stronger than the love of the child to the mother, even if the child strives to repay the parent for everything given to them. He gives two reasons: (a) the child is a part of the parent, like a tooth or hair, and (b) the parent has longer to love the child- they love their children from the moment of birth, whereas children begin to love their parents years after birth. See: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 181 (8.12).

¹¹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 344 (III 37).

through the language of covenant (*brit*), which is the performative act developed to concretize the relationship. Albo describes this concretely, saying that the “word covenant (*brit*) is applied to affirmation or oath or something firm which is performed by two persons to bind them to each other in love (*ha-ahavah*).”¹² In explaining the inauguration of a covenant in the Bible, he shows why it is rooted in love. He first describes how the process begins by cutting an animal in two parts, with the covenantal parties then proceeding to pass between the two parts. Albo explains that the poetic significance behind this incongruous practice is to teach that a covenant is a permanent bond, and just as the two parts of the animal were one body when alive, whereby each part felt the pain of the other, so too are the two parties making the covenant like one body in a loving and inseparable bond.¹³

Moreover, Albo describes how this loving relationship with God signifies the perfection of three ends: utility, pleasure, and goodness. It demonstrates utility in reminding us that God graciously gives life to all living beings (*honen ve-noten ha-metzi’ut le-khol nimtza*).¹⁴ Likewise, it exemplifies pleasure in reminding us that God created not only what is necessary for us to live, but also provides luxuries to human beings which are not necessary for their bare existence (*ha-me’angim she-einam hekhrekhi’im*).¹⁵ It also reflects goodness in pointing to the fact that God is the source of absolute good and is without evil (*ha-tov ha-gamur she-ein bo ra’ kella*).¹⁶ Albo also sees these attributes metaphorically expressed in the Shema: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). He interprets “with all your heart” to refer to love of the good, “with all your soul” to refer to love of the useful, and “with all your might” to refer to love of the pleasurable.¹⁷

Albo also maintains that God makes a choice to form a relationship with a specific group that is different than his relationship with the rest of humanity, symbolized by the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. As part of the covenant, God gave to Israel a divine law, the Torah, that guides its adherents to true

¹² Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 440 (IV 45).

¹³ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 441-442 (IV 45).

¹⁴ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 318 (III 35).

¹⁵ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 318-319 (III 35).

¹⁶ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 318 (III 35).

¹⁷ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 319-320 (III 35).

spiritual happiness and immortality (*ha-hatzlaḥah ha-amitit she-hi hatzlaḥat ha-nefesh ve-ha-hisharut ha-nitzḥi*).¹⁸ This bond is not just existent as part of the divine law itself, but is built into the very relationship between God and the specific nation of Israel.¹⁹ One example of this unique bond, for Albo, is the sabbath, which is described in the Bible as “a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever” (Exod. 31:17). He explains that this means that the Sabbath is a sign of the bond with God that is forever attached to the nation of Israel. Through this bond, they will attain eternal happiness (*ha-hatzlaḥah ha-nitzḥit*) and ultimately a union with God, even suggesting that those who observe the sabbath can produce changes in nature.²⁰

Albo describes this type of love as a passionate love that is reasonless (*bli shum ta'am*), with God's reasonless love for Israel embodied by the term *heshek* in the Bible.²¹ By reasonless he means that it cannot be reduced to a natural cause that can be explained through the use of the human intellect. However, Albo notes that even though God's relationship to Israel is the highest expression of utility, pleasure, and the good, he contends that it is not God's reason for making the covenant.²² Strangely enough, Albo's proof-text for God's reasonless love derives from the story of the rape of Dinah by Shechem, son of Hamor, in Genesis 34. Albo uses a statement made by Hamor in which he justifies Shechem's behavior in a conversation with Jacob and his sons and offers to arrange a marriage after the rape. Hamor says: “The soul of my son Shechem longeth (*hashkah nafsho*) for your daughter” (Gen. 34:8). Albo adds a comment to Hamor's explanation: “even though he can find one more beautiful.”²³ Certainly one may question Albo's choice of examples regarding whether it is apt to draw a parallel between God and the father of a rapist defending his son's behavior. However, there may be more than meets the eye in the connection Albo makes. It should first be noted that the statement is not made by Shechem, but by his father, Hamor,

¹⁸ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. i, 79 (I 7) and vol. i, 173 (I 21).

¹⁹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. ii, 65-66 (II 11) and vol. iii, 273 (III 29).

²⁰ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. ii, 65-66 (II 11).

²¹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 346-348 (III 37). The nature of *heshek* as reasonless love has been analyzed in Warren Zev Harvey, “Albo on the Reasonlessness of True Love” *Iyyun* 49 (2000), 83-86 and Weiss, *Joseph Albo on Free Choice*, 150-151 and 156-165.

²² Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 346-348 (III 37).

²³ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 346 (III 37).

negotiating on his behalf. Like any good father, Hamor will tend to see the best in his son and will also try to find some goodness underlying his bad behavior. Hamor's statement about his son's passionate and reasonless love, in Albo's reading, is what any good father would say about his son. And perhaps here lies the similarity between God and Hamor. Albo writes that God's love for Israel is not based on their perfection or imperfection. In fact, he argues that if God was choosing by a standard of perfection, the Jews would not be the ideal choice, since they are not the most numerous and they have not always acted righteously.²⁴ Like a parent's reasonless love for a child, Albo argues that God's love for Israel is independent of all natural and rational considerations. Even if God has a hidden reason, at least from our perspective, it is not based on a rational choice that we can understand.

One can detect the polemical context out of which Albo's exegetical writing derives. Learning from his teacher Crescas, Albo uses passages from the scripture itself as a subtle response to the Christian pressure to convert. The Christian supersessionist argument is that God's love has changed from the Jews to the Christians, whereby Christians are now the new Israel. This is based on the premise that Jewish behavior has justified God's changing his love to a new lover. Albo's response is that God's choice of Israel does not fit into the categories of friendship as delineated by Aristotle, since it is ultimately not based on a reason and therefore cannot be changed by a new reason. It is rooted in a transcendent cause and is thus timeless. Albo's contention is meant to encourage his Jewish readers who may be facing pressure to convert to Christianity to reconsider and strengthen their loyalty to the Torah and Jewish people.

Trust (*Bitahon*), Hope (*Tikvah*) and Fortitude (*Savlanut*)

In order to defend the transcendent loving covenant between God and Israel, Albo articulates three virtues that support it: trust, hope, and fortitude. These virtues are especially necessary during times of persecution and despair, when there is a strong temptation to abandon one's community, faith, and tradition to join those who are stronger and possess more power.

²⁴ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 347 (III 37).

In defending the Jewish covenant with God as a friendship that is eternal, unchanging, and reasonless, Albo develops these theological virtues to support this enterprise in *Ikkarim* IV 46-48. Let me note that the term “theological virtues” is not a term that Albo explicitly uses, but a category of virtues developed by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa* (introduced in 1-2 and developed in detail in 2-2).²⁵ Aquinas takes what Aristotle refers to as happiness, *eudaimonia*, and categorizes it as “incomplete happiness,” since it is a state we achieve by means of our natural human aptitudes. This is distinguished from complete happiness, *beatitudo*, which is the supernatural union with God. The means to achieve *beatitudo* lies beyond what we can achieve on our own.²⁶ One finds a similar distinction in the work of Albo’s teacher, Ḥasdai Crescas, who in *Light of the Lord* distinguishes between “bodily happiness” (*hatzlaḥot gufiyot*) / “temporary happiness” (*hatzlaḥot zemaniyot*) and “psychic happiness” (*hatzlaḥah ha-nafshit*) / “eternal happiness” (*hatzlaḥah ha-nitzḥit*). It is similarly continued in Albo’s *Ikkarim* between “corporeal happiness” (*hatzlaḥot gashmiyot*) and “the true happiness, which is psychic happiness and immortality” (*ha-hatzlaḥah ha-amitit she-hi hatzlaḥat ha-nefesh ve-ha-hisharut ha-nitzḥi*) / “eternal happiness” (*hatzlaḥah ha-nitzḥit*).²⁷

Furthermore, Aquinas insists that “it is necessary for man to receive from God some additional principles, by which he may be directed to supernatural happiness,” which are the theological virtues in distinction from the moral virtues.²⁸ For Aquinas, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity are the perfected traits that bring

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2.62 (theological virtues), 2-2.1-16 (faith), 2-2.17-22 (hope), 2-2.23-26 (charity). Following Daniel Lasker, it appears likely that philosophers involved in polemics with Christians received their knowledge of Christianity from their direct contact with Christian polemicists. See: Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Ktav, 1977), 161-164.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2.62q1, 3.

²⁷ Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, 206, 209-210 (6.1.1) and Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. i, 79 (I 7), i, 173 (I 21), and iii, 217-218 (III 25). See: Warren Zev Harvey, “Hasdai Crescas’s Use of the Term ‘Happiness,’” in *The Pursuit of Happiness in Medieval Jewish and Islamic Thought: Studies Dedicated to Steven Harvey*, ed. Yehuda Halper (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 335-349.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2.62q1. English translation from *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 476.

humans to *beatitude*. I would argue that Albo develops a similar set of theological virtues — trust, hope, and fortitude — which bear some similarities to Aquinas' list, though written to show that eternal happiness through the biblical covenant between God and Israel transcends the intellect, but does not require Christian theology.

Like Aquinas, Albo does not deny the role of the moral virtues. In making the case for the superiority of divine law over conventional law in *Ikkarim* I 8, one of the reasons that Albo gives is that a law legislated purely based on human reason cannot specify the particular cases in which to apply the moral virtues. He writes that

Thus Aristotle in his *Ethics* says repeatedly in connection with the different virtues that a virtuous act consists in doing the proper thing at the proper time and in the proper place, but he does not explain what is the proper time and the proper place.²⁹

Albo expands upon this point later in *Ikkarim* III 7 when writing that

A person whose temperament is hot will admire courage and take pleasure in it; while a person of opposite temperament will admire and take pleasure in quiet. The only way to determine what is becoming and what is unbecoming in the manner above mentioned is by referring to the standard of a person of equable temperament, who does not exist. And even if such a person did exist, we should find enormous difficulty in determining what is a good quality in a particular case, a difficulty that is due to the acts themselves.³⁰

In fact, Albo argues that the reason Aristotle speaks about the moral virtues in a general way in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and does not list all the particular cases in which they can appear is a hidden admission of the limits of the intellect to legislate the practical application of the moral virtues. The variability of human temperaments and the variability of actions makes it very difficult for the intellect to prescribe the proper mean. In response, Albo gives examples of how the Torah's laws supplement the *Nicomachean Ethics* and teach the proper way to achieve the mean of courage and moderation, through

²⁹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. i, 84 (I 8).

³⁰ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 58 (III 7).

laws dealing with proper conduct in food, drink, sexual relations, and when to risk one's life.³¹ This is attained through following the Torah's divinely revealed legal actions which human reason, or a work of human reason such as a book written by Aristotle, cannot achieve. People can discover through their intellect the foundational moral principle to pursue good and avoid evil (which appears similar to Aquinas's *synderesis*), but not how to apply this principle to particular cases; hence, the need for divine guidance.³²

Ultimately, the ordinary moral virtues are not a central theme of *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* and they do not reappear in much detail after the brief discussion in the first book, since Albo's main goal in the book is not to defend religion against philosophers, but to use philosophy to defend a Jewish version of eternal happiness against its Christian articulation.³³ To achieve this goal, Albo endeavors to encourage Jews to develop each of these three traits of trust, hope, and fortitude.

Trust

The first theological virtue, trust (*bitaḥon*), is discussed in *Ikkarim* IV 46. Here Albo shows that the premise of this virtue can be understood according to the following logic. It is easy for one to believe in the promise of the divine covenant when things are going well in life, "so long as he enjoys peace and tranquility at home and prosperity in his business affairs."³⁴ But the only way to truly test your belief in the covenant between God and Israel is to test whether you will stick with it when adversity strikes. This is a test of one's faith. The individual who perfects the virtue of trust is better equipped to maintain his belief in the eternality of God's promises, even in troubled times, which is a recurring challenge for Jews.³⁵

The evidence for trust in the Bible, according to Albo, is Psalm 44. Albo reads this Psalm as testimony to the faithfulness of Israel by the sons of Korach both in times of prosperity and times of adversity.³⁶ Albo writes that

³¹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. i, 85-86 (I 8).

³² Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iii, 61-62 (III 7).

³³ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. i, 187-195 (I 24).

³⁴ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 449 (IV 46).

³⁵ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 449 (IV 46).

³⁶ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 450 (IV 46).

The entire Psalm is a laudation of the people of Israel, who trusted in God in the day of prosperity and happiness and acknowledged that all things come from Him; nor did their heart turn away from trust in Him (*bothim*) and loyalty (*maḥzikim*) to His covenant in time of trouble.³⁷

Much of the Psalm is an attempt to reconcile the changing fate of Israel over time. The question arises that if the Israelites had God's providential help in the past, such as the miracles used to liberate them from slavery in Egypt, why did God suddenly cease His providential aid to help Israel prosper during later periods in Jewish history?³⁸

In Albo's reading of the Psalm, there is a difference between trust in an unstable source and trust in a stable source. He argues that those who complain about their trust being betrayed are putting their trust in an unstable source, like wealth, while trust in God is the *only* eternal and stable source in the world.³⁹ If one trusts the loyalty of one's friend to the covenant, one would reveal one's secrets to him, as he reveals them to himself, since one's true friend is considered no different than oneself. Albo expresses this concept poetically through the numerical value (*gematria*) of the Hebrew words "love" (*ahavah*) and "one" (*eḥad*) which both equal thirteen.⁴⁰ Albo sees a biblical example of this in God making a covenant with Abraham, and then revealing all that would happen to his descendants in the future, whether these things be good or bad.⁴¹ This is the ultimate in trust—knowing that even when the bad things occur, the covenant will remain unbroken.

Even if one sees unjust suffering for the righteous who trust in the covenant of God in this world and appear abandoned by God, trust maintains the belief that they will be rewarded with eternal happiness after death. Albo writes earlier in *Ikkarim* II 15 that

Divine righteousness decrees that those who believe should obtain that degree of eternal life which is promised in the Torah, because they trust (*bothim*) in God and believe in His Torah, though they are not able to acquire an intellectual

³⁷ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 450 (IV 46).

³⁸ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 451-452 (IV 46).

³⁹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 453-454 (IV 46).

⁴⁰ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 443 (IV 45).

⁴¹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 445-446 (IV 45).

comprehension. [...] It cannot refer to life in the body, which the righteous believers enjoy no more than the wicked unbelievers.⁴²

Trust means knowing that the promises of the covenant will be fulfilled, even if they are not immediately apparent and even if not fully rewarded in this life. This is because the ultimate reward of trust in the covenant is the acquisition of eternal happiness, which is greater than worldly happiness.

Hope

The second theological virtue, hope (*tikvah*), is discussed in the following two chapters in *Ikkarim* IV 47-48, where hope is described as following from trust.⁴³ Hope is the expectation that future positive events will happen as promised because of trust in the covenant. Like trust, it can be difficult to maintain hope that that good will come when facing a situation of adversity, as Jews were facing in Albo's time.

Albo uniquely divides hope into three classes: hope based on mercy (*tikvat ha-ḥesed*), hope based on glory (*tikvat ha-kavod*), and hope based on a promise (*tikvat ha-havtaḥah*). Hope based on mercy is the expectation that God will help you because of His intrinsic mercy and not as a matter of obligation. Hope based on glory is the expectation that God will help you because He has been in the habit of helping you before and helping you now will add to His greater glory; and finally hope based on a promise is an expectation that God will fulfill a commitment that was made in the past.⁴⁴

Albo argues that the most certain form of hope is that which is based on a promise since if one has a commitment that someone will fulfill their word, it is more reliable than depending on someone's mercy or honor, which can be swayed by other factors.⁴⁵ Furthermore, since the promise we are discussing is based on God's word, it is as if the commitment is built into the laws of nature. Albo writes that "the person to whom they were promised may be as sure of them as if they

⁴² Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. ii, 98 (II 15).

⁴³ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 457-467 (IV 47-48). See: Alan Mittleman, *Hope in a Democratic Age: Philosophy, Religion and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 43-59.

⁴⁴ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 457 (IV 47).

⁴⁵ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 459-460 (IV 47).

were things which had to be by natural necessity.”⁴⁶ Here Albo draws upon an often-cited Aristotelian distinction between whether a future prediction is necessary or contingent. Some future events are considered contingent, in the sense that their occurrence is only possible depending on variable factors that affect whether it will or will not happen, such as whether it will rain tomorrow or not. Both are possible outcomes based on the shifting weather patterns. Other future events are considered necessary if they are rooted in the unchanging laws of nature, such as the sun rising tomorrow.⁴⁷ Since God and Israel are part of an eternal covenant, if God promises a future happening, it is considered necessary, like the sun rising each day. Thus, in hoping for future positive events, like being redeemed from one’s persecutors and that they will eventually face justice for their crimes, the persecuted believer recognizes that their suffering is not eternal and God’s promised redemption of Israel will happen at some point in the future.

A few chapters earlier in IV 42, Albo describes one of the clearest pieces of evidence of hope for Jews living in a time of adversity, which is the survival of the Jewish people across time when other nations have disappeared. Albo writes that:

There are nations, like the Philistines, the Ammonites, the Amalekites and others whose name has disappeared from the world, although their descendants are still existing, for there is no Philistine or Amalekite or Ammonite or Moabite nation... There is no nation which continues to exist both in name and in race except that of Israel, of whom this thing was foretold: “Shall your seed and your name remain” (Isa. 66:22) ... The other nations came into being and then disappeared and Israel too will necessarily disappear, since it came into being. To anticipate this notion, he says that it is not necessarily true that whatever is subject to genesis is also subject to

⁴⁶ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 460 (IV 47).

⁴⁷ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 460-461 (IV 47). The language of “necessary future” and “contingent future” appears similar to language used in Christian debates at the time over God’s knowledge of future events rooted in how to interpret Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*, Ch 9. For an alternative usage of these terms in medieval Jewish thought, see Ibn Kaspi’s usage as analyzed in my *Power and Progress: Joseph Ibn Kaspi and the Meaning of History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 20-21.

destruction, for the heavens and the earth are new, that is, have come into being, according, to the opinion of those who adhere to the Torah and believe in the creation of the world in time, and yet they exist before the Lord continually, ie. they are eternal, ... Hence the seed of Israel as well as their name will also remain forever and will not disappear.⁴⁸

For Albo, the survival of the Jewish nation in both its name and its people across time disproves the Aristotelian principle that all matter is subject to generation and corruption, such that just like everything else in nature that has a finite lifespan, the Jewish people will also eventually meet their demise. The divine covenant ensures that their survival is guaranteed across time, notwithstanding the Christian belief that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity and their existence is a relic of a previous covenant. The survival of the Jewish people teaches hope in times of despair so that Jews know that that just as they have overcome other adversities in their history, they will survive this challenge in Spain and live to face new challenges again in the future, since God's covenant transcends all of the contingencies of history.

Albo also singles out circumcision as the sign of the covenant that teaches Jews not to give up hope. He states that although Jews are perceived by other nations to be sick and near death, he reassures them that they will recover from the current "illness" since they know that the sign of covenant indicates that the bond between God and Israel is eternal. In fact, he maintains that they will eventually return to their original strength that they possessed earlier in their history, like in the period of prophecy. It is thus noteworthy that Albo's conception of hope is one that entails the expectation of a revival and a return to the glory of the past.⁴⁹

Fortitude

The third theological virtue is fortitude (*savlanut*), which is discussed in scattered places throughout the work, but follows thematically from other virtues. Although he stresses that it is necessary to have trust in the covenant during times of adversity and to have hope for a better future, survival also requires the fortitude to endure pain and

⁴⁸ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 425 (IV 42).

⁴⁹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part ii, 448-449 (IV 45).

suffering for the sake of God.⁵⁰ One salient case discussed in *Ikkarim* IV 27 examines the extent to which one is held responsible for actions committed involuntarily.⁵¹ In general, one is held responsible for actions committed knowingly and willingly, but one is not responsible for actions committed unknowingly or unwillingly. But Albo notes that there are certain actions that are difficult to classify as voluntary or compulsory, such as an action which is not compelled, but if one does not do it, there is a serious possibility of harm done to you. The question is grounded in how much pain and suffering one can tolerate rather than do the action.⁵² Nonetheless, Albo argues that there are actions that are *always* considered voluntary and one cannot use the excuse of them being done under compulsion, since one should endure any pain in the world rather than do them (*raui lisbol elav kol tzaar*).⁵³ He submits that one should suffer rather than (a) strike one's parent, (b) rebel against the king, or (c) rebel against God.⁵⁴ In other words, one can blame a thief for forcing you to give up your wallet, but only you are responsible if that thief forces you to harm your parents or curse God. For Albo, the necessity of having the fortitude to tolerate suffering is what the Rabbis meant in using the term, the "suffering of love" (*yisurim shel ahavah*) in worshipping God. Albo writes that "If the motive of their service is love, they will accept the suffering gracefully for the love of God."⁵⁵

For Albo, the exemplars of fortitude who have endured suffering are fully present in the Bible in the figures of Abraham and Job, though they are depicted as opposites. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his grown son Isaac was a painful decision but one that Abraham was rewarded for enduring.⁵⁶ In describing the pain that

⁵⁰ For a similar portrait in Aquinas, see LU Qiaoying, "Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 8, no. 3 (2013), 471-484. Qiaoying notes that Aquinas "defines endurance as the chief act of courage, and thus broadens the scope of courage to include the weak, including Christians" (p. 484).

⁵¹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 257-259 (IV 27). For an analysis of this chapter, see: Warren Zev Harvey, "Albo on Repentance and Coercion," *Jewish Law Annual* 21 (2015), 47-57.

⁵² Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 259 (IV 27).

⁵³ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 259 (IV 27).

⁵⁴ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 260 (IV 27).

⁵⁵ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 95 (IV 11).

⁵⁶ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 127-128 (IV 13). See: Weiss, *Joseph Albo on Free Choice*, 75-84.

Abraham had to endure, Albo writes that “suffering is inflicted in order that the person may actually endure trouble and hardship for the love of God.”⁵⁷ Other biblical characters lacked this endurance, such as Job, whose commitment was sustained in times of prosperity but waned during times of affliction. Job initially lacked the fortitude to persevere in the difficult circumstances of life that he faced. It is from Elihu that Job learns the necessity of having the fortitude to bear pain and suffering for the sake of God in order to correct one’s ways.⁵⁸ Of course, Albo’s focus on tolerating pain and suffering may be a response to the Jew considering converting to Christianity for greater social acceptance, financial gain, or avoidance of physical persecution in his own time. His response is that suffering potential pain is not an excuse for abandoning one’s commitment to God, and fortitude is always required as part of the commitment to the covenant.

Endeavor (*Hishtadlut*) and Diligence (*Haritzut*)

The emphasis on trust, hope, and fortitude may leave the impression that Albo is advocating a certain passivity in the face of adversity, with the implication that ultimately Jews in the Middle Ages were required to simply wait for redemption and assume that their own initiative is worthless. It is important to note that as central as the theological virtues are to Albo’s work, he does discuss in earlier chapters the importance of human endeavor and its relationship to divine determinism. In *Ikkarim* IV 6, he begins with the statement that “diligence (*haritzut*) and endeavor (*hishtadlut*) are useful and necessary in all human acts” and ends the chapter with the statement that “we should exert our efforts in all things as though they were dependent on our free choice, and God will do as He thinks fit.”⁵⁹ Albo reaffirms the Gersonidean principle that the heavenly bodies determine one’s future, but human beings through their intellect have the freedom to overcome the astrological decrees. In fact, according to Gersonides, even though an individual may be fated by the heavenly bodies for certain outcomes in life, it is possible to fight against these predeterminations with greater strength than other animals due to possessing the practical intellect. He contends that

⁵⁷ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 128 (IV 13).

⁵⁸ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 97 (IV 11).

⁵⁹ Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, vol. iv part i, 45, 49 (IV 6).

human beings have the ability to construct arts for their protection and cultivate the proper virtues of self-preservation such as (endeavour [*hishtadlut*], diligence [*haritzut*], and cunning [*hithakmut*] in crafting stratagems [*tahbulot*]) to acquire the necessary ends of the body.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Albo appears much more skeptical than Gersonides and many of his predecessors about the power of human reason and initiative to solve all worldly problems, especially considering the dire position of Jews in the Middle Ages. It is perhaps no surprise then that the theological virtues of trust, hope, and fortitude play a much more central and even decisive role in Albo's thought in response to historical circumstances of grave and continuous persecution.

Conclusion

As we have argued, Albo's project to adapt and theologize the *Nicomachean Ethics* was undertaken to strengthen the commitments of his Jewish followers who were being induced to convert to Christianity. His objective was to convince the Jews that they must remain loyal to their faith, notwithstanding the worldly benefits that may accrue in becoming Christian. He proceeds by demonstrating that the relationship between God and Israel represents the highest form of loving relationship based on utility, pleasure, and goodness, but is ultimately one that is reasonless from God's perspective. Hence, it is an enduring relationship that cannot be undone, as avowed in the biblical promise of the covenant. For Albo, building on the project of his teacher Crescas and drawing on Aquinas' interpretation and modifications to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the central document of this divine-human covenant, the Torah, promises eternal happiness that transcends the limited worldly happiness of human flourishing, *eudaimonia*. While the moral virtues are necessary for human flourishing and are perfected and applied to particulars by the Torah in a manner that cannot be achieved by the human intellect alone, the sustainability of the covenant requires a supplementary set of theological virtues. For Albo, the theological virtues of trust, hope, and fortitude are necessary for the maintenance of the covenant and the Torah during times of adversity. Trust is the belief that God's commitment and promises are eternal, including the achievement of

⁶⁰ I discuss this in the first chapter of *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides*, 19–61.

eternal happiness. Hope is the expectation that future positive events will happen as promised because of trust in the covenant. Fortitude is the ability to endure pain and suffering for the sake of God. All three traits bolster one's ability to withstand societal and religious pressures to give up on Judaism in times of duress. One might say that Albo develops a series of virtues that are both communal and conservative, whose intent is to defend the community and its traditions against an attack on its very existence. It may even be speculated that this stalwart defense of the tradition may account for the popularity of Albo's *Ikkarim* in future centuries, since it provided a resolute response to the persecution that Jews continued to face after Albo's death and in the centuries that followed.