

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

Leon D. Stitskin

A THIRTEENTH CENTURY PHILOSOPHER OF PERSONALISM SHEM TOB BEN JOSEPH IBN FALAQUERA

INTRODUCTION

The historian Graetz describes Shem Tob as "a living encyclopaedia of the sciences of his day, trustworthy on any topic on which information may be required."¹ Falaquera's extensive knowledge of every branch of Jewish learning as well as his unusual familiarity with the works of Plato and Aristotle's philosophies as expounded by Arabic commentators Avicenna and Averroes earned him the reputation as the most learned Jewish author of his time. A prolific writer, he compiled seventeen works on a variety of subjects but his chief concern was with philosophy. And philosophy he defines as the science of the soul which takes precedence over all other sciences.² Quoting a famous maxim which he ascribes to certain hermits, "Man, know thy soul and thou wilt know thy creator," Falaquera concludes that the major concern of philosophic speculation is knowledge of one's self, one's essential being, the uniqueness of one's personality.

Very little is known of Shem Tob's early life. He was born around 1225 in one of the provinces on the Franco-Iberian boundary.³ By nature he was a dreamer endowed with a poetic, sensitive soul; he led a contemplative life. It appears that he never married and never occupied any public position. He derived some income from his patrimony. Steinschneider⁴ maintains that he practiced medicine, although he does not seem to have great esteem for the physicians of his day.⁵ Like most of his colleagues, he wandered from place to place, leading a hazardous existence but filled with a mission to inspire love for learning and zeal for study. For him study and knowledge were not simply means to attain earthly goods but ultimate ends in themselves. In one of his early works he states: "Of what value are the good things of this world compared with the soul's satisfaction that comes from the search after truth?"⁶

It is indeed ironic that he penned those words in the thirteenth century which is described by many historians as the darkest period in history. It was a century that saw the establishment of the Inquisition, the persecution of dissenting minorities, the enslavement of

the intellect and the tyranny of the Roman Church over creative thought and free research.

In the Jewish community, however, the thirteenth century was marked by intellectual activity even among the masses. The cultural interest centered around talmudic research and the study of philosophy initiated by the great controversy over the writings of Maimonides.

Shem Tob was one of the outstanding exponents of Maimonidean thought and the unrelenting defender of the study of philosophy.⁷ His commentary on *Maimonides' Guide* under the title *Moreh ha-Moreh* reveals his wide scholarship. By comparing parallel passages from Arabic expositors, especially Averroes, with the Maimonidean text, he sought to elucidate the true meaning of the *Guide*. His translation of Ibn Gabirol's *Fons Vitae* into Hebrew made it possible in 1846 for Solomon Munk, the Jewish orientalist, to reclaim the work for Judaism.

While Shem Tob was not a trail-blazer in the sense of projecting original schemes of philosophical notions, he set for himself a three-fold task which served to break through the barriers the dark ages of medievalism sought to impose on Jewry. In the first place, he championed the rationalism of Maimonides and defended the cause of the philosophers as essential to true religion. Hostility toward philosophy comes from ignorance of the Jewish heritage, he argued. Secondly, he defined philosophy in his chief philosophic treatise *Sefer ha-Nefesh* as the discipline concerned with the study and knowledge of one's soul. In the tradition of Jewish personalism, he thus underscored the organized principle of life in the Hebraic world scheme.

This notion of philosophy gave rise to his third challenge which was to stir in others a zeal for study and learning⁸ as a discipline for the soul. Knowledge and intellectual excellence according to personalistic doctrine is more than a mere search for truth. It is a means of ecstatic union of human spirit with the divine spirit. Religious observances designed as a discipline to curb our animal impulses pave the way for our intellect and pure spirit to conceptualize and contemplate the ultimate truths of philosophy unhampered. This in turn leads to an attainment of human perfection and self-realization and ultimate union with the Infinite. We can now appreciate Falaquera's passion for intellectual activity and for study and speculation.

What follows is my translation of Shem Tob's introduction to his *Sefer ha-Nefesh* which was written as a compendium on medieval psychology.

L.D.S.

INTRODUCTION TO SEFER HA-NEFESH

Said Shem Tob ben Joseph ibn Falaquera:

I deemed it appropriate to write a brief treatise on the science of the soul drawing from the works of the latest Arabic philosophers⁹ who rationalized by means of investigation and research. While this is to be a short study it will embrace most of what they had to say about the science of the soul and the authentic conclusions they reached through philosophic investigation. Although I had already recorded at length all these notions in another work I wrote on the *Opinions of the Philosophers*¹⁰ I saw fit to write this treatise in order that it may serve me as a review manual that I might refer to repeatedly.¹¹ For it is indeed proper for everyone who seeks knowledge, that he become thoroughly conversant with this particular science which leads to an apprehension of one's essential being and in turn to the attainment of the ultimate goal of knowing one's Creator, blessed be He.

Philosophers have maintained that all sciences are worthwhile and rewarding, but that some are more rewarding than others and that the science of the soul takes precedence over all other disciplines in the category of values. A discipline is worthwhile when its notions are authentic like the science of mathematics or its postulates have value like the science of astronomy. But a knowledge of the soul is superior to both.

The scholars have also asserted that the mark of perfection is twofold: to love knowledge with utmost devotion and to choose the purest of activities with meaningful intentions. Hence, when man knows himself he attains perfect knowledge. For perfect knowledge of a substance consists in the apprehension of its form, as this constitutes the true knowledge of its essential being.

Moreover, the philosophers said that he who understands his soul knows his Creator. And by the same token one who is ignorant in the science of his soul is surely devoid of any knowledge of his Creator.¹² How, then, can one have faith in man who has achieved wisdom in all other branches of knowledge but is ignorant of the science of his soul!

They [the philosophers] further maintained that the confused who forget God, blessed be He, actually forget their souls as it is

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

written in the scrolls of the hermits, "Man, know thy soul and thou wilt know thy Creator." This is such a true maxim! For so many properties are attributed to the faculties of the soul. Even the mysterious and theological disciplines may be explained through psychological studies. For this reason they said that knowledge of the soul is a prelude to knowledge of the Deity and that the former constitutes the supreme discipline next to the science of the Deity [theology].

I have divided this treatise into twenty chapters as follows: 1. Proof for the existence of the soul. 2. Air as the bearer of the medium for the powers of the soul. 3. A definition of the soul. 4. The necessary elements of the soul's faculties. 5. The nutritive faculty. 6. The power of sensation. 7. The sense of sight. 8. The sense of hearing. 9. The sense of smell. 10. The sense of taste. 11. The sense of touch. 12. The faculty of common sense (an internal sense—*sensus communis*). 13. The faculty of imagination. 14. The rational faculty. 15. The unique properties of the rational faculty. 16. The faculty of memory. 17. The vital power. 18. A summary of the overall faculties of the soul. 19. Ancient theories of the soul. 20. The influence of the active intellect upon the soul.

NOTES

1. *Gesch.* VII, p. 216.
2. Introduction: *Sefer ha-Nefesh*, Lemberg 1835.
3. See J.Q.R. N.S. v. 1 N. 2, H. Malter on "Shem Tob ben Joseph ibn Palaquera," p. 154.
4. *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, 1894, p. 1637-8. Steinschneider quotes from המעלות 63 where Shem Tob recommends the practise of medicine as the "noblest of all human occupations." This was probably done in deference to his master Maimonides who was a physician.
5. Among his occasional poems he quotes a poet as deriding physicians who "kill off people and take their money. In this they have an advantage over the Angel of Death who must take the lives of people for nothing."
6. ראשית חכמה, published by M. David, 1902, p. 7.
7. ראשית חכמה p. 21 and המעלות, p. 48.
8. המעלות, p. 11: כרי להעיר הנפש משנת העצלה ולהזהירה תמיד על התמדה בלמוד ולרדוף אחר המעולה העליונה שהיא מעלת החכמה.

From the Pages of Tradition

9. Shem Tob, following Maimonides, distinguishes between the Mutazila — the early Arabic expositors, who approached philosophic notions with pre-conceived theological suppositions, and the later philosophers Avicenna and Averroes, who pursued the philosophic enterprise as an independent discipline. Cf. *Guide* Part I:71.

10. דעות הפילוסופים which was not published and is quoted by Steinschneider, *Cat. Leyden* 65.

11. Falaquera makes a similar assertion in his introduction to מורה המורה

12. Cf. שמות רבה 1:10; היום אשר לא ידע את יוסף למחר הוא עתיד לומר לא ידעתי את ה'