

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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HILLEL BEN SHEMUEL OF VERONA

The Individual Soul's Immortal Core

INTRODUCTION

The first Jewish philosopher to write a book dealing exclusively with psychology is Hillel ben Shemuel of Verona (1220-1295). His book, *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh* (The Rewards of the Soul), was written in order to obviate any wrong conception of the soul. Since the soul constitutes the very essence of man, any erroneous conception of man's essence might lead to false notions about the universe and even God Himself. For the key to an understanding of the ultimate reality of existence lies in the study of the nature and destiny of man. The accent in Jewish thought is on Personalism. It is on the level of human experience that we respond to the eternal challenge of the unknown. It is from the perspective of man's frame of reference that a determination is made whether the response is of an analytical or a poetic, synoptic nature. The human condition, the existential situation, sets in motion relationships with the unknown, the phenomenal world and society.

Hillel ben Shemuel was born in Verona, Italy, in 1220. In Italy during the 13th century, the Jews fared better economically and politically than in some other countries, but culturally the 13th century was comparatively inferior to others. Hillel ben Shemuel was the first devotee of Jewish learning and philosophy in Italy in the middle of the century. In his youth, he went to Spain to study the Talmud at the academy of Jonah Gerundi at Barcelona, and philosophy and science with other masters. Upon his return to his native country he settled in Ferra and Forli where he was engaged in the practice of medicine.

A strong admirer of Maimonides, he undertook to defend him against the attacks of his opponents and proposed a conference of scholars to judge the works and philosophy of the great master. He wrote a commentary on Maimonides' twenty-five propositions.

His knowledge of Latin gave him access to the writings of the scholastics and he translated many of their works as well as several medical treatises into Hebrew, among them a book of surgery. He also translated the neo-Platonic *Liber de*

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Causis and made extensive use of many other philosophic and scientific books in Latin. Moreover, it was his knowledge of Latin that enabled him to make use of the refutation of Averroes by Thomas Aquinas.

His title as a Jewish philosopher rests on his main philosophic work *Tagmule ha-Nefesh* which treats of man's essential being, the soul, as a developmental, functional process destined to life everlasting. The book is chiefly a refutation of Averroes' theory of the soul and intellect, known as the *unitas intellectus*. The implications of this scheme, according to Hillel, would undermine the central personalistic position of Jewish philosophy with its emphasis on the individual soul's immortal core.

What follows is my translation of Hillel's introduction to *Tagmule ha-Nefesh*.

L.D.S.

THE REWARDS OF THE SOUL

The author Hillel, son of the saintly R. Shemuel, son of the Gaon R. Eliezer of Verona, said: It is generally acknowledged among all men of science that the most precious possession of man is the soul, and its well-being constitutes the ultimate purpose of man's existence. And yet, the number of those who are impervious to the study of the origin and the destiny of the soul is constantly increasing over those who would take pains to engage in this discipline almost to the point of one hundred to one. And even the few who do undertake to investigate this important subject are unable to arrive at the truth. For the matter itself is difficult and requires long preparations and preliminary knowledge. Then again, the natural indolence of man when it comes to study, coupled with the general vicissitudes of life and its short duration, completely account for the lack of true knowledge among men.

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These considerations induced me, for the sake of Heaven, to write a small, comprehensive treatise that will embrace in concise form the various notions necessary to apprehend the illuminations of the soul with which the Almighty has endowed us. The work of this treatise although quantitatively small was exceedingly difficult for me, due to my limited intelligence, lack of imagination and subtlety respecting the underlying principles. I, therefore, set out to collect a variety of notions scattered among the extensive works of the philosophers, arranging and expounding them in such a concise and lucid manner in order that their investigation will not be too cumbersome and discourage those in search of wisdom.

The purpose I sought in this enterprise is the knowledge of truth for such knowledge has only one end and that is that its knowledge is truth.¹ It is similar to the statement of the rabbis that the reward of the *mitzvah* is the *mitzvah*. Although some interpret this statement to mean that the performance of one *mitzvah* will inevitably lead to the performance of another *mitzvah*, both inferences are correct and convey the same meaning.

For this reason, I directed my attention in this work to explain the existence of the soul, its nature and reward. Apprehending the truth of this discipline, we shall then arrive at the truth of ultimate reality. For the soul is that which makes man man, and puts us in the category of humanity.

Hence we should not forget our formative constituent nature, namely, the essence of our being. Nor should we neglect to know the nature of that which makes us intelligent beings, else we don't deserve the name of intelligent or even human beings but are likened unto cattle and beast. Compare the admonition of the Psalmist "Be ye not like the horse or like the mule, who hath no understanding . . ." (Ps. 32:9).

Another important reason for the study of the nature of the soul, known otherwise as the rational faculty, is that any erroneous notions in this matter lead to more serious mistakes in other areas of knowledge and belief, as I shall explain presently. Suppose an ordinary man who calls himself pious assumes that the soul after leaving the body will be subject to corporeal

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reward and punishment, as would appear from a hasty, nimble, confused and literal rendering of Biblical and Talmudic passages, he would by the same token be led to imagine that the soul is also corporeal. This he would derive from the fact that any object capable of being acted upon by a corporeal object is itself corporeal. If then the soul after departing is subject to corporeal retribution, it must also be corporeal.

Now this notion may not in itself be so harmful if not for the dreadful consequences one may draw from it regarding other doctrinal beliefs. For, as soon as we apprehend the soul to be of some corporeal nature either of a very thin or luminous substance shining like the sun, we are led inevitably to believe that the celestial world must have bodies and definite places, since it is believed that the soul comes from on high. This apprehension leads immediately to the assumption that the angels are corporeal. Now, since angels are emanations from the divine splendor, as the masses maintain, in keeping with a Rabbinic interpretation of the verse in Psalms, "He covereth himself with light as with a garment" (104:2) and inasmuch as it is well known that the first emanation is generally similar to the emanator, the conclusion is inevitable that God too is body. Once we make such a deduction, you can readily see what happens: we have destroyed the soul, . . . and repudiated the fundamentals of our faith.

Accordingly, I sought to present in this treatise sufficient material for those searching for the truth as you will presently see, and divided the book into two parts. In the first part, I expound upon several aspects relating to the soul. In this part I have included a special significant chapter designed to strengthen our sacred faith. In the other chapters of the first part I discuss also briefly the three kinds of intellect and the soul's union with the active intellect.

The second part treats of the soul's reward and punishment after its parting from the body. I shall support my assumptions with Biblical and Talmudic references and attempt to resolve what may appear to the ignorant at the outset apparent contradictions. I therefore called this treatise *Tagmule ha-Nefesh*, and exhort every intelligent person not to read the book hastily

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but with penetrating deliberation, stripped of any trace of envy. Should he discover some mistakes, I hope that, for the sake of the Almighty, he will investigate them thoroughly and point them out to me and I promise to accept his authoritative judgment as a student accepts the advice of his teacher. May the Lord help me in this task!

The first part contains seven sections. The first section proves the existence of the soul.² The second proves that the soul is a substance, not a corporeal entity, not a property, not an accident.³ In the third section I shall prove that the soul is not subject to any form of motion, nor divisible, nor unchangeable in any form.⁴ The fourth will deal with a definition of the soul.⁵ The fifth raises the question whether there are in essence a multiplicity or unity of souls in which I shall prove conclusively its unity.⁶ The sixth section proves the existence of three kinds of intellect and points out the manner in which the rational part of the soul unites with the active intellect.⁷ The seventh section deals with the relation of our material intellect to the rest of the human soul, refuting the contrary assertions of those (like Averroes) who say that that the possible intellect is not the form of the soul nor part of the soul.⁸

The second part of the book contains three sections. In the first section, I discuss the various forms of reward and punishment; whether they are corporeal or spiritual. I conclude that they must be devoid of corporeal nature which I demonstrate from the point of view of the justice of God and from a knowledge of the science of nature.⁹ The second section deals with the nature of spiritual reward and punishment. In the third section, I interpret the various statements of the rabbis which on the surface would ascribe corporeality to reward and punishment. But, as I shall show, this is not the case.¹⁰

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NOTES

1. We have here an interesting notion of *Torah lishmah* (knowledge for its own sake).

2. *T.N.*, p. 1b: The first proof he offers for the existence of the soul is that we see natural bodies take food, grow, propagate their like, while others like stones do not take food, grow, or propagate their like. This shows clearly that the powers mentioned cannot be due to the corporeal part of the objects performing them, else stones, too, would have those powers as they are corporeal like the rest. There must therefore be in their being a different principle making for perfection other than a body which is responsible for those activities. We call it soul.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 2b: "The soul must be either a substance or an accident since all existents are so constituted. Now an accident according to Aristotle is that which may be or not be without causing the being or non-being of the object in which it is. But one cannot possibly conceive that a body remain a living body without the soul. Hence the soul is not an accident." In the Aristotelean tradition the soul by its definition represents the boundary line between living and non-living.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 3b, 4a: After ruling out in section 2 the soul's union and separation from the body as motions since descent and ascent when applied to the soul are not a spatial relation, Hillel proceeds in this section to reject the notion that the soul is subject to motion while in the body. After enumerating Aristotle's six classifications of motion such as genesis, decay, increase, diminution, qualitative change and motion proper, he shows that the soul can have none of these motions. As for the qualitative changes such as from joy to grief, "to this we reply that these changes are not due to the soul but to certain corporeal powers which are in a state of mixture of the humors in the body and which the soul shares insofar as it is united with the body as Galen indicates in all his medical works."

6. *Ibid.*, p. 7a: "The soul is a stage of emanation consisting of a formal substance which subsists through its own perfection and occupies the fourth place next to the Active Intellect giving primary perfection to a natural body. Its ultimate source is God who is the true Perfection and the ultimate Good and it emanates from Him through the mediation of the Separate Intelligences standing above it in the scale of emanation. Aristotle gives a similar definition of the soul as the first entelechy of a natural body."

To be sure, we have here an extreme form of an Aristotelean neo-platonized definition of the soul, which places the soul fourth in the series of emanations. Even Ibn Zaddik's definition represented a purer rendering of the Aristotelean standpoint. Apparently Hillel was not influenced even by Maimonides' definition. The reason may be that since he translated part of the Proclean book *Liber de Causis* into Hebrew, thinking that the author was Aristotle, he imbibed completely its neo-Platonic content and ascribed it to Aristotle.

6. See Note 8.

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 10a: "Just as the senses require three instruments to realize their operations, so does the intellect. And the three elements are: one, the power of reception, that is, a sensory organ. Two, an external real object to arouse the sense faculty to perceive. Three, an agent that will bring the object of sense perception to the senses, that is the air which is the medium of transmission.

Similarly with regard to the material intellect, we have three grades of intellect. First, the faculty of receptivity which is the material intellect similar to the relation of the senses to the objects of sense perception. Secondly, the faculty of acquisition, the capacity of the material intellect to apprehend the intellect. This is the speculative faculty (the actual functioning of the possible intellect), which is called the acquired intellect. Thirdly, the active intellect, which is the agent responsible for actualizing the material intellect.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 3b: This problem follows the pattern similar to the major issue of the treatise, namely, the unity of the human intellect. It arose from Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle's psychology in which he maintained that the intellect is a unitary immaterial substance and not a form of the body. On the other hand, the part of the soul which is associated with the body as its form embraces the lower faculties of sense, and dies with the death of the body. Hillel disagrees with Averroes and posits the possible intellect as part of the soul for reward and punishment. He cites as an example that when the soul experiences anxiety and other emotions the latter are reflected in the human intellect "and if the possible intellect were a distinct substance it would not be affected by the accidents of the soul" (*Ibid.*, 19b).

It should be noted that Thomas Aquinas maintained that the active intellect in the Aristotelean scheme was also part of the human soul — and not one of the separate Intelligences. Hence, the rational part too has an individual existence both during life and after death.

9. *Ibid.*, 20a-20b: After discussing the various opinions regarding the nature of reward and punishment, Hillel first advances a natural proof for the spiritual nature of reward and punishment. He argues that immaterial substances like the soul cannot be influenced by corporeal treatment. For corporeal influence implies motion on the part of the agent casting its influences upon every part of the recipient. But since a spiritual substance has no parts, it cannot therefore be subject to corporeal influence.

Moreover, from a purely practical standpoint, if retribution is corporeal, it would be more effective if it takes place on this earth where the soul is still joined with the corporeal body. The effect would be much greater also upon others, who would see how the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished.

After a lengthy discourse on the nature of spiritual reward, in the second section, Hillel offers the doctrine of resurrection as further proof for spiritual retribution. If retribution were corporeal, he argues, why is it necessary to join body and soul together again after death for their proper compensation when the same purpose would have been served in one's lifetime (p. 24).

10. *Ibid.*, p. 26b:

הנה מצאנו שרבותנו ז"ל אמרו בכמה מקומות בתלמוד שגיהנם הוא מאש חמרי

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ושנפש הרשע נשרפת באותה אש אחרי מותו . . . עשן עולה מעל קברי רשעים
לאחר אחרי מותם . . . ומצאנו ג"כ שנפש הצדיק היא מתעננת בנהרי אפרסמון
טהור, ושלחנות של זהב בעלי רגלים, ובגנת שיש בהם אילנות בעלי ריח ואפילו
עליהם מופלגים בריח.

Hillel quotes many such passages where retribution is projected in corporeal terms such as the wicked burning in fire and "smoke rises from the grave of the wicked immediately after burial, while the souls of the righteous delight in pure waters, golden tables and gardens filled with fragrant trees." He proceeds to show that such passages are not to be taken literally for the contents of the Talmud are divided in six groupings, not all possessing the same binding power. The discussions of Halakhah, which embrace legal and ceremonial laws as well as narratives of miracles, must be taken literally. However, the parables and allegories, peculiar *aggadot*, homilies addressed to the people on the holidays for spiritual purposes, biblical interpretations where no ceremonial precept is involved, visions of the future in an allegorical manner, jests by way of relief from the strain of study — all these cannot be understood literally. Accordingly, retribution is expressed corporeally in order to impress ordinary people with frightening punishment consequent upon wrong-doing.