

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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NATURALISM AND PERSONALISM

Bahya ibn Pakuda's Response to the Mechanistic Naturalists

INTRODUCTION

In 1896, Isaac Broydé published a Hebrew translation¹ of a treatise "On the Essence of the Soul," written originally in Arabic under the title *Kitab Ma'ani al-Nafs*. Despite its neo-Platonic structure, Dr. Broydé attributed the work to Bahya ibn Pakuda, author of *Chovot Halevovot* which is Kalamistic in content and opposes the notion of creation as a graded series of emanations. Other scholars, however, beginning with Jacob Guttman² and followed by Goldziher³ maintain that the author of *Sefer Torot ha-Nefesh*, although a contemporary of Bahya was someone other than he and they refer to him as pseudo Bahya. They support their claim by at least two arguments. First, they contend, there is an apparent discrepancy in the two works relating to the sources of the doctrine of creation and unity. As we mentioned, the author of *Torot ha-Nefesh* seems to be under the influence of neo-Platonism, while Bahya follows the Kalam. The second argument points to the avowed opposition by the author of *Torot ha-Nefesh* to the Mutazila on the ground that they are followers of the naturalists whose notions are not in accord with the Bible and the authentic philosophers.

I am inclined to agree with Isaac Broydé especially in view of a Parsee⁴ manuscript discovered in the early nineteen twenties, ascribing the treatise to Bahya ibn Pakuda. The first argument advanced by the scholars disputing the authorship of Bahya of this text cannot be taken too seriously. For one thing the lines between neo-Platonism and Mutakallimum were not drawn that sharply among the medieval philosophers after the tenth century. Neo-Platonism served largely as a religious scheme rather than as a metaphysical system. As such it was introduced into Islamic literature by the *Ikwah al safa* (Brethren of Purity) and its doctrine of emanation was used in a somewhat loose and popular form as Islamic neo-Platonism. Surely by the time this text appeared, the doctrine of creation was combined with that of

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emanation to such a point that distinctive differences between the two concepts had been erased.

Accordingly, we find, as I pointed out in a previous study,⁵ that Isaac Israeli likewise employed both doctrines interchangeably. In his *Book of Definition*, he used the notion of emanation and in his treatise "On the Elements," the doctrine of creation. Apparently the major concern for the medieval Jewish philosopher was not so much to establish the nature of the origin of the world as that man's soul was created directly by God, endowing the human species with a measure of sovereignty. Whichever scheme served to underscore the spiritual essence of the soul as a creation of the Divine Will and Wisdom was embraced by the philosophers. Accordingly, Isaac Israeli applied one cosmological framework to the celestial sphere and another to the sublunar. By the same token it was possible for Bahya to make use of both concepts in his two works as long as each doctrine helped to establish the hierarchial level of creation.

The other argument levelled against a common authorship for both works is based on the forthright opposition to the Mutazila by the writer of *Sefer Torot ha-Nefesh*. But this assumption is easily refutable, when we keep in mind that there were two Mutazila sects—the Basra and the Baghdad Mutazila—and that the author's opposition was aimed at the former sect. It is indeed amazing that the critics of Broydé were not aware of this historical fact. The Basra sect, to which the author of *Torot ha-Nefesh* makes reference, was under the influence of al Djubbal and his son Abu Hashim who promulgated a more naturalistic philosophy than the Baghdad group with respect to Divine control over human action and the relation of the soul to the body. Our author's opposition to the al-Djubbal sect of the Mutazila was therefore no indication of a total rejection of the Mutakallimum. It was the naturalism of the al-Djubbal that he repudiated, and there is no justification to allude to the author of *Torot ha-Nefesh* as anti-Kalimist.

This brings us to the crucial issue that coalesces both treatises, namely the onslaught against a naturalistic secularism and mechanism by means of personalism. It is only a personalistic scheme projecting subjective man in a state of self-confrontation, who can affirm the reality of a dimension which transcends the phenomenal world. As a contemporary theologian⁶ has pointed out that when we examine man we find a strange contradiction. He appears to be a part of nature, partaking of her ways, subject to her laws, but at the same time he has the capacity to stand aside, to behold, to transcend and to control nature for his own creative purposes. He is the only being who participates in nature and yet by his ability to behold it differs from it rad-

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ically. He is the only phenomenon who appears to be outside the immutable patterns of the natural world as known by science. And although scientific naturalism may argue that any deviation from the uniformity of nature is only a seeming exception which more advanced scientific investigation will disprove, yet when it comes to an examination of the nature of man, naturalistic empiricism is inadequate. For here the very act of self-awareness, when man confronts and recognizes himself as part of nature is already an indication that he is also a free spirit beyond the natural data.

By the same token, Bahya in *Sefer ha-Nefesh* defines philosophy as "man's self knowledge"⁷ which has an organic character of its own and stands in opposition to a naturalism which fails to take into account the realm of the spirit where the self exists in an undefined, developmental situation. Man's spirit is not an accident of the body but a self-subsistent entity surmounting claims to absolute universality of physical law. Similarly in his *Chovot Halevovot*,⁸ he affirms that from the *Olam Katan*, the microcosm, the human species which is the ultimate purpose of the existence of the larger world, we derive evidence of Divine wisdom and design in all Creation. He states:

When we have arrived at an understanding of the matters noted in regard to man much of the mystery of the universe will become clear to us, since the one resembles the other. And thus, some sages declared that philosophy is man's knowledge of himself, that is, knowledge of what has been mentioned in regard to the human being so that through the evidence of Divine wisdom displayed in himself, he will become cognizant of the Creator; as Job said (Job 19:26), "From my flesh, I behold God."

Manifestly, by projecting human personality as a primary datum, the personalist makes two assumptions. One, that the self as a spiritual nature transcends the level of a physical, biological organism and thrusts us into another realm of the spirit. Secondly, it formulates a body of propositions making claims about reality in existential terms eluding fixed mechanistic properties and positing the realizable end and ultimate concerns as absolute and the cohesive integrated whole as real.

What follows is my translation of the first chapter of *Sefer Torot ha-Nefesh* embodying two principles of a philosophy of personalism.

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BAHYA'S SEFER TOROT HA-NEFESH

It is proper for you to know that knowledge of the soul is related to knowledge of the Creator of the soul, may His name be exalted, and its mysteries, subtleties and ramifications. It is possible that you have already delved into many books on this topic and considered different views and various theories on the matter of the soul. One of the philosophers, however, has said already that "philosophy is man's knowledge of his soul"; furthermore, whoever knows his soul better knows his Master better.⁹

Pursuing diligently this matter, I determined with the help of the Creator, may His memory be exalted, after considering and reflecting upon all other schemes that this (personalistic view) is the authentic world view and correct doctrine grounded in logical and speculative proof and upholding our religious heritage and tradition without apologetics or contradictory claims. It is, moreover, independent of any other scheme and pursues its own organic character out of love for the truth and a disposition for righteousness endowing man with superiority as stated in Scriptures, "the way of truth have I chosen"¹⁰ . . . "And snatch not the word of truth out of my mouth, for I wait for thy ordinance."¹¹

Examining the essential doctrines of the externalists, I noted that they are divided into two opposing groups. One group consists of the naturalists and the other of the metaphysicians. I perceived further that most of the notions of the true philosophers are derived from our Torah and its commentaries; while the thought modes of the naturalists contradict Scripture and are at variance with the insights of the metaphysicians.

Subsequently, I inquired into the statutes and modes of thought as delineated in our sacred Torah and discovered that our concepts relating to the soul are in most cases compatible with those of the true philosophers. On the other hand, I noted that not a single scriptural insight nor most of its narratives are in accord with the naturalists, with the exception of the following two sects. One is a sect of an Islamic school called the Mutazila,¹² which was related to Abu Hashim al Djubbal,¹³

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author of a dialectical theory of modes¹⁴ and identified by the name al Djubbali because of the nature of this sect. The other group of Jewish origin is referred to as the Karaites.¹⁵

Now the doctrine of the naturalists is that the soul is a corporeal property and an accident borne by the body and when the latter disintegrates and disappears, its property and accident dissolve with it. There is accordingly, no immortality of the soul after the destruction of the physical organism that bears it. This is the view of one group of the Mutazilites and the Karaites who maintain that inasmuch as the soul is an accident of the body, that when the latter is corrupted its accident shares the same fate.

To be sure those of the Mutazilites who believe in the hereafter hold that at time of the resurrection, God will bring the parts of the body together with its accident, the soul, and will reward or punish them. But there is no point in discussing the nature of the soul in relation to the problem of resurrection, as we are presently not involved in the question of resurrection. Know this!

The opinion of the Bible and the true philosophers is that the soul is a spiritual substance, existing prior to the body and continuing to exist after its dissolution. As a self-subsistent entity it can never happen that the soul disappears even if the body ceases to exist.

Now I found a third doctrine which maintains that the soul comes into existence together with the body but does not disintegrate with the cessation of the body. This is the view of Ibn Sina¹⁶ (Avicenna) and it does not coincide with the Bible and the authentic philosophers who hold that the soul must be prior to the object it is attached to, as the senses precede the object of sense and the intellect the object of apprehension.

I noted however, that in his work *al-Mabda wa-al Maad (The Beginning and the Return)*, Ibn Sina deduced from the Koran the assertion that the soul originates with God and returns to God. This obviously is in agreement with our Scriptures. He writes: "Alas, thy silent soul, return to your Master that thou desirest!" This is similar to Solomon's observation, "And the spirit returneth unto the Lord who gave it."¹⁷ Ibn Sina's further

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statement to the effect, "that the return of the soul will be to the place whence it came," is another indication of his agreement with the Biblical view of the world to come. His own observation, however, with reference to the creation of the soul with the creation of the body which he alludes to in the previously mentioned work does not conform to Biblical doctrine. Know this!

NOTES

1. The translation by I. Broydé has recently been published in a new edition in Israel.
2. M G W J, XLI, p. 241 ff.
3. In the introduction to his Arabic edition, edited 1907. Also Husik and Julius Guttman concur with this opinion in their respective histories on Jewish philosophy.
4. A Zoroastrian sect descendants of the Persians who settled in India in the eighth century to escape Moslem persecution.
5. *TRADITION* — Vol. 7, No. 4.
6. Reinhold Neibhur, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.
7. *Sefer Torot ha-Nefesh*, pp. 3-4.
8. Treatise 5 *Shaar ha behinah*, tr. M. Hyamson, p. 151.
9. The Persian philosopher al-Ghazali's (1059-1111) basic personalistic notions were regarded by Jewish philosophers as closely akin to those of Judaism. Yehuda, editor of the Arabic text of Bahya's *Duties of the Heart* points out, for example, that many passages in Bahya's work are identical in content and expression with similar ones found in Ghazali's work. The latter's tolerance was reflected in his advice to his Islamic brethren to take the pious Jew as their prototype in religious spiritual reverence.
10. Psalms, 119:30.
11. *Ibid.*, 43.
12. The founder of the Mutazila (separatist) was Wasil ibn Ata, who, in the eighth century separated himself from the school of the master and established a school of his own. The movement was based on two principles, freedom of will and the absolute unity of God, calling for a rejection of attributes.
13. Abu Hashim 'Abd al-Salam, was the son of al-Djubbal, d. 321/933. He was a contemporary of al-Ash'ari, and one of the very last Mu'tazila to exercise a direct influence on Sunni thought.

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14. The works of Abu Hashim have not survived. He was known chiefly for his theories of "modes" (*ahwal*), a sort of conceptualism which attempted to resolve the problem of the relationship between the divine attributes and the divine essence. Anxious to safeguard the absolute Unity of God, Abu Hashim made use of the grammatical notion of *hal*, ("state" of the verb in relation to the agent), to define the degree of reality of mental concepts, and then the degree of reality of the divine attributes. The *hal* is the "state" established in our mind by the meaning according to which the idea is received, and it is intermediate "between existence and non-existence." From the human concept to the divine attribute there is thus, for Abu Hashim, a constant interplay between the logical and the metaphysical. See *Encyclopaedia of Islam* V. 2, p. 125.

15. The founder of the Karaitic movement was Anan Ben David, born in Basra, Persia, about 714 c.e., who polemicized against the Rabbinic interpretation of Scriptures and denied the notion of *hasharot ha-nefesh*.

16. Bahya in linking partially Ibn Sina to Abu Hashim apparently accepted the common notion of explaining the semi-conceptualism or mysticism of the former as having been derived from Abu Hashim's thesis.

17. Ecclesiastes, 12:10.