

# FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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## ABRAHAM BAR HIYYA'S PERSONALISM AND METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

Abraham Bar Hiyya<sup>1</sup> is the father of the philosophy of personalism. While Saadia before him as well as Joseph Ibn Zaddick and Moses and Abraham Ibn Ezra expounded their philosophic notions in a personalistic tradition, it was Bar Hiyya who gave full sway to every aspect of this scheme of thought.

According to Bar Hiyya, Judaism came upon the scene to proclaim a new kind of an encounter between man and God. Up to the advent of biblical Judaism, religion was purely naturalistic in origin and content. It projected a God-nature centered universe. Judaism introduced a new dialogue — between man and God. What this implies conceptually is so far-reaching that it endowed Jewish philosophic thought modes with an organic character, as I have indicated in my work, *Judaism As a Philosophy*.

My major concern now, however, is the methodology of Bar Hiyya's personalism. As a scientist and a mathematician, Bar Hiyya was concerned with method as well as content. How to validate religious doctrine and ideological formulations was one of the primary tasks of the philosopher.

To be sure, revelation — interpreted as an historical fact, not merely as a movement of the spirit of God within man or in a secular view, as an intuitive act of intellect — constituted the objective ground for the promulgation of moral judgments and metaphysical insights. But the philosopher sought to establish a rational basis for the truths of revelation.

For Abraham Bar Hiyya, wisdom (*chakhmah*) is identified with the soul of man. *Ki chakhmat ha-adam hi ha-nefesh*. (*Heg. ha-Nefesh* p. 17). What the mind postulates and acquires is accorded objectivity. "Any potential object which wisdom affirms its realization must have already changed to actuality" (*ibid.*, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> Since the ultimate in man's nature is the acquisition of wisdom, the latter constitutes the standard of truth verification.<sup>3</sup> Personalism is the key to philosophic inquiry and methodology:

In the realm of moral behavior, however, Bar Hiyya goes one step further in his methodology. Inasmuch as ethical judgments are of a practical nature,<sup>3</sup> Bar Hiyya maintains that they may be reducible to the concepts of natural science. Ethical

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theory may be regarded as naturalistic<sup>4</sup> for the simple reason that the goals of human behavior are always related to means. There is a moral law in the nature of things corresponding to the natural law. The elimination of war in a nuclear age is not only a moral imperative; it is a natural law which has to do with man's primary urge of self-preservation. Hate is an aberration of the physical laws of nature as well as the moral judgment of the spirit. It is only when man's true rational nature develops to the fullest, that we can apprehend the naturalistic aspects of ethical theory.

What follows is my translation of the last portion of the fourth chapter of Bar Hiyya's *Hegyon ha-Nefesh*. These passages constitute a remarkable contribution to ethical theory and methodology as well as a fresh approach to the concepts of the Messianic era and *Olam Haba*.

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To explain its<sup>5</sup> true meaning<sup>6</sup> we maintain that the verb *shema* "to hear" in the Hebrew language is used in our present context in a three-fold manner. There is first the physical connotation of listening by ear, unrelated to the comprehension of the subject matter, such as "I had only heard of thee by the hearing of the ear" (Job 42:5), "And when Abraham heard that his brother was taken captive" (Gen. 14:14). Secondly the term *shema* connotes obedience to someone's counsel or command, as "And Jacob had obeyed his father and mother" (Gen. 28:7); "And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai" (Gen. 16:3); "And they will hearken unto thy voice" (Ex. 3:18); "Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor shalt thou hearken unto him" (Deut. 13:9). Finally *shema* implies understanding as we find "speak we pray thee unto thy servants in the Syrian language for we understand it" (Is. 37:11); "that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it" (Gen. 41:15), that is to say to apprehend its interpretation. Thus the verb "and hearkenest" in the verse "So that thou returnest unto the Lord thy God and hearkenest unto his voice" (Deut. 30:2) has the third connotation which implies understanding and does not convey acceptance as is its common usage.

Accordingly, when we are told that "the sound of the voice you heard, but any similitude ye saw not save a voice" (Deut.

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4:12), the implication is that the Israelites heard and accepted the voice in its ordinary sense, but failed to see its image with the heart's "eye" and comprehend the form of that voice and its inner meaning except the audible sound, as the verse concludes "there was nothing but a sound."

The voice that emanates from the Omnipotent directed toward the sublunar world possesses either one of two characteristics. It is either in the form of a decree realizable simultaneously with the Almighty's utterance such as the injunction "And God said, let there be light" (Gen. 1:12), as well as the other divine utterances by which the world came into being. Then there is the other aspect, the voice which admonishes and commands, (which is not instantly implemented) as God said to Adam, "Of all the trees of the garden thou mayest freely eat, but of the tree of knowledge, of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it" (Gen. 2:16-17).

We maintain that the Ten Commandments, heard by all the Israelites at Mt. Sinai embraced both aspects of the Almighty's "voice." In the beginning the Israelites heard the voice of admonition implying a state of choice of acceptance and a willingness to be guided by its precepts. Admittedly, the meaning of "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" and the other commandments that follow was in the nature of an injunction and an admonition in this voluntaristic manner persisting from the time of Revelation to the Final Redemption.<sup>7</sup> Thus there were some among them who were receptive to the voice of God and acted properly; others did not. Some were meritorious; others, transgressors. The intention of the Almighty, blessed be His name, however, was to infuse ultimately the commandments with instinctual, involuntaristic fulfillment, so that the injunction "thou shalt have no other gods before me" would leave us no choice but remain forever an utter impossibility. Beginning with the Messianic period the people of Israel will be compelled to accept the Torah in a proper fashion. They will not have the possibility or choice to stray from the Torah, just as all phenomena of creation possess no choice to deviate from the irrevocable laws built into their very structure. Thus all Israelites in the days to come will conduct themselves like the con-

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secrated saints whose conduct we described at the outset of our discussion.

Our scriptural text proceeds to elucidate clearly this matter and its implications. Following the verses quoted above we read: "And the Lord Thy God will circumcise thy heart and the heart of thy seed to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul in order that thou mayest live" (Deut. 30:6). We have here the promise that the Lord will remove the hard crust and the foreskin that prevents us from comprehending the voice of the Lord in its manifold aspects in order "that thou mayest live," in the world-to-come where there is eternal life.

Now in a previous chapter, we read "to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 11:13). The passage concludes by stating: "In order that your days may be multiplied and the days of your children in the land (*ib.*, 21). The implication here is that when you are motivated to love God with all your heart and all your soul because of his commands or when you conduct your affairs as a submission to His will, then the Almighty will cause you to prosper in this world, which because of man's sins has deteriorated from its original course intended for it at the time of creation and made dependent for its prosperity and regeneration upon man's own spiritual transformation. However, when your love of God is derived involuntarily from the Almighty's immutable decree, the world will prosper automatically following its natural course for which it was created irrespective of man's action. Hence, there is left no other form of reward for man's labors except eternal life in the hereafter. That is why the concluding verse refers only to the exclusive reward of the world-to-come, "that thou mayest live" (*ib.*, 30:6), whereas the preceding verses allude to man's reward in this world as we find: "that I will send rain for your land in due season" (*ib.*, 11:14), and concludes with the words "In order that your days will be multiplied" (*ib.*, 21).

You will discover this central theme in the prophecy of Jeremiah when he states: "Behold days are coming, saith the Lord, when I will make with the house of Israel and with the house

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of Judah a new covenant" (Jer. 31:31). The prophet refers to the days of redemption whose advent we hope will be speedily accomplished with God's mercy when all the exiles of Israel and Judea will be delivered. The prophecy continues: "Not like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day that I took hold of them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, in as much they have broken my covenant although I was a lord over them, saith the Lord" (*ib.*, 32). This is to say "they have broken my covenant," because I left the choice of the fear of heaven and the practice of good deeds in their own hands, "and I was a lord over them" implies that they did not fulfill my precepts properly.

The prophet then proceeds: "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," after the present exile, "I will place the law in their inward parts and upon their heart will I write." That is to say that instead of engraving the Law upon tablets of stone as I did for their ancestors, I will inscribe it on the tablets of their hearts to be enshrined forever, never to be forgotten. The prophet then concludes, "And I will be unto them a God and they shall be unto me a people. And they shall not teach any more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother saying, know the Lord, for they shall know me, from the least of them even unto their greatest, saith the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and their sin will I not remember any more" (*ib.*, 32-33).

You will find the implication of this comforting message in the promise that the Holy One will destroy the evil inclination and stamp it out from the world so that all believers will have faith in God and from their infancy to old age. The Almighty will moreover forgive all the sins of the ancients from Adam on, as He proceeds to improve man's heart that was evil from childhood.

The same theme is expounded by Ezekiel in a different version when he declares: "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone out of your body and I will give you a heart of flesh. And my spirit will I put within you and I will cause that you shall walk in my statutes and my ordinances ye shall keep and do them" (Ez. 36:26-27). In the first verse the prophet makes reference

to God's double endowment to men of "a new heart and a new spirit" which they possessed previously in a different manner and in another form. He then proceeds to describe the old heart beat which he will remove from their flesh as a heart of stone. Comp. "and I will remove the heart of stone out of your body" (*ibid*).

It is well now to inquire in what way the hearts of people in this world may be compared to stone. We know that every limb of the body when stimulated to perform its proper function requires no special training or guidance. For it performs its function naturally for the specific purpose for which it was created. We say, for instance, that God created feet for walking, the hand to grasp and lead, the ear to hear, the eye to see, the heart to understand and to reason. Thus every limb comes into being to be useful to man in a specific manner and fulfill its appointed task every time man requires it. Not a single limb requires training or repeated action for its prescribed task except the human heart which cannot implement its specific assignment without prior guidance, prompting or training from which it acquires a faculty or a spirit to understand, to guide itself as well as the other faculties of the body that depend upon it. Now this spirit that it acquires may be either good or evil, and will determine the leanings of the heart which will likewise turn out to be either good or bad. In this respect then, the heart is likened unto a stone for the latter cannot move by itself from one place to another, nor change its form but depends upon man's will for its movement and the change of its form. Likewise, the heart has not the capacity to rule over its acquired spirit or alter its course but rather follows the dictates of the latter. This is unlike the other limbs of the body that require no external pressure, but are controlled and activated by the original potential with which they are endowed. This is why the prophet compares the heart to a stone, for indeed in its present state, it must be referred to as a stone. However, when the Holy One, blessed be He, will remove from the heart the characteristics of a stone and endow it with the qualities of the other limbs of the body to control the faculties implanted in them, then He will allude to the heart with the appellation of "flesh," similar to the other limbs

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of the body as it is written “and I will give you a heart of flesh” (*ib.*).

Now it is significant that the prophet does not describe for us the nature of the form of the old spirit that is being removed as a substitute for the new spirit, as He delineated previously the nature of the old heart which is referred to as a stone. The reason for that is because the spirit which the heart acquires in this world is not a self-existent entity at the time of its creation but something that enters from without and develops through constant training and habitual practice. Or to put it a different way, we might say that the spirit is a potential which may be actualized by habitual practices and constant development. At the time of Redemption, the Holy One will act upon this spirit in the hearts of His people which heretofore existed potentially as a force for both good and evil and he will actualize it as an exclusive force for good as we read “and my spirit will I put within you” meaning, my good and upright spirit. The heart will then act upon this spirit in the same manner as the other limbs without necessary recourse to special training as was the case formerly.

It is further written: “And I will cause that you shall walk in my statutes and my ordinances ye shall keep and do them” (*ib.*). This indicates that while the fear of God, the worship of his name and righteous conduct were formerly only in a state of potentiality, the Holy One will henceforth implant them unremittingly in the hearts of men, leaving them no choice for deviation. At the Messianic era all the people of Israel as well as the proselytes who will live at that time, as we derived from the Scriptural verses interpreted before, will pursue one mode of conduct with a sense of consecration and reverence. They will implement automatically the precepts enshrined on the tablets of their hearts and articulated orally and consequently all transactions of this mundane world will be conducted in an equitable fashion. Supporting evidence of this is apparent to any student versed in Scriptures such as the verse “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18). This precept will be practiced and fulfilled by all inhabitants of the world at the time of redemption. Moreover, when all people will love one another as themselves,

envy, hatred and greed, which are the cause of wars and strife in the world, will disappear. That is why the prophet envisions the Messianic era as a period when: "And they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation" (Mic. 4:3). The observance of this precept alone protects us from five prohibitions that constitute the foundations for the other injunctions of the Torah starting with the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" until the end of the Decalogue.

NOTES

1. Abraham bar Hiyya was born in Soria, Spain in 1065. As a member of the Zerubbabel family, he occupied a high position at one of the Moslem Courts. He was held in high esteem by several rulers on account of his astronomical knowledge. Together with his contemporary, Abraham Ibn Ezra, he was a disciple of R. Moshe ha-Darshan, who as a teacher was noted for his vast erudition in talmudic and worldly culture. Bar Hiyya, however, surpassed his Jewish contemporaries in scientific knowledge as is evidenced by the fact that he assisted other scholars in their translation of scientific works and some of his own writings, such as the fifth chapter of *Megillat ha-Megalleh*, which was translated into Latin and French and widely used as source material on the astronomy of his day. In addition, he stood preeminent as the first scholar to write original philosophic and scientific works in Hebrew. His works are quoted profusely by his successors especially Maimonides who referred to him as "one of the most brilliant minds of Spain." For a critical study of his philosophic works and his contribution to Jewish thought, the reader may turn to my work, "*Judaism As A Philosophy*" published by B.R.G.S., Yeshiva University.

2. כי כל החלקים אשר החכמה נותנת להוציאם אל גוף המעשה כבר יצאו מן הכח אל המעשה.

3. Ethics is not only concerned with the question, what is the good? It also asks, how can I be good? How can I develop good behavior patterns?

4. Modern philosophy tends to classify ethical theory into emotive, non-naturalistic and naturalistic. A theory is defined as emotive if it contends that moral judgments are neither true nor false but are merely expressive of the feelings of those who utter them and arouse the feeling of those who hear them. A theory is non-naturalistic if it holds ethical judgments to be true or false but not reducible to any natural science. An ethical theory is naturalistic if it holds both that moral judgments are true and false and reducible to the concepts of natural science.

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5. Bar Hiyya refers to the meaning of God's voice in the verse "And thou shalt return unto the Lord thy God and hearken unto his voice" (Deut. 30:2).

6. Bar Hiyya employs the term **מעם** in three different ways: (a) meaning — *Megillat ha-Megalleh* 49.; (b) proposition — *Sefer ha-Mishichah V'ha-Tishbo-ret* 11.8; (c) argument — *Sefer ha-Ibbur* 75.

7. The redemption of Israel will be marked by this transformation of the heart from a state of ability to choose between right and wrong, to a state of moving irrevocably to the right and of unremitting service of God. In *Megillat ha-Megalleh*, Bar Hiyya attempts to find through exegetic computation the year of redemption. He cites the following possibilities: 4790, 5118, 5208 (M.M. 46, 83, 107, 151).

8. Like other ancient and medieval philosophers, Bar Hiyya assumed that the heart was the seat of reason and understanding.