

Chovot Halevavot – or More? The Philosophy of R' Bachya

By Rabbi Moshe Becker

The 11th century heralded a new era in the realm of Jewish thought. Over the course of the 10th century the nexus of Jewish intellectual activity moved from Babylonia, where it had been for several centuries, to Europe; primarily Muslim Spain. The new reality provided new opportunities for Jewish scholarship; interaction with Islam and Christianity created a niche for literary works explaining, and often justifying, the Jewish religion. The corpus of literature available to us from the medieval “Rishonim” includes many such works and their significance is no smaller than those of the legal and exegetical genre.

The focus of this essay is the work of R' Bachya Ben Yosef Ibn Paquda, author of *Torat Chovot Halevavot*, in the original Arabic *Kitab al-Hidaya ila Faraid al-Qulub*, otherwise known as (*The Guide to*) *The Duties of the Heart*.

Very little biographical information is available about the book or its author. The date of the book's appearance has long been debated; however a consensus of sorts has put the year at approximately

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

1080⁶. Nothing is known to us about the author, other than that he was a *Dayan* (Judge)⁷, and likely lived in Saragossa⁸. We are also aware of several *piyyutim* which are ascribed to R' Bachya, some published and others in remaining in manuscript.

Although *Chovot Halevavot* is an extremely popular book, its uniqueness is best appreciated in its historical context. Few books merited such wide readership or became a Torah “classic” alongside the *Mishna*, *Gemara* and works of *Halacha* as *Chovot Halevavot* did. Following its first translation to Hebrew shortly after its publication in Arabic, it was translated over the generations into virtually every language read by Jews throughout the world. Over nearly 1000 years *Chovot Halevavot* has remained a classic text for the student seeking the path to internal growth and development. It is easy to forget that *Chovot Halevavot* was the *first* such work, and marks a distinct development in Jewish thought, as the author initiated an entirely new type of literature – and to a certain degree, even practice – into the Jewish world.

6 The accepted date, which appears in one early manuscript, had always been 1040. However certain scholars based on similarities in the book to the works of the Arabic philosopher Al-Ghazali, put 1105 as the date, the earliest that an author could have been influenced by the main work of Al-Ghazali. In 1927 P. Kokowzoff published an article proving that the date could be no later than the last third of the 11th century, based on a statement by Moses Ibn Ezra in a manuscript he discovered. (The Date of Life of Bachya ibn Paqoda, Warsaw: 1927).

For a resolution regarding the similarities to Al-Ghazali see D.S. Baneth, “M’kor Meshutaf l’R’ Bachya bar Yosef v’Algazali” in Magnes Anniversary Book [Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1938] pp. 23-30.

7 The first translation from Arabic to Hebrew was by R’ Yehuda Ibn Tibbon in the late 12th century. In the translator’s introduction, he refers to the author as “Dayyan”.

8 L. Zunz, “La Patria de Bachya ibn Paqoda” in Sefarad XI (1951) pp. 103-105. For a synopsis of much of the discussion regarding the fragments of information about R’ Bachya’s life see S.W. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews, [New York: Columbia University Press, 1958] p. 303, note 11 and p. 312, note 23.

The author conveys his intent in the introduction: To fill a gap he perceived in Torah literature; a book dealing with the non-physical obligations of the Torah. As he points out, those preceding him had already authored works on the Torah and the Prophets, had created compendiums of the Mitzvot, and R' Saadia's philosophical-theological works set out to prove the validity of the Jewish religion. He looked to these books to see where they address the "concealed obligations":

"Perusing these books and finding not a single one of them dedicated to the science of the Mitzvot which involve the mind, I realized that the study of this science had somehow been abandoned, and not a single book had been written to set down its principles. It was a field left fallow and no one had compiled it in such a way as to include all the parts."⁹

Following this, R' Bachya goes to great lengths to establish the actual existence of such obligations, based on the dictates of reason, Scripture, and tradition. He sought to address the lack of a book delineating and explaining the internal obligation, and he indeed did so in a most systematic and organized fashion. Throughout the book, including the introduction justifying its need, R' Bachya demonstrates an extremely thorough methodology; he is the perfect teacher guiding the student through the steps necessary for growth in these areas.

The warm piety which the author expresses while addressing this gap in Torah literature caused his book to become immensely popular. However, the devotional nature of Chovot Halevavot is not its only unique aspect. Chovot Halevavot was not written as a theoretical presentation of the philosophy of Judaism, and would have been a highly significant work even if R' Bachya had not addressed the fundamental areas of Jewish philosophy. As a result it is easy to

⁹ Chovot Halevavot, Introduction. All translations are adapted from the translation of Y. Feldman, *The Duties of the Heart* [Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996]

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

overlook the fact that R' Bachya was one of the first medieval Jewish philosophers. In fact, Chovot Halevavot contains many of the foundations upon which the more theoretical works of other Rishonim were built.

In addition to being a Torah scholar of stature, fully versed in Talmudic literature, R' Bachya was educated in the philosophy and the sciences of his time, which he makes frequent references to. He was heavily influenced by Neo-Platonist mysticism¹⁰ and Sufi¹¹ teachings, yet there is no conflict between the “foreign” elements and the traditional sources in his writings. Our author was for the most part a strict traditionalist; yet he made ample use of the insights available in other sources.

This essay will focus on R' Bachya's attitudes and philosophy regarding human reason, Divine unity and attributes of God, and free will. It is these areas in which he made a significant contribution to Jewish philosophy, though his originality can be seen in other discussions too; not to mention the entire enterprise of writing a book on the “duties of the heart”. Since the three aforementioned topics are all connected to some degree, it is not possible to treat them as entirely separate; a clear picture is only possible when viewing all the parts as a whole.¹²

10 Primarily in his positions regarding the transcendence of God and the need for negative attributes, which will be discussed later, as well as the spiritual nature of the soul and its “desire” to reconnect with God's light.

11 Sufism is a mystic Islamic tradition which began in the 8th century and developed considerably in the 10th and 11th centuries. Many of the concepts found in Chovot Halevavot are similar to those found in Sufi writings, and the illustrations are often identical. For the most part this affinity is in the areas of asceticism and how the soul experiences God, these issues are not addressed in the essay.

12 I am for the most part leaving the devotional aspects, including the important aspect of R' Bachya's asceticism, out of this essay.

Most of what can be considered proper philosophy is found in the first section of the book “Shaar Hayichud” – “The Gate of Oneness”-, where R' Bachya discusses God’s existence. However some important insights, as well as the general context of the book, are found in the introduction.

Human Reason

R' Bachya begins his introduction with an ode of sorts to wisdom. Wisdom – reason, is a supreme gift to mankind:

The greatest of all the good things the Creator gave His servants, humankind, after He gave them full consciousness and awareness, was wisdom. It is the life of their spirits and the light of their intellects. It enables them to fulfill God’s will and to be sheltered from His ire, both in this world and the next. As the verse says, “For God gives wisdom, from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding”...¹³

Without the ability to cognize, evaluate, investigate and reach conclusions, man would be unable to recognize his role in the world and understand God’s message to him.

The three types of wisdom which human reason is able to grasp are: 1) the natural world, which includes physics and chemistry, 2) the logical sciences such as mathematics and music, 3) and *Eloket*; theology, the Torah, and the workings of the soul and mind. These fields are beneficial and necessary for both the physical and the

13 Chovot Halevavot, Introduction

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

spiritual aspects of existence, and their study is required for success in both spheres¹⁴.

The Torah wisdom has two parts to it; the “obligations of the limbs” – the physical Mitzvot, and the “obligations of the heart” – the internal responsibilities such as self-perfection and proper worship of God¹⁵. It is to the latter category that R' Bachya devotes his work, although it should not be understood that he in any way intended to minimize the importance of the physical obligations¹⁶.

Everything then is considered wisdom and should be studied and examined as a discipline, including the obligations of the heart. R' Bachya carries this rational approach over to the realm of God's existence, as we shall see presently.

Necessity of rational proof for God's existence

The first step, and the foundation upon which the structure of self-perfection is to be built according to R' Bachya, is the acceptance of God's unity. *Shaar Hayichud*, the first Gate of the ten Gates of Chovot Halevavot is thus dedicated to this theme. In this Gate the author insists that an individual seeking to begin serving God properly, must start with a rational acceptance of God's existence and His unity – a

14 The same categorization was made by R' Saadia, *Emunot V'deot*, V, 73.

15 The distinction between duties of the heart and duties of the limbs may itself have been adapted from Islamic sources. Some of the earliest Sufi writers, Hasan al-Basri (8th century) and al-Muhasibi (781-857), spoke about a “science of the heart” and the need for consonance between action and intention. See introduction to Arabic edition of *Chovot Halevavot* edited by A.S. Yahuda [Leiden: 1912] for a more detailed discussion.

16 Unlike Graetz, who writes that R' Bachya indeed considered outward physical Mitzvot to be far less important than holiness of purpose, (*History of the Jews*, III, pp. 271-273).

concept which R' Bachya explains at length. In this section, we also find the doctrine of the Divine attributes.

The starting point for service of God, must obviously be belief in His existence. However, R' Bachya points out that mere belief is neither sufficient nor desirable in and of itself. Only rational conclusion can indeed be considered “acceptance of God’s unity”. He then describes four categories of people who affirm God’s oneness: 1) The young and illiterate, who merely say God is one without any in depth understanding. 2) Those who say God is one based on a tradition they received. They are like a row of blind men following someone with sight; if the first stumbles they all fall, likewise these people are susceptible to arguments against their faith¹⁷. 3) Individuals who have actually come to a rational conclusion regarding His existence, but do not understand the different kinds of oneness¹⁸. 4) Those who say God is one after knowing and feeling based on rational proofs they have established and a thorough understanding of the concept of oneness.

R' Bachya insists that as a prerequisite for serving God and setting out on the path of fulfilling religious obligations, we must not only believe in God, but actually engage in rational investigation and come to an understanding of His existence and unity. Although he then sets forth proofs for the creation of the world and God’s existence, it would seem that he does not want the reader to merely read the book and accept his arguments; such a reader would fall into the second group of people¹⁹. Each individual must investigate independently, and reach the proofs that seem the most reasonable to them. This would run contrary to Rambam’s approach, whereby only certain methods are acceptable, and improper methodology is deplored even

17 The same comparison is made by the Ikhwan al-Safa. J. Guttman, *The Philosophies of Judaism*, [Northvale, NJ]: J. Aronson, 1988] p. 425, n 70.

18 And therefore they are lacking as they cannot accept His “unity”.

19 See Y. Feldman, *op cit.* p. 19 n. 10.

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

where the conclusion is identical. Thus Rambam devotes several chapters to dismantling the proofs of the Kalam²⁰ which he thought were incorrect, although the latter – like Rambam - were attempting to prove God's existence²¹.

The need for a thorough rational investigation into the matter of God's existence is supported, like all important matters, by reason, scripture, and tradition. Reason dictates that one, who is capable of delving into the matter but neglects to do so, is intellectually and functionally lax; comparable to a sick person who has the knowledge and ability to discover the cure to his illness and refrains from doing so. The *passuk* “*V'yadata hayom v'hashevota el l'vavecha*” (“Know today and affirm it upon your heart”)²², instructs us to *know* that God is the L-rd in heaven etc. Knowing is only possible through rational understanding; blind faith – belief does not qualify as knowledge. Additionally, the *passuk* “*Ki hi chochmatchem u'binatchem l'einei ha'amim*” (“Because it is your wisdom and insight in the eyes of the nations”)²³, declares that a Jew's acceptance of Torah and observance of Mitzvot is a sign of wisdom which shall be apparent to the nations of the world. It is inconceivable that the Torah expected that pure (blind) faith would be a reflection of wisdom and insight. Additionally, our sages instructed that we should know what to respond to the

20 Kalam generally refers to the Muslim schools of philosophy and theology in the middle ages. Many of their doctrines and methods were considered “popular” as opposed to scientific, lacking true philosophical reasoning. Several early Jewish philosophers, including R' Saadia, clearly aligned themselves with the Kalam, while others, like R' Bachya can be viewed as being on the periphery and only drew certain ideas from Kalam.

21 Moreh Nevuchim II, 8, 19

22 Devarim 4:39

23 Devarim 4:6

heretic²⁴; clearly a thorough understanding of the subject is necessary if one is to engage in dialogue with a non-believer.

The above notwithstanding, and despite R' Bachya's respect for the capabilities of the human mind, a major qualification to the elevated status of man's intellect is stated before R' Bachya gives us his proof for God's existence. Unlike any other area where the probing of our intellect is unrestricted; in the realm of theology we are not allowed to ask what, how or why God is, rather we may only ask *if* he exists.

Proof of God

R' Bachya first sought to prove that the world came into existence at one point in time, as opposed to the position that the world exists eternally. Once we have established the fact of creation, we can infer the existence of a Creator. The proof R' Bachya uses is actually a combination of premises and arguments which are often offered as independent proofs.

Three premises

The first of what R' Bachya considers three premises necessary to prove God is the fact that nothing can create itself. This conclusion can be reached via simple logic; an object cannot create itself before it exists, and after it exists it is too late - there is nothing to create. Thus, if we can establish the world's coming into existence, we can take the next step and assume a divine Creator.

The second premise is: causes are necessarily limited in number, and must lead back to a first cause before which there was no beginning.

24 Avot 2:14

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

This is established by adducing the following argument regarding infinity: Something infinite cannot be broken down into parts, because a part is a “measure that is removed from a whole which is defined by the sum of its parts”²⁵. If we were to imagine removing a part of something infinite, we would have to say that the part removed is smaller than the remainder, but both are infinite and there can be two infinite things of different sizes, which is impossible. Similarly, if the world were infinite, nothing new could be happening as that would be adding to infinity, which is equally unreasonable. When we look at any sequence of time in history, we are viewing something finite, so existence must be finite. If existence is finite it must have a cause or series of causes leading back to an ultimate first cause.²⁶

The concept of a first cause originates with Aristotle and in its fully developed form serves as an independent proof of God. R' Bachya preceded the developments of Avicenna, Averroes, and other medieval Aristotelians who clarified the concept; he uses it as a step towards his own proof of the existence of God.²⁷

The third premise is the assertion that since everything composite must be made of two things preceding it²⁸, a composite such as our

25 R' Bachya quotes this from Euclid's Geometry at the beginning of the 5th discourse.

26 This is known as the impossibility of an infinite number and an infinite regress of causes. A response is offered to the problem of an infinite number by Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim I, 75) in the name of Alfarabi: The problem of an infinite number is only valid when the series exists in actuality; since the previous individuals, for instance, only continue to exist “in imagination” and never together with the continuation, the absurdity of an infinite number does not apply. See H. Davidson, Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987] p. 128.

27 See H. Davidson, op cit. Chapter XI.

28 One thing can be said to precede another in several ways. See Aristotle, Categories 12.

world cannot possibly be infinite. At this stage R' Bachya seems to be alluding to a proof of God from the composition of the universe which appears as early as Philoponus²⁹, and may have even been prompted by Aristotle or Plato³⁰. According to this proof the fact of composition indicates a series of causes³¹, and the eternal cannot have a cause. This reasoning assumes that if something is causally prior, such as the components of a composite³², it must also be temporally prior. Therefore, anything that has a cause must necessarily come in to existence after that cause. R' Bachya seems to accept this logic, however we will see shortly that in the formulation of his own proof he combines another concept which hints at a different understanding.

Applying the aforementioned premises, R' Bachya enjoins the reader to observe the world surrounding him and to appreciate its functioning and perfection. All aspects of the world work together in harmony, designed for the good and well-being of man. Even elements that by nature are at odds with each other co-exist in the composition of the universe. Furthermore, these elements exhibit this complexity within themselves; they are all made of matter and form. It has been established that nothing can create itself and that there cannot be an infinite number of causes; therefore we have clear evidence of a divine Creator, who created the universe and the elements of which it is comprised and who is truly prior to everything.

R' Bachya then proceeds to ridicule those who suggest the world came into being on its own without a Creator. Would such an

29 Alexandrian philosopher and one of the early critics of Aristotle. Lived ca. 490–ca. 570.

30 H. Davidson, *op cit.* p. 146

31 Because the parts must have preceded the composite.

32 “Causally prior” : The composite is dependant upon it’s parts for it’s existence; hence the components can be called prior. “Temporally prior”: Preceding in time.

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

individual believe that an irrigation wheel came into existence without having been designed and manufactured, or that a piece of literature was composed of some ink accidentally splattered on paper?³³ Such a suggestion would be scoffed at; the universe, which is far more subtle and complicated and reflects the wisdom and perfection of a divine Creator, should certainly be viewed as something that must have a Designer and Creator.

What did R' Bachya consider the actual proof?

To prove the existence of God, R' Bachya combined the following ideas: An infinite series of causes is impossible, composition in general implies creation, co-existence of contrary elements implies a restraining force, and the perfection of the universe as a whole reflects the wisdom of a Designer. R' Bachya's main focus of proof is the idea of creation versus eternity of the universe; in fact he concludes his proof by saying that he has disproved the theory of eternity of the universe³⁴. This follows the standard Kalam procedure, which was to prove the existence of God by establishing the creation of the world, and to infer from creation the existence of a Creator³⁵. It was considered self-evident that what comes into being must have a creator. In R' Bachya's first premise, he reasoned that nothing can create itself, it then follows that anything that comes into existence must have an external cause. Following the standard formula, all that remains is to prove that the world could not have been eternal and must have come into existence at some point; we can then infer the existence of the Creator.

Despite the fact that he is using Kalam arguments to prove God, R' Bachya introduces a line of thought which was not needed to complete the argument he was constructing from the three premises.

33 Both of these examples appear already in Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II

34 End of Ch. 6

35 H. Davidson, *op cit.* p. 154

The teleological theme which appears as R' Bachya instructs the reader to look about him and appreciate the purposefulness of the universe is foreign to the Kalam origins of his proof. It is no longer only the fact of composition that we are using as evidence of creation, but also the beauty, grandeur and perfect functioning of the cosmos as a whole, which are testimony to a perfect Designer. The Ikhwan al-Safa³⁶ use a teleological theme to prove God, and its usage by R' Bachya could be due to their influence. Alternatively, another work which has been suggested as being one of R' Bachya sources, the *K. al-Dala'il*³⁷, makes extensive use of the teleological argument³⁸. Another author suggests that in fact R' Bachya was not following the method of inferring Creator from creation; and since the three premises only prove that world came into existence in time, he introduced the design aspect to supplement the missing link – the intelligence and will of a Creator³⁹.

It is likely however that in the context of Chovot Halevavot, R' Bachya saw a particular advantage in advancing this line of thought. As noted, Chovot Halevavot is not intended as a theoretical work. Its primary goal is to guide the reader in realizing his religious responsibilities in the realm of the heart, mind, and soul. Although this section of the book is devoted to a rational presentation proving the existence of God, the author nevertheless saw fit to encourage

36 Literally “Brethren of Purity”, were an obscure group of Arabic philosophers that functioned in Basra, Iraq sometime in the 10th century, and composed a 52 volume encyclopedia of knowledge, known as the *Rasa'il*, including a large section on philosophy which has a strong Neo-Platonist flavor. The Neo-Platonist influence in Chovot Halevavot is attributed by many to the writings of the Ikhwan al-Safa.

37 See D.S. Baneth, “M'kor Meshutaf l'R' Bachya bar Yosef v'Algazali” in *Magnes Anniversary Book* [Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1938] pp. 23-30.

38 H. Davidson, *op cit.* pp. 219-228

39 S. B. Ohrbach, *Amudei Hamachshava Hayisraelit - Chamesh Dmuyot B'philosofia*, [Jerusalem: Hahistadrut Hatziyonit Haolamit, 1993] p. 113

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

the reader to be overwhelmed and inspired by the beauty seen in the world. We know that R' Bachya was not interested in mere inspiration as a basis for religious activity, yet he wished to point out, even in the context of rational demonstration⁴⁰, how the entire universe seems to have been specifically engineered for man's use and to encourage the religious devotion which comes as a natural result of that realization.

Creation ex nihilo

Another point regarding R' Bachya's proofs of God and creation, is that he claims to have proven creation ex nihilo. The proof from composition, however, only proves the creation of our universe – not creation *ex nihilo*⁴¹. For whatever reason, R' Bachya chose not to address the various possible permutations of this question.⁴²It is possible that he felt no need to go beyond proving the existence of an external force who fashioned the world. Due to the fact that once we accept the existence of a Divine will within whose power it is to affect change in the universe, our acceptance of His Torah must follow.

R' Bachya has established, based on rational demonstration, that the world is created by a divine Creator. Acceptance of Gods unity, the first obligation in Chovot Halevavot, presupposes not only accepting the existence of a divine Creator, but also an intellectual grasp of His oneness, which R' Bachya develops along similar rational lines.

40 In the second gate “Shaar HaBechina” he regards this “reflection” as an outright obligation.

41 D. Kaufmann, Die Theologie des Bachja ibn Pakuda, [Wien: K. Gerold, 1874] p. 48 n. 1

42 As opposed to Rambam who discussed the viability of the various opinions of Plato, Aristotle and the traditional approach of Chazal.

Unity

The author presents us with a list of reasons why logic dictates there can only be one God. First, we observe in all areas that the number of causes is always smaller than the number of effects. Therefore, if we reduce everything in the world to two primary antecedents, matter and form, it follows that their cause is a smaller number, namely one. Secondly, the wisdom one can observe in creation bears the mark of one designer; if there were more than one we would expect to see cross-purposes in the functions of the world. The use of the teleological theme again is characteristic of R' Bachya's religious philosophy, and would seem to lend support to the suggestion made earlier that R' Bachya wished to awaken a sense of awe in the reader, and so encouraged him to reflect upon the workings of the Creator. Thirdly, the existence of one creator satisfies the demands of the investigation into the creation of the world; it is logically improper to assume anything more than absolutely necessary⁴³. Fourth, the existence of multiple creators implies boundaries; one created this, the second created that, etc. Boundaries imply finitude, as that which is infinite cannot have boundaries. It has already been established that since there cannot be an infinite regress of causes, the first cause of the universe, by definition cannot be finite.

With the exception of the teleological argument, these proofs all follow the Kalam method of proving the unity of God, which R' Saadia followed as well. R'Bachya now switches to a different type of argument, that of pure theoretical reasoning, which marks the transition of his philosophy to Neo-Platonism.

43 An objection that can be raised to this logic is that absence of a proof is not proof of non-existence. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim I, 75. See H. Davidson, op cit. p. 170.

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

The fifth point is based on Euclid's definition of "one": "The state of being which allows someone to refer to something as one"⁴⁴. Meaning, the concept of oneness must exist before anything in the world can be called one, just as the concept of heat must exist before anything can be considered hot. Furthermore, we can see that plurality must be preceded by unity; plurality – any number – must be multiples of one. The source of all things then must also be a true unity, for it precedes everything; conceptually and actually. As noted this is a Neo-Platonist idea, which R' Bachya in all likelihood took from the Ikhwan al-Safa⁴⁵. The sixth point is related to this idea: Plurality is a property (otherwise known in philosophy as an "accident") modifying an essence⁴⁶; it is inappropriate to assign a property - or a description of any sort - to the Creator of all essences, who is beyond description or any comparison to His creations.

The final proof that there can only be one creator is the argument that a need for multiple creators undermines the abilities of a creator: If one could have created everything by itself, the others are superfluous and, essentially there is only one. If on the other hand, the others are needed that implies a weakness in each, and weakness implies a finite amount of strength and capability – an unacceptable conclusion with respect to the Creator. Additionally, the work would never be completed as the creators would disagree over the manner in which things should be done.⁴⁷

44 Elements, Ch. VI

45 J. Guttman, The Philosophies of Judaism [Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1988] p. 106 and G. Vajda, "Bachya ben Josef Ibn Pakuda" entry in Encyclopedia Judaica [Jerusalem: 1972]

46 A person, a stone – refers to an essence or body, the assignation "two" describes something about the bodies, just as "big" would be a descriptive term regarding one body.

47 An objection to the last point, that two creators would interfere with each other or be mutually exclusive, can be raised. Might not there exist two (or more) creators

R'Bachya concludes this section with a return to the observation that the universe is a perfect, complete creation which functions properly. This can only be the handiwork of one creator, for any type of governance is only possible under one individual. To support this assertion, R' Bachya quotes Aristotle: "Plurality in leadership is not good"⁴⁸ and Shlomo Hamelech who says: "When the earth is sinful, it has a lot of officers"⁴⁹.

Oneness

R' Bachya has demonstrated that the world could only have originated with one creator; now he seeks to differentiate between the concept of oneness as we think of it regarding most things in our world, and what he refers to as "true oneness". While he alluded to the idea in the context of proving that the world could only have one creator, he did not stress its significance as he does now.

As stated earlier, something can only be called one after the concept of oneness exists. Once the concept exists, there are two ways in which something can be called one. The first is the more common usage; when "one" is a property of an essence or "circumstantial oneness". This use of the term is used to describe something that in fact has many parts to it; the common factor among those parts allows them to collectively be called one, or one of something. For example: One person is really made of many, many components; however since together they form a unit we can refer to him as

who agree and would not interfere with each other? The response is that the argument does not assume that these two creators will disagree; the fact that they can disagree is the point. In the event that there would be a conflict only the one who has the ability to execute its will can reasonably be considered the creator. See H. Davidson op cit. p. 168

48 Metaphysics, XII, originates from Homer.

49 Mishlei 28:2

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

“one”. But since his arm or heart (or any part) can also be referred to as “one”, we realize that in truth he is an amalgam of many “ones” that can be isolated from each other. Only when viewed in a certain context is the term “one” used to describe the composite human being; hence “one” is merely a circumstantial property and does not say anything about the essence it describes.⁵⁰

The other type of “circumstantial one” is something that appears not to be comprised of individual parts; nevertheless since it is made of matter and form and is subject to change it cannot be considered “one” in the true sense. Anything subject to change cannot truly be called “one”; since after the change it is a different “one” than it was before. The use of “one” to describe such a body is incidental; a convenient way of viewing it, but really it is temporary, not the “true one” we are looking for, which R' Bachya now turns to.

True oneness can also be divided into two categories; abstract or reality. The number one is an abstract concept; it is the beginning of all numbers. This type of one always refers to a true beginning, a first, such as we find in Bereishit: “It was evening, it was morning; one day”. The *passuk* used “one” instead of “first” to teach us that the number one always describes a beginning. A number therefore is defined as “an amalgam of separate units”⁵¹. A number – not the object being counted - is an instance of “true oneness” since it has no composition. This type of oneness, although “true”, is abstract because it is a concept not tangible by any of the senses, even when the object being counted is.

50 Other examples would be: An army battalion can be called “one”, though it is made up of many individuals who may in fact have nothing in common other than the fact of their belonging to the same battalion. A quart is the name of a unit describing a certain quantity; one quart is comprised of many parts. Both of these are units are made up of multiples and can themselves also be part of a larger unit; therefore the designation “one” is entirely incidental and temporary.

51 Euclid, Elements Ch. VII.

The true definition of ‘oneness’, manifests itself as being “concrete” and tangible; the oneness of God, is something entirely different. It is not composed of multiple parts, or subject to change of any kind. It is so entirely different from anything we experience that it cannot be described in physical terms, and it does not possess any of the qualities which cause things to change or act in conjunction with anything else. True oneness is the root of all plurality, as R' Bachya explained earlier, and has no beginning and no end; as those events would require a change which indicates plurality.

The question can then be asked, perhaps our use of “one” to describe God is also merely a property modifying His Essence. The response is that in fact our use of oneness to describe God is a negation of any plurality, increase or change in Him; and indeed we cannot describe Him in any way.

Oneness of God

Following the abovementioned distinction between circumstantial, temporary oneness and true oneness, R' Bachya proceeds to prove that the Creator considered one in the true sense; and consequently incomparable to anything else in human experience.

As discussed earlier, we know that plurality must always be preceded by a unity; since plurality is many units of one. Our world is a composite; many parts joined into one i.e. plurality turned singular. Since oneness must exist before plurality, it follows that the source of all things in the world is one in the true sense of the definition.

Secondly, that which is merely a property in one entity is actually the essence of another. Heat for example, is a property of hot water, but is the essence of fire. Moisture which is the essence of water is only a property of wet things. Similarly, oneness, which we have said is a property when referring to things in our world, must exist somewhere as an essence. The source of all things then is the essence

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

of oneness, from which is derived any possible use of oneness as a property. Since any “temporary” physical use of oneness derives its meaning from a true essential oneness, and as it has been demonstrated that all things flow from an ultimate Source; that Ultimate Source and the essential oneness can be identified as one and the same.

The likely source from which R' Bachya drew this precise formulation is Plotinus, the father of Neo-Platonism, who stressed the teaching that God is a supreme, transcendent One, containing no division or multiplicity, and is beyond all categories of being or non-being. “Being” as we understand it is defined via the human experience, which God is beyond. As the works of Plotinus himself were not translated to Arabic, R' Bachya's native tongue, the Ikhwan al-Safa, who drew heavily from Neo-Platonist philosophy, was probably his more immediate source. These ideas are certainly in synch with the prohibition of likening God to anything, albeit extended to the farthest possible conceptual understanding and application of the prohibition. This particular formulation though, can be considered an original contribution to the world of Jewish thought.⁵²

R' Bachya has arrived at a truly Neo-Platonist conception of God, accordingly God is the absolute unity which precedes all plurality, just as the abstract idea of the number one precedes all numbers. Consequently God has become very far removed from human perception. Any concept we would use to try to describe or understand Him will necessarily come from within our physical world and will be incorrect and thus a violation of His oneness.

52 It is unclear if R' Bachya was preceded by R' Shlomo ibn Gabirol or not. The latter's work has a far more sophisticated Neo-Platonism, and emphasizes the transcendence of God and the impossibility of describing Him in greater philosophical detail.

Divine Attributes

We now have a problem. R' Bachya has meticulously differentiated between the temporary, circumstantial oneness of physical things and the true essential oneness of God. The latter oneness precludes any type of multiplicity or internal composition, as well as any type of change. How then can we speak about God in any way? Almost any statement made presupposes the existence of a part of God or the possibility of a change. For example the statement “God sees” assumes the existence of a part of Him that performs the act of seeing, and implies an activity which by nature has to denote change. He is now doing something that he was not doing before. Such a statement is not feasible according to what R' Bachya has taught us until this point. How then do we find not only ourselves, but the Torah itself, describing God and His activities?

The final chapter of Shaar Hayichud is devoted to resolving this important issue. Although this follows as a direct continuation from the work of R' Saadia, who began working on the problem of the attributes, R' Bachya's developments progress far beyond those of R' Saadia and they set the tone for all further discussion of God's attributes in medieval Jewish philosophy. It is entirely superfluous for R' Bachya to prove that God must be incorporeal⁵³; the conception of God which he has arrived at is far beyond any type of human understanding. Thus certainly attributing physical form to Him is

53 R' Bachya was among a group of Jewish writers, including Rambam and R' Saadia, who were branded heretics by R' Moshe of Taku (13th century Tosafist), because they refused to accept divine corporeality, which according to the latter constituted a rejection of many parts of the written and oral Torah.

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

absurd⁵⁴. The remaining question is only in what ways it is correct or appropriate for us to refer to or describe Him at all.

Essential attributes

There are two basic ways in which we attempt to talk about God: the first is by using an attribute to describe His essence, and the second is by referring to an act on His part. It is clear that in the case of the former, that which we have learned until this point precludes any such attempt. True oneness is a concept for which we have no point of reference; any description we use will only come from within our physical world. Nevertheless, R' Bachya, using the terminology of R' Saadia tells us that there are three words which we may and do use to describe Him: He Exists; for it has been demonstrated that He must exist, He is One; likewise it has been proven that the creator must be One, and He is Eternal; as the First Cause must be the beginning before which there was no beginning. These three “attributes” are necessarily connected, and the use of one presupposes an acceptance of the others. In fact, they are so dependant on each other that they should be one idea; it is only due to the limitations of language and the restrictions which human communication places upon us that we must use three separate words. Using three distinct words, which in our world conveys three distinct concepts, puts us at risk of attributing some kind of plurality to Him; it is only for the aforementioned reason that we have no choice. The proper way to make use of these three “acceptable” descriptions is by way of negations; not positive statements. For example, based on the evidence we have explored it is inconceivable that God does not

54 Rambam, on the other hand, who is a more rigorous rationalist, did actually prove that God is incorporeal. Obviously, this could be merely due to the fact that his book set up as a theoretical presentation which seeks to demonstrate the mistakes of other positions.

exist; or that the possibility of His being mortal is impossible. In this manner we can assert the conclusions of our investigation without taking the risk of making a positive statement about God, whom we cannot conceive in our minds.

This Neo-Platonist approach, which can possibly be traced as far back as Plato and Aristotle, goes hand in hand with the pasuk “Lo reisem kol temunah” (“You have not seen an image [of God]”)⁵⁵. This doesn’t merely apply in the base, physical sense of an image, but on the higher conceptual level as well. A “temunah” is any conceptualization that the mind uses to understand something; the process of negation insures that we stay away from a mistaken, and possibly heretical, conception.

Attributes of action

A different approach is to be employed when describing God’s actions. Here we are empowered to label an act of God using descriptions which we take from our own physical surroundings. It is legitimate to compare the activities of God to those of His creations because we must have knowledge of His ways as we are enjoined to emulate them. The only way that is available for us to “see” God is through the world which He created. Thus any phenomena which we experience in the world, if performed by a physical agent would be the result of a particular action, can be referred to as being the result of that same action on God’s part. The difference is that with regards to a human we can attribute that act to a catalyst of some sort i.e. an emotion of the agent or some other motive. Regarding His actions however, all we can see are the results as we are not granted a view of the Agent or His motives.

55 Devarim 4:15

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

We find the prophets often use such terminology to describe God. This is because the exhortations of the prophets were aimed at directing the listener towards proper service of God. It is possible that an individual just setting out on his spiritual path may need to conceptualize the focus of his service. The hope however was, that once the person progressed and their religious experience became more sophisticated they would be able to appreciate the concept of true oneness, and the impossibility of actually describing or using any physical point of reference to understand God would become manifest.

Proper attitude towards describing God

R' Bachya continues, following this model. It is incumbent upon anyone who has the ability, to go beyond the descriptions found in the pesukim and continue with the process of negation; which is the only true way to describe God. Only the illiterate and otherwise limited individuals can claim to be relying solely on the pesukim. This is reminiscent of his earlier statement that anybody who is able to investigate the matter of God's existence but fails to do so is intellectually and functionally lax. The same holds true for one who adheres to the simple reading of the pesukim describing actions of God. The intelligent mind, capable of realizing the inherent difficulty with attributing physicality to the Creator of all things, must probe further and discover the deeper layers of meaning that the attributes found in the pesukim are conveying.

The distinction between the “essential attributes” named above; existence, oneness and eternity, and the attributes of actions is wholly R' Bachya's development. Although the terms are alluded to by R' Saadia, the concepts were not defined at all or used thematically. The clear differentiation, whereby the essential attributes should only be negations, while the attributes of actions reflect the human perception of a given result but do not state anything about God, is

set out first by R' Bachya. The entire enterprise of explaining the nature of God's attributes as found in the works of subsequent Rishonim only restate and clarify the themes presented by R' Bachya. He is the first of the Jewish writers to use the negative theology adopted by many philosophers to follow.⁵⁶

Awareness of our limitations

In summation of the matter of the attributes, and really the entire approach to understanding God, he states that humans comprehend reality in three different ways: Through the experiences of the five senses, through rational investigation and understanding, and by receiving a tradition from others. When it comes to experiencing God, we are unable to use the five senses; God far supercedes that type of experience. We can rely on the report of our tradition, which has the shortcomings mentioned earlier, and we can observe Him as He manifests Himself through His actions. For this reason there is so much emphasis in the pesukim on the works of God; it is there that the probing of human intelligence can come closest to Him, as His actual essence cannot be comprehended. He offers the analogy – in fact he calls it “the closest analogy - of the mind and soul; which although we cannot picture or give form to, nevertheless, we are confident of their existence as their manifestations are obvious.

Just as the five senses are limited, and cannot be used to experience that which belongs in the realm of a different sense, the mind too has its limitations. Thus attempting to use the latter to understand the essence of God is akin to trying to “hear” a taste. When someone sees a stone being thrown his senses initially inform him of what is happening; he sees or hears the stone being thrown etc., eventually

56 See S. B. Ohrbach, *Amudei Hamachshava Hayisraelit - Chamesh Dmuyot B'philosofia*, [Jerusalem: Hahistadrut Hatziyonit Haolamit, 1993] p.

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

though his mind must take over. Past experiences help him imagine what happens next; the stone is falling, perhaps striking something, and so on. Since we can have no sensual experience of God, the mind cannot go beyond the fact of His existence as it has nothing to draw upon. The person who desires to know about the sun can only observe its impact on the world; the light it provides, the heat, the seasons, etc. It is only the fool who believes that he will learn more about the sun by looking directly at it, for not only does he not learn anything – he loses his vision completely.

This is the proper way to think about and reflect upon God's nature; effectively bringing us around full circle. Initially the human mind was the perfect tool which R' Bachya praised as being the greatest kindness bestowed upon mankind. After following the progression of Shaar Hayichud, beginning with proof of God's existence and ending with full understanding and acceptance of His unity, reason demands that one suspend the activity of his mind when it comes to probing further, and submission of the intellect to the will of the Creator is, in fact, a rational conclusion. An attempt on the part of the intellect to approach any closer undermines that which has been reached; going further is effectively distancing oneself.

That which began as our only connection to Him has now encountered a reality it cannot contemplate; knowledge and experience of God can only come to the soul, which seeks to perform His will and perfect itself. This task is the one which R' Bachya maps out in the ensuing chapters of the book.

Now that we have rationally proven the existence of God, there is another source of authority joining our reason in determining how we are to live our lives; the word of God as it is made known to us through the Torah. Despite R' Bachya's demand that we not conduct ourselves as blind men who are dependant on the caution of the sighted man, he is also aware that the conclusion of one's mind may differ from the instructions of the Torah. Unlike R' Saadia who

greatly encouraged further investigation into religious activity, such as understanding the reasons for the Mitzvot, as a means to further knowledge of God, R' Bachya understood that this is impossible. There is no attempt to rationalize any of the Mitzvot or explain their affect beyond the general approach that they serve to remind us of God and our responsibilities to Him⁵⁷; that would be an attempt at understanding something about God. It is not even necessary for the purpose of having proper “*kavana*” – intention when performing Mitzvot. Having proper “intention” is a feature and result of inner devotion and perfection, which can only be attained by way of the steps outlined in Chovot Halevavot.

That R' Bachya felt one's intellect could lead him astray is evident by a statement he made in his discussion of the various advantages and disadvantages to Torah-induced service of God over rationally induced service and vice-versa⁵⁸. One of the advantages of Torah-induced service is that just as one may fall prey to his bodily urges and abandon himself to physicality, he is similarly at risk of deferring entirely to the realm of the mind and shunning the world completely. Since neither of these extremes is desirable, the Torah is necessary to provide the means for resolving this potential conflict. Similar sentiments are expressed later in his discussion of asceticism⁵⁹, where he details how the Torah modifies that which may seem to be entirely appropriate behaviour based on rational conclusion.⁶⁰

57 There are certainly Mitzvot which would be logical even without the command of the Torah, and R' Bachya explains why they are included as Mitzvot nonetheless. However, unlike Rambam and other writers who explained at least some of the non-rational Mitzvot, no such attempt was made by R' Bachya.

58 Chovot Halevavot, III, 3

59 Ibid, IX, 1,3

60 I. Heineman, Ta'amei Hamitzvot B'sifrut Yisrael [Jerusalem: 1966] p. 55. The topic of asceticism belongs in the realm of practice more than it relates to philosophy or theology. For this reason I have avoided a discussion on asceticism

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

R' Bachya has not given up on the human mind completely and the claim that after establishing the existence of God and the authority of the Torah he considers the mind to be an improper device for discovering truth is unfounded⁶¹. This argument is based on a statement where R' Bachya says that the human mind is restricted from investigating certain things⁶²; indicating that the mind is in fact a dangerous tool and not to be relied upon. However, if this statement is viewed in context, it is then seen in a totally different light. R' Bachya is discussing how one must be introspective about the fact that he has become over-involved and indulged in this world. One of the examples of such a loss of focus is investigation into matters which do not lead to service and love of God, regarding which Shlomo Hamelech said “Al titchakem yoter miday” (“Do not be overly wise”)⁶³. It is not the mind which cannot be trusted but rather the individual’s desire to gratify himself with all that this world has to offer, which in turn leads him to neglect the correct service of God. Intelligence is indeed the greatest gift bestowed upon man and consequently, exercising that intelligence includes being aware of the things it is not capable of grasping and focusing on that which brings about positive awareness of God.

despite the fact that it is a major theme in Chovot Halevavot and one of R' Bachya’s unique contributions to Jewish thought and practice.

61 Y. Eisenberg, “Sechel V’regeish B’Chovot Halevavot”, in Daat, vol. 7.

62 Chovot Halevavot, VIII, 3 (25)

63 Kohelet 7:17

Free will

This limitation of our intelligence, which prevents us from understanding God, relates to another issue; the question of free will versus Divine omnipotence. This problem, which all thinkers, regardless of religion, must grapple with, is presented by R' Bachya not only as a philosophical dilemma, but as an implicit contradiction in the Torah itself⁶⁴. Many pesukim seem to be saying that everything accomplished in the world is done by God alone. Man merely “adorns” the world and is no different than any other part of creation.⁶⁵ On the other hand, there are also pesukim that indicate that man does indeed act of his own free will.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the entire enterprise of Torah and Mitzvot, which presupposes a system of reward and punishment, affirms that man is indeed the master of his actions, deserving to be recompensed for his choices.

R' Bachya observes that while it is true that we may set out to do a specific task seemingly of our own free will, we are often unsuccessful at that endeavour. If in fact man was given full control over his actions and their results, his efforts should always meet with success; the fact that this is not the case demonstrates that he is not fully in control. The sense of powerlessness in the face of God’s will is directly related to the teleological themes R' Bachya writes about; we are expected to see and feel God everywhere, perhaps this sense is meant to be greater than our perception of having free will to act.

R' Bachya then discusses the opinions of “the sages” regarding this matter; apparently referring to the positions found in earlier philosophers. One opinion is that man’s actions are entirely in his hands. According to this opinion, the concept of God’s perfect

64 Chovot Halevavot, III, 8. In IV, 4 he treats the matter differently, but possibly the context there is relying upon the conclusions of III, 8.

65 For example: Tehillim 135:6, 127:1.

66 For example: Devarim 30:15, 19, Iyov 34:11.

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

justice must be preserved. Reward and punishment therefore are only possible if the individual is indeed responsible. If God was the agent of the person's act, how could the latter be punished (or rewarded) for such a deed? This is the opinion recorded by R' Saadia⁶⁷ following the Mu'tazilite branch of the Kalam, for whom the concept of God's justice is directly related to the central doctrine of His goodness and kindness⁶⁸. The second opinion quoted by R' Bachya, which corresponds to the Ash'arite view, is that in fact everything is controlled by God. According to this doctrine, which was for the most part rejected by Jewish writers⁶⁹, the concept of a perfect and omnipotent God precludes the possibility of an act having any source other than Him⁷⁰. The question of justice as it relates to reward and punishment is beyond human understanding.

A theoretical resolution is impossible since the nature of the relationship between God's omnipotence and His justice cannot be fathomed by the human mind. The matter relates to God's essence, which we cannot comprehend and are enjoined from attempting to do. Our only concern should be with how we are to conduct ourselves, lacking this knowledge. For R' Bachya this is not only a

67 "God does not impose an obligation on anyone unless it lies within his competence and he is able to fulfill it. ..." *Emunos v'Deos* IV.

68 See W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* [London: 1948]

69 According to Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* I, 71), there were no Jewish counterparts to the Ash'arite theologians at all. See A. Hyman, "Divine Law and Human Reason" in *Scholars and Scholarship in Jewish History*, [New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990] p. 43.

70 This is known as the doctrine of "acquisition" whereby every act is considered to have two agents; God who actually causes it, and man who "acquires" it. This would be similar to saying that a stone fell; we attribute the act to the stone despite the fact that it was not actually the cause of the act. For further explanation of this complicated philosophy see W. Montgomery Watt, "The Origin of the Islamic Doctrine of Acquisition" in *Early Islam*, [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990] pp. 117-128.

theoretical problem, it is an experiential conflict between our belief in God's justice (and His will that we choose to observe the Torah) and the religious experience of utter submission and dependence on God.

Therefore he instructs us to make decisions and choose to do good as if we have free will and attempt to act on those decisions. The outcome is not up to us, rather to God's will, and we must trust that He will reward us according to our choices rather than their fruition. This is not merely a working hypothesis, according to R' Bachya it is the only approach which synthesizes the two facets of religious experience – our trust in His justice and our experience of dependence - and enables us to function despite this limitation of our understanding⁷¹. The description of this approach as being a pragmatic solution that ignores the inherent contradictions⁷² is misleading. R' Bachya is not dealing with a theoretical proposition; a very real question affecting every aspect of the religious individual's life is at stake, and the resolution must address the realm of religious activity. The inherent contradictions, the philosopher's problem, are results of our inability to understand God; the philosopher also knows his limitations and can accept the existence of irresolvable questions. We are happy to use the “astrolabe, weighing machine, and millstone” despite the fact that we do not understand their workings; our inability to grasp the mysteries of God's justice should likewise not interfere with our service of God.

71 A. Altmann, “Free Will and Predestination in Saadia, Bachya, and Maimonides” in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History*, [Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1981] p. 46. Altmann points out the connection between the approach of R' Bachya and that of the Sufis which is conscious of being under direct “control” of God. These sentiments are echoed by Avraham Ben HaRambam who was influenced by R' Bachya as well as Sufi piety.

72 T.M. Rudavsky, “Jewish Neo-Platonism” in *History of Jewish philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, [London: Routledge, 1997] p. 162.

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

Conclusion

Chovot Halevavot is indeed a unique work. The author introduces the concept of “inner obligations” as an independent discipline in Torah study. This clearly stems from a worldview that religious activity and devotion encompass all aspects of human existence, as reflected in the author’s constant state of amazement at God’s creation and awareness of His presence. For this reason, the human mind, which is the gift God gave man as a means to understanding His world, must be active in all areas; including the study of “*Elokat*”. Philosophy is an important part of “*Elokat*”, which includes the Torah and all study of Godly matters; without it one cannot properly accept God’s existence. At best he will be among those who merely affirm His unity without appreciating the meaning of that statement. The resulting religious growth of such an individual is deficient; it lacks the fundamental aspect of a fulfilling a Divine purpose, for one can hardly claim to be serving a God which he has not contemplated. This contemplation must take the form of a rational approach to the necessity of God’s existence, and an understanding of His unity, the latter including correct use of the Divine attributes. However we cannot take this too far. After the individual has arrived at this point he realizes that God is a concept which the human mind cannot grasp, and should not try to. It is impossible to fully understand anything that relates directly to His essence, including matters such as how He created and runs the world or why, the nature of His essence or even whether or not man in fact has free will.

R' Bachya was a groundbreaker, yet the concept of inner obligations, which he introduced, became a central part of Jewish thought. His impact in the area of philosophy was no less significant, a near-perfect synthesis between the Torah and the philosophies which he drew upon. Despite the considerable amount of treatment given to these matters in the centuries following R' Bachya, the parameters he set up in defining God’s unity and the Divine attributes can almost be declared the final word in medieval Jewish philosophy. Additionally,

Chovot Halevavot – or more? The philosophy of R' Bachya

parts of his proofs of God, primarily the teleological themes, are still used in a nearly identical manner to the way he expressed them. Chovot Halevavot was and remains a classic of Torah literature in all these areas, and provides a timeless and valuable insight in utilizing the paradigms of general scholarship to come to a fully developed understanding of God's will.