Rabbenu Bahiya Ibn Paquda (1045-1120) and the duties of the heart

I want to share with you a class from the Hakham Yosef Faur z”l that I recently heard titled “ Four Sephardic Giants” . The class was given in Miami, 1998. Rabbi Faur mentions four rabbis who lived in the golden age of Sephardic Jewry, between the 9th and 13th centuries of the common era. Each of these rabbis, presented in chronological order, introduced an innovative idea that forged the millennial tradition of the Jews of Spain and their descendants.

The first Hakham he mentions is Rabbenu Bahiya Ibn Paquda, born in Zaragoza, Spain, around the year 1045. We do not have much information about his life but we do know that it was Dayan, a judge in the rabbinical court; a honorary position that in those times was exercised pro bono.His main work is Hobot haLebabot, “The Duties of the Heart”, in which the author systematically formulates the principles of Jewish ethics. The book was written in Arabic and translated into Hebrew by the famous Rabbi Yehuda Ibn Tibbon.

What is this book about?

As we know, the Tora contains 613 commandments.Rabbi Ibn Paquda divides the commandments into two categories: 1. The precepts that we carry out in a physical way, with our body, our assets, etc. (2 .(□□□□□□ □□□□□. The commandments we carry out with our hearts (□□□□□□ □□□□□).

It was the first time that a rabbi recorded this differentiationWe will start from the second category.

DUTIES OF THE HEART The author affirms that the most important commandments of the Tora are fulfilled with “the heart”, that is, our psychological, emotional and intellectual apparatus (today we would say “brain” or “mind”).

Some examples.

1. SHEMA ISRAEL: “Hear, oh, Israel, HaShem is our God, and he is One.”This verse demands us to “know” that God exists and that He alone exists. This command does not order us to do anything specific. However, it is an absolutely transformative commandment.Ancient man perceived that natural forces were independent of each other and confronted each other: darkness vs. light; disease vs. health; evil vs good, war vs. peace, death vs. birth. To the pagan man it was absolutely evident that these forces came from different origins. They imagined that the multiple “gods” were waging war against each other in an eternal cosmic conflict. In this polytheistic universe, human beings are mere involuntary spectators of these mythological wars, over which they have no have control. For most ancient myths of creation, the world was not deliberately created, it appeared accidentally, product of the battles between the gods. Life for the pagan man had no transcendental meaning. The goal was to satisfy his urges and to prevent the gods from unleashing their anger on humans.Jewish monotheism, which today we take for granted, was entirely counter-intuitive. It was impossible for the ancient man to perceive the power of a unique CREATOR, with no other forces in charge of this world. Knowing that there is only one God, a Creator, brings the individual to a different level of understanding. God is behind good forces of “nature” and behind what we perceive as bad. The Creator fashioned an intelligent design, in which He (deliberately) established a pattern of opposing forces which operate together to maintain a permanent balance. Moreover, a monotheistic man knows and recognizes that much is beyond his comprehension. Knowing the existence of an intelligent Creator imbues life with purpose. And it pushes us to find it and reach it. Jewish monotheism is evolution. Or revolution. The “Shema Israel” as a commandment demands a total transformation of our “heart”, of our thoughts.

2. VEAHABTA ET HASHEM ELOQEKHA: “You shall love HaShem your God.”You cannot possibly love God with all your heart if you are constantly bitter. If you don’t value everything you have. Rabbi Faur explains that this Mitzva, “loving God”, cannot be fulfilled unless one is happy. And being happy requires an existential transformation. Being happy does not consist in having everything I want but in appreciating everything I have. A person can have money, family, health and be unhappy, because he or she has not developed the intelligence necessary to appreciate life. This commandment is not performed in a physical way, but like the previous one, it is absolutely and comprehensively transformative. Probably, more than any commandment that we do with our body.

3. VEHAHABTA LEREAKHA CAMOKHA, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” To love, in this sense, is to accept. This formative commandment tells me that just as I love myself in spite of my multiple shortcomings, I must learn to love my peers in spite of their shortcomings.

DUTIES OF THE BODY

In the first part of the book, the one that refers to the “physical” commandments, the author points out that these precepts also have as their objective, directly or indirectly, the improvement of the heart. One should not observe the precepts of the Tora in a mechanical and cold way. We must do it with an open heart. And these commandments , in turn, will have a positive effect in our hearts. “The heart is nourished by our good deeds”.

My most favorite prayer

I want to end by introducing a text from the book Hobot HaLebabot, *heshbon hanefesh, Chapter 3*. It is a short and very original prayer. Normally, when you pray, you ask God to fulfill your wishes. For example, if you are going to a job interview, you will pray to God to help you to get that job, because you believe this job is beneficial for you. This special prayer, which used to be printed in some Sephardic Sidurim like Bet‘ Obed and (I think) Tefilat haHodesh, teaches us that the correct way to pray is “to surrender” the final decision to God. Recognizing that you need God’s assistance not just to fulfill your request but also to ignore some of those requests, when HE KNOWS that they are not beneficial for you .In this prayer we ask God to listen “selectively” to our request, because He knows better. It ends by declaring: You know me better than I know myself. Your decision, HaShem, is better than mine. What You decide I will humbly and gratefully accept.

“My God, I present myself before You without ignoring my smallness and my insufficient knowledge of Your greatness and Your transcendence. I know that You are infinite and exalted, and I am a mere creature of very little importance. I am too insignificant to praise You and sing to You or bless Your Name, which is sanctified by the most elevated angels. The only thing that gives me the courage to address You is that You have commanded me to pray, and thus You have allowed me to praise Your exalted name according to my limited understanding. And that is why I address You with all humility. And I recognize that when I pray and I beg You to listen to my requests, I know that You know better than I what is best for me, and what are the best ways for my life. I also know that when I expressed my needs, I do not do that so that You would know them, since everything is known to You, but I express my requests so that “I” become aware of my permanent dependence on Your assistance, and my trust in You. So, I declare that if, out of ignorance, I request something that is not good for me or that does not benefit me, I accept Your choice instead of my choice. And I surrender to You the decision to listen (or ignore) what my heart asks of you. Because Your determination is wise, enduring and supreme. As King David said: “God, my heart is not arrogant, my gaze does not rise in haughtiness, I do not pretend to understand things that are too big and mysterious for me.” Therefore, I have given myself to you, “like a baby who breastfeeds and depends entirely on his mother …” (Tehillim 131: 1-2) »