

A Loving Bond with G-d

Category: Bereishis, Chayei Sarah

Why would the great Jewish philosopher ban the study of philosophy?

The Golden Age

Good Shabbos!

For centuries, Jews lived in Spain—particularly in Catalonia and especially in Barcelona, the capital city of Catalonia. These were places where Jewish communities flourished peacefully for hundreds of years.

During this “Golden Era” of Spanish Jewry, Catalonia was home to some of the most famous Jewish leaders of the first part of the past millennium. These included Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (“the Ramban”), Rabbeinu Nissim (“the Ran”), Rabbeinu Asher (“the Rosh), and others.

One of the great leaders of Spanish Jewry, who lived in Barcelona from 1230 to 1310, was Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham Ibn Aderet, also known by the acronym Rashba.

Now, to understand the overall spirit and culture in which the Rashba was active, we need to go back and first look at the status of Spanish Jewry in the era in which the Rashba lived.

In the year 700 C.E., the majority of Spain was conquered by Muslim forces. That began the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. The Muslim conquerors granted full religious freedom to their Jewish subjects, and that freedom lasted into the 1200s, when the Christians retook most of Spain again. It was then that blood libels against the Jews were invented, and what’s worse, the Christians forced the Jews into philosophical debates with their leading priests.

The first and most famous of these debates took place in Barcelona in 1263, with the Ramban representing Judaism and tragically, a Jewish “convert” to Christianity representing Christianity. He was there to “prove” that Christianity was right—or, better said, that he was right for having “converted.”

Well, the Ramban won the debate.

The King of Spain, whose courtroom hosted the debate and who personally participated in the debate, presented the Ramban with a sum of money and let him leave in peace. But as a result of the debate and the fame that it brought him, the Ramban was forced to leave Spain; he made Aliyah to the Land of Israel.

Taking his place and becoming the leader of Spanish Jewry was his disciple, the Rashba.

Rabbi Shlomo had been a Rosh Yeshivah with hundreds of students who was also a famous physician who was active in healing the sick. In addition, in his capacity as Chief Rabbi of Spanish Jewry, he was approached with questions from throughout Spain and beyond—and he wrote thousands of responses. And on top of all that, he found time to take a walk every day.

Time Success

The Rebbe used to speak about his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe, who was living in Petersburg, Russia in 1926—a particularly difficult period for Russian Jewry.

The Communists then were at the height of their power, and anything having to do with religion was against the law. So in those days, the Previous Rebbe led a secret network of cheders, yeshivahs, shuls and mikvahs—and all illegally. But the government and the KGB in particular knew all about it—and kept an eye on him.

At one point during that time, the Previous Rebbe was supposed to travel to the capital city of Moscow to help reinforce Judaism there. Everyone knew that the KGB's patience would eventually wear thin and that they would arrest him—as indeed happened several months later. But despite all that, when the Rebbe entered the Previous Rebbe's office 30 minutes before he was scheduled to leave for Moscow, he found the Previous Rebbe sitting calmly and writing a deep essay in Chasidic philosophy.

So the Rebbe, who at the time was engaged to become the Previous Rebbe's son-in-law, asked his future father-in-law: So calm?

What the Rebbe was most struck by was the fact that even though his father-in-

law knew the severity of the situation well, that at any given moment he could be arrested and sent off to Siberia for many years, there he still was, sitting calmly and concentrating on writing on a deep subject in Kabbalah.

So the Previous Rebbe responded that there is a concept called time success.

In general, average people like most of us here have difficulty concentrating. For example, when we're about to head out on vacation, we're already thinking about the vacation a good few days before we actually depart for vacation. We're already busy with plans and schedules about what we're going to do and when we're going to do it. In short, we may be in the office, but our heads are already off somewhere in the Caribbean.

And when we finally do find ourselves on that vacation, hardly a day or two goes by before we find ourselves starting to worry about all the work we'll need to get done as soon as we get back from vacation. And so to a certain extent, it's hard for us to actually enjoy our vacations—when we get back home, we sit and stare at our vacation photos. You know that feeling? In short, our head never is where our body is. We just can't seem to be present.

Having said that, time success means the ability to improve yourself to the point that you are able to work on one task in front of you as if no other task exists in the world—even for a small amount of time. Time success means that for that duration of time, you have no distracting thoughts—not of the past and not of the future. That's what time success is.

In plain English, the ability to concentrate on the one thing that you're doing at the moment and to not let anything else occupy your mind is what time success is.

And as an example of someone who succeeded in internalizing time success into his life, making it his secret of success, the Previous Rebbe would cite the Rashba, Rabbi Shlomo Ben Avraham.

The Rashba packed in a full day every day, but still found the time to go for a walk every day, because he had the rare concentration powers required for some serious time success. When he was busy with a specific thing, he just would not get distracted by any other thing. And so even when he took a walk, he was fully present during that walk. He enjoyed the walk. Because during those moments,

no other concern or worry disturbed his relaxation. (Sichah, 20 Shvat, 5730, Toras Menachem Vol. 59, pg. 186 et al.)

Philosophy—Yes or No?

In that era of Spanish Jewry, there were many philosophers, both Jewish and non Jewish, with the study of philosophy especially popular among young people.

During that era, young people tried to understand and appreciate everything intellectually. They tried to find reasons for every mitzvah and tried to explain every story in the Torah intellectually. Their entire connection to G-d and Torah was based on intellect. And the Rashba understood that in human nature, emotion often supersedes reason, and when there is a battle between the mind and the heart, the heart wins with the majority of people.

Rabbi Shlomo was very worried that if these philosophy students were to suffer in their personal lives, and then try to intellectually understand G-d's ways and fail, they might break and end up abandoning the faith.

So Rabbi Shlomo enacted an “excommunication” in 1305, in which he banned the study of philosophy for young men under the age of 25. He argued that young people just need to study the Torah as it is and thus build a firm foundation of faith in G-d—to forge an emotional connection with G-d. Rabbi Shlomo wanted that to be their identity, and only after they had that strong spine could they proceed to study philosophy, after which it would not harm them and on the contrary, give them understanding and appreciation of Torah and mitzvos.

As far as Rabbi Shlomo was concerned, the start and foundation of the Jew's relationship with G-d needed to be based on an emotional connection that is above intellect. And then it would make no difference how many opposing intellectual proofs there might be—the G-d connection would endure eternally.

The Rashba wanted every Jew to have a love for G-d like the love of parents for their children—one that didn't need to be understood intellectually; or like the love between a couple, which often makes no sense at all but in which “love wins.” Similarly, the foundation for the Jew's bond with G-d needs to be one of senseless love.

However, not everyone agreed with Rabbi Shlomo's belief, and the Spanish Jewish community found itself split in two over the issue: Those who sided with the Rashba and would not study philosophy at a young age, and those who disagreed with him and argued that youth should be taught philosophy—that on the contrary, it was good for them.

Many years passed. Over 100 years after Rabbi Shlomo passed away, in the year 1413, another debate broke out in Catalonia between a group of Jewish rabbis and an apostate Jew.

But at this debate, because there were no great rabbis on the Jewish side like the Ramban, and some of the Jewish rabbis were philosophers who were filled with doubts concerning Judaism even before the debate, what resulted was that even before the debate was over, many of the rabbis converted!

It was then that they saw how right the Rashba was in banning the study of philosophy among young people. And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Love Overcomes

In our Parshah, we review the life story of Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, whom G-d tested with ten tests.

What exactly do we mean when we say that G-d gives someone a "test"? It means that G-d puts the person in a situation that, if approached intellectually, one would abandon G-d (G-d forbid).

So let's just concentrate on two of Avraham's ten tests.

At the beginning of the Torah portion of Lech Lecha, G-d promises Avraham, "To your descendants shall I give this Land"—and right after that we read, "And there was a famine in the Land"! The famine forced Avraham to go down to Egypt—which, Rashi explains, was arranged by G-d "to test him if he'd reconsider the word of G-d, who had told him to go to the Land of Canaan and then brought him to leave it."

Well, many years later, Avraham had become a very wealthy man who had also won wars, etc. So then, after the saga of the Akeidah when his wife Sarah passed away and he had to bury her, he is back in Canaan—the place that G-d promised

60 years earlier would be his land—and he now has to find a place to bury his wife! And he even has to pay for it!

That's the first one. The second example of Avraham's tests is the test of the Akeidah.

For years, G-d had promised Avraham a son. He hung on for decades with that promise, and the cynics of the generation laughed at him and his faith. But ultimately, at the age of 100 years old, Yitzchak is born—and now, he broadcasts the message that there is a G-d. The promise was kept. But then, G-d tells Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak! And not only that, but G-d tells Avraham to do so before Yitzchak is even married—which would leave Avraham with no lineage! It would have been something totally against any logic—not just in terms of sacrificing your own son, but also in terms of G-d's first promise to Avraham itself!

And yet, we find that Avraham asked no questions.

Why so? Because Avraham's bond with G-d was one of love. As the Prophet (Yeshayahu 41:8) says, "Avraham who loves me"—and, as we know, "love wins." And thus Avraham became "father of the nation" because it was he who bequeathed to us our love for G-d that is above reason and intellect. Love needs no explanations—it is a deep emotional connection that is stronger than any philosophical argument in the world. And it is this bond with and love for G-d that has stood us in good stead throughout the generations.

What's the lesson in all this, my friends?

The lesson is that, intellectually speaking, Jews are not always believers and do not always agree. But there is something deep in our collective heart that does not allow us to rest—something emotional that is stronger than any scholarly argument.

And it is our mission, my friends, to pass that feeling, that sentiment, on to our kids.