S. Heller-Wilensky, *The Thought of R. Isaac Arama*

pp.191–193 [top]

2. Commandments and virtues

Arama adduces traditional classifications in his treatment of the commandments in the Torah. He divides them into positive and negative commandments with respect to their external form, while he divides them into commandments between “man and God” and commandments between “man and man” with respect to their internal content. In accord with the tradition of religious philosophy that had existed since the time of Philo, he classifies the commandments so that they are also in harmony with the virtues of the philosophers. He cites Maimonides’ statement that all of the commandments in the Torah either instruct us in intellectual virtues or ethical virtues, or else they entail practical virtues which facilitate our attainment of intellectual and ethical virtues. The most fundamental classification, according to Arama, is the classification into “Torah” commandments and “ethical” commandments, or alternatively, into “divine” commandments and “human” commandments. The former, i.e., the “divine-Torah,” are commandments whose subject is God, and which are parallel to the intellectual virtues of the philosophers, while the latter, the “human-ethical” commandments, are those commandments which are between man and man, and which are parallel to the ethical virtues of the philosophers.

1. Divine commandments and intellectual virtues

The Torah commandments, or, the intellectual virtues, include correct opinions concerning God as well as the knowledge that is necessary for man to attain perfection with respect to God. The correct knowledge concerning God is given to us through the six principles of the Torah, namely: 1. Creation; 2. Power; 3. Prophecy and Revelation; 4. Providence; 5. Repentance; 6. The World to Come. These principles are conveyed to us through the Sabbath and other holidays, which we are to fulfill through action.

Arama stresses the idea that the principles are garbed in actions and beliefs are dependent upon the commandments. These symbolize the Torah principle that not only ethical virtues, but intellectual virtues too are acquired by way of action and habituation—this in contrast to Aristotle, who claimed that intellectual virtues are acquired, for the most part and principally, by way of study, while only ethical virtues are acquired by way of action and habituation. The “Torah” commandments are precisely those that instill intellectual virtues, for indeed, the Torah “commands and sets forth commandments….for [both] of man’s two [component] parts, including the intellectual part, to rightly guide him in terms of true opinions and beliefs….which the intellect cannot determine nor apprehend in itself,” like the six principle of the Torah. These opinions are acquired by way of “Torah actions.” “But as for this notion”—Arama adds—that is, the existence and establishing of the commandments and actions for the purpose of instilling intellectual virtues, “it was concealed from Aristotle and all those who followed him, who did not see the light of the divine Torah, and for this reason, they did not attribute any activity to the theoretical part, but rather understood all of [the theoretical part’s] activities as remaining completely internal” (Gate 33).

Just as ethical activities instill in man ethical perfection, so too “Torah actions” instill in man his theoretical perfection, and in this, says Arama, “I have created anew for you a wonderous notion which was hidden from all of the sages of philosophical investigation, who wearied of finding an activity ordered from the theoretical intellect” (commentary on Ecclesiastes). For indeed, “the theoretical intellect ought to hold fast to those actions which are particular to it in respect of its being a theoretical intellect, and these are the divine, Torah commandments” (ibid). Arama cites the words of Ecclesiastes: *the end of the matter all having been heard, fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole of man*, and explains: “he said that this is the whole of man for a most wonderous reason, and this is that he had already investigated every action of man and the various parts of his activities according to the manner in which Aristotle divided them in his saying: ‘as for every art and every study and every action and every choice, it is apparent that it is [done] for the hope of some good’….but he did not find therein any proprium for man qua man…until he clarified that as for these Torah activities—which exist in connection with the intellectual part, which is guided by the divine Torah—that this is the whole of man. However, this notion was concealed from Aristotle and all those who followed him” (33).

Arama notes two distinctions between divine or Torah virtues and the intellectual virtues of the philosophers, i.e., of “Aristotle and his followers”: (1) the philosophers did not know or recognize that intellectual virtues are attained by way of actions, therefore they restricted action and habit, understanding these to apply to the attainment of ethical virtues only; (2) the philosophers did not concede to the existence of actions and commandments that obtain between man and God, and so restricted man’s duties only to those commandments and actions which obtain between man and his neighbor: “Indeed, they did not see that any merit or duty should pertain to the intellectual part with respect to the heavens at all, for in their opinion, no action in the bodily part is ordered from the theoretical part, whereas [as for that action which] is ordered from the practical [intellect], uprightness or sin therein in only in respect to political or human law, not in respect to God at all” (64).

Arama adds and says that if Aristotle had so merited and “the light of the Torah and the commandments had illuminated upon him, he would have sensed that from the theoretical intellect which is within us, all of the divine commandments are ordered,” and he would have conceded that there are actions which bring one to possess the divine, intellectual virtues, just as there are actions which bring one to possess human, ethical virtues. However, since Aristotle did not merit the light of the Torah, indeed, “the principle of actions through which man becomes felicitous,” those actions which bring one to attainment of the divine virtues, those actions which are between man and his God, “were lacking in his book” (64). And since Aristotle did not know of the existence of the actions that bring one to divine perfection and instill within man the correct opinions concerning God and the divine virtues, he claimed that the principle perfection of man is encompassed by theoretical contemplation, not action: “however, this notion was concealed from Aristotle and from all those who followed after him who did not see the light of the divine Torah, and for this reason did not attribute any activity as being ordered from the theoretical, intellectual part, but rather they understood all of [the theoretical part’s] activities as remaining in itself” (same quote as above, 33)….