CHAPTER 5

Concept and Meaning of Time

5.1 Subject and Structure of the Chapter

The structure of the first chapter of Megillat ha-Megalleh can be summarized as follows:

MM1a Introduction (MM 5:1–6:25)
MM1a.1 On form, privation and time (MM 5:1–6:2)
MM1a.2 Definitions of time (MM 6:3–6:25)
MM1b Being in time (MM 6:26–8:18)
MM1b.1 Meanings of being in something (MM 6:26–7:33)
MM1b.2 That all created beings are in time (MM 7:34–8:18)
MM1c Time and creation (MM 8:19–10:7)
MM1c.1 Question of the duration of the world (MM 8:19–8:22)
MM1c.2 Kinds of precedence (MM 8:23–9:29)
MM1c.3 Precedence and creation (MM 9:30–10:3)
MM1c.4 Explanation of creation (MM 10:4–10:9)
MM1d Finitude of time (MM 10:8–10:23)
MM1e Various views on the duration of the world and their refutation (MM 10:24–13:7)
MM1f Conclusion: reason cannot solve the question of the duration of the world (MM 13:8–13:26)

In this chapter, Bar Hiyya proceeds to present philosophical materials, weaving together the introduction of philosophical concepts, such as potentiality and actuality, with the gradual exposition of his philosophy of time. This culminates in the first formulation of his ideas concerning creation and time (MM1c.4) followed by an argument for the finitude of time. In the latter part of the chapter, Bar Hiyya presents and refutes a number of non-Jewish views on the question of the duration of the world, and finally concludes that this question cannot be solved by unaided reason.

Before the analysis of the chapter, a brief summary of previous research on Bar Hiyya’s concept of time will be given. Then, the contents of the chapter will be presented and analyzed, together with translations of essential passages.
5.2 Previous Research on Bar Hiyya's Concept of Time

Before proceeding with an analysis of Bar Hiyya's text and how he approaches the concept of time, let us consider how the previous research has placed him against the main philosophical concepts of time current in late antiquity and in the Middle Ages, which are

- the Aristotelian idea of time as the numbering of motion according to before and after,
- the Neoplatonic idea of time as the duration of the soul, and thus independent of the existence of any matter,
- the Augustinian idea of time in the mind, as the remembrance of the past and the expectation of the future,
- various less developed ideas, such as time as the motion of the sphere in the Rasâ’il Ikhwân as-Safâ.

Not surprisingly, the previous research has been not been very successful in placing Bar Hiyya within these relatively well-defined positions. First, there have been those that have considered that Bar Hiyya lacks a coherent view of time. G. Vajda mentions many aspects contained in Bar Hiyya’s discussion of time, without attempting to explain the differences.¹ Specifically, he finds that in Megillat ha-Megalleh Bar Hiyya presents an Aristotelian definition of time, whereas in Hegyon ha-Nefesh he presents a non-Aristotelian concept of time based on duration.²

Julius Guttmann notes that Bar Hiyya’s definition of time: “it is said of time that it depends on the existents, is consequent to them, and all the formed beings exist in it, but it does not exist except in the mind, visible by the heart”³ (MM 6:22–23) is full of contradictions, even if he admits that this apparent contradiction may be due to terminological problems.⁴

Meir Waxman pays attention to the same passage that troubled Guttmann, claiming that according to Bar Hiyya time is

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² This is an over-simplification. Megillat ha-Megalleh contains several definitions of time, including the Aristotelian one.
³ My translation of this passage is influenced by H.A. Wolfson’s translation (Wolfson, Crescas, 1971, p. 661) without being identical to it.
⁴ Julius Guttmann, Introduction, 1924, p. XIV.