

Rabbi Levi ben Gershon [Ralba"g]

Yahrzeit date – 6th of Iyyar 1,344.

The subject of our study was one of the most celebrated commentators of the Bible (most of the twenty four books) during the early Middle Ages. Beyond that he was also a first rate philosopher, a physician, a mathematician, and was an astronomer of great repute. All this, of course, allied with an exquisite mastery of all Talmudic knowledge, as is readily evident from perusing his commentary to the Torah. Not only was he a genius in knowing all of the Agada, but he knew all of the Halachic debates of the Talmud, many a time revealing the Biblical sources for their decisions, even then Hazzal themselves were silent on the subject. He also is persistent to explain Biblical passages as according to the Rambam's approach (whether in Mishna Torah, or in the "Guide to the Perplexed") even in such topics upon which the Rambam did not indicate his opinion. Ralbag was so well steeped in Maimonidean thinking, that it was quite simple for him to continue and extend the Rambam's mode of thought and to teach us "what the Rambam would have said, if asked upon this point".

Ralbag was born in 1,288 (some 80 years after the Rambam's demise) and according to the customary education at the time amongst Jews in Southern France, he studied various philosophies.

The Hebrew Encyclopedia (of Israel) dwells upon the great innovations and improvements that Ralbag instituted in the study of astronomy (volume four, pp. 819-820) and so too his novel thoughts concerning trigonometry (volume eighteen, pp. 978-979). Dealing with non-sacred philosophy, he wrote treatises upon the works of the Arab philosopher Ibn-Rashd, so too concerning the works of Aristotle.

Ralbag's original work concerning "The Development of Logic" remains yet in manuscript form, unpublished.

However, his most important work is that treating with religious philosophy (concerning the reliability of Astrology, questions as to what extent is there Divine Providence, and to what extent practical matters are not pre-ordained but left open to human attempts, to exertions of each individual). So too he dealt with the delicate question to what extent are there overt miracles, and to what extent are natural changes of causes and effects, propitiously altered by Divine intervention, yet not really deviating from the natural Law of Nature. Here

he culled a page from the Rambam's teachings (Avot, chapter five), that overt miracles are few and far between, since G-d has a negative attitude towards changing the Institutions of Nature and their regularity that He has engendered. The aforementioned subjects, and many others, are developed by Ralbag in his monumental work "**Milchamot Hashem**". This book has 6 sections. Concerning:

- the eternity of the soul,
- Prophecy,
- Free Will versus Foreknowledge of human action,
- Providence,
- the Planetary system and the stars (his section was skipped by the printers and is available only in its Latin translation, published in the 15th century),
- and the sequels of Creation of the world.

For each question he debates the pros and the cons, attempting to find the true and valid explanation. True that there were several of the Rabbis, throughout the ages, who considered this book to be damaging to Orthodox belief. (This is due to his peculiar understanding of the Eternity of the Soul as relating only to the wisdom accrued, and not due to Mussaric action; **and also** due to his odd belief that as per the ability to fathom the wisdom of Astronomy and understanding the works of Nature, so a person acquires an Everlasting soul. See on this point his commentary to Bereshis, pp. 51-52). One great opponent to this approach was the **Maharal**.

However, the great majority of Rabbis, thought this book to be still within the realm of true Jewish thought, although there certainly are other approaches to the above questions, not as drastic as that of the Ralbag, the philosopher. He who wishes a short synapse of the above, can read Dr. Isaac Husik's expert summary in his work "A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy" (pp. 328-361).

Ralbag's commentary to the Bible has extraordinary value due to the "**To'alyot**" at the end of every chapter, where he summarizes the Mussaric lessons to be garnered from each passage. These are to found in every "Mikra'ot Ge-dolot" edition of the Prophets. Just recently the famous printing house of Mossad ha-Rav Kook came out with an annotated five volume edition of his work on the Torah. His language is clear, although not brief. Ralbag also wrote a valuable treatise concerning how the discover Torah sheh-ba'al peh Laws hinted at in the Torah sheh bi-Ktav. This book is called "**Sha'arei Tzedek**" (published originally in 1,541 and republished in 1,800, Livorno, as an addition to the book "Brit Ya'akov").

An added great function to which he applied his fertile intelligence was the quest to understand the rational explanation for the Mitzvot. His approach is many a time quite novel. It is worth the expenditure of time involved to read these hundreds of Moral points. A small amount of these were assembled in a Tel Aviv (1,951) edition. But many others came out rearranged alphabetically as per topics (Wilna, 1865) preceded by lavish "haskomot" from the illustrious great Rabbis: the Netziv of Wolozhin, Malbim, Rabbi Israel Salant, Rabbi Yehoshua Diskin, etc. All praised him on this point.

So too in the year 1,860 there was a Koenigsberg edition of the Ralbag to four Megillot, Shir ha-shirim, Ruth, Kohelet and Esther. These are most noteworthy.

Truly, to this very day the radiant sun of the mental giants of days of yore yet shines and causes us deep insight into the secrets of our Divine Torah.

May G-d bless us with the ability to be able to drink of the waters of his wisdom.