

RABBI MOSHE BEN NACHMAN [the Ramban]

Yahrzeit date: 5th of Nissan, 1270

This famous Rabbi was a Talmudic genius, a Bible commentator and Posek of his generation. All this besides being a kabbalist of great distinction (the Arizal writes in his foreword to "Eitz Ha'im", that of all those who wrote on the subject in those generations, Ramban was the most reliable of all). Aside from which he was a poet of note, a medical doctor and so too proficient in Natural Science and philosophy.

The Rivash (Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet) writes concerning the Ramban: "He was "baki as Sinai" and keenly dialectical, his words were fiery, all Rabbis in Katalonia (an area in Spain) rely on him just as if he were Moshe Rabbenu delivering G-d's words".

The rabbis of Castille said that one should meticulously ponder on every single word that he wrote, since there is not a superfluous expression there.

Ramban was a great debater. In his time a certain apostate claimed before the king that the Midrash itself justified the belief in Christianity. King James ordered a public disputation, and by royal decree ordered the Ramban's participation. The meetings lasted for 4 days, and were attended by the king and all of his court, so too by many monks and friars, and of course was held in the Spanish language. The Ramban afterwards put into writing both the claims by the apostate and so too his learned rebuttals. We have this today in "Kitvei Ramban", part one, pp. 300-320 (Mossad Harav Kook) and so too in "Otzar ha-Vikuchim", published by David Eisenstein.

Of course the Ramban succeeded in dispelling all doubts as to the justice of the Jewish standpoint. Although the Ramban had explicit permit from the king to speak openly and freely, the monks vended to the Pope Clemens iv to accuse the Ramban of maligning the Christian faith and after four years of behind the scenes maneuvering, the Pope pressured the king to peremptorily order the Ramban to leave the country (1267). (Despite that, the king granted him a sign of distinction, the gift of 300 golden coins.)

A short time thereafter the Ramban left for the Holy Land.

We fortunately have some of his letters (republished in "Kitvei ha-Ramban", Mossad ha-Rav Kook, vol. One pp. 331-377). There (p. 368) he writes to his son, that in the Holy Country, land that is more sacred, is more desolate (until the fulfillment of the predictions of the Geula). In his

commentary to Parshat va-yechi he corrects Rashi's words as to the proper geographical locale of Rachel's tomb (in Beth-lehem) based on Ramban's travels in the vicinity.

The Ramban is noteworthy for the most vital and central place in Jewish law that he dedicates to the Mitzva of **Yishuv Eretz Israel** (Commentary to Vayikra 18, 25). He claims (based on Hazzalic sources) that all of the Mitzvot in the diaspora were so binding so that we do not forget their proper application upon our re-arriving in Israel, which is the real spot for implementation of the Mitzvot. Rashi too (Dvorim 11, 18) mentions this point. It is accepted too by Maharal (Gur Aryeh, op. Cit.) and again by the Wilna Gaon (Aderet Elyahu, Dvorim, chapter 8).

What could be a greater paean of praise to Eretz Israel?

We know that the Ramban had poetic gifts.

- We have his lovely elegy "Omdot Hayu Raglenu bi-She'arayich Jerusalem" ("Kitvei Ramban", vol. One pp. 424-432).
- So too his penitential "Sli-chot" (ibid. Pp. 395, 433-439).
- So too his special prayer, written in elegant poesy (pp. 422-423) before departing on the high seas.
- So too he habitually prefaced many books with beautiful lines.
- So his preface to "Hilchot Nedarim" (p. 403) and to "Hilchot Niddah" (p. 421).
- So too his book defending the Rif's opinions "Milchamot Hashem" (p. 407, 410).
- So too his preface to "Sefer ha-Z'chut" (p. 415) and to "Dina de-Garmi" (p. 417);
- so too to his criticisms of the Rambam's Sefer ha-Mitzvot (p. 418).

All these show a complete mastery of the language, using choice words in order to designate an exact shade of meaning.

One of the most interesting facets of the Ramban's contribution to Jewish literature is his defense of the Jewish Hashkafa.

It is well known that in his period there was a problem whether to study philosophy or not. Experience had shown that many of the youth forsook practice of the Law after this study. Since they (falsely) understood that the main point in life is proper traits and attitudes, but not the minutiae of the ritual Law, they were

not punctilious in its observance. It is as if a person would say "It is unimportant to observe 39 prohibitions of the Shabbat, as long as a person recognizes the fact that G-d created the world".

Therefore, in the Rashba's period the Rabbis proclaimed anathema against any youth studying forbidden philosophy before the age of 30 ("She'elot u'Tshuvot Rashba", vol. One paragraphs 413-418). See again the words of Rav Hai Ga'on, brought by the Rama ("Darkei Moshe" printed in all editions of the Tur, to Yoreh Da'oh, chapter 246).

Generally speaking, the Rabbis of Southern Spain were not extreme against this study, as compared to the Rabbis of Northern France (and of course so too those of Germany) who were most antagonistic. The violent debates got so out of hand, that there were those who publicly banned the studies of the Rambam's works (including his "Mishna torah") due to the opinions expressed in "Guide to the Perplexed".

Some even burnt his books!

But the truth of the matter is somewhere between the two extreme positions.

There are modern youth who have already had contact with Gentile views, or who already have been accustomed to "open thinking". If these will not meet literature written by those Rabbis who are acquainted with philosophical thought or with Gentile cultures, and know how to explain the apparent contradictions, this youth will be lost to the Jewish community.

But on the other hand, those who were brought up to be "Tmimim" (naive) it would be catastrophic to expose them to investigative thought, since possibly they would readily comprehend the questions, but not so easily grasp the answers. This is not only a matter of individual age, but of mode of education, of social attitudes. He Ramban attempted to mediate between the forces (see "Kitvei ha-Ramban", vol. One pp.330-351) and apparently his great authority availed to calm down the high spirits. As he writes (page 348) "You should know that if you proclaim a curse and ban, the communities will not obey your prohibition".

The Hebrew Encyclopedia (vol. 24 p. 565) notifies that the Ramban set up a learning schedule (based on the different ages) how to study secular studies, and yet guard religious faith.

One of the major fields of endeavor upon which the Ramban put a lot of emphasis was the faith in the "Kabbalah". He himself makes many an allusion to this esoteric knowledge (see his concluding words at the end of his Prologue to his commentary to the Torah). (There are several books explaining his Kabbalistic commentaries, such as "Me'irat Einayim", Ma'or va-Shemesh", "Keter Shem Tov" etc.)

In "She'elot u'Tshuvot Rivash" (chapter 157) there are those that claim that Ramban was overly addicted to this discipline. Nevertheless, he wrote a fierce defense of this subject ("Kitvei ha-Ramban", pp. 463-469) so too his commentary to Sefer Yetzira.

There are those who claim that his tough words against the Rambam (on the subject of the animal sacrifices, Vaikra I; So too on the sin of Moshe, at the Waters of Meriva (Bamidbar 20, 12) were an outburst due to the Rambam's neglect of the Kabbalistic beliefs.

The commentaries of the Ramban for Talmud study are classics and constantly referred to by every serious student. The Rashba's words are constantly based on the Ramban. So too the "Hinuch". Even the super commentary "Rabbi Nissim" on the Rif, was written by his disciple and embodies much of his teachings.

We cannot conclude our short resume of the Ramban, without referring to several great points of his historiasophia.

- In his commentary to the Torah he claims that all that occurred to our Patriarchs is an emblem and portent sign of national occurrences which will come upon our nation (Bereshis 12, 6; 26, 1).
- The Ramban teaches that the Chastisement of Parshat Behukotai refers to the first destruction of the Temple, and that of Ki Tavo refers to the second destruction (there he analyzes the details).
- He teaches that the details itemized during the six days of Creation, fit perfectly with historical matters, each thousand years vis a vis that day of Creation.

The Ramban teaches of the utmost sanctity of each letter in the Torah (see his foreword) and dedicates to many of the mitzvot a kabbalistic explanation. What is most interesting is that in many of his explanations to Biblical verses, he takes an independent stand, many a time suggesting an explanation entirely different from that of Hazzal. (See for example his novel suggestion, in his commentary to Bereshis 2, 10; that Abraham sinned by leaving Israel and going to Egypt during the hunger years, therefore

the king abducted Sarah his wife. This explanation is odd, since Hazzal praise Abraham for not questioning G-d, and don't consider his actions as sinful.

Or Ramban's other suggestion, Bereshis 16, 6; that throughout history Jews suffer at Arab hands because Sarah unnecessarily persecuted Hagar, their great ancestress. These reveal an independent mind, since Hazzal never said that.)

How does this fit with his great implicit faith in Kabbalah and the teachings of our forefathers? The answer is that the two levels don't contradict each other or clash. There are different levels of comprehension. P'shat doesn't erase Sod, or vice versa. There is room for free thought, whilst still observing intact all of the teachings of our predecessors. This is the great power of the Ramban, whose edifying example can profit us even today.