

RABBI ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

Yahrzeit Date of – First of Adar (A), 4924 (AD 1164)

Rabbi ibn Ezra was one of the foremost sages of the middle Ages.

Rabbi Bahya ben Asher wrote one of the most popular commentaries to the Torah, already reprinted in over thirty editions. Of all of the tens of Talmidei Chachomim that he cites, it is only to the name of Rabbi Abraham that he applied the title of honor "Ha-haham" (the wise).

Not only was Rabbi Abraham proficient in all books of the Bible, but he was expert in Mathematics, Astronomy, Physics, Grammar and philosophy, and knew well several languages. Beyond that he was a poet of note (The Hebrew Encyclopedia, page 212, cites that two volumes of his poetry have been recently published).

To amass a treasure of knowledge (in that ancient period, before the invention of the printing press and manuscripts were rare and expensive) is in itself a great feat. This is especially so since a person cannot carry with him his library (especially so a person like Rabbi ibn Ezra who was always on the move and reached eastwards as far as India, and travelled north as far as England, was in Algeria and Morocco, *ibid* page 211). Therefore all what he knows must be committed to memory, which is no small feat.

However, even beyond that, Rabbi ibn Ezra was gifted with a most keen sense of criticism. Except for Hazzal, he bent head before nobody. The magistrate of Truth is only clear thinking, assuming nothing and taking nothing as granted.

There is a letter extant that the Rambam wrote to his son Abraham. This letter is called *Iggeret ha-Mussar* (altho Rabbi Yosef Kappach disputes the authorship of the Rambam to this letter).

Towards the conclusion he adjures his son to study the Commentary of Rabbi ibn Ezra to the Bible. He concludes by saying "Don't dissipate your concentration by scattering your studies upon many books.

But Rabbi ibn Ezra's works benefit he who reads them intently with clear thought and dedication. His works are not similar unto others, for he was blessed with a spirit similar to Abraham the Patriarch. He had no dread or fear of anyone and didn't flatter any author (i. e. he never diluted or adulterated the Truth). Not only that, but he voyaged unto many distant lands, and was in the service of kings".

(So to say, he was well experienced and by being observant of many facets of human experience, he readily knew different applications of human wisdom. He met tens of scholars, debated with them and accrued a vast amount of knowledge from hearing other people's opinions. This is a good tenet which we could profit thereby, if we would utilize it. In other words he was not narrow minded and thereby he had a margin beyond other authors.)

Any reader of his works immediately recognizes a free spirit, unfettered by previous dispositions. His approach is always fresh and novel. His language is terse and to the point. He never wastes words. Amongst the tens of predecessors that he quotes, some (such as the Geonim) he cites to corroborate a point; and some (such as the Karaites, his arch foes) he cites so to attack, to derogate and so poke fun at their primitive attitudes. Some of his puns make for enjoyable literature.

In his introduction to his commentary on the Bible, he categorizes all of the works written up to his day as four: the traditional school, the Karaites, the Allegorists (many of them Christians), and the Literalists (P'shat). Rabbi Abraham chose the path of the fourth. Nevertheless he never disputed with the Halachic decisions of the first group. Even those comments which we might find in his Commentary which conflict with Hazal, these are interpolations inserted by strangers into his Work posthumously (So said Rabbi Azulai H'i-dah, in his bibliographical work "Shem ha-Gedolim").

Rabbi Abraham says that when Hazzal pinned a Drash explanation on a Biblical verse which patently says otherwise, Hazzal never meant it as an "explanation" but only as an "asmakta" (a memory device, so to never forget the lesson implied).

As aforementioned, Rabbi Abraham was a most prolific writer. Even before Marco Polo brought paper from China, and all precious scripts were on animal skins, Rabbi Abraham wrote 108 small tracts (so records "Hebrew Encyclopedia", page 212) which is fantastic. He was held in great regard by his contemporaries, as well as by the subsequent generations. There a great number of these have been guarded and saved. See a competent list offered by Asher Weiser (Ibn Ezra to the Bible, Mossad Harav Kook, volume one, pp. 16-20).

So too the interesting monograph written by Naftali ben Menachem "Inyanei ibn Ezra", published by "Mossad Harav Kook" (1978) pp. 1-8.

While travelling in France, he met the great Tosafist Rabbenu Ya'akov Tam (the grandson of Rashi) who especially composed a paean of honor to thereby greet Rabbi Abraham. This short poem is published by Rabbi Maimon in "Midei Hodesh b'Chodsho", volume two, page 264.

It is remarkable that such a great legalist and traditionalist as Rabbenu Tam should take such an attitude of reverence to a personality such as Rabbi Abraham. Even to our present day and age, the great personalities of the Hassidic Grand-Rabbis praised Rabbi Abraham's works.

Ben-Menachem (ibid. pp. 329-336) cites Rebbe Elimelech from Lizensk, Rabbi Pinchas from Koritz, Rabbi Ya'akov Shimshon from Shipitivka, Rabbi Israel Koznitz, Rabbi Simcha Pershiska, Rabbi Moshe Teitlebaum ("Yismach Moshe"). I would add the illustrious name of Rabbi Elazar Rokach ("Belz") who had a meritorious habit to intently study each year a different commentator to the weekly Parshat ha-shavua. He afterwards related to his adherents that the year that he dedicated towards the study of ibn-Ezra to the weekly portion, **was the most G-d fearing year that he ever experienced!** This he explained at his seeing the great earnestness of ibn-Ezra in his quest for The Truth.

Rabbi ibn Ezra was a great fighter for the truth. We have his article "Ma'amar ha-Shabbat" (republished by Rabbi Maimon, ibid, volume two, page 265) where he sharply scorns those who think that the observance of Shabbat should be day before night (and end at sunrise) and so be similar the "unit" of "day" observed at the presentation of sacrifices in the Holy Temple. This wrong understanding was fostered by the Rashbam's words of commentary to the first verses of Bereshis, who says that only in Moshe Rabbenu's period did we begin to observe "night preceding the day". It is for this reason that in nearly all editions of Rashbam to the Bible, the first eight verses are excluded. Only in the Shulsinger edition (New York, year 1950) is it added as addenda, at the end of the last volume, with a scholarly article on the subject written by the great Torah sage Rabbi Menachem Kasher.

As aforementioned, Rabbi Abaraham was a great mathematician.

Upon being asked why is it that we see righteous people who are afflicted with ailments or poverty, why is it that we see vicious despots wreaking havoc on their populations, doing great injustice and yet left unpunished?

Rabbi Abraham responded by stating that we are ignorant enough not to understand human judgment, much more so Divine judgment. He told a mythical story. It so happened that three friends voyaged together on a ship, on the high seas. One had with him three loaves of bread. The other had with him two loaves. The third had none. Very generously the two who owned loaves permitted the third traveler to participate with them. After the friendly three finished their meal of five loaves, the grateful third party took out of his wallet five golden dinars and gave it as reward to his two companions. But here he opened the door to great argumentation, much rancor and vilification.

The first benefactor who donated his 3 loaves, wished to take three of the coins (since all together there were five loaves). But that man who gave 2 loaves demanded that that the sum be split equally between them, since the "guest" ate half and half from each donor, therefore according to his logic he was entitled to half of the sum. They perforce agreed that upon reaching land they would go to a Judge and abide by his verdict. What was their surprise to hear that he decided that the first donor (three loaves) should receive 4 coins, and the donor of two loaves should get only one coin! Both litigants derided the "judge". How could it be that he deliver to the "three loaves" party MORE than he requested, and therefore to the aggrieved party (one loaf) to obtain even LESS than the sum that his opponent was already willing to give him?!

Here Rabbi ibn Ezra appeared with his immense shrewdness and acumen.

To the contrary, only the Judge was right Appraising the situation intellectually on a mathematical basis.

The first party donated three loaves and the second two loaves. Five loaves (split into fractions of thirds) comprise fifteen thirds. Since each of the three participants ate equally only one third of the loaves, each ate only five thirds of the fifteen thirds offered. Now of course the first benefactor who gave three loaves (which are nine thirds) ate only five on his own account, and delivered

unto his guest four thirds (the remainder of his three loaves). Therefore he is deserving of four coins. However his friend who delivered two loaves (which are six thirds) only partook of five thirds (of the original fifteen thirds) and therefore his remainder to the guest was only one third. Speaking precisely, he is therefore only entitled to one coin. And this is exactly what the wise Judge decided.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra summed up to his rapt inquirer, "If so we do not comprehend human wisdom, how much more so is Divine wisdom above our understanding!" (This story is recorded by Rabbi Maimon, *ibid*, page 262).

It is important that we make use of his commentary to the Bible.

- Besides the Mossad Harav Kook edition (aforementioned) the best super-commentator to unravel Rabbi Abraham's pithy comments,
- it is important to recognize the "**me-ho-kekei Judah**" edition (1903 and recently republished) which includes "**Yahel Or**" and "**karnei Or**". These are five lengthy volumes.
- Another very important work is "**Zofnat Pa'aneach**" (from Rabbi Yosef Bonfils, a medieval sage (reprinted in Crakow, 1912)). The Mosasad Harav Kook edition has an ample 70 pages foreword to explain Rabbi Abraham's basic thoughts and approaches. See page 35 on his mathematical ingenuity.

Besides his mathematical works (mostly unpublished, but we have "**sefer Ha-Mispar**" (1,895) we also enjoy his clever essay on G-d's Holy Names ("**sefer ha-Shem**") and his wonderful explanation as to the Mussaric approaches in understanding the 613 Mitzvot, in his book "**Yessod Morah**".

If we wish to cite details from his Mussar approach, we must mention that he taught to be satisfied with what one has and not to be envious unto others. Rabbi Abraham hated receiving gifts from others and earned his livelihood from his authorship. He also translated ibn Hayug's grammatical treatises from the Arabic. He also edited Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon's Comments to the Bible. But he did not want to live from "charity".

Rabbi Abraham had five children, only the name of one do we know (Isaac). Jewish legend has it that Rabbi Abraham married the daughter of Rabbi Judah Ha-levi, author of the "Book of the Kuzari". This is mentioned by Rabbi Isaac Abravenel (Sh'mos, beginning of Chapter 32, page 311). Rabbi Abraham mentions a question he was asked by Rabbi Judah (Sh'mos, beginning of chapter twenty).

The "Hebrew Encyclopedia" (page 211) informs us that at reaching old age he travelled to the Holy Country (although he died in Rome).

That he had a great and abiding love of the Holy Country we know from his writings –

- (A) The Torah recounts at great length the purchase of the burial ground of our Patriarchs. Why is this not told simply, by a few words? Rabbi Abraham answers (Bereshis 23 verse 19) to teach of the spiritual values of the Land of Israel, for the live and so too for the dead.
- (B) Once again when the Torah informs us that Yaakov purchased Sh'chem so to bury his wife Rachel, Rabbi Abraham writes "To teach us that he who owns a land plot in the Holy Country, it is as if he has possession of O'lam ha-bo".
- (C) Many are familiar with Ramban's teaching that all of the Torah was preplanned to be observed in the Holy Country. The rest of the world was parcelled out to the seventy nations. Not many know that this idea the Ramban learnt from the ibn Ezra (D'varim 4 verse 19 and so too chapter 31 verse 16. This we know from the ibn Ezra's words on Va'yikra 18 verse 25)

It is important to mention Rabbi Abraham's religious philosophy.

He taught that G-d pervades all, and is constantly Present (Bereshis, one verse 26). This point is taken up again, when Moshe Rabbenu sinned (Mei meriva, Bamidbar chapter 20) and the Torah castigates him "you did not believe in Me" (verse 12).

Rabbi Abraham says that Moshe was dis-attached from the G-d head, by scolding the Jews with great ire. Therefore he no longer had power to affect any miracles. The idea involved is that so long as a person doesn't "forget" the G-dly presence, he is enlivened by the Divine Presence. To get angry is a token of dis-attachment. This idea is expanded and expounded upon by the Rambam. ("Guide to the Perplexed", part three, chap. 51).

Another important lesson taught by Rabbi Abraham is how not to be envious of others. The “Ten Commandments” end with the exhortation not to desire anybody else’s wife. How is it possible to demand of a person what **not to think?** Thought is involuntary. The fleeting fantasies pop up, beyond a person’s control of what his mind thinks. So how is it possible to demand of a person “not to think” and even more so, what justice is there in punishing him for what he is not in control of supervising?

The answer given by the great sage is that it is not the thought itself which is punishable. It is the previous approach to that man’s standing in his community. It is well known that a peasant cannot marry the King’s daughter. The difference in social rank is so vast, that it is inconceivable that any matchmaker offers that suggestion and even if uttered, it would be the laughing stock of all.

So too, if a person would appreciate the fact that G-d has granted unto each and every single creature all that is necessary for it, one would not even consider desiring something that is a superfluous accessory. If a person would constantly consider the fact that all that is in Creation is under G-d’s sovereignty and pre-ordained (except for freewill for sins or good actions) – then, even that fleeting thought would be considered preposterous and abnormal, and would not even enter his mind. This is the effect of the prohibition not to covet, to recognize that all is planned by Providence.

Another important lesson taught by Rabbi Abraham is that the Resurrection of the Dead is mentioned specifically in the Torah.

G-d proclaims: “I put to death and I bring alive” (D’vorim 32, verse 39). Speaking logically, death comes **after** the situation of life, not vice versa! Yet here the Torah teaches the principle of life after death. So explains Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, in his commentary there.

We have touched upon several interesting topics concerning this fascinating sage. Of course nothing could substitute for the original and genuine study of his works. His Yahrzeit date is the first of Adar.

May his merit benefit all of us.