

PARSHAS BEREISHIS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

DON YITZCHAK ABARBANEL DIPLOMAT, FINANCIER, MYSTIC; A TORAH SCHOLAR FOR OUR OPEN SOCIETY.

INTRODUCTION.

This Torah scholar, diplomat, financier, mystic and leader of his people, although living some 5 centuries ago, is particularly pertinent to the modern open society and global village in which we live, in a way that no other scholar seems to be. He is probably the last person to combine within his person 4 major and long existent Jewish traditions; philosopher, states-man, torah scholarship and cabbalist. His commentary on the Torah seems particularly suitable to those of us who earn our livelihoods, engage in business or professions and willy-nilly are confronted with the challenges of living globally, for the first time since his period, in free societies.

Faced with the challenges inherent in the cultural and religious free market of his time Â 15th century Spain, his knowledge of Torah, philosophy, both Jewish and that of classical Greece and European Renaissance, and mystical sources, he presents a commentary suitable to us living in a similar assimilatory prone, open and spiritually free society. As a scion of traumatic Jewish expulsion, persecution and suffering, his ideas of galut, redemption and messianism are extremely relevant to our post holocaust generation.

Adopting a special Socratic style of detailed questions and answers, he produces a commentary on the Chumash and the Nach that is familiar and convenient for us trained as we are, knowingly or unknowingly, in Greek methods of thought and those of science and technology. Furthermore, he constantly refers to the classical commentators who preceded him- Rashi, Rambam, Ibn Ezra, Ralbag and Ramban, but has a different perspective. BIOGRAPHY.

He was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1437, into a family descended from King David that ranked in the forefront of the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula. They were distinguished by their financial, political and Jewish communal leadership achievements.

In addition they were known as a family that loved scholarship, and piety, and had strong moral convictions. All these as well as their commercial and financial strengths Don Yitzchak inherited.

Then in 1483, with the ascension of the anti Semitic king Joao, he was forced to flee to Spain, where he re-established himself till the expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492. Ultimately he made his way to Italy, where he lived in Naples and Venice till his death in 1508.

In addition to his commentary on the whole Tanach, he wrote commentaries on Pirkei Avot and the Pesach Haggadah, and a trilogy, Mayanot Hayeshua, Mevaser Hayeshua and Yeshuat Messicho- his great work on Galut and Redemption.

Parshat Bereishit.

It is fascinating to find in this scholar, some 400 years before Darwin, a sort of Darwinism when he discusses the sequence of the creatures created during the 6 days of creation. He too points out the progression from the simple to the most complicated and developed form of life, but in contrast to the Darwinists, he sees this progression not as merely physical and determined by the survival of the fittest but primarily spiritual in nature and importance, decreed by Divine Will.

The inanimate things in G-d's world are spiritually at the lowest level, having neither life nor ability to act on their own. Fishes and birds, the physically simplest and least developed species of the living world, are at a higher spiritual and religious level than the inanimate yet are spiritually the weakest of that world. Apart from anything else, they can only reproduce by means of the hatching of eggs, a mechanical and disinterested process. In contrast, in the mammals including Adam, the continuation of the species is through the actual body of the female, an indication of a certain nobility flowing from feelings, creativity and relationships.

An indication of the spirituality attached to this ability to reproduce a continuation of the species that is a replica of the species is shown by Abarbanel when he comments on the naming of Adam's first born. The text makes it clear that the naming of Cain was done by Chava who said, "kaniti" [from the root to acquire or to take possession] a man with the help of the Lord" (Bereishit, 4:1). She herself had been formed by G-d from Adam, however, she, together with the Lord, had created this son. Despite this, of all the other parts of Creation the text says, "let the Earth bring forth" whereas regarding Adam the Torah says, "And G-d said, 'Let us make Man' or 'G-d created Man'", thus demonstrating a closer and special relationship between him and Hashem, that is radically different qualitatively and spiritually from the rest of creation. Adam alone had elements of the heavenly beings and of divinity. So his creation was a special and constructive act rather than something mechanically called forth from the earth and this despite his being taken from the Adamah and his common source with the rest of the creation. Nevertheless, there is no special day set aside for his creation as befits one who is created in G-d's image, otherwise Adam would have thought that he was a god. So Adam was created on the 6th day together with all the other animals and beasts, who like him, procreate their species. This is further strengthened by the text using the phrase 'kedmuteinu' 'after our likeness'

but not in our likeness (Bereishit.I: 26).

However, in addition to his earthy source, Adam also had the intelligence, wisdom and understanding that, being of Divinity, is lacking in the other beings. Above all, Mankind alone has the free will to choose between good and evil that is the hallmark of the image of G-d.

The duality that Abarbanel speaks of does not mean the existence of two competitive natures, destined to struggle against each other, but rather a balance whereby the divinity gives Adam free will so that the earthy can be educated and refined; this is the distinguishing mark of Mankind. Abarbanel's answer to 2 questions regarding the Generations of Heaven and Earth (Bereishit 2: 4), can serve as an example to his method of commentary as well as this concept of a balance between the earthy and the heavenly dualism in Mankind.

" And Adam became a ânefesh chaya" (Ber.2: 7). Abarbanel questions all of the commentators who see in the term; â nefesh chaya' a reference to some sublime characteristic of Man, whether having the power of speech (Onkelos), the soul as evidence of his spiritual nature (Ibn Ezra), the sum total of his intellectual-spiritual-rational nature (Guide to the Perplexed) or the superiority of the soul of Man over the soul of the animal who are also referred to as ânefesh chaya' (Rashi). In contrast Abarbanel sees this verse as expressing the common source that Man has with the animals, that guides him unless he is able to use his spiritual wisdom to guide his free choice. This idea is supported by the verse, "Man is glorious but if he does not understand, he is likened to the animals that perish" (Tehilim, 49:21), or "Because of the sons of Man that G-d may sift them that they may see that they are but as beasts" (Koheleth, 3:18). That is why Nefesh Chaya is followed by the creation of Gan Eden.

Abarbanel questions why the Torah tells us that there was no rain before Adam was created on the 6th day, so that there was no growth of plants and trees, even though we were told that these were created on the 3rd day. He rejects Rashi's comment that this is because before Adam there was nobody who could thank G-d for the rain. Surely the whole of creation including the trees, shrubs and flowers would have been thankful for the rain so that they could have grown without Adam? So he explains that then they could only flourish and grow by the virtue of the nature inherent in them; this would similarly apply to the animal nature of Man. However, Adam was created from the mixture of earth with the rain that came from heaven; a mixture that enables him and through him the rest of creation to grow and develop according to the Divine Will. Gan Eden was then created to emphasize for Adam that the penalty for transgressing that Divine Will was a return to the dust from which he was formed- a return to the non growth that existed before that mixture of earthiness and spirituality from which Adam was created.

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