

ליל תורת ארץ ישראל

THE NIGHT OF TORAT ERETZ YISRAEL

Ramban and me on the way to the Land

Summary page

The following is a guide for the delivering of the session “Ramban and me on the way to the Land”.

We suggest to teach the text by learning and discussing bit by bit. In the following scheme you find insights and tips to lead the analysis of the text in a meaningful and engaging way.

The letter is from the Ramban, Rabbi Moshe Bar Nachman.

Leading Questions

Who was the Ramban?

Content

Refer to Wikipedia below.

Delivery Tips

Translate the letter
Photocopy Wikipedia. The group should create a brief biography.

May G-d bless you, my son Nachman, that you may see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life; and see your children's children and may your table be like our Father Avraham's table.

Leading Questions

How important do you think it is for your father to have a connection with you? Rate between 1-10 and explain.

Content

Parents are a source of inspiration that we must invest in.

I'm writing you this letter from the Holy city of Jerusalem.

I had the honor of getting here on the ninth day of the month of Elul, and I stayed here until Yom haKippurim; now my plan is to go to Hevron, the city of the graves of our Fathers, to prostrate to them and dig a grave for myself, please G-d.

Leading Questions

How long did the Ramban spend in Jerusalem and why for such a short period of time?

Content

The point of his journey was to be buried in Chevron, like the Avot. A stark contrast to people today, who make Aliyah to live in Israel and not to die there.

What can I tell you about the Land? Many are its forsaken places, and great is the desecration. The rule seems to be that the more sacred the place, the greater the devastation it has suffered.

Jerusalem is the most desolate place of all, and the land of Yehuda is even more desolate than the Galil.

Even in its destruction, it is an exceedingly good land:

<u>Leading Questions</u> Why is it that the more holy the greater the destruction?	<u>Content</u> Because of the wasted potential	
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there are more than two thousand citizens, three hundred amongst them are christian, refugees from the sultan's sword, and there are no Jews amongst them: they went away since the Tartars came in, or they got killed by their swords.

There are two brothers, dyers by trade. There are ten men who meet on every Shabbat and they hold services at their home.

<u>Leading Questions</u> Explain the concept 'Netzach Yisrael' on a background of events.	<u>Content</u> The Jews will always survive, even in situations of dark destruction. Other examples in history – Holocaust, slavery in Egypt.	<u>Delivery Tips</u> Use a picture of Genghis Khan and the Tartars.
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We motivated them and we found some ruins of a house built on pillars of marble and with a nice dome, so we made it into a Bet Kneset, since the city's been abandoned and every person that wants to take advantage of the ruins, can. We volunteered to fix the house, and they already started sending people to the city of Shechem, to get from there Torah scrolls that were once in Jerusalem and got moved from there when the Tartars arrived - so we created there a Bet Kneset, and they davened.

<u>Leading Questions</u> Why didn't the two brothers think of it themselves?	<u>Content</u> A prisoner can't free himself from prison – One needs external help and inspiration. Examples: Shlichim, Montefiore, the growth of Jerusalem outside of the Old City walls.	
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Many people come to Jerusalem, men and women, from Damascus, Tzova and every area of the Land, and they come to see what happened to the Bet haMikdash and mourn it. And may He who let us see Jerusalem in its destruction, let us see Jerusalem rebuilt and restored, when the Divine Presence will return on it. And you, my son, and your brothers, and all the house of your father, may you deserve the good of Jerusalem and the consolation of Zion.

Your father who cares and forgets, sees and rejoys.

<u>Leading Questions</u> The Ramban was about to die. How did he possibly think he was going to see the Mashiach?	<u>Content</u> Believing every day that he would come. Beyond the rules of nature and his limitations.	<u>Delivery Tips</u> Chocolate competition – Summary quiz. Chocolate prizes for what they can remember from the letter. Finish by singing Ani Maamin.
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Conclusion

The Ramban uses this letter to his son to share his thoughts about the Land of Yisrael, especially during a time of difficulties and persecutions. While telling what he sees and does, he explains how even in one of its most difficult times, the Land keeps a potential of greatness and splendor, and is a house of what remained of Am Yisrael in the area. This message serves as a declaration of hope for the Land and the people of Yisrael to revive the presence in the Land and draw closer the Redemption.

Nahmanides

Also known as Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman Girondi, Bonastruc ça (de) Porta and by his acronym Ramban (1194 – 1270), was a leading medieval Jewish scholar, Catalanrabbi, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator. He was raised, studied, and lived for most of his life in Girona.

Name

"Nahmanides" is a Greek-influenced formation meaning "son of Naḥman". He is also commonly known by his Hebrew acronym, "רמב"ן", (Rabbi Moshe ben Naḥman). His Catalan name was Bonastruc ça Porta, (also written Saporta, de Porta).

Biography

Nahmanides was born in Girona in 1194, where he grew up and studied (hence his name "Girondi"), and died in the Land of Israel about 1270. He was the grandson of Isaac ben Reuben of Barcelona and cousin of Jonah Gerondi (the Rabbeinu Yonah); possibly his brother was Benveniste de Porta, the bailie of Barcelona. Among his teachers in Talmud were Judah ben Yakkar and Meir ben Nathan of Trinquetaille, and he is said to have been instructed in Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) by his countryman Azriel of Gerona, who was in turn a disciple of Isaac the Blind.

Nahmanides studied medicine which he practiced as a means of livelihood; he also studied philosophy. During his teens he began to get a reputation as a learned Jewish scholar. At age 16 he began his writings on Jewish law. In his *Milhamot Hashem* (Wars of the Lord) he defended Alfasi's decisions against the criticisms of Zerachiah ha-Levi of Girona. These writings reveal a conservative tendency that distinguished his later works — an unbounded respect for the earlier authorities.

In the view of Nahmanides, the wisdom of the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, as well as the Geonim (rabbis of the early medieval era) was unquestionable. Their words were to be neither doubted nor criticized. "We bow," he says, "before them, and even when the reason for their words is not quite evident to us, we submit to them" (*Aseifat Zekkenim*, commentary on *Ketubot*). Nahmanides' adherence to the words of the earlier authorities may be due to piety, or the influence of the northern French Jewish school of thought. However, it is thought that it also may be a reaction to the rapid acceptance of Greco-Arabic philosophy among the Jews of Spain and Provence; this occurred soon after the appearance of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*. This work gave rise to a tendency to allegorize Biblical narratives, and to downplay the role of miracles. Against this tendency Nahmanides strove, and went to the other extreme, not even allowing the utterances of the immediate disciples of the Geonim to be questioned.

Views on death, mourning and the resurrection

In Nahmanides's *Torat ha-Adam*, which deals with mourning rites, burial customs, etc., Nahmanides sharply criticizes writers who strove to render man indifferent to both pleasure and pain. This, he declares, is against the Law, which commands man to rejoice on the day of joy and weep on the day of mourning. The last chapter, entitled *Shaar ha-Gemul*, discusses reward and punishment, resurrection, and kindred subjects. It derides the presumption of the philosophers who pretend to a knowledge of the essence of God and the angels, while even the composition of their own bodies is a mystery to them.

For Nahmanides, divine revelation is the best guide in all these questions, and proceeds to give his views on Jewish views of the afterlife. He holds that as God is eminently just, there must be reward and punishment. This reward and punishment must take place in another world, for the good and evil of this world are relative and transitory.

Besides the animal soul, which is derived from the "Supreme powers" and is common to all creatures, man possesses a special soul. This special soul, which is a direct emanation from God, existed before the creation of the world. Through the medium of man it enters the material life; and at the dissolution of its medium it either returns to its original source or enters the body of another man. This belief is, according to Nahmanides, the basis of the levirate marriage, the child of which inherits not only the name of the brother of his fleshly father, but also his soul, and thus continues its existence on the earth. The resurrection spoken of by the prophets, which will take place after the coming of the Messiah, is referred by Nahmanides to the body. The physical body may, through the influence of the soul, transform itself into so pure an essence that it will become eternal.

Commentary on the Torah

His commentary on the Torah (five books of Moses) was his last work, and his most well known. It frequently cites and critiques Rashi's commentary, and it usually provides alternative interpretations. He was prompted to write it by three motives: (1) to satisfy the minds of students of the Law and stimulate their interest by a critical examination of the text; (2) to justify the ways of God and discover the hidden meanings of the words of Scripture, "for in the Torah are hidden every wonder and every mystery, and in her treasures is sealed every beauty of wisdom"; (3) to soothe the minds of the students by simple explanations and pleasant words when they read the appointed sections of the Pentateuch on Sabbaths and festivals.

His commentary on the creation of the world describes the universe expanding, and matter forming.

"...At the briefest instant following creation all the matter of the universe was concentrated in a very small place, no larger than a grain of mustard. The matter at this time was very thin, so intangible, that it did not have real substance. It did have, however, a potential to gain substance and form and to become tangible matter. From the initial concentration of this intangible substance in its minute location, the substance expanded, expanding the universe as it did so. As the expansion progressed, a change in the substance occurred. This initially thin noncorporeal substance took on the tangible aspects of matter as we know it. From this initial act of creation, from this etherically thin pseudosubstance, everything that has existed, or will ever exist, was, is, and will be formed."

His exposition, intermingled with aggadic and mystical interpretations, is based upon careful philology and original study of the Bible. As in his preceding works, he vehemently attacks the Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, and frequently criticizes Maimonides' Biblical interpretations. Thus he cites Maimonides' interpretation of Gen. 18:8, asserting that it is contrary to the evident meaning of the Biblical words and that it is sinful even to hear it. While Maimonides endeavored to reduce the miracles of the Bible to the level of natural phenomena, Nahmanides emphasizes them, declaring that "no man can share in the Torah of our teacher Moses unless he believes that all our affairs, whether they concern masses or individuals, are miraculously controlled, and that nothing can be attributed to nature or the order of the world." See further on this debate under Divine Providence.

Next to belief in miracles Nahmanides places three other beliefs, which are, according to him, the Jewish principles of faith, namely, the belief in creation out of nothing, in the omniscience of God, and in divine providence.

In Jerusalem

Nahmanides left Aragon and sojourned for three years somewhere in Castille or in southern France. In 1267, seeking refuge in Muslim lands from Christian persecution, he made Aliyah to Jerusalem. There he established a synagogue in the Old City that exists until present day, known as the Ramban Synagogue. His re-establishment of Jewish communal life in Jerusalem (which had been interrupted by Crusader repression) is notable in that it marked the beginning of almost 700 consecutive Jewish years in Jerusalem until the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Nahmanides then settled at Acre, where he was very active in spreading Jewish learning, which was at that time very much neglected in the Holy Land. He gathered a circle of pupils around him, and people came in crowds, even from the district of the Euphrates, to hear him. Karaites were said to have attended his lectures, among them being Aaron ben Joseph the Elder, who later became one of the greatest Karaite authorities (although Graetz writes that there is no veracity to that).

It was to arouse the interest of the Israeli Jews in the exposition of the Bible that Nahmanides wrote the greatest of his works, the above-mentioned commentary on the Torah. Although surrounded by friends and pupils, Nahmanides keenly felt the pangs of exile. "I left my family, I forsook my house. There, with my sons and daughters, the sweet, dear children I brought up at my knees, I left also my soul. My heart and my eyes will dwell with them forever."

During his three years' stay in the Holy Land Nahmanides maintained a correspondence with his native land, by means of which he endeavored to bring about a closer connection between Judea and Spain. Shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem he addressed a letter to his son Nahman, in which he described the desolation of the Holy City, where there were at that time only two Jewish inhabitants — two brothers, dyers by trade. In a later letter from Acre he counsels his son to cultivate humility, which he considers to be the first of virtues. In another, addressed to his second son, who occupied an official position at the Castilian court, Nahmanides recommends the recitation of the daily prayers and warns above all against immorality. Nahmanides died after having passed the age of seventy-six. There is a disagreement as to his actual burial place. Some say that his remains were interred at Haifa. Others say that they are as he requested, next to the building housing the grave sites of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron. Supporting this latter theory was the discovery of a small underground tomb by an expert in the use of divining rods in the exact place that his request mentioned, under the seventh step of the small stairs to the right of the building. This location is visited at times by people to give respect to this great Torah Master. Other traditions hold that a rock-hewn cave, called the Cave of the Ramban in Jerusalem, is the Ramban's final resting place.

Works

Nahmanides' wrote glosses on the whole Talmud, made compendiums of parts of Jewish law, after the model of Isaac Alfasi. His major work on the Talmud is referred to as: "Chiddushei haRamban", and offers a dazzling breadth and depth to the Talmud. He often provides a different perspective on a variety of issues that are addressed by the Tosefot.

Nahmanides' known halakhic works are: "Mishpetei ha-Cherem," the laws concerning excommunication, reproduced in "Kol Bo"; "Hilkhot Bedikkah," on the examination of the lungs of slaughtered animals, cited by Shimshon ben Tzemach Duran in his "Yavin Shemu'ah"; "Torat ha-Adam," on the laws of mourning and burial ceremonies, in thirty chapters, the last of which,

entitled "Sha'ar ha-Gemul," deals with eschatology (Constantinople, 1519, and frequently reprinted).

Nahmanides' writings in the defense of Simeon Kayyara and Alfasi also belong in the category of his Talmudic and halachic works. These writings are: "Milhamot HaShem," defending Alfasi against the criticisms of Zerachiah ha-Levi of Girona (published with the "Alfasi," Venice, 1552; frequently reprinted; separate edition, Berlin, 1759); "Sefer ha-Zekhut," in defense of Alfasi against the criticisms of Abraham ben David (RABaD; printed with Abraham Meldola's "Shiv'ah 'Enayim," Leghorn, 1745; under the title "Machaseh u-Magen," Venice, 1808); "Hassagot" (Constantinople, 1510; frequently reprinted), in defense of Simeon Kayyara against the criticisms of Maimonides' "Sefer ha-Mitzwoth" (Book of Precepts).

- "Derashah", sermon delivered in the presence of the King of Castile
- "Sefer ha-Ge'ulah", or "Sefer Ketz ha-Ge'ulah", on the time of the arrival of the Messiah (in Azariah dei Rossi's "Me'or 'Enayim Imre Binah," ch. xliii., and frequently reprinted)
- "Iggeret ha-Musar", ethical letter addressed to his son (in the "Sefer ha-Yir'ah," or "Iggeret ha-Teshuvah," of Jonah Gerondi)
- "Iggeret ha-Chemdah", letter addressed to the French rabbis in defense of Maimonides (with the "Ta'alumot Chokmah" of Joseph Delmedigo)
- "Wikkuach", religious controversy with Pablo Christiani (in the "Milchamot Chovah")
- "Perush Iyyov", commentary on Job
- "Bi'ur" or "Perush 'al ha-Torah", commentary on the Torah