

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

This week's shiurim are dedicated in memory of
Lillian Grossman z"l – Devorah Leah bas Shlomo Halevi
by Larry and Maureen Eisenberg

Dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray

Lecture #17:
Ramban, Part I

A. Biography

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman¹ (henceforth known as the Ramban) was born in Girona, Catalonia (today in northeast Spain), part of the Crown of Aragon, in 1194. This area was heavily influenced by Spanish Muslim culture and by French Ashkenazic culture. Indeed, the Ramban's writings reflect Spanish philosophy as well as the studiousness which characterized Ashkenazic Jewry. The Ramban was a physician by profession, but he studied *Tanakh*, Talmud, philosophy and philology as well.

The Ramban served as a yeshiva head in Barcelona and as leader of the Jewish community. In the year 1232, following the polemics about the Rambam's writings,² the Ramban tried to resolve the conflict between the Rambam's supporters on the one hand and his opponents on the other, by offering a compromise: the Rambam's work would no longer be banned, but there would be a minimum age for studying philosophy and science. In its time, the Ramban's attempt at compromise was not successful.

1 The official Spanish name of the Ramban was Bonastruc ça Porta. He is also referred to as Nahmanides, and his last name is sometimes given as Girondi, indicating the city of his birth.

2 This controversy arose due to the Rambam's reliance on Greek philosophy in *Moreh Ha-nvukhim*; there was strong opposition to his writings among French Jewry. According to his opponents, the Rambam made the Jewish tradition subservient to concepts from Greek (pagan) philosophy. The polemics began when Rabbi Shelomo min Ha-har and his student Rabbeinu Yona Girondi (the Ramban's cousin) turned to the French sages to express the Ashkenazic opposition to the Rambam's writings. The French sages indeed expressed their strong objections, banning both that work and *Sefer Ha-madda*, the first part of Mishneh Torah. For their part, the Spanish sages band the works of Rabbi Shelomo min Ha-har, the initiator of the ban.

In the year 1263, as part of his position as chief rabbi of Castilian Jewry, the Ramban was asked by King James I of Aragon³ to represent Judaism in a public debate with Christianity. This disputation occurred in Barcelona, in the royal palace and in the royal presence. Pablo Christiani, a Jewish apostate, represented the Church. For four days, Christiani attempted to bring proofs of Jesus' divinity and of the abrogation of the commandments of the Torah from the *Tanakh* and the Talmud, but the Ramban refuted all of his claims. The disputation ended with the Ramban victorious, and he received a reward of 300 dinars. The Ramban summarized the debates in a book, which exists today as the *Sefer Ha-vikuach*, and following the publication of this work, the organizers of the disputation wanted to put the Ramban on trial for defaming and libeling Christianity. This came about two years after the end of the disputation (1265). Due to the king's intervention, this was delayed, but the disputation's organizers succeeded in convincing Pope Clement IV to condemn the Ramban to perpetual exile over what he wrote in *Sefer Ha-vikuach*. Thus, in 1267, the Ramban had no choice but to flee Spain; he moved to the Land of Israel.

By mid-1267, the Ramban had reached the coast of Acre, and on the 9th of Elul (the first of September) he arrived in Jerusalem.⁴ The Ramban was shocked by what he found: Jerusalem was in ruins, the economic status of the Jews was very difficult, and their numbers were very low, to the extent that it was quite challenging to find a ten-man quorum for public prayer. The Ramban describes in a long elegy the misery of Jerusalem's Jewish population at this time:

Over these I cry and forswear all pleasure,
For the city remains in waste and desolate beyond measure.
Our holy and glorious temple, where our fathers praised you, has been
burned with fire, and in ruins lie all our treasures.

...

How the faithful city has become a byword!
Great among the nation, supreme and preferred,
How has this befallen the land's sovereign? How absurd!
The dove city, perfect to every extent,
Sun-bright, moon-beautiful in ascent,
Myrrh and frankincense are her scent.

...

Holy one, I saw in you, by today's light,
A most difficult and troubling sight.
I found in you a Jew who weathered cruelty and spite;
A dyer he was, and I witnessed his plight.⁵
He had borne every unbearable slight.⁶

³ He was also known as *Jaime el Conquistador* (the Conqueror).

⁴ This is what arises from his elegy over the destruction of Jerusalem (see below):

For on the ninth day of the month of Elul, five thousand and twenty-seven, you came
in the ruined city, desolate and without her children, sitting with her head covered...

⁵ A Jew who is oppressed and suffers

⁶ By occupation

Old and young gather in the house to make a quorum:
A congregation, though they have no place in the forum,⁷
No possession or property to maintain decorum,
Poor, needy, indigent, without argent or aurum.

The destroyed state of the city and the status of the Jews in it touched the Ramban's heart, and with great determination he came out to strengthen the city and to reorganize the remnants of the community in Jerusalem. Among other projects, the Ramban built a synagogue (named after him) in the city at a partially ruined site. With the Ramban's arrival in Jerusalem and his activities to revive the community, Jews started to return. Despite his minimal stay in Jerusalem (about a year, apparently), his influence on the character of the city was tremendous, and we may credit the Ramban with rejuvenating Jewish Jerusalem in the 13th century. From Jerusalem, he returned to Acre, which had the largest and most important Jewish community in the Land of Israel, where he lived until his death at age 76 in the year 1270.⁸

B. The Ramban's Writings

The Ramban composed dozens of works, among them novellae on different tractates of the Talmud; *Sefer Milchamot Hashem*, in which the Ramban protects the Rif from the attacks of the Baal Ha-maor; halakhic compositions and philosophical works; glosses on the Rambam's *Sefer Hamitzvot*; books of responsa, etc. However, his most famous work is his commentary on the Torah, which was among the first books to be published in Hebrew.

In his writings, the Ramban clearly demonstrates his expansive and deep mastery of the Talmud; the writings of the Rif, Rashi and Tosafot (the Tosafists are mentioned in his commentary on the Talmud more than one hundred and fifty times⁹); the Sages' homilies; his predecessors' exegesis (Onkelos, Rashi, ibn Ezra); and philosophical knowledge of great breadth and depth.¹⁰ The Ramban integrates the studiousness of the Ashkenazic-French study hall, with the philosophy and philology which characterized Torah study in Spain. The Ramban was considered in his time the head of Spanish Jewry, but he was accepted and praised by the sages of France and Ashkenaz.

7 In the marketplace, i.e., the congregation had no way to make a living.

8 There are a number of traditions concerning his place of burial; according to one version, he was buried in Acre, and according to other traditions, he was buried in Jerusalem or Hebron.

9 The Ramban had great regard for the Tosafists. For example, in his comments on *Chullin* 94a, he writes this:

And this reason... I have learnt from the words of our French masters, of blessed memory, and I have added some applications, but our Torah is theirs.

In his introduction to his *Dina De-garmi*, he writes:

The French sages have been gathered to their people: they are the teachers; they are the educators; they are the one who reveal the hidden...

10 While the Rambam tries to unify Greek philosophy and the Torah, the Ramban believes that one should not put foreign elements in Judaism (see "*Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman*", Rav Dr. Yitzchak Unna, Jerusalem, 5737, p. 11).

Rav Dr. Yitzchak Unna, in his research on the Ramban, describes very well¹¹ the complexity of the Ramban:

The Ramban unifies, as it were, the virtues of both sides. Aside from his great expertise in Talmud and his respect for tradition, he also exhibits knowledge of philosophy and fine sensitivity for all linguistic issues. Nevertheless, tradition is always his guide in his commentary, and in every place he tries to repel the attacks against it. However, he knows well the nature of the problems which the Torah sets before us; he recognizes the streams of time and the questions which come out of them, and he does not retreat before them.

C. Characteristics of Commentary to the Torah

As we have said, in all of his writings, the Ramban's commentary to the Torah is the most widely distributed. Thus, he had great influence in shaping Jewish thought.

As for the aim of his commentary, the Ramban writes in his introductory poem:

In the name of God, awesome, mighty and great,
I shall begin my comments on the Torah, to innovate...
My mind is not broad enough for all of its secrets to accommodate.
Hidden in its house and veiled in the rooms of its estate,
For every treasure and every wonder and every deep secret and every
glorious wisdom incarnate,
Remains stored up in it, sealed in its storehouse, innate —
In allusion and speech, to write and state.
As the prophet, glorious in crown and in royal garb habilitate,
The anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel did
dictate:
"I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is
exceedingly broad" (*Tehillim* 119:96)...
But what shall I do? My soul longs to plunge in the Torah's stream!
There is in my heart a consuming fire, a burning gleam
Stopped up in my innards to the extreme.
I long to follow in the footsteps of the first ones, the lions of the team,
The geniuses of the generations, masters of might and esteem:
To bear with them the heaviness of the beam,
**To write in them simple meanings in verses and lore, in
commandments and homilies to deem**
Ordered in all things and sure, as they seem.
The lamps of the pure candelabrum I set as my light,
The words of Rabbeinu Shelomo, coronet of beauty, diadem of
glorious might.
His name is his crown; Scripture, Mishna and Talmud, his delight.
His is the firstborn's rite.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 16.

**Of his words I think, in their love I sink, to debate and defend, to
examine and excite
Every definition and derivation
And every allegorical citation
Mentioned in his commentation.
And Rabbi Avraham ben Ezra, I will speak of
With open rebuke and hidden love.**

This introductory poem reveals a number of characteristics of this commentary. First of all, the Ramban in his commentary intends to offer new interpretations (“I shall begin my comments on the Torah, to innovate...”) and not to explain the verses sequentially. When the Ramban does not interpret a given verse, we may assume that he intends to accept Rashi’s approach (unless he explicitly states otherwise), as he writes in his poem, “The lamps of the pure candelabrum I set as my light/ The words of Rabbeinu Shelomo, coronet of beauty, diadem of glorious might.”¹² Another characteristic of the commentary is its being a wide-ranging, comprehensive commentary, in which the Ramban uses specific verses as jumping boards to general topics. The Ramban does not look only at the verse which stands before him, but rather the general context, and he relates to additional contents and topics which are tied to the issue under discussion.

D. Two Examples of the Ramban’s Generalist Approach

We will now examine two instances of the Ramban’s wide-ranging exegesis from the Book of *Bereishit*: the food designated for the human race, as descendants of Adam and Noach, and the massacre of the male citizenry of Shekhem by Yaakov’s sons.

Man’s Dietary Laws

First let us consider his commentary on *Bereishit* 1:29-30, “And God said, ‘Behold I have given to you all seed-bearing vegetation...’” The Ramban explains at length the shift which occurs in the menu of people from their creation until Noach leaves the Ark:

...but he gave to Adam and his wife every seed-bearing herb and all of the fruits of the tree. To the animals of the land and the birds of the heaven, he gave every grassy herb, not the fruits of the tree or the seeds. Their food is not for all of them together equally, but until the Noahides, they were not allowed to eat meat, according to our Rabbis. This is the simple meaning of the verse. Now, this is because the owners of the moving soul have a bit of an elevation in their souls; they may be compared in it to the intelligent soul, having a choice in their good and their foods-, and fleeing from pain and death. Indeed, the verse says (*Kohelet* 3:21), “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?”

¹² Below we will discuss at length the relationship of Ramban to Rashi.

When they sinned, and every flesh corrupted its way upon the earth, He decreed that they would die in the Flood, and because of Noach they were saved, in order that the species might survive, so He gave them permission to slaughter and eat, that this might serve for their survival.

Nevertheless, there was no permission given to them [to partake] of the soul, and He forbade them [to eat] a limb from a living animal. Similarly, He added for us the commandments to forbid every type blood, because it maintains the soul, as it says (*Vayikra* 17:14), “For the soul of every flesh, its blood is in its soul,” and He said to the Israelites, “The blood of every flesh do not eat, for the soul of every flesh is its blood,” for He permits [the consumption of] the body of the living that does not speak after its death, not the soul itself...

We should note the many topics to which the Ramban relates in this comment:

1. An explanation of the verse itself, in which the Ramban distinguishes between that which is allowed for human beings and that which is allowed for animals to eat.
2. The reason to forbid eating animals for Adam.
3. A reason to annul the prohibition for Noahides.
4. Delimiting the application of eating animals.

On the other hand, Rashi explains the verses precisely:

“For you it shall be to eat, and for all the animals of the land” — the verse equates for them wild and domesticated animals to eat,¹³ and it does not allow Adam and his wife to kill a creature and to eat meat, but every grassy herb they may eat, all of them together. When the Noahides were permitted to eat meat, it says (below 9:3), “Every creeping thing which lives,” etc. “like the grassy herb” which I gave to Adam, “I have given you everything.”

The Execution of the Men of Shekhem

An additional example is the Ramban’s interpretation of the narrative of Shekhem, in which the Ramban (*Bereishit* 34:13) relates to a wide range of topics. First, he wonders how it is that Yaakov seems shocked and surprised by his sons’ action; was he not present when they devised their scheme and convinced the men of Shekhem to circumcise themselves?

There is a question here: it appears that by the will of her father and his counsel they answered, for they were before him, and he knew how they responded, speaking with guile; if so, why was he angry?

¹³ The Ramban disputes this view; he believes that man was not equated to animals initially when it came to eating vegetable matter.

Moreover, how can it be that he would marry his daughter off to a Canaanite who had defiled her? Behold all of the brothers respond thus with guile, and Shimon and Levi alone did the act [of the killing the men of the city], but their father cursed [Shimon and Levi] alone?

Now, the guile was in their saying that every male should circumcise himself, for they believed that the people of the city would not have done that, and if perhaps they would listen to the princes and they would all be circumcised, they could come on the third day when they were in pain and take their daughter from Shekhem's house. This was the counsel of the brothers, sanctioned by their father, but Shimon and Levi wanted to be avenged of them, and they killed all the men of the city.

It may be that the anger of Yaakov, who cursed their wrath, came because they killed the men of the city, who had not sinned towards him, and what was fit for them is that they should have killed Shekhem [the prince of the city] alone. This is what the verse says, "The sons of Jacob answered Shekhem and his father Chamor with guile, because he had defiled their sister Dina." For all of them agreed to speak to him with guile, because of the outrage committed against them.

Now, many have asked: how could Yaakov's righteous sons have committed this act, spilling innocent blood?

The master responded in *Sefer Shofetim (Hilkhos Melakhim 9:14)* and said that Noahides are bound [to enforce] laws... and a Noahide who violates one of them is killed by the sword... Because of this, all of the citizens of Shekhem were deserving of capital punishment, because [Prince] Shekhem was a thief, and they saw and knew this, but they did not bring him to justice.

These things are not right in my eyes, for if so, Yaakov would have to have taken the lead in killing them. Even if he was afraid of them, why did he rage against his sons and curse their anger repeatedly, punishing them by sundering and scattering them? Did they not take the initiative and fulfill a commandment, trusting in God, Who in fact saved them?!

In my view, the law [enforcement] which they counted for the Noahides among their seven commandments is not to establish judges in each and every province alone; He also bound them to uphold the laws of theft and fraud... This includes appointing judges in each and every city, just as for Israel, but if they do not do so, they are not killed, because [law enforcement] is a positive commandment for them. Indeed they said (*Sanhedrin 57a*), that "their prohibition is their death penalty," and a prohibition is only that which one is proscribed from doing. This is the way of the Talmud in *Sanhedrin (59b)*...

Why does the master¹⁴ search for a liability? Were the men of Shekhem and the seven nations not idolaters and adulterers, committing all that God finds abominable... Nevertheless, it is not the responsibility of Yaakov and his sons to hold them accountable for these offenses.

Rather, the issue of Shekhem is this: Yaakov's sons, because the men of Shekhem were so evil that their blood was water in their eyes, sought to avenge themselves with the sword of retribution, and they killed the king and all the men of his city... Thus, Yaakov said to them here that they had put him in jeopardy, as it says, "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land" — and there,¹⁵ "Cursed is their anger" — because they committed violence against the men of the city, who had said to them in his presence,¹⁶ "And we will dwell with you and become one people." However, [Yaakov's sons] made the choice to undermine their words, even though the possibility existed that [the men of Shekhem] might return to God, which would mean that they killed them for nothing, for they did not do any evil to them. This is why he said: "Tools of violence are their wares" (*ibid.* 49:5).¹⁷

If we believe the book *Milchamot Benei Yaakov*¹⁸ (which is *Sefer Ha-yashar*), their father's fears were fulfilled, for all the neighbors of Shekhem gathered against them and waged three great battles against them, and were it not for their father who girded his weapons of war and fought, they would have been in jeopardy, as it is told in this book. And our Rabbis (*Bereishit Rabba* 80:10) made mention of this concerning the following verse (48:22): "Which I took from the hand of The Amorite, by my sword and by my bow." We see that all who surrounded them gathered to engage them, so Yaakov had to gird his weapons of war, as Rashi writes *ad loc.*

Nevertheless, the verse chose brevity, for this is a hidden miracle, as they were heroic men and it was their might that saved them, just as the verse truncates the issue of Avraham in Ur Kasdim... Indeed, this is the meaning of "God's terror [was upon the cities surrounding them]" (35:5), for awe and fright fell upon [Shekhem's neighbors] when they saw their might in war, and therefore it is said (35:6), "And Yaakov came to Luz, he and all the people with him," to let us know that neither they nor their servants fell in battle.

14 This refers to the Rambam.

15 This is in Yaakov's blessings, *Bereishit* 49:7.

16 This was in Yaakov's presence.

17 In other words, there was a logical chance that the men of the city of Shekhem, who consented to circumcise themselves, so that they were ready to accept on themselves the faith and the morality of Yaakov's family.

18 The history book which describes in a narrative style the events of our forefathers from the time of Adam until the period of the Judges. The book was edited, apparently, around the 9th century.

The Ramban relates to a number of points:

1. Why does Yaakov get angry at his sons after they kill the men of Shekhem, while according to the verse, he himself was involved in the trickery, because he was present at the time of the speech between his sons on the one hand and Shekhem and Chamor his father on the other? Why was he angry at Shimon and Levi, when all of the brothers responded deceitfully?

2. Philosophical question: how can it be that the righteous sons of Yaakov killed deceitfully?

3. Response of the Rambam: since Noahides are obligated to appoint judges, and the abuse of Dina shows that there were no judges in Shekhem, the lawful sentence for the men of Shekhem was death.

4. Rejecting the view of the Rambam according to the simple meaning of the verses.

5. Rejecting the view of the Rambam on halakhic grounds, and a lengthy analysis defining and delimiting the requirements of the seven Noahide laws.

6. The view of the Ramban that Yaakov's sons indeed sinned by killing the men of Shekhem deceitfully.

7. The reference of the Ramban to Yaakov's suspicion (v. 30), "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household" — a concern which proved true.

8. The reason for the Torah's omission of the Amorite war against Yaakov is that it is a hidden miracle, and there is no need to spell out hidden miracles. At this point, the Ramban adds examples of other hidden miracles not mentioned in the verses.

Using these two examples, we may see by way of these two examples that it is not only that the Ramban, in his commentary to a lone verse, may relate to many facets of exegetical, halakhic and philosophical issues; he seeks an explanation which jibes with the details of many wider contexts. The proof is not local, but wide-ranging, comprehensive, taking in a broad perspective. One may see also the analytical style constructed, in which the Ramban, in an organized, consistent way, lays out the issues, brings different opinions and deals with them until he develops his own view.

As for the Ramban's writing style in his commentary on the Torah, there are clear parallels between it and his writing style in his novellae on the Talmud. There as well, we are talking about organized, topical, analytical writing. In his Talmudic novellae, it is clear that there is a wider analytical element, for he draws from the style of the Tosafists; still, he integrates the Tosafists' analyses within his orderly topical framework, as appropriate for a scholar brought up on the Spanish tradition. Apparently, he copied this style for his biblical exegesis as well.

In the next lesson, God willing, we will deal with specific philosophical topics which are common in the Ramban's commentaries on the Torah; these have proven to be quite influential in shaping Jewish thought throughout the generations.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch