

## D'var Torah Noah – Oct. 29, 2022

By Howard Smith

Last spring, Nancy and I traveled through Spain. We visited Cordoba, the hometown of Rambam in southern Spain, a beautiful, historic and interesting city probably settled by Jews in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It features one of the very few old synagogues still in existence in Spain. It also has a statue of Rambam, who lived there around 1150, eventually fleeing.

Those of you who know me know that I am a big fan of Maimonides. I quote him often in my lectures on astronomy, science and religion because he articulated the unwavering view that things were rational. Reductive reason alone – including about God and the spiritual life – undergirded Torah. All of the mitzvot, for example, had a rational basis. Incidentally, he also argues that everyone serious about their religion needs to know some astronomy.

We also visited northern Spanish towns in Catalonia: Barcelona, Girona, Besalu, and others. Nachmanides, the Ramban, lived and wrote in Girona around 1250, until he fled to Israel. There is a statue of Nachmanides in Girona. Ramban was a Kabbalist, and often and frequently in writing and commentaries he alludes to concepts in Kabbalah. Those of you who know me know that I am also a fan of Nachmanides and Kabbalah which I quote often in my lectures on cosmology and Kabbalah.

Even though they were speaking the same language, Ramban severely criticized Rambam and took an exactly opposite position on almost everything, even when they both are talking about the same pasuk or halacha. It shows that much depends on how you look at it. I'll give you some examples in a second, but first - to the parasha: Noah, where things depend on how you look at them.

Example: Noah was תַּמִּים הָיָה בְּדָרְתִּי

– a righteous person in a wicked world. What a great compliment! Except wait: the rabbis say he was righteous ONLY IN COMPARISON to the wicked around him. Think Liz Cheney. Suddenly this compliment is really an insult.

Another example: Noach saved with world by heeding God's commands to building an ark! BUT: Recall the reason given for the flood: the wickedness of the people?

וְתַמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חַמָּס

Nineveh suffered from the same wickedness:

יָשְׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדְרָכּוֹ הָרָעָה וּמִן־הַחַמָּס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם:

They repented of their evil path and the חַמָּס of which they are guilty.

Jonah saved Nineveh in a few days! It took Noach 120 years to construct the ark (the exact length of time is uncertain) during which time he failed to explain to anyone the errors of their ways, and so no one did teshuvah. Noach's **failure** to lead the people to repent resulted in the flood. Noah did not save the world – his failure condemned the world to destruction. Really – it depends on how you think about it.

I recently finished a fabulous new book by Moshe Halbertal called "Nahmanides", which I very highly recommend. It is a clear -even brilliant - discussion of many fundamental ideas in Jewish thought as seen by Ramban in the context of talking a stance counter to Rambam. So I found it extremely moving to walk along the narrow streets and alleys of Girona, one of the early centers of Kabbalah, where he taught.

I said before that Ramban opposed Maimonides. Here is an example that Halbertal raises early on. You all will be familiar with the fact that every page of Talmud records debates and disagreements. No doubt you once asked - How is this possible? Since all of Torah was revealed at Sinai, how can be any disagreements? The prime examples are the disputes between Beit Hillel and Beit

Shammai? The traditional answer is that formulated by the Geonim from about the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries –the message had been forgotten or corrupted and the rabbis are trying to reconstruct it.

Sound reasonable, right? You agree? Show of hands? If you have wondered about this issue, wouldn't you say this is kind-of like how you would understand it?

Well, here's what Maimonides said in the introduction to his commentary on Mishna in the 12<sup>th</sup> century:

“[The Geonic approach] is void and null! What led them [the Geonim] to this ruinous belief is a deficient comprehension of the words of our sages....” !!

His concern is that once you grant that a Divine message can be forgotten or corrupted, then you undermine the reliability of everything derived from Sinai. How can you be sure any decision in an argument is the right one? You can't. So Maimonides rejected the Geonic view outright.

Rather, he says, the disputes are only about **rabbinic** laws and those derived from the logical application of the 13 rules of inference. For example, whether you should light a channukiah going from 8 candles to 1, or from 1 to 8. This is a purely rabbinic matter. Logic can and should be used to decide which ruling is the correct one; the rabbis are arguing about logical principles.

This also sounds reasonable, right? I'll bet that this is the approach most of us here adopt.

Show of hands?

Note that both the Geonim and Rambam agree on one thing: controversy is a symptom of decline and deterioration. (p.59) -- i.e., forgetfulness or illogical reasoning.

Now here comes the Ramban and his followers, writing a generation after Rambam, and they say no to Rambam. They argue: **all** sides of the argument can be true. This eminently non-reductionist point of view is most commonly referred to in a quote from Ramban's famous disciple the Ritva, R'Yom Tov ben Abraham of Seville (Seville is a bit southwest of Cordoba – He cites the Talmud itself on Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai:

אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים

Controversy – both these and these - reflects the multifaceted nature of revelation. As Halbertal puts it: [This approach is essentially a Kabbalistic one in which] “the multifaceted dynamism of the Godhead is mirrored in revelation itself. Interpretation... does not discover a fixed meaning but decides between various interpretive possibilities....”

This also sounds good! But wait, you say –they both can't be right!? “You're right too!”

But for halacha, what could Ramban mean when he says both are right. To understand this you must understand Ramban's larger context: the Kabbalistic context: the Torah text and these laws are reflective of the sefirot, the ten aspects of the Divine. The cosmic Divine sphere is not immutable or uninvolved in our lives - human behavior influences the Divine world itself. INdxeed, this is the ultimate notion behind tikkun olam!

As Halbertal explains, for Ramban “the interpreter of Torah not only clarifies the words of the text but also retroactively constitutes their meaning.” People have the responsibility to morally engage with the world. As Halbertal puts it (p272): Human reason possesses the power to **create moral norms that have significance EVEN in God's eyes**.

The power of halakha is transformative in the world. Halbertal quotes Ramban, ‘the Sages [p.31] do not expose the meaning of revelation, they constitute it

“because it is in accordance with their understanding that God commands and gives us the Torah.” There are modern echoes of this same debate today. Take the Supreme Court debating Originalism. Or philosophers arguing about the meaning of reality in the light of quantum, where observations constitute reality.

Consider our parasha again: What was reason given for the flood?

תַּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חֲמָס

Ibn Ezra explains חֲמָס as ROBBERY, oppression and rape.

Rashi and most others explain it as referring to robbery. The tradition, in the Midrash Rabba, explains that humanity was commanded at the time of Adam

שִׁבַע מִצְוֹת בְּנֵי נֹחַ

7 things: **courts, blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, robbery, and eating the blood of a living animal.**

These laws are derived from the extraneous passage in Genesis 2:16:

וַיֹּצֵא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ־הַגֶּן אָכַל תֹּאכֵל

The Talmud explicates each word to derive the 7 laws. The generation of the flood were guilty of violating this law and so were deserving of punishment.

But Ramban sees it differently. He says the SMB”N were **not** commanded at the time of Adam -- they were given to Noah after the flood. Rather, he explains, the generation of the flood was guilty of not taking moral accountability.

Remember: “Human reason possesses the power to **create moral norms.**”

According to Ramban, moral obligations do not require divine revelation as they can be deduced from reason, and these obligations have RELIGIOUS STANDING such that God will punish those who do not observe them.

In Ramban’s Kabbalistic terminology, God’s attribute of mercy- Tiferet – became separated from His heart – Malchut. As it says

וַיִּנְחָם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־לְבָבוֹ

This imbalance left the quality of Judgment, Din, dominant, releasing the flood. The generation of the flood failed in their moral accountability on Earth, and as a consequence the waters of the Earth flooded over them. Thus Nachmanides provides an alternative way to view Noah and his generation.

I close with a thought for today, a teaching thanks to the Ramban, and prompted by this week's UN report on Climate:

The flood offers a lesson for us and our actions today. You don't need a law to know how to behave about climate change. There are no laws regulating our energy use, or requiring solar power or carbon sequestration. But unless we accept our moral responsibilities on Earth, we too will face the punishing consequences, perhaps like the generation that was filled with חמץ : and we also face the rising waters of the Earth, its raging fires, and natural disasters.

יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהינו.....

“לֹא־אִסַּף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת־הָאָדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם”

Shabbat Shalom.