

Medieval Israel Class #4: The Dreamers and Rebuilders: Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi and Nachmanides

Timeline

8th century Khazar kingdom converts to Judaism

915 -970 Hasdai Ibn Shaprut

993-1056 Shmuel HaNagid (both Jews in the Golden Age of Spain)

1075 -1141 Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi

1089-1167 Abraham Ibn Ezra

1090s Almohades rule in Muslim Spain

1140 Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi sets out for the land of Israel

1194 – 1270 Nachmanides

1260 Mamelukes control Jerusalem

1263 Nachmanides takes part in a religious disputation with Pablo Christiani

1267 Nachmanides arrives in Jerusalem

1268 Nachmanides arrives in Akko

Akko Timeline

1104 Crusader conquest

1187 Saladin captures Akko for the Muslims

1191 Richard the Lion Heart returns Akko to the Crusaders and it becomes the capital of his kingdom

12th-13th century Akko visited and/or settled by Maimonides, Nahmanides, Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, three hundred rabbis

1291 Mameluke conquest and destruction

1740 Renewed Jewish community Rabbi Chaim ben Atar (Or HaChaim), Rabbi Moshe Luzzato (Ramchal)

1750 Ottoman rebuilding of Akko

1775 Ahmad al Jazzar rules

A Deep Connection to Israel

ליבי במזרח ואנוכי בסוף מערב -
איך אטעמה את אשר אוכל ואיך יערב?
איכה אשלם נדרי ואסרי, בעוד
ציון בחבל אדום ואני בכבל ערב?
ייקל בעיני עזוב כל טוב ספרד,
כמו ייקר בעיני ראות עפרות דביר נחרב!

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west--

How can I find savour in food? How shall it be sweet to me?

How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet

Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?

A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain --

Seeing how precious in mine eyes to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

And a Desire to Return

ציון, הלא תשאלי לשלום אסיריך,
דורשי שלומך והם יתר עדרייך
מים ומזרח ומצפון ותימן שלום
רחוק וקרוב שאי מכל עברייך
ושלום אסיר תקוה נותן דמעיו כטל חרמון
!ונכסף לרידתם על הררייך

לבכות ענותך אני תנים, ועת אחלום
שיבת שבותך - אני כינור לשיריך

Zion, will you not ask after the welfare of your prisoners,
Who seek your welfare, and are the remnant of your flock?
From west and east, and from north and south,
The welfare of those far and near, inquire from all of your sides.
And the welfare of the prisoner of hope, who sheds tears like Hermon's dew,
And yearns for them to descend upon your mountains.
Crying for your suffering, I am a jackal,
And when I dream of the return of your captives, I am a harp for your songs.

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi Borrows the Khazar Story

2:10 The Rabbi: Thou wilt have no difficulty in perceiving that one country may have higher qualifications than others. There are places in which particular plants, metals, or animals are found, or where the inhabitants are distinguished

by their form and character, since perfection or deficiency of the soul are produced by the mingling of the elements.

11. Al Khazari: Yet I never heard that the inhabitants of the Land of Israel were better than other people.

12. The Rabbi: How about the hill on which you say that the vines thrive so well? If it had not been properly planted and cultivated, it would never produce grapes. Priority belongs, in the first instance, to the people which, as stated before, is the essence and kernel [of the nations]. In the second instance, it would belong to the country], on account of the religious acts connected with it, which I would compare to the cultivation of the vineyard. No other place would share the distinction of the divine influence, just as no other mountain might be able to produce good wine.

23. Al Khazari: If this be so, thou fallest short of the duty laid down in thy law, by not endeavouring to reach that place, and making it thy abode in life and death, although thou sayest: 'Have mercy on Zion, for it is the house of our life,' and believest that the Shekhinah will return thither.

Did Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi Reach Eretz Yisrael?

The Rabbi was then concerned to leave the land of the Khazars and to go to Jerusalem. The king did not want to let him go and asked him, what can be sought in the Land of Israel nowadays since the divine reflex is absent from it and with a pure mind and desire one can approach God in any place?

The Rabbi answered: . . . The Land of Israel is especially distinguished by the Lord of Israel and no function can be perfect except there. . . Jerusalem can only be rebuilt when Israel yearns for it to such an extent that they embrace her stones and her dust. (End of The Kuzari)

Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, Renaissance Man

Living in Christendom, Dreaming of the Land of Israel

The Land of Israel is like no other land, it is unable to contain sinners. . .it is on the basis of this matter that the rabbis have said in the Sifre: “and you perish quickly from off the good land, and you shall lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul.” Although I banish you from the land, make yourselves distinctive by the commandments so that when you return they shall not be novelties to you. This can be compared to a master who was angry with his wife and sent her back to her father’s house and told her, adorn yourself with precious things so that when you come back they will not be novelties to you. And so did the prophet Jeremiah say “set yourself signposts,” these are the commandments by which Israel is made distinctive.. . **For the main fulfillment of the**

commandments is to be kept when dwelling in the land of God. (Ramban commentary to VaYikra 18:25)

שכחת העשין ד'

שנצטוינו לרשת הארץ אשר נתן האל יתעלה לאבותינו לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב ולא נעזבה ביד זולתנו מן האומות או לשממה והוא אמרו להם והורשתם את הארץ וישבתם בה כי לכם נתתי את הארץ לרשת אותה והתנחלתם את הארץ אשר נשבעתי לאבותיכם. . , ואמרו ישיבת ארץ ישראל שקולה כנגד כל המצות:

The Disputation 1263

The Disputation of Barcelona (1263): the Hebrew Report of Moshe Ben Nachman OUR LORD THE KING commanded me to dispute with Friar Paul in his palace before him and his advisors in Barcelona. I replied: "I will do as the king commands, if you permit me to speak freely. I hereby request the permission of the king and the permission of Friar Raymond of Penaforte and his associates who are here." Friar Raymond of Penaforte replied: "So long as you do not utter blasphemies." I said to them: "I wish to observe your law in this regard. But I also wish to speak freely in debate, as you speak freely. I have the wisdom to speak properly in debate as you indicate, but it must be according to my will." They all gave me permission to speak freely

Friar Paul inquired: Do you believe that he (the Messiah) has already come?

I answered: No, I believe and know rather that he has not come. . It is impossible for me to accept that he is the Messiah, for the prophet has said "he will have dominion from sea to sea. . 'and the Nazarene had no dominion. During his life he was persecuted by his enemies and was in hiding from them. . . Similarly, the prophet states that in the time of the Messiah. . ."they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hoods, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Form the days of the Nazarene until now, the entire world has been full of violence and robbery, indeed the Christians spill more blood than the rest of the nations. . .How difficult it would be for you, my lord king, and these your knights if they would "neither lead war any more!"

Banished from Spain, Choosing to Make Aliyah

What shall I tell you about the land? The sum of it is that the holier the place, the worse the destruction. Jerusalem is more desolate than the rest of the land, Judah more than the Galilee. Yet for all its destruction, it is wonderful. It has nearly two thousand inhabitants. . .there are no Israelites among them.. There are only two dyers who purchase dye from the government unto whom a minyan gathers for prayers in their house on the Sabbath. I encouraged them and we found an abandoned building with marble pillars and a lovely arch which we

converted into a synagogue, for the city is wide open and anyone who wishes to take possession of an abandoned building can do so. People have contributed to the refurbishing of the building and we have already sent to the city of Shechem for Torah scrolls that had been sent there for safekeeping. . .Who ever is privileged to see [the Temple] in its destruction will be privileged to see it rebuilt and repaired when the Divine Presence returns to it. (Letter from the Ramban to his son, Elul 1267)

Visiting Hebron and Kever Rachel

May Hashem bless you, my son Nachman, and may you see the goodness of Jerusalem. May you live to see your grandchildren. And may your table be like that of the Patriarch Abraham. I am writing you this letter from Jerusalem, the Holy City. With praise and thanksgiving to the Creator I managed to arrive there in peace on the ninth of Elul, [1267 (5067)], and remained there until the day after Yom Kippur. Then I went to Hebron for the Holiday [of Sukkot]. I went to the city of the graves of our forefathers to prostrate myself before them and to dig [purchase] a grave for me there.

זה כתבתי תחילה ועכשיו שזכיתי ובאתי אני לירושלם שבח לאל הטוב והמטיב ראיתי בעיני שאין
מן קבורת רחל לבית לחם אפילו מיל (פירוש לתורה בראשית לה:טז)

Akko: Inside the Land or Outside?

Rabbi Yosi ben Hanina would kiss the rocks of Akko and say “till here is the land of Israel.” (Talmud Yerushalmi Shviit 4:7)

If one delivers a get from abroad (medinat hayam), he must affirm that it was written and sealed in his presence.. .

1:2 [where does medinat hayam begin?] Rabbi Judah says from Rekem to the east and Rekem is like the east, from Ashkelon to the south and Ashkelon is like the south, from Akko to the north, and Akko is like the north. Rabbi Meir says Akko is considered the land of Israel for a get. (Mishnah Gittin 1:1)

Jewish Visitors

Maimonides (1135-1204) 1165: and on the 1st day of the week, on the 3rd day of Sivan, I safely left the sea. I came to Akko and was saved from apostasy and arrived in the land of Israel. And I vowed that this day would be one of happiness and joy, feasting and giving gifts to the poor, for myself and my household forever. On the 3rd day of the week, on the 4th of MarHeshvan, in the year 4726, we left Akko to go up to Jerusalem, in dangerous circumstances. And I entered the great and holy house and prayed there on the 5th day of the week, the 6th of MarHeshvan. On the 1st of the week, the 9th of the month, I left Jerusalem to and traveled to Hebron to kiss the graves of my fathers in the cave [of Machpelah].

And that day I stood and prayed , thank God for everything. And these two days, the 6th and the 9th of MarHeshvan, I vowed that they would be holidays for me . . . and as I was privileged to pray in it [the Temple] in its destruction, so should I and all Israel see it rebuilt speedily, amen!

And I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be astonished at it. (VaYikra 26: 32)

Nachmanides commentary: And these words promise redemption more than any of the visions of Daniel. And when it says “and your enemies will be astonished by it,” this is good news, informing us that our land cannot accept our enemies, and this is a great proof and promise, because you cannot find another land as fertile and as prosperous that is now so destroyed, because since we have left it is has not accepted any nation or language and all try to settle it and cannot succeed.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1707-1746)

A consideration of the general state of affairs will reveal that the majority of men of quick intelligence and keen mentality devote most of their thought and speculation to the subtleties of wisdom and the profundities of analysis, each according to the inclination of his intelligence and his natural bent. . . There are few however who devote thought and study to perfection of Divine service – to love, fear, communion and all the other aspects of saintliness. It is not that they consider this knowledge unessential, if questioned each one would maintain that it is of paramount importance . . . Their failure to devote more attention to it stems rather from its being so manifest and so obvious to them that they see no need for spending much time on it. Consequently, this study and reading of works of this kind have been left to those of a not too sensitive, almost dull intelligence. These you will see immersed in the study of saintliness, not stirring from it. . . This state of affairs results in evil consequences both for those who possess wisdom and for those who do not, causing both sides to lack true saintliness and rendering it extremely rare. The wise lack it because of their limited consideration of it, and the unwise because of their limited grasp. The result is that saintliness is construed by most to consist in the recitation of many Psalms, very long confessions, difficult fasts and ablutions in ice and snow – all of which are incompatible with intellect and which reason cannot accept. (Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzato (1707-1746), The Path of the Just (Mesilat Yesharim)