

## Text 5: Ramban commentary on B. Shabbat 88a

To follow this text you may need to refer back to text 3 – from the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a. It is a complex text which might need to be read and re-read.

והא דאמרינן בענין אגדה הא מודעא רבא לאורייתא ומתרץ כבר קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. קשה לי וכי מה קבלוה זו עושה מסופו של עולם לתחלתו, אם קודם אחשורוש לא היו מצווים למה נענשו ואם נאמר מפני שעברו על גזירת מלכם אי"כ בטלת מודעא זו, ועוד למה הצריכם לקבלה וברית,

וני"ל לומר דמתחלה אע"פ שהיה להם מודעא מ"מ לא נתן להם הארץ אלא כדי שיקיימו התורה כמו שמפורש בתורה בכמה פרשיות, וכתוב (תהלים ק"ה) "ויתן להם ארצות גוים ועמל לאומים ירשו בעבור ישמרו חוקיו ותורותיו ינצורו", והם עצמן מתחלה לא עכבו בדבר כלל ולא אמרו במודעא כלום אלא ברצון נפשם מעצמם אמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע,

לפיכך כשעברו על התורה עמד והגלם מן הארץ, משגלו מסרו מודעא על הדבר מדכתיב (יחזקאל כ') והעולה על רוחכם היה לא תהיה אשר אתם אומרים נהיה כגוים וכמשפחות האדמה לשרת עץ ואבן, וכדאמרינן באגדה (סנהדרין ק"ה א') רבינו יחזקאל עבד שמכרו רבו כלום יש לו עליו וכו', לפיכך כשבאו לארץ בביאה שניה בימי עזרא עמדו מעצמם וקבלוה ברצון שלא יטענו עוד שום תרעומות, והיינו בימי אחשורוש שהוציאם ממות לחיים והיה זה חביב עליהם מגאולה של מצרים.

We say concerning the subject of the agadah that a "strong protest against the Torah" that it [the protest] is resolved because they already accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus. This is difficult for me, that this acceptance was done from the end of the world to its beginning. If prior to Ahasuerus they were not commanded why were they punished? If one says because they transgressed the rule of their king, if so it is an annulment of the warning. Moreover, why was acceptance and the covenant required?

It seems to me to say that from the start, even though they had the warning, in any event God only gave the land in order to uphold the Torah as it is explained in the Torah in many sections. It is written (Psalm 105:44-45) "He gave them the lands of the nations: and they inherited the labour of the people; that they might observe his statutes, and keep his laws." And they themselves from the start did not delay in this matter and they did not say any warning, rather with complete willingness they said "All that the Eternal One has said we will do and we will obey" (Exodus 24:7).

Therefore, when they transgressed the Torah, God expelled them from the land. Since they were expelled they passed warning concerning the matter as it is written, "that which comes into your mind shall never come to pass, that you should say we shall be as the nations and families of the earth to serve wood and stone" (Ezekiel 20:32). And as it said in the agadah (B. Sanhedrin 105a) "If a master sells his slave, does he have any hold over him?". Therefore, when they came to the land for the second time in the days of Ezra they stood for themselves and willingly accepted that they would not claim again this objection. This refers to the days of Ahaseurus, God brought them from death to life and this was more beloved to them than the redemption from Egypt.

## From Pesach to Shavuot

### Who was Ramban?

(taken from <http://myjewishlearning.com> by Rabbi Louis Jacobs)

Nahmanides was a Spanish Talmudist, Kabbalist, and biblical exegete (1194-1270), known, after the initial letters of his name, as Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman). Nahmanides was born in Gerona, Spain, where he lived for most of his life. An outstanding Talmudist, his work in this field still enjoys the highest esteem among students of the Talmud. As a halakhic authority, he exercised a great influence on the Codes of Jewish law, especially through the Responsa of his most distinguished disciple, Solomon Ibn Adret. Nahmanides was also the leading figure in the Gerona circle of Kabbalists. Indeed, it was through his renown as a Talmudist that respectability was won for the Spanish Kabbalah; though he was very circumspect in sharing his Kabbalistic insights, referring to them, for instance, in his Commentary to the Pentateuch, only by hint.

### Step by step in the commentary

What follows is an attempt to guide you through the text step by step.

Text	Translation	Notes
והא דאמרין בענין אגדה הא מודעא רבא לאורייתא ומתרץ כבר קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש.	We say concerning the subject of the agadah that a "strong protest against the Torah" that it [the protest] is resolved because they already accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus.	Ramban begins by summarising the first part of our Talmudic text which he emphasises is aggadah (not law) – in which the upturned mountain and threat of death gives a claim that the covenant was coerced. This is partially resolved by the following point in the Talmud – the people willingly accepted the covenant in the symbol of observance of Purim.
קשה לי וכי מה קבלה זו עושה מסופו של עולם לתחלתו, אם קודם אחשוורוש לא היו מצווים למה נענשו	This is difficult for me, that this acceptance was done from the end of the world to its beginning. If prior to Ahasuerus they were not commanded why were they punished?	Ramban now makes the logical point that what happened between Sinai and Purim? How could the later impact on the earlier? Why were the people punished and sent into exile from the land of Israel if the 'protest against the Torah' held weight?
ואם נאמר מפני שעברו על גזירת מלכם אי"כ בטלת מודעא זו, ועוד למה הצריכם לקבלה וברית,	If one says because they transgressed the rule of their king, if so it is an annulment of the warning. Moreover, why was acceptance and the covenant required?	He clarifies – if this is because of God's law then the 'protest' has no significance otherwise it would still mean the people should not have been punished. If they were punished anyway, why was any acceptance required in the days of Ahasuerus. That is to say, if God's rule was in place then claim or no claim, acceptance or not, the people were obligated.
וני"ל לומר דמתחלה אעי"פ שהיה להם מודעא מ"מ לא נתן להם הארץ אלא כדי שיקיימו התורה כמו שמפורש	It seems to me to say that from the start, even though they had the warning, in any event God <u>only</u> gave the land in order to uphold the Torah as it is explained in the Torah	Ramban now offers his theory to explain both the punishment and the need for acceptance: the protest was legitimate (the Israelites could claim they were coerced to accept the covenant) however that was in the background because the reason the people were punished was because they were

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בכמה בתורה פרשיות,	in many sections.	living in the land of Israel and living in the land was contingent upon keeping the mitzvot.
וכתיב (תהלים ק"ה) "ויתן להם ארצות גוים ועמל לאומים ירשו בעבור ישמרו חוקיו ותורותיו ינצורו",	It is written (Psalm 105:44-45) "He gave them the lands of the nations: and they inherited the wealth of the people; that they might observe his statutes, and keep his laws."	Ramban offers the following proof for the land and the Torah being contingent on one another.
והם עצמן מתחלה לא עכבו בדבר כלל ולא אמרו במודעא כלום אלא ברצון נפשם מעצמם אמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע,	And they themselves from the start did not delay in this matter and they did not say any warning, rather with complete willingness they said "All that the Eternal One has said we will do and we will obey" (Exodus 24:7).	In response to the connection between upholding the law of Torah and living in the land of Israel the people say 'we will do and we will obey' – they accept.
לפיכך כשעברו על התורה עמד והגלם מן הארץ,	Therefore, when they transgressed the Torah, God expelled them from the land.	It follows therefore, that the punishment of expulsion was not because the moment at Sinai was coerced but because life in Israel was contingent on obedience to Torah.
משגלו מודעא על הדבר מדכתיב (יחזקאל כ') והעולה על רוחכם היה לא תהיה אשר אתם אומרים נהיה כגוים וכמשפחות האדמה לשרת עץ ואבן,	Since they were expelled they passed warning concerning the matter as it is written, "that which comes into your mind shall never come to pass, that you should say we shall be as the nations and families of the earth to serve wood and stone" (Ezekiel 20:32).	Now comes the need for acceptance which Ramban mentioned earlier. As soon as the people are not living in the land of Israel the 'protest' against coercion comes back into play. In quoting Ezekiel, Ramban suggests that God's rule carried through even in exile however in exile there is no acceptance of the law by the people, unlike when they were in the land of Israel.
וכדאמרין באגדה (סנהדרין ק"ה א') רבינו יחזקאל עבד שמכרו רבו כלום יש לו עליו וכו',	And as it said in the agadah (B. Sanhedrin 105a) "If a master sells his slave, does he have any hold over him?".	This text from the Babylonian Talmud compares a slave who is sold by his master with Israel in exile. Once a slave-master sells his slave he no longer has any hold over him. However, Israel in exile is still under the rule of God.
לפיכך כשבאו לארץ בביאה שניה בימי עזרא עמדו מעצמם וקבלו ברצון שלא יטענו עוד שום תרעומות, והיינו בימי אחשורוש שהוציאים ממות לחיים והיה זה חביב עליהם מגאולה של מצרים.	Therefore, when they came to the land for the second time in the days of Ezra they stood for themselves and willingly accepted that they would not claim again this objection. This refers to the days of Ahaseurus, God brought them from death to life and this was more beloved to them than the redemption from Egypt.	If God's authority was still in place, but the people had not consented to the covenant a fresh voluntary acceptance was required for life outside of the land of Israel. That is the point of the reacceptance in the time of Ahasuerus was a demonstration of the covenantal relationship in exile.

### Brief Discussion

Ramban's explanation is slightly tricky to grasp. Essentially he argues that the protest against the coerced covenant was irrelevant whilst in the land of Israel, because God gave the land of Israel to the Israelites on the condition that they would uphold God's law. The people consent to this agreement, according to Ramban, when they say, "All the Eternal One has said we will do and obey." However, once they have been expelled from the land of Israel because of transgression of the law, the protest came back into effect. The people once again could claim that they were forced to accept the covenant and therefore did not need to obey the covenant in exile – even though God's rule extended beyond the land of Israel. Therefore, when they were saved in the days of Ahasuerus they reaccepted voluntarily the covenant. Purim is a synecdoche (a part representing the whole) for the whole covenant.

Thus, for Ramban the land of Israel holds a pivotal place in living a Jewish life in accordance with the covenant. Life outside the land of Israel has a different quality and is even lacking a certain spiritual essence. For further details of Ramban's view on the relationship of the mitzvot to the land of Israel see his commentary on Leviticus 18:25.

Note therefore, that for the Ramban there are two different acceptances – one acceptance by the people regarding their life in the land of Israel and another for their life living in the diaspora.

### Questions

- 1) Ramban is responding to a specific issue with the logic in the Babylonian Talmud – what happens between the moment at Sinai and the reacceptance in the time of Ahasuerus? His conclusion is based on looking at what is different in the situation of the Israelites – at the time of Ahasuerus the people are in exile. Does this logic work and what are the difficulties?
- 2) Is there any validity to feeling a sense of coercion to being Jewish for Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?
- 3) Is there any difference between the status of observing Jewish life (in whatever form that takes) in the land of Israel and outside of the land of Israel?
- 4) How do we bear the burden of former acceptance of a covenant by our ancestors and how do we revisit that decision as individuals today?
- 5) How does being Jewish and Jewish identity differ between the diaspora and Israel today?
- 6) Does the model of acceptance of a covenant even work in our time?

### A Final Idea

The State of Israel has recently become the place where the largest number of Jews live in the world and is, according to some, undergoing some kind of a renaissance in creativity in ideas about being Jewish today. Yet, perhaps we are also seeing a greater globalisation of Jewish life and a change in how different Jewish populations influence one another (Limmud is one example of this – something that began in the UK and has now spread globally).