

Pesach – A Holiday Of Questions:

A Look at the Haggadah Commentary of Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel



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The events of the Exodus from Egypt of the children of Israel about 3,300 years ago present a model example for the human pursuit of liberty. This story has remained relevant ever since. The idea of liberty touches us equally whether it relates to an entire nation or only to a single person.

On the Seder evening, in which we celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, some will place an additional chair around the festive table which stands symbolically for those Jews who are still not free, as is the case in some countries in the world. For decades, this symbolic empty chair referred to the Jews in the former Soviet Union. Today, already over one million of these Jews are in Israel. Wasn't this mass emigration of the Soviet Jews a modern Exodus?

Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel wrote an insightful commentary on the Haggadah. Abarbanel personally experienced a number of expulsions. Nevertheless, he never lost hope that his people would be free and would experience deliverance. His commentary on the Haggadah illustrates his strong messianic conviction.

Abarbanel was born in Lisbon in 1437 and grew up on the Iberian peninsula. Searching his family tree, he traced his roots to King David. According to his studies, his ancestors left Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple and reached Spain. Abarbanel intensively and comprehensively studied the Bible and became the chief rabbi of Portugal. At the same time, he became the finance minister of the Portuguese king.

In 1471, King Alfons conquered the city of Arzilla in Morocco and took many prisoners. Among them were 250 Jews. Abarbanel organized a nationwide fundraising campaign among Jewish communities in order to set these Jewish prisoners free. He donated a fortune from his own property so that these Jews could live two years in Portugal until they learned the language and found a job. Later, Abarbanel suffered under the persecutions of the Jews and had to flee to Toledo in Spain. There, in 1484, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella appointed him as their finance minister for the Kingdom of Castile and Aragon.

Eight years later, in 1492, he and his family experienced the notorious expulsion of all the Jews from Spain. Even his offer to pay an enormous ransom was rejected by the Catholic regime. So once again, he had to emigrate, leading a large number of Jews from Spain to Italy. In Naples, in 1494, he again became a finance consultant to the local king. But in 1503 he was forced to leave for Venice, having all his possessions confiscated again. He again served there as a finance consultant to the Serenissima. Abarbanel died in Venice in 1508 and was buried in Padua. One year later, the Jewish cemetery there was completely destroyed during a war. His gravestone has never been found.

Abarbanel's written heritage is not composed of economic and financial treatises. He left us monumental and most valuable Torah commentaries and philosophical books which deal with essential

topics of religious belief such as the creation of the universe and the resurrection of the dead. His intensive personal political experience at the court of a number of kings increased his distrust toward monarchies and politics in general. (In particular, see his comments on *Genesis* chapters 4 and 9.) In his comments on the book of Exodus and on Samuel I, chapter 8, he showed that he understood all too well how the prophet had interpreted the

"*Kushiyot*" (Questions) posed by the youngest participant in the Seder – to look for the unique character of the evening. The special meals and customs are designed by halacha to raise questions among the children so that they will be given relevant explanations.

Since I cannot discuss all 100 of Abarbanel's questions in this article, I will focus on a few of them and provide Abarbanel's own answers.

Question: Why does the text of the Haggadah begin in the Aramaic language?

Answer: The ordinary people of Israel, the women and the children who could hardly speak or understand Hebrew at the time of the Mishna when the Haggadah was composed, should be able to understand the content. So it was written in Aramaic, the spoken language at that time. Since the beginning of the Haggadah is an invitation to come and join the meal, it was important to make sure that the poor people would understand the offer.

Q: Why is the matzah called the "bread of the poor" ("*lachma anya*")? At the Seder it is obligatory to say loudly at least the words "Pesach," "matzah," and "*marror*." Actually, the matzah should remind us more of the redemption than of the poverty of the time of the enslavement.

A: The matzah is an unleavened bread and thus is very thin. So it symbolizes deprivation and the humiliation of slavery. Abarbanel named a further reason: The matzah takes longer to digest. So it is well suited for poor people as a meal providing a long-lasting feeling of being full.

Q: Why then is the sentence "*L'shana haba'ah b'nei chorin*" ("Next year a free people") formulated in Hebrew and not in Aramaic?

A: The reason for the Hebrew formulation was that foreign nations under which the Israelites lived would not understand it and therefore not suspect the intention of a Jewish rebellion.

Q: What does the name of the Egyptian king Pharaoh mean in Hebrew?

A: The word Pharaoh sounds in Hebrew like "*Peh rah*," meaning an evil mouth.

Q: What is the meaning of the Hebrew name for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*?

A: In Hebrew, the name of the country *Mitzrayim* is spelled and sounds similar to the Hebrew word "*metzarim*," which means a bottleneck or a narrow and pressing path.

Q: What have we gained from the Exodus from Egypt and the related redemption if we (including Abarbanel and his Jewish contemporaries) are now again in exile?

A: First of all, the gain was the impact on the world, as the nations of the world recognized the supremacy of G-d and were informed that G-d chose Israel as His people. Secondly, Israel inherited the Land of Israel and spent over 1,300 years there. Thirdly and most importantly, the people of Israel received the Torah after the Exodus from Egypt on the way to Israel. Since then, the *Shechina* and Divine Providence reside with the people of



The author with the Haggadah Zevach Pesach.

request of the Israelites to crown a king as a rebellion against the kingdom of G-d. Abarbanel preferred a republican constitution and described the ancient Israelite theocracy according to the model of the constitution of Venice.

Abarbanel's unique method of Bible commentary is characterized by posing an extensive set of questions relating to a topical section. A further specialty of his Bible commentaries is his detailed introduction to each book, in which he summarizes the essential themes of the book. His methods were unconventional for the Middle Ages. He applied them also to his explanations of the Pesach Haggadah – formulating 100 questions on the Haggadah.

He referred to these 100 questions as "gates." His concept: The gate to knowledge is a question. Thus, it is no wonder that Abarbanel is considered one of the leading philosophers of his time. Like Socrates, he formulated questions. His questions on the Haggadah reflect the purpose of the Four

Continued on p.S21

Lipinski
Continued from p.S20

Israel. So despite the fact that the Jews are in the Diaspora, they can learn the Torah and about the miracles G-d performed. This fills the Jews, including Abarbanel, with hope for the redemption to come.

Q: Where does the name of G-d “HaMakom” come from, as we say in the Haggadah, “Baruch HaMakom, Baruch Hu”?

A: HaMakom means “the Place.” Chazal used this name to describe G-d’s omnipresence. The name HaMakom points at the ubiquity of G-d, in heaven and on earth, in the higher spheres and beyond. So this way the blessing “Baruch HaMakom,” can be understood as “Blessed is the exalted place, which is beyond our perception.”

Q: What is the meaning of the phrase: “Mit’chila ovdei avoda zara hayu avotenu, v’achshav kervanu haMakom l’avodato” (“In the beginning our fathers were idolaters, but now HaMakom brought us nearer to Him, so we can serve Him”)?

A: This statement reflects the structure of the whole Haggadah: At first rejection, then finally worship. For this purpose, Abraham is given as an example. At first Abraham did not possess the land, nor the complete faith he needed, nor the promised son. But in the end, he was given all of those.

A few more important insights of the Abarbanel on the Haggadah: Abarbanel proves in his interpretation of the exile his extraordinary ability to serve as a comforter to his people. He contradicted other scholars who tried to see the Egyptian exile as a punishment for the sins committed by the sons of Yaakov. Abarbanel emphasized that the Egyptian exile was an implication of the treatment of Yosef by his brothers, but not a punishment. Therein the Egyptian exile was different from the Babylonian and Roman exiles.

The blessing “Baruch shomer havtachato l’Yisrael” (“Blessed is the keeper of His promise to Israel”) in the Haggadah is also valid independently from the sins of the Israelites, because G-d will fulfill His promises in any case. From this one can imply that since G-d kept His promise and liberated the Israelites from Egypt despite their sins, He will do so also in future and will liberate us too. This was an important message to Abarbanel’s contemporaries, many of whom had experienced the expulsion from Spain. Their fate should not be wrongly interpreted as if they were themselves to blame for the crimes done to them – as if what happened was a punishment. Abarbanel wanted to release his fellow Jews from an unnecessary guilt complex. The crimes of the Pharaohs, the Torquemadas, and the Hitlers must not be blamed on the Jews who were the victims.

In the Haggadah it says: “Shehayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham,” that Israel was distinguished in Egypt. Abarbanel indicates that the word “metzuyanim” here can be interpreted not only as “excellent” or “distinguished,” but can be derived from another root meaning “marked.” Abarbanel supports his view by referring to the fact that the Israelites kept their Hebrew language and maintained their personal names, clothing, and religion. These marked qualities distinguished the Israelites from the Egyptians. The fact that the Children of Israel preserved their identity was crucial for their later liberation from the slavery in Egypt.

Abarbanel emphasizes that G-d Himself res-

cued the people of Israel from Egypt, not a mediator or a messenger, not even an angel. G-d speaks explicitly in first person: “Ani ve’lo malach, Ani v’lo saraf...” (I and not an angel, I and not a seraph...). We learn that we owe our liberty directly to G-d and to no one else. The Haggadah teaches us that if G-d did not rescue our fathers from Egypt, then we would be still enslaved their today. Therefore, everyone should personally be grateful to G-d for their liberty and thank G-d for that, especially on Pesach.

For the upcoming Pesach holiday, which is also called Chag HaCheirut (The Festival of Liberty) and Chag HaGe’ulah (The Festival of Redemption), I wish all the Children of Israel to be liberated from physical and mental chains, so that we can devote ourselves, like Abarbanel, to the many questions of history and of the present time. Abarbanel can serve as a model for us of someone who

never gave up hope despite all the hardships he had to endure.

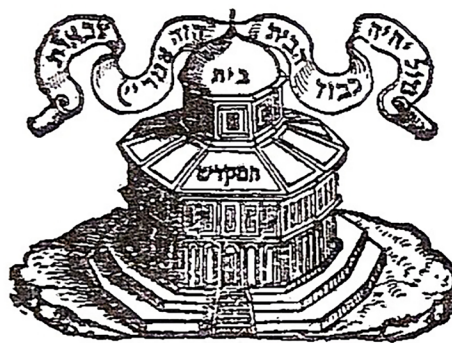
Chag Sameach!

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גדפס בניגוי ציאה העיר הגדולה המהולה אשר חחת מפסלת השורה יהי תגדל וחגשא פלכותם. אמן. בטנת סף לפק.



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יצחק אברבנאל אשר מצא באב יצחק מאה שער תם כזה שח;
הביא שאלות בסכום מאה, ודש גרנו במטהו כהרדש קצח;
רסן תשובות עם פרישות חן, ולא נמנע וחדל לעשות חפה צח;
דקדק וקשר אמרות, סניד ישועות אל בישראל, במצרים רצח;
הן אל בכור זבח, ופקח על בכור, לכן שמי כנה בזבח פסח.

תם

Cover page of Abarbanel’s Haggadah, called “Zevach Pessach.”