
The 11th of Nissan marks the anniversary of the date that the Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, passed away, in the year 1270.

THE Ramban

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman

Education of a Giant

By Rabbi Chayim S. Chasan

Yehoshua ben Perachiah said, "Make a rabbi for yourself, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person favorably."
(Pirkei Avos 1:6)

The Ramban was born in Gerona, in eastern Spain. He was a child prodigy, and became versed not only in the Torah, but in Kabbalah, philosophy, medicine, and other disciplines.

(For more details about the Ramban's life, see "Our Story.")

The Ramban took the dictate of Yehoshua ben Perachiah very seriously. He desperately wished to find a *rav*, a mentor to whom he could look for guidance. And yet he was unable to find such a man in his native Gerona. Blessed though the town was with great Torah scholars

and Kabbalists, none of them fit exactly the model for which the Ramban was looking. He wished to find a man who was great in Torah, Kabbalah, and worldly knowledge, a man who had a multi-faceted personality. In his eyes, none of Gerona's rabbis met this description.



Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar was born in Provence, in southern France, but as a young man moved to the north in order to study under Rabbi Yitzchak ben Avraham, known to us as the Riva or Ritzva, one of the greatest Tosafists (authors of the Tosafos commentary on the Gemara).

The Riva, in turn, had studied under Rabbi Yitzchak ben Shmuel, whom we commonly refer to as the Ri.

One day, the Ramban heard that Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar was due to arrive in Barcelona, which lay a short distance to the south of Gerona. The Ramban was told by his friends that here was the man who might serve as his mentor. The Ramban set out to Barcelona; however, the two great rabbis met on the road between the cities, and they returned together to Gerona.

Rabbi Yehuda said: "We have heard about you, Nachmani of Gerona; we have heard that in Gerona may be found a young man who is capable of uprooting mountains in Torah study."

Replied Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman: "What you have heard is exaggerated; all I am seeking is a rabbi and mentor. This has been my desire for many years."

The men made their way back to Gerona, hand in hand, discussing deep matters of Jewish law and mysticism. As they entered the city, Rabbi Yehuda declared that it was his duty to study from the mouths of Gerona's *talmidei chachamim*.

Said Rabbi Moshe: "It is appropriate to repeat the words of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the Rambam. Commenting on Yehoshua ben Perachiah's advice to 'Make a rabbi for yourself,' the Rambam says, 'Even if he is not worthy of being your rabbi, make him your rabbi anyway, so that you will discuss things with him. In this way your studies will become firmed. This is because there is no comparison between studying by yourself and studying with a partner. When one studies with a partner, his studies remain with him and

When the Ramban was in Provence, studying with Rabbi Nassan, the latter told the following story:

It was Rosh Hashanah in the synagogue of the Riva. While blowing the *shofar*, the *ba'al tokea* mistakenly blew four *shevarim* instead of the required three tones.

The Riva instructed him to repeat the series of notes. The *ba'al tokea* did as the rabbi had ordered, while the other disciples observed the incident quietly.

After the prayers were over, the students surrounded the Riva and asked why he had instructed for the *shevarim* to be repeated. A halachic discussion ensued, and eventually the Riva agreed that he had made a mistake.

The Ramban took two lessons from this story. First, he saw that, at the time of the incident, the students made no attempt to contradict their rabbi; they accepted his decision even though they were sure he was wrong. Second, the Riva was not afraid to admit he had erred. This did not lower his stature at all in the eyes of his students.

become clearer. This should be done even if the partner is only equal, or even inferior, in wisdom.' "

At the same time that the Ramban urgently wished to find a mentor, it became clear that Rabbi Yehuda was looking for something else. Rabbi Yehuda had a rabbi, the great Riva. He had also been under the tutelage of Rabbi Yitzchak Sagi Nahor ("The Blind"), a leading Kabbalist who was the son of Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquieres (the Ra'avad). What Rabbi Yehuda didn't have was a "friend," and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah had also advised to "acquire a friend." Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar found his "friend," while the

Ramban found a "rabbi."



Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar was immediately liked by the Torah scholars of Gerona, among whom was no less a man than Rabbeinu Yonah, the author of *Sha'arei Teshuvah* and the Ramban's cousin. These scholars wished to hear Rabbi Yehuda's words of Torah, and he responded by giving a daily Torah lecture.

Rabbi Yehuda was the head of the Rabbinical court in Barcelona, and he could not remain in Gerona for long. However, before leaving, he is reported to have said: "I have never

met students such as the ones in Gerona. They are brilliant and well versed. I love them, and for their sake I will visit Gerona whenever possible."

Rabbi Yehuda's visit had made an indelible impression upon the Ramban. At the time, there were two major Torah schools in Europe. The Ramban had grown up in the Sephardic school of Spain, which featured scholars such as the Rambam. But just as important was the French and German school,

study at his feet.

The Ramban was very impressed by his stay in Provence. He had finally found his mentors: Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar and Rabbi Nassan. The Ramban later transmitted what he learned there to his students in Gerona.

The time came for Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman to depart Provence; his home was in Gerona, and he knew that it was there that he had to live.

The Ramban had believed that it

As the time went by, Rabbi Moshe continued to apply his philosophy: that there is no substitute for having a Torah mentor. And so he drew heavily on the thoughts of his teachers. Provence was too far off, but Barcelona was much closer, and Rabbi Moshe frequently traveled there to study and consult with Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar. They studied Talmud and halacha in the *bais midrash*, and went off to the fields to immerse themselves in the deepest secrets of the Torah, in the Kabbalah. Rabbi Yehuda added his voice to his friend Rabbi Nassan's in saying that the Ramban would become a leader of his generation.

The Ramban requested, "Promise me that you will stand by me at all times."

Rabbi Nassan's answer revealed his perception of the Torah's demands upon us. He agreed to assist his student whenever possible. However, he warned, "There are times when you will have to rely upon your own resources, when I will not be able to help you. Life is not a smooth plain; there are pitfalls and traps along the road. A man must choose his own road. He cannot always rely on others, not even on his own rabbis and mentors. Your abilities in halacha and Kabbalah and your general Torah knowledge will stand you in good stead in the trying times that are sure to come."



So it was that the Ramban learned some of the most important lessons in life: how to pick a rabbi; and how to separate himself from his rabbi when the time came to go out on his own, all along relying on his mentor for support. JR

**Rabbi Nassan told the Ramban,
"In the short time you have been
here, I have come to know you
as well as I know all my other
students. You are destined
for greatness."**

whence emanated the Ashkenazic scholars, including Rashi, Rabbeinu Tam, and the Rashbam. Rabbi Yehuda had studied in France, and he attuned the Ramban to the greatness of the Ashkenazic scholars.

Before taking leave of the Ramban, Rabbi Yehuda advised him to travel to France, to the town of Provence. There he was to seek out Rabbi Nassan ben Meir, a fellow student of the Riva.

When the Ramban expressed his reservations, Rabbi Yehuda continued that Rabbi Nassan was expert in the Ashkenazic traditions, and that it was imperative for the Ramban to

was his task to spend his life in Torah study. However, Rabbi Nassan asserted that Rabbi Moshe's future lay in communal work, that he would become one of the leaders of the Jewish people.

The Ramban said, "My rabbi and teacher, I think you are predicting great things for me because you do not know me well enough. I have only studied here a short time."

Rabbi Nassan responded, "In the short time you have been here, I have come to know you as well as I know all my other students. You are destined for greatness."



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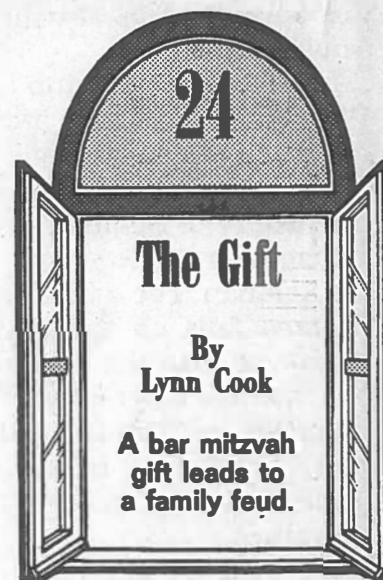
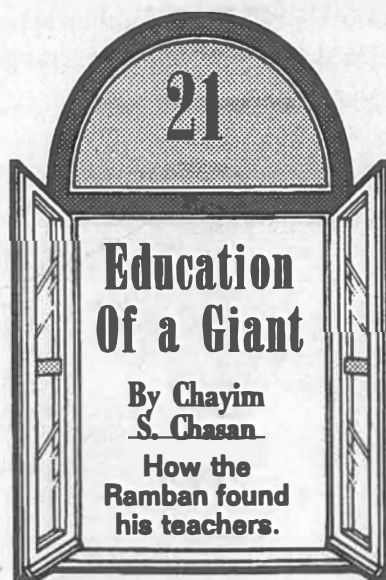
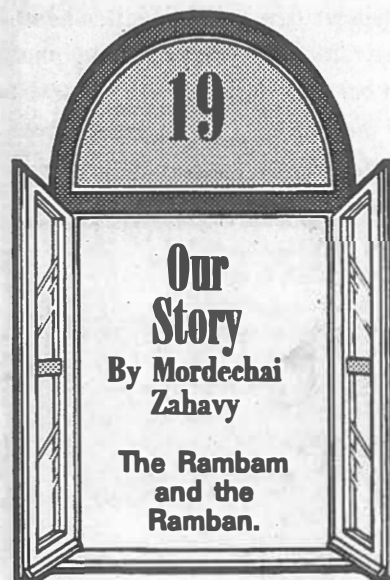
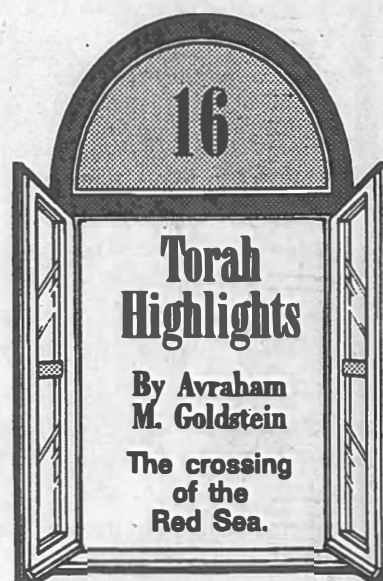
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