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## *On the Assessment of R. Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides) and His Literary Oeuvre*

IN THE EIGHT HUNDRED years since his birth, R. Moses b. Naḥman (1194-1270) has come to be known as a major intellectual force in the medieval Jewish world, second perhaps only to Maimonides. Ramban excelled as a talmudist, biblical exegete, kabbalist, disputant and man of letters. The unusual breadth of Ramban's expertise coupled with his remarkable intellectual agility render the study of his works both an adventure and a challenge.

Naḥmanides earned muted praise, however, from those who wrote during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about medieval rabbinic literature and thought. Some stressed that Naḥmanides was more inclined to proclaim loyalty to his predecessors and to defend or elucidate their writings, than to rule independently or with innovative flare in matters of Jewish law and custom. Others maintained that Naḥmanides pursued and embraced forms of kabbalistic thought which at best tolerated, and at worst ignored or even negated, the tenets and developments of medieval Jewish rationalism. In addition, Naḥmanides adopted a measured position in the Maimonidean controversy that could in no way be construed as an unqualified endorsement of the heroic Maimonides.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, Naḥmanides fared far better in the historiography of this period than did his Provençal predecessor, R. Avraham b. David (Rabad) of Posquières, despite some obvious similarities in their relationship to the Maimonidean corpus and their proclivities in Jewish thought.<sup>2</sup> The sheer volume of Naḥmanides'

protean oeuvre, which included extensive talmudic commentaries, halakhic critiques (*hassagot*), monographs and responsa, as well as a unique Torah commentary and sermonic expositions (*derashot*), could not be gainsaid. Naḥmanides' works had an undeniable impact upon subsequent generations of rabbinic scholars. Perhaps most significant, Naḥmanides appeared to be a complex, multifaceted thinker, whose corpus eluded facile or even neat definition and description.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Naḥmanides consistently expressed himself with humility, despite his diverse accomplishments, which also included training in the medical sciences.<sup>4</sup> His role in the disputation at Barcelona in 1263 was seen as an affirmation of his prowess as a scholar, his leadership qualities, and his ability to interact effectively with Jews and Christians alike.<sup>5</sup>

3. See Graetz, pp. 122-31, and Chaim Tchernowitz, *Toledot ha-Posekim*, v. 2 (New York, 1947), pp. 106-17. R. Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai (Ḥida), *Shem ha-Gedolim, ma'arekhet gedolim*, s.v. R. Moses b. Naḥman, described Ramban as "mal'akh melitz tov 'al ha-rishonim." Two articles by Joseph Perles, "Ueber den Geist des Commentars des R. Moses ben Nachman zum Pentateuch und über sein Verhältniss zum Pentateuch-Commentar Raschi's," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 7 (1858): 81-97, 117-36, and "Nachtrage über R. Moses ben Nachman," [which includes a critical transcription of Naḥmanides' famous letter to the rabbis of northern France in defense of Maimonides] *MGWJ* 9 (1860): 184-95, have been cited and lauded consistently by modern scholarship for their insights into Ramban's methodologies and intellectual hierarchy. Note also Solomon Schechter's biographical portrait, "Nachmanides," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 5 (1895): 78-128 [= *Studies in Judaism* (1st Series, repr. Philadelphia, 1945) pp. 99-141.]
4. On Ramban's attitudes toward medicine and science, see J.O. Leibowitz, "Netunim Refu'iyim be-Sefer Torat ha-Adam le-R. Mosheh ben Naḥman," *Koroth* 8 (1983): 209-15; David Horwitz, "Rashba's Attitude Towards Science and its Limits," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 3 (1991-92): 51-82; and Y.T. Langermann, "Acceptance and Devaluation: Naḥmanides' Attitude Towards Science," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 [in press]. See also M. Idel (below, n. 10), pp. 61-62; E. Wolfson (below, n. 13), p. 118, n. 45; B. Septimus (below, n. 18), pp. 24-25, n. 45; and cf. I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven, 1980), p. 497. For Ramban's views on the practice of medicine as a livelihood, see Samuel Kottek, "Refu'ah ve-Halakhah be-Sefer Ḥasidim," *Assia* 10 (1984): 37-42.
5. Note the claim by Simon Dubnow, *Divrei Yemei Am Olam* (Tel Aviv, 1968), v. 5, p. 66, that Naḥmanides' "report on the disputation at Barcelona has historical and religious value and will certainly live longer than his big books in *halakhah*." Cf. Dubnow, pp. 53-54, 61-62, 65, and I. Twersky's introduction to *R. Moses b. Naḥman (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and*

1. See e.g., Heinrich Graetz, *Divrei Yemei Yisrael*, v. 5 (Warsaw, 1897), pp. 45-58, 83; I.H. Weiss, *Dor Dor ve-Dorshav*, v. 5 (New York, 1923), pp. 4-20.

2. See Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières* (revised edition, Philadelphia, 1980), pp. 56-59, 84-85, 183-90, 348.

Nahmanides' role in the disputation at Barcelona and as a mediator in the Maimonidean controversy were given a disproportionate amount of attention. The task of correlating and analysing the relatively complete and self-contained documents, letters and accounts, which captured the sometimes explosive positions of the antagonists in both episodes, was undoubtedly alluring. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, scholars began to classify Nahmanides' methodologies in his talmudic, biblical and kabbalistic studies in a more systematic fashion. An effort was made to place Nahmanides' positions and tactics during the public controversies within the context of his scholarly writings, rather than the reverse.<sup>6</sup> With the publication of a large number of annotated texts, the study of Nahmanides' writings became much easier.<sup>7</sup> Yet in this period as in the earlier one, Maimonides stood virtually alone as the figure against whom to measure, compare and categorize Nahmanides' approaches to rabbinic literature and Jewish thought. To be sure, Nahmanides did react and respond, both explicitly and without attribution, to Maimonidean positions. But Nahmanides' interests and frames of reference were far broader than the writings of Maimonides alone.<sup>8</sup>

*Literary Virtuosity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), ed. I. Twersky [hereafter cited as *Ramban: Explorations*], p. 8, n. 20. For a current bibliography of studies dealing with the Barcelona Disputation, see Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond* (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 205-206, nn. 1, 4. For the Maimonidean Controversy, see Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 147, n. 1.

6. See Aaron Yeroham, *Ohel Raḥel* (New York, 1942); Isak Unna, *R. Mosheh ben Nahman, Hayyav u-Fe'ulato* (Jerusalem, 1954); H.H. Ben Sasson, "Ha-Ramban: Ish be-Sivkhei Tekufato," *Molad* n.s. 1 (1967): 360-66; Chaim Henoch, *Ha-Ramban ke-Hoker u'khe-Mekubbal* (Jerusalem, 1978).
7. C.B. Chavel, *Perushei Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman* (Jerusalem, 1959), and *Kitvei Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman* (Jerusalem, 1963-64). Ephraim Gottlieb, in a lengthy review of *Kitvei ha-Ramban* published in his *Mehkarim be-Sifrut ha-Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 516-35, criticized Chavel for including kabbalistic works that were attributed to Ramban but were in fact written by others. Chavel also published an intellectual biography of Ramban, *Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman: Hayyav, Zemano, ve-Hibburav* (Jerusalem, 1967). His edition of *Perushei ha-Ramban 'al Nevi'im u-Khetuvim* (Jerusalem, 1964) is a collection of comments to biblical verses that are found throughout Ramban's writings.
8. See, e.g., Ritva, *Sefer ha-Zikkaron*, ed. Kalman Kahana (rev. ed., Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 88-90. Of course, points of suggestive comparison and contrast have not yet been exhausted. See, e.g., Moshe Idel, "Maimonides and Kab-

### WIDE SCOPE

In the last two decades, scholars have made great strides in describing more precisely the extraordinary range of Nahmanides' intellectual-spiritual orientation and interests. A number of rich studies have focused on the varied strands that formed the core of Nahmanides' training, attempting to assess which of those strands played a dominant role in his writings.<sup>9</sup> Particular attention has been paid to the kabbalistic teachings of Nahmanides. Nahmanides authored very few distinct kabbalistic treatises.<sup>10</sup> His kabbalah was integrated within his other works, especially his commentaries to the Torah and to other biblical books, as well as his *derashot*. The very fact that Nahmanides chose to present kabbalistic material in exegetical contexts says something about the nature of his kabbalah. Was he attempting thereby to conceal his kabbalistic teachings or was he advocating a particular approach to the study of Jewish mysticism?

Moshe Idel has argued that Nahmanides' relatively meager output in terms of kabbalistic literature is tied to the fact that Nahmanides was a conservative kabbalist. Ramban was prepared to formulate or record only those kabbalistic interpretations that he had received from his teacher(s). Even interpretations suggested by fellow members of the Gerona school of kabbalah, such as those of R. Ezra b. Solomon, were not accepted by

balah," *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 37-38, 41, 44-45, regarding esotericism, and D. Berger (below, n. 18), pp. 107-09, regarding Creation.

9. The volume edited by Prof. Twersky (above n. 5, and cited frequently below) is the most prominent example. Note also the series of articles by Mauro Perani: "Note sull'esegesi biblica di Nahmanide," *Revista Biblica* 33 (1985): 229-43; "Senso letterale e senso cabalistico nel commento di Mosheh b. Nahman all'episodio de vitello d'oro," *Henoch* 8:1 (1986): 39-48; "Esegesi biblica e storia nel 'Sefer ha-ge'ullah' di Nahmanide," *Associazione Italiano per lo studio del Giudaismo* 4 (1987): 89-104; "Mistica e filosofia; la mediazione di Nahmanide nella polemica sugli scritti di Maimonide," *AISG* 5 (1987): 227-56.
10. See Israel Ta-Shema, *Ha-Ramban ve-Yetzirato* (Jerusalem, 1967) [a bibliography of Ramban's writings that also includes selected medieval and modern responses and descriptions, prepared in conjunction with the seven hundredth anniversary of Ramban's 'aliyah], entries 32-34; Gershon Scholem, *Ha-Kabbalah bi-Gerona* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 12-15; 255-65; E. Gottlieb, *Mehkarim*, pp. 88-95, 569-70; Moshe Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This," *Ramban: Explorations*, pp. 51-52.

Ramban unless he was certain that they had emerged from a reliable kabbalistic tradition. In addition, Nahmanides was uncomfortable speculating about or expanding upon the secrets that he received.<sup>11</sup> Jacob Katz attributed Ramban's reticence to a concern, felt by other medieval halakhists, about enunciating kabbalistic considerations which might impinge on halakhic matters.<sup>12</sup>

Elliot Wolfson, on the other hand, has argued that Ramban's warning against speculation about kabbalistic secrets and ideas is overshadowed by the fact that he included allusions to these secrets in his biblical commentaries. Nahmanides thus brought kabbalistic material to the attention of a general audience and, perhaps unintentionally, also encouraged students of kabbalah to attempt to explain his allusions.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Ramban employed a dynamic kabbalistic hermeneutical method that is represented by his statement, "in the truest sense Scripture speaks of lower matters and alludes to supernal matters."<sup>14</sup> In the realm of esoteric interpretation, Nahmanides followed both a theological system as well as a mystical tradition which read the text of Scripture as a matrix of Divine names.<sup>15</sup> All agree, however, that Nahmanides was opposed to the approach adopted by other members of the Gerona school which favored direct and open dissemination of kabbalistic teachings.<sup>16</sup>

11. M. Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition," pp. 53-73. Cf. below, n. 16.

12. Jacob Katz, "Halakhah ve-Kabbalah: Magga'im Rishonim," [reprinted in his] *Halakhah ve-Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 29-32; "Halakhah ve-Kabbalah ke-Nos'ei Limmud Mitharim," *Halakhah ve-Kabbalah*, pp. 76-77. There appears to be virtually no kabbalistic material in Ramban's talmudic commentaries. Cf. *Hiddushei ha-Ramban, Shevu'ot 29a, s.v. ha ditenan* (end), and *1 Unna* (above, n. 6), p. 23.

13. Elliot Wolfson, "'By Way of Truth': Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 103-05. Cf. Amos Funkenstein, "Parshanuto ha-Tippologit shel ha-Ramban," *Zion* 45 (1980): 58-59 [= "Nahmanides' Symbolical Reading of History," *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 142]. For medieval explanations of Ramban's kabbalistic allusions, see Idel, "Peirush Lo Yadua' le-Sodot ha-Ramban," *Da'at* 2 (1978): 121-26, and Gottlieb, *Mehkarim*, pp. 569-70.

14. See Ramban's commentary to Genesis 1:2.

15. See Wolfson, "'By Way of Truth,'" p. 190. Ramban's view of the Torah as an amalgam of Divine names is found in the teachings of the German Pietists; cf. below, n. 49.

Since his biblical commentaries were the venue for most of his kabbalistic material, a discussion of Nahmanides as kabbalist must also entail consideration of Nahmanides as biblical exegete. The relationship between his intense desire to pursue *peshat* (straightforward) exegesis and his affinity for offering esoteric interpretations (*sod*, usually called *derekh ha-'emet*) has been analyzed in recent literature. Amos Funkenstein has written that *peshat* and *sod* almost never overlap in Nahmanides' commentaries.<sup>17</sup> David Berger and Bernard Septimus have adduced, however, numerous instances in which *peshat* and *sod* do coincide. In several of these cases, Ramban openly suggests that the interpretation which best fits the verse is the one arrived at through kabbalistic exegesis. Indeed, Nahmanides broadened the conception of *peshat* held by Ibn Ezra to include kabbalistic considerations among others. Among contemporary kabbalists, Nahmanides' devotion to *peshat* exegesis is atypical.<sup>18</sup>

#### HIS VIEW OF AGGADAH

If Nahmanides' interest in *peshat* exegesis is somewhat unusual in light of his kabbalistic orientation, his use of midrash and aggadah as sources of kabbalistic teachings is to be expected. And yet, in placing Nahmanides' attitude toward aggadah in the context of his overarching thesis that Nahmanides owed much to Andalusian rationalism, Septimus writes that

16. See M. Idel (above, n. 11); J. Katz, "Halakhah ve-Kabbalah: *Magga'im Rishonim*," pp. 20-32; and Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Seattle, 1986), pp. 28-39. On the relationship between Ramban and the other *mekubbalei Gerona*, whose kabbalistic school was not as monolithic as heretofore thought, see also Bezalel Safran, "R. Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man," *Ramban Explorations*, pp. 75-106; M. Idel (below n. 45), and "Be-Or ha-Hayyim: Iyyun be-Eskatologiyyah Kabbalit," *Kiddush ha-Hayyim ve-Heruf ha-Nefesh*, ed. Y. Gafni and A. Ravitzky (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 191-205; Idel, "Tefisat ha-Torah be-Sifrut ha-Heikhalot ve-Gilgulehah ba-Kabbalah," *Mehkerei Yerushalayim be-Mahashevet Yisrael* 1:3 (1982): 49-58; idem., "Ha-Mahashavah ha-Yehudit bi-Sefarad shel Yemei ha-Benayim," *Moreshet Sefarad*, ed. H. Beinart (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 216-18; and below, n. 28.

17. See Funkenstein (above, n. 13), pp. 46-47 [= 133].

18. David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," *Ramban: Explorations*, pp. 112-13, n. 19, and Bernard Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love': Nahmanides and the Anadalousian Tradition," *Ramban: Explorations*, pp. 17-18, 22, n. 41. See also E. Wolfson, "The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides," *Da'at* 24 (1990) [English section]: 29, 47.

kabbalah rather than maintaining that Ramban, as a kabbalist, had to accept all aggadic statements as binding, is also able to integrate Ramban's rejection of certain aggadic passages in his Torah commentary as well as Ramban's stance concerning aggadah at Barcelona.<sup>23</sup> The position taken by Nahmanides in his Torah commentary concerning the fallibility of the Patriarchs appears to be particularly bold in light of his involvement in the Jewish-Christian debate.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Shlomo Pines has argued for Christian influences on Nahmanides' treatment of the Creation story, as did Gershom Scholem.<sup>25</sup>

#### ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY

Related to the nature of Ramban's kabbalah is his attitude toward philosophy. Despite the claim of a thirteenth-century philosopher, R. Zerayah Hen, that Nahmanides did not display competence in philosophical studies,<sup>26</sup> as well as statements by Nahmanides to the effect that philosophers of his day had missed the mark,<sup>27</sup> Ramban was familiar with large tracts of medieval Jewish and general philosophical literature and integrated them effectively into his corpus. Given the affinity between Neoplatonic thought and Jewish mysticism, it is hardly surprising that Nahmanides, among other members of the Gerona school of kabbalah, made particular use of Neoplatonic material.<sup>28</sup> Far more striking are the facts, demonstrated by David

23. See above, n. 20.  
 24. See David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis," *Understanding Scripture*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyszogrod (New York, 1989), pp. 49-53.  
 25. See Shlomo Pines, "Diveri ha-Ramban 'al Adam ha-Rishon be-Can Eden le-Or Petrushim Aherim 'al Bereshit Bet ve-Gimmel," *Ga'at Ahar Golan*, ed. Aharon Mirsky et al. (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 159-64. See also Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, 1987), p. 449; Bezalel Satran, "Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides," p. 106; and A. Funkenstein (above, n. 13), pp. 35-59 [= 129-50].  
 26. See Moritz Güdenmann, *Ha-Torah ve-ha-Hayim* (Warsaw, 1899), v. 2, pp. 134-35, 150-52; Septimus, "Open Rebuke," p. 25, n. 45; Aviezer Ravitzky, *Al Davat ha-Makom* (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 153-54. Cf. Ritva, *Seder ha-Zikkaron*, pp. 46-48, 55-56, 86-88.  
 27. See Scholem, *Origins*, p. 403, and Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," pp. 37-38, n. 16.  
 28. See, e.g., G. Scholem, *Ha-Kabbalah be-Gerona*, pp. 123-40; Sara O. Heller-Willensky, "Al ha-Nivra ha-Rishon be-Reshit ha-Kabbalah u-Mekorotav ha-Filosofiyim," *Mehkarim be-Hagut Yehudit*, ed. S.O. Willensky and M. Idel

"Nahmanides did *not* [emphasis his] see kabbalistic interpretation as a universal key to the understanding of all aggadah. When he does resort to kabbalistic defense it is often of aggadot that are entirely beyond the reach of Andalusian understanding." Wolfson, in accordance with his view that Ramban was a kabbalist first and foremost, and a not-so-conservative kabbalist at that, writes that "Nahmanides . . . did not differentiate between rabbinic and kabbalistic modes of interpretation. . . ." Inverting Sepimus' phrase, Wolfson asserts "that Nahmanides saw aggadic interpretation as the universal key to the understanding of kabbalah."<sup>29</sup>

As different as Wolfson's and Sepimus' views are, they share an important point in common. The tendency in earlier historiography was to acknowledge that Nahmanides' dismissal of certain aggadic passages at the Barcelona disputation was clearly opposed to the general position which he took in his biblical commentaries, that rabbinic interpretations and aggadot were to be accepted wherever possible, either literally or with an appropriate explanation. In order to succeed at a very trying and crucial moment, Nahmanides adopted the rationalistic view that aggadah was not always binding. This view was perfectly legitimate within the history of Jewish interpretation, and Ramban could certainly be forgiven a reversal of position in order to perform successfully in a highly charged polemical context.<sup>30</sup> According to both Sepimus and Wolfson, however, Nahmanides' stance on aggadah at the Barcelona disputation was fully consonant with his true exegetical proclivities concerning aggadah. Nahmanides, as an inheritor of the Geonic-Andalusian tradition had never, in Sepimus' view, accepted "the absolute authority of all aggadah."<sup>31</sup> Wolfson, by asserting of that use of aggadah was critical to Ramban's understanding of

19. Sepimus, "Open Rebuke," p. 19.  
 20. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," pp. 153-76.  
 21. Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, pp. 142-56, presents a detailed analysis of the differing positions within modern historiography on Ramban and aggadah. He further suggests, as part of a larger claim, that by distinguishing between the disputation itself and Nahmanides' narrative portrayal of the event, one can gain a fuller perspective on Nahmanides' views concerning the rejection of aggadah.  
 22. Sepimus, "Open Rebuke," pp. 20-22. See also Marvin Fox, "Nahmanides on the Status of Aggadot: Perspectives on the Disputation at Barcelona, 1263," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989): 95-109.

Berger, that Nahmanides employed rigorous philosophical argumentation in connecting the reality of miracles with creation *ex nihilo*, and that Nahmanides saw natural law as governing the lives of almost all people. Indeed, in Berger's view, Nahmanides was among those who were attracted to the study of kabbalah in order to "satisfy their yearning for what might best be termed not a religious philosophy but a philosophical religion."<sup>29</sup>

Ramban's attitude toward Maimonides' philosophical works also needs to be considered. Ramban studied *Moreh Nevukhim* thoroughly, possibly in its Arabic original.<sup>30</sup> He disagreed with it on numerous occasions in his Torah commentary, not as an object of derision or as a fundamentally flawed work, but as both a locus of novel interpretations that were occasionally unsuccessful, and as a work of Jewish Aristotelianism that read into biblical passages and rabbinic formulations ideas which Nahmanides did not believe they held.<sup>31</sup> In suggesting to the Rabbis of Northern France, ostensibly as a compromise, that *Moreh Nevukhim* be sanctioned for study only by small groups of capable students, Nahmanides was perhaps arguing for what he himself believed to be the best policy in any event. Although

(Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 266-72; Michael Oron, "Kavvim le-Torat ha-Nefesh v'ha-Gilgul ba-Kabbalah ba-Me'ah ha-Yod Gimmel," *Mehkarim be-Hagut Yehudit*, pp. 277-83; Avraham Lifshitz, "Le-Torat ha-Beri'ah shel R. Mosheh ben Nahman," *Sinai* 100 (1987): 534-41; B. Safran, "R. Azriel and Nahmanides," p. 81; Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," pp. 35-37, esp. n. 15; Alan Brill, "The Kabbalistic Neoplatonism of R. Azriel of Gerona and R. Moses Nahmanides," (unpublished paper presented at the annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, Mass., December, 1992). On the members of the Gerona school who were even more inclined than Ramban toward philosophy, see also *Peirush ha-Aggadot le-R. Azriel*, ed. Isaiah Tishby (Jerusalem, 1945), p. 83, and cf. Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Plainview, 1969), pp. 128-39, 172-79.

29. Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," *Ramban: Explorations*, esp. p. 111. See also I. Unna, *R. Mosheh ben Nahman*, pp. 6-8; B. Septimus, "Open Rebuke," p. 28, and cf. his *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, pp. 109-11; I. Ta-Shema, *R. Zerayah ha-Levi Ba'al ha-Ma'or u-Venei Hugo* (Jerusalem, 1992), p. 144, n. 32.
30. On the degree of Ramban's familiarity with Arabic, see Raphael Jospe, "Ha-Ramban v'ha-Aravit," *Tarbiz* 57 (1988): 67-93, and the literature cited in nn. 2-6; Septimus, "Open Rebuke," p. 12, n. 4; K. Kahana's introduction to his edition of Ritva's *Sefer ha-Zikkaron*, pp. 28-37.
31. See, e.g., Kahana's introduction to *Sefer ha-Zikkaron*, pp. 16-17.

Nahmanides viewed the road toward human perfection in terms of mystical constructs,<sup>32</sup> his role in the Maimonidean controversy was not primarily motivated by anti-philosophical animus.<sup>33</sup>

Nahmanides is regarded as the leading Spanish talmudist of the thirteenth century. Already in his student days, however, he came into contact with the teachings and method of the Tosafists of northern France, as well as with Provençal halakhah.<sup>34</sup> The basic methodology employed by Nahmanides in his talmudic commentaries is Tosafist dialectic. At the same time, Ramban placed even greater emphasis than the Tosafists did on reaching and rendering halakhic conclusions as an outgrowth of the exegetical or analytical process.<sup>35</sup> In terms of style, Nahmanides' commentaries conformed to the medieval Spanish model. As opposed to Tosafist commentaries and halakhic works, Nahmanides' students did not play any apparent role in the written version of his novellae, neither in the discussion, nor in the formulation and recording.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the other kinds of halakhic writing that Nahmanides did, such as his mo-

32. On asceticism and *devekut* as components of Ramban's program for human perfection, see B. Safran, "R. Azriel and Nahmanides on the Fall of Man," esp. p. 84, n. 44; Ritva, *Sefer ha-Zikkaron*, pp. 91-92; C. Henoah, *Ha-Ramban ke-Hoker u'khe-Mekubbal*, pp. 131-36; and my "Nezirut ve-Nidrei Issur be-Mishnatam shel ha-Rambam v'ha-Ramban," *Hadarom* 50 (1990): 79-84. [On Ramban's attitude toward the spirituality of women, see Naftali Wieder, "Al ha-Berakhot Goy-Eved-Ishah," *Sinai* 85 (1979): 111, n. 69, and Chavel's response in *Sinai* 86 (1980): 96.]
33. Ramban expressed no reservations about *Sefer ha-Madda* and did not wish to limit access to it in any way. Cf. Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, pp. 99-102. Regarding Ramban's stance on *Moreh Nevukhim*, note the variant readings in Nahmanides' letter to the rabbis of northern France. See Chavel, *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, v.1 (3rd rev. ed., Jerusalem, 1968), p. 349, and cf. J. Dan (above, n.16), pp. 36-41.
34. See E.E. Urbach, *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 26, 263-64, 479, 586, and Avraham Grossman, "Ha-Kesharim Bein Yahadut Sefarad le-Yahadut Ashkenaz Bimei ha-Benayim," *Moresheet Sefarad*, ed. H. Beinart, pp. 179-82. See also below, n. 50.
35. See I. Unna, *R. Mosheh ben Nahman*, pp. 23-27, and I. Ta-Shema, "Nahmanides: As Halakhist," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 12:778-79.
36. Mordechai Breuer, "Le-Heker ha-Tippologiyah shel Yeshivot ha-Ma'arav Bimei ha-Benayim," *Studies in the History of Jewish Society in the Middle Ages and in the Modern Period*, ed. E. Etkes and Y. Salmon (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 45-48, and A. Grossman, "Yetziratam ha-Hilkhatit shel Hakhmei Sefarad," *Moresheet Sefarad*, pp. 158-60.

nographs and *hassagot*, reflect Spanish (or Provençal) conventions.<sup>37</sup>

### APPROACH TO HALAKHAH

Whether Nahmanides consistently adhered to Ashkenazic or Spanish halakhah in his commentaries, in cases where the two were in conflict, is most difficult to determine.<sup>38</sup> Septimus has suggested that even as Ramban was deeply indebted to Tosafist talmudic methodology, and extolled the Tosafists for their method, "devotion to the study and defense of the Geonic-Andalusian tradition remained a major counter-theme in his halakhic career." In a note, Septimus points to several examples where Ramban in his *Hiddushim* sided with the position of earlier Sefardic halakhists against a strong Ashkenazic consensus.<sup>39</sup>

Satisfactory resolution of this question can come only after a comprehensive analysis of Nahmanides' *Hiddushim* in their entirety. As a working hypothesis, however, I would suggest that Ramban was inclined to take the part of *Hakhmei Sefarad* rather than follow competing Ashkenazic practices in matters of ritual law and custom, such as the recitation of *pryyutim* and the *Shema*,<sup>40</sup> food preparation for the Sabbath, and the burial of Jews on Yom Tov by non-Jews.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, a perusal of *Hiddushei ha-Ramban* at the end of tractate *Mo'ed Qatan* reveals that Ramban consistently

37. See Septimus, "Open Rebuke," pp. 30-32; Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières*, pp. 56-59, 84-85; Ta-Shema, *EJ* 12:780-81.
38. Despite a disclaimer that he would defend R. Isaac Alfasi's views only up to a point (similar in tone to the disclaimer made in the introduction to his *hassagot* on *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*), Ramban tended to accept the rulings of Rif (whom he refers to throughout his writings as *Rabbenu ha-Gadol*) in his *Milhamot ha-Shem* and *Tashlum Halakhot*. Both these works, however, were intended to complement Rif's *Halakhot*, and neither cites Tosafist views with any frequency. See C.B. Chavel, *Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman*, pp. 73-75, 84-96; his *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, v. 1, pp. 413-14, 418-21; and Unna, *R. Mosheh ben Nahman*, pp. 24-26.
39. Septimus, p. 33, n. 86.
40. See Septimus, *ibid.*; Jacob Katz, "Ma'ariv bi-Zemanno u-shelo bi-Zemanno," *Halakhah ve-Kabbalah*, pp. 190-92; I. Ta-Shema, "E-l Melekh Ne'eman — Gilgulo shel Minhag," *Tarbiz* 39 (1970): 184-94; and Katz, *Halakhah ve-Kabbalah*, pp. 39-42.
41. See Katz, *Goy shel Shabbat* (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 166-72, and R. Menahem ha-Meiri, *Bet ha-Behirah 'al Massekhet Shabbat*, ed. Y.S. Lange (Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 141-42.

opposed the procedures advocated by *rabbaneihakhmei Tsarefat* over a range of issues within *hilkhot 'avelut*.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Nahmanides was more inclined to follow Tosafist interpretations and rule accordingly in matters of monetary law.<sup>43</sup> Affecting this entire analysis, however, is the fact that Nahmanides, regardless of the area of law that was involved, did not adhere to the prevalent Ashkenazic strategy of reconciling practices and conventions that appeared to be in conflict with talmudic law.<sup>44</sup>

42. See, e.g., *Hiddushei ha-Ramban, Mo'ed Qatan* 17b, s.v. *kol shiv'ah*, 19a, s.v. *'amar R. Amram*, 20a, s.v. *'amar Rav Huna*, and *hanei shiv'ah yomei* (fol. 158), 21b, s.v. *tannu rabbanan*, and cf. *Torat ha-Adam, Kitvei ha-Ramban*, v.2, pp. 99-100, 158-63, 189-90.
43. See, e.g., *Hiddushei ha-Ramban, Bava Batra* 55a, s.v. *'im ken*; Simha Assaf, *Sifran shel Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1935), pp. 87-89; and Shmuel Shiloh, *Dina Demalkhuta Dina* (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 191-95, 318-20, 326-29. See also *Hiddushei ha-Ramban, Bava Metzia* 70b, s.v. *mai lav* and *Tosafot ad loc.*, and Haym Soloveitchik in the next note. Ramban's strongest words of praise for the greatness of the French Tosafists' talmudic scholarship appear at the beginning of his monograph on *dina de-garmi*, which deals with laws of torts. Cf. I. Ta-Shema, *EJ* 12:780.

In several of the examples adduced by Septimus (above, n. 39), Ramban sides with the Spanish view in cases of monetary law. These may not, however, be indicative. In these cases, Ramban's position is determined either by talmudic *musha'ot*, where Ramban's consistent preference for Spanish readings is well known [see Unna, p. 21, and Ta-Shema, *EJ* 12:779], or the French position is cited as the opinion of one scholar rather than the view of *rabbaneihakhmei Tsarefat* in general.

44. See H. Soloveitchik, *Halakhah, Kalkalah ve-Dimmui Atzmi* (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 112-19, and Katz (above, nn. 40-41), and *Halakhah ve-Kabbalah*, pp. 135-36, 160 regarding *yibbum*. For Ramban's position on *pilagshut*, see my "Rabbinic Attitudes Toward Non-Observance in the Medieval Period," *Jewish Tradition and Nontraditional Jews*, ed. J.J. Schacter (New York, 1992), pp. 17-26, and see also pp. 30-35. Ramban's diverse tendencies in halakhic decision-making and codification further complicate any attempt to identify broad patterns of innovativeness or conservatism in his writings. See R. Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, pp. 37, 185-94. Indeed, while Ramban, as Chazan has shown, takes a very forward approach to messianic speculation, his stance in regard to (mystical) eschatology is quite conservative. See Idel, "Be-Or ha-Hayyim," (above, n. 16).

Israel Ta-Shema has noted that the talmudic novellae of Ramban and Rashba, among those of other leading medieval Spanish talmudists, were never mentioned in Yizhak Baer's *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*. Baer includes, of course, material from other parts of Ramban's corpus. See Ta-Shema, "Rabbinic Literature in Fifteenth-Century Spain: the Case of *Menorat ha-Ma'or* by R. Isaac Aboab," to appear in the proceedings of a conference, Intellectual Creativity in a Community in Decline: Spanish

Recent research has pointed to a number of possible influences on Nahmanides' writings that also require further study. R. Yehudah ha-Levi's impact on Ramban in regard to the primacy of the Land of Israel has been duly noted.<sup>45</sup> Ha-Levi's significant role in regard to the parameters of natural law has also been demonstrated.<sup>46</sup> A number of other phrases and concepts in Ramban's thought may owe their origins to ha-Levi, whose *Kuzari* reflects elements of *merkavah* mysticism.<sup>47</sup> Some of ha-Levi's material may have been brought to Ramban's attention via Avraham ibn Ezra who, in addition to having a major impact on Ramban's biblical exegesis, also had an influence on Nahmanides' kabbalistic conceptions.<sup>48</sup>

#### PIETIST INFLUENCES

R. Eleazar of Worms, who was cited by Ramban in his letter to the rabbis of northern France and was linked in kabbalistic pseudepigraphy to Ramban, also had a significant amount of influence, as did other unnamed German Pietists. In addition,

Jewry, 1391-1492, held at Yeshiva University in October 1992. Ta-Shema discusses the ramifications of these omissions in a forthcoming article in *Shenaton ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri*.

45. See M. Idel, "The Land of Israel in Medieval Kabbalah," *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. L.H. Hoffman (Notre Dame, 1986), pp. 176-78; Shalom Rosenberg, "The Link to the Land of Israel in Jewish Thought," *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, pp. 148-56; A. Ravitzky, *Al Da'at ha-Makom*, pp. 42-55; E. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," p. 151, n. 36.
46. See Michael Nehorai, "Torat ha-Nes v'ha-Teva Etzel ha-Ramban ve-Zikatah le-R. Yehudah ha-Levi," *Da'at* 17 (1986): 23-31 (and cf. D. Berger's response in *Da'at* 18 [1987]: 169-70).
47. Elliot Wolfson, "Merkavah Tradition in Philosophical Garb — Judah Halevi Reconsidered," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1991): 179-242; Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 223-24, 410-11; Septimus, "Open Rebuke," pp. 14-16, 27, 30; Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition," pp. 59, n. 33, 69; Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," 105, n. 6; Safran, "R. Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man," p. 84, n. 43, p. 100, n. 84. Cf. I. Twersky, *Rabad*, pp. 275-76, 280, and see now Howard Kreisler, "Judah Halevi's Influence on Maimonides: A Preliminary Appraisal," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 95-121.
48. See Septimus, "Open Rebuke," p. 23, nn. 42, 43; Scholem, *Origins*, p. 411, n. 108; and Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," 115, n. 37. Regarding Ramban's relationship to the exegetical methods of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, see Septimus, "Open Rebuke," pp. 17-18, nn. 27-28, and 19-20, nn. 31-32, and Y.S. Licht, "Ramban," *Entziklopediah Mikra'it* 8:683-89.

R. Yehudah b. Yakar, a major teacher of Ramban in talmudic studies and apparently in mysticism as well, had meaningful contact with *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. The impact of *Sefer ha-Bahir* on Ramban is also noteworthy. *Sefer ha-Bahir*'s circulation among *Hasidei Ashkenaz* prior to its arrival in Provence and Spain has been confirmed. Indeed, all of these details accord with the larger claim, made in several recent studies, that a number of crucial Spanish mystical teachings were received from *Hasidei Ashkenaz*.<sup>49</sup> In terms of biblical exegesis, Ramban was directly influenced by Radak, the leading Provençal commentator, and by R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, among other *peshat* exegetes of northern France.<sup>50</sup>

The geographic and ideological diversity of these figures might lead us to brand Nahmanides, as some have done with ibn Ezra, an eclectic. This designation does not begin, however, to capture the manner in which Nahmanides developed and synthesized his vast erudition. Nahmanides integrated an unusually wide array of disciplines, methodologies and concerns, in a seamless fashion. One almost gets the sense that Ramban, in preparation for his task, sought to be able to understand kabbalah with the greatest of kabbalists, to uncover *pehuto shel mikra* with the best of the *pashtanim*, to ponder philosophical questions with the most prominent Jewish thinkers, in addition to developing a dazzling mastery of talmudic literature. Nahmanides could speak the language of each discipline separately, but he managed to blend them as well. In this sense,

49. See the literature cited in my "Rabbinic Figures in Castilian Kabbalistic Pseudepigraphy: R. Yehudah he-Ilai and R. Elhanan of Corbeil," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993) [in press], nn. 73, 99, 108. For the influence of the *Bahir* on Ramban, see Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," 177-78; M. Oron, "Kavvim le-Torat ha-Nefesh," (above, n. 27), pp. 284-88; and J. Katz, "Halakhah ve-Kabbalah: Magga'im Rishonim," pp. 30-31.
50. The claim made by both Chavel, in his introduction to *Peirushei ha-Ramban 'al Nevi'im u-Khetuvim*, p. 6, and Septimus, "Open Rebuke," pp. 17-18, n. 27, that Radak was a major source for Ramban despite the fact that his name is hardly mentioned, has been demonstrated by Hillel Novetsky, "The Influence of Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor and Radak on Ramban's Commentary on the Torah," (M.A. thesis, Yeshiva University, 1992). The influence of Bekhor Shor appears to have been less than that of Radak. For the possible Provençal roots of Ramban's extensive use of Talmud Yerushalmi and his defense of *Hilkhot ha-Rif*, see B.Z. Benedikt, *Merkaz ha-Torah bi-Provence* (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 11, n. 76, 52, n. 146, and cf. I. Twersky (above, n. 37), and Ta-Shema, *Ef* 12:779.

he was different from Maimonides, whose interests, methodologies, and sources appear to be more limited.<sup>51</sup> It is perhaps the multilayered complexity of Nahmanides' oeuvre which slowed the progress of those who wished to study his works. Thankfully, we have reached the point where this enterprise can now continue on firm ground.<sup>52</sup>

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51. On the blending of rabbinic cultures and methods in medieval Europe which occurred in the early thirteenth century, see Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, pp. 46-51, 59-60, and A. Grossman (above, n. 34), pp. 181-82.
  52. Forthcoming published studies on Ramban include David Novak, *The Theology of Nahmanides: Systematically Presented*, and Moshe Idel, "Nahmanides — Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership."



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