

REVIEW ESSAY

THE BARCELONA DISPUTATION

by

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Robert Chazan. *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, x, 257 pp.

In many respects, Robert Chazan's new book on the disputation of 1263 between Nahmanides and Friar Paul Christian is an excellent and very important contribution to the century-old historiographical debate about one of the most famous events in medieval Jewish history. The Barcelona disputation, where Friar Paul unveiled a relatively new approach appealing to talmudic sources as evidence for the truth of Christianity, was manifestly a moment of high drama, so significant and so thoroughly investigated that we might be pardoned a certain skepticism about the ability of any scholar to say something new about it. To a significant degree, Chazan has overcome this obstacle by providing an overview of the event that forces us to look at the large picture fortified with a healthy infusion of common sense. At the same time, part of the analysis seems to me to stand in tension with itself, and I am inclined to utilize some of the evidence that Chazan presents so lucidly to reach a conclusion different from his.

The book begins with a vigorous and persuasive argument against the widespread, natural inclination to seek clear winners and losers through a close analysis of the partisan records of such disputations. The apt analogy to presidential debates drives home the point that people who see the same event will often perceive the results quite differently depending upon their

ideological orientation (p. 14).¹ Even more important, Chazan shows how most of the significant discrepancies between the Latin and Hebrew versions of the disputation can be accounted for as different perceptions of the same discussion rather than as purposeful distortions or outright lies. While the argument here is not entirely new, Chazan's analysis is more systematic than that of his predecessors; he evinces greater sympathy for the Latin account than Isidore Loeb or Yitzhak Baer while at the same time reinforcing Loeb's argument that this account rarely makes factual assertions that flatly contradict Naḥmanides' narrative. In this crucial respect, the book makes a major contribution.

Despite his effort to understand both versions as essentially honest, though highly tendentious works, Chazan cannot avoid a confrontation with the issue of purposeful distortion or lying, and here he evinces considerable discomfort. On the one hand, he writes that "the royal seal [on the Latin document], . . . Naḥmanides' general stature, . . . and above all else, the public nature of the event . . . make . . . out-and-out lying unthinkable" (p. 14). On the following page, however, he affirms that the matter is not so simple. The Latin version's depiction of Naḥmanides' confusion and the latter's description of his confident attacks on Christianity are "embellishment and exaggeration" of a sort that "do not seem to me to warrant the accusation of lying. If readers prefer that label to embellishment and exaggeration, so be it."

The problem here is not semantic alone. It goes to the heart of Chazan's vision of the disputation. He explicitly avoids the term "lie," partly because of the analytical difficulties that it would cause him, and partly, I suspect, because he is such a quintessential gentleman. But the brute fact is that Chazan maintains unequivocally that Naḥmanides lied about a truly fundamental aspect of the proceedings. At several important moments in the Hebrew account, Naḥmanides informs us that he succeeded in presenting certain standard Jewish criticisms of Christian belief, sometimes in sharp language. Chazan regards this as virtually impossible for two reasons that we would do well to examine.

The first of these is the commonsense observation, already noted to some degree by Baer, that it is highly implausible that Naḥmanides could have spoken in a public forum about the utter irrationality of the incarnation, the

1. As Chazan notes (p. 7), the basic observation was made by Isidore Loeb in his classic article, "La Controverse de 1263 à Barcelone entre Paulus Christiani et Moïse ben Nahman," *Revue des Études Juives* 15 (1887): 2.

militarism of the Spanish Christian state, the Messiah's future destruction of Rome, or the curses to befall Christians. Naḥmanides reports—and a Christian document confirms—that he was granted freedom of speech, but he also reports that he gave assurances of his “good sense to speak properly.” No grant of free speech could have extended this far (pp. 48–49, 94–97, 138).

The second reason goes to one of Chazan's most important insights. He argues quite correctly that the use of the Talmud to demonstrate the truth of Christianity provided a structure to the debate between Jews and Christians in which the Christian side could not lose. In an exchange about an allegedly Christological verse in the Bible, a Jew might be able to reverse the argument by showing that the revealed text in fact contradicts Christianity; if, however, the text is talmudic, it has no authority for Christians, so that the Jew can do nothing more than neutralize the citation by showing that it does not support Christian doctrine. “To have developed such a potent new technique and then let it be readily contravened by the Jewish protagonist further strains credulity” (p. 50, and cf. p. 138). Indeed, adds Chazan, evidence from the later Tortosa disputation clearly demonstrates that Christians applying Friar Paul's approach prevented Jews from raising issues that could disturb this one-sided structure (pp. 53–54). Chazan's structural insight, then, impels him to affirm the very strong position that even had Naḥmanides spoken with consummate politeness and extreme diffidence, he could not have presented a substantial percentage of the arguments that he reports.

Neither of these points can be dismissed easily. Nonetheless, the second strikes me as a case of anachronistically imposing the Tortosa model on Barcelona, and both must confront a monumental problem that Chazan touches lightly but fails to give its due.

As Chazan indicates, indeed emphasizes, the disputation at Barcelona was a pioneering experiment. I have argued elsewhere that many Jewish-Christian debates of an informal sort had taken place over the generations in an atmosphere of relatively free repartee.² It should not be taken for granted that thirteenth-century friars could snap their fingers and change the ground rules abruptly and with total, immediate success to one of ironclad control over the Jewish participant. The ultimate authority during the debate was not

2. D. Berger, “Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 576–591. To be sure, the strongest evidence comes from Northern Europe, but there is enough from the South to sustain the point.

the clerics who had constructed the new approach, but the king of Aragon. The king was obviously on the Christian side; nonetheless he may have enjoyed the spectacle of intellectual jousting, which would have been ruined by the ruthlessly consistent suppression of every new point that Nahmanides wanted to raise. Not only is this scenario not unreasonable; it is, I think, more plausible than Chazan's alternative. Among many other things, Tortosa was a result of lessons learned at Barcelona.

There is, of course, no doubt that Nahmanides worked under severe restraints, and he informs us more than once of initiatives that were thwarted by uneven ground rules. It is self-evident, however, that he would have attempted to broaden the focus of the debate, and there is little reason to believe that at this point in history every such foray was doomed to abject failure. It seems to me that the picture he presents of occasional tolerance and occasional repression is more than credible; it is precisely what we should expect at this transitional point in the medieval Jewish-Christian relationship.

We are left with the sharp formulations and moderately lengthy excursions that Nahmanides reports, and there is no question that these must give us pause. At the same time, we must keep in mind that a remark can look much sharper on paper than in an oral exchange, where its impact can be mitigated by a disarming smile, a shrug, a softness in tone, particularly if the parties have a cordial relationship, for which there is some external evidence in the case of Nahmanides and the king. More important, our instinctive skepticism must be set against a powerful argument for at least the approximate accuracy of these assertions. Nahmanides probably wrote his account after the dissemination of the Latin summary. He certainly knew that it would be subjected to microscopic scrutiny in an attempt to discredit it. He also knew that James I would surely be informed of any false assertions that audacious and arguably disrespectful statements had been articulated in the royal presence and in two of the crucial instances (about militarism and the incarnation) addressed directly to him. We are, in short, being told that it is hard to imagine that Nahmanides could have said these things in the heat of a debate because he had promised to speak properly and because he knew he would be stopped, but it is perfectly imaginable that he would have lied about saying them in a carefully composed document that would surely be shown to the king.

The core of this point was made already by Loeb. "The friars," he wrote, "could have said and written whatever they wanted with impunity.

Nahmanides would have exposed himself to grave dangers had he inserted inexactitudes or lies into his account. He would not have dared to do it.”³ In Baer’s critique of the disputation, he ignored this point entirely.⁴ Chazan does raise the argument and replies as follows: “The only answer I can supply is that Nahmanides was deeply convinced of the need for such a work and retained some confidence in the capacity of Jewish leverage to protect him, as it eventually did” (p. 98). He goes on to say that the silence of those who heard Nahmanides’ alleged remarks would be more problematic than this difficulty (p. 98, and cf. p. 138). By “silence” he presumably means failure to cut off such statements with ruthless efficiency, since the absence of a recorded objection at a particular point in Nahmanides’ narrative does not necessarily mean that there was none. Moreover, in a passage that Chazan does his best to explain away at a different point in his analysis (pp. 75–77), Nahmanides informs us that after a day which ended with one of his aggressive comments, he began the next morning’s proceedings by asking that the debate be ended because Jews were fearful and Christians, including one whom he identifies by name, had told him that it was inappropriate for him to speak against their faith in their presence.⁵

Chazan is clearly uncomfortable with his reply, and the force of the question is even more powerful than he indicates. A royal document of 1265 reveals that Nahmanides came under attack for “vituperation” against the Catholic faith in what he said at the disputation as well as in what he wrote. This assertion in itself creates intractable problems for Chazan’s position, despite his plausible conclusion in light of a papal letter that it was the written work “that set in motion the cycle of prosecution” (p. 98). What is particularly telling is that Nahmanides defended himself by pointing to the

3. Loeb, “La Controverse,” p. 7.

4. Y. Baer, “Le-Bikkoret ha-Vikkuḥim shel R. Yeḥiel mi-Paris ve-R. Mosheh ben Nahman,” *Tarbiz* 2 (1930–31): 172–187.

5. *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. C. D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 312. Elsewhere (p. 97), Chazan argues that the failure of the Latin account to take Nahmanides to task for his “blasphemies” would be “unthinkable” if he had really spoken as he says. I do not find this silence troubling. The Latin version is very brief and interested primarily in highlighting Nahmanides’ ineffectiveness; emphasizing his aggressiveness would have been counterproductive. Moreover, the fact that the king had allowed these statements would have made the charge of blasphemy extremely difficult to level from a political standpoint. It was the publication of the book, which the king had never permitted, that made the attack on Nahmanides politically feasible. It should also be kept in mind that for all his sharp comments, Nahmanides never claims to have said a negative word about Jesus.

freedom of speech granted him by the king at the disputation, a defense that is clearly intended to apply to the written work as well. If we accept the position that the “vituperative” statements had never been made orally, this defense establishes a standard for chutzpah that may even eclipse that of the proverbial parricide who asked the judge for clemency as an orphan. “After all,” said Naḥmanides to the king, “you granted me freedom of expression at the disputation. Since I ascribed my vituperative statements in the written work to the oral disputation, the grant of free speech applies to them. The fact that this ascription happens to be false is entirely irrelevant.”

And even this is not the end of it. No one has ever suggested that the judge accepted the young murderer’s argument. In our case, James I resisted the demands of the Church for draconian punishment and proposed milder measures than the ecclesiastical authorities were willing to accept. His reason? “We are certain that the said permission was given to him at that time by us and by Friar R[aymund] of Penyafort” (“cum nobis certum sit, dictam licentiam a nobis et fratre R. de Pennaforti sibi tunc temporis fore datam”).⁶ Even if we recognize the role of larger policy concerns in the king’s position, this scenario does more than strain credulity; it skirts the edges of the inconceivable.⁷

There is some uncertainty as to whether or not the book mentioned in this document, a book which was presented to the bishop of Gerona and allegedly written at his request, is the same as our Hebrew narrative. Chazan’s position appears to be that the book given to the bishop could not have been the Hebrew disputation but that it was that disputation which was under attack. I do not understand how this position can be reconciled with the royal document, which asserts with absolute clarity that the book containing the alleged vituperation was given to the bishop; at the same time, it is easy to understand the dilemma which forced Chazan into this uncomfortable stance. On his assumption that Naḥmanides could have said virtually nothing offensive at the disputation, the following conundrums arise:

6. Heinrich Denifle, “Quellen zur Disputation Pablos Christiani mit Mose Nachmani zu Barcelona 1263,” *Historisches Jahrbuch des Görres-Gesellschaft* 8 (1887): 239.

7. Even Martin Cohen’s theory of collusion between Naḥmanides and the king would not provide an adequate explanation. For this conspiracy theory, which Chazan rightly rejects, see Cohen’s “Reflections on the Text and Context of the Disputation of Barcelona,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 35 (1964): 157–192. (Cohen’s close reading of the Hebrew version as a sustained account of Naḥmanides’ public humiliation at Barcelona is remarkable, if unsettling, testimony to the awesome powers of human ingenuity.)

If the book represented the disputation more or less faithfully, it would have been almost impossible to label it vituperative with any credibility. If the Hebrew narrative existed in 1265 alongside such a faithful report, it is bizarre indeed that the latter rather than the former should have been prosecuted. If the Hebrew narrative did not exist at that time, how can we imagine that after a terrifying brush with severe punishment for writing an accurate account, Naḥmanides would proceed to write a much different, far more aggressive, distorted narrative? If, on the other hand, this book was anything like the Hebrew work in our possession, Chazan cannot imagine that Naḥmanides would have given it to the bishop; moreover, the claim that the book was covered by the grant of free speech would be quite incomprehensible.

I am inclined to regard this book as very close to the Hebrew disputation though probably not quite identical with it.⁸ What remains crystal clear is that Naḥmanides wrote a book with arguably vituperative statements against Christianity, that he defended it on the grounds that these statements had been made at the disputation, where he had been granted freedom of expression, and that James I endorsed this defense.

In general, Naḥmanides' account has been confirmed by Christian documentation to a degree that we would hardly have had the right to expect. The Latin version, complete with its royal seal, says that Naḥmanides ended the disputation by slipping out of town in the king's absence, while the Hebrew text speaks of a friendly leave-taking at which the king gave the rabbi three hundred *dinarim*, a payment which is mentioned in a later royal document. Records that predate the disputation imply the existence of the sort of positive relationship between the royal court and the rabbi of Gerona which emerges from Naḥmanides' account. Perhaps most significant of all is the confirmation of the grant of free speech. While reading Chazan's analysis of the iron control exercised by the Christian side and particularly his argument about the implausibility of Naḥmanides' assertion that he played some role in formulating the agenda, I began to imagine the scholarly reaction to the rabbi's claim to a grant of free expression had we not possessed the confirming evidence.

8. This is more or less Baer's formulation in *Toledot ha-Yehudim bi-Sefarad ha-Nošerit* (Tel Aviv, 1959), p. 93. I assume, for example, that the very sharp introductory paragraph of our Hebrew text, which does not represent anything that Naḥmanides said at the disputation, was omitted from the copy prepared for the bishop of Gerona.

Nahmanides, we would have been told, needed to establish a framework in which his blatantly problematic assertions that he criticized Christian beliefs so vigorously and publicly would appear credible. He consequently constructed an exchange in which he extracted a promise that he would be allowed to speak freely. Given the new technique introduced by Friar Paul and his ecclesiastical retainers and surely enforced by their royal sponsor, it is unthinkable that such a dangerous promise could actually have been made. Besides, what leverage did Nahmanides have to elicit such a guarantee? Could he have threatened to go home if the king did not acquiesce? Despite its cleverness, then, this is a transparent ploy which presents one of Nahmanides' least credible claims.

Yet the claim is indisputably true.

None of this means that Nahmanides' oral formulations might not have been somewhat milder than his written version (or even that the book referred to in the royal document might not have been a bit milder than our Hebrew text); it means only that he could not have written something at any stage that he could not have defended as a more or less accurate depiction of what he had said. Needless to say, I am not arguing that the Hebrew account is anything resembling a stenographic record. On the contrary, Chazan is surely correct in his observation that "even a cursory look at the text indicates that it cannot be viewed as a thorough account of the confrontation. The narrative is far too short for that; the reportage on the Christian thrusts is far too restricted; the unfolding of events is far too neat. The Nahmanidean narrative is clearly a carefully crafted record aimed at creating a certain set of impressions in the minds of its readers" (pp. 102–103). It is indeed highly unlikely that the unmediated impression made by the disputation itself even upon Jews was the smashing, devastating victory that the reader of the Hebrew account sees, but Nahmanides' work creates its own impression not by the invention of arguments but by emphasis, allocation of space, rhetorical flourishes, partisan interpretation, and the inevitable clarification, improvement, and elaboration that come with the written formulation of an oral exchange by a highly interested participant.

Chazan devotes an entire chapter to the narrative art of Nahmanides' account. I do not believe that his discussion of the work's "verisimilitude" grants sufficient recognition to the role that verity can play in producing verisimilitude, and where Chazan sees invention I see skillful use of emphasis, characterization, and narration. But I see this largely thanks to Chazan, and

I feel very uncomfortable in leveling even a minor criticism against this marvelous chapter. It is brimming with literary sensitivity, and it enables us to understand the impact that this little work has made upon its readers throughout the generations. One of my clearest teenage memories is reading the *Vikkuaḥ ha-Ramban* for the first time, and I am grateful to Chazan for giving me a better understanding of why I reacted as I did.

There is much more to be said about the issues raised in this book, but this is not the forum to discuss them in detail. Chazan devotes chapters to the authority of rabbinic aggadah, to Nahmanides' brief work on Isaiah 53, and to his more important book on the redemption, *Sefer ha-Ge'ullah*. On the first issue, a careful study of Nahmanides' treatment of aggadot throughout his oeuvre remains a desideratum.⁹ On *Sefer ha-Ge'ullah*, Chazan makes a number of valuable observations; still, I would not fully endorse the assertion that "the same Nahmanides who was so conservative and secretive with respect to kabbalistic teachings was explosively original and open with respect to equally dangerous messianic speculations" (p. 186). *Sefer ha-Ge'ullah* is indeed an innovative, important work, but it presents a messianic date that is safely in the future and reflects the author's conservatism in other ways as well. I think that Chazan is quite correct in emphasizing Nahmanides' conviction that the times demanded such a work, and this conviction itself tells us something important about the insecurities of Spanish Jews at the time of Nahmanides' impressive achievement at Barcelona.

And it was an impressive achievement. Near the beginning of his study, Chazan points to the danger of Jewish or Christian partisanship that can affect the study of the disputation and pledges his best efforts to avoid it. I have already confessed to a teenage crush on Nahmanides' narrative, and I write this review with full awareness that I could stand accused of both bias and credulousness. I will confess further that my regard for Nahmanides' moral stature prevents me from lightly dismissing his summary statement, which the structure of his work did not force him to make: "This is the substance of all the debates. In my opinion, I have changed nothing in them."¹⁰ Chazan

9. Bernard Septimus's very brief discussion, to which Chazan makes frequent reference, is still the best treatment of this question; see his "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love': Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 20–22.

10. *Kitvei Ramban*, p. 319. A fair reading of this assertion is, I think, quite consistent with the sorts of changes that I believe Nahmanides did make.

himself, as we have seen, does take account of “Naḥmanides’ stature” in a related context, and this is no less a legitimate historical consideration than the probabilities of royal or ecclesiastical displeasure at a particular argument. The quest for objectivity may sometimes compel us to brave the appearance of bias, and the critical search for truth can occasionally drive us into the arms of the credulous.

This is an admirable study—careful, learned, sensitive, and insightful. Much of it I can unreservedly endorse. Even where I disagree with a fundamental part of the thesis, one of Chazan’s arguments for the position I reject turns out to be a significant contribution to our understanding of the structural impact of Friar Paul’s use of the Talmud. Naḥmanides’ performance in Barcelona was far more forceful, wide-ranging, and effective than this book is prepared to acknowledge, and yet Chazan has provided us the tools for a more sophisticated appreciation of that very achievement.

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