

## Book Review

Oded Yisraeli, *R. Moses ben Nachman (Nachmanides): Intellectual Biography* [Hebrew] (Magnes Press, 2020), 452 pp.

Reviewed by  
Mordechai Z. Cohen

**M**oses Nahmanides, often referred to as Ramban (1194–1270), was one of the most important Jewish scholars of the medieval period, indeed of all time. A polymath with seminal contributions in Talmud commentary, Bible commentary, and Kabbalah, Nahmanides made an indelible mark on Jewish thought—comparable to that of the great philosopher-halakhist Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). Indeed, it could be said that the landscape of medieval Jewish scholarship is charted by these two thinkers and the nexus between them. Yet, whereas dozens of monographs and hundreds of scholarly articles have been devoted to Maimonides over the last century, there has been, until recently, a noticeable dearth of high-quality studies of Nahmanides. In the introduction to a groundbreaking volume of studies on Nahmanides he edited in 1983, Isadore Twersky noted that the study of this great rabbinic master was still in its infancy, despite his importance in the pantheon of medieval Jewish sages.<sup>1</sup>

In the four decades since then, important studies have been published on virtually all aspects of Nahmanides' scholarly output: his Bible and Talmud commentaries, kabbalistic thought, and communal activity, especially his decisive involvement in the Maimonidean controversy of the mid-1230s, and his public disputation with Pablo Christiani in the royal palace of King James I of Aragon in Barcelona, from July 20–24, 1263. As might be expected, however, those studies typically relate to only one or another realm of Nahmanides' work, with few traversing multiple disciplines of this versatile medieval scholar. A notable exception is Moshe Halbertal's *Nahmanides: Law & Mysticism* (Yale University Press, 2020), which bridges a number of areas of Nahmanides' exegesis and thought.

1 Isadore Twersky, ed., *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 1–9.

But the intellectual biography by Oded Yisraeli reviewed here does something unprecedented: drawing upon the wide range of specialized studies on all sub-fields of his work, Yisraeli draws a comprehensive portrait of Nahmanides, the man and his works, offering insight into every stage of his life, career, and thought.

Most students raised in the traditional Jewish educational system will have had exposure to Nahmanides' writings. Usually, one first encounters his Torah commentary, and a select few may venture from there to study his Job commentary. (These are the only two biblical books on which Nahmanides commented systematically. His homily on Ecclesiastes is not a verse-by-verse commentary. The commentary on Song of Songs attributed to Nahmanides printed in Chavel's *Kitvei Ramban* is by R. Azriel of Girona.) More advanced yeshiva students will know Nahmanides as a foundational Talmud commentator through the various genres of his halakhic writings, most popular of which are his *hassagot* (critiques) of *Ba'al ha-Ma'or*, Rabad, and Maimonides' *Book of the Commandments*, as well as his *hiddushim* (novellae) on many tractates of the Talmud. Those with an interest in Jewish thought will study Nahmanides' theologically-oriented works (like *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*) and the kabbalistic allusions sprinkled throughout his writings. Many readers of *TRADITION* probably fall into some or even all of these categories. For such readers, Oded Yisraeli's new Hebrew volume will be most welcome, as it puts all of those different aspects of the Nahmanidean oeuvre into a clear, comprehensive chronological portrait, like pieces in a puzzle, from his earliest writings to those penned in his final years in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Nahmanides was born in Girona in 1194, where he lived most of his life. He began composing halakhic works already in his late teens. The first fruits of those early labors were his "supplements" to the *Halakhot* of R. Isaac Alfasi. Adopting the complex talmudic-Aramaic style of Alfasi, Nahmanides aimed to "complete" Alfasi's work on some of the talmudic tractates the latter had not included in his digest: *Bekhorot*, *Nedarim*, and *Halla*. By 1220, when still in his early twenties, he composed two other important works related to Alfasi—*Milhamot Hashem* and *Sefer ha-Zekhut*, his defense of Alfasi from the critiques of R. Zerahiah HaLevi and Rabad, respectively. His stated motive in composing these works, which subsequently became highly influential among Talmud scholars (as they are to this day), was to defend the opinions and the very honor of Alfasi. Why was this so important for Nahmanides? Citing contemporaneous rabbinic sources, Yisraeli demonstrates that the Geonic-Sefardic tradition of Talmud scholarship represented by Alfasi had fallen to a low point after the death of his student Joseph Ibn Megas in the mid-twelfth century. By contrast, other centers of talmudic learning were on the

rise, especially the Tosafist school in northern France and the Provençal center represented by Rabad and R. Zerahiah HaLevi. It was this crisis, Yisraeli argues, that prompted Nahmanides to uphold the honor of his Sefardic heritage.

Yet, Yisraeli notes a decisive change in Nahmanides' tone that can be discerned by comparing the two separate introductions he wrote to *Milhamot Hashem*. That work was written in two parts, the first on *Seder Nashim* and *Seder Nezikin* and the second, written just a few years later, on *Seder Mo'ed*, each with its own introduction. As Yisraeli points out (48, n. 25), Chavel, in his edition of the introduction to *Milhamot Hashem* published in *Kitvei Ramban*, failed to observe that the printed edition conflates the two introductions. In his first introduction, Nahmanides refers to his goal to criticize R. Zerahiah HaLevi and thereby defend Alfasi's honor. In his second introduction, on the other hand, Nahmanides reflects on the work he had already done, and signals a new outlook. Originally, he acknowledges, "youthful fervor" led him to follow Alfasi zealously and unquestioningly. In the second part of *Milhamot Hashem*, by contrast, he announces that he will only defend Alfasi, but not attack *Ba'al ha-Ma'or*. More important, he concedes that even his critiques of R. Zerahiah, explicit or implied, cannot be taken as complete refutations, since there can never be absolute proofs in talmudic scholarship, unlike in mathematics and science (50). This profound observation about the very nature of Talmud study would guide all of Nahmanides' subsequent Talmud scholarship.

In that second introduction to *Milhamot Hashem*, Nahmanides actually manifests a new level of intellectual independence, while still expressing loyalty to the older Sefardic tradition. He offers that his defense of Alfasi at times is merely *limmud zekhut*, an endeavor to rationalize the thought-process of "the great Master," which he himself otherwise considers to be less than compelling (50–51). A remarkable, and yet more revealing self-reflection in this vein, appears in Nahmanides' introduction to his critique of Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, a much later work, written at the end of the 1240s, when Nahmanides was in his 50s. One of the stated aims of that work was to defend the enumeration of the 613 *mitzvot* appended to the late geonic work *Halakhot Gedolot*, which came under harsh critique by Maimonides. Even while defending the honor of the "early sages"—like the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*—by rationalizing their opinions, the rabbinic master of Girona insists that he will not be merely like "a donkey who carries books." In other words, he will honestly evaluate and at times criticize their views as he sees fit (53).

This spirit guided Nahmanides in writing his supremely influential *hiddushim* (novellae) on the Talmud, which he seems to have completed

by the time he was 30 years old.<sup>2</sup> Two motifs characterize Nahmanides' Talmud commentaries. On the one hand, he openly expresses loyalty to the Sefardic halakhic tradition embodied by Alfasi, though not without reservations. At the same time, the style of his analysis betrays the influence of the Tosafists and their dialectic method of study. Yet, the range of the Girona sage's sources goes far beyond the scholarly scope of the Tosafists, as he cites masters of Jewish learning from the Sefardic tradition such as Samuel HaNagid, Alfasi, Ibn Megas, Maimonides, as well as the Provençal scholars Rabad and Zerahiah HaLevi, and others (58–60).

The wide range of multiple opinions that Nahmanides evaluates critically in his *hiddushim* makes this work truly groundbreaking in the tradition of Talmud study. Nahmanides himself, in a concluding note to his *hiddushim* on *Bava Batra*, actually offers a programmatic statement to explain his tendency to present all reasonable views known to him on any given talmudic matter, even where he decisively prefers one view. It is possible, he concedes, that his reader will find merit in a view that he personally does not favor. This is the exact opposite of the Maimonidean effort in *Mishneh Torah* to create a decisive code of Jewish law that eliminates plurality of opinions—precisely the mode that characterizes the Talmud. What motivated Nahmanides to compose his commentary in this comprehensive manner as a survey of all talmudic interpretations known to him? Yisraeli suggests that this is a manifestation of the thirteenth-century scholastic trend to summarize all possible views on a topic or question and evaluate them critically (63). It is useful, from a typological perspective, to describe Nahmanides' commentarial style as “scholastic” in this respect. It seems to me, however, that further evidence would be required to demonstrate a meaningful link between Nahmanides and this stream of Latin learning in order to view it as a motivating factor in the shaping of his Talmud commentary. More convincing, in my opinion, is Yisraeli's suggestion that Nahmanides intuitively realized that the Talmud is an open text legitimately subject to multiple interpretations—a feature he sought to reflect in his commentary (67).

Nahmanides would play a decisive role in the Maimonidean controversy that engulfed the Jewish communities throughout Western Europe between 1232 and 1235. Although he was relatively young—still in his 30s when the controversy erupted—his erudite Talmud commentaries evidently earned him a reputation as a leading rabbinic authority throughout the Jewish world. The learned epistle he sent to the rabbis of northern

2 Yisraeli determines this dating in two ways. Nahmanides, in passing, actually mentions the upcoming *shemitta* year, 4983 (=1223) in his commentary on *Avoda Zara*. Likewise, *Sefer ha-Terumot*, which appeared in Barcelona around 1223 cites from Nahmanides' *hiddushim* on the Talmud.

France evidently persuaded them to recant their decree of *herem* (excommunication) on those who studied Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Madda* and *Guide of the Perplexed*. Likewise, his letter to the communities of Navarre, Aragon, and Castille convinced their leaders not to side with the Provençal pro-Maimonideans in their quest to excommunicate the anti-Maimonidean Provençal scholar R. Solomon of Montpellier. In his detailed analysis of both letters and the historical facts surrounding them, Yisraeli demonstrates that Nahmanides took a nuanced middle approach, both politically and ideologically (70–84). The wise rabbinic master of Girona pointed out that the small and vulnerable Jewish communities of Western Europe could not afford to be divided—and thus had to find ways to compromise and unite. Conceptually, Nahmanides advanced views that integrated many aspects of Maimonides' philosophical thought, but rejected some of the more extreme Maimonidean positions that he felt betrayed the spirit of traditional Judaism.

This Nahmanidean “middle position,” an integration of elements from disparate streams of Jewish thought, is especially apparent in his important theological work *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* (“Chapter on Recompense”). In the aftermath of the Maimonidean controversy, Nahmanides, by then in his early 40s, composed *Torat ha-Adam*, essentially a halakhic work about the end of life, principally the laws of mourning. But its last section, *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, is philosophically-oriented. There, Nahmanides systematically spells out his views on reward and punishment after death, resurrection, and messianic times—hot button topics of the Maimonidean controversy (85–97). Nahmanides endorsed the fundamental Maimonidean view (rejected, for example, by the northern French rabbis) that reward and punishment in the afterlife is spiritual and not physical. At the same time, he sought to interpret literally—or as literally as possible—the vivid talmudic and midrashic depictions of the reward and punishment in *Gan Eden* (“Garden of Eden”) and *Gehinom* (“hell”) that Maimonides had rendered in purely figurative terms. In other words, Nahmanides sought to offer a more literal reading of the classical biblical and rabbinic sources on these matters that Maimonides had effectively allegorized away. Yisraeli acknowledges the inconsistencies in this Nahmanidean tendency to “hold the rope from both ends” (94), as he argues that the disembodied human soul after death somehow “literally” will experience pain or pleasure from the fire of *Gehinom* or the light and warmth of God's presence in *Gan Eden*. Yet, Yisraeli argues that Nahmanides seems to have been drawing upon precedents in the writings of Rabbi Eliezer of Worms—a sage from the circle of Hasidei Ashkenaz cited at times by Nahmanides—for his hybrid literal-spiritual reading of the reward and punishment in the afterlife (92, 97).

With *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, Yisraeli argues, Nahmanides opened an entirely new trajectory in his scholarly career. In fact, in Yisraeli's opinion (repeated a number of times throughout this biography), virtually all of Nahmanides' writings from the late 1230s onward were motivated by the ideological crisis that came to light during the Maimonidean controversy. From this point forward, he ceased to compose halakhic works and focused all of his attention on Bible and theology in an endeavor to demonstrate that the Bible, rather than philosophy or "foreign wisdom," is the genuine and complete source of Jewish thought. Furthermore, Yisraeli argues (as discussed below) that, for Nahmanides, the text of the Bible itself, and not rabbinic literature, held ultimate authority. To me it seems that, in this respect, he was influenced by earlier commentators such as Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and even Maimonides, who privileged the authority of *peshuto shel mikra* ("the plain sense of the text").<sup>3</sup>

Nahmanides articulates this Bible-centric outlook in his homily (*derasha*) *Torat Hashem Temima* ("The Torah of God is Perfect"), which seems to have been delivered orally in Barcelona in the late 1230s or early 1240s and committed to writing soon afterwards. (Yisraeli rejects the view that this homily was written much later, after the Torah commentary; 102, n. 91). In this *derasha*, Nahmanides states, for the first time, that all human wisdom, including science and theology, is derived from the Torah, either explicitly or through allusion (*remez*). This view, unprecedented in traditional Jewish thought (though it is attested among the Karaites), would become a pillar of Nahmanides' Torah commentary, which occupied him for the remaining decades of his lifetime.

In the early 1240s, Nahmanides composed his *derasha* on Ecclesiastes and commentary on Job, which deal with the problem of theodicy and its practical implications for the religious life. In many respects, the content of these works overlaps with *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*; but they mark the new, biblically-oriented focus of Nahmanides' writings, as he establishes the text of Scripture—rather than rabbinic literature—as the basis for his theological views (108–114).

Sometime in his late 40s, soon after the year 1250, Nahmanides penned his Critiques (*hassagot*) on Maimonides' *Book of the Commandments*. Although this may seem to be a halakhic work, Yisraeli—in the spirit of his thesis that the latter half of Nahmanides' career was as an author focused on the Bible—argues that, in fact, this set of Critiques represents an attempt to anchor the foundations of talmudic halakha in the text of

3 See Mordechai Z. Cohen, *The Rule of Peshat: Jewish Constructions of the Plain Sense of Scripture and Their Christian and Muslim Contexts* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020) and the discussion below.

Scripture (107, n. 1), as evident from overlapping halakhic discussions in Nahmanides' Torah commentary (152).

Three and a half chapters of Yisraeli's book are devoted to the Torah commentary (114–280), which, as Yisraeli argues throughout his volume, Nahmanides seems to have regarded as his most important work, representing the summation of his scholarship. Yisraeli puts to rest the various views about when Nahmanides actually composed the Torah commentary, ranging from those who date its beginnings to his early years to the opinion that the commentary was not yet complete when he left Spain for *Eretz Yisrael* at the end of his life. Based on his careful dating of Nahmanides' other works, Yisraeli concludes that he began to work on the Torah commentary in the 1250s and completed it by the mid-1260s (122). Yet Yisraeli traces the development of the commentary through multiple stages. Evidence for a (now lost) early version of the commentary is brought from Yisraeli's own study of Nahmanides' detailed kabbalistic commentary of Genesis 1 (published by Gershom Scholem). Yisraeli argues that Nahmanides originally had included that passage in the first version of his Torah commentary but later replaced it with a briefer, more enigmatic passage that does not reveal what he regarded as kabbalistic secrets (118). On the other hand, even once the "final" version of the commentary was complete, Nahmanides continued to update it with notes he composed in *Eretz Yisrael* and sent back to Spain—as demonstrated by the detailed study of Joseph Ofer and Jonathan Jacobs,<sup>4</sup> to which Yisraeli himself provided assistance (118–119).

It would be impractical here to summarize Yisraeli's rich and multi-faceted discussion of Nahmanides' Torah commentary comprehensively; but we can highlight some of the most important points he makes in his analysis of this most influential Nahmanidean work. First of all, Yisraeli observes a structural-methodological parallel to Nahmanides' Talmud commentaries—the scholastic-style effort to engage with a broad range of earlier interpretations, which he evaluates critically before coming to his own conclusions (122–124). Although he most often mentions Rashi and Ibn Ezra by name, Nahmanides regularly draws upon other medieval commentators, for example, Radak, Joseph Bekhor Shor, and Hizkuni, without mentioning them by name. (Radak is mentioned once in the Torah commentary; but his opinions are often cited anonymously as *yesh mefarshim*, "there are those who interpret . . ."). Equally important, Nahmanides engaged in his exegetical deliberations with works that are not commentaries per se—the *Targumim*, the grammatical-lexicographic

4 Joseph Ofer and Jonathan Jacobs, *Nahmanides' Torah Commentary Addenda Written in the Land of Israel* [Hebrew] (Herzog Academic College and the World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013).

works penned in Spain, for example, by Menahem ben Saruk and Jonah Ibn Janah, as well as Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Mishneh Torah*. Although the very observation that Nahmanides drew upon a broad range of sources in his Torah Commentary is not new (in fact, it is fairly evident to anyone well-acquainted with this work), Yisraeli's documentation of the various sources used by Nahmanides (especially the anonymous ones discovered in recent scholarship, which Yisraeli cites meticulously) is very useful. Moreover, he puts this Nahmanidean tendency into biographic perspective when arguing that Nahmanides, in his 50s and 60s, returned to the same "workshop" he had occupied in his 20s, only that the object of his labors had shifted from interpreting the Talmud to interpreting the Torah (124–125).

More distinctive is Yisraeli's argument that Nahmanides' main objective in his Torah commentary is to demonstrate his claim, mentioned above, that all wisdom—especially theology—is included in the Torah (125–130). Whereas Maimonides presented his theology systematically, especially in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, as an endeavor to harmonize the Torah and philosophy (for which he drew freely from Greco-Arabic tradition), Nahmanides aims to show that the fundamental beliefs of Judaism are to be derived from the Torah alone (131). Yisraeli notes, furthermore, that Nahmanides aims, to the extent possible, to demonstrate that his theology is based on a *peshat* analysis of the verses, rather than on talmudic and midrashic sources (133–155). Here I would add that although Nahmanides recognized four levels of biblical interpretation—*peshat*, *remez* (typological interpretation), *derash*, and *sod* or *derekh ha-emet* (mystical interpretation)—his preference was to anchor his views in the *peshat*, which he regarded as the most cogent and central sense of the text of Scripture. In this respect, he was following a hermeneutical hierarchy that had been established by Ibn Ezra and Maimonides. Yet, within Nahmanides' four-fold system of scriptural signification, the primacy he gives to *peshat* also bears resemblance to the statement of his younger contemporary Aquinas, who adopted a Christian four-fold scheme of Scriptural signification, that "all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn."<sup>5</sup>

It is in this vein that we can appreciate Yisraeli's observation that Nahmanides' kabbalistic notes in his Torah commentary can be divided into two types. Where he uses the expression "by way of truth (*'al derekh ha-emet*)"—a codeword for introducing Kabbalah—Nahmanides means to offer an interpretation of a difficult biblical verse or exegetical crux under discussion, for which he had already provided alternatives by way of

5 See Cohen, *Rule of Peshat*, 224, 271–300.



*peshat* (usually citing earlier commentators) and, at times, from midrashic sources (173–174). In some cases, Yisraeli notes, Nahmanides regarded the kabbalistic sense to be the most cogent interpretation of the biblical text (170). I would add that, for Nahmanides, in such cases, the kabbalistic reading, in fact, yields the single correct *peshat* interpretation. Especially important are the cases of this sort in which the Girona master invokes Kabbalah to show how a verse interpreted figuratively by Maimonides and other rationalist exegetes can actually be read literally—and thus more faithfully, in his view.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, as Yisraeli notes, there are cases in which Nahmanides introduces kabbalistic notions with the term *sod* (“secret, mystery”) and derivatives of the term *remez* (“hint”), especially that “scripture hints . . . (*yirmoz ha-katuv*)” at a particular matter or idea. In these cases, Yisraeli argues, Nahmanides does not invoke Kabbalah to resolve an exegetical issue, but rather to present a doctrine or esoteric concept that, in his view, emanates from a verse that is otherwise clear (174–177).

Kabbalah forms a central aspect of Nahmanides’ Torah commentary and enables him to offer a more traditional alternative to what he regarded as the extreme rationalism of Maimonides. Yet, Yisraeli notes a critical tension in Nahmanides’ thinking about the permissibility and advisability of revealing the content of this esoteric discipline. In a well-known passage at the conclusion of his introduction to the Torah commentary, Nahmanides warns his reader that any attempt to guess at the deep meaning of his kabbalistic allusions is hazardous—which matches comments in the commentary itself that he is not permitted to reveal the kabbalistic secrets to which he alludes (231–232). Yisraeli cites a fundamental debate over Nahmanides’ reasoning for presenting Kabbalah in such a seemingly contradictory way. Gershom Scholem argued that the purported “warnings” about the dangers of delving into Kabbalah were a clever strategy to generate a thirst for this discipline. Moshe Idel, on the other hand, offered a more nuanced view: that Nahmanides never intended to reveal the full content of Kabbalah to a broad readership. Rather, the Girona master sought primarily to inform his readers of the existence of a traditional Jewish mode of biblical interpretation more authentic than the philosophical-allegorical Maimonidean style of interpretation (224).

Keeping in character with the biographical orientation of his study, Yisraeli argues that the views of Scholem and Idel both have merit—with respect to different stages in Nahmanides’ career (225). As mentioned above, Yisraeli cites evidence that, in an earlier version of the Torah commentary, Nahmanides presented his kabbalistic doctrines more clearly

6 See Cohen, *Rule of Peshat*, 296–299.

and fully, whereas the commentary in its finished form offers only enigmatic allusions to kabbalistic matters. Perhaps most dramatically, Yisraeli cites evidence from the aforementioned study of Ofer and Jacobs that the “warning” about the hazards of trying to understand his kabbalistic allusions in the concluding passage of his introduction was actually a late addition—from his years in *Eretz Yisrael*. On this basis, Yisraeli argues that initially Nahmanides indeed wished to publicize Kabbalah, as Scholem maintained, but that later in life he adopted a more guarded view, as Idel argued. What could have caused this about-face? Yisraeli cites indirect evidence that Nahmanides became aware that readers were devising interpretations of his kabbalistic notes that were not to his liking (229–235). Of course, the trend itself could not be stopped—and many commentaries purporting to reveal Nahmanides’ kabbalistic secrets would, in fact, be written, especially in the subsequent three generations.

The Maimonidean controversy that engulfed Nahmanides in his late 30s had a decisive impact on the very direction of his scholarship, prompting him to shift gears from Talmud scholarship to a focus on Bible and theology. By contrast, he participated in the Barcelona disputation of 1263 when he was almost 70, after he had completed all of his major works, including his monumental Torah commentary. Understandably, that tumultuous event, important as it was, had little impact on Nahmanides’ “intellectual biography” by that stage of his life. Not surprisingly, then, Yisraeli analyzes this episode and the resulting literary record, *The Book of Disputation (Sefer ha-Viku'ah)* penned by Nahmanides, in light of his earlier scholarship—in other words, looking backwards. He notes, for example, that Nahmanides’ turn away from Talmud and rabbinic literature to a biblical focus stood him in good stead when engaged in the disputation with Pablo Christiani, who sought to prove the truth of Christianity from various rabbinic statements (298). Accordingly, Nahmanides could honestly say that he did not regard midrash as categorically authoritative, thereby deflecting his Christian interlocutor’s argument (142–145). Yisraeli, likewise, evaluates Nahmanides’ statements about the Messiah and messianic times in the Barcelona Disputation in light of his earlier writings, especially *Sha’ar ha-Gemul*, but also *Sefer ha-Ge’ula* (“Book of Redemption”), a work about these topics that he had composed in the 1240s as a defense against Christian missionizing (291).

Nahmanides’ Aliyah to *Eretz Yisrael* at the end of his life no doubt held special ideological significance for him, as he himself had developed the innovative theory—repeated throughout his Torah commentary—that the divine commandments could truly be fulfilled only in the Holy Land (157–158). But practical factors undoubtedly played a major role in Nahmanides’ difficult decision to uproot himself from his home and family

in old age. In fact, in his *Derasha le-Rosh ha-Shana* (“New Year Homily”), a written record of his oral delivery in Acre, Nahmanides speaks rather dejectedly about this displacement and acknowledges—with a tone of guilt—that he had abandoned his sons and daughters in Spain (318). After the Barcelona Disputation, and especially after publication of his *Book of Disputation*, the Church authorities sought to punish Nahmanides—leading to a decree in 1265 that he be exiled from Aragon (319–320). Although this decree evidently was never enforced, Nahmanides understood the danger facing him in Spain and decided to emigrate to *Eretz Yisrael*.

In 1267 or 1268 Nahmanides arrived at the port of Acre. Shortly after that, he made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and composed his important and moving “Prayer upon the Ruins of Jerusalem,” which Yisraeli analyzes in depth (338–352). But it was in Acre that Nahmanides actually settled, evidently living there until his death in 1270. A relatively thriving Jewish community dwelled in that city, ruled at the time by the Crusaders. Among its members were students of the Tosafists that had arrived earlier in the thirteenth century.

What were the fruits of Nahmanides’ scholarship in Acre? The only new scholarly work he composed in Israel was the aforementioned *Derasha le-Rosh ha-Shana*, which aims to demonstrate the biblical sources for the *halakhot* of *Rosh ha-Shana*—sharpening ideas he had already developed in his Torah Commentary (334–337). Yisraeli cites a study by Shalem Yahalom who points out that Nahmanides in that *derasha* engages in a polemic with the views of the Tosafists on these matters related to *Rosh ha-Shana*—of which he evidently first became aware while in Acre.

Nahmanides’ most important scholarly achievement while in the Holy Land was not a new work at all, but rather the systematic corrections and addenda to his Torah commentary that he sent back to Spain. In Yisraeli’s view, even though the Commentary had been “finished” before he made Aliyah, Nahmanides never could let go of this monumental work, which he continually updated until his death. Yisraeli argues that this reflects the centrality of the Torah commentary in Nahmanides’ eyes (329–334)—which matches the enormous influence it, in fact, had on subsequent generations of Jewish readers.

Yisraeli’s intellectual biography of Nahmanides sheds new light on this “genius at the crossroads” of the various streams of Jewish thought that collided in thirteenth-century Western Europe. Nahmanides drew upon a broad spectrum of learning: talmudic scholarship, *peshat* exegesis, philosophy, and Kabbalah, and from a wide range of sources: the Geonic school, the Andalusian school (especially Ibn Ezra and Maimonides), the Provençal school, Rashi and the Tosafists, and *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. Most important, the great rabbinic master of Girona judiciously integrated all

of these elements from those disparate streams of Jewish learning in creative and profound ways. Oded Yisraeli's important and original book masterfully traces the development of this intellectual and spiritual giant in a most satisfying and illuminating new portrait of the great sage—the man and his writings. This intellectual biography makes unique contributions to our understanding of Nahmanides, and, as such, to medieval Jewish history and thought at large.

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