

Ramban: An Exemplar of Equilibrium

Keren Rosner

Although Ramban has been labeled a mystic due to his Chumash commentary, he is also a very practical thinker as demonstrated by his Iggeret. It is interesting that there is such a stark contrast between his usual esoteric attitude and the Iggeret HaRamban. About the Iggeret, Nahmanides himself stated its practicality applies daily, and recommended that his son read it weekly, at the very least. Ramban had a deep, mystical attitude when approaching the Torah, but perhaps he had a practical mindset and approach to life. Although he had a Kabbalistic style in most writings, he clearly was in touch with the physical, practical world as evidenced by his profession as a physician.

Ramban is labeled a creative theologian by many. His philosophy comprises connecting basic symbols of the mystical tradition with fundamental ideas in Judaism. His system of thought contains many deep, philosophical and theological concepts such as the occurrence of miracles, nature and providence, the will of man and of God, faith, image, and time. He influenced a vast number among a broad spectrum of Kabbalists, and basic concepts “of his theology are also subtly connected to a body of symbolic knowledge and render Nahmanides’ Kabbalah uniquely profound, and resulted in its influencing a broader circle outside of Kabbalah alone” (“NAHMANIDES”).

In his most prolific and well-known work, his interpretation of the Pentateuch, Ramban constantly references Kabbalistic concepts and ideas. In his works on death, judgment, and the

final destiny of man, he bases his approach in the mystical tradition as well. He became well-known as an expert on Kabbalah, and Kabbalists in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries put forth great efforts to uncovering and understanding the depth of Ramban's interpretation of the Pentateuch. He was so prolific in his mystical knowledge that "Nahmanides' kabbalistic writings were studied and relied upon to a far greater degree than the Zohar itself" ("NAHMANIDES").

His conception of time is based on Kabbalistic *sefirot*. He does not explain time on a practical level; rather, his interpretation of time is based on a mystical level alone. He was instrumental in putting Kabbalistic texts to writing via his commentary on the Pentateuch. This was somewhat of a new concept at his time. While others had put mystical tradition in writing, the writings of other scholars was not directly correlated to the text of the Torah, while Ramban's Kabbalistic remarks are in context of the Torah.

While he was iconic in the world of Kabbalah, or mysticism in general, in Deuteronomy 22:1, Ramban states that "the sole purpose of God's mitzvot are to refine and purify mankind." He explains further that the mitzvot expel impurities from the hearts of mankind, just as the crucible separates the impurities from precious metals. God's commandments were not put in place for God himself; rather, they mean to enable mankind to work on its character traits. Each of God's commandments is parallel to a character trait, and an individual who masters God's commandments becomes a true paragon of virtue. This perspective seemingly ignores the kabbalistic reasons for which mankind does mitzvot, and focuses more on the practical, day-to-day application of God's Torah, and that is to use it for betterment of self (Feuer xii).

Ramban's novella "are notable for their wealth of sources and mode of presentation, their clear, lucid style and logical structure...in his desire to arrive at the authentic literal meaning" ("NAHMANIDES"). Ramban was instrumental in creating a new synthesis in the method of study in Spain, comprised of the aforementioned logical structure. Before his time, Talmudic argumentation was studied and argued for its own sake. Nahmanides, however elucidated the Talmud for its practical purposes.

Arguably his most practical piece, the *Iggeret Haramban*, was compiled by Ramban for his son as a guide. Essentially, Ramban was communicating to his son, Nachman, that in order to build, one must first lay a foundation. In this case, the foundation is character traits, and the building is a spiritual structure. This is not a contradiction of Ramban's kabbalistic, esoteric approach to the Torah; rather, Ramban was only able to attain such lofty, spiritual heights by ensuring that his day-to-day functioning *bein adam l'chavero* was up to par. He would have been incapable of accomplishing his spiritual endeavors if not for his stable foundation in betterment of character.

It is here that the bridge between the Ramban's kabbalistic and practical ideology is seen. Through his writing of the *Iggeret*, he was explaining to his son and the rest of Judaism that day-to-day life in this physical existence is just as important, if not more so, than studying concepts of the afterlife and the spiritual realm. He instructs mankind to "speak gently to all people at all times, which will protect you from anger" (Feuer 17). With this seemingly mundane statement, he is teaching each individual that in order to truly succeed spiritually, one must protect himself from anger, which is "a most serious character flaw which causes one to sin" (Feuer 17). These

excerpts are taken from the very beginning of the Iggeret, which teaches the reader the importance of prioritizing the refinement of character as the first step in spiritual growth.

Furthermore, the Ramban continues to tell his son that once he has distanced himself from anger, he will attain humility, which is “the sterling quality and the finest of all admirable traits” (Feuer 17). He goes on to describe the importance of a daily review of one’s actions, also known as a *cheshbon hanefesh*. The fact that Ramban stresses this point to his son shows the reader that Nahmanides himself was heavily focused on daily growth, which was essential to his spiritual progress. Again, his daily analysis of betterment of character was not contradictory to his Kabbalistic plane.

This illustration that Ramban was grounded in the reality of his physical role is underscored by his Igrot Hakodesh. This halachic work, detailing the laws of marriage, holiness, and sexual relations, criticizes “Maimonides for stigmatizing man's sexual nature as a disgrace to man. In the view of the author, the body with all its functions being the work of God, is holy, and so none of its normal sexual impulses and actions can be regarded as objectionable” (“Nahmanides”).

Similarly, in his Torat HaAdam, a halachic work which covers mourning rites, burial customs, and the like, “Nahmanides sharply criticizes writers who strove to render man indifferent to both pleasure and pain” (“Nahmanides”). He goes on to state that doing so is against the Torah, which commands man to rejoice on the day of joy and weep on the day of mourning. This strong opinion on pleasure and pain further proves that Ramban was rooted in the material world.

By definition, halacha deals with the day-to-day, but even here, Ramban interweaves kabbalah. He opines that there is no way to view the laws of death other than from a kabbalistic perspective. In his *Torat HaAdam*, he discusses that besides the animal soul, which is derivative of the Supreme powers and is possessed by all creatures, man possesses a higher soul. This soul existed before the existence of the world, and is a direct emanation of God. He explains the concept of *gilgulim*, that the soul enters the physical world via human life. At the dissolution of this material existence, the soul either returns to its original source or it proceeds to enter the body of another human being. According to the Ramban, this concept is the “basis of the levirate marriage, the child of which inherits not only the name of the brother of his fleshly father, but also his soul, and thus continues its existence on the earth. The resurrection spoken of by the prophets, which will take place after the coming of the Messiah, is referred by Nahmanides to the body. The physical body may, through the influence of the soul, transform itself into so pure an essence that it will become eternal” (“Nahmanides”). The concept of bridging the material and the spiritual is exhibited yet again in Ramban’s *Torat HaAdam*.

Ramban’s legacy is one of balance. His interpretation of the Pentateuch is intermingled with mystical interpretations, but built upon careful study of the text. His halachic works are monumental and practical, but they simultaneously focus on the deeper significance of the laws at hand. Finally, in his letter for the ages, which includes promises of success and well-being if followed, is the paradigm of the Ramban’s life philosophy. Its discussion of character betterment, along with practical guidance on working on oneself, shows that Nahmanides prioritized middot before jumping to spiritual heights.

Works Cited

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