DON ISAAC ABRAVANEL

Lecture I

INTRODUCTION

BY PAUL GOODMAN
INTRODUCTION

DON ISAAC ABRAVANEL lived at a time which proved decisive in the development of European civilization, and he was not only the last of the galaxy of great Jews on the soil of Sepharad (Spain), but he participated actively in the events of his age. As a youth of eighteen, he heard of the capture of Constantinople by the Turks, resulting in the flight of the scholars of Byzantium, who, by their dispersal far and wide, brought about the period of the Renaissance. The discovery of printing gave the impetus to a cultural upheaval of incomparable consequence. The quest for the sea route to India by the venturers of Spain and Portugal and the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in the fateful year 1492 brought into being a new world which was to redress the balance of the old. Unlimited economic and social potentialities, as far-reaching as the technical developments of to-day, then presented themselves for the weal and woe of mankind.

The epoch in which Isaac Abravanel lived was also one of the most tragic in the chequered annals of the Jewish people. More than in any other part of their Dispersion, the Jews on the Iberian peninsula have acquired immortal renown both by their achievements and by their martyrdom. Moorish-Jewish co-operation built a bridge over the Middle Ages between the ancient world and the new. The Jews and crypto-Jews shared in the discoveries and in the economic development or exploitation of the infinitely vast acquisitions by Spain and Portugal. To these Jews, known as Sephardim, the names of the cities of Toledo and Cordova, Granada and Seville, acquired a significance, proud and sad beyond compare. There stands Lisbon, built upon towering hills with the view of a bay rare in its beauty, which has immeasurable Semitic associations with the Jews and their Phoenician cousins and fellow-traders. Even to-day, the

1 This Address was delivered originally in German at a Commemoration of Don Isaac Abravanel at the Great Hall of the University of Tartu (Dorpat), Esthonia, on 17 April 1937 (see Preface, p. viii).
attention of the visitor is still attracted by the Semitic physiognomy of many of the inhabitants, particularly by the graceful figures of the Ovarinas, the female fish vendors of Carthaginian origin, that are to be seen in their archaic attire in the steep and narrow lanes of the poorer quarters of Lisbon.

It was in this capital city of Portugal that five hundred years ago there was born a scion of the Jewish race who may be designated as the last of the great Jews of the Middle Ages. Don Isaac Abravanel, statesman and financier, philosopher and Bible commentator, a Jew true to his ancestral faith and devoted to the last to his people—thus has he remained a unique figure in history. He represents the Sephardi Jew at his best; in him was incorporated in an exceptional measure תורה ורגלהו נמקו אהוב, the union of Torah and social distinction.

Don Isaac Abravanel claimed descent from the royal house of David. According to the family tradition, his forbears came to Spain after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem and settled in Seville. It is on record that an Abravanel was in Seville in the year 1310. Don Jhuda Abravanel, as he was called, was almoxarife, a Royal Treasurer, and exercised such influence at Court that Don Isaac applied to him and his descendants the biblical verse (Gen. xlix, 10): “The Sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet.” Don Isaac appears to have been fully convinced of his Davidic origin, for in his commentaries on books of the Scriptures he thus describes himself:

אוני הנבר צוחק_FINAL1 בְא֣יָשׁ יַרְדֵּ֔נְבּ הִשְׁאֲרֵל֙ נִוּלַ֔ שְׁמַי
אֵ֣וֹרָהּ בַּ֔מֶּשֶׁאֽו בְּיֹרָהּ...מָכֵ֖נָא בָּלָא אַגָּשְׁר
רַאֲשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל מַשְׁורֵץ֙ שֵׁי בִּתְּ הִלְדֵ֔ה מַמְפָּשָֽה בִּת
רוֹדַ֖נֶּה פַּזְנוֹת֙ לַאֲוָאִי נִזְיָ֔ל.

(“I, Isaac, son of . . . Judah, son of Samuel, son of Judah . . . of the stock of Jesse the Bethlehemite . . .”)
PAUL GOODMAN

In any case, there is no doubt that his patrician forbears had rendered valuable services to the State and to their people. His grandfather, Don Samuel, was a financier of importance under Henry II of Trastamara (1369–79), but, having been forced after the death of the King to adopt Christianity under the name of Juan Sanches de Sevilla, he settled in Lisbon in order to be able to return openly to his ancestral religion. His son Judah, the father of Don Isaac, acquired a considerable influence at the Portuguese Court, especially as treasurer of the Infante Dom Fernando, the brother of King Duarte of Portugal.

Isaac Abravanel enjoyed a careful education, which was not confined to traditional Jewish studies but extended to classical literature and the general culture of his time. In addition to a remarkably thorough knowledge of the Bible he possessed an extensive acquaintance with the works of Jewish and Christian exegetes, with Talmudical literature and the writings of medieval poets and philosophers. Besides the many quotations from Latincommentaries of Christian theologians which appear in his works, there is ascribed to him the translation of Thomas Aquinas’ treatise *Quaestio de spiritualibus creaturis* (the manuscript of which was in the possession of Moses Almosnino in the sixteenth century). He was acquainted with Arabic and possibly also with Greek. His daily language was Portuguese, which he used, not only on account of his environment or habit, but by reason of the profound attachment to that tongue which Jews of Portuguese origin have manifested for centuries after their exile—just as so many groups of Spanish Jews have retained the language of Castile to this day. Later he acquired a literary knowledge of Spanish and Italian. Although at first he was not able to handle Hebrew with great fluency, he later on used it in his literary work by preference with exceptional skill and elegance.

He was a man of the world and had acquired a range of knowledge unusual in its width, and, by journeys he had undertaken abroad for business purposes, was acquainted with the customs and political conditions prevailing in foreign lands.
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Don Isaac Abravanel was destined to occupy a high position in the service of his native country and to enjoy there a high social status, for members of his family had for generations been entrusted by kings and noblemen with the conduct of their finances and had stood in close relationship to them. His own personal inclinations and talents paved the way to a leading role in the financial affairs of the Portuguese State. He thus occupied an influential position as treasurer at the Court of King Alfonso V (1438–81), and was on particularly confidential terms with Fernando, Duke of Braganza, one of the most powerful nobles in the kingdom. Alfonso, who, until his death, remained well disposed to Don Isaac, granted him an estate at Queluz. He was exempted from the obligation, imposed on other Jews, of wearing the badge, and was given the right, then denied to them, of riding on a mule.

Don Isaac, in the introduction to his commentary on the book of Joshua, thus describes the position he had enjoyed:

Happy was I in the palace of Don Alfonso, the powerful king, whose dominion extended over two seas, the king who sat on the throne of justice, who exercised mercy and ruled with righteousness in the land. He had eaten of the tree of knowledge and possessed grace and understanding. . . . While his riches grew, God remembered his people. Relief and deliverance arose to the Jews. Under his shadow I loved to dwell. I stood near to him and he leant on my hand. And so long as he lived on earth I walked in the royal palace.

It was through the relations of King Alfonso with the Signoria of Florence and the Medici that Abravanel was, presumably, able to get into communication with Italian authorities, and his correspondence with the Florentine banker and Maecenas, Jehiel of Pisa, was strengthened by the visit to the latter of the physician João Sezira, a friend of Abravanel, who, on a mission from King Alfonso to Rome, also carried with him a petition by Abravanel to Pope Sixtus IV, on matters affecting the Jews.

Isaac Abravanel was a leader of the Jewish Community of Lisbon, and one of the interesting features of his activities,
described in a communication by him to Jehiel of Pisa, was the manumission of 250 Jewish captives who fell into the hands of the Portuguese, on the conquest of Arzila, in Morocco. The efforts which he devoted to this purpose is a magnificent example of the Mitzvah of Pidyon Shebuim (duty of redemption of captives) as it was carried out by Jews at that time.

Abravanel was the possessor of a great fortune, which he had partly inherited from his ancestors but which he owed largely to his own enterprise. The extent of his wealth was particularly manifested by the fact that he contributed a tenth part of the indemnity imposed on Portugal after the unfortunate issue of the war with Castile. But these circumstances came to a sudden end with the death of King Alfonso in the year 1481. John II, who changed entirely the policy pursued by his father, accused Abravanel of a conspiracy against the King with Duke Fernando of Braganza, who was executed in 1483, and, although Abravanel protested his innocence, he could save himself only by flight to neighbouring Castile. But all his possessions were confiscated, and he, together with his son-in-law Joseph Abravanel, were subsequently condemned to death in contumacia.

Thus, in his forty-eighth year, Don Isaac Abravanel had to begin his life anew. By the part he played in Portuguese finances, he established influential contact with the rulers of Spain, who came to value and utilize his great experience in financial affairs. It is only thus that it is possible to explain his remarkable change from the position of an exile deprived of his fortune to that of a trusted adviser of the Catholic Ferdinand and Isabella. In 1484 King Ferdinand entrusted him with the financial administration of the country, and retained Abravanel’s services until the hapless year 1492. In this position, Abravanel was, during the course of eight years, called upon to provide the financial resources for the pursuit of the war against Granada, the last Moorish stronghold on Spanish soil. Jointly with the Court Rabbi and chief tax-farmer Abraham Senior, he supplied the army with provisions, and rendered particularly valuable services to the
country by applying not only his own wealth for that purpose but by inducing other Jews to follow his example.

Of exceptional historic interest is the meeting of Abravanel with Christopher Columbus at Malaga in August 1487. According to M. Kayserling, it may be assumed that they had already met in Lisbon, where Columbus had had dealings with a number of Jews, and that Abravanel was the first to afford financial support to Columbus’ undertaking. But the part which Isaac Abravanel played in the Pyrenean peninsula came to a tragic end in 1492 on the expulsion of the Jews by Ferdinand and Isabella from Spanish soil.

This event has remained unique in its immeasurable cruelty, as it does in the martyrdom of the exiles. We stand amazed and deeply moved before this noble and unexampled confession of faith. Proud in their bearing and steadfast in their faith, these Spanish Jews departed from the land which they had enriched and made renowned by their spirit and their energies. On the fast-day of the Ninth of Ab—commemorating the twofold destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem—these Spanish Jews left their native country for ever. In the words of Isaac Abravanel:

Their King went before them, their fear of God and their love for Him. They did not blaspheme, nor did they desecrate His Covenant; they left in the anguish and shame of their widowhood. And they moved from people to people, hither and thither, fugitives and wanderers, until they disappeared from the face of the earth.

We, here, who are now living four and a half centuries after this terror, know the verdict of history, the judgement which it has passed on the persecutors and the persecuted.

Not all the Jews departed. There remained behind the eighty-years-old Abraham Senior, who was closely connected with Isaac Abravanel in their financial transactions; and as this venerable Rabbi and courtier stood at the baptismal font, there were at his side the King and Queen as his sponsors.

Isaac Abravanel went into exile. On three occasions he implored the rulers of the country to withdraw the dread edict. He offered 30,000 gold ducats. And as he had almost
succeeded in his efforts, the Grand Inquisitor Thomas Torquemada, the father confessor of the Queen, is said to have appeared before the royal couple, crucifix in hand, with the dramatic appeal: “Behold Him, whom Judas sold for thirty pieces of silver, and whom ye would sell now for 30,000!”

The order of expulsion became irrevocable. Yet for decades, nay for centuries, Jewish neo-Christians remained in the country of their birth, and the Spanish sky was reddened by the fires of the stakes whereby in autos-da-fé the spiritual nostalgia of men and women of Jewish blood was to be ex-terminated.

Isaac Abravanel was fifty-four years old when he left Spain for Italy with his three sons, Judah, Joseph and Samuel. The Spanish Government considered it opportune to retain relations with this very important Jewish family for the future. The authorities took over a substantial part of the Abravanel properties and mitigated the rigours which were generally applied to the Jewish exiles. At first, Abravanel stayed in Naples; he then had to escape to Sicily and afterwards fled to Corfu. He remained for some time at Monopoli, on the coast of Apulia; and then went to Venice, where he died in his seventy-first year, on 25 November 1508. His mortal remains were interred in Padua; but this city was sacked a year afterwards, and the grave of one of the noblest sons of the Jewish people has remained unknown to this day.

Isaac Abravanel’s eldest son, Judah, was born about 1460. Judah, who settled with his father in Italy and, under the name of Leone Ebreo, became renowned by his Dialoghi di Amore, was a physician by profession. He practised medicine before his departure from Lisbon in 1483, and acquired distinction on his settlement in Castile. Among the children of the exiles from Spain who found refuge in Portugal was Judah’s little son—named Isaac after his grandfather—a child one year old. King Ferdinand, who had a high regard for Judah Abravanel’s medical skill, endeavoured to persuade him to accept the Christian faith, and, on failing in this

1 This scene forms the subject of a famous picture by S. Hart, R.A.
attempt, secretly directed the boy to be baptized. This, however, came to the knowledge of the father, who sent the child in charge of a nurse to relations in Portugal so that his son might eventually join him in Italy. The measures which King John II of Portugal took to subject Jewish children forcibly to baptism affected also the young Isaac Abravanel, and, as was the fate of innumerable other Jewish children at that time, this scion of the Abravanel family disappeared in the cataclysm which then engulfed the exiles of Sepharad.

The vicissitudes of Don Isaac Abravanel at the Courts of the Christian Kings in Portugal, Spain and Italy represent a very remarkable phenomenon: intensely Jewish though he was, he moved, conscious of his noble Jewish lineage, freely and with an apparently self-assured dignity in an atmosphere that was so impregnated with the mystical glamour and impelled by the temporal might of the Universal Church that it could not tolerate any other religious manifestation. There was, indeed, a Juderia, but without the cramping effect of the ghetto or Judengasse of Central and Eastern Europe. The Sephardi Jews were not aliens, living apart from the autochthonous people of the land, but were by their language, mentality and mode of life an almost indistinguishable part of the general landscape. Their mental equipment fitted in well with their intellectual environment. In Poland, the Jews also felt at home, not only religiously but intellectually, yet there was an insurmountable barrier between them and their Catholic neighbours. Quite otherwise was the relationship between Jew and Christian on the Iberian peninsula when fanaticism was not stirred to frenzy. For instance, in the case of Solomon ibn Gabirol, there was not the slightest trace of Jewish authorship in his philosophical work Mekor Haim (Fons Vitae1). In striking contrast to the cramped intellectual horizon of the

1 “And so, for centuries Gabirol marched through the philosophic schools of medieval Europe, some taking him for a Christian and some for a Mohammedan, none suspecting that he was a Jew. It was on November 12, 1846, that the learned world was startled by the announcement of Solomon Munk, in the Literaturblatt des Orients, that the well-known scholastic Avicenna was identical with the still better known Solomon ibn Gabirol.” (I. Davidson, Selected Religious Poems of Solomon ibn Gabirol, Philadelphia, 1923, p. xxxii.)