ISAAC ABRAVANEL
ISAAC ABRAVANEL

Six Lectures

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PREFACE

The quingentenary of the birth of Isaac Abravanel has attracted much attention in academic institutions, both in Europe and in America, especially in the South American States of Iberian origin. It is impossible to enumerate the functions that have been arranged. Abravanel was a man of many parts. His life work is of interest to historians, to biblical exegetes, to students of political theory and, naturally, also to students of Rabbinics and to the Jewish communities. Hence it follows that the anniversary of his birth has been the occasion of numerous celebrations. Since the month in which he was born is not known, the functions have been held on no uniform date, and to collect a list of them would be a matter of considerable difficulty. It must suffice to enumerate only a few of them.

The impetus to the celebrations may be said to have originated with Dr Alfred Klee, who organized a highly successful Abravanel Exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. No doubt there are other claimants to the honour of priority, since, as the works of Abravanel enjoy so much popularity, the idea must have occurred to more than one student of his works. Dr Klee’s Catalogue, which contains, among the etchings, a contemporary picture of Lisbon and reproductions of some of the first editions of Abravanel’s works, is both historically and artistically valuable and has already become a rare pamphlet. The editors wish to express their thanks to him for the loan of the blocks reproduced in this volume.

In London, the Anglo-Jewish community held a special commemorative service in the ancient Synagogue of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation at Bevis Marks; the sermon, delivered by the Senior Minister, the Rev. David Bueno de Mesquita, B.A., has been published. The Jewish Historical Society of England organized a series of lectures which will be printed in the Transactions of the Society.
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PREFACE

At Tartu (Dorpat), a celebration, in connection with the Chair of Judaica, occupied by Prof. L. Gulkowitsch, was held in the Aula of the University, in the presence of the Rector and University officials, when a lecture was delivered by Mr P. Goodman, F.R.Hist.Soc., the Secretary of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation, Kahal Kados Sahar Asamaim: we are indeed glad that Mr Goodman has been able to contribute to this volume. His knowledge of Iberian-Jewish history, his numerous writings on the subject and, above all, his practical work for the revival of Judaism among the Marranos, whom he has helped to return to their ancestral faith, entitle him to the first place in our series of lectures. It is mainly through his efforts that the quingentenary will be marked in Oporto by the opening, in December, of a Synagogue for the Marranos. This building has now been completed by the munificence of Sir Elly Kadoorie of Shanghai.

The Cambridge Hebrew Congregation had arranged a commemoration service for 14 November, when Dr Gaster, the learned Haham Emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation, was to have preached. Unfortunately, ill-health prevented his visit. His lecture on Abravanel’s works was delivered by his son, Mr T. H. Gaster. An Abravanel service was held on the following Saturday (21 November) and the sermon preached by Rabbi Dr Rabinowitz.

It has been our privilege to welcome Prof. Llubera of Belfast, who has made a profound study of the Hebrew elements in Spanish literature, as is evidenced by his edition of Shemtob’s Maxims and the Coplas de Yocef. He gives an outline of the Iberian background against which the life and work of Abravanel must be viewed.

Dr Rabinowitz has given a careful analysis of Abravanel’s exegetical method. His Bible Commentaries attracted probably more Christian translators than did those of any other Jewish scholar. Amongst other causes of this must be reckoned Abravanel’s deep knowledge of Christianity. His bent for eschatology suited his age. English readers will be specially attracted by Abravanel’s remarks about the British Isles and their history which Dr Rabinowitz has collected.
Abravanel's views on monarchy and democracy, his agreements with, and his differences from Maimonides in this regard are described by Dr Strauss. The subject will prove of interest to historians and to students of political theory. Dr Strauss examines the relation of Abravanel and his predecessors to Plato and Aristotle.

Finally, Mr Milburn deals with Leone Ebreo, Abravanel's son, and his influence on the Renaissance. This influence was widespread and is severed from its Jewish origin. It has, indeed, been suggested, though on insufficient grounds, that Leone became a Christian. The fact that his Dialogues are in the Italian language—though this may not have been their original—made them accessible to a wide circle.

The connection of Abravanel through his son with Renaissance platonism leads on to Spinoza, and so to modern thought. In another direction Abravanel is important to students of Spanish. The great contribution of Spain to European thought is now recognized to have been made in the Middle Ages; and the medieval Spanish thinkers (who were mainly Muslims, or inspired by Muslims) would have had little chance of becoming known in the rest of Europe, if it had not been for the help or translation (as well as the important original contributions) of learned Spanish Jews.

On p. 16 Mr Goodman refers to the expression of thanks recorded by the Senate of Venice and the Council of Ten to Abravanel in connection with his services in concluding the treaty with Portugal. The document was discovered by the late David Kaufmann in the State Archives of Venice and was published by him in the Revue des Études Juives, vol. xxxviii (1899), pp. 145–8. We have thought it desirable to reproduce the text in full in its original form:

MDIII die xii augusti cum additione

Quod domino Isaach Abrah[m][u]anel hebreo, qui nuper huc venit ex portugallia fecitque eam propositionem in materia spetierum cholocth quae nunc lecta fuit huic consilio, responderi debeat per capita in hanc sententiam.

Che nuy lo habiamo veduto et aldito voluntieri, si per le bone qualità et virtù de la persona sua, si etiam per la materia proposta,
et per la bona mente el dimostra haver, al beneficio et commodo
de la Signoria nostra de la qual el sij cum parolle grave et accom-
modate rengratii. Siai deinde facta mention de la antiquissima
amicitia et benivolencia, che naturaliter è sempre stata fra quel
Sermini. Re et la Sigilia nostra et tuta la nation portugaltese et
Venetiana come è noto a tutto il mondo. Poi se subzonzi, che nuy
habiamo intesa la oblatione el fa de remandar el suo nepote in
portogallo, per portarne una resolucion in questa facenda; et che
quando el sara ritornato, nuy aldiremo tuto quello el ne proponerà
et ben consyderato et ponderato el tuto, non se partiremo da
quelli termini che ne parerano rasonevoli et convenienti. In Caso
veramente che la cosa habi luogo, et sortisca effecto, el puol
esser certo, che non li è, per manchar la solita gratitudine del stato
nostro.

We have made no attempt to reconcile divergent statements
of the several lecturers. Such questions as the spelling of the
name as Abravanel or Abarbanel are still unsettled. We have
followed Baer and Graetz; Dr Gaster, for sound reasons,
prefers the latter form. Nor have we eliminated a few repeti-
tions, for these have made each lecture self-contained and
have obviated cross-references.

In order to fit this course into the confines of a term the
number of weekly lectures had to be limited. The choice of
subjects was therefore somewhat restricted. It was, in con-
sequence, impossible to include a consideration of the age of
Abravanel and his relation to that age. One of us has added
a few remarks on this subject to serve as a general introduction.

It remains for us to express our thanks, and the thanks of
our collaborators. First, to those who have made the publica-
tion of this volume possible: to the Syndics of the University
Press; to the Gentlemen of the Mahamad of the Spanish and
Portuguese Jews’ Congregation of London; to the Com-
mitee of Heshaim; to the Committee of the Endowment of
Sir Moses Montefiore, Bart.; and to the Society of Jews and
Christians. Secondly, to Mr D. H. Aaron, who has very kindly
read the proofs of this book and offered many suggestions of
great value.

J. B. TREND
H. LOEWE

6 December 1937
ISAAC ABRAVANEL AND HIS AGE

Abravanel’s name suggests the meeting point of two epochs, both in Jewish and in general history. During his lifetime we can speak of medievalism fading into modernity. In many respects we stand almost upon the threshold of our own days. There are several tests by which a period may be estimated culturally. Perhaps the simplest is to ask ourselves how we personally should fit into it, and by this means we can judge how much or how little variation has taken place during the intervening years. Thus, most of us would feel more at home during the reign of Queen Anne than under Queen Elizabeth. We prefer the comfort of Wren’s houses to the grander architecture of the Tudors: the furniture, costumes, literature and art appeal to us more. Most of all, we would sooner live in an age when we breakfasted off a dish of tea and toast than in an age that started the day with small beer or sack and a haunch of venison.

Now in the age of Abravanel our ancestors had not quite achieved the teapot. But they were well on the way to it, they almost had coffee. It was a fellow-citizen and a contemporary of Isaac, Vasco da Gama, who inaugurated the sea-route to India, and the impetus thus given to oriental commerce made many Eastern rarities familiar to Western households. Coffee\(^1\) was not long in penetrating into Europe. Joseph Caro, who was born in Abravanel’s middle age, possibly mentions coffee in the Shulhan ‘Arukh. Still, it was not till a century and a half after the death of Abravanel that the berry was first introduced into England by a Jew called Jacob, who, in 1650, opened the first British café in Oxford and thus enriched that city’s menu with something besides marmalade.

Therefore when one says that Abravanel lived just on the threshold of modern days, the statement needs precisely that qualification which has been given as an example. Abravanel

\(^1\) Coffee from Arabia and Abyssinia came mainly via the Mediterranean but the Eastern trade was, in general, stimulated by the new route.
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lived in the days of da Gama the Admiral, not of Jacob the restaurateur. But without the Admiral, the restaurateur would have been impossible. Abravanel never had the pleasure of a good cup of coffee, but in his days people were beginning to long for it. A century and a half before Abravanel represents a much greater cultural remoteness than a century and a half after him. He lived in a time of striving and endeavour, in a time pregnant with far-reaching changes, changes which have directly influenced our own lives, and so with the advent of Abravanel’s period we can say that the curtain has been rung down and a new scene is set on the stage.

Let us briefly examine this transformation. Abravanel was born in Lisbon in 1437: he died at Venice in 1508. His life therefore covers an immensely important period in the progress of humanism. Several elements of signal interest contributed to his environment.

First and foremost was the Renaissance. It is usual to date the revival of classical culture from the visit to Italy of Emanuel Chrysoloras in 1396. Emanuel lectured in Florence on Greek literature. Under his stimulus, the desire to read Greek masterpieces arose in Italy and gained strength. The most distinguished men of the day flocked to hear Emanuel, and they carried the seeds of his teaching far and wide. All eyes were turned to Constantinople, whence Emanuel came and whence successors to Emanuel carried on his work. In this revival four periods are usually recognized, and it is worth while to note them. The first was contemporary with the earlier life of Cosimo de’ Medici, before he attained power, 1389–1433. During this time the Byzantine scholars were the chief humanists. The second period began in 1433 and lasted until Cosimo’s death in 1464. During this period Abravanel was born. The new culture was beginning to spread and was reaching Portugal, faintly perhaps, but surely. Camoens was not born till a dozen years after Abravanel’s death. But cultural influences were creeping in. That is to say, although general life in Portugal was scarcely, if at all, affected, yet the intellectuals, to which circle the Abravanel family certainly belonged, were brought under the sway of the Renaissance,
and young Isaac grew up in a household where the new learning was discussed. This is clear from his earliest writings, written before the age of 20. These show an acquaintance with contemporary thought that would be hardly explicable if the Abravanel family had lived in literary isolation. What the Renaissance meant for the education of a young man may be gauged from the well-known remark of J. A. Symonds: “English youths who spend their time at Eton between athletic sports and Latin verses and who take an ‘Ireland’ with a first class in Greats at Oxford, are pursuing the same course of physical and mental discipline as the princes of Gonzaga or Montefeltro in the fifteenth century.” Some of these influences must have made themselves felt in the education of Abravanel.

During this second period, an event occurred which reverberated throughout Europe. In 1453, when Isaac was 16, Constantinople fell. The effect of this event on the Renaissance has been variously estimated. But, however low be the estimate, it is safe to say that 1453 must have made a deep impression on young Abravanel and his contemporaries. The Turk was now firmly established in the citadel of the Eastern Empire. Christian dominance suffered a blow in the East which counteracted the triumph in the West, where, nearer to Abravanel’s home, the Moors were gradually being expelled from the Iberian peninsula. Thus Abravanel, who saw Christian power ever growing and Islam waning nearer home, was made conscious that the balance was redressed in other quarters, and so, in his youth, he learnt to assess the forces of Islam and Christianity, lessons which were to stand him in good stead, when, later in life, he embraced politics. He never served a Moslem ruler; his political career was spent under four Christian kings. But he never under-valued the force of Islam. The conquest of Constantinople is usually said, though the statement is often contested, to have furthered the revival of learning by releasing the pent-up store of scholarship and by dispersing it over Europe. Exiled scholars fled as refugees to the West, teaching in their new homes and bringing with them precious Greek manuscripts which had
escaped the sack of the city. Just so had the overthrow of Bagdad, the Abbasid capital of Islam, led to a revival of Moslem culture two centuries earlier, and just so had the destruction of Jerusalem spread a knowledge of humanism over a wider surface of the globe. The scourge of God does not smite blindly: there is a purpose in the blow. And thus, when Isaac Abravanel was a youth in his most impressionable age, the fall of Constantinople, and the consequences which came from that fall, must have stirred his imagination even as the Great War in our days influenced the brains of those who were old enough to reflect on it but too young to take part in it. In this second period of the Renaissance, while Abravanel was between the ages of 4 and 27, there flourished Fra Lippo Lippi, Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci.

The third period of the Renaissance, which synchronized with the opening and ending of the public life of Lorenzo de’ Medici (1470–92), coincided with one of the most active portions of Abravanel’s life. This was perhaps the most glorious period of the Renaissance. Education was revolutionized and the foundations of accurate scholarship were laid.

The last period of the Renaissance (1492–1527) reaches 19 years beyond the life of Abravanel and ends with the sack of Rome during the pontificate of the Medicean Pope Clement VII. Henceforth Rome supplanted Florence. It was the age of Michael Angelo, Andrea del Sarto and Raphael. The Renaissance spent itself in different ways in different lands. In Holland and Italy it found expression chiefly in art, in England in literature and in Spain and Portugal in exploration, literature and colonization. The Renaissance, then, was the first important element that must be taken into account in visualizing the environment in which Abravanel lived.

The second element is the invention of printing. In the year after the fall of Constantinople, that is to say in 1454, when Abravanel was 17 years old, the earliest dated documents printed from movable type appeared in Mainz, from the founts of Fust and Gutenberg. A stroll through the galleries of the King’s Library in the British Museum brings home with
remarkable clarity the relative progress made by the new art in the various countries of Europe, for the visitor will there see a series of show-cases in which specimens of *incunabula* are grouped geographically. The case devoted to Portugal reveals the significant fact that the first press in that country was established by Jews and that in 1495, when Portugal contained five presses, three were Jewish and produced Hebrew books. It was at Faro, in 1487, that the first Hebrew book in Portugal was printed. At that time Abravanel had been for four years an exile from his native land. He was already fifty years old but his youth had passed during the infancy of typography. If we think of the inventions of our own day of motors and submarines and wireless and X-rays, we shall have a faint, but only a faint, vision of the age of Abravanel, for how can these things, wonderful as they indeed are, compare in importance to mankind with the wonder of the printing press? Now, for the first time, literature was placed in the grasp of the many. Books were multiplied, learning was facilitated. Mankind was stirring from the torpor of the dark ages and at this juncture Abravanel lived. To us the spate of books which floods our shelves is a commonplace that arouses no thrill but we can picture to ourselves the excitement that must have sped far and wide when rumours circulated that, at long last, this or that masterpiece of antiquity, this or that much coveted poem or history or commentary was brought within reach of the eager reader. To this delight Isaac could look forward and his father must no doubt frequently have pointed out to him the immense contrast between the days of old and the present. And so, in considering Isaac’s environment, we must take into account that he lived in a time when the private library was a possibility within the powers of the middle classes, not the cherished monopoly of the wealthy nobility.

The third factor of importance in the environment of Abravanel is largely the outcome of the two former. The Renaissance and the printing press created thought and thought demanded intellectual freedom, liberty to think as reason demanded and liberty to worship as conscience required. The result of these tendencies was the Reformation.
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Now the actual Reformation belongs to a later period. It was in 1517, nine years after Abravanel was buried, that Martin Luther startled the world by publishing his famous theses in which he attacked the sale of indulgences. But during the lifetime of Abravanel the pot was seething though it was not till after his death that it boiled over. Two hundred years had elapsed since the Albigenses had vainly attempted to challenge the supremacy of the Church. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the renewed demand for internal reform was successfully resisted. The Lollards were suppressed in England, John Huss, the Bohemian disciple of Wycliffe, was put to death at Constance in 1415, 22 years before the birth of Abravanel, and the Hussites, after many victories, were defeated. In Basle the Reforming party were unable to carry through the proposed changes in the organization of the Church. But postponement and hesitation hampered the efforts of the Papacy. Discontent became the more powerful the more it was checked and disappointment and delay gave time for the development of new forces in which religious malcontents were to find powerful allies. The Renaissance destroyed the clerical monopoly of learning and education and brought with it a questioning and a critical spirit which could not be excluded from the domain of religion. Above all, the growing force of national consciousness inspired a spirit of revolt against the domination and the pecuniary exactions of an alien spiritual authority. It is often said that at the beginning of the fifteenth century, it might have been possible to reform the worst abuses of the Church and yet retain its unity and cohesion. By the beginning of the sixteenth century this was no longer possible. During this period of ferment, when men were speaking and thinking and writing and acting so much and so vehemently on the subject of religion, Abravanel lived and died. Moreover he lived in a stronghold of Catholicism and this had an important influence on his pen. Had his life been spent in closer contact with the Reformers, had his days been spared the horrors of the Inquisition, which was reorganized in Spain in 1478, Abravanel’s views of Christianity might have been very different, wide though
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they were. What this difference would have been we can
gauge by comparing Abravanel’s views with those of his
younger contemporary, Elijah Levita, who was born in 1468
and who lived on terms of intimacy and friendship with
Protestant as well as Catholic divines, with Paulus Fagius as
well as Cardinal Egidio of Viterbo. But Abravanel’s years
coincided with the years of preparation for freedom and he
died in the blackest period of darkness, just before the dawn.

The fourth element that claims consideration is geo-
graphical. We have mentioned the developments of the
intellect that belong to the age of Abravanel, there remains
the development of the material side, territorial expansion.
This is particularly important in the case of Abravanel be-
cause he was a Portuguese and in the Iberian peninsula,
where Catholicism was so firmly entrenched, the spirit of the
Renaissance found its outlet in maritime adventure. Spain
and Portugal sent out pioneers whose heroism enlarged the
bounds of the habitable globe and it was during the lifetime
of Abravanel that this stupendous advance was made. In
1492 Christopher Columbus, who was but two years older
than Abravanel, set sail on his momentous voyage that re-
sulted in the discovery of America. In 1498, Vasco da Gama,
from Portugal, who was 32 years younger than his fellow-
citizen Abravanel, reached India by the sea-route. As will be
seen, Abravanel was at one time occupied in the political
consequences of the latter discovery. It needs but little
imagination to picture the effect which the work of da Gama
and Columbus must have exercised on their contemporaries.
This one factor alone would suffice to draw this period into
close relation with our own. When we sum up the foregoing
and reflect that Abravanel lived in a time of printed books, of
intellectual and religious emancipation, of a world enlarged
by the inclusion of America and India, we must acknowledge
that we are in all truth standing on the threshold of our own
days and that Abravanel is almost to be considered as a child
of our own age.

So much for the general environment in which Abravanel
is to be placed. Now what of the Jewish surroundings? Abra-
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Abravanel comes between Maimonides and the Shulḥan ‘Arukh, of which the author, Joseph Caro, was born in 1488, when Abravanel was at the height of his fame. Let us take the four factors that we considered in the creation of the general environment and apply them to the Judaism in which Abravanel is to be set. By the end of the Middle Ages the Jews had been politically and socially degraded in many lands, not, however, in Spain and Portugal. But though the Jews were crushed externally, the Ghetto was, to a large extent, free from the tyranny internally. That is to say, within the Ghetto there was light. True, the period was not one of great literary brilliance. Scientific labours were laid aside, the shadow of Montpellier, where Jewish obscurantists had banned the learning of Maimonides and declared his spirit to be incompatible with Judaism, still hung over Jewry. But contrasted with the larger world without, Jewry was intellectually advanced. It was an age of Pilpul (scholastic dialectics) rather than an age of philosophy and poetry but this generalization is very hazardous and corrective details, for which there is no space here, would somewhat modify the picture. But just because Judaism was not so backward as the environment, the reaction was slower. The effect of the Renaissance was more gradual, just for the very reason that there was not so much lost ground to be made up. Printing was welcomed by the Jews. They termed it Melékhet hak-Kōdesh, the holy work. Books were being printed in amazing numbers, not only in Hebrew but in Judaeo-German and in other dialects. Not long after Caxton began to popularize romances, Jewish presses were turning out cheap books for the use of the people, love poems, secular stories, fables and histories, as well as books of piety, Holy Scriptures and liturgies. The share of the Jews in exploration has often been told. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries Jewish travellers abounded. In 1501 a Seville Jewess was in India, making the grand tour in the platonick company of two Christian gentlemen. When Vasco da Gama reached India, a Jew from Posen was there to meet him and tried to capture his fleet single-handed. The news of the route to India was brought to Portugal by two
Jews in the service of the Portuguese king, Abraham of Beja and Joseph of Lamégo. One of them was a cobbler and it is fascinating to reflect that the first reports of the wealth of the Indies were brought to their future owners by a poor Jewish shoemaker. Similarly Columbus was indebted to Abraham Zacuto for the maps and instruments of navigation that rendered his voyage possible. All these events occurred in the lifetime of Abravanel. From this meagre outline it is possible to realise that he lived in an age of vigour and effort and that in this Drang nach Osten the Jews took a fair share, far more than the restrictions on their movement would, one might imagine, have permitted.

In Portugal the earlier kings had protected the Jews but had compelled them to live in juderias, or Jewish quarters. Ever since 1223, the Jewish courts enjoyed autonomy in civil and criminal jurisdiction: the Chief Rabbi was appointed by the king and was entitled to use the royal arms on his seal. In 1443 Alphonso V ascended the throne. This monarch, who reigned till 1481 and was one of the best that ever reigned in the land, was noted for his gentle character. Among his noteworthy acts was his offering an asylum to the exiles from Constantinople. Alphonsu permitted his Jewish subjects to live outside the juderias and relieved them from the obligation of wearing a distinctive costume, an ordinance enforced since 1325. During his reign, says the Shevet Yehudah of Solomon ibn Virga, the Jews enjoyed freedom and prospered. It was their last tranquil period in the peninsula. Alphonso promoted Jews to public offices and admitted them to his friendship. In culture the Jews far surpassed the Christians of Portugal. The Jews were well versed in the philosophy of Aristotle and in scholastic studies; in Astronomy, Science and Medicine they occupied a very high rank. They furnished several royal physicians. They were pioneers and intelligencers. In commerce they were especially prominent, indeed the expulsion of the Jews ruined Portuguese trade. They prospered in business, in spite of the fact that Jews paid special taxes on practically every transaction, besides a special poll tax of 30 dinhetros in memory of the 30 pieces of silver paid to Judas
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Iscariot. For this reason, they were naturally favoured by the crown. For centuries they lived on good terms with the commons and the subsequent prejudice that was stirred up against them was due partly, no doubt, to injudicious ostentation on the Jewish side but far more to the deliberate action of the Clergy and the nobles, but this prejudice was neither innate in the populace nor fostered by the king; nor were most Jews ostentatious. As often happens, the many suffer for the folly of a few.

We may now turn to the biographical facts of Isaac Abravanel. The name is spelled Abarbanel and Abravanel. Elias Levita, a contemporary of Isaac, calls him מיכאלו, but the evidence of a contemporary is not always decisive, as analogies from Pepys and others show. Nor is the meaning of the name known. Most probably is it to be derived from a place. The family was a distinguished one. Isaac, in the introduction to his commentary on Isaiah, claimed descent from David. According to the Shevet Yehudah there were other families of this pedigree in Spain also; Isaac ibn Ghayyath also laid claim to royal lineage. Judah Abravanel dwelt in Seville: his grandson, Samuel, settled at Valencia. He and his son Judah emigrated to Portugal where, about 1400, he became the king’s treasurer at Lisbon. He also managed the financial affairs of prince Fernando, who, in 1437, assigned to him over half a million reis blancos. In that year Isaac, the subject of these lectures, was born. In consequence of his father’s intellectual ability and position at court, Isaac received a first class secular education: he was equally well instructed in Jewish matters by Joseph Ḥayyim, the Lisbon Rabbi. He specialized in philosophy. In Lisbon the first period of his life, extending to 44 years, was spent. Before he was 20 years of age he had written on natural science and given evidence of marked ability. At the age of 20 he composed his first book, ‘Aṭrēth Zekenim, and he also began to lecture on the book of Deuteronomy in the Synagogue but the manuscript was mislaid and published only after an interval of many years. But during this first period of his life his literary activities were interrupted by other pursuits. He sketched and planned
books which he completed in subsequent years. Now he was
busied mainly with politics and philanthropy. His agile brain
soon attracted notice and he, in his turn, was appointed to his
father's post and became the royal treasurer. In this position
he achieved remarkable success and enjoyed the favour and
friendship of Alfonso V. All this time he exerted himself on
behalf of the Jews. As a result of a war in Morocco many Jews
were enslaved and Abravanel set himself to buy them out of
servitude. But his efforts were soon needed nearer home.
The Jews incurred the envy of the populace owing to the
favour shown them by the king. For the first time in Portugal
an attack on the Jews broke out and in 1449 the juderia in
Lisbon was sacked by the mob. Several Jews were killed.
The king interfered on their behalf. With Abravanel's help
the sufferers were relieved and the miscreants punished. At
the Assemblies of the Cortes at Santarem in 1451, at Lisbon
in 1455, at Coimbra in 1473, restrictions against the Jews
were demanded by the representatives of the people and
refused by the king. Again at Evora, in 1481, the same
requests were put forward. In that year Alfonso V died,
and, as Abravanel says, “all Israel was filled with grief and
mourning: the people fasted and wept”. Alfonso was
succeeded by his son John II, who was of a morose dis-
position and not like his father. So far as the Jews were con-
cerned, the policy of the previous reign was not changed.
John showed them favour in numerous ways but of this
nothing need now be said because the first period of
Abravanel's life is now drawing to a close and in the second
he was not in Portugal. Therefore he was not directly affected
by the fate of the Portuguese Jews. John's political policy was
directed against the nobles who had long been in opposition
to the crown. John, on his accession declared that the liberality
of former kings had left the crown no estates save the high
roads of Portugal and he determined to crush the feudal
nobility and seize its territories. A Cortes held at Evora in
1481, which proposed restrictions on the Jews, also empowered
judges nominated by the crown to administer justice in all
feudal domains. The nobles resisted this infringement of their
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rights but their leader, Ferdinand, Duke of Braganza, was beheaded for high treason in 1483. The king stabbed to death his own brother-in-law, the Duke of Vizeu, and 80 other members of the aristocracy were executed. Thus John, the perfect, as he was called, assured the supremacy of the crown. And Abravanel? His enemies persuaded the king that he was supporting the Duke of Braganza and John gave orders for Abravanel’s arrest. His condemnation would have been certain but he received timely warning and made his escape. He fled to Castile and thus, in 1483, the first period of his career came to an end. In later years, when he wrote his commentary to the Book of Kings, he referred to this period as the happiest in his life. He was one of the richest Jews of Portugal and his house was a focus of all the learned world, Jewish and non-Jewish. Among these was certainly included the Duke of Braganza, but there is no evidence that Abravanel had any complicity in his political schemes. And now he was a penniless fugitive, for all his vast fortune was confiscated by the king. He reached Castile with his life and nothing else.

From the frontier Abravanel wrote to the king an impassioned letter protesting his innocence. But this was of no avail. On hearing that his property had been sequestrated, Abravanel continued his journey. He settled in Toledo, where he was followed by his wife and his sons Joseph and Samuel. Judah, another son, remained in Portugal.

The second chapter of his life, the Spanish period, now opens and this lasted till 1492. On his arrival at Toledo Abravanel resumed his literary activity. He had contemplated a commentary on the prophets and in a very short time he completed three books. He must have been a quick worker, judging by the time spent on his task, and it must moreover be remembered that Abravanel is rather diffuse in style. At all events the commentary on Joshua was finished in 16 days, that on Judges in 24 days, and that on Samuel in 75 days. He now began a commentary on Kings but politics intervened. So great was his fame that he was summoned to enter the service of the Spanish crown. He farmed the revenues and refilled the depleted exchequer and supplied the army with
provisions. Abravanel rose high in the royal favour and was often able to protect his brethren from the attacks of the Inquisition. But the sands were running out. Torquemada’s agitation had its effect and in 1492 the blow fell. The decree of banishment which was launched against the Spanish Jews and which Abravanel did his best to prevent need not have applied to Abravanel, for the king offered to let him remain. But Abravanel accompanied his brethren.

The third chapter in Abravanel’s life now opens. Just three months before Columbus set sail for his discovery of America, Abravanel left Spain with his family and betook himself with his household to Naples. The first thing he did was to get to work on his interrupted commentary on the book of Kings and this he finished, with his accustomed rapidity, by the eve of the Jewish New Year in 1493. But just as in his exile from Portugal he was not suffered to remain long in private life, so here too, in Naples, his reputation reached the ears of the king. Ferdinand of Naples, unlike his contemporary namesake of Spain, was a humane monarch and a wise one. He welcomed the Jews and he employed Abravanel. Ferdinand was threatened with war by the French and he needed all the aid he could gather in making his preparations. So once again Abravanel entered royal service. Ferdinand was succeeded by his son Alphonso II who retained Abravanel in his service. In January 1494 the French king Charles VIII conquered Naples. Abravanel’s house was plundered and his valuable library destroyed, after it had survived the vicissitudes of the emigration from Spain. Abravanel went into exile yet again, following his prince Alphonso to Messina in 1495. Alphonso died in June of that year. During this period, in addition to the commentary on Kings, Abravanel wrote a book called Rosh ’Amanah in which he explained the fundamental principles of Judaism and criticised the Thirteen Articles of the Creed of Maimonides. He also began his commentary on the later prophets.

Hitherto the family of Abravanel had been united. The conquest of Naples dispersed them. The most tragic fate of all overtook his eldest son Judah Leon Medigo, who was born
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in 1470. Judah was kept in Spain as a Marrano. His little son Isaac was to be detained as a hostage, to prevent Judah from quitting the country. Judah, hearing of this, smuggled his son away to Portugal but thought it safer not to go with him, so he went to Naples. But John II seized young Isaac Abravanel and had him baptized. Isaac never saw his parents again. He was brought up as a Christian. The agony of the father at the living death of his lost son was boundless. But thousands of parents were in a similar plight, by reason of the wholesale abduction of Jewish children at the bidding of the Inquisition, and their forcible baptism.

After the death of Alphonso II in 1495, Abravanel went to Corfù. Here he began his commentary on Isaiah but this took him 3 years to complete. When the French in 1496 evacuated the kingdom of Naples, Abravanel returned and settled at Monopoli. He was separated from his wife and children and sought alleviation in writing. To this period belong several of his books, all of which need not now be specified. Mention must be made, however, of his famous commentary on the Passover Haggadah and of the works he wrote in defence of Judaism against Christianity. This task he undertook on behalf of the Marranos and also to strengthen the faith of those Jews who were constantly subject to the arguments of the Missionaries. In 1508 Abravanel died in Venice and was buried in Padua. In consequence of the spoliation of the country, his grave is unknown.

So ended the career of a truly remarkable man. Just consider the stirring days in which his life was cast. Here was a man who lived through the Renaissance, the invention of printing, the fall of Constantinople, the birth-pangs of the Reformation, the discovery of America and the opening of the sea route to India. In the compass of 71 years he witnessed all these significant events, but fate prevented him from enjoying them to the full. Christopher Columbus set sail for America on August 3, 1492; the mass of the Spanish Jews wandered forth into exile on the previous day, which was appropriately enough, the ninth Ab, the fast day commemorating the fall of the two Temples. Again, Vasco da Gama
left Lisbon in 1499; Abravanel, the chief man in the kingdom was there no more: he had long been driven out, a fugitive. In 1487 the first book, a Hebrew book too, was printed in Portugal, but again Abravanel was not suffered by fortune to be present at this epoch-making occasion. He suffered exile three times and was forced to be a wanderer till his old age. He died sundered from wife and children. His life may be regarded as typical of that of his people and it is significant that he should have written so much about the Messiah. He laid the greatest stress on the doctrine of the gradual development of mankind to a better knowledge of God and a better relation between man and man. He looked ahead. Evil and persecution were transitory and would give way to good. Israel has been called the "suffering servant" and if ever the character of the Messiah in Isaiah LI—I have been capable of a personal application, surely it is to Abravanel that it may be applied—Abravanel, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, at whom kings shut their mouths and who suffered the sinfulness of many. Yet it would be a great error to depict the life of Abravanel as continuously unfortunate. This is a mistake to which Jewish writers are prone, a mistake too often repeated in Jewish history generally. Misfortunes indeed he suffered. But there were long periods of quiet and happiness in his life. Of his 71 years, we must certainly exclude the first 44, which he himself declared to be supremely peaceful and blessed. In the second period he must likewise have had 6 or 7 years unclouded by trouble, and later on there were, similarly, bright times amid the gloom. When we examine a biography or when we cast a glance at history, we often ignore the normal. We fix our eyes on the noteworthy events and overlook the commonplace days. Yet these are, in truth, the happy ones. Happy is the people that has no history. Let us look at our own lives. If we were to keep a diary, we should certainly note down the outstanding events. We should record births and marriages and we should include deaths, worries, illnesses, losses in business, opportunities missed, hopes frustrated and bitter disappointments. But we should not put down our average day’s programme, our dull and uneventful
occupations that constitute our quiet existence. Yet this is life. Not the exceptional and not the bizarre. In fact, if we truly analyse our time we shall find that no inconsiderable portion of it, possibly one third to one half of our entire life, is spent in bed.

Why do we consider Abravanel a great man? Is it because he was the last Jewish Aristotelian? Scarcely. The world is not troubled now with the controversy whether matter is or is not eternal. That is a relatively minor point. The fact is that of Abravanel we may say as we do of Maimonides that though his methods may be obsolete yet his spirit and his system have permanent value. We can still and for long learn from them. Nor is the fact that Abravanel wrote over twenty books in itself enough to command our interest in him. Others have written more volumes, which repose unread on library shelves. The great things about Abravanel were his sanity and dignity. In his books, he was often imaginative and even fantastic. In his actions he was sober and deliberate. He never lost his head; he never exaggerated; he took long views; he had a calm and judicial outlook. How many of us, overwhelmed by gigantic catastrophes, time after time, would have recovered our balance! How many of us would have made a fresh start after experiencing calamities such as those which relentlessly pursued Abravanel! How many of us would have shone as a leader in such terrible days as 1492, when a whole people was driven out into exile and needed aid and counsel and calm guidance to save them from frenzied despair! In all the chaos of the flight from Spain Abravanel stood firm as a rock. He never “despaired of the State” and amid the overwhelming attacks of Church and Crown he was able to prepare a double defence, to organize the relief of the wanderers and to fit them out with literary weapons with which to meet their adversaries who sought to destroy their faith in their religion.

Why was Abravanel so successful? Why were his books read and re-read by Jews? Why were his defence of Judaism and his criticisms of Christianity so carefully considered and deemed so serious by numerous Christian scholars? Not only
on account of his learning, not merely because of his moderation, but also for the reason that Abravanel was a master of general scholarship. He knew the arguments of Christian scholars. Not only could he meet them on their own ground but he could evaluate their work and use the valuable residue for teaching Jews. He was steeped in the humanities, as well as in Jewish lore, and so he could frame a reasoned verdict and his pleas carried conviction.

Abravanel was a true Shtadlan (Defender), always to the fore in the defence of his brethren. But there have been others. Why was he distinguished from them? Because, in addition to being a wealthy man, an influential man, an inordinately charitable man and a conspicuous philanthropist, he was also a scholar and an amateur scholar. Today we do not combine the roles. We have scholars, we have philanthropists, we have Shtadlanim (Defenders), but are the parts united?

The man who put the finances of three kingdoms into order, the man who managed the taxation of a nation and refilled the depleted exchequer without exactions, the man who successfully provided the supplies for an army across the seas was essentially a man of affairs and at the same time he was a philosopher and an exegete. And his faith in God never wavered.

H. LOEWI.