

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS

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Lecture #18: Ramban, Part II

In the previous lesson, we looked at the most prominent characteristic of the commentary of the Ramban on the Torah - his comprehensive approach to many topics in the category of theology and faith. This lesson is dedicated to a number of philosophical topics that recur throughout the Ramban's commentary on the Torah.

A. *Ma'aseh Avot Siman Le-Vanim*

An interesting issue in the commentary of the Ramban is his melding of historiography and exegesis, an idea expressed in the dictum, "*Ma'aseh avot siman le-banim*," "The happening of the fathers is an omen for the children."¹ The source of this view is found in the words of the Sages:

R. Pinchas said in the name of R. Hoshaya the Great: The Holy One, Blessed be He said to our patriarch Avraham, "Go and pave the way before your children."

Thus, **you find that everything that is written of Avraham is written of children as well.** Of Avraham it is written, "And there was a famine in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:10), and of Israel it is written, "For these two years, the famine is in the midst of the land" (*ibid.* 45:6). Of Avraham it is written, "And Avram went down to Egypt to sojourn there" (*ibid.* 12:10), and of Israel it is written "And our fathers went down to Egypt" (*Bamidbar* 20:15). Of Avraham it is written, "To sojourn there" (*Bereishit* 12:10), and of Israel it is written, "To sojourn in the land we have come" (*ibid.* 47:4). Of Avraham it is written, "For the famine was severe in the land of Canaan" (47:4),² and of Israel it is written, "And the famine was severe in the land" (43:1)... (*Bereishit Rabba*, Vilna, *Parashat Lekh Lekha* 40)

1 In the Ramban, this is actually formulated: "The incidents which befell our fathers..." The term "*Ma'aseh avot siman le-vanim*" is mentioned by *Acharonim* who cite the view of the Ramban.

2 This verse actually appears concerning Yaakov and his children; perhaps the reference is meant to be the verse, "And there was a famine in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:10), which appears in Avraham's narrative.

R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin said: **The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave an omen to Avraham: every incident which befell him befell his children.**

How so? He chose Avraham from all of his father's house, as it says, "You are Lord, the God, You Who chose Avram and took him out from Ur Kasdim, and you made his name Avraham" (*Nechemya* 9:7), and He chose his children from seventy nations, as it says, "For a holy people are you to Lord your God, and you Lord your God chose to be a treasured people, from all the peoples upon the face of the earth" (*Devarim* 14:2). To Avraham it is said, "Go for yourself" (*Bereishit* 12:1), and to his children it says, "I will bring you up from the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites..." (*Shemot* 3:17). To Avraham it is said, "And I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you" (*Bereishit* 12:2-3), and to his children it says, "God shall bless you" (*Bamidbar* 6:24). To Avraham it is said, "And I shall make you a great nation" (*Bereishit* 12:2), and to his children it says, "And what great nation" (*Devarim* 4:8)...³ (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Warsaw, *Parashat Lekh Lekha* 9)

It appears that in each of these two homilies, the nature of the link between the ancestors' actions and the experiences of their descendants it is different. According to the *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba*, the connection between the progenitor and the seed is the connection of cause and effect. The father – in a conscious, intentional way - influences the future of his children by his acts: "Go and pave the way..." In other words, the parent has the capacity to influence the experiences of the children. The view of R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin in *Midrash Tanchuma* is different: we are not talking about a conscious or willful act of the father, but rather information given to the father about his seed — **"an omen... that everything which happened to him happened to his children."** What befalls the father is a *siman*, an omen, a portent. The examples cited are not those in which the ancestors are active; rather, events that happen to the ancestor are an allusion, a presage of the future which will befall his children. In other words, the *Avot*, the Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, could have learnt from what occurred to them what would happen to their descendants in the future. According to this, the ancestor does not influence history in a conscious way, but one may predict and foretell history based on the ancestor's experiences.

The Ramban relates to this idea in a number of places, generally in a way similar to that of the *Midrash Tanchuma* – the events of the fathers constitute an expression of prophetic transmission, the message of God to the Patriarchs (and to the readers of the stories). He even mentions, in a roundabout way, the language of "*siman le-vanim*."

The Ramban relates first to this topic in his commentary to *Bereishit* 12:7:

³ Afterwards, additional homilies are cited.

“And Avram passed through the land, to the place of Shekhem” — I will tell you a rule to allow you to understand all of the coming passages, the matter of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. This is a fundamental subject, mentioned by our Rabbis in a condensed way, namely that **the incidents which befell our fathers is an omen for the children (*siman le-banim*)**. Therefore, the verses will elaborate on the narrative of the journeys, digging wells, and other incidents, and one may be led to think that these things are extraneous and purposeless, **but they all come to teach of the future**. When a prophecy of the Patriarchs comes true through these occurrences, he must think of the matter decreed to come upon his seed as a result.

The Ramban expresses this view many more times, including later in the same chapter:

Behold, Avraham went down to Egypt because of the famine to sojourn there, in order to keep himself alive in days of famine. The Egyptians wronged him without cause by taking his wife, so God avenged him with great plagues, and He took him out from there with flocks, silver, and gold, and Pharaoh also ordered his men to escort him. **He alluded to him that his children would go down to Egypt because of famine, in order to reside there in the land**, and the Egyptians would treat them badly and take their women from them, as it says (*Shemot* 1:22), “And let live every girl.” Nevertheless, God would take revenge with great plagues, taking them out with silver and gold, sheep and cattle, very great flocks; indeed [the Egyptians] would compel them, sending them out of the land. **There was not one iota of the father’s experience which the children did not undergo**. This is explained in *Bereishit Rabba...* (Ramban, *Bereishit* 12:10)

On the other hand, as he goes on to explain *Bereishit* 12:6, it may be that there is a slightly different element involved:

... Know that once a decree delivered by angels emerges from the potential to the actual via symbolization, this decree will be fulfilled in all cases. Therefore, the prophets perform an act of prophecy, as Yirmiyahu ordered Barukh (*Yirmiyahu* 51:63-64): “When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, ‘Thus shall Babylon sink,’” etc. This is the issue of Elisha’s putting his hand on the bow: (II *Melakhim* 13:17): “Then Elisha said, ‘Shoot,’ and he shot. And he said, ‘The Lord’s arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!’” And it says there (v. 19): “Then the man of God was angry with him and said, ‘You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Aram until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Aram only three times.’” Therefore, God strengthened Avraham in the land, causing him to perform acts which symbolized all of the future events which would befall his seed. Understand this.

Some see a mystical element in the words of the Ramban, according to which the acts of the fathers do not just teach us about the destiny of their seed, but rather create and determine the future. However, as we have seen, the Ramban in his commentary views the essence of the issue as a prophetic transmission; he directly compares these things to the symbolic acts performed by different prophets. It appears that the intent of the Ramban is to set out that there are different levels of certainty as to words of prophecy — some prophecies may not necessarily be fulfilled (for example, a prophecy dependent on human activity), while other prophecies will definitely occur. The form of the expression of the prophecy determines the level of certainty and teaches us about it.⁴ The claim of the Ramban is that any prophecy which is given over not only verbally, but actively as well, is a prophecy which is immutable. In other words, since these events happened, microcosmically, to the father, the future of the prophecy, macrocosmically, is certain. In this sense, Avraham's actions pave the way for his children.

It seems that the Ramban also accomplishes another goal by developing this principle - he explains the tension in the Midrashic sources between the active language of, "Go and pave the way before your children," on the one hand, and the passive formulation of, "**The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave an omen to Avraham.**" Once we understand that there are varying levels of probability for the practical fulfillment of different prophecies, this becomes clearer. Nevertheless, this is not a simple concept, which is why the Ramban ends with the two-word imperative: "Understand this."⁵

This idea is almost explicit in his introduction to the Book of *Shemot*. As he explains there, the Patriarchs determine and shape the future, but in essence, it is not their actions which accomplish this; it is God's proclamation of the future, as reinforced by events, which creates and determines this future:

Thus ends the Book of *Bereishit*, which is the book of the creation and invention of the world and the creation of every creature; [it is also the book of] the experiences of the *Avot*, which are, for their seed, a matter of creation **because all of their experiences are illustrations. They**

4 This is similar to what Yosef says to Pharaoh (*Bereishit* 41:32): "And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is proper by God, and God will shortly bring it about." (Still, the commentators argue regarding whether the term "proper" indicates inevitability or proximity.)

5 In one place, the Ramban speaks in a clear way of the causal connection between Avraham's actions and his children's experiences. Immediately after what we have cited above from *Bereishit* 12:10, he goes on to say:

Know that Avraham Avinu sinned greatly, if inadvertently, by involving his righteous wife in the stumbling-block of sin... as well as leaving the land... This is the sin he committed... and for this act, it was decreed upon his seed the exile in the land of Egypt, by the hands of Pharaoh. However, it appears that there is no link between this matter and the previous issue, the general idea of the experiences of the fathers being an omen for the children. The Ramban simply adds a new element - that in this specific instance, Avraham sinned and brought about, by his actions, a punishment for his children.

allude to and tell of all future events which are fated to befall them.

After completing the [story of] creation, another book begins, detailing all of the results **emanating from these allusions**. Thus, the Book of *Shemot* is dedicated to the issue of the first explicitly-decreed exile and the redemption from it.

In particular, the Ramban stresses how the generations of exile and redemption of the Jewish people are alluded to in the narratives of the *Avot*. As we have seen, the events of Avraham's life allude to the first exile, the Egyptian exile. The Ramban goes further and determines that the events which befall Yitzchak allude to the second exile, the Babylonian/Persian exile. This is what the Ramban writes in his commentary to *Bereishit* 26:1:

In my view, this issue contains an allusion to the future, because the exile of Avraham to Egypt due to famine alludes to the fact that his children will be exiled there, but his going to Avimelekh was not exile, for he settled there of his own accord.

However, Yitzchak's descent there because of the famine does allude to this exile, for he was exiled from his place against his will and went to another land; indeed, he is exiled from his place to the land of the Philistines, which was the land of his father's sojourning. This alludes to the Babylonian exile, for it is the place of their fathers' sojourns, namely Ur Kasdim...

The Ramban adds and specifies points of comparison between Yitzchak's exile and the Babylonian exile. Just as Yitzchak leaves the land due to the compulsion of famine and goes to a land which his father settled in the past, the Israelites are similarly destined to go out of their land against their will and go to the land of their fathers' sojourns, in Babylonia (indeed, we first encounter Avraham in Babylonia, in Ur Kasdim). Just as Yitzchak's settlement in Philistines is without affliction, so too, the Babylonian exile is destined to be without subjugation and affliction (the Jews prospered in Babylonia). Just as the Philistines sent Yitzchak out of their land after he had settled there, the Israelites are similarly destined to be sent out from the Babylonian exile (by the edict of Cyrus the Great).

Following this line of thought, the Ramban sees the events of Yaakov's life as alluding to the Edomite exile. To this exile, the Ramban dedicates huge swathes of his commentary, as this is the exile in which the Ramban and his contemporaries reside:

"To Esav his brother, to the land of Seir" — Because the south of the Land of Israel is next to Edom, and his father resided in the southland, one would have to pass by Edom or close to it. Thus, [Yaakov] was afraid lest Esav hear, so he sent messengers ahead of him to his land.

However, the Sages, likening him to “One who takes the dog by the ears” (*Mishlei* 26:17), have already criticized him. As they put it (*Bereishit Rabba* 75:3): “The Holy One, Blessed be He said to him: He was going along his way, and you sent to him and said (*Bereishit* 32:5), ‘So says your servant Yaakov?’”

In my view, this also alludes to the fact that we initiated our downfall in the hand of Edom, for the kings of the Second Temple forged a covenant with the Romans (*Chashmonaim* 1:8), and some of them went to Rome, which was the ultimate cause of our downfall in their hands, and this is mentioned in our Rabbis’ words and publicized in books (*Yosippon*, ch. 65).(Ramban, *Bereishit* 32:4)

This is how it is for us with Rome and Edom. It is our brothers who have caused our downfall in their hands, for they forged a covenant with the Romans. The latter King Agrippas of the Second Temple fled to them for assistance, and because of the famine, the Jerusalemites were captured. Now, the exile has been lengthened a great deal, without our knowing when it will end, like the other exiles. We are in it like the dead, saying (*Yechezkel* 37:11), “Our bones are dried up [and our hope is lost]; we are indeed cut off...” Nevertheless, they shall bring up all of us from all the nations as an offering to God (*Yeshayahu* 66:20), and they will have severe mourning when they see our glory. We will witness God’s vengeance, for “He shall lift us up, and we will live before Him” (*Hoshea* 6:2).(Ramban, *Bereishit* 47:28)

This historical view of the Ramban is of great significance, not just in the field of exegesis, but also because it has such a clear polemical anti-Christian aim. The Church sought to prove that Jesus and Church history were already predicted and prefigured in *Tanakh*. Taking into account the Christian approach, one may understand the significance of the commentaries of the Ramban, in which he stress that indeed there is an allusion to the future in the stories of the *Avot*, but the allusion is for Israel’s future — what is decreed upon their seed — but not for others, who are not of their seed.⁶

B. The Superiority of the Land of Israel

The Ramban is known for his deep love of the Land of Israel. We may detect echoes of this in his poetry,⁷ and indeed the Ramban moved to Israel. In his commentary to *Bereishit* 35:16, he writes: “I have merited arriving in Jerusalem myself — praise be to God, good and beneficent!” In the halakhic sphere, the Ramban is the first of the enumerators of the 613 commandments who counts living in Israel as a *mitzva*:

We have been commanded to settle the land... and not to leave it in the hands of other nations, nor [to leave it] desolate... And I say that

⁶ See about this at length in Amos Funkenstein’s comprehensive essay, “*Parshanuto Ha-Typologit shel Ramban*,” *Zion* 45 (5740), pp. 35-59.

⁷ “*Al Chorvotayikh Yerushalayim*” (see previous lesson).

the commandment which the Sages go to extremes to express is that of living in the Land of Israel... It is a positive commandment for all generations, and everyone is bound by it, even in a time of exile. (Ramban, *Glosses to Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Positive 4)⁸

According to the Ramban, the superiority of the Land of Israel predates its being given to Avraham and to the People of Israel. For example, the Ramban explains that the overturning of Sedom was due to the superiority of the Land of Israel.

Know that **Sedom was judged by virtue of the superiority of the Land of Israel, for it has the status of God's portion, and it does not tolerate abominable people.** When it vomited out the entire nation because of its abominations, it came first and vomited this people out, for they were the most evil, towards Heaven and towards creations... For there are exceedingly evil and sinful nations whom He does not do this to, **but all of this was because of the superiority of this land, for God's sanctuary is there.**⁹(Ramban, *Bereishit* 19:5)

In other words, the unique superiority of the Land of Israel is because of its status as “God's portion” and “God's sanctuary,” and the unique connection of this land to God incurs a great attribute of justice more so than other lands, since God is less tolerant of sins in His portion than in other places. The issue is explained more broadly in his commentary on *Parashat Acharei Mot* (*Vayikra* 18:25), where the Ramban explains that God does not directly control the affairs of the nations of the world. Instead, He appoints angelic representatives for each and every people and land, and He directs them by way of these intermediaries.¹⁰ The Land of Israel, in contrast, is managed by God directly:

This is the matter... God in His glory created everything, and He put control of the lower realms in the upper realms, and he put over each

8 The same may be found in his commentary on the Torah (*Bamidbar* 33:53): “And you shall occupy the land and you shall reside in it:”

As I see it, this is a positive commandment, commanding them to reside in the land and settle it, for it is given to them and they must not reject God's portion. Now, they may have a thought of going and conquering the land of Sumer or the land of Assyria or others and to settle there, but this would violate God's command. Indeed, our Rabbis go to extremes to express the commandment of residing in the Land of Israel and that it is forbidden to leave it — by this, we have been bound by this commandment. For this verse is a positive command... However, Rashi explains: “‘And you shall occupy the land’ — you shall clear it of its inhabitants, and then ‘You shall reside in it.’ Only then will you be able to survive there, but if you do not do this, you will be unable to survive there.” Nevertheless, what I have said is the essence.

9 See *Vayikra* 18:24-28, 20:21-24.

10 According to the Ramban, there is a hierarchy of these factors: the fates of the nations are determined directly by heavenly factors (astrology), and the heavenly factors are directed by angels (according to the Ramban, these are the “princes” and “kings” mentioned in the Book of Daniel), who are under God's control. This cosmological hierarchy matches the philosophical views that were commonly held in medieval times, and the Ramban certainly perceives it as a natural system. According to him, it is specifically the situation in the Land of Israel which constitutes a supernatural situation.

and every one, in their lands and by their nations... He gave them sublime angels to be princes over them... Now, God in his glory is the God of gods and the Lord of Lords, for the entire world. However, the Land of Israel, the center of the civilization, is God's portion, dedicated to His name; He does not appoint over it any angel as an officer, marshal, or governor. Instead, He gives it as a portion to the nation which unifies His name, the seed of his beloved... Thus, He gives to us the land so that He, in his blessedness, will be our God and we shall be unified for His name. Behold, the land which is the portion of God, in His glory, will vomit out anyone who defiles it, and it will not tolerate idolaters and adulterers.¹¹

The Ramban goes quite far in his approach, and he declaims that the main significance of the fulfillment of commandments is specifically in the Land of Israel. Fulfilling the commandments outside the land — even those which are clearly bodily obligations, such as putting on *tefillin* — is designed only in order for us not to forget the commandments upon returning from exile. He cites the explanation of the *Sifrei* (*Ekev* 43):

“And you will quickly perish” (*Devarim* 11:17) — [God says:] “Even though I have exiled you from the land to dwell outside it, remain distinguishable by the commandments, so that when you return, they will not be new to you.”

This is analogous to husband who, furious at his wife, sends her to her father's home. He said to her, “Keep wearing your jewelry, so that when you return, they will not be new to you.”

Thus said *Yirmiyahu* (31:20): “Set markers for yourself” — these are the commandments, which make Israel remarkable...”

The Ramban concludes:

They explained that it should not be new to you when you return to the land, **for the essence of all the commandments is for those who reside in the land of God.**¹²(Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25)

It appears that the connection between the Land of Israel and the fulfillment of the commandments is an outgrowth of the special status of the Land of Israel as a land with a direct link to the Divine Presence.

Indeed, the Ramban manages to find praise for the Land of Israel even amid God's severe rebuke:

And this is what it says here (v. 32), “So that your enemies who live there will be desolated” — this is in fact good news, cheering the exiles; our land does not accept our enemies, and this is a great proof and

¹¹ See the verses which the Ramban refers to, *Vayikra* 18:24-28.

¹² He includes a similar point in his commentary to *Devarim* 4:5.

promise for us. For you will not find in civilization a land which is as good and broad, and which was always settled, yet is so devastated... For from the time we left, it has not accepted any nation or state; though all of them try to settle it, they do not succeed...(Ramban, *Vayikra* 26:16)

C. *Nissayon*

An additional philosophical issue which appears in the Ramban's commentary is *nissayon*, testing or proving. In the Torah, there are a number of situations in which God tests people, and there is a basic philosophical question common to all of them: what is the point of the *nissayon*, when all is known and revealed to Him? What reason does Omniscient God have to "test" human beings?

The Ramban relates to this in an explicit way regarding the *nissayon* of the Binding of Yitzchak:

This is called a *nissayon* for the one being tested, but the Tester, in his blessedness, will command him **to realize his potential in actuality, to earn the reward of good action and not the reward of a good heart alone.** Know that "God examines the righteous" (*Tehillim* 11:5), when He knows full well that the righteous will do His will, but He seeks to demonstrate his righteousness, He will give him a test. However, he will not examine the wicked, who will not listen regardless. **Thus, each of the tests in the Torah is for the benefit of the one being tested.**(Ramban, *Bereishit* 22:1)

If so, in the view of the Ramban, the test is designed to serve not the Tester, God, but rather the one who is being tested. The *nissayon* in the Torah is an opportunity which is provided for the righteous to apply in practice their dedication to God and to earn a reward for this. In this way, they will receive a reward not only for their potential dedication, but for their actual dedication.

In a similar way, the Ramban explains the test of the manna, about which the Torah says, "So that I may test them, whether they will follow My law or not" (*Shemot* 16:4). The *nissayon* is designed to take the Israelites' dedication and readiness from the realm of the potential to the realm of the actual, realizing their reliance on God:

"So that I may test them, whether they will follow My law or not" — to test them and to provide them good in the end, that they will believe in Him forever...

Furthermore, the Ramban explains (*Devarim* 8:2) "And you shall recall all the way" in the following manner:

“And you shall recall all the way” — ... but He subjected them to this test, for from it He knows that they will keep His commandments forever.

According to the Ramban, the aim of the test of the manna is to take the total dedication of the Israelites to God from the potential to the actual, as they will exemplify throughout their years of wandering in the desert, and the reward for withstanding the test is that they will believe in Him forever.¹³

As we have said, we have cited only some of the philosophical issues which the Ramban deals with in his commentary. Throughout his work, the reader may find dozens of analyses of philosophical topics, which continue to shape our worldview until this very day.

13 However, in his commentary to *Shemot* 20:16, the Ramban explains the *nissayon* in a different manner:

...And according to my view, it is an actual test. He will say that God wanted to test you whether you will keep his commandments, for He removed all doubt from your heart, and now He shall see whether you love Him and if you desire Him and His commandments.

Indeed, any term of testing is examination. [As David says of Shaul's battle dress,] “I cannot go with these, for I have not been tested” (I *Shemuel* 17:39) — I have never examined my soul by going in them.

It may be that this testing is for the good, for the master will sometimes test his servant with harsh service to know if he will tolerate it out of his love, and sometimes he will do good to him to know if he will repay him for this good which he has received, to enhance his master's service and honor.

This is just as the Sages said (*Shemot Rabba* 31:20): “Fortunate is the man who withstands his tests, for there is no creature whom the Holy One, Blessed be He does not test: the rich one He tests to see if his hand will be open to the poor; and the poor He tests if he can accept the suffering,” etc.

Therefore, the verse says that God has been good to you to show you His glory, which He did not do for any nation, to test you. Will you repay Him the good which he has bestowed upon you, as His allotted nation, as it says, “Shall you repay God with this?” (*Devarim* 32:6).

Moreover, it says, “Only you have I known from all the families of the earth; therefore I will take account of you for your sins” (*Amos* 3:2); the nations are not obligated to Me as you are, for I have known you face-to-face.