

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

Don Isaac Abravanel

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MOSES AT SINAI: *The beginning of the Tradition*

INTRODUCTION

Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) was a leader in the temporal and spiritual affairs of the Jewry of his day. In his youth he received a well-grounded traditional education. As a grown man he served as treasurer to King Alfonso V of Portugal, but lost his position and worldly possessions in the intrigues of the court of King John II, Alfonso's successor. Rising to eminence again in Castile, he became financial advisor to Ferdinand and Isabella, and voluntarily shared the fate of his brethren under the edict of exile of 1492. For a period he served the king of Naples. Abravanel's turbulent life ended in Venice.

His works fall into three categories : Biblical exegesis, philosophy, and apologetics. His philosophical treatise *Rosh Amanah* defended Maimonides' Thirteen Principles against the attacks of Crescas and Albo. However, his works of commentary on the Bible are the most enduring.

The *Pirkei Abot*, or "Ethics of the Fathers," is a tractate of the Mishnah which is customarily studied, a chapter every Sabbath, from Passover till Rosh Hashanah. Abravanel's commentary on the *Ethics of the Fathers*, from which this excerpt is freely translated, was written approximately in 1496. In his introduction to this work Abravanel tells of his people's as well as his personal

trials and tribulations in the wake of the Spanish catastrophe. At the same time he gives us a glimpse into the enduring faith and steadfastness of a great Jew.

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THE QUESTION

“Moses received the Torah from Sinai”—why was his acceptance not linked to God, Who gave the Torah? It ought to have been declared that Moses accepted the Torah from *God*; instead it is stated that he received it from *Sinai!* Moreover, if merely an indication of the place was desired, the expression should have been *at Sinai* and not *from Sinai!*

THE ANSWER

This Mishnah teaches us that our Teacher Moses, may he rest in peace, accepted the Torah as a complete entity, comparable to the creation of Adam as a whole human being. Living beings are born from their like, of their own genus. Man is born from a father and mother. But the first man was created by God in a miraculous fashion, dust from earth, without a corporeal father and mother as progenitors. After him all mankind followed in natural course, in straight lineage of father unto son. In a similar vein do we view the master-prophet's Torah and his completeness as a man. Other people learned one from the other, but our Teacher Moses, of blessed memory, was not taught by man. It was the Holy One who filled him with the spirit of higher wisdom and prophecy to a phenomenal degree. And all this was attained from Sinai! The meaning is that it was attained as a result of his lonely sojourn there (at Sinai) without food or drink throughout the days of spiritual communion with God. After Moses, the tradition was transmitted from man unto man, even as all humans are linked man unto man. Thus, in accordance with the aforesaid explanation, the first man came into being when form devolved upon dust (without help from another man). Adam was the beginning for all mankind; so too was Moses in his prophecy, when the Godly spirit devolved upon him, the first of all prophets.

The prerequisite for this perfection was Sinai, the mountain

Moses at Sinai

which God chose for His divine presence and revelation. Moses' lonely sojourn at Sinai enabled him to achieve all this. This is the explanation for the statement of our sages that "Moses received the Torah *from* Sinai"; the letter מ in מסיני (*from* Sinai) is causative: Moses' remarkable, lonely stay at Sinai caused him to reach the highest degree attainable in order to receive the Godly Torah. This idea was already hinted at in *Midrash Chazita* "He brings me to the House of wine and looks at me with love' (Song of Songs 2:4). Sinai can be likened to a storage place of precious wine whence one brings forth drink for men." This interpretation also reflects the words of the Torah: "Come up to me into the mount and be there: and I will give thee the tables of stone, and the law, and the commandment which I have written that thou mayest teach them" (Ex. 24:12). Moses was instructed to go up that Godly mountain, which is the "storage place" of the Law and higher Godly discipline, and tarry there many days. The words "and *be* there," indicate that Moses is to become another being, elevated from the natural state of his corporeality to a higher and nobler state, and thus be privileged to receive the Tablets of Stone, the Written Torah, and "the commandment," i.e. its traditional commentary. Of this traditional commentary is it said "and he transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, etc." The Written Law was inscribed by Moses on Scrolls and a copy was given to each tribe, but the commentary thereon, and all that is to be derived logically from it, Moses taught and transmitted to Israel orally.