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JUDAH ABRABANEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE

Judah Abrabanel, commonly known as Leone Ebreo, was among the greatest love-writers of the Italian Renaissance. Born in Lisbon, Portugal, c. 1460, into one of the most distinguished families of Jewish history, Leone gained fame both as a physician and a philosopher. His life was characterized by restless wandering and intense suffering. As a young man he and his family were forced to flee to Toledo due to a political plot against his famous father, Don Isaac Abrabanel. In 1492, with the decree of expulsion of Jews in effect, Leone left Spain for Naples. His departure must have been particularly agonizing: he left without his beloved one-year-old son, whom he had secretly sent to Portugal with a nurse. However, the child was seized and baptized through the order of King John II.

Judah Abrabanel found little rest in Naples, being expelled with his coreligionists in 1497. He then lived in succession at Genoa, Barletta, Venice, perhaps Florence, and ultimately back in Naples where he served as court physician to the Spanish viceroy, Don Gonsalva de Cordoba.¹

In his travels through Italy, Leone came into close contact with Italian humanism. Where ever he lived, he frequented the most cultured circles. He composed a now lost philosophic treatise, *Harmony of the Heavens*, for Pico della Mirandola and was on friendly terms with Mario Lenzi. Leone's brilliant mind absorbed and synthesized the intellectual traditions of Europe, ultimately developing a philosophy of love which he set down in the *Dialoghi d'Amore*. First published posthumously in 1535, the *Dialoghi* went into numerous editions. It was translated twice into Spanish, twice into French, as well as into Latin and Hebrew. In terms of the number of editions printed, the *Dialoghi* rivalled Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium* and Pico's commentary on some sonnets by Beneviente as a main source of sixteenth century neo-Platonism.²

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The influence of the *Dialoghi d'Amore* was vast. Menendez y Pelayo, the great Spanish scholar, claimed that it was the most notable monument of Platonic philosophy in the sixteenth century, and the most beautiful in form since the days of Plotinus.³ Cervantes, in his prologue to *Don Quixote*, referred praisingly to Leone.⁴ Camoens, Montaigne, Giordano Bruno, and Spinoza were among those who benefited from Leone's works. In England, Leone's influence is evident in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* of Robert Burton and in the poetry of John Donne.

The *Dialoghi d'Amore* is a philosophical love-treatise in the tradition of the Italian Renaissance. Its approach is universalistic — it comprehends all experience in a harmonious framework of love. It explains Greek myths as well as Biblical passages; it unites Elijah, Moses, Enoch, and John the Evangelist; it discusses Aristotle and Plato, Maimonides and Ibn Gabirol. Indeed, the universalistic outlook of the work has served to obscure its pervasive Jewish elements. Many readers have believed with Graetz that the *Dialoghi d'Amore* "throughout was far removed from Judaism."⁵ One writer has gone so far as to suggest that Leone may actually have converted to Christianity.⁶ To see the work in this light, though, is to misunderstand it and to misrepresent its author.

Those who consider this work as being far removed from Judaism ignore the numerous Biblical references and interpretations, the continual reliance on basic Jewish teachings, and the prominence of Jewish elements in the major themes. Indeed, not only are the ideas saturated with Jewish content, but the author clearly identifies with Judaism. Philo and Sophia, the two participants in the dialogues of love, refer to themselves as believers and followers of the teachings of Moses. There is no significant evidence justifying the claim that Judah Abrabanel opted for Christianity. On the contrary, there is more than ample evidence to prove his faithfulness to Judaism.

Even the casual reader of the dialogues will find many external evidences of Leone's Jewishness in terms of Biblical references, Talmudic paraphrases and personal declarations of faith. Julius Guttmann has pointed out that

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Leone's concept of love, which is the central doctrine of his system, rests on Jewish foundations . . . That which distinguishes Leone from Plato and Plotinus—his idea that love streams not only from creatures to God, but from God to His creatures—unites him with Crescas.⁷

Joseph Klausner has demonstrated that Leone borrowed ideas from Ibn Gabirol.⁸ Moreover, Leone's recognition of the importance of the human body in love was a Jewish concept and was a rejection of a neo-Platonic attitude which thought of love in purely spiritual terms.

One of Leone's major themes is that the cosmos is infused with love. He conceives of the order of things in terms of a circle whose beginning and end is God.⁹ Love originates with God and descends to the angels, then to the heavenly spheres, then to first matter. Matter is at the diametrically opposite end of the circle from purely spiritual God. The elements ascend, attracted through love, towards God, and so do plants, animals, and so, on a higher level, does man.

When Leone speaks of love in inanimate objects, he does not mean that they have emotions; he means rather that they tend to fulfill themselves, to find their natural positions, e.g., gases rise, stones fall. They do so through no will of their own: they have no will. Leone states this in the second dialogue:

And even as the arrow rightly seeks its mark, not by means of its own knowledge, but by means of that of the archer who shot it, so these lower bodies seek their proper place in virtue, not of their own knowledge, but of the true knowledge of the Primal Creator, instilled into the soul of the world and the general nature of lower things (p. 76).

Leone never equates the universe with God and is therefore not guilty of pantheism, as is sometimes suggested. God created the world from nothing, He informs the world, He is the end towards which everything naturally strives.

Leone's notion of man's relationship with God is also deeply imbued with Jewish thinking. In explaining how man should gain happiness through union with God, he invokes a Maimonidean formula:¹⁰

Moral virtues are indispensable to the achievement of happiness, which,

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however, really rests on wisdom. But wisdom is unattainable without moral virtue; for no one lacking virtue can be wise, even as no sage can be without virtue. So that virtue is the road to wisdom, which is the shrine of happiness (p. 38).

Moral and intellectual perfections are inter-related, but it is the perfected intellect which brings man closest to God. It is

the element most remote from matter and darkness and nearest to the Divine Light . . . which alone among the parts and powers of men escapes the hideousness of death (p. 21).

The aim and end of the human intellect is union with God. The intellect is

nothing but a tiny beam of the infinite splendour of God, assigned to man to make him rational, deathless and happy (p. 32).

This formulation corresponds to Maimonides' definition of *zelem e-lokim* in Book one, Chapter one of the *Guide*. For Leone, the intellect's duty is to contemplate God. As it is perfected it will seem to unite with God. It will attain

to such union and copulation with God Most High as proves our intellect to be rather a part of the essence of God than understanding of merely human form (p. 49).

But the mind, as long as it is connected to the body, cannot achieve total union with God.¹¹ Only in death will the intellect be free to contemplate God without hindrance.

In describing the relationship of love among humans, Leone stresses spiritual qualities in human relationships. He does not negate physical relationship; but he sees the physical as meaningful only if accompanied by the proper spiritual perspective. He defines true and equal love as "a conversion of each lover into the other" (p. 55). Perfect love engrosses the lover in ecstasy. He has no care for himself, he performs no function of nature, motion or reason on his own behalf. He is

everything estranged from himself, belonging to and wholly transformed into the object of his love and contemplation (p. 23).

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All human love, though, is not perfect. When motivated by physical desire alone, love is imperfect and will die. What is required is a deep spiritual attachment. Only then does a physical relationship become an act of love. The physical must be translated into spiritual terms.

This attitude accounts for another distinctive feature in Leone's philosophy of love. The predominant aesthetic principle of his contemporaries insisted that beauty consisted of the proportion of the parts to the whole. Leone argued that this proposition was too basely materialistic. Can all beauty be included within the rigid bounds of proportionality? Is a gleaming diamond or a blazing fire beautiful because of a neat relationship between the parts and the whole? Certainly not. And can a human being be judged beautiful merely on the basis of physical considerations? Leone contended that the aesthetic standard of the "new philosophers" totally ignored the spiritual gleam that constitutes the real beauty of objects and of human beings.

The three dialogues of the *Dialoghi d'Amore* present the reader with a sensitive and idealistic world view. Love pervades the universe. If viewed solely as a work of Renaissance Italy, the *Dialoghi d'Amore* is an important and characteristic literary contribution.

However, the Jewish reader is left with some difficulty in understanding the book and its author. After all, the dialogues were written by Judah Abrabanel, not by a native Italian humanist. Abrabanel, as we have seen, had suffered tremendously through persecutions and exiles. He can hardly have thought that the governing force in the world was love. His experience would have refuted such an idea instantly. Why then did he write a work which would seem so radically at odds with his experiences and the experiences of the Jewish people of whom he was part?

In one passage in the second dialogue we find a significant remark which reveals something of Abrabanel's bitterness towards his oppressors. He recognizes that any theory of love does not and cannot totally encompass human behavior:

Men naturally love one another, as do beasts of the same species; and especially so, men of the same country or land. But this love is not in men as sure and steadfast as in animals. For the fiercest and most

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savage beasts do not turn their savagery against others of their own kind: lions do not rend lions, nor snake poison snakes. But men suffer more evils and deaths at the hands of their fellows than through all other animals and adverse forces of the universe; yes, more men succumb to the enmity, snares and violence of other men than to all other accidental and natural ills together. This decay of the love ordained by nature between men is due to their greed and care for superfluities: which begets feuds not only between far-sundered habitants of different countries, but between those of a single province, a single city, a single household: between brother and brother, parents and children, husband and wife. And to this must be added other human superstitions which give rise to savage enmities (pp. 71-2).

This passage, which stands in contrast to the general flow of the dialogues, is most in harmony with what we would have expected Abrabanel to write. But how can we explain Abrabanel's willingness to suppress these feelings for the most part and to evolve a philosophy of love?

Judah Abrabanel's work should be seen as an attempt to respond to the catastrophes of Jewish expulsion from Spain and other Christian lands. The disillusionment and despair which overwhelmed the exiles led to spiritual depression. How were these Jewish victims to understand their situation? Why had God abandoned them? Did the world of human life make any sense? Sephardic intellectuals had to answer these questions for the masses of Jews and also for themselves. Very often, they found solutions in messianism and mysticism. They had to discover ways to escape the horrors of reality, and they did by finding hope in a speedy redemption or by explaining events in a metaphysical fashion which gave them hidden meaning. Thus, Don Isaac Abrabanel wrote a messianic trilogy in which he predicted the arrival of the Messiah in 1503. He justified his speculation with the argument that the people now needed to know when the Messiah was going to appear.¹² Such knowledge could carry them through their present crisis. Moreover, the rise of the mystical schools in Safed and elsewhere can be correlated to the need to explain events in a spiritually meaningful way.¹³ Messianism and mysticism were natural and deeply sincere means of dealing with the enormous tragedy which engulfed Sephardic Jewry.

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With these responses in mind, we may now understand the thinking of Judah Abrabanel. He attempted to deal with his reality not through traditional Jewish messianism and mysticism. Rather, he reached out to neo-Platonic idealism. The world operated on two levels. This world that we live in is a world of illusions, shadows. The real world, the world of being, is not here. The ideal world of ideas which dwells in light is beyond our every-day experience. Thus Abrabanel's philosophy of love transcends the mundane details of human existence. It grasps at an explanation of the entire cosmos. It sees God, the universe and humanity in broad brushstrokes. When Abrabanel looks too closely at human interaction, he is forced to comment about it bitterly, as we have seen before. Therefore, he prefers not to deal with the grossness of human social reality, but rather to operate on an idealistic plane. In this way, he changes one's focus from dismal reality to a beautiful, idealistic, love-imbued world. Seen in this light, the *Dialoghi d'Amore* is far more than a work of the Italian Renaissance. It is the response of a searching Jewish mind to the Spanish expulsion.

Because Judah Abrabanel's writing was not rooted in traditional Jewish messianism or mysticism, it did not make a large impact on the Jewish world. It was popular, however, among Italian intellectuals. We may assume that Jews who were familiar with Italian culture were influenced by the *Dialoghi d'Amore*. However, since the work was only peripherally significant to Jewry and did not become a main-stream part of Jewish literature and philosophy, its importance as a Jewish response to the expulsion was not seen. For centuries, Leone Ebreo has been evaluated as a product of the Italian Renaissance. We must, however, remember that the author was Judah Abrabanel, victim of expulsions. He was an intellectual Jew searching for answers.

NOTES

1. Biographical details have been drawn from Cecil Roth's introduction to Abrabanel's *The Philosophy of Love*, translated by F. Friedeberg-Seeley and Jean H. Barnes, London, 1937. All page references in the text of this article refer to this volume. See also Cecil Roth, *Jews in the Renaissance*, Philadelphia, 1959, pp. 129f.

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2. Helen Gardner, "The Argument about 'The Ecstasy,'" in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to F. P. Wilson*, Oxford, 1959, p. 287.
3. Menendez y Pelayo, *Historia de las ideas esteticas en España*, Madrid, 1884, Vol. 3, p. 60.
4. "Si tratáredes de amores, en dos onzas que sepáis de la lengua/ Toscana toparáis con León Hebreo, que os hincha las medidas."
5. H. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. 4, Philadelphia, 1894, p. 480.
6. Jacob Agus, *The Evolution of Jewish Thought*, New York, 1959, p. 298.
7. J. Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, trans. David Silverman, Garden City, N. Y., 1966, p. 296.
8. J. Klausner, "Don Judah Abrabanel and his Love-Philosophy," *Tarbitz*, Vol. 3 (1931-32), 79. See also Klausner's introduction to *Mekor Hayyim*, Jerusalem, 1926, p. 62.
9. See the third dialogue in particular, pp. 449-50.
10. See the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book 3, Chapter 54.
11. Cf. Maimonides, *Shemonah Perakim*, Chapter 7.
12. See Abrabanel's introduction to his *Yeshuot Meshiho*, Koenigsberg, 1861, p. 4a. For a full discussion of Abrabanel's messianic works, see B. Netanyahu, *Abravanel*, Philadelphia, 1968, chapter four.
13. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1967, pp. 244f.