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Preface

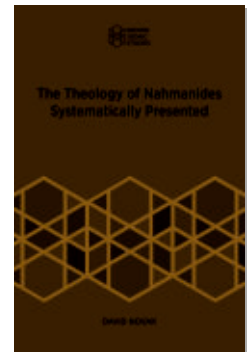
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Preface

In introducing a recent collection of papers on Nahmanides' thought, Isadore Twersky writes, "great is the literary oeuvre of Ramban, embracing as it does halakah, aggadah, Scriptural exegesis, homilies, kabbalah, philosophy, poetry, polemics.... we should mention also his intensive activity as communal leader and spokesman for Spanish Jewry during prolonged periods of internal crisis, antagonism and strife as well as external oppression and turbulence."¹ Given the immensity of Nahmanides' achievement, a definitive study of his work covering all these areas in detail and leading to a general synthesis has yet to be written. This book does not pretend to such comprehensiveness. My task here is the more modest one of uncovering the theology that guides Nahmanides in his exegetical work and informs his reading of Scriptural and rabbinic texts. I hope that this book will prove helpful to students interested in discerning an overall picture of Nahmanides' theology and to the readers of his works.

The main elements of Nahmanides' theology are set forth in the divisions of this book. Each section is based on selections from the texts where the relevant ideas are most clearly presented. In searching for the central themes, I have examined all of Nahmanides' extant writings, but most of the passages chosen are from his *magnum opus*, the *Commentary on the Torah*, which was the culmination of his life's work.² Accompanying these selections are introductory notes and sometimes an endnote. The former sketch the conceptual point made by the Ramban and suggest its role in the context of his thought. The latter seek to situate the point he is making, either by comparison or by contrast, in the larger context of Jewish tradition.

I have tried to see the issues as perennial ones, so that contemporary readers who are interested in Jewish theology – even committed to it – can better see Nahmanides' views as options within an ongoing enterprise. That, indeed, is the main purpose of this book. It is inspired by (but hardly comparable to) the efforts of the classical codifiers of Jewish law, who

reorganized great volumes of heterogenous Talmudic material along more recognizably conceptual lines.³ Their purpose was to make the material more readily available for the normative tasks of their day and the future. In attempting to adopt the methodological model of the classical codifiers, I am expressing a commitment to the view that theology is a normative task for Jewish thinkers today.

To lay out the elements of Nahmanides' theology systematically requires transposing passages from their original contexts. Nahmanides himself did not write a comprehensive treatise on theology. The closest he came was a short work called *Torat ha-Shem Temimah*, which was in fact a long sermon he preached in Barcelona in 1263 just before his famous disputation with the apostate Jew Pablo Christiani before King James of Aragon and his court. But this work, much influenced by Judah Halevi, presents only Nahmanides' theology of history. It deals especially with public miracles and the meaning of those commandments that seem intended to commemorate and celebrate them. It does not deal with the other two main strands of Nahmanides' religious thought: his rationalist themes, which have strong affinities with the ideas of Saadiah Gaon, and the crucial and distinctive kabbalistic elements in his theology. Moreover, the sermon does not reveal how deeply his ongoing critique of Maimonides stimulated his original theological insights. Thus a translation of *Torat ha-Shem Temimah*, or even a discussion of its major points, would not adequately represent the richness of Nahmanides' theology.

In reconstructing that theology on systematic lines, I have resorted as much as possible to the relevant secondary scholarship – most of it of rather recent issue. Even so, the selection and ordering of texts cannot help but appear somewhat arbitrary. Yet because I am convinced that our own discussions in Jewish theology can be greatly enriched by the insights of Nahmanides, I persevered in the arduous and often uncertain task of selecting and ordering his diverse comments and remarks and coping with his notoriously difficult Hebrew style. The fundamentally exegetical nature of Nahmanides' project and his difficult style of writing render his insights less accessible today than those of more systematic Jewish theologians like Saadiah Gaon, Judah Halevi, Maimonides, the author of the *Zohar*, Gersonides, Hasdai ibn Crescas, Joseph Albo, Isaac Abrabanel, Moses Cordovero, Elijah Benamozegh, Hermann Cohen, or Franz Rosenzweig. My task, as I see it, is to help remedy Nahmanides' present undeserved obscurity.

My interest in Nahmanides began at the age of sixteen, when as a Talmud student in Chicago I was first introduced to his *Commentary on the Torah* by my pious teacher, Rabbi Curt Peritz, whose reverence for Nahmanides was clearly marked by his always calling him *Der Ramban Kaudesch*. I echo his distinctive German pronunciation of the name as I so often heard it, "the holy Rabbi Moses ben Nahman." His reverence for Nahmanides stemmed from the influence of Rabbi Moses Schreiber (the

Hatam Sofer, d. 1839), in whose yeshivah in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia (formerly, Pressburg, Hungary) my teacher had studied under the spiritual and lineal descendants of the Hatam Sofer in the years just following the First World War. For it was the Hatam Sofer who greatly urged that the works of Nahmanides be rescued from obscurity and restored to centrality in the curriculum of rabbinic scholars.⁴

As a student in the Jewish Theological Seminary of America during the years 1961-1966, I was privileged to take part in a special research program in Jewish theology led by my late revered teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel. During my last year there I was assigned the task of intense study of the works of Nahmanides, especially his disputes with Maimonides.⁵ That experience focused my lifelong interest in this body of thought. Over the years I have returned to Nahmanides again and again, both in my research on questions of Jewish law and theology, and also for insights into the weekly readings of the Torah, upon which it was my privilege to preach during the more than twenty years I served as a pulpit rabbi.

So it was a welcome invitation when my close friend and colleague, Lenn E. Goodman of the University of Hawaii, the editor of *Studies in Medieval Judaism* for the *Brown Judaic Studies Series*, asked me to write this little book on Nahmanides' theology. I am deeply grateful to Professor Goodman for his patience in waiting for the manuscript (which was far too long in coming), his extraordinary care in editing it (both as regards substance and style), and his continual encouragement of this work and others. Our friendship over the years, sustained over an enormous geographic distance, has demonstrated to me the truth of Aristotle's insight that intellectual friendship is friendship at its very best.

I owe much to David Berger of Brooklyn College, a distinguished scholar of Nahmanides' thought, who read the entire manuscript and taught me much by his insightful and learned comments. I am appreciative too for the helpful comments of two anonymous readers of the manuscript I prepared. Since Nahmanides was one of the great Talmudists of all times, my understanding of his use of rabbinic texts has profited from my many discussions with one of the great Talmudists of our own time, my friend, David Weiss Halivni of Columbia University, now also the Rector of the Institute of Traditional Judaism, where he and I are both privileged to teach. I feel obligated to express thanks here also to a deceased scholar whom I never knew personally, Charles B. Chavel. We both served as rabbis in Far Rockaway, New York, but at different times. All students of the works of Nahmanides today owe a debt of gratitude to the painstaking efforts of the late Rabbi Chavel in providing us with carefully edited versions of most of Nahmanides' works, along with many useful cross references to the vast Nahmanidean corpus and the works of his predecessors, contemporaries and successors.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my teacher, mentor and friend, Harry H. Ruskin. Like Nahmanides, he was not afraid to plumb the depths of the Torah. The purity of his faith, the power of his mind, and the nobility of his character inspired me when he was alive and continue to inspire me after his death. May his memory be blessed!

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