**The Influence of Christian Theology on Jewish Biblical Exegesis**

**in 15th Century Portugal**

In this talk we will see how the influence of Christian theology bubbles out in unexpected places, in the commentary of a Jewish exegete on the eve of the expulsion from Spain; and how the social and historical reality influenced his exegesis. As a bonus, we will also be able to learn about the culture of the Jews in that period, their social status, and what disturbed them — as that exegete saw them.

R. Joseph Hayyun was the dean of the rabbis in Lisbon in the era before the expulsion from Spain. His dates of birth and death are not known precisely, but he apparently died before the expulsion, after quite a long life. Even though very little is known about him, we learn from the account of his student R. Joseph Jabez that R. Hayyun was considered the dean of the sages of that generation. One of the scholars who was in contact with him was the well-known intellectual Don Isaac Abarbanel, who lived in Lisbon for 46 years. The greatest of the Sephardic halakhic decisors of the last 500 years, R. Joseph Caro, who lived into the 16th century, also mentions him, in his monumental *Shulhan Arukh*.

Hayyun wrote commentaries to many of the books of the Bible. Until recently, most of them remained only in manuscript, but today all his books have been edited (and some published) except for his commentary on the Song of Songs. In this talk, I will give examples from his commentary on Psalms, which I edited and published three years ago.

In various studies that have been published on his commentaries, scholars (I among them) have pointed to his unique exegetical method. In my own work on his commentary to Psalms, I showed that Hayyun stuck to the plain sense of the text, staying faithful to the language of the Bible as used in its biblical context. In our context, we should note his efforts to refrain from understanding the psalms as historically, relevant to a period later than that of their author. For example, the commentators who preceded Hayyun interpreted 63 psalms as prayers for the future redemption. Hayyun concurred in just one-third of these cases; the rest he explained as applicable to the time of the psalm’s author.

On this account, whenever Hayyun did give a psalm an anachronistic, non-contextual meaning, it immediately stands out, forcing us as readers to try to understand what impelled him to do so. A significant proportion of the time, his departures from his standard exegetical method are in response to arguments made by the Church (as we will see shortly). Apparently, Hayyun felt a deep sense of responsibility to the Jews who were living among Christians, groaning under the hardships of the exile, susceptible to Christian theological persuasion, and in need of words of encouragement and comfort.

In the introduction to his commentary, Hayyun explains that, after completing his commentaries on Isaiah and Jeremiah, he decided to proceed directly to Psalms, having been asked to do so by his friends. Hayyun does not explain what prompted their request. But it cannot have been because of the use of the psalms in prayer, since the majority of the psalms are *not* so used. It could be that the motive behind their request was the extensive Christian exegesis that had developed around the psalms, and the necessity this created among believing Jews, for exegetical alternatives.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how, in certain places in his commentary to Psalms, Hayyun departed from his usual method and took the road of confrontation with Christian theology and exegesis, and how he sought to use his words to encourage his Jewish contemporaries. Hayyun’s method differs from that of his predecessors. With a single exception, Hayyun refrains from writing explicitly against Christological exegesis. In Psalm 43, the sons of Korah (identified in the titles of Psalms 42 and 44-49, and so implicitly responsible for Psalm 43 as well) pray to be protected against “those who are deceitful.” From Hayyun’s perspective, the “sons of Korah” could have lived no later than the time of David. Yet he chooses to give these words a contemporary meaning, interpreting this prayer as the poet’s request for assistance in coping with Christian libel and theological attacks. The reason they are called “deceitful” in the psalm, in his opinion, was:

that they were masters of deceit — using words to deceive us, and causing us grief with verses from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, claiming that our Messiah has come and that God is three-in-one and that he cohabited with a virgin, and all the rest of it.

Hayyun molds the epithet “deceitful” into a description of Christian bullying of the Jews — leveling false accusations against them, harassing them with Christian exegesis, and reading into the text meanings that really derive from Christian theology.

In many places in his commentary, Hayyun insists that the heads of the Church are behaving rudely. His purpose is to repudiate their argument that the Lord had made a covenant with them in place of the covenant with Israel. When Psalm 43 says, “Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust, deliver me!” Hayyun sees harsh criticism of the Christians and the Muslims:

“Against an ungodly people” alludes to the Ishmaelite nations, for they vaunt their sanctity and display themselves as holy, when on the contrary they are adulterers and embezzlers and thieves. And “those who are deceitful and unjust” alludes to the nations of Edom, for they are masters of deceit, using words to deceive us … and they are masters of injustice, for they do great injustice in their courts, convicting the innocent and acquitting the guilty.

This comment was deleted from the manuscripts by the censor, but remains in an old printed edition. With this comment, Hayyun accuses the Christian sages of forgery, of pretending to be sacred and sublime but really acting indecently and immorally.

Elsewhere Hayyun describes the great suffering inflicted on the Jews by their Gentile neighbors: the false accusations, whose only purpose was, to justify attacking and oppressing the Jews, or compelling them to “return” loot they had not really taken. Hayyun describes the blows the Gentiles inflict on Israel, as cruel blows that so deform the face and the body that even the very mother and brothers of the victims are unable to identify them. In the eyes of those who inflict the blows, the Jews are given even less respect than animals.

But in his opinion, even though the Israelites have suffered terrible burdens in the two exiles, the exile among the Muslims was harsher. That is why David complains first about the Ishmaelite exile and only later about the exile to Edom. The anachronism in this exegesis is obvious.

To Hayyun, it was important to refute the Church’s contention that God had abandoned His covenant with Israel and that He had given a new Torah. For example, in places where the psalmist calls Israel God’s “possession,” Hayyun explains that the use of this expression means that, just as a possession that one inherits from one’s ancestors belongs to one **forever**, so Israel would **forever** be God’s possession. Hayyun explains the psalmist’s use of the image of a dove for Israel by noting that doves are faithful to each other forever and never change mates.

When it comes to verses that ostensibly teach that the Lord made a covenant with the other nations as well, Hayyun explains them, in such a way as to repudiate that understanding. For example, in his comment on Ps 105:6, “O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.,” Hayyun writes:

Even though Ishmael and the sons of Keturah were born to him, none is called his “offspring” but Isaac: “it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you” [Gen 21:12]. The others were “the sons of Abraham’s concubines” [Gen 25:6].

“Children of Jacob, his chosen ones” — but *not* “children of Isaac,” since Esau’s children too were the children of Isaac. Jacob and Esau were the sons of one mother. So the children of Esau are excluded here by calling Abraham’s offspring “children of Jacob.”

According to this interpretation, the expression “offspring of Abraham” is intended to eliminate the possibility of defining the Ishmaelites (the Muslims) as continuing the “offspring” of Abraham, the Lord’s chosen one. And the expression “children of Jacob” is intended to eliminate the same possibility for the Christians. The Jews alone are Abraham’s successors.

In order to prove that the Torah is eternal —never to be altered or annulled — Hayyun explains that the psalmist’s intent in the words “Long ago I learned from your decrees that you have established them forever” (Ps 119:152) was to say: The decree of the Lord — that is, the Torah — is eternal, not for some limited time, as the Christian priests claim.

The special closeness between the Holy One and the Jewish people, also finds expression in a divine providence restricted exclusively to them. He did not put them under the supervision of one of His angels, as He did the other nations of the world. For this reason, “‘let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice’ [Ps 105:3] applies to those of the other nations who convert to Judaism. They should rejoice to realize that the Lord Himself will rule over them, not an angel or a star.” In this way, Hayyun seeks to instill in his readers pride in their Judaism.

The continuation of the exile made it extremely difficult for the Jews to believe in the possibility that redemption would in fact arrive, or even that the covenant with God still stood and had not been abrogated as the Church claimed. Hayyun sought to reassure his readers that the exile was temporary and that redemption would indeed come. For this reason, he explained Psalm 78:9-10, the prayer of Asaph, who lived in the same generation as King David, as a list of proofs that redemption was an unstoppable process. In his opinion, Asaph enumerated four possible things that might prevent salvation from occurring, none of which was relevant in the case of God. This proved that redemption was inevitable.

The other nations of the world, who mock the Jews and say they will *not* be redeemed, Hayyun calls “clowns.” For they “make fun of us when we recall the redemption that is in store for us. About them, David has already said, ‘I say to the boastful, “Do not boast”’ [Ps 75:4].”

The cause of the continuation of the exile, in Hayyun’s opinion, is the sins of Israel. This is how the righteous are customarily treated, in order that they may inherit the world to come. In his opinion, one should not take the better material status of the Christians as a sign of their righteousness and correctness; reality proves the opposite.

In various periods, the heads of the Church attempted to convert the Jews. According to Hayyun, they directed their efforts primarily at the rabbis, under the assumption that converting them would have a great influence on the rest of the Jewish public. This, for example, is how Hayyun explains Ps 83:4, “They lay crafty plans against your people; they consult together against those you protect”:

“Against those you protect” — they are your pious ones and your sages, who are protected in the hidden recesses of your heart, and who will be rewarded with the great goodness that you have hidden away for them. For the Christians will try even harder … to incite these people to belief in the Christian faith, imagining that when they apostasize, the rest of the people will “see and do likewise” [Jud 7:17].

Hayyun explains many psalms as asking that when redemption comes, God will punish the nations who have oppressed Israel. Hayyun extends one of these requests even further, explaining that the poet is praying that the Lord will punish the nations not just for killing Israel but also for being proud of doing so. Hayyun explains another saying as a prayer that redemption comes, revenge against the nations who have oppressed the Jews will be decisive, not partial as it was in the earlier redemptions.

Psalms also discusses why bad things happen to good people (and good things happen to bad people). Hayyun makes use of Psalm 73:10, which complains that this phenomenon leads to apostasy, to describe the difficult situation of Israel in exile. He writes:

And so, on account of the pride of the wicked, and their success, God’s people return home day after day afflicted and depressed. For these wicked ones torture them and crush them in the gate and there is none to rescue them. And they give them to drink from “the cup of reeling” … On this account, they say, “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?” [Ps 73:11].

Hayyun saw in Christianity a religion that sinned by incarnating God in the flesh, a sin that Psalm 50 considers a defect greater than any other. So Hayyun attempted to explain metaphorically every verse that could possibly be understood as describing God in physical terms. Hayyun even put in David’s own mouth a saying that, when God speaks with Israel, he does not worry about using physical metaphors, in contrast to the times he speaks with the other nations, when he *is* concerned about that — because they would not understand correctly, and would believe that he really has physical qualities and bodily organs.

To sum up: we can state confidently that Christian exegesis and Christian theology influenced Hayyun’s own exegesis. However, unlike his predecessors, he chose not to confront Christological interpretations, only other Christian theological concepts.

Hayyun carefully chose those psalms that he could explicate in terms of exile and redemption, and he recast them into his own period. The picture of the situation of the Jews in that period that arises from his comments to those psalms is a gloomy one. Hayyun refers to the lowly status of the Jews, the terrible blows and tortures that are their lot, the false accusations to which their neighbors subject them with in order to steal their property, and the Jews’ own indecision about abandoning their religion. Hayyun also deals with the efforts of the Church to convert the Jews, especially the greatest of them. So he sought to reassure them and persuade them that the covenant of the Lord with Israel remained in force and that the Torah would never change. Additionally, Hayyun tried to plant in the hearts of his readers a faith that redemption, though it might tarry, would certainly come. These subjects receive special emphasis when Scripture itself makes them clear. For his readers groaning in the exile, they were a refreshing breeze.