Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven was apparently born in Gerona, in northern Spain, and his life spanned the years 1315–1375, approximately. He served as head of the Jewish communities and led the yeshiva in Barcelona. He had many students, including Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet (Ribash) and Rabbi Hasdai Crescas. He earned his living as a physician, and he may have been a doctor at the king’s court. For a certain period, he was imprisoned, along with his students and other prominent community members, in the wake of accusations made about them to the authorities. When their innocence had been demonstrated, they were released (Responsa of the Ribash, §376-377). During his lifetime, the Black Plague epidemic broke out in Europe, and he described it as follows: “We saw […] that primordial arrangements of nature were disturbed, for an evil descended from God in that year upon most of the world’s inhabitants, who suffered then from strange diseases […], so much so that the world suffered more change and upset in that one year than it previously had experienced in two hundred years. In many places, things befell people like what happened to Dathan and Abiram; some people and everything they had simply came to an end and were extirpated” (*Derashot Ha-Ran*, §10).

Rabbi Nissim wrote novellae on the Talmud and a commentary to the Rif (Rabbi Isaac Al-Fasi). His famous book of sermons is based on explanations of selected passages in the Pentateuch, and his commentaries there offer comprehensive explanations, philosophical in nature, of such topics as the development of the created world, the sale of the birthright, the power of blessings and prayer, Moses’ mission, the power of prophecy, and reward and punishment.

Rabbi Nissim began to compose a comprehensive commentary to the Pentateuch, which he never finished. All five manuscripts that include this commentary end at Genesis 23:20. In this work, he often opens his commentary with a list of questions and then presents his answers at length. He integrates a simple contextual [*peshat*] reading of the verses with considerable dependence on classic rabbinic interpretation. On occasion, he tries to support the rabbinic *midrash* with a *peshat* understanding of the verse. In a number of places, he professes allegiance to classical *midrash*, as in these statements: “One should not take issue with the Sages, for they know” (on Gen. 4:1) and “Just as we were commanded to follow their agreement regarding the Torah’s laws, so were we commanded regarding all that has been told to us on the basis of received tradition regarding opinions and the explication of biblical verses, whether that verse concerns a *mitzvah* or not, and anyone who deviates from them, even in a matter unrelated to clarifying a *mitzvah*, is an *epikoros* and has no share in the World to Come” (*Derashot Ha-Ran*, §13). Nonetheless, he sometimes offered interpretations that are alternatives to the rabbinic *midrash* (e.g., at Gen. 4:13-22).

Rabbi Nissim was familiar with the Jerusalem Targum and Targum Onqelos (Aramaic translations of the Bible). In scores of places he cites the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides and the writings of Maimonides. He was influenced greatly by the biblical commentaries of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides), but did not mention him by name.

His commentary to Genesis exerted an influence on such later commentators as Hasdai Crescas, Don Isaac Abravanel, Avraham Saba, Isaac Karo, and others, who cited his words and copied passages from his commentary.