Rabbi Moshe Almosnino (Greece 1515-1580)

Rabbi Almosnino was born in Salonica in 1515. Rabbi Almosnino belonged to a prominent Sephardic family, which fled Aragon after two of his ancestors died on the stake, condemned by the Inquisition. Rabbi Moshe Almosnino was the rabbi of the main Spanish Sephardic community “Neve Shalom”.
Rabbi Almosnino was a prolific author, and the earliest known writer in Ladino.

He was also a very prominent community leader. In 1565 he represented the Jewish communities at an audience with the sultan Selim II, petitioning the confirmation of the civil rights of the Jews who lived in the Ottoman Empire.
Anticipating by a few centuries the idea of Tora uMada (the compatibility between Tora and sciences), Rabbi Almosnino, who had great interest in all scientific fields and particularly in astronomy, wrote commentaries on Aristotle’s Physics and on John Sacrobosco’s Sphaera Mundi. He translated and commented George von Peuerbach’s Teoriae Novae Planetarum, composed an exposition of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and a commentary on al-Ghazali’s work.
Rabbi Moshe Almosnino is the author of many important Jewish books as well.
For example:
“Yede moshe” , a commentary on the five megillot: Shir haShrim, Ruth, Ekha (Lamentations) Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) and Esther.
“Pirqe Moshe” an exposition of the treatise Pirqe Abot Chapters of the fathers (Salonica 1563).
“Tefila leMoshe” a book on the praises and wonders of the Tora. Based on the Psalms.
He also wrote in Spanish and in Ladino (Spanish with Hebrew letters)
“Regimiento de la Vida” (The rules of life), written in Spanish. He dedicated tis work to his son Shim’on (Salonica 1564). It is a guide to the moral conduct meant for educated young men not fluent in Hebrew. It deals, among other things, with the nature of good and evil, Divine providence vis-a-vis free will, the importance of education, etc. To this book was appended a chapter called: “El Tratado de los suenyos” (A treatise on Dreams).
“Extremos y Grandezas de Constantinopla”, originally written in ladino was transliterated and republished by Jacob Cansino in Madrid, 1638. In this extraordinary book he describes the life in Constantinople. Its weather, its inhabitants, the life in the city, etc. It is the earliest known book written in Ladino and it is priceless for historians.
Rabbi Almosnino’s most famous book, Yede Moshe (600 pages long), is a commentary to the five Meguilot, among them Meguilat Esther.
Rabbi Almosnino’s expertise was “language” and beyond his mastery of Hebrew grammar he was extremely sharp and sensitive for textual analysis of the Peshat (the text’s plain literary meaning). As it was the way of Sephardic rabbis, he analyzes the Peshat independently from the Midrashim.
We will see now one example from his commentary to the book of Esther. Rabbi Almosnino asks himself, and the reader, why do we need the seemingly superfluous first chapter of the Meguila. What can be learned from it, vis-a-vis the main plot of the story, Haman’s plan to exterminate the Jewish people?
Rabbi Almosnino shows that when we examine closely the first chapter of the book of Esther, we get a better idea of the magnitude of the miracle of Purim.
A few examples:
The story of Esther begins in verse 1:1, telling us that Ahashverosh reigned over 127 cities of the Persian Empire. Why would the Megilla need to tell us these seemingly irrelevant details? Because we should understand that the decree of Haman to kill the Jews of Persia, would have implied the end of the Jewish nation. The Persian Empire, at the time of Ahashverosh, was so large that there were no Jews living outside these 127 cities. This shows us the magnitude of the miracle: 1. There was no escape for the Jews, and later on . 2. the entire Jewish nation was saved from Haman’s decree.
In the following lines, pasuq 1:3, Rabbi Almosnino draws an outstanding psychological profile of Ahashverosh. Unlike a psychologist who examines his patient’s profile from a therapy session, Rabbi Almosnino delved into Ahashverosh personality from a profound “psychoanalysis “ of the text.
bishnat shalosh lemolkho: The Meguila describes Ahashverosh as an inexperienced, naive King. What defines a King’s lack of experience? A King is surrounded by advisers. The advisers very often would give the King an advice that favors them personally, rather than the King or the Kingdom. But they would always disguise their advice as if they are favoring the King or the Kingdom. An experienced King is able to detect these tricks. An inexperienced King would be tricked by his advisers’ maneuvers. The book of Esther is presenting us with this fact, Ahashverosh third year in power, to anticipate that the King is inexperienced. Later on in the Meguila, we will see all kind of maneuvers coming from Haman, which Ahashverosh was unable to detect. When Haman presented the King with his plan to kill the Jews, his way to achieve a personal vendetta for a private affront, Haman describes the plan not as related to his private interest, but to the King’s interest.“These people do not follow your rules… It is not in the interest of the King to let this people live”. The inexperienced King took the bait.
‘asa mishte lekhol sarav va’abadav. “The King threw a party to all his servants”, ergo, says rabbi Almosnino, this King is “a people pleaser”. Normally, the people would honor the King, throwing a party in his honor. But Ahashverosh was insecure of his people’s loyalty and of their love for him. He must have had the emotional need to be loved and praised, in order to feel good with himself. Therefore, his decisions will be made having in mind not the benefit of the Kingdom, but his own image. As a people pleaser he would do and execute whatever would reflect positively in his image and vice-versa. This is why the King will eventually accepts Haman’s evil request: to please his favorite adviser. On the other hand, Haman, very cleverly, does not reveal the name of the people he wants to exterminate. Haman never mentions to Ahashverosh: “I want to kill the Jews”. He advises the King to get rid of “a” people , anonymous, unnamed. In a way that no one Ahashverosh knows would be displeased.
behar-oto et ‘osher kebod malkhuto ve-et yeqar…: “Ahashverosh threw the big party to show-off his wealth and the magnificence of his splendorous Kingship.” Rabbi Almosnino explains that there are two major drives for powerful people: money and image/vanity (ga’ava). For some people, money is number 1 priority. And these people would sacrifice their image and honor in order to gain more money. But for other people, image/honor is above money. These people would spend all their money to boost their image. Ahashverosh, Rabbi Almosnino says, belongs to the second group. He spent a fortune in his party just to advance his image and self-pride in the eyes of all his subjects. Rabbi Almosnino explains that vanity was the consequence of Ahashverosh’s insecurity and low self esteem. And knowing this will help us understand that because of his arrogance and insecure character, he would probably not consider backing down from his decisions.
And why is it important for the reader of the Meguilla to know this about Ahashverosh? Because later on in the Meguila, once the decree is made and signed by the King, the reader might think that if the Jews collect enough money, they will be able to buy the King’s favor and make him cancel his decree. But once we know that for this King money is below image/honor, and that backing down from his decision would have been psychologically impossible for a person with a low self esteem, you would think that there is no way to make this decree disappear! (My son Ya’aqob explains that, projecting his own personality, when Ahashverosh wishes to reward Mordekhay for his services to the crown, he does not think of a monetary reward for Mordekhay but of an honorific reward that would enhance “Mordekhay’s image”. This is why Ahashverosh accepts Haman’s suggestion to lead Mordekhay on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, “This is what is done for the man the king wishes to honor!”). Having all this in mind, when you read the Meguila for the first time and you see that Ahashverosh is insobornable, proud and stubborn, you say to yourself: “this decree cannot be undo”, thus, you get to better appreciate the magnitude of the miracle of Purim.

Read Rabbi Almosnino's Books

You can find the Hebrew books of Rabbi Moshe Almosnino in www.hebrewbooks.org

For "Regimiento de la vida" (ancient Spanish) click **here** .

For "Extremos y grandezas de Constantinopla" (Spanish) click **here**.