Rabbi Emanuel Abohab (1555-1628) and the Jewish "Mental Law"

Rabbi Emanuel Abohab was born in the city of Porto, Portugal, in 1555. He was the great-grandson of the famous rabbi Isaac Abohab, also known as the Gaon of Castile (d. 1493).

Rabbi Abohab lost his parents at an early age and he was raised by his grandfather, Abraham Abohab. In Portugal the Jews had to live like *anusim* (crypto-Jews) or Marranos, unable to practice Judaism. In 1585 he emigrated to Italy and since then he dedicated his life to encouraging *anusim* living as Catholics to escape from Portugal and Spain and embrace Judaism in Italy and, from 1596, in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

He lived for short time in various Italian cities, such as Pisa and Spoleto. His writing career began in an unusual way. In 1608 he wrote a treatise on the famous Latin phrase *"Humanum est peccare, angelicum se emendare, diabolicum perseverare"*, "To err is human, to amend [our mistakes] is angelic, and to persevere [in one's sin] is perverse." In this short treatise Rabbi Abohab exposed this sentence from the Jewish perspective of Teshuba. By doing this, he wished to to reach out to the crypto-Jews, who knew Latin better than Hebrew, and persuade them to amend their ways and come back to Judaism.

In 1615 he established himself in Venice, a major center of Jewish life at the time, where he was invited to serve as the rabbi of the Jewish-Portuguese community of that city. That year he began his most important book, "Nomology or Legal Discourses".

Towards the end of his life, Rabbi Abohab led a group of Yehudim to Erets Israel and he finally settled in

Yerushalayim. There, he also continued his work to encourage *anusim* to come back to their origins. He died in 1628.

“NOMOLOGIA O DISCURSOS LEGALES”

This book was originally written in Spanish and first published in Amsterdam in 1629, a year after the author’s death. The book “Nomology or Legal Discourses” deals primarily with the subject of Tora she be’al pe, commonly known as the “Oral Law”, which Rabbi Abohab with an excellent judgment calls “Mental Law”, i.e., the explanation, exposition and application of the Mitsvot, as our Sages taught.

This topic was very critical for the *anusim* since most of them were educated in convents, and although they knew very well the Biblical text, all they had learned was the Christian explanations of it, and they lacked the mental apparatus to process the Tora in the original Jewish way.

One example: In his book Rabbi Abohab dedicates two chapters (Section 2, Chapter 18 and 19) to denounce how contemporary Catholic translations deliberately deviated from the literal meaning of the Biblical text to suit their dogmas of faith. This sort of things contributed to the “mental” switch, from the Jewish to the gentile mode of understanding the Bible.

The book “Nomologia” (nomology means “the science of the laws of the mind”) is divided into two sections.

The first section contains 25 chapters and 30 chapters the second section.

Some illustrations

Section 1

1: 9: (original text) *“En el qual se prueva como es impossible entenderse el perfecto modo de la observancia de los preceptos divinos sin la doctrina de los Sabios”*(“In which it is shown

that it is impossible to understand the perfect way for the observance of the divine precepts without the doctrine of the Elders”)

From Chapter 15 to 21 the author shows that the Mental Law is necessary for the observance of mitsvot, and as an example he brings the Rabbis’ calculation of the complex Hebrew calendar, which combines the cycles of the sun and moon.

In chapters 22, 23 and 24 he exposes the 13 principles of Halakhic interpretation (hermeneutics) of Rabbi Yshma’el.

Section 2

This section explains that HaShem gave us the written Tora and the “Mental Law”; how is the level of prophecy reached; the superior level of Moshe Rabbenu’s prophecy and the history of the uninterrupted transmission of the “Mental Law” since Moses until his own days. One of the last rabbanim mentioned is Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575)

More, from the original Spanish text:

Chapter 14 (on the authority of the Sanhedrin). *“En el que se trata el principio y institucion del Supremo magistrado de los setenta y un Senadores [Sanhedrín] y de la obediencia que le devia todo el pueblo de Israel”*

Chapter 26 (on the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain) *“En el que se cuenta el destierro de los iudios de los reynos de Castilla en el año de cinco mil y dozientos y cinquenta y dos, y el de Portugal que sucedió de alli a seis años,las causas que movieron a aquellos reyes a desterrarlos etc.”*

To download the book “Nomologia” click here

NOTE: *When reading this book, the reader should know that in old Spanish (and English) the letter “S” at the beginning or in the middle of the word, is used to be written taller than today’s “s”, and it gives the feeling of being an “f”.*