Rabbi Hasday Crescas (1340-1411)

Rabbi Hasday Crescas (1340-1411) was born in Barcelona, Spain in the winter of 1340. He was a rabbi, a philosopher and a statesman. A student of the famous rabbi Nisim Gerondi, also known as the Ran. One of his colleagues and friends was the famous Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshat, the Ribash.

In the year 1370 he was assigned by the King Pedro IV de Aragon to adjudicate certain cases concerning Jews, and received legal queries from Jews throughout the Kingdom of Aragon and abroad.

With the accession of King John I, *el cazador* , in 1387 Rabbi Crescas became even more familiar with the royal household. In 1389 he moved to Zaragoza, seat of the main royal court, and served there as the rabbi of the city. In 1390 he was empowered by the throne to act as judge of all the Jews of the Kingdom of Aragon.

Things changed dramatically for the Jews of Spain in the year 1391. The cause of the violence was the incitement of a Christian monk named Ferrán Martinez. The priest's speeches of hatred toward the Jews raised public expectations of a mass conversion of Jews and sparked popular riots. Angry crowds entered the Juderias, the city's Jewish section, attacked its residents and pillaged their houses and businesses. On June 6, 1391, rioters entered the Juderia of Sevilla, blocked the two exits from the quarter, and set it on fire. An estimated 4,000 Jews were killed that day. Most of those who survived converted or left the city.

The progroms soon extended to Aragon and all over Spain. Hundreds of Jewish communities in Valencia, Majorca, and Catalonia were destroyed, thousands of Jews were killed, and more than 100,000 were converted by force to Christianity.

Despite Rabbi Crescas' efforts to have his family protected, his only son was murdered in the riots of Barcelona. He wrote about his murdered son, who chose to die as a Jew rather than convert: "My only son, a twenty years old bridegroom, a lamb without blemish, was sacrificed among other martyrs, for the sanctification of the name of God…".

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After the progroms of 1391 Rabbi Crescas devoted himself to the reconstruction of the devastated Jewish communities of the Kingdom of Aragon. He also secured passage for thousands of *conversos*, Jews that had adopted the Christian religion under duress, to sail for places outside Christendom, like North Africa or the Land of Israel, where they could return openly to Judaism. Among them was the Ribash, who escaped to Tunis.

Rabbi Hasday Crescas died in Zaragoza in 1411.

HIS BOOKS

Rabbi Crescas’ life was very intense and he had a very limited time for writing. As part of a campaign to combat the Christianizing literature aimed to convert the Jews, he wrote in Catalan his “Refutation of the Christian Principles”. There is a translation of this book into English done by my friend, Professor Daniel Lasker, from Ben Gurion University. See here
The most famous book of Rabbi Crescas is “Or HaShem”. In it Rabbi Crescas praises the immensity of Maimonides’ work but disagrees with him in many areas. One example: according to Maimonides, the opening words of the Ten Commandants, “I am the Lord your God” (Ex. 20:2) constitute the positive commandment to believe in the existence of God. Rabbi Crescas, by contrast, argued that to believe in the existence of God cannot be a commandment itself. It must be a presupposition for the other commandments. Before one can speak of a divine commandment one must be convinced of the existence of a Divine Commander. For rabbi Crescas belief is involuntary, and one can only be reasonably commanded to do what one has the power to choose to do. Therefore, he thinks that the belief in the existence of God is a preamble for all the other commandments, but not a commandment in itself.
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