Rabbi David Nieto (1654-1720) and the Sephardic community of London

Portrait of Rabbi David ben Pinehas Nieto

FROM VENICE TO LONDON

Rabbi David Nieto was born in Venice, Italy, in 1654. At an early age he moved to Livorno, a very important Jewish community at the time, and devoted himself to Tora study. In Livorno, he acted as a rabbi, Dayan and also as a physician , since like many other rabbis in Italy at that time, he studied medicine at the University of Padua. Rabbi Nieto was also a Renascence man: a distinguished scientist, philosopher, physician, poet, mathematician, and astronomer. In 1702 at the age of 48 he was appointed Hacham of the Sephardic Community of London "Sha'ar HaShamayim". Let us remember that the Jews were expelled from England in 1290, during the reign of Edward I, and did not return for centuries. In 1655, following the intervention of the famous Rabbi Manasseh ben Israel, Oliver Cromwell readmitted Jews to England and thus began what is to this day called the Spanish and Portuguese Sephardic community and its splendid building, Bevis Marks, the oldest synagogue in England (see here). The first members of this Spanish-Portuguese community in London were mainly Jews from Amsterdam, including some highly successful businessmen. All members of the community spoke and wrote in Spanish or Portuguese, since they or their parents were originally from Spain or Portugal. Rabbi Nieto served the London community until his death in 1728. His son, Rabbi Isaac Nieto, was appointed in his place as rabbi of this community.

HIS FIRST BOOKS

Rabbi Nieto wrote his first book on one of his favorite subjects: the calendar. "Pascologia", was written in Italian

and explains the differences between the Gentile calendars—the Greek Orthodox calendar, the Roman calendars—and the Jewish calendar, showing the miscalculations in the gentile calendar since the first Council of Nicaea. (325) until 1692. Two years later, he published his book "De la Divina Providencia" which explains, among other things, that the concept of "nature", as opposed to "Creation", is a secular idea. The way Judaism explains the dynamic between God and Creation is by using the verbal construction "hif'il" which in Hebrew defines when: "A" causes "B" to produce "C". Thus, for example, when the Sages describe that the Creator produces rain, they formulate the idea using this conjugation. For example: *mashib haruach morid hageshem*, which means: God (A) produces natural phenomena ("B") —temperature changes, air pressure air, etc.— that produce wind and rain ("C"). What Gentiles call "nature" is, so to speak, God's modus operandi. But nature cannot be confused with God, as Spinoza, a contemporary of Rabbi Nieto, affirmed. This book was highly praised by the famous Hacham Zevi Ashkenazi and by Rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulai (the "Jidah").

THE SECOND CUZARI

Rabbi David Nieto's most famous book is undoubtedly "Matteh Dan" (this is how the author writes these two words in Hebrew). It was written in a bilingual edition: Hebrew and Spanish, and published in London in 1714. In this book, Rabbi Nieto shows the authenticity of the rabbinical tradition (Tora SheBealpe) demonstrating the intellectual integrity of the rabbis of the Talmud. He explains that the disagreements among the Sages—supposed evidence of a faulty tradition—never focus on the essential laws of the Torah (shorashim or roots) but only on the details (anafim or branches) of the commandments, or the new halakhic cases that had no legal precedent. "Matteh Dan" is also called the Second Cuzari, and is divided into five chapters, which the author calls "dialogues", because it was written in the style of imaginary conversations between a rabbi and a gentile king, "the Cuzari", the king of the

Khazars. Rabbi Nieto explains that the reason he modeled his book after the famous book by Rabbi Yehuda haLevi (1075-1141) is that "…the Cuzari demonstrates the truth of the Written Torah, and this book, which will be called the second Cuzari will prove the truth of the Oral Torah."

MATTEH DAN, CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

1. In the first dialogue Rabbi Nieto demonstrates that the Oral Torah existed even before the written Torah, and that an oral tradition is always necessary to understand any written law.

2. In the second dialogue, in my opinion the most original of all chapters, Rabbi Nieto proves –using arguments and principles of history, psychology, logic, and even economics– that the Oral Tora could not have been made up by the rabbis, because it benefits no one, particularly the rabbis who transmitted and sanctioned it. Rabbinic Judaism, he says, was received and passed down from generation to generation with extreme care and devotion.

3. The third chapter talks about the different categories of laws included in the Oral Torah. He also explains what kind of laws there is consensus among the rabbis and what laws do not.

4. The fourth chapter shows that the Sages of the Mishnah and the Gemara (□"□□) had a very deep knowledge of the sciences, such as medicine, physics, biology, etc.

5. The fifth chapter deals with the Hebrew calendar. Knowledge of the calendar demands a very deep expertise on astronomy, physics, mathematics, etc. Because it is the only calendar that combines the lunar year –354 days– with the solar year –365 days– and for this combination to be calculated accurately, it is necessary to know very precisely the exact duration of the moon's cycle and the exact duration of earth orbit. Rabbi Nieto mentions that the Christian calendar, which is only based on the orbit of the earth around the sun, had to

be modified by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582: that year the calendar jumped from October 4 to 15 in 24 hours, and all this was because gentile scientists did not have the exact information of the solar cycle. The Elders of Israel knew the lunar cicle with an accuracy of 5 decimal places, something that was recently confirmed by NASA (see Video below). This is perhaps the most technical chapter in the book, and one that can be difficult for the beginner, but it is a must-read for those who want to know more about the details of our Hebrew calendar, and understand the role that rabbinic tradition plays in it and in many other cases.

WHAT AUDIENCE IS THIS BOOK ADDRESSED TO?

Rabbi Nieto wrote this book for the *bene anusim* of his time, that is, for the descendants of those Jews who, due to the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, lived as Christians for generations, and now returned to Judaism and wanted to know more about it. Many Bene Anusim were university students, professionals, doctors, and knew the Bible very well –because of their Christian background– but they were completely ignorant of the Jewish Oral Tora and its principles. Matteh Dan was also written with religious dissidents in mind, such as the disciples of Spinoza and Uriel de Acosta, who criticized Rabbinic Judaism.

Matteh Dan should be required reading for anyone beginning to study the Mishnah and Gemara, or for anyone wishing to understand the most basic principles of normative Rabbinic Judaism.


MATTEH DAN
CUZARI
DAVID NIETO
מטה דן
כוזרי