Rabbi Menashe ben Israel (1604-1657) the most famous Jew in the world

Portrait of Menasseh ben Israel by Rembrandt

Ribbi Menashe was born in Portugal in 1604, under the name Manoel Dias Soeiro. His family moved to the Netherlands in 1610, when Amsterdam was an important center of Jewish life in Europe. Like many other Jews arriving from Portugal, Ribbi Menashe's family openly returned to Judaism.

Young Menashe received the best possible education within the Sephardic tradition, which maintains that secular studies should complement religious studies. He excelled in his Talmudic studies and deeply knew the Tanakh. He mastered the entire spectrum of Jewish thought, from the school of Maimonides to the writings of the most famous Kabbalists.

He had an extensive knowledge of medicine, mathematics, and astronomy in secular matters. He stood out in languages: he spoke ten languages. He was also well-versed in classical literature and the writings of non-Jewish philosophers and theologians. This knowledge enabled him to debate with non-Jewish intellectuals and refute their ideas when they contradicted Judaism.

At the surprisingly young age of 18, in 1620, he was appointed as the rabbi of the Sephardic community and soon became one of the most famous preachers in that prestigious community. Shortly after assuming this position, he married Raquel Soeiro, a direct descendant of Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, with whom he had three children.

In 1626, he established the first Hebrew press in Amsterdam,

and indeed in all of the Netherlands, called “Emet MeErets Titsmaj.” In his printing press, he used a new typeface that would later be copied by many European presses.

During those years, the Dutch colonized Brazil, and many Jews from the Amsterdam community, and prominent international traders, moved to the city of Recife in the region of Pernambuco. In 1638, Ribbi Menashe decided to visit Recife and was probably the first rabbi to set foot on American soil, but he returned to Amsterdam shortly after arriving because two important Portuguese Jewish entrepreneurs, the brothers Abraham, and Isaac Pereyra, had settled in the city and offered to hire Rabbi Menashe to lead a Talmud Torah, a Jewish school they had founded.

One of Ribbi Menashe’s early books was “El Conciliador,” written in Spanish and later translated into English by Elias Hayim Lindo (see here). This extraordinary book (which I mention several times in my book “Awesome Creation”) aims to reconcile all the texts of the Tanakh that seem to contradict each other. For example, one of the first points he analyzes is the apparent contradiction between what the Torah describes during the first three days of Creation, “and there was evening, and there was morning,” and what seems to be the creation of the sun on the fourth day. Rabbi Menashe presents eight possible answers to resolve this issue (the Jewish sages, by the way, explain that the sun and moon were created on the first day, in the first act of Creation). In this book, the Portuguese rabbi refutes the arguments of self-proclaimed Bible critics. It was one of the first works written by a Jew in a modern language that aroused great interest among Christian readers. This earned the rabbi a great reputation in the non-Jewish academic world. Over time, his fame as a scholar and expert in all matters of learning and science spread beyond the Netherlands. Some of the most prominent figures in the world

sought his friendship and advice. His non-Jewish correspondents and friends included Queen Christina of Sweden, the famous artist Rembrandt who painted his portrait, and the statesman and philosopher Hugo Grotius.

In 1644, Ribbí Menashe met Antonio de Montezinos, a Portuguese Jewish converso who had traveled to the New World and had encountered the then-exotic lands and cultures of the Americas. Montezinos told him that the indigenous peoples of the South American Andes practiced certain rituals and symbols similar to those of the Jews and that, in his opinion, they were descendants of the Ten Tribes of Israel. The colorful accounts of Montezinos and Ribbi Menashe's theory regarding the significance of this discovery in relation to the arrival of the Messiah were recorded in one of his most famous books, which he wrote in Spanish: "MIKVE ISRAEL: La esperanza de Israel o el origen de los americanos."

A few years later, he wrote an extraordinary historical and philosophical treatise addressed to the authorities of England, presenting arguments in favor of the readmission of Jews to England, from where they had been expelled in 1290. His letter to Cromwell, written in perfect English, can be found here in this link from Hebrewbooks (https://hebrewbooks.org/52715). In 1653, Ribbi Menashe traveled to England to formally request the readmission of Jews. He was received by none other than Oliver Cromwell. However, he faced many difficulties, including the demand that for readmission, Jews had to convert en masse to Christianity. He left England and returned to the Netherlands in 1655, frustrated for not achieving his objective and materially impoverished for not having worked for such a long time. He never knew that it was thanks to his efforts that Oliver Cromwell finally readmitted Jews to England and allowed them to freely practice their religion,

as he passed away in Amsterdam that same year, 1657.

In his time, Rabbi Menashe ben Israel was the most famous Jew in the world.

For a complete biography, see “Cecil Roth: Life of Menasseh Ben Israel (The Modern Jewish Experience).”