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THE THEOLOGY OF OVADYA BEN YAAKOV S'FORNO  
AS REFLECTED IN HIS COMMENTARY  
ON THE TORAH

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## INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to evaluate the confrontation between Judaism and the Italian Renaissance. Needless to say such a far reaching subject is too great for an exhaustive treatment. Instead, this paper will concentrate on the theology of one of the great Rabbis of the period: Ovadya ben Yaakov Sforno. Sforno's work has enduring value as a commentary on the Torah, elucidating its meaning and clarifying its obscurities. Besides this intrinsic value, however, the attitudes expressed reflect Sforno's response to the world in which he lived. Based upon this response, this world may be reconstructed.

The present study will concentrate on the theological discussions of God, Man, Israel, and Revelation as treated in Sforno's commentary on the Torah and his prefaces thereto. Each of these theologic questions will be illuminated through a consideration of the intellectual and political background of the Renaissance. The various alternatives and choices open to Sforno will be discussed. Eventually a total picture may be obtained in which Sforno's specific decisions may be seen as a unified reaction to a general problem.

The method of analysis will be two fold: historical and philosophical. While the philosophic implications of

Sforino's commentary will be treated at length, the historical forces at work will not be overlooked. The historic context as well as the philosophic traditions out of which Sforino worked will be analyzed. Before treating each area individually a general picture of Italy during the Renaissance will be given. Since a total analysis of the period is inappropriate at this point, only those forces directly influencing theology and religious development will be emphasized. The political and social forces will be seen as the background of intellectual and spiritual productivity. Following the analysis of specific theologic questions a general summary and conclusion will be offered. An attempt will be made to discover modern applications for the methods Sforino applied.

## CHAPTER I

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance marks the transition from the age of religious domination to the age of secular power. As such it provides a unique understanding of the genesis of the modern confrontation of Church and State. The conflict between secularism and religious influence can be illuminated by a study of this period.

For the student of modern Jewish history there is perhaps no period as tantalizing as that of the Renaissance. Within the context of toleration and intellectual freedom Jews developed a manifold society. Intense assimilation and fervent particularism existed side by side. Mysticism and skeptic rationalism competed for domination. Secular learning and religious education battled for control of men's minds. In the midst of this conflict questions were asked which have followed the Jewish people throughout the modern period. What is the effect of skepticism and scientific rationalism upon traditional Jewish values? What standards can be applied to the traditional sources of Jewish learning? What is the significance of a particularistic culture in a cosmopolitan world?

The Renaissance poses the more practical question of co-existing Jewish factions. What should the

relationship be between competing sections of the Jewish community? Is there any way of uniting the divided classes of Jewish society? Within the normal stratification of human society can the Jews find any social or theoretical basis for unity?

One of the most effective means of uniting a diverse and varied population is through ideology, and in such ideological manipulation the Renaissance was an advanced culture. For the Jew the ideology was necessarily a theologic one and so a consideration of theologic problems is imperative. How can the belief in God, revelation, the chosen people, and man as partner with God, be reconciled with philosophic skepticism and scientific pragmatism? Philosophic freedom seems to breed philosophic relativism. Can religion permit free thought and yet retain its unity? These were matters of real concern during the Renaissance and foremost Rabbis sought answers to these questions. Through a study of these attempts we can find guidelines for our search. An examination of the past leads to a greater understanding of the present.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GENERAL ENVIRONMENT OF RENAISSANCE CULTURE

In any discussion of Jewish history it is imperative to set the Jewish society within the context of general history. In the period of the Renaissance this contextual setting is crucial. While scholars remind us that

Classicism did not come as a sudden revelation, it grew up among the luxuriant vegetation of medieval thought.<sup>1</sup>

the social and economic background of the Renaissance presents us with startling discontinuity when compared with earlier ages.

For religion in particular these differences created a set of problems that cast a new and revolutionary light upon established modes of thinking. Two changes in particular were crucial. The first was a separation of ideals from organized religion. The growth of cities had introduced a new type of individual into society. The free-lance businessman, untied to past definitions, strode forward into his own.

To begin with we note that the merchants (mercatores) were 'new men.' They made their appearance as the creators of a new kind of wealth, side by side with the possessors of the old, territorial wealth, and they did not emerge from the class of landowners.<sup>2</sup>

Since the class that arose was new it sought to establish itself through a new ideology. Authority was



not based upon inheritance or lineage, but upon work achieved. The new mobility provided by the cities and the growing commercially based wealth enabled the growing middle class to present the upper classes with a fait accompli. De facto they had made it; they now required an intellectual base to convert this forced victory into a right de jure.

The new ideology denied that the feudal nobilitas contained aught of virtue, and assigned nobility to the new virtus; thus on intellectual grounds a battle was waged which was concurrent with and parallel to the economic and political struggle of the bourgeoisie against the feudal nobility.<sup>3</sup>

This new ideology had far reaching effects in religious life. Man's role as passive recipient of a divine revelation was challenged. The ideal of philosophic contemplation was replaced by the humanist ideal of an active life. The layman demanded his share in the work of religion. In referring to this attitude to religion Max Weber characterizes it as actually hostile.

In fact, it no longer needs the support of any religious forces, and feels the attempts of religion to influence economic life, insofar as they can still be felt at all, to be as much an unjustified interference as its regulation by the state.<sup>4</sup>

Such a radicalism did not pervade the Renaissance, and we find only the beginnings of this later independence reflected at this time. The threat, however, was real.

Urban piety, as we see, was an active piety. The layman--and this was still a novel phenomenon--collaborated directly in the religious life, claiming their right to play their part in it beside the clergy. This represented a two-fold peril to the Church. The first

and most dangerous of these was the threat of orthodoxy ... (secondly) the cities openly attacked the tribunals of the church, its financial exemptions, and the monopoly which it claimed to exercise in respect of education.<sup>5</sup>

While on the one hand a characteristic of the Renaissance is increased freedom and mobility, the second feature following from it is increased restriction. Mobility in Italy was possible not only within communities, but between them. This period is marked by the rise of many sovereign states and principalities. There was a hostile rivalry dividing northern and southern Italy. The rivalry between Venice and Florence is well known. The impulse to autonomy gave rise to a need for tighter government--the rule by tyrants.

The fermentation and chaos of a bourgeois civilization which unleashed new forces, but also brought with it a thoroughgoing disintegration, had made way for a new compulsion, new ties, new authorities.<sup>6</sup>

There was an almost unspoken agreement between the intellectuals and the princes. As in so many situations in the past, the courts discovered a need for the support of the scholar class. The new power group needed a means of communication with the established wealthy class. This link was provided during the Renaissance as it had been before, by the humanists and court poets and scholars. It was inevitable that the ideology of complete freedom and independence would be modified.

From the particularism and originality of the Early Renaissance, the new ideal of man as a work of art had led to the classic ideal of the uomo universale of the

Renaissance, and to the later ideal of the impeccable cavalier... Form and dignity were the aim of the new education for Princes.<sup>7</sup>

This new allegiance with the ruling houses by members of the scholar class had its effect upon religious thinkers. Those artisans and shopkeepers who maintained the free life of the city found this alliance a betrayal. Religion seemed irrelevant because it thwarted their needs. Another section of the populace considered philosophy tainted by its association with the nobility and advocated a return to faith alone.

How to reconcile religious values with the economic division of Italian society became the theologic question of the day. Mysticism, skepticism, and orthodoxy arose from the various social and political situations in which the society had been stratified. The question before religion was the possibility of finding one ideology to satisfy all.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE JEWISH BACKGROUND AND SFORNO'S ROLE AS THEOLOGIAN

As many scholars have noted, there is a great similarity between the Jewish life of the Renaissance and that today. As Cecil Roth declares, "In Renaissance Italy, we have the unique phenomenon of that successful synthesis which is the unfulfilled hope of many today."<sup>8</sup>

The first distinctive feature of the period is that of widespread toleration. This is particularly true of Rome.

In general and despite the few exceptions, the character of the Popes of the fifteenth Century and the first half of the sixteenth was such that the Jewish community and its individuals could develop with a certain freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Not only was this true of Rome, but wherever a strong duke established his power, the Jew flourished. Characteristic was the favorable position of the Jews under the family of the Medicis. "From the year 1530 and onward once the domination of the Medici family was strengthened, there was increased breadth of toleration for the Jews of Tuscany."<sup>10</sup>

Even Salo Baron, whose very methodology seems chosen to emphasize the dark side of Jewish history, is forced to admit the existence of favorable conditions.

"Italy as a whole had a relatively clean record when compared with the bloody annals of Jewish history in most other European countries."<sup>11</sup>

Under such conditions it was to be expected that Jewish living was modeled on that of gentiles. In social habits as well as economic pursuits the Jews followed the pattern of the non-Jewish community. Assimilation was rampant.

Notwithstanding the very different background and circumstances of life of the Italian Jews in this period ...however strongly Jewish, they were at the same time profoundly Italian.<sup>12</sup>

The Christian community was hardly adverse to this process of acculturation. In fact assimilation was encouraged. The various "condotti" or contracts between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities emphasize the complete equality afforded Jews. "We desire that Jews should be as free and secure in pursuing their business and professions in Our city and Our duchy as the Christians."<sup>13</sup>

In parallel development to the rising movement towards assimilation was a growing tendency towards a narrow talmudism that emphasized the particularistic elements in Jewish culture. Side by side with this scholarship was a latent mysticism always threatening to flare into prominence. The messianic figures of David Reubeni and his sometime associate Solomon Molcho captured the imagination not only of Jews, but of Christians as well.

The firm faith of the Roman Jews in these Messianic

pretenders is also a remarkable phenomenon... The first anti-religious period of Renaissance and Humanism was over.<sup>14</sup>

The combination of sophistication and superstition arose from a specific economic and social climate. Economically three layers of society can be pointed out among the Jews of this period. The first and least prosperous group was composed of merchants, petty tradesmen and artisans. These workers found competition not only strong, but also well organized. The Christian community possessed a well developed system of guilds. The Jews in turn organized their own guilds in self defense. An interesting literature has arisen concerning the rights of such workers' organizations. Solomon Ibn Adret declared that if such guilds

...pass an ordinance regarding their trade, it is as binding upon individual members as are the laws of the Torah... The members of a guild are as autonomous in their own affairs as are the citizens of a municipality.<sup>15</sup>

The second economic group was made up of bankers. By the sixteenth century the early banking establishments in Italy had been suppressed, leaving the way open for the spread of Jewish bankers. "After the financial fall of the great firms of Peruzzi and Bardi in Florence, and to a severe breakdown of the Banci di Genova, new opportunities opened up for Jews."<sup>16</sup>

In this business the Jews were necessary for the nobility. It was with them especially that they set up credit and loans. But more pervading was the financial

ground they provided for merchants and wealthy traders of the cities. It was to their influence with these members of society that the condotti and contracts between Jewish and non-Jewish communities owe their existence. When the Jews were exiled and recalled, as was often the case in such places as Naples or Venice, the chief influence in securing their return was the non-Jewish merchant class. The group of Jewish bankers more than any other social class had a stake in the established order of communal life. Very naturally the leaders of the Jewish people who represented the Jew before the Gentile were taken from this part of society.

The third class was made up of men who nominally could be classed as physicians. The term, however, is misleading. A physician in this period was more an adjunct of the court, an advisor and diplomat, than a medical practitioner. Through medical skill Jews gained admission into the court life of the Renaissance. Thus while Elijah del Medigo is classified as a physician, he was in actuality a court savant. The court poets and translators fall into this general category.

Jewish influence in this regard was particularly strong. Many of the great Renaissance medical academies had Jewish members on their faculty. "The roll of illustrious Italian Jewish practitioners in the Renaissance period is almost unending, and they include some of the most brilliant figures of the day."<sup>17</sup>

The coincidence of scholarship with medical training is no accident. This class was almost exclusively made up of men with diplomatic experience.<sup>18</sup> Exiles from the Iberian peninsular understood politics well. Not only diplomatic skill but scholarly inclination as well was utilized by the nobility. This scholarly elite was the most alienated from the rest of the Jewish community. Their fate depended merely upon the whim of their master, and so they had little concern for the everyday affairs of communal living. Having no stake in the mercantile life of the society, they remained aloof and apart from it. Enjoying their own prosperity they could not understand the poverty of those beneath them. A chasm of resentment separated them from the banking class which while on the periphery of noble society, could only look in as servants, but were fated to remain outsiders.

Not only economic status, but distinct historical roots separated the Italian Jews. "The community was divided into three sections: Levantines (Jews from Italy, Greece, and Turkey), Ashkenazim, and Sefardim."<sup>19</sup>

The Levantines remained almost exclusively small merchants, petty traders, and shopkeepers. They carried out their tasks without very hopeful prospects for the future. The broad disgruntled base upon which mysticism was founded came from this group.

The Ashkenazim were in the main comprised of bankers and wealthy tradesmen. Some few of their station



rose to court favor, but they were looked at with suspicion by their brethren. It was the ashkenazic immigrant who controlled the communal affairs of the Italian communities. "As a rule the imigrant Jews...obtained supremacy in Italy over native Jews."<sup>20</sup>

The orientation of the Ashkenazim was talmudic. Even when they pursued mysticism it was not that of the Kabbala but a learned intellectual variety. Before the sixteenth century talmudic learning was sparse in Italy. With the influx of ashkenazic newcomers, however, the pilpulistic method flourished in schools and academies mushrooming throughout the Italian states.<sup>21</sup> Cassuto records the life of a Florentine Rabbi who represents this class. As a leader of his community he followed the ashkenazic tradition. His outlook was determined by a desire to keep Judaism within the bounds of social conformity. When he interpreted scripture,

...dava un'interpretazione litterale dei racconti travanero pero anche spresso allegorie filosof ico-morali sotto il velo della naturazione...restava per sempre lontano dal misticismo e dalla Cabbala.<sup>22</sup>

At Padua the Germans gained control and began a famous talmudic academy. Graetz examines its faculty, "where presided not Italians but immigrant Germans."<sup>23</sup>

Particularly instructive is the development of Solomon Molcho. David Reubeni as well as Molcho began with an appeal to the underprivileged masses. The dregs of society had nothing to lose and so staked all upon the

messianic pretenders. Reubeni scorned talmudic learning and replaced tradition with mystic incantation. With time, however, Molcho became convinced that not in the masses, but in the community leaders lay the true gold mine! Setting out to woo this new group his ideology changed. Whereas before "Molcho inoculated his followers with a longing for martyrdom,"<sup>24</sup> now

He no longer believed in Reubeni's ignorance but felt convinced that Talmudic and Kabbalistic learning not being in keeping with his character as an Arabian prince, it was assumed by him in order to deceive the people.<sup>25</sup>

The Sefardim wandered as a people apart from the other Jewish elements in the society. Made up primarily of exiles from either Spain or Portugal they kept their sights on other countries. Characteristic is Samuel Usque who while writing in Italy composed his work in Portuguese.

Ironically, Usque, an apologist for the Jews living outside his native land, tapped the inherent beauty of the Portuguese language at the very time it was being used to persecute and degrade the children of his people.<sup>26</sup>

Like Usque, the various Spanish exiles even while enjoying court life of the Italian nobility, looked back to the Iberian Peninsula and struggled with problems and questions related to another world. No wonder that, "The Spanish Anusim did not participate in the governing of the community."<sup>27</sup>

Intellectually, the Sephardim were far removed from the Ashkenazim. Unlike them, the Sephardim were eager to

assimilate the philosophic notions of the secular world. Schooled in the thought of Maimonides or Gersonides, the Sephardim looked askance at the parochialism of the Ashkenazim. While not ignoring the Talmud, they sought philosophy within its pages as well as law.

Basic to an understanding of Jewry in the Renaissance is a comprehension of this three-fold division. Some ideological bridge was needed to link all three into a unified community of thought and identity.

If one man was suited for the construction of that intellectual bridge, it was Ovadya ben Yaakov Sforno. His life seems the typical one of an upper class scholar. In Rome he studied medicine and taught Hebrew to Christian scholars such as Johann Reuchlin and Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola. He was open and receptive to all thought, including the philosophy of the secular world. In Rome he wrote a paraphrase and commentary on the works of Euclid. For some time he led the characteristic life of wandering that denoted the alienated Spanish Jew. His commentaries on Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs together with his philosophic work "Or Ammim" are dedicated to Henry II of France.

When we refer, however, to Sforno's years in Bologna, we find a typically ashkenazic talmudist! In Bologna Sforno established a famous talmudic academy. His relations with the Rabbinic leaders of Ferrara was exemplary. The greatest halachic authorities consulted him on

matters of intricate traditional complexity. Meir Katzenellenbogen and Joseph Colon invoke his authority. At the invitation of the Pope he settled a halachic dispute involving none less than Samuel Zarfati's daughter.

Through his commentary Sforno hoped to find a universe interpretation of Jewish theology that could unite the fragmented parts of the Jewish community. How his work reflects the Ashkenazic tradition in its confrontation with Sephardic power will be seen in the following pages.

## CHAPTER IV

### SFORNO'S JUSTIFICATION OF FAITH

It is striking to note that in the majority of works dealing with the Jews in the Renaissance a positive emphasis is given to the increased interest of Christians in Jewish literature. And yet the implications of such open tolerance presented many problems for the Jewish philosophers in those times. The problem, of course, was not merely a Jewish one. As with other difficulties, these problems transcended any one religious group.

If unbelief in this respect made such progress among the more highly cultivated natures the reason lay partly in the fact that the great earthly task of discovering the world and representing it in word and form absorbed most of the higher spiritual faculties. We have already spoken of the inevitable worldliness of the Renaissance. But this investigation and this art were necessarily accompanied by a general spirit of doubt and inquiry.<sup>28</sup>

While we can understand that much of the Renaissance continued the scholastic tradition and that many chief thinkers retained a religious orientation, it is also true that the growth of eclecticism led to a weakening of traditional belief in a particularistic religion.

...Pico della Mirandola could propose to defend as true nine hundred theses taken from the most diverse ancient, Arabic, Jewish and Christian thinkers. This view makes it possible to recognize the original merit and truth in other religions and philosophies and common element in all...<sup>29</sup>

This universalist movement was obvious among the Sephardim. It shows a daring unprecedented in Jewish philosophy when Leon Ebreo uses Greek mythology. This grandson of Don Isaac Abravanel goes so far as to have one of his protagonists declare, "Your authorities are good, but they will not satisfy me unless they satisfy reason also."<sup>30</sup>

Yehiel of Pisa, a contemporary of Sforno, sees well the implication of the Renaissance style of life upon the study of Torah, and declares, "What shall the rulers of the nations say about us for we only appear to be Jews and the only similarity between us and our ancestors is a similarity in name alone."<sup>31</sup>

The study of Torah was crowded into a day devoted to other subjects. Because the Spanish Jew saw no relevance in traditional study he was alienated from Torah. The business of politics was pressing.

Because of the extingencies of our times, men live for the moment, rushing around like bees so they have no opportunity or time appropriate for viewing the wonders of our Torah.

Thus Sforno begins his introduction to the Pentateuch. Linking himself with the ashkenazic tradition he affirms the value of tradition. But he seeks to transmit this tradition to the intellectual community. He was to support the claim of Torah as revelation in terms of philosophy and maintain at the same time the talmudic and midrashic method of exegesis.

Given his problem of justifying faith three solutions were currently available.<sup>32</sup> The first is the best represented by the Neo-Platonic school of Marsilio Ficino and the non-Averroist Aristotelianism of Pompanazzi. This approach suggests that there are two equally valid sources of truth: reason and faith. Neither one nor the other has precedence.

...philosophy is no longer taken to be an activity separated from religion, whether as rival or 'handmaid' ...each is required by the other... The truth and superiority of the Christian religion is not questioned in Ficino's writings, but this truth and superiority does not depend upon a unique revelation.<sup>33</sup>

The approach of Pompanazzi is especially revealing. Like Augustine before him, he allows philosophy certain rights, but then declares that faith must take over. Philosophy is independent and has definite limits. Thus Pompanazzi can show that immortality cannot be proven by reason, but is nevertheless true because of faith.

Wherefore if any arguments seem to prove the mortality of the soul they are false and merely seeming, since the first light and the first truth show the opposite. But if any seem to prove its immortality they are true and clear, but not light and truth.<sup>34</sup>

The second alternative is one often used by Jewish authors: allegory. During the Renaissance Petrarcha is perhaps the most important practitioner of this art. But we must not forget that this method was a favorite of many stylists in imitation of Roman writers.

The majority of the ignorant lot clings to words as the shipwrecked do to a wooden plank, and believe that a matter cannot be better said and cannot be phrased otherwise.<sup>35</sup>

Moderns who speak so highly about scholarly method and the impartiality of scholarship often forget that investigation itself can often be a method of interpretation. This approach was utilized often unconsciously, often purposefully, in the Renaissance. That greatest of all humanists, Erasmus, can be understood only if we place his biblical scholarship in the context of such creative investigation.

He rejoices because Holy Scripture is approached so much more closely, because all sorts of shadings are brought to light by considering not only what is said, but also by whom, for whom, at what time, on what occasion, what precedes and what follows... Unperceived he passed from emendations of the different versions to the correction of the contents.<sup>36</sup>

The third approach advocates a continuity with the scholastic method. Reason is a handmaid of revelation. Revelation is the basic truth which is understood by aid of reason.

Valla, on the other hand, broke decisively with these endeavors...to create a synthesis of paganism and Christianity...he consistently and comprehensively emphasized the irreconcilability of reason and faith, of philosophy and theology, of paganism and Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

Among Jewish thinkers there was a similar division. Although Netanyahu emphasizes the agreement between Don Isaac Abravanel and Leon Ebreo (Judah Abravanel)<sup>38</sup> it seems closer to the truth to place Leon Ebreo with those Neo-Platonists like Ficino who considered philosophy and revelation equal sources of truth. He advocates a clear distinction between faith and knowledge. "Since it is



sufficient that faith should not conflict with reason, we have no need of proof, for then we should have knowledge and not faith."<sup>39</sup>

As Netanyahu points out, Abravanel's own approach was entirely different.

Repudiating the supremacy of reason and denying it a status even comparable to Faith, Abravanel goes back to the pre-Thomistic period in Christianity and pre-Maimonidean period in Judaism. Although he was steeped in philosophical speculation...his true teacher and mentor is not Maimonides, but Saadya.<sup>40</sup>

Sforno followed in the path of Saadya and Abravanel. The way to the supremacy of faith was inevitable since the Sephardim had relegated philosophy and the primacy of reason to themselves. We have noted before the ashkenazic fear of kabbala and mysticism. Beyond this, however, Sforno was dedicated to justifying not only faith, but more importantly practice. A purely theoretical justification of Judaism would not lead to ritual observance. Allegory cannot explain the claim of religious dictum. Laws of purity and kashrut, Sabbath observance and tefilin do not come from allegory, as the rabbinic analysis of Korach acknowledges. Sforno's aim was to provide a theoretical and philosophic basis upon which all elements in Jewish society would be united in practice of the laws ordained by revelation.

The keynote of Sforno's justification can be found in his comment to Deuteronomy 17:19: "It is the portion of reason that from her is understood the miracles and signs

of God's greatness that necessitates awe."

Sforno limits the range of reason to that of a tool by which faith is understood. Too much reason is misleading! We may seek to understand by reason the way of observing a law, Sforno tells us in explanation of Numbers 19:2, but we cannot question the authority of God's word because of reason. "You are not given the authority to think about it," he declares. But this statement is qualified to mean that reason cannot invalidate practice.

There is a valid role for reason, however, Jewish existence points to a truth beyond it.

Since you were shown the decrees of God which incur exile if you sin, guard (yourselves) from sin and keep His commandments without subtracting or adding to them, since each addition or subtraction brings upon you an essential curse. (on Deuteronomy 4:1)

With the mention of curses another element comes into play: self interest. Reward and punishment, however, are contingent upon the validity of Israel's relationship to God. Sforno seeks this justification on philosophic grounds understandable to his times. Whereas most Renaissance thinkers stressed natural philosophy, Sforno reverts to the scholastic emphasis on prophecy as an essentially different category of knowledge than logic. "At that time prophecy began, for it is a higher level (of knowledge) than the vision since it was by both word and vision of God. (on Gen. 18:20)

As for Ha-levi and Saadya, so for Sforno, prophecy is in the hands of God. But there is an interesting

difference. While not accepting completely Maimonides' man-centered theories, Sforno contends that preparation helps. The human material and the physical setting must both be right before prophecy is fully effective!

Doubtlessly this place is worthy for prophecy since I've seen a vision without having prepared myself for prophecy. Preparation is required of the intellectual faculties for prophecy just as the atmosphere of different lands is needed, as it is said: the land of Israel makes wise. (on Gen. 28:15)

The Torah is particularly compelling because it has the unique combination of being a prophecy given to the most appropriate prophet--Moses--in the most appropriate place--Israel. Never was the combination of land and person so perfect as in the case of Moses at Sinai.

For surely no man has arisen like Moses to the level of his prophecy which gave to him a law of truth, concerning which there can be no addition and from which there can be no subtraction. (Introduction to Deuteronomy)

Like Maimonides, Sforno wants the best both of philosophy and Jewish practice. To justify his Code Rambam similarly emphasizes the philosophic excellence of such a revelation and on philosophic reasons seeks to enforce the observance of Jewish law. Given this premise it is easy for Sforno to argue from self interest. "He who ceases involvement in the Torah from riches will eventually neglect it in poverty." (on Exodus 11:1) On the other hand it is beneficial to be concerned with Torah. "All its commandments are powerful for curing your life from illness." (on Exodus 15:26)

Sforno justifies faith and practice by an emphasis upon the uniqueness of the Jewish law. Rather than select either faith or reason as primary he proclaims Jewish revelation an inherently different kind of reason! By so doing he gains insistent arguments for a traditionally oriented life even among the secularly aware upper classes.

By establishing through philosophic means the rationale for a specific code of Jewish living he attempts to bring assimilated Sephardim back into the fold. Finally by emphasizing reason as the foundation of Jewish ritual living he brings a greater understanding of philosophy and secular logic into ashkenazic circles and makes the ways of the Sephardim more palatable to them.

## CHAPTER V

### SFORNO'S THEOLOGY OF GOD'S EXISTENCE AND POWER

While it is obvious from the preceding that Sforno would necessarily think of God as an active agent in history, it is not immediately apparent in what way God would communicate with Man. The Renaissance reveals a strong naturalistic tendency even among those who maintain His activity. Leon Ebreo, for example, while declaring that "The Godhead is at once the origin, means and end of all good deeds,"<sup>41</sup> was still enough of a determinist to consider astrology an inevitable sign of the future.<sup>42</sup> This approach was even more pronounced in the general philosophic world.

Although God as the source of all being is ultimately also the source of the seer's illumination, it nevertheless takes place according to the cosmic situation of the world which in turn, is indicated by the disposition of the heavenly bodies.<sup>43</sup>

The prevailing attitude towards God emphasized His transcendence, unknowability, difference from man. In a defense of God's foreknowledge of human action Valla makes this clear. "Indeed the most worthy reason may be adduced as to why He hardens this one and shows mercy to that, namely that He is most wise and good."<sup>44</sup>

This answer is obviously no answer, but taken in

the light of God's transcendence its relevance becomes clear. Thus there was a striking dualism in Renaissance thought. Nature was an independent organism, but God was a transcendent being who controlled the pattern. This dualism expressed itself in a superstition that was co-existent with extreme scientism.

The feeling of the upper and middle classes in Italy with regard to the Church at the time when the Renaissance culminated was compounded of deep and contemptuous aversion...and of a sense of dependence on Sacraments and ceremonies.<sup>45</sup>

That this would characterize the poor who hung onto messianism is clear, but what is unusual is its appeal for the upper classes. We must remember that the Sephardim had known the trauma of exile. There was no base of firm religiosity on which to build a philosophy to cope with the tragedy, indeed, "Platonism of the salons which was... purely a matter of taste which imposed no obligations upon a refined society of beaux esprits."<sup>46</sup> In such a situation they fell back either upon an inactive God or a God so mysterious that he was unaffected by what mankind did. Thus Don Isaac Abravanel placed great emphasis upon the coming of the Messiah in God's time whereas Leon Ebreo discounted an active Godhead. Men like Don Isaac could see God working over and against the natural order. "Bible is the word of God...the Bible must be taken literally... these miracles cannot be explained by natural processes..."<sup>47</sup>

Does man have any freedom? The answer is given by another exile, Samuel Usque. Writing to anusim and

encouraging a return to Judaism, Usque emphasizes that man can choose to obey the law. While we cannot know God we can argue from the past that he punishes us for not being Jewish. The messiah, however, will come when God decides that he should come!

Sforno is confronted with a two-fold demand. He needs to explain God's workings in a way that will leave man free, and yet he needs to have God concerned with Israel. The complete ignorance of God presupposed by the mystics and messianic hopefuls is at variance with the vested interests of the Ashkenazim; the Sephardim, however, need assurance of plan and purpose.

Sforno begins with the admission that God is, in essence, unknowable. He quotes approvingly the talmudic story of Rabbi Joshua who answers Caesar's demand to see God by challenging him to view the sun. (on Exodus 20:17) In discussing creation he emphasizes creatio ex nihilo, although he is clearly influenced by platonic thought. (Gen. 1:1) Most interesting in this discussion is his explanation of the plural "elohim": "The plural form is used to teach that He is the form of all eternal forms and such as they." God as the master form in which all ideas are contained is one way in which Sforno understands divinity. "God's knowledge is of himself." (on Deut. 2:7)

How does this intellectual God become the warmly concerned God characteristic of the bourgeoisie?

The great bourgeois on the other hand faced him (God) as a business partner...even religiousness became

a matter for the calculation of advantages, part of a speculation designed to succeed in economic as well as political matters.<sup>48</sup>

The Sephardic Jew or the lower class Levantine Jew could accept the distant philosopher's God and hope for justification in the end of days. Not so the Ashkenazim who required a God to reward and punish the performance of individual mitzvot. Sforno compromises by declaring that all sections of the community are right from their individual perspectives! There are three distinct ways in which God reveals his power. The first is through hidden miracles. As Ramban points out the natural order is a miracle itself! This knowledge of God can be attained by anyone and requires only the philosopher's God as its support. This is in fact the God of the philosophers, as one contemporary wrote: "...all things are led by one certain orderer who is most full of reason. Indeed a supremely rational order flows from the highest reason and wisdom of a mind..."<sup>49</sup>

Sforno then goes on to explain that there are other manifestations of God's power. One example is his will as carried out by an external agent--e.g. man. This view fits in well with the Renaissance view of magic. "...magic itself does not work miracles, but simply supports, like an industrious servant, the operative forces in nature."<sup>50</sup>

Thus far Sforno has followed the pattern of any Renaissance philosopher, but when he turns to the role of Israel in history he steps beyond the general approach.



The third manifestation of God's power is his action which in no way can be ascribed to nature. And it is this type of miracle which characterizes His behavior towards Israel. Why is it that God punishes Moses and Aaron at the waters of Meribah? Because they transformed a miracle of the third type into an example of the second! They relegated magical power to themselves rather than "sanctify Israel" by a display of God's arbitrary will. (on Numbers 20:8)

If God has this power, why is it so often hidden? Israel has not proven worthy of it. Only when Israel is actively engaged in God does God alter nature. The prime example occurs with the tenth plague in Egypt. "Since Israel was engaged in the command of the passover therefore God struck at the self same time the strong of Egypt for their (Israel's) salvation." (on Exodus 12:29)

Egypt affords the prime example as well of God's action in opposition to nature. Sforno explains "The strong hand" (Exodus 13:9) as "His alterations of nature." When Israel sings before God at the Reed Sea "who is like You among the Aylim" (Exodus 15:11) Sforno explains this as a reference meaning "Since you alter the nature of existing things not destroying their essential nature, withal."

All this, of course, is contingent upon Israel. Miracles are possible only when a state of faith is achieved. In what is, perhaps the most astounding comment he makes, Sforno reveals his hand!

For this reason the Shechinah dwells (among Israel)

and she dwells in each place where there are scholars of the generation who have set themselves intellectually to know it (the law). (on Exodus 25:22)

In other words, the intellectuals--the Sephardim--themselves are preventing miracles! Only true scholarship based upon ashkenazic faith can prepare the way for salvation! God does interfere in the affairs of men, but only manifestly when Israel has proven itself through obedience. The triumph of God depends upon the unification of intellectual skill and traditional practice! God exists and is known through reason--partially. God is effective through faith--partially. Only a joint action by the entire Jewish community can lead to a full understanding and experience of God!

## CHAPTER VI

### SOFORNO ON MAN'S IMPORTANCE

One of the most striking elements in the Renaissance was an emphasis upon the dignity of man and the importance of the individual. "Thus they indicated a basic concern for man and his dignity, and this aspiration became quite explicit in many of their writings."<sup>51</sup>

It should, of course, be understood that the idea of human dignity includes many shades and tones. Most important is the feeling that man's actions are meaningful, that man can determine the course of his own life. This idea receives its classical form in Pico. God is said to declare to man,

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgement thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire...thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.<sup>52</sup>

In connection with this idea it was stressed that the individual was crucial. Not society as society, but society as formed by autonomous individuals constituted the basic unit of the cosmos. Within the individual, the world as well as society found reflection in a microcosm.

The human mind is a divine seed that comprehends in its simple essence the totality of everything knowable;

but in order for this seed to blossom and to bear fruit, it must be planted in the soil of the sensible world.<sup>53</sup>

Not only is man free, but his development depends upon his own initiative. Yet this development also depends upon the conditions of his environment. Whether philosophically considered as the world of the senses or politically as the state, there is as much emphasis upon the background upon which man grows as on the unique individuality of his growth.

The humanists of Florence, the intellectual leaders of Italy, took a new attitude towards the state. They began to reassert without reservation the importance of civic virtue and the duty of public service as once asserted by Cicero and Livy... The result was a set of values and a code of conduct as potent in inspiring disinterested service to the state as the code of chivalry had been in insuring fealty to a feudal overlord.<sup>54</sup>

The two sided conception of the individual as both sovereign in his own rights and yet essentially linked to the state can be related to the economic evolution occurring at this time. The first important change is that of environment. "With the Renaissance the economic and thus the social emphasis moves into the town; from the conservative to the liberal, for the town is a changeable and changing element."<sup>55</sup>

The humanistic impetus came from just that group most benefitted by this change of emphasis: the students and second echelon church leaders associated with universities. Paul O. Kristeller stresses the continuity with the scholasticism of the past.

They were either secretaries of princes or cities, or they were teachers of grammar and rhetoric at universities or at secondary schools...far from representing a new class (they) were the professional heirs and successors of the medieval rhetoricians.<sup>56</sup>

This very fact, however, stresses discontinuity! While the humanists might be filling the same positions, the opportunities open for them were entirely changed. Their ideology was an attempt to establish themselves as a power in the newly developed institutions of city life. When we understand humanist individualism as an aggressive attempt to assert the right of upward mobility and their nationalism as an expression of loyalty to the source of their new found power, the strange dualism falls into place.

Despotism, as we have already seen, fostered in the highest degree the individuality not only of the tyrant or condottiere himself, but also of the men whom he protected or used as his tools--the secretary, minister, poet, and companion.<sup>57</sup>

Here we see a not unfamiliar alliance. The scholars as in Islamic Spain form a tightly knit clique around the petty monarch. Both seemed to stand for different ideals and to maintain only a temporary truce.

The relationship of work and intellect, of business and knowledge, was a relationship of two social groups drawn from the same social strata and conditions. But their leadership extended over two very different fields which as ideal types are in fact diametrically opposed.<sup>58</sup>

In welding these two groups into one an imposing passion was needed. Just this was supplied by fervent patriotism. Individualism guaranteed the separate

existence of the two groups; patriotism insured their continued cooperation. As one perceptive writer explains it, the individualism of the humanists was the most fertile ground possible for the seed of nationalism. "Thus the new individualism steadily developed step by step with the emergence of the state during the fifteenth century."<sup>59</sup>

Understanding the background of the Renaissance view of man we can better anticipate the expression of Jewish life in this regard. The Sephardim were accustomed to such an outlook. Long training on the Iberian Peninsula had taught them the merits of an open system. The individual freedom, self determination, the right to progress, were positively included in their philosophies. Man is centrally placed in their theology.

Man's special position according to him (Isaac Abravanel) is that he stands between the two worlds and provides a link between them. While all other beings are either matter or spirit, man--and man only--is both matter and spirit...consequently 'man is the most perfect of all forms'...<sup>60</sup>

In a complex allegory<sup>61</sup> Leon Ebreo establishes twin impulses in man and admits man's freedom of choice, his ability as an individual to practice self determination.

It is hard to decide what precisely Sforza feels about man in the abstract since his approach focuses primarily on Israel. It is clear, however, that mankind has a special place within creation. "The genus of man is the final cause of creation." (on Leviticus 13:47) God created man with the intention of having a creature in his own

image, worthy of him. (Leviticus 19:1) The entire race of mankind is special and singled out by God. (Deuteronomy 33:3)

In terms of the individual, Sforzo appears to support strongly the idea that the individual is crucial. Concerning the miracles of the exodus he writes, "The miracle was done for each individual on his own and not for the sake of the general community." (on Exodus 12:27) The individual's actions affect the entire community.

Sforzo is being very cautious in his generalizations, he wishes neither to advocate complete anarchy by allowing the individual complete autonomy, nor does he wish to excuse the individual from responsibility.

In justifying the community of Israel over and against the individual he does so in Renaissance terms. The courtier may have political fervor, for the Jew the spiritual Israel is his state! More importantly, however, Israel redeems all individuals! God had tried individualism; he had trusted the sons of Noah, and they had failed him. Israel was His final hope. Just as the humanists declared that individuals could find selfhood only within the city-state, so Sforzo claimed that the individual could attain his full humanity only in the community of Israel.

And this (Israel) is the completion and ultimate species among man toward which God had been directing man since creating him in His image and likeness. (on Genesis 19:1)

Even though all mankind is dear to Me since they are the highest form of lower existants...Israel is closest to me... (on Exodus 19:5)

Returning to Leviticus 13:47 we find Sforno moving from Man as the purpose of creation and saying "And when God chose this people Israel...this was because God desired something more worthy and He found it in the individuals of this nation."

While accepting a basic individualism Sforno contends that only within Israel can the full potential of mankind be realized. He has merely substituted a religious community for the civic state and a theological commitment for political loyalties. The Sephardim, so loath to enter communal affairs, are thus given a philosophic justification of such involvement. The Ashkenazim are given a goal to reach and a respect for the individualism of the Sephardim. All are included as part of one community, indeed the only community that can truly affirm the humanity of man.



## CHAPTER VII

### SFORNO AND JEWISH IDENTITY AND VALUES

The question of Jewish identity is not a new one. For the Jews of the Renaissance this problem was a burning issue. The exile of Jews from Spain and Portugal had sent numbers of Anusim to the mainland of Europe. How were these anusim to be treated? Did they need reconversion? Although the halacha had precedents for such queries the issue was not completely settled.

The Sephardim, naturally, took a lenient view. They laid great emphasis upon the racial character of the Jewish people. It is futile to think, they argued, that a mere change of religion can alter the deeply ingrained Judaism which lurks in the bloodstream. Even such a drastic move as intermarriage is not considered critical, as Isaac Abravanel sees it.

Even if they will intermingle with the nations and intermarry with them, God, as the prophet said, will separate them from the nations and keep them distinct and apart.

Although many of the Sephardic thinkers, like Abravanel himself, maintained strict adherence to the halacha, others felt that such a philosophy permitted an easy approach to observance.

...the sermons in the synagogue were actually suspended

during the period of the masquerades so as to permit the faithful to go about their pleasure without qualms of conscience.<sup>63</sup>

This approach of the Sephardim aroused a natural reaction from the more halachically oriented Ashkenazim. Birth alone was not enough to prove Jewish identity. Their attitude towards the anusim was in general more strict and demanding. Above all they placed emphasis upon acceptance of the oral law.

Whosoever goes by the name of an Israelite and enters into the religion of Moses, of blessed memory, is consequently obliged to observe the positive and the negative commandments of the Torah... Whoever enters the fold of the Torah and Moses our teacher and is part of our Jewish religion is obliged to observe the commandments of both the Oral and Written Torah, even in the days of exile. Whoever wilfully forsakes the yoke of a single positive or negative commandment has left the fold of Israel.<sup>64</sup>

Such an outlook places involvement in the mitzvot as primary and centers Jewish identity around observance of the law. Rather than regarding Judaism as an unchangeable gift of birth, it is instead a responsibility to be won, an honor to be earned.

Sforno's work shows a reconciliation of these two strains. He was representative of the halachic approach, but he also demanded a logical rationale for his decisions. This is apparent in his defense of a halachic definition of Jewish identity.

The first support he brings for action rather than accident as decisive is historical. The experience of the Exodus shows that God requires Israel to perform the

mitzvot before it is worthy of being chosen. (Why were the Jews saved)...because they had been separate from them (the Egyptians) by virtue of circumcision, language and specific Hebrew customs." (on Exodus 1;10) When did the chosenness of Israel commence? Only after they received the Torah. It is the virtue of the mitzvot that they bring God's indwelling presence with them.

After Israel received the spiritual witnesses that were included at the giving of the Torah (only then) were they worthy of God's presence resting upon them without an intermediary. (on Leviticus 11:2)

The same requirement was asked of Moses. Only after circumcising his son was he worthy of having a direct revelation. (on Exodus 4:29)

This historical proof, however, was not enough. Sforno added logical arguments to bolster his position. God had chosen the Jew to become the creature most like unto the creator. This could be achieved only by special and extraordinary laws. "Even though I permit these things to the sons of Noah, I forbid them to Israel." (on Leviticus 17:14) It is through these laws that the Jew learns to activate his intellect and become similar to God.

And this (activating the intellect) is achieved by observing the wonders within it (the Torah) which give direction by signs to the wonder of His deeds and the way of His goodness. (on Exodus 25:20)

There are two parts to the training of the Jew: the theoretical and the practical; the potential and the actual.

And the Torah: the speculative teachings,

And the commandment: the practical. (on Exodus 24:12)

Because of this outlook time and again Sforno stresses the importance of a strict observance of the halacha. While he admits that within the law there are gradations, he contends that such variation is neither haphazard nor arbitrary. "Even though I (God) commanded you concerning the ark, even so always observe my Sabbath." (Exodus 31:13, 35:2) "In general no command can push aside the Sabbath...when it is possible to perform a mitzvah on another day it can never push aside the Sabbath." (Exodus 31:16)

The mitzvot must be observed perfectly for only in that manner will the messiah be brought to Israel. The first reason for the messiah's coming lies with God, but as was already suggested, Sforno saw man's role as crucial.

In explaining Judaism to the Jew, this is a fine polemic. Sforno also felt it necessary to show the validity of halacha as a means of impressing the non-Jew.

"...They (Israel) are accounted scholars and men of understanding in the opinion of the nations since they keep the statutes of God and His Torah." (on Deuteronomy 4:8)

Since so much of Sforno's reputation lies upon his transmission of the Talmud to the non-Jew, notably Pico della Mirandola and Reuchlin, his interpretation of its contents cannot be overlooked. This is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of Sforno's selective use of talmudic sources, but his method can be highlighted. It

becomes obvious that unlike Rashi, Sforno is concerned not with intricate halachic discussions. Instead he presents a collection of pithy sayings and maxims. He stresses the humanistic elements, reward and punishment, measure for measure, general courtesy, respect for individuals, and other universal values. His most frequent reference is to "The sayings of the father" the mishnah most filled with moral statements. It is easy to see, therefore, why Christian scholars having been taught by Sforno to navigate the sea of the Talmud according to ethical signposts would be champions in its behalf.

The approach was also calculated to impress the Spanish Jew whose hostile attitude to the halacha separated him from his ashkenazic brothers. Stressing values in behalf of which all could agree, Sforno helped bridge the ideological gap between segments in the Jewish community. Jewish identity was a combination of innate aptitude and cultivation of talent through observance. Jewish law reflected the highest moral values of any age or time. Thus a unification of Jewish society was made possible that would help them progress in the work towards universal salvation and the coming of the messiah.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSIONS

Sforno's commentaries can be understood both as polemics and as independent theology. Perhaps the method chosen here of contrasting his work with its background is preferable because he wrote self-consciously in response to that background. His writings were meant as a justification of Judaism. "Das Ziel, das sich Sforno bei der Ausarbeitung seiner Commentare gesteckt hat, ist die Verteidigung der heiligen Schrift und des Judentums."<sup>65</sup>

Yet even in such a nonsystematic framework, the philosophic integrity which Sforno brought to his more complete tract Or Anim can be seen. The two focal problems with which he deals in that great work are creation and providence. In a sense they comprise a defense of the freedom of God on the one hand and the freedom of man on the other. It is this polarity which characterizes his approach in the commentaries.

Sforno continually stresses God's ability to perform miracles. God hears prayers and visits punishments. God is primary, unique, and eternal. All these powers flow from God as source of creation. By focusing upon a specific act of creation marking the beginning of time

Sforno has given God complete control over what happens within time. "Remember that since God owns all movable and immovable property you are but resident aliens with Him." (on Deuteronomy 6:2)

In order to preserve God's power over the world, however, Sforno must also be careful to keep God outside the world. God can interpose His will by miracles, but He Himself remains otherworldly. Thus in the passage in which God appears to Moses (Exodus 33:19) Sforno follows Rambam in stressing that man can know God's accidents but not his essence. He also follows Rambam in considering the thirteen attributes as negative attributes.

In the light of such an all powerful God it seems strange that God's omniscience also leaves room for man's freedom. Individual providence, however, is based on the presumption of such freedom. Since the mitzvot imply reward and punishment, and since man is judged "mida k'neged mida" he must be responsible for his actions. In dealing with the question of Cain in Genesis 4:13, Sforno points out that God's providence implies man's ability to repent. Man's free will, not God's decision, closes off the possibility of forgiveness. It is in this vein that Sforno quotes approvingly the talmudic dictum: I do not desire the death of the sinner but that he turn from his evil ways and live. (on Exodus 4:18)

The disparity between these ideas and the implied contradiction is solved by the concept of "imitatio dei."

Man imitates God through the activation of his intellect. Speculation is needed for man to realize his potential. Such activation of the mind is possible only in freedom. Commenting on Leviticus 19:9, Sforno reminds us that "Since I am your God and all my ways are merciful and righteous it is fitting for you to observe these precepts of righteousness." Man's freedom is a direct consequence of Sforno's conception of God's freedom.

These two concepts lay the foundation of Sforno's approach to Torah and Israel. In his introduction Sforno comments that the Torah is intellectually viable as a means of demonstrating God's existence and activity. Yet it seems to work the other way around. Having established God's freedom then and only then can Sforno show that the Torah is a product of divine intervention in the world. It is because of God's absolute power that he can give Israel a set of laws different from the other nations. It is because of this power God possesses that Sforno can argue in a long exposition on Deuteronomy 23:14 that even if we think we are changing the laws in order to protect them, or honor our elders, or any such reason, we are not permitted to alter them one bit!

And yet Sforno admits the necessity, even the obligation for speculative thought. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 17:19, he makes the explicit statement that "By means of the active intellect and speculation we understand the great signs and the providence of God which



knowledge necessitates reverence." The very laws of purity found in Leviticus 18:6 are meant to bring Israel to a rational theology. Just as God is free to choose Israel, Israel has the freedom to neglect its duties.

There is an integration between polemic and philosophy. Just as a consistent theory can be built from the two-fold emphasis on God's freedom and on man's, so too the two-fold demand for study and observance can be rooted in this concept.

Now we can ask the crucial question. Either as philosophy or as polemic did Sforino's attempt work? Did he indeed bridge the gap between the segments of Jewish society? In the face of the economic and political disasters that soon struck Italy it is impossible to answer this question. And yet, from an ideological standpoint--and for the American Jew today I consider this crucial--his work at reconciliation stands the test of time and logic.

The three groups of Jews in Italy were divided by conflicting interests in the daily affairs of community life, in adherence to talmudic law, in acceptance of philosophy, and in style of life.

Sforino's idea of man makes involvement in community affairs imperative. Man's duty is that of activating the godly within the world. Man's deeds no less than his thoughts count under Sforino's theology. His strict adherence to the concept "mida k'neged mida" implies

individual responsibility for communal life. Turning to the Sephardic Jew whose interests were oriented outside the community, he could say that only through community involvement would Jews ever attain the place set for them by God and philosophy!

For the Ashkenazim, on the other hand, Sforno provides a broader base of interest than community concern alone. His is a vision of a Jewry united in its actualization of that potential which God demands of man. They are thus taught a concern and sympathy for the Spaniard in their midst.

Sforno's idea of revelation makes it possible for both Ashkenazim and Sephardim to join in an acceptance of the Oral Law. The Ashkenazim accept it as the revealed word of God because that was the tradition. The Sephardim, however, would find in halacha the means of bringing man's potential into actuality. The idea of prophecy which Sforno asserts is close to that of Rambam and enables the philosopher to accept the law without sacrificing human freedom. Through his selective study of Talmud, Sforno enables the Sephardim to embrace their heritage as a compendium of moral truth.

The prominent position given to reason and philosophy in Sforno's commentary broadens the perspective of the Ashkenazim. Talmudic law alone is not enough, it needs the measure of reason and logic. In understanding how to follow God's word we need the rule of reason. Reason does

not abrogate the law, but the law cannot exist without reason. Philosophy is a necessary part of human existence and without it Torah would be meaningless.

Nor does Sforno forget the underprivileged. For them he offers the consolation of Israel's chosenness! The Jew must suffer, but from this suffering the better world will be born. Trust God who has power over the world and can create miracles. There is no need to look for the messiah, your actions will hasten his coming. Trust in the future since God has proven faithful to Israel in the past.

These ideas are strikingly relevant today. So much of modern society is chaotic and divided against itself. The Jewish community is split in many sections and threatens to waste all its energy in petty internal squabbling. The ideas of Sforno are helpful. Under the ideology of moderation which unites man's responsibility with a trust in God's guidance, a belief in the importance of specific, particularistic patterns of action as affirmations of universal truths and values, together with a sense of community involvement tempered by scholarly acuteness, the fragmented parts of Jewish society can be united.

In every generation Jewish society seems on the verge of destruction either through external forces or internal dissension. Today, when the threat of petty division seems to hang over Jewish communal life, the example of this Renaissance Rabbi should stand as a pattern worthy to be emulated. May a study of history lead to a

rededicated life in the present.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (New York: 1954) p. 321

<sup>2</sup>H. Pirenne, A History of Europe (New York: 1958) p. 192

<sup>3</sup>A. Von Martin, Sociology of the Renaissance (New York: 1963) p. 63

<sup>4</sup>M. Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism (New York: 1958) p. 78

<sup>5</sup>H. Pirenne, op. cit. pp. 223-224

<sup>6</sup>A. Von Martin, op. cit. p. 77

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 75

<sup>8</sup>C. Roth, The Jews in the Renaissance (New York: 1959) p. xi

<sup>9</sup>H. Vogelstein, History of the Jews in Rome (Philadelphia: 1941) p. 222

<sup>10</sup>S. Dubnow, Divre Yeme Am Olam VI (Tel Aviv: 1948) p. 44

<sup>11</sup>S. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews XI (New York: 1967) p. 262

<sup>12</sup>C. Roth, op. cit. p. 44

<sup>13</sup>S. Baron, op. cit. XII p. 61

<sup>14</sup>H. Vogelstein, op. cit. p. 252

<sup>15</sup>S. Baron, op. cit. XII p. 61

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. p. 161

<sup>17</sup>H. Vogelstein, op. cit. p. 252

<sup>18</sup>L. Kravitz, "Towards a Functional Approach to Medieval Jewish Philosophy, in Central Conference American

Rabbis Journal (1965) p. 28. Rabbi Kravitz has noted the close connection between the medical profession and philosophy and sees a connection with the fact that both medical texts were transmitted together.

<sup>19</sup>S. Dubnow, op. cit. VI p. 42

<sup>20</sup>H. Graetz, History of the Jews V (Philadelphia: 1956) p. 403

<sup>21</sup>M. Shulvass, Haye ha-Yehudim be-Italia be Teku-fat ha-Renaissance (New York: 1955) p. 4

<sup>22</sup>U. Cassuto, "Un Rabbino Fiorentino Del Secolo XV," in Rivista Israelitica, Anno III (Fierenze: 1908) pp. 5,6

<sup>23</sup>H. Graetz, op. cit. --. 410

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. p. 497

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. p. 504

<sup>26</sup>M. Cohen, Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel by Samuel Usque (Philadelphia: 1965) p. 11

<sup>27</sup>S. Dubnow, op. cit. p. 42

<sup>28</sup>J. Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (New York: 1929) p. 511

<sup>29</sup>P. Kristeller, in Facets of the Renaissance (New York: 1963) p. 113

<sup>30</sup>L. Ebreo, The Philosophy of Love (London: 1937) p. 252

<sup>31</sup>Y. da Pisa, The Eternal Life (New York: 1962) p. 151

<sup>32</sup>For a different view see: B. Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel (Philadelphia: 1968) pp. 95-96

<sup>33</sup>J. Burroughs, in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man (Chicago: 1948) p. 187

<sup>34</sup>P. Pompanazzi, ibid. p. 397

<sup>35</sup>F. Petrarca, ibid. p. 102

<sup>36</sup>J. Huizinga, Erasmus and the Age of Reformation (New York: 1924) p. 112

<sup>37</sup>C. Trinkaus, Jr., in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man p. 157

<sup>38</sup>B. Netanyahu, op. cit. p. 288

<sup>39</sup>L. Ebreo, op. cit. p. 282

<sup>40</sup>B. Netanyahu, op. cit. p. 97

<sup>41</sup>L. Ebreo, op. cit. p. 31

<sup>42</sup>J. Klausner, "Don Yehudah Abravanel u filosofit ha-ahava shelo," in Tarbiz (Israel) pp. 67-98

<sup>43</sup>E. Cassirer, The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy (New York: 1963) p. 107

<sup>44</sup>L. Valla, in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man p. 176

<sup>45</sup>J. Burckhardt, op. cit. p. 445

<sup>46</sup>A. Von Martin, op. cit. p. 90

<sup>47</sup>B. Netanyahu, op. cit. p. 107

<sup>48</sup>A. Von Martin, op. cit. p. 17

<sup>49</sup>M. Ficino in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man p. 194

<sup>50</sup>E. Cassirer, op. cit. p. 149

<sup>51</sup>P. O. Kristeller, Renaissance Thought (New York: 1961) p. 102

<sup>52</sup>J. Pico della Mirandola, in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man pp. 224-225

<sup>53</sup>E. Cassirer, op. cit. p. 45

<sup>54</sup>G. Mattingly, in Facets of the Renaissance (New York: 1963) p. 31

<sup>55</sup>A. Von Martin, op. cit. p. 144

<sup>56</sup>P. O. Kristeller, op. cit. p. 102

<sup>57</sup>J. Burckhardt, op. cit. p. 144

<sup>58</sup>A. Von Martin, op. cit. p. 41

<sup>59</sup>E. Shmueli, Men of the Renaissance I (Ramat Gan:  
1956) p. 30

<sup>60</sup>B. Netanyahu, op. cit. p. 113

<sup>61</sup>L. Ebreo, op. cit. pp. 345-364

<sup>62</sup>B. Netanyahu, op. cit. p. 203

<sup>63</sup>C. Roth, op. cit. p. 25

<sup>64</sup>Y. de Pisa, op. cit. pp. 43, 47

<sup>65</sup>E. Finkel, R. Obadja Sforno als Exeget (Breslau:  
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