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AUTHOR: Pamela A. Mailender

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SIGNATURE OF ADVISOR(S)

Date

Harriet Cohen

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The Politics Surrounding Solomon's Accession to the Throne and Adonijah's Rebellion, as Reflected in the Eighteenth Century Commentary, the *Me'am Lo'ez*

The goal of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of I Kings: 1-3 (specifically, Solomon's accession to the throne and Adonijah's rebellion) in light of the commentary, the *Me'am Lo'ez*. By focusing on the author's language, remarks, and choice of sources, the idea was to glean information about the text, as well as the audience for whom the author was writing. The contribution of this thesis is that there is now a document that highlights issues that Sephardic Jews, living in the eighteenth century under the Ottoman Empire, were confronting. By reading this thesis, one can understand how the author was able to use I Kings: 1-3 to address these problems. The reader will also have access to some obscure rabbinic sources and comments.

This thesis is comprised of six chapters, as well as a preface, introduction, conclusion, and bibliography. The first chapter summarizes I Kings: 1-3, the second and third chapters provide background information about Culi and the *Me'am Lo'ez*, while the last three are an analysis of the social and political implications of the *Me'am Lo'ez* commentary to I Kings: 1-3. The sources used include *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez: I Kings*, *The Book of I Kings: Me'am Lo'ez*, *The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez*, the Jewish Publication Society's *Hebrew-English Tanakh*, as well as rabbinic sources mentioned by the author within the text. Other sources include secondary books and articles from sources such as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* and *The Jewish Encyclopedia*.

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Throne and Adonijah's Rebellion,
as Reflected in the Eighteenth Century Commentary,
the *Me'am Lo'ez***

Pamela A. Mailender

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
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Advisor: Dr. Martin A. Cohen

Table of Contents

I.	Preface	3
II.	Introduction	4
III.	Chapter 1: The Biblical Account of the Accession of Solomon	6
IV.	Chapter 2: The Life and Work of Jacob Culi	16
V.	Chapter 3: Précis of Culi's Introduction to the <i>Me'am Lo'ez</i>	22
VI.	Chapter 4: The Social and Political Implications of the <i>Me'am Lo'ez</i> Commentary to I Kings, Chapter 1	32
VII.	Chapter 5: The Social and Political Implications of the <i>Me'am Lo'ez</i> Commentary to I Kings, Chapter 2	53
VIII.	Chapter 6: The Social and Political Implications of the <i>Me'am Lo'ez</i> Commentary to I Kings, Chapter 3	77
IX.	Chapter 7: The Sources	94
X.	Conclusion	114
XI.	Bibliography	117

Preface

As Jacob Culi thanked his benefactor in the introduction to the *Me'am Lo'ez*, I too must offer a few words of gratitude. First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Martin A. Cohen. Without his help, this project may have seemed arduous and overwhelming. Yet, with Dr. Cohen's ability to put tasks in perspective and his unwavering guidance, he made the writing of this thesis an enjoyable and valuable process. Not only is Dr. Cohen a distinguished scholar and professor, he is also a great rabbi and mentor. I am most grateful to have had the opportunity to work with him as it has allowed me to understand his love of Judaism and Jewish History. I would also like to thank the faculty and board of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. My experience at the college has been extremely satisfying. I have been extremely impressed by my fellow classmates, the academics, the integrity of the school, and most importantly, the sense of community. I am certain that my time at HUC, and in particular the exercise of writing a composition such as this, has prepared me for a future in the rabbinate.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting me throughout these months of research and writing. The love and encouragement of my fiancé Brad Mandel, my mother Geraldine Mailender, my father Ken Mailender, my brother Kevin Mailender, my sister Haley Mailender, and my stepmother Melissa Mailender, has been inspirational and essential. It is for them and those mentioned above that I dedicate this thesis.

Introduction

In my sophomore year of college at Cornell University, I haphazardly enrolled in a course on the Kings of Israel. It was not a topic with which I was familiar. I just thought that the description was interesting and the professor had an excellent reputation. The class soon enraptured me. I could not learn or read enough about these Kings, particularly Saul, David, and Solomon. I felt that the stories of their lives were important and applicable. When this course ended, I decided to major in Near Eastern Studies where I would continue to take Bible classes. However, there was never another class specifically on the Kings. And when I entered the Hebrew Union College, the same was true. We may have touched upon these individuals in our studies, but never devoted any significant time to them. Thus, when I was given the opportunity to select a specific topic for my thesis, I felt that it would be a wonderful chance to return to the Kings of Israel. I would be able to return full circle.

I entertained the thought of pursuing a study of the kings in a Biblical context. However, after some thought and a conversation with Dr. Martin A. Cohen, I realized that there was more to gain from a socio-political study on these individuals. While there is great worth in the text itself, I felt that even more could be learned by understanding how different people at different times connected with this text. I soon narrowed down my scope and decided to focus on I Kings, Chapters 1, 2, and 3. I chose this section because I was moved by the fact that the great King David was nearing the end of his life. I was angered by the thought of his son, Adonijah, trying to usurp the throne. I was hopeful that Solomon would be able to establish himself and serve God and the people in the same way that David had. It had all the elements of a gripping and exciting narrative.

However, I did not just think that it was a great story. I knew that there was something important and insightful that could be learned from it.

Therefore, at Dr. Cohen's suggestion, I decided to study Jacob Culi's, *Me'am Lo'ez*. I felt that by examining this commentary on I Kings that I would be able to glean important information about how the Sephardic Jews, living under the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century, understood this text. I wanted to know what lessons Culi wanted them to deduce from this section of the Bible. I chose Culi's commentary for many reasons, but most important is the fact that it was written for the average Jew. It was a scholarly work, yet it was written in Ladino for the common Jew who was not particularly learned. Hence, Culi's main goal was to get these Jews to understand and connect with these words. It is certainly hard to get the average individual to study the Torah, how much more difficult to entice him to learn about I Kings. Yet, Culi succeeded in pulling out messages from the text that were clear and pertinent to their lives. He created a commentary that can serve as a manual on topics such as death, leadership, and faith in God. By focusing on Culi's statements, as well as his selection and rejection of rabbinic material, I have also been able to understand the life of a Jewish community living during a difficult time in Jewish history. It is interesting to take this information and compare it with issues that are important in the lives of the Jews that I will be serving, the Jews of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1: The Biblical Account of the Accession of Solomon

At the end of the second book of Samuel, King David conducts a census throughout Judah and Israel. This census is considered a sin, and as a result, David is given three punishments from which he must choose: a seven-year famine, being chased by his enemies for three months, or three days of pestilence in the land. David selects the latter and the people and the land suffer from this plague. David then builds an altar for the Lord and offers sacrifices of burnt offerings and offerings of well-being in an attempt to repent and prevent further punishment. At the end of the book, the reader learns that “the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague against Israel was checked.”¹

The book of I Kings, which directly follows II Samuel in the Tanakh, begins with an assessment of King David’s physical condition. However, it is uncertain how many years have passed since the time of the census. At this point, David is old and his body is always cold. Thus, his servants suggest that a young virgin attend to him and lie with him, so that he could benefit from the extra human body warmth. The narrative explains that this woman, Abishag, the Shunammite, is a very beautiful virgin. While the nature of their relationship is not described, the text is explicit in mentioning that the king was not intimate with her. In the Bible, this term,

“וְהַמֶּלֶךְ לֹא יָדָעָה” implies that he did not have sexual intercourse with her.

The importance of the fact that David is now weak becomes clear when the narrative turns to Adonijah, David’s oldest living son. Adonijah is attempting to usurp the throne. He begins his campaign by declaring that he will be king and outfits himself

¹ The Jewish Publication Society, Hebrew-English Tanakh (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), II Samuel 24:25.

with chariots, horses, and fifty outrunners. It is important to note that this is the same exact thing that Absalom, Adonijah's older brother, does in II Samuel 15:1, when he tries to seize David's throne. There it says, "Sometime afterward, Absalom provided himself with a chariot, horses, and fifty outrunners."² Thus, one can assume that Adonijah modeled his plan after Absalom's, even though it was unsuccessful. And to further highlight the similarities between the two brothers and their rebellions, the author of I Kings explains that Adonijah resembled Absalom and was the son born after him. Since Adonijah was the next oldest son, one can imply that Adonijah was the rightful heir apparent, not Solomon.

In his quest for the throne, Adonijah turns to Joab and the priest Abiathar for support and guidance. It is of great importance that Adonijah aligns himself with these two specific individuals, while Solomon finds company with the priest Zadok, Benaiah, the prophet Nathan, Shimei and Rai, and David's own fighting men, known as the Cherethites and the Pelethites. In his article, "The Rebellions During the Reign of David," Martin A. Cohen explains that the "political positions of both Solomon and Adonijah coincided with those of their respective backers."³

One must note that Zadok and Benaiah, in particular, were both bureaucratic appointments, thus their loyalty undeniably laid with the king. Yet Joab, as commander of the united militias of Israel and Judah, and Abiathar, the leading Shilonite priest, were connected to pre-monarchial power sources that helped bring the monarchy to power. Joab and Abiathar supported the idea of the monarchy more than they supported the king

² Ibid., II Samuel 15:1.

³ Martin Cohen, "The Rebellions During the Reign of David," Studies in Jewish Bibliography History and Literature in honor of I. Edward Kiev (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1971), 93.

who sat at the head of it. Therefore, they believed that Adonijah could claim the monarchy on the basis of primogeniture. However, "like Benaiah and Zadok, Solomon was David's man, [thus] his claim to the throne rested entirely on his father's appointment."⁴ It is clear that Adonijah's rebellion was about more than two brothers fighting for the throne. It was about the Old Guard in the provinces struggling with the new power concentrated in Jerusalem. It was the pre-monarchy's attempt to take on the bureaucracy created by David. This split between the Old Guard and the New is also evident in Absalom's rebellion. Cohen explains that "the familiar pattern is visible in this rebellion. David and his bureaucratic structure are pitted against a coalition of Old Guard elements, comprising Saulides and other Northerners, as well as the national armies of Israel-Judah."⁵ In the case of both rebellions, the Old Guard fears that David is moving towards centralization and total control.

Returning to I Kings, Chapter 1, the reader sees that Adonijah is aware of the fact that Solomon has aligned himself with David's bureaucracy. Adonijah prepares a feast and purposely excludes Nathan, Benaiah, his father's elite fighting group, and Solomon. The prophet Nathan catches wind of Adonijah's actions and approaches Bathsheba. He asks her if she has heard that Adonijah is trying to assume the kingship without David's consent. Nathan then tells her that if she wants to save her life, and Solomon's, she must go to David and say, "Did not you, O lord king, swear to your maidservant: 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit upon my throne?' Then why has Adonijah become king?"⁶ It seems that Nathan assumes that Adonijah knows of David's promise to Bathsheba. Therefore, Nathan fears that Adonijah may try to eliminate

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:13.

possible threats to his rule, such as Solomon and all of his supporters.⁷ It is for this reason that Nathan encourages Bathsheba to confront David. He says that he will come in after Bathsheba has spoken to the king and confirm her words.

Bathsheba approaches the king, and even goes beyond what Nathan had instructed her to say. For example, she reminds David that he not only swore to her, but “swore by the Lord your God,” that Solomon would succeed him as king.⁸ She informs him of Adonijah’s actions and of the fact that Abiathar and Joab are supporting him. She concludes by saying, “And so the eyes of all Israel are upon you, O lord king, to tell them who shall succeed my lord the king on the throne. Otherwise, when my lord the king lies down with his fathers, my son Solomon and I will be regarded as traitors.”⁹

Nathan then enters the king’s quarters and says, “O lord king, you must have said, ‘Adonijah shall succeed me as king and he shall sit upon my throne.’”¹⁰ It is as though Nathan is saying that nobody can become the king without David’s consent. Nathan also makes sure that David knows that along with Solomon, he, Nathan was excluded from the events, as well as Zadok and Benaiah. Perhaps he is making it clear to David who is on his side.

David then speaks to Nathan and Bathsheba and repeats the contents of the oath that were quoted by Bathsheba.¹¹ He not only says that Solomon will sit upon his throne, but that Solomon will sit upon his throne in his stead.¹² In addition, he will fulfill this

⁷ Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1991), 672.

⁸ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:17.

⁹ Ibid., I Kings 1:21.

¹⁰ Ibid., I Kings 1:24.

¹¹ Telushkin, 673.

¹² The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:30.

oath on this very day and make Solomon king of Israel and Judah. Bathsheba bows before the king and prays that he will live forever.

David commands that his personal guard escort Solomon, on his (David's) mule, to the Gihon spring. The fact that it is David's mule is important, as it was the act of giving over his royal property.¹³ At the Gihon, Solomon is to be anointed king by Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the general. A horn is to be blasted and they are to declare, "Long live King Solomon." He is then to sit upon David's throne. Benaiah says amen to David's words and offers a prayer that the Lord will be with Solomon as God has been with David and that God will exalt Solomon's throne even higher than he exalted David's throne.¹⁴ They do as David has instructed and all the people march behind Solomon and celebrate.

Adonijah hears the people celebrating and Joab hears the sound of the horn. They do not know the cause of the uproar until Jonathan, the son of Abiathar, arrives. He informs them that David has made Solomon king. He tells them all of the details of the anointing so that they are certain that it is legitimate. He concludes by telling them that David said, "Praised be the Lord, the God of Israel who has this day provided a successor to my throne, while my own eyes can see it."¹⁵ At this point, Adonijah is fearful and he hurries to grasp the horns of the altar. The Jewish Study Bible explains, "Taking hold of them was a way for an individual who believed himself innocent of any capital crime to claim sanctuary."¹⁶ Solomon learns of Adonijah's actions and his request that Solomon swear not to kill him. In response to this, Solomon says that if Adonijah behaves himself

¹³ Telushkin, 673.

¹⁴ The Jewish Publication Society, 1 Kings 1:37.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1 Kings 1:48.

¹⁶ Telushkin, 674.

he will be spared, but if he is guilty of any offense, he will die. The chapter ends with Solomon having Adonijah removed from the altar and being brought before him. Adonijah bows before King Solomon and Solomon send him home.

At the beginning of Chapter 2, the reader learns that David's life is coming to an end. He advises Solomon that in order to ensure an unending dynasty, he must follow the laws, commandments, rules, and admonitions of the Lord, God, as recorded in the Teaching of Moses. By doing this he will ensure his own success and their line will remain on the throne of Israel forever. He then asks Solomon to take vengeance on Joab and deal graciously with the sons of Barzillai, the Gileadite, who befriended him when he fled from Absalom. David also instructs Solomon to punish Shimei, the son of Gera, who insulted him during Absalom's rebellion. The narrative continues by saying that, "David slept with his fathers, and he was buried in the City of David. The length of David's reign over Israel was forty years: he reigned seven years in Hebron, and he reigned thirty-three in Jerusalem. And Solomon sat upon the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established."¹⁷

The narrative then returns to Adonijah. He comes to see Bathsheba and tells her that the kingship really belonged to him and that the people Israel actually wanted him to reign. However, due to the will of the Lord, it was passed on to Solomon. Here he explicitly says that it was the doing of the Lord rather than that of his father, David. He takes the power away from David. He then says that he has one request of Bathsheba. He wants her to ask King Solomon to give him Abishag, the Shunammite, as a wife. He says he is asking Bathsheba because he does not think that Solomon will refuse her. Adonijah acts as though this request is harmless, but in reality, it is a serious offense. His

¹⁷ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:10-12.

plan is to "take as a wife one who, so far as the public knew, may have been intimate with David. This is tantamount to usurping the throne."¹⁸ One cannot ignore the similarity to II Samuel, Chapter 16, in which Absalom sleeps with David's concubines in order to prove to the people, Israel, that he is taking over the throne.¹⁹

Bathsheba does as Adonijah requests and speaks with King Solomon. She says, "Let Abishag, the Shunammite, be given to your brother Adonijah as wife."²⁰ To which Solomon replies, "Why request Abishag, the Shunammite, for Adonijah? Request the kingship for him! For he is my older brother and the priest Abiathar and Joab son of Zeruiah are on his side."²¹ From this statement it is clear that Solomon is suspicious of Adonijah's intentions and understands that this is a ploy to usurp the throne. Thus, Adonijah instructs Benaiah to strike Adonijah down. Subsequently, Adonijah dies. Solomon considers killing Abiathar the priest but instead, he banishes him to his estate at Anathoth. He deserves to die but Solomon spares his life because of the fact that he carried the Ark before David and endured many hardships with David, during his reign.

When Joab hears of this news, he flees to the Tent of the Lord and grasps the horns of the altar, as Adonijah had done. The text also states that Joab had aligned himself with Adonijah, but he had not supported Absalom. King Solomon sends Benaiah to kill Joab, but when he gets to the Tent, Joab refuses to come out. Benaiah returns and tells Solomon of Joab's response. Solomon tells him to go back and strike Joab down. By doing this, Solomon is ridding himself of Joab's guilt. He is making sure that Joab's guilt will remain with him and his descendants, and not the House of David. For, Joab

¹⁸ Telushkin, 675.

¹⁹ The Jewish Publication Society, II Samuel 16:21-22.

²⁰ Ibid., I Kings 2:21.

²¹ Ibid., I Kings 2:22.

had killed innocent and righteous people, such as Abner, the army commander of Israel, and Amasa, the army commander of Judah. Benaiah kills Joab, and he is buried at his home in the wilderness. Solomon then appoints Benaiah commander of the army and Zadok as the priest in Abiathar's place.

Solomon then deals with punishing Shimei as David had requested. He tells him to build a house in Jerusalem. He is to stay there and never go out from the house. If he does leave, he will be killed. Shimei feels that Solomon's judgment is fair and the narrative explains that Shimei remained in Jerusalem for a long time. However, three years later, two of Shimei's slaves run away to Gath. Shimei goes out to find them and return them to his house. Solomon is told that Shimei had left his house, so he sends for him. Solomon reminds Shimei of the oath that he had sworn by and now broken. He also says, "You know all the wrong, which you remember very well, that you did to my father David. Now the Lord brings down your wrongdoing upon your own head."²² Solomon instructs Benaiah to strike down Shimei and he dies. The chapter ends by saying that "the kingdom was secured in Solomon's hands."²³

Now that Solomon has authority over his own people, he begins to make political alliances with the outside world. Thus, at the beginning of Chapter 3, the reader learns that Solomon allies himself with the Egyptians by marrying the Pharaoh's daughter. He brings her to live with in the City of David until he has finished building his palace. Next, the narrative says that Solomon joins with the people, and continues to make sacrifices to the Lord at high places and shrines outside of Jerusalem.

²² Ibid., I Kings 2:44.

²³ Ibid., I Kings 2:46.

Solomon then goes to Gibeon, the site of the largest shrine, and presents burnt offerings to the Lord, the God of his father, David. While there, God appears to him in a dream. God asks Solomon what He can do for him. Solomon acknowledges all the gracious ways in which the Lord dealt with David, since David was faithful and righteous. And he is grateful that God has allowed David's son to occupy his throne. However, Solomon says that he is a young man with little leadership experience. He says, "Your servant finds himself in the midst of the people You have chosen, a people too numerous to be numbered or counted. Grant, then, Your servant an understanding mind to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad; for who can judge this vast people of Yours?"²⁴

God is impressed that Solomon's asks for wisdom to judge rather than long life, riches, and the death of his enemies. God says, "I grant you a wise and discerning mind; there has never been anyone like you before, nor will anyone like you rise again. And I also grant you what you did not ask for- both riches and glory all your life- the like of which no king has ever had."²⁵ The Lord also promises to give Solomon the gift of a long life if he follows the laws and commandments as David had done. When Solomon wakes up, he remembers this dream, and goes to the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord in Jerusalem. There he offers up sacrifices to the Lord and holds a banquet for his courtiers.

The chapter ends with a case that is brought before King Solomon. Two prostitutes come to him and one woman (woman A, for clarity purposes) explains that these women live in the same house. She says that she (woman A) gave birth to a child while the other woman (woman B) was in the house. And three days later, this other

²⁴ Ibid., 1 Kings 3:8-9.

²⁵ Ibid., 1 Kings 3:12-13.

woman (woman B) also gave birth to a child. They were alone in the house. Now during the night, the other woman (woman B) lay on top of her child, and the child died.

Therefore, this woman (woman B) woke up and took her (woman A's) baby while she (woman A) was sleeping. She (woman B) then placed the dead baby in her (woman A's) bosom. When this woman (woman A) woke up to feed her baby, she saw that he was dead. But when she (woman A) looked closely at the child, she realized it was not the son to whom she had given birth.

The other woman (woman B), after hearing this story, then says, "No, the live one is my son, and the dead one is yours!"²⁶ But the first woman (woman A) says that this is not the case and they argue in front of King Solomon. In order to determine who the mother of the living child is, Solomon requests a sword. The sword is brought to him and he orders for the child to be cut in two. He says that way one woman can have one half of the child, and the other woman can have the other half.

But the woman whose child is the live one begs the king not to kill the child. She says, "Please, my lord, give her the live child; only do not kill it!"²⁷ The other woman says, "It shall be neither yours nor mine; cut it in two!"²⁸ At that point Solomon knows that the child belongs to the woman who wants to spare the child's life. He orders that the child be saved and given to this woman, since she is the rightful mother. The chapter ends by glorifying King Solomon. It says, "When all Israel heard the decision that the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king; for they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice."²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., I Kings 3:22.

²⁷ Ibid., I Kings 3:26.

²⁸ Ibid., I Kings 3:27.

²⁹ Ibid., I Kings 3:28.

Chapter 2: The Life and Work of Jacob Culi

Jacob Culi was born in Israel in 1685. Both his father and his mother came from rabbinical families. His father was the son of a Cretan rabbi of Spanish descent and his mother was the daughter of R. Moses ibn Habib. While it is unclear if he was born in Safed, it is certain that he lived there during the early years of his life. However, he would eventually leave Safed for Constantinople, where he intended to publish his grandfather's writing. While there, he began learning with R. Judah Rosanes, the chief rabbi of Constantinople. When Culi finished his studies, R. Rosanes appointed him judge and teacher of the Jewish community in Constantinople. By the late 1720's, Culi had also succeeded in publishing some of his grandfather's works. He even had attached his own responsa to two of them. Thus, when R. Rosanes died, Culi was chosen to publish some of R. Rosanes' works. Culi would add his own introductions and notes to these books as well.³⁰

It was not surprising when in 1730, Culi began to create his own work, a commentary on the Bible. It is believed that Culi had a few reasons for writing a commentary on the Bible. He enjoyed scholarship and wanted to share his ideas with the Jewish masses. But, he also wanted to fill a void and clear up some of the confusion that had resulted from the Shabbatai Zevi heresy. Shabbatai Zevi was a Turkish Jew who was thought to be the Messiah. Many Jews thought that he would liberate Palestine from Turkish rule and restore it as a Jewish state.³¹ However, Shabbatai Zevi did not follow through. When he met with the Turkish sultan and was going to demand Palestine's liberation, something else happened. The sultan threatened Shabbatai Zevi and told him

³⁰ Encyclopaedia Judaica: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed., s.v. "Jacob Culi."

³¹ Telushkin, 210.

that he must either convert to Islam or be tortured to death. Most Jews were shocked when "shortly thereafter, Shabbatai entered the sultan's palace, donned a turban, and took the Muslim name Mehemet Effendi."³² Many Jews felt betrayed and called this man a false messiah. They could not believe that he would abandon them and their cause. Many were saddened, some were dismayed, and others were just angry. Thus, many Jews at this time did not know if they could or should continue to have faith in Judaism. This was an issue that plagued the Jewish people in the decades following the Shabbatai Zevi crisis. Therefore, Culi's goal was to reabsorb the masses back into Orthodox Judaism. He wanted to regain their trust and bring them back.

One also cannot ignore the fact that the early eighteenth century continued to be a difficult time for the Jews living under the Ottoman Empire. During this time, the Turkish Empire began to decline. The Empire was no longer as militarily, politically or economically successful as it had once been. And, the leadership of the empire was seemingly ineffective. They faced many defeats and even lost states that they had previously conquered. These setbacks frustrated the leaders. They felt that they were losing control, as was also evidenced by the revolts of their own subjects.³³

Therefore, the leaders of the Ottoman Empire wanted to show that they were still powerful. They decided to exert their authority over the Jews by issuing decrees. In 1728, Ahmed III ordered all Jews living in the capital near the fish market, to sell their houses and possessions to Muslims so that they would not contaminate the street. This was just one example, as the Jews faced other restrictions and limitations of their rights. The Jews living during this time felt oppressed and discouraged as their status

³² Ibid.

³³ Encyclopaedia Judaica: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed., s.v. "Ottoman Empire."

deteriorated. Many felt that their lives would be easier if they were not Jewish and even considered converting to Islam.³⁴

Culi thought that a Bible commentary would be an effective way of educating the public and renewing an interest in Judaism. However, he identified a major problem. He realized that most of the Jews in Constantinople and the surrounding areas, were unfamiliar with the Hebrew language. They were unable to read it; therefore, they were unable to access traditional Jewish literature. Culi felt that the inability to connect with important Jewish sources made Jews feel even more estranged from their own religion. And this often led them away from Jewish observance.³⁵

Therefore, in an effort to bring Jews back to Judaism, Culi began writing a commentary on the book of Genesis. Originally, Culi wanted to call this work, *Beit Ya'akov*, meaning House of Jacob. However, he later decided to call it, the *Me'am Lo'ez*. This Hebrew phrase comes from Psalm 114:1, where it says, "When Israel went forth out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of a strange language."³⁶ Thus, the meaning of the title of the book is "people of a strange language." It is important to note that Culi decided to write his commentary in colloquial and conversational style. However, even more significant is the fact that he wrote in the language of Ladino.³⁷

Ladino, which is also known as Judeo-Spanish, Romance, Gudezmo, and Spaniolish, was the spoken and written Hispanic language of the Jews of Spanish origin. It is believed that the Jews of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries "interspersed their dialects with words or expressions borrowed from Hebrew (particularly terms and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed., s.v. "Jacob Culi."

³⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, trans., Psalm 114:1.

³⁷ Israel Katz, "Ladino," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed.

concepts connected with religion and ethics).³⁸ However, it was not until after 1492 that Ladino became known as a specifically Jewish language. This was the year in which the Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Since they were now cut off from the Peninsula when the Castilian Spanish language was still developing, they retained the Spanish and Hispanic dialects of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The further away from Spain the emigrants went, the more cut off they were from the developments in the language, and thus, the more Ladino began to diverge from mainstream Castilian Spanish.

In Amsterdam, England, and Italy, the Jews who spoke Ladino were closer to Spain, and thus, their language was not much different from the new Castilian Spanish. However, in the Sephardic communities of the Ottoman Empire, for example where Culi lived, the language reflected older Spanish forms and borrowed words from Hebrew and Arabic, as well as Greek, Turkish, and even French. Ladino was the spoken and written language of the people of this time and place. However, while the use of Ladino was widespread, it could not be utilized for all linguistic purposes. For example, "the language of Bible translations and prayers, which remained more resistant to the words, expressions, and syntactic patterns of the local tongue, became, in the course of the centuries, less and less comprehensible to the masses."³⁹ But Culi was determined to find a way to bring these works, as well as other Jewish writings, back to the masses. He knew that it would be difficult to utilize the Ladino in this way, but he knew that if he was successful, then the people would be able to connect with the Jewish sources. He realized that Ladino was the language that the people knew and understood.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

The Encyclopaedia Judaica says that Culi's aim "was to popularize Jewish lore by means of extracts from the Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, and the biblical commentaries."⁴⁰ His goal was to make important rabbinic sources accessible to the people. He wanted to "put the elements of Jewish life at the disposal of people unable to use the sources. He [dealt] with all aspects of Jewish life, and often with life in general, with history ethics, philosophy, and biblical exegesis. [He commented] on the prescriptions of the Law and [clarified] them with a profusion of detail."⁴¹ His idea was to write a commentary on each weekly portion of the Torah. He would go verse by verse and compile all the information he could find that was worthwhile. He would then link the information together by using anecdotes, legends, historical narratives, and folklore.

The first volume of the *Me'am Lo'ez* was published in Constantinople in 1730. It was an immediate success. However, in the year 1732, Jacob Culi died. This was right before his commentary on the first part of the book of Exodus was published. When he died, it was discovered that he had left many unfinished commentaries on other books of the Hebrew Bible. Later writers would use these manuscripts as a starting point for their own commentaries. When they were completed, they were compiled as part of the *Me'am Lo'ez*. And years later, new editions of Culi's original commentaries on Genesis and Exodus would be published. In fact, new editions in Hebrew and Ladino have been published as recently as the 1960's.⁴²

As Culi had anticipated, this work was highly popular amongst the Sephardic Jews, especially those of Turkey and the Balkans. One reason for this being that for many Sephardic Jews it was the only piece of Jewish literature that they could read. The

⁴⁰ Encyclopaedia Judaica: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed., s.v. "Jacob Culi."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Henri Guttel, "*Me'am Lo'ez*," in Encyclopaedia Judaica: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed.

Me'am Lo'ez was so important that it was often given as a dowry. Furthermore, it was studied in groups and many families saw the reading of it as a religious duty. And unlike other commentaries of the time, the *Me'am Lo'ez* was intended for all people: men, women, and even children.⁴³ It seems that Jacob Culi achieved his goal, as he certainly succeeded in making Judaism accessible to the masses.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3: Précis of Culi's Introduction to the *Me'am Lo'ez*⁴⁴

According to Culi, the *Me'am Lo'ez* will include a discussion on the basic principles of Judaism. In particular, there are four ideas that prevent one from sinning.

The First Idea: Nothing existed before God. God created the world and is concerned with the entire world and all beings who dwell within it. Thus, God has the power to give rewards and punishments. Once a person realizes that God has this power, he or she will not sin.

The Second Idea: A person must study and understand the Written Torah and the Oral Torah in order to avoid sin. God gave Moses the Written Torah on Mt. Sinai and at the same time, God explained each commandment. Together these God-given explanations form the Oral Torah. The people of Moses' generation knew that he was receiving more than the two tablets because he stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. It took time to explain the Torah. These explanations are important because of the fact that the Torah has been written in such a concise manner.

God intended for the Oral Torah to be recited from memory and passed from person to person. Thus, before Moses died he taught everything he knew to the people, and Joshua retained all of this information. He then passed it on and eventually, Rabbi Yehudah the Prince would receive this instruction.

He decided to "put the Oral Torah into writing. This became the Mishnah, which he compiled and edited."⁴⁵ He knew that the Oral Torah was not meant to be written but he felt that the information would be completely forgotten since the Jews were facing persecution. There were fewer sages than ever and the Jews were being dispersed.

⁴⁴ Jacob Culi, and Aryeh Kaplan trans., *The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez*, (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1977), 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Therefore, in an attempt to save this valuable information, the Mishnah was compiled. It was completed in 189 CE. Soon after, works were written to explain the Mishnah. These became necessary since there were few sages left who could accurately explain the Mishnah. Rav Ashi would also compile "a great set of volumes, known as the Babylonian Talmud, or the Gemarah. With the passage of time, many points were being forgotten, and the Mishnah had become so difficult that no one could understand it."⁴⁶

The Talmud had been written in Aramaic, as it was the vernacular of the time. But once people stopped speaking Aramaic, the Talmud became difficult to understand. The Gaonim would write books in an attempt to explain the laws, but they too were difficult to understand. In 1168, Maimonides wrote the *Mishneh Torah*, in which he "codified all the laws and commandments of the Torah."⁴⁷ One could learn "all the explanations, rules and laws, without resorting to any other text."⁴⁸ This book included the basic obligations that a Jew must follow in order to avoid punishment in the world to come. Around this same time, Rashi would write his extraordinary commentary on the Torah and the Talmud. His work was clear and user friendly. Later, Rabbi Joseph Caro (1448-1575) wrote the *Shulhan Arukh*, "in which he codifies all the pertinent laws and commandments of the Torah."⁴⁹

Each of these individuals created these works so that the meaning of the Torah would not be forgotten. In Culi's time, even fewer people can read the Torah as knowledge of Hebrew is not widespread. Thus, "ways of Judaism are gradually being

⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.

forgotten.”⁵⁰ He fears that those who do not understand the Torah will face punishment in the world to come. People also seem to know even less about religious practice and the laws than they do about the Torah.

The Third Idea: The entire basis for the Torah is found in Leviticus 19:17, where it says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” A person who follows this commandment will not envy another and will give the other the benefit of the doubt. A person who gives another the benefit of the doubt is given the benefit of the doubt by God, especially in the most unusual circumstances. In sum, a person who follows Leviticus 19:17 “will not do to another anything that he would not want done to himself. Through this, he will keep the entire Torah and not sin.”⁵¹

The Fourth Idea: A person will avoid sinning if he realizes that he is mortal and will eventually die. “Contemplating one’s morality is a tested method of destroying the power of the evil urge.”⁵² It is said that when a person is about to die, the Angel of Death tries to get him to deny the Torah. Thus, during a person’s life, he should make a declaration each year in which affirms his faith in God, God’s judgment, and the Torah. If he does this, when his time comes, he will not be led astray by any evil beings. He will not sin, even at his last moment.

Scope of this Anthology: It is in response to these four ideas that Culi is compelled to write a commentary on the entire Bible. And he is writing it for the average person, in the language of Ladino. He explains that “each chapter will be an anthology of the teachings of the Midrash and other major Jewish classics. Also included will be all pertinent laws, as presented in the works of the Rambam and in Rabbi Joseph Caro’s

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

⁵² Ibid.

Shulhan Arukh. I will not discuss anything that goes beyond the law; merely the simple obligations binding on every Jew.”⁵³ Culi has decided to divided the work into seven parts: 1. Genesis, 2. Exodus and Leviticus, 3. Numbers and Deuteronomy, 4. The Early Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), 5. The Later Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), 6. The Twelve Minor Prophets, together with the five Scrolls (Esther, Lamentations, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), 7. The rest of the Bible.

Culi stresses the fact that this work is an anthology and that none of the writing is actually his own. He is merely compiling ideas from the Jewish classics and translating them into Ladino. He says that he will be quoting all sources since the Torah requires this. He believes that it would be theft to make statements and not credit the appropriate source.

Benefits: Culi writes about ten different ways in which one will benefit from studying the *Me'am Lo'ez*. The first is that a person who reads this anthology will make himself aware of the commandments for which he is responsible, as well as the sins and prohibitions which he must avoid. The second benefit is that a person will now be aware of the miracles that God produced for our ancestors. In the Torah, these miracles are often explained in a terse manner, so Culi's aim is to provide more information so one can gain a deeper understanding of how these miracles occurred. The third benefit is that the average Jew will now be able to fulfill the obligation to review the Torah portion each week. The command is to read the scripture twice and the Targum once. However, most people no longer know Aramaic, in which the Targum is written, so they can read this anthology in its place. And for those who do not know Hebrew either, they may read this anthology alone. Since it is written in Ladino, they will be able to comprehend the

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

meaning of the Torah portion. Culi thinks that the best way to read the Torah portion is to divide it into seven parts and read one part each day.

Culi explains that in the Torah, "there are words that appear superfluous, ideas that seem contradictory, and concepts that are difficult to understand."⁵⁴ Thus, a fourth benefit is that one will be able to understand these issues if he reads the anthology. A fifth benefit to be derived from reading the text is that one will be able to understand the relationships among the prophets and the kings of Israel. This anthology also provides information that may be useful to a businessperson. Therefore, a sixth benefit is that one can learn to conduct his business affairs according to the standards of the Torah.⁵⁵ A seventh benefit is that a person will become knowledgeable about sacred literature (such as the Talmud, Midrash, and other classics), as opposed to the secular literature. Culi then gives permission to reprint the book so long as the explanations of the laws remain. It should not become a book of only stories and anecdotes.

An eighth benefit is that one will learn how the Temple appeared and how the sacrifices were offered. He realizes that we no longer offer sacrifices but explains that "when a person studies the laws of sacrifice in order to understand the Biblical references, it is counted as if he had actually offered the sacrifice."⁵⁶ This is unique because if one studies the laws of Shabbat, it is not as though one observed the Sabbath. Culi discusses the five types of sacrifice: the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, the crime offering, and the peace offering. Hence, when one studies the book of Genesis it is as though he sacrificed a burnt offering. One who studies the book of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Exodus, it is considered a meal offering, and so on. When one studies all five books of the Torah, he has offered all of the sacrifices.

The ninth benefit of reading the *Me'am Lo'ez* is that one will gain a greater understanding of the greatness of Torah. Culi wants the people to know that the Torah is not merely a history book; the stories are not just legends. These stories serve a purpose, and not a mundane one. Culi explains that "when the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, it was therefore necessary that all of its secrets and mysteries be disguised in the form of stories. If the Torah had remained in its true spiritual form, the world could never have accepted it, and the human intellect could never comprehend it."⁵⁷ Thus, the histories and stories are like clothes that protect the body of the Torah, the rules and laws. And within the body of the Torah is the soul, the mysteries of the Torah. The greatest sages are the one who understand the laws and then focus on these mysteries. And their reward in the world to come is that they will have great intelligence so that they will be able to better understand these mysteries. Culi then discusses the fact that the Torah is not written in chronological order. This is to make people realize that the Torah is not a history book.

The tenth benefit, which Culi describes, is more important than all the rest. He explains that we have not only been commanded to engage in the study of Torah, but also to keep the commandments and do good deeds. He believes that a person who studies this anthology will come to realize the importance of observing the commandments. He says that "without the observance of the commandments, study of the Torah is not sufficient."⁵⁸ Thus, the main purpose of studying Torah is to make it possible for one to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 22.

keep the commandments. And one should begin observing these commandments immediately since we do not know when we will die.

Acknowledgement: Culi then thanks God for allowing him to compile this book which has allowed for the study of Torah. It has also enabled him to make a profit which will be given to charity. He thanks the philanthropist Yehudah Mizrahi for printing the book. He explains that the money made from the first book is to be used to pay for printing expenses and then the production of other books. But the rest of the money will be given to charity. Money will be set aside to support the sages and to aid the sick.

A Parable: Culi tells a parable which explains that it is not enough to just live a life free of sin. In order to have a place in the world to come, one must follow the commandments and perform good deeds. The parable is that a king says that no one in the kingdom will attain a high position unless each person accomplishes something great. Thus, he encourages his sons to perform significant acts so that they can remain in the court. They take a ship and head to Ethiopia. They eventually find a garden and are told that they may enter but to remember that they cannot remain there forever. They may eat and drink whatever they want, but cannot take anything with them when they leave. They are also told that they should be careful not to eat anything unripe or spoiled.

While in the garden, the first prince is only concerned with eating and drinking as much as he can. The second prince becomes obsessed with hoarding the gold, silver, and diamonds. But the third son is wiser than the other two. He spends his time learning about the magnificent garden and wants to understand how it functions. He is also anxious to discover who the owner of this garden is. The princes are then summoned home. On the way, the first brother dies because the air outside the garden was different

and did not react well with all the food he had eaten. The second brother tries to leave with all of his treasures, but at the gate, the guards beat him for trying to take the stones with him. And when he returns to the city, he is so disheveled that the people would not even let him enter. The third son then approaches his father, the king, and tells him of the wondrous garden and the way in which it functions. The king tells his son that he is happy that he had not pursued vain things. He then reveals that he is the owner of the garden and gives his son a high position in the court.

Culi explains that the garden in the parable is the physical world, and God is the king. God sends people to this world so that "they can amass observances and good deeds so as to be worthy of high status in the Future World."⁵⁹ There are people in the world like the three brothers: some pursue physical pleasures, others wish to amass fortunes and are never satisfied, and then there are wise people. These people are the masters of their own souls. Their goal is to discover God, study Torah, and follow the commandments.

Wealth: Culi then relays a parable making the point that a person's monetary wealth is only determined by how much money one has to give to charity and good deeds. And he says that wealth in this world is not as important as the reward one may get in the World to Come. He concludes that true wealth is studying Torah for the sake of heaven. Culi then thanks Yehudah Mizrachi for making him wealthy since Mizrachi has allowed him to "bring the multitude to do good."⁶⁰ Culi believes that when people read this book they will become enlightened by Jewish thought and will be motivated to perform religious duties.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 30.

Torah Study: Culi says that the only thing preventing people from becoming good Jews is their lack of Torah knowledge. Thus, they should make it a point to read this anthology so they can understand the wisdom of the Torah and learn how to keep God's commandments. Since it is in Ladino, the people should read it everyday since they will be able to understand it without exerting too much energy. Plus, when one reads this text, it is as though he has studied Scripture, Talmud, Midrash and Codes.

He then explains that people who have faith in Judaism will pray to God for Culi so that he will be able to complete a commentary such as this on the entire Bible. If one finds an error or mistake in this text, he should correct it. He admits that he has worked quickly to finish the work so there may be errors. Furthermore, he is only human so mistakes are inevitable. He then prays that God will help him make as few as errors as possible. He is concerned that others will mock him if they find these mistakes and he does not want them to be punished for these reactions.

A Final Word: Culi concludes by once again praising his benefactor, the philanthropist Yehudah Mizrachi. He says that there is an obligation to bless one's benefactors, but he cannot compose such a prayer. Thus, he quotes an anecdote about Rabbi Yosi. Yosi was on a journey and he was hot and thirsty and all of a sudden, he came upon a tree with a brook flowing beside it. There he ate, drank, and slept. When he left, he said, "Tree, tree, how can I bless you? You are perfect in every way, lacking nothing. Therefore, I will say, 'May it be God's will that your offspring be just like you.'"⁶¹ This is similar to the blessing God gives to Abraham. Culi then offers the same sentiments to Mizrachi. He prays that his descendents be "good, upright, lovers of the

⁶¹ Ibid., 32.

commandments, good hearted, and perfect in every respect" and that "God grant him joy to a ripe old age."⁶² Amen.

⁶² Ibid.

Chapter 4: The Social and Political Implications of the Me'am Lo'ez Commentary to I Kings, Chapter 1

The author begins his commentary on I Kings by focusing on an idea presented in the first verse. Here, the Bible says, "King David was old and advanced in years, and they covered him with clothes, but he was not warmed."⁶³ This phrase, "old and advanced in years" (זָקֵן וְעָבָר), is of import for a variety of reasons.⁶⁴ However, it is most likely that the author chooses to interpret this phrase because he is aware of his audience. He realizes that many of the individuals who will study his commentary will also be of an older age. These people have worked their entire lives, and now they have the time for themselves, time that they could spend studying Torah. Therefore, he wants to entice them and find a way to connect them to the text.

The author begins by putting a positive spin on old age. He explains that there are three individuals who were crowned with old age. This makes becoming elderly seem like a privilege. He names the three people: Abraham, Joshua, and David. Even for the reader who is not extremely learned, it is likely that he is familiar with these extraordinary men. Thus, he praises those who have reached an old age by making it seem like a club for the elite and the important.

Then he tries to further dissect the phrase "old and advanced in years." He explains that there are three ways to look at getting old. He writes, "There are some who advance in years without showing their age. Others suffer from old age before their time."⁶⁵ Certainly one would be blessed to become old without showing any signs of

⁶³ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:1.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Shmuel Yerushalmi, *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez: I Kings*, (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1967), 3.

aging. But the author realizes that this is not very realistic and that the average person probably does not experience aging in this way. It is for that reason that he cites Isaac Abravanel's opinion that Abraham, Joshua, and David, all grew old according to their years. He wants to show that they grew old a natural pace. He wants the reader to understand that aging is a normal process.

Later in the commentary, the author discusses the scene that ensues when King David announces that he will place Solomon on his throne.⁶⁶ Bathsheba is overjoyed and she bows and prostrates herself to the king and says, "May my lord, King David, live forever."⁶⁷ The author explains that Bathsheba is not actually praying that David will physically live forever. She knows that it is not possible since he is old and believed to have been on his deathbed. Plus, the author points out that "even a healthy person knows that he will not live forever."⁶⁸ He says that "even the greatest of prophets and the most pious men eventually die."⁶⁹ He is trying to comfort the reader. However, as people get older, the idea of death is often looming. It can seem frightening. Therefore, the author explains that when Bathsheba wishes for David to live forever, she means that he should have eternal life, meaning that his soul will live on forever. In some ways, it seems that the author is saying that one does not need to fear death since there will be the world to come. But for now, you are still alive. You should stay positive since you have already reached an old age.

Futhermore, in the case of the readers, it is even more remarkable than usual that they have lived so long. One must remember that these individuals' life circumstances

⁶⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:30.

⁶⁷ Ibid., I Kings 1:31.

⁶⁸ Yerushalmi, 23.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

have been difficult. They are living at the time of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, a time when the Jews are facing hardships and oppression.⁷⁰ Thus, the author's mention of Abraham, Joshua, and David is even more apropos. As he says early on in the commentary, all of these "were men that had withstood great trials."⁷¹ For example, David had faced many dangers. These include the wars with the Philistines, Saul's persecution, and his son Absalom's rebellion.⁷² In each case, there was a chance that David could have lost control of the kingship. It is clear that David had struggled, yet he was able to persevere. The author wants the reader to find inspiration in this.

Therefore, he focuses on the end of David's life. He talks about the fact that even though David is advanced in years, he is able to stay in control. He borrows an idea from R. Isaac da Acosta. He says, "Till his last days, King David ruled over the Jewish People. He was able to prevent the strong and arrogant from taking advantage of the weak, and he kept the nation from falling into turmoil."⁷³ This comment refers to the situation with Adonijah. Adonijah knows that David is old and weak. He thinks he can take advantage of David's state and take over the throne. However, David rises to the occasion. He does not close his eyes to the danger because he wants to assume that everything will be okay.⁷⁴ It is true David "no longer [has] the strength to rule the people or mediate in their disputes. The many years of fighting and suffering [have] taken their toll of him."⁷⁵ But by placing Solomon on the throne, he proves that he is in charge of his own life, as well as the kingship. This is a message for the readers. They may be

⁷⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed., s.v. "Ottoman Empire."

⁷¹ Yerushalmi, 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

older now, but they have already survived a great deal of antagonism. Therefore, they cannot give up now.⁷⁶

And they must remain determined even if their aging becomes difficult and they begin to suffer. The author explains that though people may be sure that they will be rewarded in the world to come, "in this world they may yet incur unforeseen problems."⁷⁷ For, even David suffers in his old age. I Kings explains that his body has become old and he cannot not become warm. Turning to *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* and Rashi, the author explains that this coldness was a punishment for the census that David conducted. Following the census, God sent a plague and seventy thousand people died. When the Angel of Death approached Jerusalem, God commanded him to stop, because David had taken the blame and said that only he had sinned. Thus, the "Angel of Death took his sword and wiped it off on David's cloak... David's entire body was chilled with fright. The terror of that experience never left him. From that moment on he could never again find warmth."⁷⁸ The readers can identify with this terror as they may feel this way living under the Ottoman rule.

The author seems to be concerned that under these harsh and unfortunate circumstances, the people may be tempted to go astray and follow the ways of the wicked. Not only are the Jews facing severe edicts, but the political and economical situation is such that many are finding it difficult survive without turning to illegal activity. It is for this reason that the author chooses to confront the wicked. He wants to point out the repercussions of living a life filled with sin and depravity.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 4.

He returns to the phrase, "old and advanced in years."⁷⁹ He explains that this means that the person's days come "forward to testify to the righteousness that he has done."⁸⁰ However, this is not true for the wicked human being. This individual's years hide. They do not come forward. Borrowing from the concept of Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (the Gra), he explains, "They are afraid to come forward and reveal the evil deeds that were done on them."⁸¹ Therefore, the author is presenting the idea that a wicked person will not be granted a long life. Though the times are filled with corruptness and immorality, he is trying to inspire the readers to live righteously and avoid wickedness.

The author is also trying to purge the community of its wickedness entirely. In I Kings 1:5-6, the reader learns about the way in which Adonijah tries to take over the throne.⁸² The text says that he makes himself a chariot with horses and had fifty men run before him. Then a description is given about Adonijah. It says that he is very handsome, and that he was born after Absalom. From this statement, it is clear that the text is trying to connect Adonijah to Absalom. They are both handsome. They both rebel against David. And they both have a chariot with fifty runners. The commentary says, "By mentioning Absalom, the Bible implies that he was partially responsible for Adonijah's corruption."⁸³ This proves one wicked person is responsible for the wickedness of others. They spread their evilness to others and eventually, the entire society is at risk of being permeated by sin. Therefore, the author is trying to tell these

⁷⁹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:1.

⁸⁰ Yerushalmi, 3.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:5-6.

⁸³ Ibid., 10.

Jews to identify the wicked amongst them and force them to change their ways. If they do not, the entire community is at risk.

For example, when Adonijah is trying to take over the throne, he is aware of the fact that not everybody supports him. Therefore, he thinks that he will tempt people to drink large amounts of alcohol. Then they will lose their inhibitions and no longer worry about acting morally and uprightly. Then he will be able to convince them that he should be the next king.⁸⁴ This is just another example of a wicked individual trying to coerce others to act dishonestly. The author explains that "the wicked are always conniving and trying to trap the righteous."⁸⁵ This is also clear at the end of the first chapter of I Kings when Adonijah tries to get Solomon to swear that he will not kill him. But Solomon does not fall for his tactics. He tells Adonijah that if he acts courageously, he will live. If he acts evilly, then he will die. He does not make promises. This is because he knows better than to fall into the traps of the wicked.

Certainly some of these individuals do get drunk off the wine and decide to support Adonijah in his quest for the throne. However, once word is reported back to the group that David has anointed Solomon as king, they each get up and go on their own way.⁸⁶ They desert Adonijah. Yerushalmi explains that this is not surprising since "the wicked are never truly united. They form alliances only for their own good, and break them when they no longer suit their purposes. Those who rely upon them find themselves abandoned when they are in trouble."⁸⁷ Thus, the wicked members of the society cannot be trusted.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 12 (based on the comments of R. da Acosta).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁸⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:49.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 34.

Next, the author tries to encourage the members of his community to speak out against the wicked. Perhaps if their actions are revealed, they will be prevented from acting in this manner in the future. This concept is clear when the author comments on the section in which Nathan, the prophet, encourages Bathsheba to approach the king and tell him that Adonijah has made himself king. He does not have any reservations about telling David about Adonijah's rebellion. The author explains that the "Torah forbids speaking evil of people, even those who are sinful, or revealing their shameful deeds."⁸⁸ Thus, even in these cases, one should not report another person. However, in the Palestinian Talmud, *Peah* 1:1, there is some clarification of this statement. The Talmud says that this is the case unless this sinner is also one who causes fights and arguments. Yet, even in this situation, one may not slander or speak ill of this individual. However, "one may talk about them if there is a purpose."⁸⁹ It seems that Nathan has a purpose. He thinks that by informing David of Adonijah's actions that he will be able to prevent a war that might ensue between Adonijah and Solomon. He is trying to prevent unnecessary deaths. The author says, "But when, by revealing their evil machinations, one is able to prevent conflict and reestablish peace, he is not permitted to remain silent. Any hatred that he causes is far outweighed by that which he prevents."⁹⁰ Thus, it seems that he is making the point that it is acceptable to speak out against the wicked because they need to be brought to justice. Due to the morally difficult times, measures must be taken so that the integrity of the community can be preserved.

Now, a wicked person who is reading this commentary might feel discouraged at this point. This person might feel as though all hope is lost. However, by reading this

⁸⁸ Yerushalmi, 14.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 15.

commentary, the author makes it clear that repentance is possible. At the beginning of the commentary, he presents a few reasons why David cannot not get warm. As already mentioned, one reason is a result of a meeting with the Angel of Death following the census. Yet, another reason pertains to an incident involving Saul. Once, when Saul is chasing David, he stops in a cave. Saul does not know David and his men are in the cave. In an attempt to prove to Saul that he is loyal and supportive, David sneaks behind Saul and cuts off the corner of his robe. Saul does not notice David's actions and he leaves the cave. David then runs out after him and says, "Please, sir, take a close look at the corner of your cloak in my hand; for when I cut off the corner of your cloak, I did not kill you. You must see plainly that I have done nothing evil or rebellious, and I have never wronged you."⁹¹ Saul then blesses David and trusts his loyalty.

David is pleased that he has gained Saul's trust. However, based on the comments of David Kimhi, the author explains that David was always ashamed that he had cut Saul's robe. He had treated clothing, and more importantly royal clothing, with disrespect. Therefore, the fact that David suffers at the end of his life, is actually the way in which he atones for his sin.⁹² The commentary is making the point that it is possible to atone for one's wrongs.

The author then delves into the concept of repentance. He mentions the sin that David committed with Bathsheba. In II Samuel, David has sexual intercourse with Bathsheba while she is married, and then he arranges for her husband to be killed in battle. Yerushalmi explains that while "David had already repented, been punished and forgiven, his repentance was not yet complete. He had never had the opportunity to

⁹¹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Samuel 24:12.

⁹² Yerushalmi, 4.

withstand a similar temptation.”⁹³ He has atoned for his sin, but he has not fully repented. And the only way to fully repent is to place yourself in the same situation in which you have sinned and prove that you have changed your ways. In David’s case, he needed to prove that he could resist temptation. Towards the end of his life, David has the beautiful virgin Abishag serving him. They are always in close proximity to one another and she even lies on top of him to try to warm his body up and keep it from losing any of its own heat. This is clearly physical temptation. Moreover, the fact that she is not married makes it even easier for him to have sex with her. Therefore, the fact that David resists her proved that he has truly overcome his sin.

It seems that the author is making the point that repentance is an option for everyone. This is fitting since Culi, in his introduction to the *Me'am Lo'ez*, says that individuals should give one another the benefit of the doubt. We must believe that our fellow human beings have the capacity to change. Later in the commentary, it says, “David wanted all future generations to learn from his example the power of repentance. No sinner should ever consider his situation hopeless.”⁹⁴ If the King of Israel, one of the greatest and most holy men can repent at the end of his life, when he is old and suffering, it is not too late for them. David knows that he has repented and God has accepted his offering. But he wants to make sure that the people know that he has been forgiven by God. He is concerned that if Adonijah does take the throne that he will continually remind people of the incident with Bathsheba. Adonijah might then sentence Bathsheba to death for adultery. Since Solomon is the product of this union, he might find the justification for his death as well. Therefore, David knows that he has to anoint Solomon

⁹³ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 18.

as king while he is still alive. He cannot not risk the people thinking that he has not fully repented and been forgiven by God.⁹⁵

It seems that the author is using David's case to give the people hope. Perhaps he is speaking to the individuals who abandoned Judaism in the wake of Shabbatai Zevi incident. Some followed the false messiah and took on Islam as their religion, while others turned their backs on Judaism. Thus, he may be saying that times are still difficult, as they were during the time of Shabbatai Zevi. They are still living under Turkish rule and the concept of other religions or no religion is tempting. But they need to see the error of their ways. One way in which they can prove that they have repented is to return to Judaism, with an open mind.

It is clear that the author is trying to persuade the reader to embrace their Judaism and return to Torah. As Culi states in the introduction to *Me'am Lo'ez*, the only way a person will be able to avoid further sin is if he studies and understands the Written and Oral Torah. Since the Torah is "everlasting and unchanging" it is never too late for one to return to it.⁹⁶ Likewise, learning Torah is another way to repent for one's sins. It is for this reason that the author includes many Biblical references and teachings, as well as rabbinic commentaries throughout his work. He wants the reader to have access to this information.

He also makes statements about the nature of individuals who study Torah. He claims that they are righteous. He writes, "The righteous are firmly united by the Torah. Their common goal is to serve God, and that is what brings them together. They are ready to make great sacrifice for it, because they know that it is right. Even in times of

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 29.

trouble they persist.”⁹⁷ Thus, even though times are difficult, even oppressive, people acting righteously, clinging to Torah, and performing good deeds, can strengthen the community. It is not enough to not be wicked, one must actively pursue righteousness. And to be righteous means to follow the Torah and serve God. Only those who are righteous are truly happy. These individuals are optimistic about life. This is because “the only true security comes from God. Only those who trust in Him and follow Him faithfully never be afraid.”⁹⁸ The message is to return to Judaism, become more involved, and then you will be free of sin and wickedness.

While the author is certainly speaking to the entire community, it does seem that this commentary is aimed at one specific sector. Throughout the text, there are numerous remarks that are applicable to the leaders of the people. One must remember that at this time in the eighteenth century, the leadership of the Ottoman Empire is on the decline. They are frustrated as they have faced many defeats and lost large amounts of territory. They are seemingly ineffective and in an attempt to exert influence, they decide to issue decrees against the Jews.⁹⁹ Therefore, the leaders of the Jewish community are in a tenuous situation. They have to create a balance. They do not want to further upset the Ottoman leaders, hence, they want to keep the relationship stable. Yet, at the same time, they want to serve the needs of their own community. However, oftentimes in these oppressive circumstances, the leaders themselves are struggling to stay afloat. This is especially true when times are economically challenging. Therefore, while the leaders may have the community’s needs in mind, they may often desert their people to fulfill their own personal needs.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁹ Encyclopaedia Judaica: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed., s.v. “Ottoman Empire.”

Thus, the author attempts to encourage the leaders to stay strong and upright. In order to portray how a leader should not act, he explains flaws within Adonijah's quest for leadership. The author explains that Adonijah's actions only prove that he is unfit to be king and lead the people of Israel. For, a leader must be God-fearing and humble. Yet, Adonijah "puts on a show to impress people, rather than studying God's Torah and developing the qualities of a true and dedicated leader."¹⁰⁰ (Yerushalmi 8). Here, he explicitly states that a leader should be engaged in the study of Torah. Through the Torah, a leader can learn effective leadership skills.

Then the author takes issue with the leaders who are too preoccupied with their own finances and power. He explains that when Adonijah is seeking the kingship, he keeps a stable that has an extremely large number of horses. But a leader should only have as many horses as are necessary "so that he will not become preoccupied with his own wealth and power, and lose his concern for the people." These Jewish leaders should see to it that they have enough money to survive, but they should not concern themselves with excess. They should be concerned with the people and use any extra funds to aid them.

A case is also made that the leaders should remember to remain humble. In I Kings 1:22-23, the prophet Nathan enters King David's quarters to confront him about Adonijah's quest for the throne. When he enters the room, Nathan bows with his face to the ground to the king. According to R. Moses Alshekh, as a prophet Nathan does not have to ask for permission to enter the king's quarters. However, he is obligated to "stand up and bow before [the king], and not sit unless the king gives him leave. If the

¹⁰⁰ Yerushalmi, 8.

king summons him, he must come and appear before him.”¹⁰¹ This can be explained by Deuteronomy 17:15, where it says, “You will surely put a king upon yourselves.”¹⁰² The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Melakhim*, elucidates on this point by saying that it is the duty of the people to raise the king above all others. This should be done physically (meaning one should bow before the king) and mentally (meaning one should always respect the king’s lofty position). It is likely that in some ways, the leaders of the Jewish community are also elevated above everyone else. However, these leaders must not let this power go to their heads. They remember that they are not as powerful as the king of Israel.

Based on the work *Homat Anakh*, the author reminds the reader that a king is only anointed if there is a prophet, a priest, and a member of the Sanhedrin present.¹⁰³ The presence of the prophet is of extreme importance because it is through the prophet that there is a “revelation of God’s approval.”¹⁰⁴ In the case of David and Solomon, the prophet Nathan prophesies that David should appoint Solomon to succeed him on the throne. He is a messenger of God. Thus, his duty is to see that God’s will is revealed. In the commentary, the author discusses why Nathan feels the need to take action and speak to David when Adonijah tries to take the throne away from Solomon. It seems as though Nathan is concerned that his prophecy may be incorrect. The author explains that Nathan is confident in his prophecy. He knows that God’s will is for Solomon to become king, so inevitably he will become king. However, he feels that it would only happen if he, Bathsheba, and David, do what is required of them. The commentary says, according to Abravanel, “As long as he, David, and Bathsheba did their best, God promised that they

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰² The Jewish Publication Society, Deuteronomy 17:15.

¹⁰³ Yerushalmi, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 11.

would be successful.”¹⁰⁵ Success for Nathan, is ensuring that God’s will is fulfilled. Of Nathan, the author says, “Like all those who are pious and truly love God, his greatest desire was to have the opportunity to help God’s word be fulfilled.”¹⁰⁶ This is an important message for the leaders of the Jewish community under the Ottoman Empire. It is a reminder that they ultimately, are in service of God.

At another point in the text, the author borrows from Abravanel’s commentary to point out that David too lived in service to God. He says that “to his dying day, King David was the true servant of God. His every desire was to do God’s will and find favor in His eyes.”¹⁰⁷ And when Solomon is appointed king, David has him ride on his mule. This is a symbolic act because once an animal is identified as the king’s, no other person may ride it. Thus, this act proves that Solomon is the new king. However, it is also important that Solomon rides on David’s mule, rather than his horse. At this time, one only rode a horse when going to war. This also contrasts the fact that when Adonijah tried to claim the throne, it was with a horse drawn chariot. This again shows that Solomon is the legitimate heir to the throne. But the mule also signifies the fact that Solomon’s reign will be one of peace, not war. It is for this reason that he is permitted to build the Temple, rather than David. The fact that Solomon’s kingship will be peaceful is also evident from the fact that Solomon is anointed at Gihon, which is a place of peace and tranquility. It is clear that Solomon will not have to fight. All that he will have to do is serve God faithfully.¹⁰⁸ While the readers may be able to better identify with David’s

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 25.

reign, since they are living at a time of war and oppression, they still may be able to find hope in Solomon's situation. It reminds them that the future may be different.

Throughout the text, there are other reminders of God's role in society. For example, in I Kings 1:17, when Bathsheba is reminding David of the promise he made that Solomon would become king after him, she says, "My lord, you yourself swore to your maidservant by the Lord your God: 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit upon my throne.'"¹⁰⁹ Nathan does not tell her that she has to say that he swore by the Lord, your God. She says this on her own volition because she knows that he will realize that his words were binding. Invoking God's name in an oath makes it indissoluble.

Similarly, when Solomon is anointed as king, Benaiah ben Jehoiada says, "Amen! And may the Lord, the God of my lord the king, so ordain. As the Lord was with my lord the king, so may He be with Solomon; and may He exalt his throne even higher than the throne of my lord King David."¹¹⁰ This statement makes it clear that the success of the king is dependent on God. Therefore, if God would be with Solomon as he was with David, then "the kingdom would grow too, so that his throne would soon be even greater than when he inherited it."¹¹¹

It seems that Benaiah ben Jehoiada, as well as Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, are confident that the kingdom will indeed thrive with Solomon as king. Therefore, when it is time to anoint Solomon, they do in the light of day in front of all the people. Yerushalmi explains, "Solomon's supporters were not afraid of anyone. God

¹⁰⁹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:17.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., I Kings 1:36-37.

¹¹¹ Yerushalmi, 27 (based on the comments of Joseph Caro).

was on their side, and no one could stop them.”¹¹² They know that David has followed the ways of the Lord and God is with them then. Thus, they are certain that Solomon will follow his father’s example and God will remain with them. These comments are included to remind the leaders of the Jewish community that they need to serve God so that God will be with them too. This is the only way that their community will survive and one day be prosperous.

In I Kings, it also says that when the people hear that David has named Solomon as his successor, they rejoice.¹¹³ They know that Solomon is a messenger of God and will follow God’s ways.¹¹⁴ Thus, they too believe that the kingdom will be prosperous. While it is certainly rewarding for Solomon to have the support of the people, it is not completely necessary. When discussing Solomon’s appointment as king, the author explains the rules for choosing a king. He explains that “the firstborn son of the king inherited his father’s position even if there were others among the people who were better qualified. Only if he lacked minimal qualifications would it be given to his younger brother instead, and so on until a suitable successor was found.”¹¹⁵ This was a hereditary position and it possible that the Jewish communal leader was selected in this same way. However, the Jewish leader at this time may have been selected in a manner similar to the High Priest. The High Priest “was appointed on the basis of his own merit. He was chosen from among all the priests for his excellence in piety, wisdom, strength, wealth and other good qualities.”¹¹⁶ If this is the situation, then the leaders of this Jewish

¹¹² Ibid., 28.

¹¹³ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:40.

¹¹⁴ Yerushalmi, 32.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

community are merely citizens who have been elected by their peers to stand up for their rights and protect them. They must feel honored and humbled by this vote of confidence.

Unlike the king and priest, the Jewish communal leader is not anointed with oil, as Solomon is when David decides that he will take over the throne. Oil was used because it was a symbol of honor, it lasted a long time, and because it was burned to give light. A king or priest needed this oil, since he was like a lamp that gave light. The author explains that "like a lamp, the priest and king affect not only those with whom they actually come in contact, but even those around them."¹¹⁷ Hence, the leaders of the Jewish community must remember that their actions have the power to affect everyone. This statement can be viewed in a positive and negative light. When they perform good deeds and act righteously, their constituents are inspired to act in the same manner, thus strengthening the society. However, when they partake in any illegal or immoral acts, this type of behavior permeates.

It is evident that parts of this commentary are aimed at the leaders of the society to improve their character and make their leadership more effective. This is done mostly by focusing on aspects of David's role as king. However, by concentrating on David's function as a father, this commentary can also be a very useful parenting guide. This does not mean that David always acted as an exemplary father. In fact, in some ways one can learn from the mistakes that he made in his role as parent. For example, one cannot forget that David was Adonijah's father too. Therefore, the author discusses aspects of David's parenting that may have led Adonijah to think that he had David's approval and that it was acceptable for him to try to claim the kingship. In I Kings 1:6, it written, "His

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

father had never scolded him: "Why did you do that?"¹¹⁸ Some scholars, such as David Kimhi and Abravanel, believe that this refers specifically to him trying to take the throne. They say that David knows of Adonijah's actions but never tries to stop him. He never questions him about his behavior and his motives. Consequently, Adonijah thinks that he has his father's support. However, others say that this comment in I Kings refers to Adonijah's behavior throughout his life. The author explains that "David had never gotten angry at him or punished him, even when he did something bad. Adonijah thought that his father loved him so much that he would give him anything he wanted."¹¹⁹ He thought that David would give him the kingship.

Due to the lack of discipline, Adonijah has become somewhat entitled and spoiled. When he hears that Solomon is going to become king, it is likely that he becomes very angry. He truly thinks that the kingship belongs to him. And since he knows that David will not punish him, he decides to rebel and try to claim it on his own. If David had been more aggressive in his parenting and more willing to reprimand Adonijah, he may have never rebelled. To support this claim, the author weaves in the text from Proverbs 13:24, where it says, "He who holds back his staff hates his son, but he who loves him rebukes him freely."¹²⁰ A parent who loves his or her child will punish the child when the child misbehaves. This is in the child's best interest, as it will allow him to learn from his mistakes. This child will grow up to be kind, loving, and respectful. He will not become contemptuous and rebellious, like Adonijah.

Based on other comments made by Abravanel, it is also possible that David has always misinterpreted Adonijah's actions and that is why he does not punish his son

¹¹⁸ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:6.

¹¹⁹ Yerushalmi, 9 (based on the comments of Rashi, Kimhi, Caro, and Abravanel).

¹²⁰ The Jewish Publication Society, Proverbs 13:24.

when it is necessary.¹²¹ He loves his son so much that he tries to find something positive in all of his actions. As Culi mentions in the introduction to *Me'am Lo'ez*, as human beings it is required of us to give one another the benefit of the doubt. However, it is a parent's duty to open his or her eyes and see a child as he really is. Only then can a person be a truly loving and effective parent.

The author believes that Bathsheba is aware that David always tries to see the best in Adonijah. When she approaches the king, to tell him of Adonijah's rebellion, she may have known that he might try to find a positive explanation for his behavior. Therefore, it is possible that she might have said something like, "You have always tried to interpret [his behavior] favorably. In your love, you did not want to suspect him of rebelling against you and trying to claim the throne without your approval. You were able to do that because, until now, his actions have always been ambiguous."¹²² Now, his actions are clear. He is rebelling and for the first time, David must come forward and stop Adonijah. It will be difficult for him, as it is difficult for a parent to scold a child, but it must be done.

The author teaches that is in a parent's best interest to raise a child who is moral and upright. Because once a person dies, it is up to the child to carry on his parent's name. In I King 1:31, after David has proclaimed that he will place Solomon on the throne, Bathsheba prays that David will live forever. As previously discussed, she knows that he will not live much longer. Yet, she knows that he will live on through her son. Therefore, when Bathsheba makes this comment, it is possible that she might "have been alluding to the eternal life that David would merit by having a son follow in his footsteps.

¹²¹ Yerushalmi, 9.

¹²² Ibid., 17.

As long as a person leaves children who continue his good deeds in the world, it is as if he never died.”¹²³ Clearly, this thought is also something about which Culi felt strongly. At the end of his introduction to *Me'am Lo'ez*, Culi offers thanks to his benefactor, Yehudah Mizrachi. He prays that Mizrachi's descendents will be just like him, good hearted and followers of the commandments, so that they will carry on his name in a respectable manner.

Furthermore, parents should try to raise children who exceed them in every capacity. A parent should want his child to be more righteous, more prosperous, more popular than he ever was. Therefore, in I Kings 1:37, when Benaiah ben Jehoiada says, “May He make [Solomon's] throne greater than the throne of my lord, King David,” David is not offended. In fact, “nothing could please David more. There was no limit to the blessings that David wished upon him. A father is not jealous of his son. He is as proud of his son's achievements as he would be of his own.”¹²⁴

Lastly, in this commentary, the author makes one other statement about family values. He speaks about the issue of divorce. He approaches this topic when he is discussing the fact that David does not have intercourse with Abishag. While it is the way in which he proves that he has repented for the transgression with Bathsheba, he can only have Abishag if he marries her. However, David is not permitted to marry Abishag since he already has eighteen wives. And in Deuteronomy 17:17, it says, “He will not have many wives.” According to the Talmud, the law is that eighteen was permitted, but not more. Therefore, in order to marry Abishag, he would have to divorce one of the other wives. The author exclaims, “See what a serious thing divorce is! Even under

¹²³ Ibid., 23.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 27 (based on the comments of Abravanel and *Sanhedrin* 102b).

these circumstances, they would not permit it! Which among David's wives would not have willingly accepted a divorce for the sake of her husband, the beloved king of Israel? It would not have been a shame for her but a distinction. Nonetheless, the court forbade it."¹²⁵

In Malachi 2:13, there is a statement, "You cover the altar of the Lord with tears, weeping, and moaning, so that He refuses to regard the oblation any more and to accept what you offer."¹²⁶ The author interprets this verse as meaning that when a man divorces his wife, the altar of the Holy Temple is disturbed and God no longer accepts this person's sacrifices. God expects that a man and woman remain husband and wife because they swore by a covenant. And more than that, they promised to be companions to one another. This is not something that should be taken lightly. These comments regarding parenting and divorce provide evidence of the author's desire to encourage stability in this downtrodden society. Although, their lives seem chaotic, the times are complicated, and many of them are now old, they take control of those aspects of life that they are still able to control. They must strive to be righteous Jews, moral leaders, respectable parents, and loyal spouses. It is their faith in God and their willingness to serve God, through study of Torah and following commandments, which will allow them to be successful. When they are able to act honorably, then the Jewish community will have a solid foundation on which it can maintain itself and eventually begin to repair itself.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, Malachi 2:13.

Chapter 5: The Social and Political Implications of the Me'am Lo'ez Commentary to I Kings, Chapter 2

As previously mentioned in the first chapter, it seems that the author is addressing an older audience. He has given them encouragement and tried to convince them to take advantage of their last years and remain strong and determined. However, it is a reality that a person cannot live forever. Therefore, the author approaches the topic of death. He does not want the reader to fear death; hence, he provides details about the end of David's life. He hopes that his audience will find courage in understanding how the King of Israel faced the end of his life. When David is nearing the end of his life, he speaks to Solomon about death. He wants his son to understand death so that he will not be overly dismayed. The author writes that David might have said to Solomon, "It is our nature, as human beings, to eventually die. Death, in itself, is not a tragedy. It is part of the natural course of events. This is the way of the earth and all who live in it. That is how God, in His infinite wisdom, created us."¹²⁷ He pleads that death is normal and cannot be prevented. Therefore, it should be embraced.

The second chapter of I Kings begins with the statement that "David's days were approaching the time for him to die." This phrase is found throughout the Bible and it has a particular use. In a literal sense, it informs the reader that a character is nearing his death. However, it seems that it also has a figurative meaning. It means that a person did not live as long his father or his ancestors. This is not something of which one should be ashamed. In Deuteronomy 31:14 it is written that God said to Moses, "Behold, your days are approaching the time for you to die."¹²⁸ Moses lives to be one hundred and twenty

¹²⁷ Yerushalmi, 41.

¹²⁸ The Jewish Publication Society, Deuteronomy 31:14.

years old, yet his father, Amram, lives to be one hundred and thirty-seven.¹²⁹ Thus, he does not live as long as his father. The Bible does not explicitly mention how many years David's father, Jesse, lived. According to the author's in depth calculations of Jesse's lineage, it seems that Jesse must have lived more than eighty years, while David only lived to be seventy years.¹³⁰ This is known from II Samuel 5:4, where it says that David was thirty years old when he became king and he reigned for forty years.¹³¹

The author is making the point that it is not the number of years that is most important. There is no shame in not living as long as one's ancestors since neither David nor Moses lived beyond theirs. God determines how long a person will live and as human beings, we have no idea how long that span will be. It varies person to person. Plus, some individual's lives are harder and filled with more turmoil. This is the case in terms of many of the *Me'am Lo'ez* readers. Therefore, they may not have the physical capacity to live as long. When David is about to die, the author explains that David tells Solomon that he has lived a full life. He says, "Though many live longer, seventy years is a normal lifespan. So do not mourn that my life has been cut short before my time. I have completed my task upon this earth. Now it is time for my soul to return to God."¹³² David did not need to live longer than he did since he had served God to the best of his capability. It is not how many years a person lives, it is how those years are lived.

In Psalm 39:5, where it says, "Let me know, O God, my end."¹³³ It is inferred from this comment that David is asking God to reveal to him the day on which he will die. However, the author explains that God does not allow any human being to know the

¹²⁹ Ibid., Exodus 6:20.

¹³⁰ Yerushalmi, 39.

¹³¹ The Jewish Publication Society, II Samuel 5:4.

¹³² Yerushalmi, 41.

¹³³ The Jewish Publication Society, Psalm 39:5.

day on which he will die. For, if a person knew, he might live in sin his entire life and then only repent on the last day to atone for all of his sins. This is illustrated in the Talmud, Shabbat 153a, when Rabbi Eliezer says, "Repent one day before your death." Since a person does not know when he will die, he should repent everyday. But more than that, he should attempt to live a life that is free of sin and filled with righteous deeds. This idea is echoed in Culi's introduction to *Me'am Lo'ez*. He writes that knowing that one is mortal and will eventually die leads a person to avoid sin so that he will be rewarded in the world to come.

Since God will not tell David when he will die, he wants to know how long he will live. But God will not reveal this information either. God says, "If I were to do that, people might sin until their last year, and spend less than a year in righteousness."¹³⁴ This is another reminder that the way in which a life is lived is most important. God is willing to concede and tell David on which day of the week he will die. He says that it will happen on Shabbat and on that Sunday, Solomon will become king. David is concerned that if he dies on Shabbat, his body will not be able to be prepared for burial since this type of activity is forbidden. He pleads with God to let him die on a Friday. But God says he could not cut David's life a day too short. He says, "Every day of your life is dear to Me. One day that you spend studying Torah is worth more to Me than a thousand sacrifices that your son, Solomon, will bring. I would not cut your life short even by a single day."¹³⁵ It is for this reason that David spends every Shabbat studying Torah. He never stops, even for a moment, because he knows that the Angel of Death will not be able to take him while he is immersed in Torah. It is only when David is

¹³⁴ Yerushalmi, 57.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

caught off guard that he is eventually distracted from his study and the Angel of Death is able to claim him.

David was concerned that his body would not be prepared for burial and that he would decay. And since he does die on Shabbat, Solomon is not sure what he should do with the body. He knows that it is not permitted to move the body, but this is the King of Israel, so he wanted to bring the body out into the sun. He asks the rabbis what he should do, and at the same time he has another issue. He has not prepared food for the dogs of the palace so he wants to know if he can cut a carcass, even though it was Shabbat, so that he can feed the animals. The rabbis say that it is permissible to cut up the carcass but he can only move David's body if he puts some sort of food for the animals on top of it. In response to this, Solomon says, "See how much greater the needs of the living than the honor of the dead. To alleviate the suffering of a living creature, even a dog, it is permitted to cut up a carcass that otherwise would be forbidden to move on the Sabbath. But there is no such leniency for the sake of the dead, even for David, King of Israel, who was compared to a lion."¹³⁶ This is proof that life, and the way in which a life is lived, is far more significant than one's death. Moreover, in *Baba Kama* 17a, it says that ultimately David's body does not deteriorate after he dies. The worms are not able to eat him. Because he has devoted his life to Torah, his body is preserved. This is another reason that one should devote their lives to Torah and be as passionate about study as David. In death, he is rewarded for living a worthy life.

One must note that it is because David is righteous and studies Torah that is more important than the fact that he is king. Therefore, in I Kings 2:1, it says that "David's

¹³⁶ Ibid., 58 (based on *Shabbat* 30a).

days were approaching the time for him to die.”¹³⁷ It does not say King David.

Yerushalmi explains that “when a person dies, it makes no difference whether he was a king or a commoner, a powerful ruler or a slave.”¹³⁸ The Angel of Death does not spare a life because a person is rich or powerful. This is an important message for the leaders of community. Because you hold a powerful position does not mean that you are untouchable and will not die. In this regard, a leader is just like every other person. Furthermore, on the day of a king’s death, he truly becomes like everyone else. He can no longer rule over the people and he no longer has the power that he had in life.

David is fortunate in that it is believed that he knows that his time is coming. Some say that he feels that he is becoming weak. Yet, Abravanel says that David is still strong, he just has to wisdom to know that he will soon die. In Psalm 90:10, it says, “The days of our years, in them are seventy years.”¹³⁹ Therefore, David knows that his life will last seventy years. Since he knows that his days were coming to an end, he takes the opportunity to make sure that his affairs are in order. The author explains that every father should follow David’s example and see to it that “his worldly and spiritual affairs are taken care of by giving his children final instructions while he is still strong and healthy. Even if he finds the thought of death frightening and unpleasant, he should not indulge himself by pushing it out of his mind.”¹⁴⁰ A person should speak to his children while his mind is still sharp. Then he will be sure to share all of the important information that he wishes to pass down and he will not forget any details. Yet, David is not the first person in the Bible to do this. Isaac speaks to Jacob, and Jacob speaks to his

¹³⁷ The Jewish Publication Society, 1 Kings 2:1.

¹³⁸ Yerushalmi, 40.

¹³⁹ The Jewish Publication Society, Psalm 90:10.

¹⁴⁰ Yerushalmi, 40.

children, when they are on their deathbeds. They are able to pass on information that is vital to their children's futures.

Yet, there are also pieces of information that a parent passes on to his children in the moments before he dies. These are particularly important because when a person is about to die, he "may experience a sort of divine inspiration that he never had during his life. His mind may suddenly become clear and he may become able to see the world from a different perspective."¹⁴¹ Therefore, this is something to which a person on the verge of dying may look forward. He might await this divine inspiration with eagerness since this will be a chance to provide his children with useful information. Also, the parent may take comfort in the fact that it is likely that the child will actually remember these last words above any other information with which they were provided during their lifetime. This is certainly true if the child thinks that the words are divinely inspired. It is for this reason that Abravanel says that "the obligation of a child to obey the last words of his parent is considered greater than the obligation to obey him during his lifetime."¹⁴² These words have a divine influence.

However, this chapter does not only focus on a parent's interaction with his child before death. Like the commentary to the first chapter of I Kings, this chapter also provides useful parenting tips that a parent should utilize throughout his lifetime. The hope is that if the child follows these instructions, he will live a life that is righteous and free of sin. The author explains that in order for children to live righteously, they must devote their lives to Torah. It is up to the parent to instill in his children a passion for

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Torah and a desire to learn. The Torah has been given to the Jewish people and it must be passed on from generation to generation.¹⁴³

In King David's case, his children have even more to gain than Torah and the righteous life that comes with the study of it. They can also inherit the throne of Israel. God promises David that the throne of Israel will forever belong to him and his descendants if they followed God's ways. In I Kings 2:4, David explains that God told him, "If your children guard their way, to walk before Me in truth with all their hearts and souls, not a single one of yours will be cut off from the throne of Israel."¹⁴⁴ To walk before God in truth means to follow God's Torah and commandments. If they do not act in this manner, they will not only lose the throne of Israel, but they will also face punishments. In Psalm 89, God warns that "if [David's] children abandon My Torah, and they do not go according to My judgments, if they profane my decrees, and do not keep My commandments, I will take notice of their transgressions with a staff, and their sins with afflictions."¹⁴⁵ The average person may not be able to identify with the fear of losing the kingship, but he can understand these consequences. He dreads the wrath of God and therefore, is encouraged to live righteously and promote the study of Torah amongst his children.

Yet, there is always the possibility that one's children will stray from Torah even if they are given the best tools and support for studying Torah. Though David loves his children and teaches the importance of Torah, Absalom and Adonijah go astray. And even though Eli, the High Priest, is a righteous man, he has sons who do not fear God.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴⁴ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:4.

¹⁴⁵ Yerushalmi, 47.

Instead of serving God, they sin and abuse the privileges of the priesthood.¹⁴⁶ In these cases, a parent may blame himself. He fears for the future of his lineage. He is concerned that they will live in sin and their children will be plagued. However, the author gives the reader hope. He explains that "a generation that abandoned the Torah might be driven out of the Holy Land, but their descendants would eventually return and inherit it again."¹⁴⁷

David, himself, might have feared that wicked sons would arise from his family and that the throne would one day be taken away. However, not all hope is lost as "there would again arise righteous one who would be worthy of inheriting the throne"¹⁴⁸ It seems that wicked behavior may be weaved in and out of a lineage but in the end, the righteousness will always return. Therefore, each parent must do his best to promote good values. Even if the times are challenging, as they were when this commentary was written, a parent must fight the pressure of the outside world and do his best to fill his children's lives with Torah. And in the case of the children who abandon Torah, a parent should not wish them harm. He should try to help his children return to the correct path. This can be seen in I Kings 2:5, where David gives Solomon instructions for after he dies. He wants Solomon to punish his general, Joab. There are a number of possible reasons that David seeks this vengeance, but the author rationalizes that it may be because Joab ordered his soldiers to kill Absalom. David was disappointed with Absalom's actions, that he had rebelled, but he never wanted to see his son killed.¹⁴⁹ A parent should love his children unconditionally.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 69.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 52.

One must not forget that there is always the possibility that a sinful child will have righteous children. Therefore, one should not abandon a wicked child. In fact, when David is telling Solomon how to deal with Shimei ben Gera, the Benjaminite who cursed him, he explains that he originally refrained from killing Shimei because he had had a divine revelation. Through this, he saw that Mordechai and Esther would be among Shimei's descendants. Hence, David does not kill Shimei at that time because he might have children who would be righteous Jewish leaders. Now that Shimei has given birth to his children, it is acceptable to kill him on account of his own sins.¹⁵⁰ It is also important to note that a person should not be punished for the sins of his ancestors. This allows a person to break away from the sins of his family and live a life that is moral and righteous.

Clearly, David is a man blessed with wisdom and who has great faith in God. David passes all of this on to Solomon. And when he dies, "all the greatness and honor that David had gained during his lifetime and all that he built, Solomon now inherited."¹⁵¹ Solomon has the privilege of benefiting from his father's character and reputation. He has the knowledge of everything that his father has taught him throughout his life and now, he is respected because of the fact that he is David's son. David also helps Solomon in establishing his throne. He knows that one of the most important tasks that Solomon will complete during his reign would be the building of the Temple. Since God has told David that he cannot build it himself, he paves the way for Solomon. For example, "during the last year of his life, he had gather[s] materials for the Holy Temple and organize[s] the priests and Levites into groups, each with its own tasks and

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 56 (based on the comments of R. Moses Alshekh).

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 60.

assignments. Solomon [is] spared all the suffering and struggle that David had gone through.”¹⁵²

David is a model parent. He is willing to face hardship and take on difficult assignments so that his son's life will be easier. He wants Solomon to be a successful king, therefore, he does everything in his power to ensure that he gets off to a good start. As previously mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, a parent's greatest reward is for his child to surpass him in every aspect of life, including beauty, strength, wealth, wisdom, and long life.¹⁵³ If a parent has lived during hard times, he wants his son's life to be peaceful and free of trouble. If a parent has struggled financially, he hopes that his child will one day be wealthy. Certainly, this concept must have resounded strongly with the readers of this commentary.

However, it is not just enough for a parent to work to serve the child's future. The child must take advantage of that which has been given to him. Solomon is a fine example of one who does “not rely upon his father's merit or the work that he had done.”¹⁵⁴ He has learned from David's ways, but he does not depend on his father. The author writes that “only a wise son takes his inheritance and makes of it something far greater than his father ever had.”¹⁵⁵ Solomon takes what David had given him and firmly establishes his own throne.

Solomon also always remembers to honor his parents. Once David dies, Solomon attempts to remain faithful to God and follow the ways of Torah as David had done. He wants his kingdom to resemble the greatness of David's throne. This is evident when

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Solomon is deliberating about how to punish Abiathar, the priest. He considers killing Abiathar since he had supported Adonijah in his rebellion against Adonijah. However, in the end, Solomon decides that he will banish Abiathar rather than kill him. He realizes that for the most part, Abiathar had been a faithful servant to David. Therefore, by sparing his life, Solomon seems to bring more justice to David and his memory.

As for his mother, Bathsheba, Solomon also goes out of his way to show respect for her. This is apparent even when Bathsheba comes to speak to him regarding Adonijah's request to take Abishag as his wife. As king, Solomon is the most honored person in the land. Everyone is required to show him respect. Yet, when his mother comes to see him, he immediately rises from his throne to show respect for the woman who gave birth to him.¹⁵⁶ It does not matter who you are, you have been commanded to honor your parents. Thus, when Bathsheba says, "One small request I ask of you. Don't turn me down," Solomon immediately answers "Ask, Oh my mother, for I will not turn you down!"¹⁵⁷ He says that he will honor his mother's request before he even knows what it is. It does not matter to him what it is. It is as if he is saying, "Even if you ask for something great I will give it to you!"¹⁵⁸ He does not question her intentions. He is hoping that he will be able to please her. He exemplifies the behavior that all children should aim to follow.

Through Solomon, and David's farewell advice to Solomon, it is also possible to gain a better understanding of those qualities that make an effective leader. When David is dying, he tells Solomon, "Now, be strong and make yourself a man!"¹⁵⁹ Yerushalmi

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 62 (according to the comments of Abravanel and *Kehilat Yaakov*).

¹⁵⁷ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:20-21.

¹⁵⁸ Yerushalmi, 63 (according to *Kehilat Yaakov*).

¹⁵⁹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:2.

comments on the meaning of this verse. Solomon will be able to stay strong because his strength will come from God. If Solomon ever feels weak, and alone, and as though he cannot lead the people of Israel, he should remember that God is by his side. David reminds Solomon that everything he has given him and taught him, ultimately comes from God. A great leader, whether you are a king or a community leader, acknowledges that his power comes from God. David then tells his son that he realizes that ruling a nation is a most difficult task. But since God has placed this task upon Solomon, he will certainly be given the ability to fulfill it.¹⁶⁰ If he were unable to perform the duties of a king, God would not have selected him. David is telling Solomon that a leader must be confident in his ability to lead a country and this is possible when one realizes that one's strength and authority come from God.

David also tells Solomon to make himself a man. This means that he should strive to be a fine human being since "the first step to being a good king is to be a good person." This is the most important command since the rabbis said that upright behavior precedes the study of Torah. The author explains, "One who does not live according to the basic standards of human conduct cannot expect to be able to properly fulfill the laws of Torah."¹⁶¹ And if one cannot fulfill the laws of Torah, he certainly cannot be a mighty king. Thus, if one lives as a righteous person, he will be able to follow the Torah, and then he will have the tools to become an effective leader.

When David tells Solomon to make himself a man, he is also expressing the idea that Solomon needs to act like an adult, not a child. This is an important piece of advice for young leaders. It is possible that the author is speaking to the young leaders of the

¹⁶⁰ Yerushalmi, 42.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

community who may be taking the place of the older guard, who are now too old and tired to remain in authoritative positions. Acting like an adult means controlling oneself, one's emotions and one's desires. An adult does not act spoiled and is not only concerned with his own well-being. He thinks about others and is concerned with the future. An adult "deliberates before he acts, and seeks the advice of others when he is in doubt. Only such a person is fit to be a ruler."¹⁶² David is reminding Solomon that he needs to surround himself with competent people. Certainly, he should turn to God, but he should also turn to these individuals when he needs help. There is no shame in this. One should not be too proud to ask for assistance from others.

Yet, these people should be wise and they must be people whom he can trust. For example, there is a man named Shimei who once curses David when he is trying to escape from Absalom. However, when David returns to Jerusalem after Absalom's defeat, Shimei begs for his forgiveness. Since David is merciful, he grants Shimei forgiveness. But he is always suspect of him. Therefore, David warns Solomon about him.¹⁶³ Shimei claims to support Solomon and they are friends, but Solomon is always hesitant and does not rely on Shimei. As a good leader does, Solomon finds advisors on whom he knows he can depend.

As an adult and a king, at times Solomon will have to be tough and make strong demands of others. He will be leading a nation and that means he will have to be decisive and even stubborn. He cannot forget that he is responsible entire group of people. He is above and in control of this nation. However, he must remember that he is still subservient to God and to the Torah. He is not above either of these so he must

¹⁶² Ibid., 42 (according to the comments of Radak and Ralbag).

¹⁶³ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:9.

always be humble and submissive to both.¹⁶⁴ While he is in charge of the others, he must follow the commands of the Torah in the same way as everyone else.¹⁶⁵ The author explains this because many leaders often feel that they are above the law. They are given advantages in the world and are often the exception to the rule. In the case of the king, there are instances in which he is given permission to violate certain commandments. However, he must not forget that it is the Torah itself that gives the king the right to occasionally violate these commands. And the reason the Torah allows for this is not so that the king can become more powerful and admired. It is so that the king will become more efficient and better adept at upholding the laws of the Torah.

Therefore, David tells him, "Guard everything of the Lord, your God, that needs to be guarded, to go in His ways, to keep His decrees and His commandments, His judgments and His testimonies, as is written in the Law of Moses, so that you may be successful in all that you do and everywhere that you turn."¹⁶⁶ He must truly become a servant of God. The author explains that "the true servant of God is concerned about everything that God desires, whether or not it is included in any particular commandment. He goes out of his way to make sure that God's name and honor are never desecrated. He finds no rest as long as God's world is incomplete and His will not being fulfilled. He does not restrict himself to only that which is required of him."¹⁶⁷ A leader must go beyond what is required of him in his service to the people, but more importantly, in his service to God. And he does not have to wait to be asked to do something. He must serve God on his own volition and not delay until he is commanded

¹⁶⁴ Yerushalmi, 43.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. (based on the comments found in *Lev Melakhim*).

¹⁶⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:3.

¹⁶⁷ Yerushalmi, 43.

to act. A person who loves God is constantly thinking about how he can serve God most effectively and to the fullest.

A person is best able to serve God when he tries to emulate God. For, there is no better guide for how a person should act than God Himself. We should recognize God's kindness and benevolence in the world, and try to reproduce that type of behavior in our relationships with one another, such as giving clothes to the naked and burying the dead.¹⁶⁸ An example of this can be seen in I Kings 2:7 where David speaks of Barzillai, the Gileadite. Barzillai supports David and gives him food when he is fleeing from Absalom. He does not know David but he sees that he is righteous, so he reaches out to him. As Abravanel explains, just as God is merciful, so should we too be merciful. This rule applies to all human beings. However, in the case of a leader it is even more paramount. He sets the example for his constituents. Therefore, it is not enough for him to follow the commandments. He must go beyond them in his service to God. He must remember that with the privilege of serving God and leading the people, comes great responsibility. This message is particularly applicable to the leaders of the Jewish community in the eighteenth century. Even though the times are difficult, they must not forget that they are responsible for shaping the character and behavior of the community. They must set a perfect example so they can inspire others.

Another way that a leader sets a good example is not only to act morally but to make a point that immoral behavior will not be acceptable. In Solomon's case, David makes it clear that he needs to establish justice in the kingdom. The most effective way to do this is reward those who have acted righteously and to punish those who have sinned against God and one another. These individuals have chosen not to adhere to the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 54.

commandments. Though they may be beyond one's comprehension, these laws must be observed. A righteous person follows God's commandments because he believes in God, not because he is trying to avoid punishment or gain reward. Yet, there are benefits that a person reaps when he follows the commandments. The author explains that God knows what is best for human beings; therefore, there must be benefits of doing good deeds and living according to the Torah. For example, by actually performing the good deeds, a person is bringing good into the world. Thus, he has played a role in making the world a better place for his children. A person who follows the commandments also gains wisdom and intelligence. In addition, he is rewarded with divine help and protection. God looks out for those people who uphold his words. It must be noted though, that people are granted different rewards for obeying the commandments. For Solomon, his greatest reward is that he is permitted to take over the throne of Israel. Yet, for others it may just be the pride in knowing that you have acted loyally towards God.

The author does take a moment to discuss that Jews receive a special reward for performing acts of kindness. That is not to say that non-Jews are not rewarded for following the commandments, since they benefit from the actual act of having done something good. However, "he [does] not accept the Torah at Mount Sinai and [does] not enter into this covenant with God, [thus] his act does not signify loyalty or obedience."¹⁶⁹ It is not surprising that the author speaks about the difference between the rewards of a Jewish person and non-Jew. He is living at a time when many Jews are being enticed by other religions, some whom even decide to abandon Judaism and convert out. Therefore, he is making a case for Judaism and saying that there are special rewards that are only granted to Jews. The Torah, itself, is the greatest example of this.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 45-6.

It is interesting that this discussion is followed by comments on idol worship. The author turns to Deuteronomy 11:16, in which God warns the people that if they worship foreign gods, he will release his wrath on them. He will withhold the rains and they will surely perish. By including this verse, the author is making the point that there are consequences that come when one disobeys the commandments, turns on Judaism, and follows another religion. It seems that this is a plea to stay committed to Judaism. There are punishments that come directly from God, as well as those that are initiated by the leader of the nation or even community.

For example, David explains to Solomon that he must deal with individuals who have committed crimes. If a person, such as Shimei, commits an act of treason or rebellion, he is to be punished. David says, "So now, don't let him off without punishment, for you are a wise man."¹⁷⁰ Thus, Solomon listens to the words of his father. He sends Shimei to live in Jerusalem and under no circumstances is he permitted to leave his house. He makes it clear that if he does, he will be killed. Thus, when Shimei leaves his home, it is seen as act of rebellion. Shimei is sentenced to death. This must have been difficult for Solomon, since Shimei is his friend. But he knows that as king, he has to do that which was in the best interest of the nation, not his friendship. He knows that Shimei has broken the law. He has disregarded his punishment. If Solomon does not kill him, he will be seen as a weak and indecisive ruler. He also knows "that many of the people, especially the tribe of Judah, still [do] not trust him. If he [lets] Shimei go unpunished they [will] be angered. He therefore [has] to take some public action against him."¹⁷¹ It is a difficult decision, but Solomon knows what needs to be done to do to

¹⁷⁰ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:9.

¹⁷¹ Yerushalmi, 78 (according to the comments of Abravanel).

secure the support of the people. Because of this decision, the people see him as a fair ruler. For, Solomon has shown that "even his own close friends were not above the law. He [does] not give them special consideration. He punishe[s] Shimei as he ha[s] his enemies."¹⁷² He also is praised because he has faithfully followed his blessed father's instructions.

Then there are other, more obvious offenders, with whom Solomon has to deal. He has to punish Joab. Joab has killed two men, Abner ben Ner and Amasa ben Jether. Solomon knows that the Torah demands the punishment of murderers, therefore, he knows that Joab should be executed.¹⁷³ Furthermore, Abravanel explains that Solomon does not need to worry that people will think that he is taking vengeance by killing Joab. Everyone knows that he had broken a central commandment. Thus, if he does not give Joab the death penalty, the people might think that he is a weak ruler for letting Joab off too easily.¹⁷⁴ Solomon has him executed in an effort to assure the people and uphold the laws of the Torah.

Much can be learned from focusing on the character, Joab. By comparing his behavior with that of David and Solomon, it is possible to understand the differences in ethical and honorable leadership and that which is less than righteous. For example, David's main concern as king is to serve God faithfully. He is loyal to God and devotes his entire being to following the commandments. Joab, on the other hand, has more personal goals. He cares about wielding power for his family and gaining rewards such as wealth and recognition. His main desire is to have the tribe of Judah rule over all of the other tribes, with his family as the leaders of the entire nation. He does not support

¹⁷² Ibid., 81 (based on the comments of Abravanel and Caro).

¹⁷³ Ibid., 49 (according the comments of R. Da Akosta).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 75.

David because he admires David's loyalty towards God. He supports David because he is family. He knows that if David is powerful, he will make gains. While David loves his family, he does not favor them over his other subjects. The author explains that "he loved every Jew as a brother and wanted to unify the whole Jewish nation. Nor did he desire that his own tribe, the tribe of Judah, maintain a position of superiority. He simply accepted the fact that God had chosen them as the leaders of the other tribes."¹⁷⁵ David does not believe in nepotism and chooses his officers from the various tribes based on their merit. This angers some of the members of his own tribe, but David is not concerned. He believes in fairness. He also knows that it is tactically the sound decision. By reaching out to other tribes, he is able to extend his support network and gain more loyalty. A true leader is most concerned with the welfare of the nation.

Joab also tends to rule in a violent and vengeful manner. In fact, he kills Abner in this way. In the narrative, Abner is King Saul's general and he supports Saul's son, Ish-bosheth, as the new king after Saul's death. The tribe of Judah, though, will only recognize David as king. Therefore, there is some fighting between those who think Saul's son is king and those who support David. During this period of warring, Abner kills a man named Asahel, in self-defense. Asahel happens to be Joab's brother, thus Joab makes it his business to seek revenge for his brother's death. When Abner realizes that God has chosen David to be king, he joins David's ranks. Joab is angry and jealous that he will have to share command of the army with Abner. Moreover, Abner is a Benjaminite and he does not want this tribe involved in the leadership of the nation. Thus, when Abner least suspects it, Joab kills him. Of this crime, I Kings says, "He put

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

the blood of war on his belt that was on his loins and his shoe that was on his feet."¹⁷⁶

This may be interpreted to mean that Joab does not wipe off Abner's blood from his belt or his shoes. He wants everyone to see what he has done. He is not remorseful. He is proud of his actions.¹⁷⁷ One cannot ignore the contrast between this type of public behavior and the kind that David utilizes in governing his kingship.

This is a hateful crime, especially since peace has already been made between the two factions. Radak and Abravanel explain that Joab is in the wrong because once peace has been made between two sides, all wrongs and injuries must be forgiven.¹⁷⁸ This is an important comment on leadership. A leader must be aware of the movement of the former enemy, but that does not mean that he cannot grant forgiveness. For the Jewish communal leaders of the eighteenth century, this may be applicable. They are living in trying times, but there is the possibility that they will pass and peaceful times will arise. When that happens, the leaders will have to make a decision if they are willing to move on and start looking towards the future instead of dwelling on the past. They will have to determine if they will spend time seeking revenge or if they will concentrate their efforts on rebuilding the broken community.

Also, in the case of Uriah, Joab acts immorally as a leader and as David's general. When Uriah is killed, the other officers blame Joab since he has given the order to withdraw the troops. They think that Joab has been ineffective in his role, and because of his carelessness, Uriah has died. Rather than braving the storm and accepting this criticism, there is the possibility that he shows the officers the message to clear his

¹⁷⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, 1 Kings 2:8.

¹⁷⁷ Yerushalmi, 52.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 51.

reputation. He chooses to betray David in order to protect himself.¹⁷⁹ A strong leader has respect for his superiors, because he wants to set a good example for the people and because he wants his inferiors to support him. But what is most offensive is that Joab does not disobey David's orders in the first place. If he were truly loyal to David, he would not have carried out this sin. This would have been acceptable since a king cannot order a subject to commit a sin. The author explains that if a king's orders "conflict with the fulfillment of God's commandments or the study of the Torah, they must be ignored."¹⁸⁰ This order conflicts with the command that one shall not murder. Thus, Joab should have ignored David's command and then David would not have sinned so appallingly in God's eyes.

However, it must be noted that in I Kings 2:34, it says that Joab is buried in his house in the desert.¹⁸¹ There are many interpretations of the meaning of this verse. Some commentators, such as Abravanel, explain that Joab is buried in this exclusive location because at one time he had built a special house there to provide food and lodging to the poor and other travelers. And he always served fine food to these individuals, not just necessities such as bread. Thus, by allowing him to be buried here, Solomon is acknowledging his few redeeming qualities. It is believed that in some ways, Joab was pious. Rashi and Radak explain that since Joab had fought in many wars, he had been able to secure a large amount of spoil, but he never took anything to which he was not entitled. He would sell these good and use the profits to construct public buildings. He

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 73 (based on Numbers Rabbah).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹⁸¹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:34.

also contributed his money to scholars.¹⁸² In his fairness, Solomon allows for some of these more favorable characteristics to be remembered.

Another person who Solomon has to punish for unethical behavior is his brother, Adonijah. There is debate as to whether or not Adonijah actually commits a crime or just attempts one. Some say that by requesting Abishag for himself, he is disgracing David's honor. The author explains that "acting disrespectfully to a king is similar to blasphemy. He is guilty in the same way that a blasphemer is guilty for simply uttering a curse, even though no physical act was involved."¹⁸³ According to Abravanel, by asking for Abishag, he proves that he still has aspirations for Solomon's throne. But the most obvious offense is that Solomon has told him that if he acts courageously, he will not be harmed. But if evil be found in him, he will die.¹⁸⁴ He is supposed to be upright and rehabilitated. However, by asking for Abishag it proves that he is still rebellious. This is the evil to which Solomon had alluded. Solomon, as a confident leader, had had mercy on his brother. Solomon had hoped that Adonijah would prove himself, but Adonijah did not change. Therefore, Solomon sends Benaiah to kill Adonijah. Abravanel explains that he finally receives the punishment that he should have been dealt in the first place.¹⁸⁵

Although Adonijah and Solomon were not particularly close, Adonijah was still Solomon's brother. More importantly, he was also David's son. However, Solomon knew that having him killed was the necessary action. He was willing to look beyond their relation and see that Adonijah was a threat to Israel. This proved that Solomon did

¹⁸² Ibid., 78 (based on *Makot* 6a).

¹⁸³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸⁴ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 1:52.

¹⁸⁵ Yerushalmi, 66.

not consider his family to be above the law.¹⁸⁶ As a strong leader, Solomon was most concerned with the nation's best interest. Adonijah was a menace in that he "caused arguments and dissension which threatened to destroy the unity of the Jewish People and split up the kingdom of David."¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, "had he been permitted to continue, it would have eventually led to civil war and much bloodshed. Adonijah was therefore like one is attacking an innocent person and trying to kill him."¹⁸⁸ For the sake of the nation and his people, Solomon had to put an end to Adonijah's antics and his deception.

Therefore, at the end of the second chapter of I Kings, it says, "Then the kingdom was secure in the hand of Solomon."¹⁸⁹ Solomon has established himself as the new king of Israel. He has proven that he is a capable and confident leader. He will punish those who threatened the kingdom, no matter what relation they have to him. And, Solomon shows that he will, indeed, follow in the footsteps of his father, David. This is evidenced by the fact that strives to live a righteous life. He adheres to the laws of the Torah and the commandments, and goes out his way to study and perform good deeds. Thus, Solomon is admired and trusted by the people.

For this reason, he is certainly praised as a role model for an effective leadership. This is especially apt for the newer, younger leaders of the Jewish community in the eighteenth century. Solomon is preceded at the throne by his father, one of the most respected and honored men of the time. David has set high standards, therefore, Solomon has much to live up to. He has to prove himself, just as many young leaders must do. He also has to deal with situations that have occurred during David's reign. He has to

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 76.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 66.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 2:46.

take these issues on as his own, just as the newer leaders of the Jewish community have to deal with a negative political, social, and economic climate. Yet, Solomon adheres to his father's advice and is able to succeed. It seems that the author is encouraging the leaders to follow the path of their predecessors. Even though the times are trying, they must remain upright and avoid sin. Only when they, themselves, are able to do this, will they be able to lead and repair a community that is in turmoil.

Chapter 6: The Social and Political Implications of the *Me'am Lo'ez* Commentary to I Kings, Chapter 3

In this chapter, the author continues commenting on Solomon's effectiveness as a king. This chapter in I Kings begins by stating that Solomon marries Pharaoh's daughter. The author of *Me'am Lo'ez* explains that this is a strategic move. Solomon does this in order to secure peace for the kingdom of Israel. By marrying the Pharaoh's daughter, he is making an alliance with Egypt. At this time, Egypt is the strongest nation in the area, thus Solomon knows that having a good relationship with the Egyptians is paramount. By focusing on this decision, it is clear that Solomon has foresight. As a leader, one must always be thinking about situations that may occur in the future. In this case, Solomon knows that if the times become tough and his nation suffers economically or politically, he will need the Egyptians by his side. Since Egypt is the most powerful country, it is easy for him to identify which nation to seek as his ally. This is not always the case. Sometimes it is difficult to determine who can be trusted as an ally. Therefore, leaders must always be hesitant when forging relations with another individual, group, or nation. They must see to it that their own needs are being addressed and that they are not being used by the other party.

The author of the commentary then begins to address the way in which Solomon makes this alliance with Egypt. It seems that this issue, of Solomon marrying a pagan woman, is problematic. The author first cites Deuteronomy 7:3 where it says, "You shall not intermarry with them."¹⁹⁰ Here, "them" refers to the other nations that the Israelites will face when they enter the land of Israel. This is a direct command not marry a gentile. Therefore, one might assume that Pharaoh's daughter converts to Judaism before

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., Deuteronomy 7:3.

they marry as this is the only way in which Solomon can take her as his wife and create this alliance.

Even if Pharaoh's daughter converts, there are still problems since she is an Egyptian. In Deuteronomy 23:8-9, it says that the Israelites may not hold a grudge against the Israelites forever and thus, "children born to them may be admitted into the congregation of the Lord in the third generation."¹⁹¹ This means that this third generation that comes from this intermarriage with an Egyptian will be fully accepted into the Jewish community. They will have all of the same rights and obligations as natural born Jews and they will be able to marry a legitimate child of Jewish parents. Yet, this is not the case of the first and second generation. Therefore, any child that might have resulted from Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, would have been seen as illegitimate. And in Deuteronomy 23:3, it specifically states that an illegitimate child may not come into the congregation of the Lord. He may not marry legitimate Jews. Thus, it is troubling that the King of Israel would marry a woman with whom any children that were born would not be viewed as fully legitimate.

Yet, it is better that Solomon marry an Egyptian woman rather than an Ammonite or Moabite convert. Some say that this law, forbidding the entrance into the community of God, applies only to Egyptian men while Egyptian women are accepted into the Jewish community immediately. Thus, any child born to an Egyptian woman is accepted as fully Jewish. This is the case when marrying an Ammonite or Moabite woman, thus, the author presents the possibility that this is the case when a Jew marries an Egyptian female convert. However, there are others who dispute this claim. They explain that the reason the law applies only to the Ammonite and Moabite men is because they are the

¹⁹¹ Ibid., Deuteronomy 23:3.

ones responsible for neglecting and treating the Israelites with ill-will when they are trying to pass through. The women are not responsible, therefore, they are exempt from this punishment of being cut off from the Jewish nation. In the case of the Egyptians, both men and women are responsible for the oppression of the Jews. Therefore, they are all punished. Nevertheless, in the case of the Ammonite and Moabite converts, their children and the generations that follow, are to be treated as illegitimate forever. They are never permitted to marry a child who was born to Jewish parents.

The Egyptians are given a more lenient judgment because while they have been cruel to the Israelites, they do have some redeeming qualities. According to *Yevamot* 76b-78b and Rashi, the Egyptians do at times provide the Israelites with refuge. They save Jacob's family from the famine in Israel and though they enslave the Jews, they never kill all of them. It is for this reason that their children will not be punished forever. In fact, the author explains that it is a positive commandment to accept this third generation. They should not be discriminated against, since "the Torah is saying that while we cannot deny any natural aversion to Egyptians, after having been treated so cruelly by them, nonetheless, we should not let this aversion extend more than two generations. It is not sufficient reason to exclude their descendants forever."¹⁹² This is an important lesson for the readers of this commentary. It is a helpful reminder that at times, one must be merciful when it seems impossible. Forgiveness is a difficult thing. And these Jews are feeling oppressed by the Muslim leadership of the eighteenth century. However, they must not pass on their hostility to all future generations. They may not bear a grudge forever. Also, as Jews, they have a responsibility to try and find some of their oppressors redeeming characteristics.

¹⁹² Yerushalmi, 85.

It is also possible that there is another interpretation of the third generation. The author suggests "that the three generations mentioned in the Torah refer not to the generations of the convert himself, but to the three generations immediately following the Exodus. According to this interpretation, it was only the Egyptians who had personally taken part in the persecution of the Jews who were excluded."¹⁹³ They and their children will not be able to join the Jewish people, but their descendants will be fully accepted. Thus, since it is long after the Exodus from Egypt, Solomon may view Pharaoh's daughter in this manner. The author suggests that Solomon might also know that it is forbidden to marry an Egyptian, but he thinks that once she converts, that she will be the same as any other Jew.

However, it is probable that Solomon knows that marrying Pharaoh's daughter is forbidden, "but [feels] that, under the circumstances, it [is] permitted for him to violate the prohibition for the sake of the security of the Jewish People."¹⁹⁴ He thinks that by marrying her, he is guaranteeing the safety of future generations. Plus, Solomon's main goal may be to make this alliance with the Egyptians and then take the opportunity to enlighten this nation about God and Torah. The gain from this would outweigh the fact that he has broken a prohibition. As a leader, Solomon is concerned with the welfare of the people. But his main objective is that he spread the greatness of Torah. Solomon knows that God is responsible for the future of the Jewish people so the most important factor is remaining faithful to God. While making political and military coalitions is highly valuable, Solomon knows that ultimately God determines the success of the Jews. The author discusses this and says, "We are not like other nations. To the extent that we

¹⁹³ Ibid., 84.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 86.

keep the Torah and are faithful to God, we are blessed and protected; but for our sins and disloyalty, we are punished. Then, save for God's mercy, no power in the world can protect us."¹⁹⁵

Furthermore, in Numbers 23:9, the wicked prophet Balaam declares that the Jews will be a nation that will dwell alone.¹⁹⁶ The Jews will never be at peace with the other nations. The times when there has been peace are exceptions. Yet, there will not truly be peace until the Messiah comes. Perhaps this message is intended to be comforting for these Jews of the Ottoman Empire. They are in the norm in terms of these Jews' relationships with other nations. Just as other Jews have withstood the test of time and endured these stressful times, so too will these Jews thrive in the end. As long as they remain faithful to God, they will be protected. Thus, it seems that Solomon's attempt to make an alliance with the Egyptians truly is for religious reasons above anything else. If he realizes that the Jews will never be at peace with other nations, then it does not seem that he is making an alliance for security purposes.

Nevertheless, the Talmud does not support intermarriage between an Egyptian convert and a Jew. In *Yevamot* 76b, an account is given in which an Egyptian convert is unable to marry into the Jewish community. Therefore, it is clear that many centuries later, intermarriage is still not viewed as acceptable. It also seems that the Bible takes issue with Solomon's behavior, even if it can be justified for religious purposes. In I Kings 11:1-2, it says, "King Solomon loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh's daughter -- Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Phoenician, and Hittite women, from the nations of which the Lord had said to the Israelites, 'None of you shall join them

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 85.

¹⁹⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, Numbers 23:9.

and none of them shall join you, lest they turn your heart away to follow their gods.' Such Solomon clung to and loved."¹⁹⁷ Solomon is later criticized for being led astray. In fact, in I Kings 3:3, the reader learns that though Solomon loves God, he continues to sacrifice on temporary alters in the years before he built the Temple.¹⁹⁸

It is not a sin to sacrifice on a temporary altar, but it certainly is more desirable for the people to begin making sacrifices at the Temple sooner rather than later. However, Solomon waits four entire years before he begins construction. Certainly, David would never would have waited this long of a time before beginning.¹⁹⁹ In that time, Solomon could have at least sacrificed at the Tabernacle. This is not demanded of him, but since David has set the precedent, Solomon should have follow it. Abravanel and Radak claim that as a leader, it is Solomon's responsibility to go beyond the minimal requirements of the law.²⁰⁰ A truly righteous person exceeds expectations, while others will only meet expectations.

Furthermore, "by mentioning that he sacrificed on the temporary altars, the Torah implicitly criticizes him for delaying the building of the Temple."²⁰¹ Since there is not yet a temple, God allows for sacrifices at a temporary location. Yet, God only wants one temporary altar since "seeing sacrifices brought on different altars and in different locations [gives] the impression that they [are] being offered to different gods. Such an institution [paves] the way for idolatry."²⁰² Having many other locations makes it easy for people to go astray since they are not bound to one location which serves one God.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., I Kings 11:1-2.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., I Kings 3:3.

¹⁹⁹ Yerushalmi, 90.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 91.

²⁰² Ibid., 91

This is something with which the Jews of the Ottoman Empire may be able to identify. They are not living in Israel. They are living in the Diaspora, which means that there are many distractions. It is easy for them to stray.

The author also presents the interpretation that these temporary altars are actually altars that Solomon's pagan wives made for their idols. Solomon may not have built these high places and he may not have sacrificed at them, but he does allow for their construction. This in itself is an issue since they often look similar to the altar for God and people can become confused and worship on the idolatrous altar.

Here, it seems that the author is going to great lengths to comment on the ills of intermarriage. This is to be expected since the commentator is writing at a time when it is difficult to live as a Jew. Therefore, many people are contemplating conversion and intermarriage. One cannot forget that at this time the Jews are being oppressed by the Ottoman Empire. These Jews may feel that by marrying non-Jews that they are making alliances of their own. They are proving that they are accepted outside of the Jewish world. They also feel that these non-Jewish individuals and their families might be able to support them and help them survive these tyrannical times. Yet, the author does not accept this as a solution. He proves that intermarriage, while at times can be justified, is not permitted in the Talmud and is criticized in the Torah. He makes the point that Solomon, as king of Israel, is led astray by these foreign, non-Jewish women. They lead him to turn away from God and sin.²⁰³ If the King of Israel can be led into sin, how much the more so could the average Jew. He is telling the people to be mindful of the difficulties of these relationships and the problems that may result from them. The author

²⁰³ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 11:9.

is stating that straying from God and sinning before Him will create a situation that is potentially more onerous than the one in which they are currently living.

It is much more likely that God will forgive Solomon than the common Jew. Not only is he the King of Israel, but up until this point, he has almost always attempted to follow in the ways of the Lord. He has served God fervently, trying to meet his father, David's, level of dedication. In I Kings 3:3, this is evident as it says that "Solomon loved God, to follow the decrees of David, his father."²⁰⁴ The author then discusses the way in which a person can love God. The first is to have a true belief in God. Solomon knows that God is the creator of the world. God created the past and continues to cause the world to exist. The commentator explains that "when a person attains a complete awareness of this, he is immediately overcome by love for God. He realizes that it is God who gave him everything he has. All the great blessings of the world come from Him."²⁰⁵ When a person understands this, he realizes that God loves him and in return, he shows that love for God.

The second way a person loves God is to trust in God. For example, even if he does not understand the commandments, he follows them because he knows that God has our best interests in mind. He knows that God has mercy on his people. The third way that a person loves God is to care for and have respect for all of God's creations. He believes that God made his creations with love, so he in turn, loves them too. For this reason, this person loves all of God's human beings.²⁰⁶ The author explains, "If a person sincerely loves, he does not permit his love to remain just an emotion of the heart. He

²⁰⁴ Ibid., I Kings 3:3.

²⁰⁵ Yerushalmi, 89.

²⁰⁶ Yerushalmi, 90 (according to the comments of Abravanel).

translates it into action.”²⁰⁷ Thus, Solomon acts in the same way that his father. He follows David’s instructions and tries to keep God’s commandments. Therefore, even if Solomon is sinning through intermarriage, God will forgive him. God will realize that Solomon actions have been “made with a pure heart. It was not love or desire that drew him to Pharaoh’s daughter, but his sense of duty to his people.”²⁰⁸ Thus, because of his love of Torah and his commitment to Torah, God is willing to overlook the fact that he has taken a foreign wife.

Along with making alliances, there are other actions that Solomon takes in order to secure the kingdom. This is evident in I Kings 3:5-9, when God appears to Solomon in a dream and tells Solomon that whatever he asks for, God will give him.²⁰⁹ Solomon praises God for the kindness that he gave to David. The kindness to which he refers is the way in which God turned David from a shepherd into a king. He also says that God “kept this great kindness for him.”²¹⁰ By this, Solomon means that not only did God give David the throne, but he continued to protect him while he sat on the throne. The author explains that in the modern world, this is unusual. He says, “Sometimes a person is given a gift, but the one who gave it does not help him take proper care of it. He doesn’t protect him from those who would take it away.”²¹¹ This is an important message for those who give charity. It is not enough to perform an act of kindness. After giving, the donor must not abandon the recipient. He must stand beside him and continue to provide him with the necessary help and care. The commentator explains that this idea is reflected in the priestly blessing. In Numbers 6:24, God commands the priest to bless the

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 86 (according to the comments of Abravanel).

²⁰⁹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 3:5-9.

²¹⁰ Ibid., I Kings 3:6.

²¹¹ Yerushalmi, 94.

people and say, "May God bless you and keep you."²¹² He says, "Until a person receives a blessing, he is in no need of protection. He has as yet nothing to lose, so there is not need for God 'to keep him.' Only once he has been blessed is it appropriate to ask God to protect him."²¹³ Therefore, this teaching is especially applicable to the leaders of a community. It is likely that they will provide members of the community with acts of charity and kindness. Thus, once they do this, they must remain concerned with these individuals well-being. They must not forget about them, as there may be new problems that arise from which they will need protection. As in David's case, he was no longer living the difficult lifestyle of a shepherd, but he now needed protection from the enemies of the nation.

Lastly, Solomon thanks God for allowing him to sit on the throne of his father. Then, Solomon answers God and says that he would like "an understanding heart, to judge Your nation, to distinguish between good and evil." The commentator believes that this is a most pious answer. He could have chosen riches or power, or even peace and brotherhood, yet he chose wisdom.²¹⁴ The author believes that Solomon chooses this type of insight because he realizes that he is going to need it in order to effectively rule the Jewish People according to the Torah. Other kings do not have to answer to authorities as high and mighty as God and the Torah. If they make a mistake and punish someone wrongly, there is no one above them to whom they must answer. However, as the King of Israel, Solomon has the Torah above him. If he makes a mistake and wrongly punishes one of his subjects, he will be guilty of committing a heinous crime before God. Therefore, since Solomon is already bright and intelligent, he realizes that

²¹² The Jewish Publication Society, Numbers 6:24.

²¹³ Yerushalmi, 94.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 92.

human intelligence has limitations.²¹⁵ He needs a special, divinely inspired wisdom to lead the people. The author says "that it was not just the size of the Jewish People that awed him nor even their greatness or holiness. It was the extremely high standards of justice and righteousness that God demanded of them, and above all, of their leaders."²¹⁶ Only wisdom will allow him to meet these demands. Solomon also has to face other obstacles besides living up to the Torah's standards. He has to face the fact that he will always be compared to his father, David. David had been a great and beloved king. Thus, Solomon knows that he will need to ask for something exceptional from God to help him reach David's status. Solomon knows that wisdom is the key to all other blessings.

One must note that Solomon does not want practical wisdom so that he can understand science, technology, and nature. He does not seek wisdom so that he can achieve his own goals.²¹⁷ He only wants "the wisdom to choose good, so that he might be a truly righteous king. Only then will he continue to find favor in God's eyes, and be worthy of reward in this world and the next."²¹⁸ He wants this wisdom so that he can successfully serve God and judge the Jewish people fairly. He wants them to come to him for decisions and he wants to be able to lead them on the path of righteousness. Solomon may feel confident that God is going to grant him this request since God tries to help each person who judges and guides God's people. The author says, "Whenever a judge or rabbi is approached with a question of Torah, God is with him and helps him answer it correctly. Thus, Solomon asks for an extra measure of this Divine

²¹⁵ Ibid., 100.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 96.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 99.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 98.

assistance.”²¹⁹ Yet, God goes beyond Solomon’s wish. He does not only grant Solomon wisdom in terms of good and evil. God grants him the ability to understand all things. Solomon does not ask that his wisdom be above any other human being. He is not greedy. He only wants the necessary wisdom so that he could fulfill the requirements of his position.

There is much that can be learned from Solomon’s request. He is humble in his desire for wisdom and has the best interests of the community on his mind. God is so impressed with Solomon’s request that he grants him wisdom unlike any person before him and unlike anyone who will come after him, except perhaps the Messiah.²²⁰ He can understand the speech of animals and see the purpose of every thing in creation. It is the type of wisdom that cannot be accumulated even after a lifetime of studying. It can only be given by God and it is given to Solomon in an instant without any effort.²²¹ Even though the average leader will never match Solomon’s wisdom does not mean that he should be deterred. He should realize that Solomon’s wisdom was special and truly unlike any others. He must understand that there is so much knowledge in the world that it is impossible to learn everything. And he must remember that acquiring wisdom takes dedication, determination, and hard work. The commentator also reminds the reader that “there are many facts to which a person does not have access. He cannot know what happened before him, or what is far away or hidden. He cannot possibly know all the tiny details of every little thing, yet without them, his knowledge is incomplete.”²²² Unlike Solomon, this leader will never be completely sure what the future will hold and

²¹⁹ Ibid., 100.

²²⁰ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 3:12.

²²¹ Yerushalmi, 100.

²²² Ibid., 101.

hence, what decisions he should make. Yet, he should strive to do his best in serving God and the Jewish people. While he will never be like Solomon, he should look to him as the ideal.

Solomon does not request power because he knows that power has its limits.²²³ And he does not request wealth, because the truly wise are rarely concerned with wealth. The author explains that the wise understand that there are things in the world that are far more valuable than worldly possessions. They would much rather be blessed with righteousness, piety, and understanding than money. Yet, God is so impressed by Solomon's desire for wisdom that he grants him both wealth and honor along with the wisdom. Now, one might assume that Solomon will be honored because of his great wisdom. This is true of the Jews, who understand the depth of Solomon's knowledge. However, the commentator explains that Solomon is to be honored by everyone, even "those who [do] not appreciate wisdom or respect Torah. He [will] receive not only the honor of a wise man, but that of a mighty king."²²⁴ Thus, Solomon is a man blessed with wisdom, wealth and honor. This is something to which many leaders aspire, but very few obtain. Many who are blessed with wealth, spend all of their money on the pursuit of honor. Others who seek wealth are not wise enough to figure out how to acquire it. Therefore, the fact that Solomon has all three is quite extraordinary. God gives these gifts to Solomon unconditionally. Even if he strays from God, these blessings will always be with him. One must note though, that God does not give Solomon a guarantee that he would live a long life or that his children will sit upon the throne after him. In Deuteronomy 17:20, these very promises are made to the kings of Israel on the condition

²²³ Ibid., 98.

²²⁴ Ibid., 99.

that the king follows the commandments and has faith in God and Torah.²²⁵ The same holds true for Solomon. Even though he is blessed many times over by God, unless he follows the ways of the Torah, he will not be granted long life or the success of his descendants. He is expected to guard the commandments as every other Jew does. As the leader of the Jewish People, his actions matter. He is setting an example for everyone. Therefore, if he successfully follows God's commands, he will be even more blessed. This provides an incentive to the leaders of the Jewish community for whom the commentator is writing. Their main goal should be to follow the laws of Torah for the sake of Torah and to set a fine example. For when they do this, they strengthen the community and also pave the way for great rewards in the future.

After this dream, Solomon wakes and goes to Jerusalem where he offers sacrifices before God. I Kings 3:15 also says that he has a great party for all of his servants.²²⁶ Realizing that he has been blessed with such wisdom, Solomon immediately goes to offer thanks to God. The author explains that by understanding how thrilled Solomon is to be granted this gift, the reader can learn to truly value wisdom and its importance. Furthermore, this act of celebrating when one learns something or understands something important has been taken on in the Jewish community. When a person finishes reading the Torah or studying a section of Mishnah or Talmud, he celebrates. Thus, the commentator believes that this custom comes from the fact that Solomon has a party when he realizes he has been divinely blessed with wisdom.

This commentary is intended to provide the reader with other practical information regarding Torah and its study. For example, the author explains that the first

²²⁵ The Jewish Publication Society, Deuteronomy 17:20.

²²⁶ Ibid., I Kings 3:15.

two verses of the third chapter are actually meant to be a part of the second chapter. They detail how Solomon becomes king and how he establishes his throne. Yet, the third verse explains how Solomon acquires his exceptional wisdom. Thus, it seems that this verse would be a more striking beginning for the third chapter since the previous verses are related to the content of I Kings 2. The author explains that the reason for this mistake is that the divisions of the Torah were actually made by the Christians. He says, "Since they did not always understand the Torah properly, they sometimes divided it in the wrong places. During the Middle Ages these Christians tried to convince Jews to convert to their religion, forcing the rabbis to participate in debate with their priests."²²⁷ Certainly this is something with which the Jews of the Ottoman Empire can identify. In these debates, the Christians would quote verses from Torah to make a point. But they did not quote in Hebrew like the rabbis. Thus, the rabbis had to find a way to show the rabbis which verses they were referring to in the Latin Bibles. Hence, "the rabbis copied the chapter and verse numbers from the Bibles of the Christians into their own Hebrew Bible, the Torah. Until that time, Hebrew Bibles had no chapter or verse numbers."²²⁸ The rabbis found these divisions to be quite useful and began to use them all the time. But they never changed them from the divisions that they had copied from the Christians because for the most part, they were quite accurate. However, in this case, of I Kings 3, it seems that the divisions are not correct.

The author also explains that beginning with verse three, in I Kings 3, the events dealt with are ones that occur very early in Solomon's reign. They come a long time before Solomon has Shimei killed and he takes on the Pharaoh's daughter as his wife.

²²⁷ Yerushalmi, 91.

²²⁸ Ibid.

Thus, they are chronologically out of order. This is not unusual. In fact, there are "many places in the Torah where events are juxtaposed because they deal with similar subjects, even though they took place at different times. Continuity of subject is given precedence over continuity of time."²²⁹ One should always be aware of these types of issues when studying Torah because they allow one to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

Towards the end of the chapter, God provides Solomon with an opportunity to prove to the people that he is truly a man of great wisdom. But God also wants to show the people that Solomon is a humble and pious leader. Therefore, God brings two prostitutes before him. Some say that they bring their case to Solomon and do not even consult a lower court because they are extremely pushy and have no shame. Others say that they do approach the lower courts, but their issue is so complex that the court cannot issue a decision. Their case is a complicated one in which two women give birth within three days of one another. They are alone in the house. One evening, one woman's son dies because she lies on top of him. This mother then gets up and takes the other living child from the other woman. She places her dead child in the other mother's bosom while she is sleeping. When the other woman awakens, she realizes that the child she is holding is dead. She screams that this is not her child, hers is the live child. They bring this difficult case before Solomon. The author points out that the fact that Solomon even hears this case proves that he has compassion for every individual in his kingdom. Another king might refuse a case that involves prostitutes in an outrageous scandal. But Solomon is willing to hear every case. Then the way that he deals with cases is very judicious. After hearing the prostitutes present their case, he repeats both arguments.

²²⁹ Ibid., 92 (based on comments made in *Seder Olam* and by Rashi).

The commentator explains that “every judge must do that before he decides a case. He must make sure that he properly understood the arguments of both sides. They listen to him carefully, and if there is anything that he misunderstood, they have an opportunity to correct him.”²³⁰ By listening to both sides and then cleverly proving to the public that he can determine the rightful mother, Solomon shows that the strength of his leadership. Although there are no witnesses, he is able to perform the difficult task of deciding the case.

Thus, the chapter concludes with the words, “All Israel heard the judgment that the king had judged. They had great awe for the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was within him to do justice.”²³¹ Based on this statement, it is clear that the people now have complete trust in Solomon because they know that his decisions are divinely inspired. The people respect Solomon and are loyal to him. They will follow his example and strengthen their faith in God and the Torah. As God had promised David, Solomon rules the kingdom in peace. His kingdom is established, but more importantly, he is established. He is no longer living in his father’s shadow. He has proven himself to be an excellent leader whose actions show that he is a man of righteousness and piety. This is a goal to which every leader, especially those living during the oppression of the Ottoman Empire, should aspire to reach.

²³⁰ Ibid., 106.

²³¹ The Jewish Publication Society, I Kings 3:28.

Chapter 7: The Sources

Abravanel, Isaac ben Judah: Abravanel was born in 1437 (d. 1508) in Lisbon, Portugal. He was born to one of the most notable families of Spanish descent. In fact, some say that the Abravanel family is connected to King David's lineage.²³² Abravanel received a sound education "embracing Jewish religious philosophy beside the traditional disciplines, also the basic works of classical literature,... the writings of the foremost Christian theologians, [and] he studied Talmud under Joseph ben Abraham Hayyin."²³³ At a young age, he composed an impressive piece on providence and prophecy, called *Ateret Zekenim*.

Like his father Judah, Isaac was also politically savvy. He was involved in commerce and state finance, and after his father died, he took on his position as treasurer to King Alfonso V of Portugal. In this position, Abravanel was able to aid Jews who were being mistreated. For example, when Arzilla, Morocco, was taken over by the Moors, the Jewish captives were being sold as slaves. Thus, Abravanel became involved in the situation, even putting up his own money, so that these Jews would be freed. After the death of Alfonso V, the situation in Portugal became intolerable for the Jews. In fact, Abravanel was accused of conspiracy and was forced to flee to Toledo in 1483.²³⁴

While in Toledo, Abravanel began to write commentaries to the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. But before he finished the commentary to Kings, he entered the service of Ferdinand and Isabella of Castille. He would once again serve as a financial advisor. However, in 1492, the edict ordering the expulsion of the Jews from

²³² Meyer Kayserling, "Abravanel, Isaac ben Judah," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, online ed.

²³³ Zvi Avneri, Abraham Grossman, and Alvin Reines, "Abravanel, Isaac ben Judah," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed.

²³⁴ Kayserling.

Spain was signed. Abravanel tried to convince the rulers to revoke the edict. Yet, they stood by their decree, and Abravanel set sail to Naples.²³⁵ When he first arrived, he finally completed his commentary to Kings. Then he was appointed by the King of Naples, Ferrante I, to a position similar to the one he held in the Castille court. The French then launched an attack on Naples, and Abravanel followed King Ferrante to Messina and then back to Naples after the French withdrawal. He would later settle in Venice. Throughout the years, he completed commentaries on the Torah, the book of Isaiah, the Prophets and Daniel.²³⁶

Abravanel was influenced by Isaac Arama as well as Levi ben Gershom in terms of form and content. He is often repetitive and does not focus on grammatical issues. His exegesis "is characterized by lengthy expositions of the content and subject matter of Scripture. Each chapter is prefaced by a short resume of its content, followed by a lengthy excursus of the subject matter in the course of which he endeavors to resolve the problems raised in the introduction."²³⁷ He often quotes homilies as well as Midrash. Besides Biblical exegesis, Abravanel dealt with the concept of the Messiah, in an attempt to convince the Jews that the Messiah would come in their days. Lastly, he was also focused on philosophical issues. In fact, he spent a great deal of time commenting and critiquing Maimonides' works, including the *Guide to the Perplexed*. By focusing on Abravanel's various writings, it is clear that his own philosophy was rooted in the topics of prophecy, history, politics, and eschatology.²³⁸

²³⁵ Averni.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

Acosta, Isaac da: Isaac de Acosta was born in the mid-seventeenth century (d. 1728). While the location is uncertain, it is probable that he was a native of Amsterdam. He was trained as a hazzan, and later served as the spiritual leader of the Jewish community of Peyrehorade, near Bayonne. This community was made up of marrano Jews (Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula) who were fleeing Christian persecution. He was also an avid scholar and proved himself to the wise men of the community. Thus, when R Hayyim de Mercado died, da Acosta was selected as his rabbinic successor. While in this position, da Acosta devoted himself to scholarship. At that time, he "composed his handbook for the administration of the last rites to the dying, *Via de Salvacion*, and his major work, *Conjeturas Sagradas*, a commentary in Spanish on the Early Prophets, based on the classical Hebrew commentators and the Midrash."²³⁹

Alfasi, Isaac ben Jacob (the Rif): Alfasi was born in 1013 near Constantine, Algeria (d. 1103). Following a period of study in Kairouan, he moved to Fez (*Fasi*). Thus, his acronym comes from the name R. Isaac of Fasi, the Rif. He remained in Fez until he was seventy-five years old, at which time he was forced to flee to Spain due to the fact that he had been denounced to the government by some enemies. In Lucena, Spain, he became the head of the yeshiva in which one of his students was Judah Halevi. Alfasi was passionate about the study of Talmud. His most famous work is *Sefer ha-Halakhot*. In this piece, Alfasi pulls out "all the halachic material from the Talmud, ascertaining the decision, and providing a comprehensive compendium for ready reference."²⁴⁰ His goal is to extract the information that is still applicable and make it accessible to the people, so that they can study Talmud. Therefore, it is fitting that Alfasi

²³⁹ Cecil Roth, "Acosta, Isaac" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed.

²⁴⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0 ed., s.v. "Alfasi, Isaac ben Jacob."

wrote in Arabic. His style of writing is similar to that of the Babylonian *geonim* and his explanations tend to be brief, except when he is thrashing out differences in opinion amongst the *geonim*. At times, he also deals with the aggadot that promote moral and ethical behavior. While he does not identify them, it is clear that Alfasi uses a number of sources in this work. For example, the author of *Me'am Lo'ez* to I Kings cites Isaac Abravanel, as quoted in the work of the Rif. Alfasi wrote also wrote a great number of responsa and his work has been commented on by numerous scholars.

Alshekh, Moses: Moses Alshekh was born in the early sixteenth century in Adrianople, Turkey (d. 1593). He studied in Salonika under the tutelage of Joseph Taitazak and Joseph Caro. He would later moved to Safed, where he became well known as a halachic authority, a Talmudist, a Kabbalist, a community leader, and a preacher. He was also ordained as rabbi by R. Joseph Caro. His passion was the study of Talmud, but in the course of preparing many sermons, he spent a great deal of his time on Biblical interpretation. Later on, he would turn these sermons into commentaries on the Bible. For example, the *Me'am Lo'ez* commentary to I Kings, was likely familiar with *Marot ha-Zove'ot* (a commentary on the early and late books of the Prophets). Some of Alshekh's commentaries were printed during his lifetime, while others were revised and printed at the instruction of his son, Hayyim. Hayyim also printed some of his father's responsa. Alshekh's commentaries became very popular, in part because they were "permeated with religious- ethical and religious- philosophical ideas supported by ample quotes from Talmudic and Midrashic sources."²⁴¹ Not only were they user-friendly, but they exposed the reader to various sources.

²⁴¹ Tovia Preschel, "Alshekh, Moses," in Encyclopaedia Judaica: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

Anokhi, Abraham: Obscure source, about whom I was unable to find pertinent information.

Arama, Isaac ben Moses: Arama was born in 1420 in Spain (d. 1494). While the exact location of his birth is uncertain, it is clear that he taught in Zamora and later served as rabbi in the provinces of Tarragona and Fraga in Aragon, Spain. Later, he was named rabbi of Calatayud. At this time, many Christian preachers were trying to encourage the Jews of Spain to convert from Judaism. Thus, Arama tried to counter these with his own sermons in which he spoke about the principles of Judaism. These sermons are also of value because they provide the historian with information about the state of the Jews in Spain prior to the expulsion of 1492. His most famous work is the book, *Akedat Yitzhak* (the "Binding of Isaac"), in which he presents philosophical homilies and allegorical commentaries on the Old Testament.²⁴² This work includes 105 sermons, which are divided into two parts: the "investigation" and the "exposition."²⁴³ Arama dealt with many philosophical issues such as the relationship between faith and reason.

Benveniste, Hayyim ben Israel: Hayyim ben Israel Benveniste was born in Constantinople in 1603 (d. 1673). He would study in this city and later served as the rabbi. In 1655, Benveniste moved to Smyrna where he became involved in the Shabbatai Zevi movement. At an early age, he began writing legal commentaries. He wrote one to Moses de Coucy's *Sefer HaMitzvot*, as well as other commentaries to other codes of law.

²⁴² Sara Heller-Wilensky, "Arama, Isaac ben Moses," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁴³ Ibid.

The Me'am Lo'ez commentary to I Kings cites Benveniste's work, *Dine de-Hayye*, known in English as the Laws of the Living.²⁴⁴

Caro, Joseph ben Ephraim: Joseph Caro was born in 1488 in Toledo, Spain or Portugal (d. 1575). It is unclear whether his family left for Portugal prior to the Jewish expulsion from Spain or if they left afterwards in 1492. Then in 1497, the Jews were once again expelled, but this time from Portugal. The Caro family would then travel to Turkey, where Joseph Caro lived for about forty years. At first, he studied under his father Ephraim, who was a skilled Talmudist. He would then travel throughout Turkey and study under various scholars. At this time, he became interested in Kabbalah. Thus, in 1536, he left Turkey to make a home in Safed (the heart of Kabbalistic study and thought). In Safed, he was regarded as one of the leading scholars. He was also the head of the yeshivah and head of the community council.

Throughout his lifetime, Caro authored a vast number of important works and commentaries. He began writing the *Beit Yosef* in 1522, while living in Turkey and did not complete it until he moved to Safed. The goal of this piece was to "finally lay down the definitive halakhah so that there should be 'one law and one Torah.'"²⁴⁵ By focusing on the work of Alfasi, Maimonides, and Asher ben Jehiel, Caro attempted to explain a halakhic code of law, by studying the Talmudic sources as well as opposing opinions. He decided to write it in the form of a commentary on Jacob ben Asher's existing code of law, known as *Arba'ah Turim*. It is likely that Caro chose ben Asher's work since ben Asher's code of law dealt with rules that were practical and contemporary.

²⁴⁴ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, online ed., s.v. "Benveniste, Hayyim ben Israel."

²⁴⁵ Louis Rabinowitz, David Tamar, and R.J. Werblowsky, "Caro, Joseph ben Ephraim," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

Yet, the piece that Caro is most well known for is the *Shulhan Arukh*. It is a digest of the *Beit Yosef*. Caro intended for this work to be used by young students, who did not have the skills to study the entire *Beit Yosef*. This is evident since it is written in clear and concise language, and in order to eliminate confusion, no authorities are listed.²⁴⁶ Caro was much more partial to the *Beit Yosef* than the *Shulhan Arukh*. For example, he does not ever mention the *Shulhan Arukh* in his numerous responsa. Yet, the *Shulhan Arukh* was very well received by the public, as was his work *Kesef Mishnah* (a commentary of part of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*). While many scholars have produced commentaries on Caro's works, it must be mentioned that there are scholars who have criticized Caro's works, such as Moses Isserles and Solomon Luria. Some also dispute whether Caro is responsible for the mystical diary, known as *Maggid Mesharim*. Some think that a halakhist of his ability was unable to reach a mystical state, nonetheless describe one. Yet, this diary is important for understanding Kabbalistic thought in Safed, following the expulsion and preceding Isaac Luria's revival.²⁴⁷

Homat Anakh: Ancient source about which no relevant information was found.

Edels, Samuel Eliezer ben Judah Ha-Levi (the Maharsha): Edels was born in 1555 in Cracow (d. 1631), and later moved to Posen, Poland. There he married the daughter of Moses Ashkenazi Heilpern and his wife, Edel. His mother-in-law, Edel, supported his studies. Thus, he later chose to be called by her name. After she died, Edels served as rabbi in Chelm, Lublin, and Ostrog. Edels wrote many commentaries on the Talmud, including *Hiddushei Halakhot*. His writing style is extremely terse and his explanations of the text are often similar to Rashi. He often uses kabbalistic thought,

²⁴⁶ Louis Ginzberg, "Jacob Culi," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, online ed.

²⁴⁷ Rabinowitz.

philosophy, and the sciences in his interpretation of the Talmud, as he believed it gave a more in depth understanding of the text. His writing makes it clear that he was critical of antisocial and unethical behaviors in the society.²⁴⁸

Ein Sofim: Obscure source about which no pertinent information was found.

Ephraim, Meir ben: Meir, also known as Moses Meir, was born in Padua, Italy in the sixteenth century (d. 1583). Shortly after his birth, his family moved to Mantua where he was born and raised. There he served as a scribe, printer, and teacher. He was also involved in many community organizations. Comments made by Meir's friend, Rabbi Moses ben Abraham Provencal, "indicate Meir's rabbinical scholarship, as does his treatise on the diacritical marks of the Torah, *Rimzi ha-Tagim*."²⁴⁹ The Me'am Lo'ez is familiar with this individual's works.

Genesis Rabbah: Once called *Bereshit de-Rabbi Oshaya Rabbah* (Genesis of R. Oshaya Rabbah), *Genesis Rabbah* is a collection of aggadic midrashim on the Book of Genesis. R. Oshaya, whose name is mentioned in the opening sentence, was one of the early Palestinian amoraim (Jewish scholars who lived between the third and sixth centuries). Thus, the book is most often attributed to R. Oshaya. *Genesis Rabbah* is divided into one hundred and one sections and most sections are introduced by a proem. This proem is usually verse from Psalms or Proverbs. The author then takes this verse and attempts to connect it with the Biblical verse at the beginning of the section. Then, through the use of midrashim, he attempts to explain and interpret each chapter, verse,

²⁴⁸ Shmuel Ashkenazi, "Edels, Samuel Eliezer ben Judah Ha-Levi," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁴⁹ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, online ed., s.v. "Ephraim, Meir ben."

and even word. The language is similar to that employed by the authors of the Jerusalem Talmud.²⁵⁰

Gershon, Levi Ben (Ralbag): Levi ben Gershon, also known as the Ralbag, Gersonides, and Maestro Leo de Bagnols, was born in 1288 in Bagnols, France (d. 1344). He lived most of his life in Orange and Avignon, which are in the south of France. This was at a time when the Jews faced persecution. Yet, little is known about the Gersonides' life, other than the fact that he came from a family of scholars. The prominent scholar, Nachmanides, was said to be his maternal grandfather. Yet, others believe that his maternal grandfather may have been Levi ha-Kohen.²⁵¹ What is certain is that Gersonides was a prolific writer.

It is clear that Gersonides was well versed in the subjects of arithmetic, geometry, trigonometry, medicine, and astronomy. In his first work, *Sefer ha-Mispar* (The Book of the Number), he speaks of the principles and applications of these mathematical sciences. In fact, Gersonides composed a number of mathematical books. He also was responsible for several philosophical works. He was interested in the works of Aristotle and Averroes and wrote commentaries based on these philosophers earlier works. Yet, he also wrote Talmudic, Liturgical, and Biblical commentaries. For example, he wrote a commentary on the thirteen hermeneutical laws of R. Ishmael, known as *Sefer Berit Yaakov*, as well as a commentary on the aggadot of *Baba Batra*. It is known that he composed poems and other pieces related to the holidays of Shavuot and Purim. And in terms of his Biblical creations, Gersonides wrote a commentary to Job, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Esther, the Pentateuch, the Former Prophets, Proverbs, Daniel,

²⁵⁰ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, online ed., s.v. "*Genesis Rabbah*."

²⁵¹ M. Seligsohn, "Gershon, Levi ben," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, online ed.

Nehemiah, and Chronicles.²⁵² The method employed by Gersonides was that he would extract "the ethical, philosophical, and religious teachings" that could be gathered from the text.²⁵³ He would give the literal meaning of the text and then attempt to discuss these teachings in light of his philosophical and theological beliefs.

Furthermore, in his well popular book, *Sefer Milhamot Adonai* (The Book of the Wars of the Lord), Gersonides deals with issues such as immortality of the soul, prophecy, divine knowledge, divine providence, the nature of celestial spheres (in which he discusses astronomy), and the eternity of matter.²⁵⁴ He felt that his predecessors, including Maimonides, had not dealt with these topics in a satisfactory fashion. Yet, he does quote these philosophers throughout his work. Gersonides' works tend to be written in Hebrew and at times, quite repetitive. It must be noted that Gersonides' works were often criticized, as there were many traditional Jews who felt that his ideas were completely counter to orthodox thinking.

He-Hasid, Judah ben Samuel: Judah ben Samuel He-Hasid (b.1150), also known as Rabbi Judah the Pious of Regensburg, was the founder of the Hasidei Ashkenaz movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Germany. He was a mystic, as well as teacher and scholar in the fields of ethics and theology. He also wrote commentaries on prayers. His main work, however, is *Sefer Hasidim*, an ethical commentary. As a sign of humility, Rabbi Judah tried to prevent name from being

²⁵² Bernard Goldstein and Charles Touati, "Levi ben Gershon," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Seligsohn.

attached to his own works. Thus, many of his works are identified as anonymous.²⁵⁵ He died in 1217.

Hilkhot Melakhim: *Hilkhot Melakhim*, meaning, “The Laws of Kings,” is one of the sections found in Maimonides’ (Moses ben Maimon, the Rambam) masterpiece, the *Mishneh Torah*. This book took Maimonides’ ten year to write. In it, he “planned a complete legal system which should give in a brief but clear form the final decision in the case of each law, so that, by the omission of long discussions and demonstrations, every regulation, law, and custom of religious life might be learned without any other manual.”²⁵⁶ He called the piece, *Mishneh Torah*, meaning the “Second Law,” since he felt that one could understand the entirety of Jewish law by reading the written Torah and then the *Mishneh Torah*. He also included important moral and ethical teachings. The *Mishneh Torah* is divided into fourteen books. *Hilkhot Melakhim* is included in the last book, called *Shoftim* or Judges. It lists all the necessary laws and rules concerning kings.

Isaac, Solomon ben (Rashi): Rashi was born in 1040 in Troyes, France (d. 1105). He was learned in many subjects, but after he married, he left Troyes to study in the great Jewish academies of Mainz and Worms. When he completed his studies, he returned to Troyes and founded a school. Rashi commented on nearly every single book of the Bible, as well as the Babylonian Talmud, and he included the comments of his students in his work. The Encyclopedia Judaica explains that “the main distinguishing characteristic of Rashi’s commentary is a compromise between the literal and the midrashic interpretations.” He bases most of his comments of rabbinic sources. When he cites a midrash, he does not just quote it. He often abridges it and changes the wording

²⁵⁵ Joseph Dan, “He-Hasid, Judah ben Samuel,” in Encyclopaedia Judaica: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁵⁶ Joseph Jacobs, “Hilkhot Melakhim,” in The Jewish Encyclopedia, online ed.

so that it is more fluid and easier to understand. The language he uses is concise and straightforward.²⁵⁷

Joseph, Isaac ben (the Semak): Isaac ben Joseph of Corbeil is one of the most well renowned French codifiers of the thirteenth century. He is most famous for his work, *Sefer Mitzvot Katan (SeMaK)*, the "Small" Book of Commandments. Since Joseph was almost always associated with this work, he was also known as the Semak (the Hebrew acronym). In *Sefer Mitzvot Katan*, he provides "the masses with a compendium of contemporary *Halakhah*, interspersed with ethical homilies, parables, and *aggadot*."²⁵⁸ Thus, his goal is similar to that of the *Me'am Lo'ez* in that he is reaching out to the average Jew. Joseph was guided and inspired by Moses of Coucy's work, *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, the "Big" Book of Commandments. However, unlike Moses of Coucy, Joseph did not include lengthy halachic discussions. The book was very popular, especially amongst Jews in France and Germany. He died in 1280.

Kimhi, David (the Radak): The Radak was born around the year 1160 in Narbonne, Provence (d. approximately 1235). He served as a teacher in the town and was also active in community affairs. It is known that he even acted as a judge on a few occasions.²⁵⁹ During the Maimonidean controversy of 1282, the Radak traveled widely and rallied in support of Maimonides. In terms of his scholarship, the Radak was praised for his work as a grammarian and an exegete.

His first piece, *Mikhlol*, was a philological treatise that contained both a grammatical section as well as a lexicon. There were many Jewish scholars who

²⁵⁷ Jona Fraenkel, Avraham Grossman, Menahem Kaddari, Aaron Rothkoff, and Israel Ta-Shema, "Rashi," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁵⁸ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1.0ed, s.v. "Joseph, Isaac ben."

²⁵⁹ Frank Talmage, "Kimhi, David," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

criticized the Radak's work as they believed it was too unconventional. Yet, he was respected and influential in the works of some Christian Hebraists of the Renaissance. He was also interested in the masorah and therefore, created an abridged version of the *Mikhlol*. He took on this project because he felt "a manual for copyists of the Bible, [was] necessitated by widespread ignorance among scribes and the proliferation of biblical manuscript traditions in the 12th century."²⁶⁰

The Radak also produced exegetical commentaries on many books of the Bible, starting with the Book of Chronicles. He then wrote commentaries to Genesis, the Prophets, and Psalms. These commentaries tend to focus on the plain meaning and grammar of the text rather than homiletical interpretations. The Radak utilized rabbinic literature, as well as the philosophical ideas of individuals such as ibn Ezra and Maimonides, to aid him in uncovering the meaning of the text. He hoped that by including these rational ideas that he would be encouraging the average student to pursue more study. It is also important to note that these commentaries contain many polemics against the Christian interpretations of the text. These are most noticeable in his commentary on the Psalms. The Radak's commentaries are still popular today.²⁶¹

Metzudat David: Written in the eighteenth century by David Altschuler, *Metzudat David* is a commentary of the Prophets and the Writings. Alschuler, a Biblical scholar from Galicia, wanted to encourage individuals to study the other parts of the Hebrew Bible, not only the Torah. Thus, he penned an "easy-to-read commentary on the Prophets and Hagiographa, based on earlier commentators."²⁶² After his death, Altschuler's son, Jehiel Hillel, completed his work. Between 1780 and 1782, Jehiel

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Tovia Preschel, "David Altschuler," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

printed the completed commentary. It is divided into two parts: *Metzudat Zion* ("The Fortress of Zion") and *Metzudat David* ("The Fortress of David"). *Metzudat Zion* provides the reader with an explanation of particular words from the Prophets and Writings, while *Metzudat David* clarifies and discusses the meaning of the text. Following the printing, both parts of the commentary became very popular.²⁶³

Michael, Meir Loeb ben Jehiel (the Malbim): The Malbim was born in 1809 in Volochisk, Volhynia (now a part of the Western Ukraine). His travels took him to Warsaw and Leczyca, and then throughout Western Europe. In 1839, he was appointed rabbi of Wreschen (Prussia) and then he moved to Kempen (Germany). In these areas, he served as rabbi and preacher. He also began working on his biblical commentaries and talmudic works. In 1858, he heeded the call of the Bucharest community and accepted the offer to serve as the chief rabbi of Rumania. Yet, in 1864, he was forced to leave Rumania as there were certain individuals who were outraged by his conservative approach and unbending stance against Reform. He would then travel between European cities, serving as rabbi and scholar for particular communities. He died in Kiev in 1879.

Among the many commentaries he produced, the one the *Me'am Lo'ez* cites is *Lev Melachim*, a commentary of the Book of Kings, which was completed sometime between 1867-1876. This commentary, like the Malbim's other works, "was motivated by his opposition to the Reform Movement, which in his view could potentially undermine the very foundation of Judaism. He wished to strengthen the position of Orthodox Judaism in the spheres of exegesis, knowledge of Hebrew, and the exposition

²⁶³ Ibid.

of the Bible according to its plain meaning."²⁶⁴ He was in favor of literal interpretation and respected the work of David Kimhi and Isaac Abravanel.

Musar HaNeviim: An obscure source, of which I was unable to find significant information.

Pardo, Jacob: Jacob Pardo, who lived during the late eighteenth century, was the son of R. David Samuel ben Jacob Pardo. His father served as chief rabbi in Spalato, Dalmatia (which is in modern day Croatia), Sajajevo, Bosnia, and was an esteemed rabbi in Jerusalem towards the end of his life. Jacob Pardo served as the chief rabbi of Ragusa, Italy. The Jewish Encyclopedia claims that like his father, he also served as chief rabbi of Spalato (Franco). He was well regarded in the subjects of Kabbalistic thought and Talmud. In his work, *Appa Zutre*, he comments on the *Hilkhot Ishut* of the *Shulhan Aruch*. Yet his works were not limited to these two fields. He was the author of a number of poems, and in his book, *Marpe Lashon*, he presented his poems alongside prayers for children. In another one of his works, *Minhat Aharon*, he dealt with the laws of prayer. He also was responsible for two Biblical commentaries. In *Mishkenot Yaakov*, he wrote a commentary to Isaiah. And in *Kohelet Yaakov* (sometimes known as *Kehillat Yaakov*), he wrote a commentary to the earlier prophets.²⁶⁵ It is this book that is cited in the *Me'am Lo'ez* commentary to I Kings.

Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer: *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, also known as *Baraita de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Haggadah de-Rabbi Eliezer*, is a book of aggadic midrashim written in the eighth century in Eretz Yisrael. It differs from other works of midrashim, in that it is

²⁶⁴ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1.0 ed., s.v. "Malbim, Meir Loeb ben Jehiel Michael."

²⁶⁵ Shlomoh Zalman Havlin, "Pardo, David Samuel ben Jacob," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

divided chronologically rather than according to the order of the Torah. For example, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* begins with an aggadah about the early days of Eliezer ben Hayrcanus and then takes the reader from creation to the time in the wilderness. It concludes with the description of Miriam's leprosy and the copper snake.²⁶⁶ One must also note that in the second half of the book, the Midrashim are often related to the blessings from the Amidah. *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* is written in Hebrew, yet does contain some Greek words. While the author does not quote his sources, it is apparent that he made use of Tannaitic literature, the Jerusalem Talmud, the aggadah of the *amoraim*, and at times, the Babylonian Talmud. It is clear that the author "was greatly influenced in both contents and form by the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Second Temple period, particularly the books of the Enoch cycle. His entire manner of narration and unique method of connecting the halakhah and aggadah were influenced by the Book of Jubilees." By focusing on these halakhah it is possible to get an idea of the customs that were being practiced at the beginning of the *geonic* period. It also contains Arabic stories that explain what life in Eretz Yisrael was like prior to the fall of the Omayyad Dynasty.

Seder Olam Rabbah: This midrashic work, meaning "The Great Order of the World," is most often associated and defined alongside the later work, *Seder Olam Zuta* ("The Small Order of the World"). In the Talmud, references are made to *Seder Olam*. *Seder Olam Rabbah* has been ascribed to R. Yose ben Halafta. The book is divided into three parts and marks the dates of important events from creation to the Bar Kochba Revolt. This book has been "written in a dry but clear Hebrew style. It is embellished

²⁶⁶ Moshe David Herr, "Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

with midrashic interpretations of biblical passages which are used as sources for the chronological calculations."²⁶⁷ *Seder Olam Rabbah* has been edited and commented on by various individuals, including R. Elijah ben Solomon Zalman Gaon of Vilna. This is due to the fact that some of the chronological calculations contradict the commonly accepted chronology. For example, *Seder Olam Rabbah* claims that the Temple was destroyed in 68 CE rather than 70 CE.

Shaarei Yerushalayim: This is another obscure source of which no pertinent information was found.

Shochoer Tov: *Shochoer Tov* is a book of aggadic midrashim on the Psalms. It is also known as *Midrash Tehillim*, *Aggadot Tehillim*, and *Midrash Psalms*. This book begins with a quote from Proverbs 11:27, in which the first words are *Shochoer Tov* (in English, "he who earnestly seeks good finds favor"). There is a midrash for every Psalm except Psalms 123 and 131. Furthermore, based on an analysis of the language and subject matter, it seems that the midrashim written on Psalms 119-150 were written at a later date than the others. *Shochoer Tov* is of a homiletical nature and utilizes "exalted language and colorful themes, cites many stories and parables, and makes extensive and tasteful use of the hermeneutics of aggadic interpretation."²⁶⁸ It was first printed in Constantinople in 1512.

Solomon, Abraham ben (The Rabash): Abraham ben Solomon, also known by the acronym "The Rabash," was born in 1482 in Tortutiel, Spain to a learned family. In 1492, he was forced to leave Spain, along with all of the other Jews who had been expelled by Ferdinand and Isabella. He was taken by his father to Fez, Morocco. There

²⁶⁷ Judah Rosenthal, "Seder Olam," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁶⁸ Jacob Elbaum, "Midrash Tehillim" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

he would continue his studies and he would later write an appendix to Abraham ibn Daud's *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*. His goal was to complete this account of the Jews from the time of ibn Daud's death in 1180 to the year 1525. In his introduction, he says that he will rely on the works of Abraham Zacuto and Joseph ben Zaddik of Arevalo. The work consists of three parts. The first provides the reader with a list of scholars and important information not mentioned by ibn Daud. In the second part, he writes about the Jewish scholars from ibn Daud's time to his own. The section ends with Isaac Canpanton, who was his father's teacher.²⁶⁹ The third section is a history of the kings of Spain, up until Ferdinand. He then gives an account of the Jews expulsion from Spain as well as what life was like in exile in Fez. He then details the scholars of import who lived after Canpanton.²⁷⁰ Since the Rabash was an eyewitness to the exile, his writing about this time is passionate and filled with emotion. He criticizes those Jews who chose to convert rather than face exile or martyrdom. And he contends that "the expulsion of 1492 was a just sentence of God upon the Jews of Spain, because of their many sins, and especially on account of the arrogance of their great men, who neglected the Law and left it to be observed only by the poor and lowly."²⁷¹ His date of death is uncertain.

Tanhuma: *Tanhuma*, also known as Midrash Tanhuma, is comprised of a group of aggadic Midrashim on the entire Pentateuch. It was first published in 1522 in Constantinople. *Tanhuma* contains a number of teachings, quotations, and proems, which are attributed to Rabbi Tanhuma. It is an example of a homiletical Midrash, meaning that it is "divided according to the old Palestinian division of the reading of the

²⁶⁹ *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, "Solomon of Tortutiel, Abraham ben," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁷⁰ Richard Gottheil, "Solomon of Tortutiel, Abraham ben" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, online ed.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Pentateuch in a triennial cycle, and contain[s] homiletical explanations to the first verse (or sometimes to the first two or three verses)" of each portion.²⁷² Often these proems begin with the phrase, "*Yelammedenu Rabbeinu*," (meaning: "May our teacher instruct us") and then they ask a rhetorical question.²⁷³ One must note that these proems are of a halachic nature, yet they lead into aggadic homilies that elucidate the opening verses of the section.

Zalman, Elijah ben Solomon (The Gra): Also known as the Vilna Gaon, Elijah Gaon, and the Gra (since the acronym Ha-Gra comes from Ha-Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu), Elijah ben Solomon Zalman lived during the 18th century. He is recognized as one of the most influential Jewish leaders and scholars of his time. He was born in the Grodno province of Belarus in 1720, to a rabbinical family (d. 1797). After he was married, he began to travel throughout Poland and Germany. He would then return and settle in Vilna, where he lived until he died.

At a young age, Zalman became proficient in Torah, Talmud, and even Kabbalah. However, he did not believe that Kabbalah should be given precedence over true Halachic studies. Therefore, when the Hasidim were on the rise, Zalman opposed them. He felt that their teachings were too extreme and that they conflicted with traditional Judaism. Plus, he was concerned about the rift that might result within the community.²⁷⁴ It is for this reason that he was viewed as a spiritual and political leader of the community. Zalman was also opposed to philosophy since he thought that philosophical ideas might also be a threat to Judaism.

²⁷² Moshe David Herr, "*Tanhuma Yelammedenu*," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Menahem Kaddari, Isaac Klausner, and Samuel Mirsky, "Zalman, Elijah ben Solomon," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: CD-ROM, 1.0ed.

The Vilna Gaon had some intense and unique study habits. One book claims that in the winter he would study in an unheated room with his feet in bucket of cold water, so that he would not fall asleep. Clearly, the Vilna Gaon was very devoted to his studies. And his studies were vast. The Encyclopaedia Judaica says, "The Bible, the Talmud, including the minor tractates, the tannaitic midrashim, the Zohar and the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, the Shulhan Aruch, Hebrew grammar, and a long list of general sciences such as geometry, measurements, astronomy and medicine- all these occupied the Gaon of Vilna, to such an extent that it may be said of him that no Jewish or general topic which had a bearing on Judaism was alien to him."²⁷⁵ One must note that he also studied Hebrew grammar fastidiously and made strides in his liturgical studies. Throughout all of his studies, Zalman's main goal was always to elucidate on the meaning of the Torah and Oral Torah. He felt that all wisdom and knowledge, of the past, present, and future, was included in Torah. Thus, by utilizing the aforementioned sources, he attempted to understand and explain Torah to others.

During his lifetime, the Vilna Gaon wrote more than seventy works. He wrote commentaries to nearly every book of the Hebrew Bible and to many books of the Mishnah. However, none of these were published while he was still alive.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

Through careful study of the *Me'am Lo'ez* commentary to I Kings:1-3, as well as Jacob Culi's introduction to this text, it is clear that the authors were concerned about the Jewish masses living during the eighteenth century. They knew that these Jews were living at a difficult time as they were being oppressed by the Ottoman Empire. These authors realized that many of these individuals were having trouble identifying as Jews and were losing the determination to defend their Jewish roots. They were becoming increasingly less interested and less learned about Judaism and the Jewish sources. Therefore, the authors of the *Me'am Lo'ez* wanted the reader to take a text, such as I Kings, and find that he or she could understand the words of the Bible. The authors wanted the readers to know that they could connect with the text, apply it to their lives, and most importantly, find meaning within it. Yet, the authors knew that the readers would not be able to do this on their own. They would need a commentary, written in the vernacular, which was clear and easy to understand. Yet, this commentary would be scholarly and legitimate. It would draw upon important rabbinic sources. The hope was that when the people realized that they could relate to these various Jewish texts and rabbinic sources, that they would renew their interest in Judaism. They would once again become passionate about their religion and their life in general.

After closely examining the *Me'am Lo'ez* commentary to I Kings:1-3, I have found that this commentary has achieved the goal of its author. He has effortlessly woven in rabbinic and other Jewish sources, making them available and understandable to the average Jew. Yet, most important is the fact that this author is reaching out to the reader. By focusing on the end of David's life, Adonijah's rebellion, and Solomon's

accession to the throne, the author is able to discuss topics that are relevant to the readers' lives. He writes about issues that are taking place within the family and the need to remain committed parents and spouses. He focuses on the problems in society and emphasizes the importance of solid and moral leadership. He also reminds the readers that they are Jews. Thus, they have been commanded to follow the laws of God and the Torah. The author empathizes with the readers and addresses their worries and concerns. He notes the difficulty of the times and their situation, but in the end, he is able to give them hope. He gives them advice, and not just any advice. This is advice rooted in Jewish sources. He uses these works to assuage the population and help them handle the problems they are facing within their families, their community, and their religious group.

As a rabbinic student, this has been a valuable exercise for understanding the life of a Jewish community far removed from my own time and place. However, it has also confirmed my own belief in the need to make all Jewish texts and sources, not just the Torah, more available to the average Jew. As the *Me'am Lo'ez* has done, we need to make Judaism more approachable. The more contact that Jews have with these sources, the more connected and passionate they will feel about their religion. They will also become more educated.

As I get ready to enter the rabbinate, I also realize the importance of meeting individuals where they are. A true leader must recognize the issues and the events that are significant in the lives of his or her constituents or congregants and then speak to these issues. A rabbi must do this same thing, but she should base her teachings on the tradition. Interestingly, many of the issues about which the author of this commentary

wrote, are still applicable today. Therefore, I am confident that I will be able to take the lessons I have learned from this thorough study and bring them to the people whom I will serve. It is my hope that with this knowledge, I will be able to strengthen these individuals' faith in family, community, and most importantly, Judaism.

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