

FROM DIVINE DIRECTIVE TO HUMAN LEGACY - TRANSITION IN THE COURSE OF NAHMANIDES' TYPOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

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Introduction

Nahmanides provided¹ literary (*Peshat*), homiletical (*Derash*),² and mystical (*Sod*)³ commentaries to the biblical text. In addition, he turned to an interpretive method using the term *Remez*, by which he showed that the biblical text contains allusions that foreshadow the future history of the nation of Israel. Nahmanides applies this exegetical method to biblical commandments⁴ and the portions of rebuke;⁵ his primary use of this method, however, appears in relationship to the patriarchal narratives in the Book of Genesis.⁶ This method was ultimately

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¹ On the life and literary works of Moshe ben Nahman, see Y. Elman, "Moses ben Nahman / Nahmanides (Ramban)," *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, Magne Sæbø (ed.), Göttingen 1996, pp. 416–417; I.M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Safrut ha-Parshanut la-Talmud b'Eiropa u'be-Tsefon Africa: Qorot, Ishim, ve-Shitot*, II, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 29-55; Y. Assis, "Ha-Yehudim be-Malkhut Argoniah u'be-Ezorei Hasuta," in: H. Beinart (ed.), *Moreshet Sepharad*, vol.1, Jerusalem 1992, pp. 36-80. For a brief summary of Nahmanides' method of commentary, see: J.S. Licht, "Ramban," in: M. Greenberg (ed.), *Parshanut ha-Miqra ha-Yehudit: Pirqei Mavo*, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 60-68.

² A significant portion of the midrashic literature introduced by Nahmanides follows Rashi's commentary, while his literary commentary is often influenced by Ibn Ezra. See: B. Septimus, "Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," I. Twersky (ed.), *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, Cambridge, MA 1983, pp. 11–34; M. Sklarz, "Hitmodedut im ha-Pa'ar bein Peshat le-Derash – Ramban be-'Iqvot Ibn Ezra," in: *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 22, 2013, pp. 189-222; M. Sklarz, "Ramban ke-Parshan ha-Agaddah be-Mahalakh Peirusho la-Torah," in: *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 23, 2014, pp. 243- 262; M. Sklarz, "Darko shel Ramban be-Imutz Divrei Ibn-Ezra ve-Havaatam shelo be-Shem Omram," in: *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 24, 2015, pp. 285-302. On the influence of Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor and the Provence Scholars on Ramban's Commentary, see: S. Yahalom, "Meqorot Alumim be-Peirush ha-Ramban la-Torah," in: *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, 2004, pp. 265-293.

³ Nahmanides was the first to integrate mysticism into a work intended primarily for the masses. See: J. Dan, *Toldot Torat ha-Sod ha-Ivrit be-Yemei ha-Beinayim*, vol. VIII, Jerusalem 2009, pp. 22-27. Comprehensive studies of Nahmanides' mysticism can be found in: H. Pedaya, *Ha-Ramban – Hitalut: Zeman Mahzori ve-Text Qadosh*, Tel Aviv, 2003; M. Halbertal, *Al Derekh ha-Emmet – ha-Ramban ve-Yetsirata shel Masoret*, Jerusalem, 2006.

⁴ See Nahmanides' commentary on Deut. 17:14 and 30:11-14, where he indicates that the passive participle (*lashon beinoni*) is used in this instance to create a dual meaning – relevant both to the time in which the text was written and to future generations. See also Nah. Deut. 4:25-26.

⁵ Nah. Lev. 26:16; Deut. 4:25-26; Deut. 28:42.

⁶ Nahmanides systematically uses the root *rmz* (רמז) in commentaries based on the dictum *ma'aseh avot siman le-banim* – "the deeds of the forefathers are a sign for the children"; however, the term also has other implications throughout his commentary. Cf. Gen. 1:1-2;

expressed in the phrase *ma'aseh avot siman le-banim* - the deeds of the forefathers are a sign for the children.⁷

In contemporary research, scholars have focused their discussion on the association of this interpretive method with Midrashic literature on the one

4:22; 16:2; Ex. 2:23; 12:8; Lev. 15:11; Num. 16:21; Deut. 17:8. A different type of allusion, based solely on mysticism, can be found in Nahmanides' commentary on Gen. 2:3, where he creates a parallel between the seven days of creation and the 7000 years of the world's existence. See also Nahmanides' treatise, "Torat Hashem Temima" in: C. B. Chavel, *Kitvei Ramban*, Vol. I, Jerusalem 1959, p.169; Nahmanides' sermon on Ecclesiastes, *ibid.* p.190. For the sources for this kabalistic doctrine, see: G. Scholem, *Ha-Kabbalah be-Girona*, Jerusalem, 1968, pp. 300-301; G. Scholem, *Reishit ha-Kabbalah*, Jerusalem, 1948, pp. 176-192; M. Halamish, *Mavo la-Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 162-165; S. Sela, "Abraham bar Hiyya's Astrological Work and Thought," *JSQ* 13 (2006): 128-58; H. Pedaya, "Eretz shel Ruah ve-Eretz Mamash: R. Ezra, R. Azriel, ve'ha-Ramban," in: M. Halamish and A. Ravitzky (ed.), *Eretz Yisrael ba-Hagut ha-Yehudit b'Yemei ha-Beinayim*, Jerusalem 1991, pp. 233-289; J. Dan, *supra*, n. 3; M. Sklarz, "Sodotav shel Ibn Ezra be-Peirush Ramban la-Torah," in: *Zer Rimomim: Studies in Biblical Literature and Jewish Exegesis Presented to Professor Rimon Kasher*, eds. Michael Avioz, Elie Assis, and Yael Shemesh (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), pp. 503-523.

⁷ Based on Midrash Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha 9 [Vilna ed. p. 54]: "God gave Abraham a sign that whatever happened to him would occur to his descendants," quoted by Nah. Gen. 12:6. As mentioned above, Nahmanides consistently uses the term *remez* (allusion) in this interpretive mode. J. Frankel, in *Darhei ha-Aggada veba-Midrash*, Jerusalem 1991, p. 607, n. 59, observes that the famous formulation *ma'aseh avot siman le-banim* initially appeared in the writing of R. Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha), who lived approximately 300 years after Nahmanides' death. Nonetheless, the critical literature entitles Nahmanides' doctrine *ma'aseh avot siman le-banim*; e.g. E. Z. Melamed, *Mefarshei ha-Miqra Darkeihem ve-Shitotehem*, Vol. II, Jerusalem 1974, p. 950; Y. Hass, "Ma'aseh Avot Siman le-Banim – Banim Mamash: ha-Parshanut ha-Tipologit shel Ramban ke-Pulmus Anti-Notsri," *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. XIV, 2004, pp. 289-299; Halbertal, *supra*, n. 3, pp. 212-248, and others.

hand,⁸ and typological Christian interpretation on the other.⁹ The principle has also been examined in relation to kabalistic¹⁰ and educational¹¹ spheres.

The current essay will discuss an additional aspect of this interpretive method which has not, as of yet, been systematically explored: the apparent development throughout Nahmanides' commentary of the patriarchal narratives. While Abraham and Isaac are described by Nahmanides as unaware of the consequences of their actions, later biblical personalities are portrayed as fully cognizant of the power of their actions; accordingly, they act deliberately and with calculation toward the effect they desire to have on their offspring's future. This shift is apparent both from the content and terminology used in Nahmanides' commentary.

Two Models of a Symbolic Action

Nahmanides presents the interpretive method through which past actions are seen to anticipate future events in his introduction to the patriarchal narratives in Genesis:

I offer you this rule, which you will understand in all of the following chapters in the matter of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is a great concept, which the Sages have mentioned briefly. They said (*Tanhuma Lekh Lekha* 9): 'Everything that occurred to the forefathers is a sign for the sons.' This is the reason for the lengthy description of the travels, the digging of wells, and other occurrences, which seem unnecessary and with no benefit – and they all come to inform about the future; for when an incident may occur to a prophet among the three forefathers, one can understand from this event that which is determined to happen to his offspring (Nah. Gen. 12:6-7).

⁸ Melamed (*supra*, n. 7), pp. 950-952; R. Ben Meir, "Ma'aseh Avot Siman le-Banim: Interpretatsiot Historiot be-Peirush ha-Ramban la-Torah," *Iyunei Miqra u-Parshanut*, vol. VIII, 2007, pp. 533-551 (following Nechama Leibowitz, *Iyyunim be-Sefer Bereishit*, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 259-263). In his commentary, Nahmanides often shows the origins of this method in rabbinic literature; see commentaries on Gen. 12:6, 10; 14:1; 15:12; 24:17; 28:12-13; 29:2; 32:4, 9, 17, 26; 36:43; 43:14.

⁹ A. Funkenstein, "Parshanuto ha-Tipologit shel ha-Ramban," in: *Tadmit ve-Toda'ah Historit ba-Yahadut u'be-Sevivata ha-Tarbutit*, Tel Aviv 1991, 157-179. See also the important critique on this view: M. Saperstein, "Jewish Typological Exegesis after Nahmanides," *JSQ* 1,2 (1993-1994), pp. 158-170; Licht, *supra*, n. 1, p. 61; Hass, *supra*, n. 7; M. Goodman, "Parshanut Tipologit ve-Ra'ayon ha-Progress – Iyyunim be-Tefisat ha-Historiya shel ha-Ramban," *Da'at*, vol. 56 (2005), 39-59; M. Sklarz, "Nahmanides' Typological Interpretation of the Encounter between Abram and Melchizedek" (Gen. 18-20), *JJS* (in Print); M. Sklarz, "The Holy One of the Lord': Aaron in Nahmanides' Commentary," *REJ* (in Print). Despite several references to Christian customs and interpretations in his Torah commentary, Nahmanides makes no direct reference to Christianity in relation to this interpretive mode; see Nahmanides' on Gen. 41:45; Ex. 20:8; 28:41; Deut. 16:22. Also see *infra*, n. 32.

¹⁰ C. Henoah, *Ha-Ramban ke-Hoqer u'ke-Mequbal*, Jerusalem, 1978, p. 437; M. Idel, *Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Neo-Platonism and Jewish Thought*, L. Goodman (ed.) Albany 1992, pp.327-330; Halbertal, *supra*, n. 3, esp. pp. 226, 239; Pedaya, *supra*, n. 6, pp. 276-277; Pedaya, *supra*, n. 3, eps. p.185.

¹¹ Leibowitz and Ben Meir, *supra*, n. 8.

Nahmanides compares the deeds of the forefathers to symbolic acts performed by the prophets, and affirms that these actions guarantee the fulfillment of God's plan for their future offspring. To illustrate the matter, Nahmanides mentions two prophetic narratives, both of which include a symbolic action, one from Jeremiah, the other from II Kings. The first focuses on Jeremiah's command:

Know that once a decree delivered by angels emerges from the potential to the actual through a symbolic act, the decree will be fulfilled in any event. Therefore, the prophets would perform acts of prophecy, as Jeremiah ordered Barukh,¹² "When you have finished reading this book, tie a stone to it, and cast it into the Euphrates, and say: so shall Babylonia sink" (Jer. 51: 63-64).

The narrative in II Kings revolves around Elisha's command:

Similarly in the matter of Elisha when he placed his hand on the bow: "Elisha said, shoot! And he shot. And he said, The Lord's arrow of victory, and the arrow of victory over Aram!" (II Kgs. 13:17); And it is written there, "So the man of God was angry with him and said, You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck Aram until you would have destroyed it. But now you shall strike Aram only three times" (*ibid.* 19) (Nahmanides, *ibid.*).

In the first of the narratives, God's prophet, Jeremiah, commands a high ranking official, Seraya the quartermaster, to perform a symbolic act, the throwing of¹³ a scroll into the Euphrates, anticipating a future blow to Israel's foe, Babylonia. In parallel terms in II Kings, it is Elisha who commands Joash (King of Israel) to shoot arrows, a symbolic act which similarly foretells disaster to Israel's enemy, Aram.

Despite these striking similarities, there are two significant distinctions between the narratives. The first relates to the knowledge of those performing the symbolic act of the future significance of their actions. Certainly Seraya was aware of the full meaning of his actions and their consequences, as the prophet informs him, "So shall Babylonia sink." By contrast, King Yoash only discovers the significance of his actions after the fact: "You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck Aram until you would have destroyed it. But now you shall strike Aram only three times." Indeed, the second distinction emanates from the first: while Seraya likely fulfilled the task set by Jeremiah fully (although the text does not provide an actual account of the implementation of the prophet's order), King Yoash failed to completely fulfill Elisha's will, thus provoking the prophet's wrath.

Because of these distinctions, the second story better highlights the power of the symbolic act, as Nahmanides defines it, to determine the future. For in the

¹² The biblical text lists Seraya's name, not Barukh's.

¹³ See Jer. 51:59.

first narrative, where the decree and action are identical, it is difficult to determine whether the edict (that is, the symbolic act) was indeed the primary reason for the realization of the prophecy. In the second narrative, however, where the action is only an incomplete realization of the prophet's will, it is the action – not the prophet's decree – that determines future reality, even though the initial action was not desired from the outset. Perhaps for this reason Nahmanides cited the two stories out of chronological order, highlighting the complementary contrast between the two accounts.

The two examples represent two different models of the symbolic act. According to the first, the act is performed with full awareness of its significance and ramifications; in the second model, an actor performs an inadvertent action without appreciation of the precise significance or consequences of that action, which might, in the end, lead to an undesirable future outcome.

In light of these two models, I now turn to Nahmanides' description of the forefathers' deeds. My aim is to determine whether, for Nahmanides, the patriarchs are similar to Joash who was not fully aware of the significance of his actions until after the fact, or to Seraya, Jeremiah's emissary, who was fully cognizant of the historical ramifications of his symbolic actions, and acted in accordance with this recognition.

First Model: "God Performed"

Nahmanides' formulation indicates that the patriarch was not fully aware of the significance of his actions until after the fact. About Abraham he writes: "Therefore, **God held** Abraham in the land, and **performed** acts which alluded to all of the future events that would befall his offspring" (Nah. Gen. 12:6-7). According to Nahmanides' wording, it is God who both decrees and acts, while the patriarch is merely an instrument through which the deed is performed, similar to the arrow or the scroll in the prophetic accounts. Such an understanding also emerges from the phrasing of Nahmanides' earlier statement: "[W]hen an incident **may occur to** a prophet among the three forefathers, **one can understand from this event** that which is determined to happen to his offspring." Although the patriarchs are referred to as 'prophets' whose deeds determine the future, they remain passive, and observe the future ramifications of their actions only after the fact.¹⁴

Furthermore, Nahmanides' terminology throughout his commentary to the patriarchal narratives generally attributes to the patriarchs a lack of awareness of

¹⁴ See also in Nahmanides' sermon, *Torat Hashem Temima* (*supra*, n. 6, p. 174): "For this reason the stories of the forefathers are described at such great length; the number of wells they dug, and the story of Jacob with Esau and Laban. But I found in Genesis Rabbah an idea that explains all of this; they said, whatever happened to the forefathers is a sign for the sons, and in this manner God wanted to reveal to the prophets the future occurrences that will befall them and their offspring, and would put the issue into effect, making it firm and abiding." He also mentions the concept in his concluding (Hebrew) rhymes for the Book of Genesis: "The Book of Genesis is completed with the story of the forefathers/ to reveal initial and new occurrences/ before they shall grow in the hearts" (based on Is. 42:9; 45:3), and in his introduction to the Book of Exodus: "The occurrences of the forefathers are as a creation for their offspring, for all their occurrences bear the impression of that which shall occur to their offspring, to allude to and inform of all that shall come to pass in their future."

the historical significance of their actions at the time of their enactment. The two prevalent patterns can be expressed as follows:

1. “[x] happened (נודמן) / [x] occurred (אירע) / [x] was (היה ל) >> to show (להורות) / to inform (להודיע) / to allude (רמז) [...]”
2. It was alluded to / to him (רמז אל-ל)

These patterns relate both to events that happened to the patriarch in passive mode, as well as to deeds that the patriarch seemingly initiated on his own. The following examples, in relationship to all three patriarchs, proceed from passive to active.

Abraham:

- The Covenant between the Parts: “He **alluded** to him that three of these sacrifices would be brought by his offspring [...] and it was also **alluded to him** that the sacrifices would be from these [animals] [...] it was **alluded to him** that the nations would come and terminate the practice of sacrifice (Dan. 11:31), and that Abraham’s offspring would chase them away (Nah. Gen. 15:9-11). “And behold, a great and dreadful darkness fell upon him – they derived from this (Gen. Rab. 44:21) **an allusion** to the enslavement by the four empires [...] **and this matter was for Abraham** [...]” (Nah. Gen. 15:12).¹⁵
- The War against the Four Kings: “This incident **occurred** to Abraham in order **to show** that four empires would rise to rule the world, but ultimately his sons will overtake them, and they will all fall in their hand, and they will return their captives and possessions” (Nah. Gen. 14:1).
- Giving a tithe to Melchizedek: “For Abraham would not have given a tithe to the priest of a foreign god, but since he knew that he was a priest to *El Elyon* (God Most High), he gave him the tithe in honor of God. And **this** provides an **allusion** to Abraham that this will be the location of the House of God, where his offspring will take their tithes, and bless God” (Nah. Gen. 14:18-19).
- Abraham’s journeys:

s ladder (Gen. 28:12): ‘Nahmanides presents a similar position in his commentary on Jacob¹⁵ “According to Rabbi Eliezer the Great (*Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 35), this image was similar to that which Abraham saw between the parts (Gen. 15:9-11), for he was shown the government of four empires rising and descending.” The divine edict and lack of human initiative are emphasized in Nahmanides’ comment on the angel’s speech to Hagar (Gen. 16:9): “Return to your mistress and submit to her – he commanded her to return and accept the yoke of her mistress. This is an allusion to the fact that she shall not be freed, and Sarah’s offspring shall rule over her offspring forever.” See in this context Nah. Gen. 25:9: “And he was buried by Isaac and Ishmael – it is formulated in Genesis Rabbah (62:3): this is where the son of the maidservant gave respect to the son of the mistress.”

“For Abraham held onto that place from the outset, before He had given him the land; **this was to allude to him** that his sons would conquer that location first [...]” (Nah. Gen. 12:6).¹⁶

“Abraham descended to Egypt [...] **this was to allude to him** that his sons would descend to Egypt [...]” (*ibid.* 12:10).¹⁷

Isaac:

- The wells uncovered by Isaac’s servants: “But this contains a hidden matter, for it comes **to inform** him about the future, that ‘a well of living water’ (26:19) **alludes to** the House of God which will be formed by Isaac’s sons [...] and this well **alludes** to the tabernacle at Shilo [...]” (Nah. Gen. 26:20, 32).¹⁸
- Isaac’s journey to Gerar: “But Isaac’s descent there because of the famine **alludes to** an exile [...] and his exile was from his location to the land of Philistines, which is the land of the dwelling of his father, which **alludes to** the Babylonian exile [...]” (*ibid.* 26:1).

Jacob:

- As in the case with Isaac’s wells, the well at which Jacob arrives in Haran alludes to the future Temple: “Here too they (Gen. Rab. 70:8) found an

¹⁶ See also Rashi’s commentary, cited by Nahmanides (on Gen. 12:9): “To the Negev – Rabbi Solomon wrote: to go to the south of the Land of Israel, and he was in the portion of the sons of Judah, who inherited in the south of the Land of Israel. And this is also the future intended for his sons, as it is written, ‘Judah will ascend’ (Jud. 1:2) – first.”

¹⁷ Just as, according to Nahmanides, Joash’s lack of awareness led him to act against God’s will, here too Nahmanides (on Gen. 12:10) attributes the future exile in Egypt to Abraham’s choice to descend to Egypt: “Know that Abraham our Father inadvertently committed a terrible sin [...] and for this deed his offspring were committed to exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh, for in the place of judgment, there lies the sin (based on Ec. 3:16).” Abraham’s lack of awareness of the consequences of his actions are apparent in Nahmanides’ sermon *Torat Hashem Temima*: “Abraham did not realize what he was being punished for, for he repeated his actions with Abimelekh” (Ramban’s Commentary on the Torah (Hebrew), Deuteronomy, Y. M. Dvir ed., Jerusalem 2005, p. 511). Nahmanides similarly links the troubles suffered by the hands of Islam with Sarah and Abraham’s treatment of Hagar (Nah. Gen. 16:6): “Our mother sinned in this torment, as did Abraham when he allowed her to do so, and God heard her misery, and gave her one who would become a wild man, who will torment Sarah and Abraham’s offspring with all kinds of torment.” He also linked the beginning of the exile by Edom to the mistakes of Jacob and his sons (Nah. Gen. 32:4): “The Sages have already accused him of this, as stated in *Genesis Rabbah* (75:3): ‘He who holds the ears of a dog (Prov. 26:17) – God said: he was walking along, and you sent him messengers to say, ‘so says your servant Jacob?!’” And I believe this alludes to our initial fall at the hands of Edom, when the monarchs of the Second Temple created a covenant with the Romans, and some came to Rome, and this was the reason they fell into their hands.” See also Nah. Gen. 47:28: “For Jacob’s sons sealed their own fate of going to Egypt by selling their brother Joseph [...] and so too we created our own fate in the hands of Rome and Edom, when they signed a covenant with the Romans, and Agrippa the last of the Second Temple kings fled to them for help.”

¹⁸ The formulation in the midrash quoted by Nahmanides regarding the water rising in the well toward Rebecca also shows that she was unaware of the significance of the events until after they had occurred (Nah. Gen. 24:17): “And in *Genesis Rabbah* (60:5): ‘And she filled her jug and ascended’ – All the women descend and refill from the spring, but this one – when the waters saw her, they would ascend; God therefore said to her: you are a sign for your sons.”

allusion to the future, since it **happened** that he came in through the road with the well [...] **to inform him** that he would succeed on this path and produce offspring that will merit the fulfillment of this allusion: for the well **alludes to** the Temple, and the three flocks of sheep – to the three pilgrimages” (Nah. Gen. 29:2).¹⁹

- Jacob’s struggle with the angel: “For the entire **incident is an allusion** for future generations, that there shall be a generation among Jacob’s descendants that will be overpowered by Esau, until he was close to destroying them, and this was the generation in the days of the Sages of the Mishna, the generation of R. Judah b. Bava and his peers [...] and there were other generations where Esau²⁰ performed this and worse, and we endured it all and have put it behind us, as **alluded to** in the words “And Jacob reached Shalem (= was complete) (Gen. 33:18)” (Nah. Gen. 32:26).
- Jacob’s Journeys:
The descent to Egypt – “For Jacob’s descent to Egypt **alludes to** the third exile” (Nah. Gen. 47:28).
Purchasing a field in Shechem – “And this deed **alluded to** the conquest of that location first, before his offspring would disinherit the dwellers of the land, as I explained by Abraham (Gen. 12:6)” (Nah. Gen. 33:18-19).
In this last discussion regarding Jacob’s journey to Shechem, Nahmanides refers to his commentary on Abraham’s journey (Gen. 12:6) to emphasize the similarity in God’s deliberate guidance of the deeds of patriarchs, even though their actions portended consequences unknown to them.

Second Model: “Jacob Performed”

For Nahmanides, the phrases employed above accompany Abraham and Isaac’s deeds from beginning to end.²¹ By contrast, while the commentary on Jacob often describes Jacob as unaware of the historical consequences of his actions, Nahmanides, at times, presents him in an entirely different light. That is, Jacob is aware of the symbolism inherent in his actions, and therefore he initiates and guides his actions in order to influence the future of his offspring. With regard to Abraham, Nahmanides comments “God held Abraham [...] and performed ...” (Nah. Gen. 12:6). With regard to Jacob, however, the verb “performed” (*asa*) is repeated several times, in reference not to God’s actions, but rather to those of the patriarch himself.

A striking example of the attribution of such awareness to Jacob is found in Nahmanides’ commentary to Jacob’s deathbed remark: “I have given to you one portion above your brothers, which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow” (Gen. 48:22). Nahmanides interprets Jacob’s

¹⁹ Nahmanides finds allusion to the Temple by each of the three forefathers: Abraham in giving a tithe to Melchizedek (Nah. Gen. 14:18-19); Isaac in his finding of the wells (*ibid.* 26:20, 32); and Jacob in his encounter with the shepherds by the well (*ibid.* 29:2).

²⁰ For the historical identification of Esau, see the end of this discussion.

²¹ In one place, Nahmanides comments that Abraham prays about future events, but fails to act: “And Rabbi Solomon wrote: he went in until the place of Shechem, to pray for Jacob’s sons, when they will return from the field grieving (see Gen. 34:7)” (Nah. Gen. 12:6).

testament to Joseph as a symbolic act deliberately initiated by the former for the purpose of establishing the conquest of the land by his descendants:

Jacob performed an action, in the way of the prophets: he pointed with a sword toward the land of the Amorite, and shot arrows there, to ensure its conquest by his sons, as Elisha did: ‘And he placed his hand upon the hands of the king [...] and Elisha said, shoot! And he shot’ (II Kgs. 13:16-17); while the text did not reveal this, it is alluded to in this verse. Perhaps this is the reason it says ‘I took’ – because from that moment it is as though the land is already in his possession.

While the deed attributed to Jacob is not mentioned explicitly in the biblical text, Nahmanides’s interpretation emphasizes Jacob’s awareness of the power and long term ramifications of his actions.

Nahmanides further stresses such awareness in his commentary to Jacob’s preparations for his encounter with Esau:

“A gap should be placed” – [...] They said in Genesis Rabbah (75:13) that this is an allusion: Jacob spoke before God and said, Master of the Universe, if troubles should befall my sons, do not bring them one after the other, but give them relief between their sufferings.

He performed an action to allude [to a future in which] there would be temporal gaps between the taxations upon his offspring by Esau’s sons (Nah. Gen. 32:17).

Jacob’s words, mentioned in the midrash, express his awareness of the power of his actions to have an impact on the future. For Nahmanides, the creating of a gap between the flocks (that are sent as a gift to Esau) is symbolic, foretelling the gaps of time between the future sufferings of his descendants. While the ²² Sages emphasize Jacob’s intentions through focusing on his prayer (“Jacob spoke before God”), Nahmanides highlights only the symbolic act: “he performed an action to allude to...” – by which Jacob deliberately determines the future of his descendants.

In Nahmanides’ commentary, Jacob’s actions, even while in his mother’s womb, are already tending toward a clear and calculated end:

“Two nations in your womb” – he informed her that she need not fear, for the scurry in her womb was due to her carrying twins, for this is the natural way of women (Gen. 31:35).

²² The Sages were surely referring to physical hardships, and not monetary troubles, as Nahmanides affirms. Nahmanides’ interpretation of the midrash solidifies the link between the original foretelling acts and their future correlates, with the temporal gaps between the gifts sent by Jacob alluding to the relief between taxations upon his offspring. Perhaps this is a reflection of Nahmanides’ historical reality when the Jews suffered less from physical persecution and more from the heavy taxation by King James I of Aragon. See: Assis, *supra*, n. 1, p. 44.

Perhaps it should also be said, that since they are two nations who hate and struggle with one another, **they performed an action** at their inception, **as an allusion** to what shall happen between them in the end, but now they can rest, and she can find peace of mind (Nah. Gen. 25:23).

Nahmanides' first comment relates to the plain realistic meaning of God's response to Rebecca: since she is carrying twins, it is natural that she feels more significant movement in her womb, and thus need not be concerned.

Nahmanides' second comment, intimating the future, is surprising, and perhaps even somewhat comical. God's reassurance does not serve to affirm that Rebecca's suffering is natural, but rather that it will not persist throughout the pregnancy. According to this interpretation, there is nothing natural about the 'scurrying' of Rebecca's twins; rather, their movement is an intentional allusion to the future rift between the brothers. Since the action is only intended to allude to future events, the 'scurrying' need not persist throughout the gestation. Once the twins have completed their symbolic action, there is no need for them to continue; they may rest until they are born, as can their mother.

In contrast to the instances where Nahmanides describes Jacob performing an action on his own, here he is described acting together with his twin brother Esau: "they performed an action...as an allusion." While Nahmanides also interprets Esau's actions as alluding to the future of his offspring,²³ only here with this comment does he describe Esau as acting consciously to this end. This is perhaps due to the unique circumstances (in which Esau and Jacob share a womb) such that Esau's actions are inextricably bound to those of Jacob.

To this point, we have seen that Nahmanides describes three of Jacob's actions, all at critical stages of his life – gestation, adulthood, and on his deathbed – by which he deliberately determines the future of his descendants.

Perhaps, then, there is a need to qualify Moshe Halbertal's sweeping distinction between the patriarchs and prophets:

However, there is a most significant difference between the talisman technique implemented by the prophets, and the occurrences in the patriarchs' lives. The prophets, as Nahmanides explains, create an event that resembles the future in order to ensure the realization of the prophetic promise. The talisman is created by the prophet who knows the prophecy, and is driven to implement it. Conversely, in the stories of the patriarchs, the talisman is created by God Himself [...] this talisman principle is therefore the causal structure of the divine action itself. The divine

²³ See Nahmanides throughout Gen. 32-33, esp. 36:43: "That which was stated in *Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer* (38): 'In compensation for removing his belongings [from Canaan] in order to make space for his brother Jacob, he was given one hundred lands from Seir to Magdiel, and Magdiel is Rome, as it is written: Chief Magdiel, Chief Iram – that is to say, as I have mentioned a number of times, that the events that occurred to the first ones is an allusion to their offspring...' See *infra*, n. 32. It is noteworthy that since Nahmanides deals with Esau, he uses the term *rishonim* – literally, 'the first ones,' instead of his usual term *avot* – 'forefathers,' e.g. "as an incident may occur to a prophet among the three forefathers" (Nah. Gen. 12:6-7). For further citations from his works, see *supra*, n. 14.

develops a representative structure, to determine the inevitable path for the future.²⁴

Halbertal's unqualified distinction between the "talismán technique" of the prophets and the "occurrences in the patriarchs' lives" is consistent with the presentation of the deeds of Abraham and Isaac, as well as most of Jacob's actions. However, as demonstrated above, some of Jacob's deeds, throughout the story cycle (Gen. chs. 25, 32, 48) are in fact described by Nahmanides in a similar fashion to "the talismán technique implemented by the prophets." Halbertal's distinction thus does not fully apply to the latter patriarch.

Moreover, Nahmanides describes an additional Biblical personality as employing "the talismán technique implemented by the prophets," that is, Moses.²⁵ In portraying Moses' struggle against Amalek, Nahmanides shows the prophet to be fully aware of the long term ramifications of the battle, deliberately designing his actions to ensure a future outcome:

This action performed by Moses was because Amalek was a resilient nation (Jer. 5:15) and very strong, and Israel was not experienced at war, and had never been to war, as it says, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt" (Ex. 13:17), and they were weary and tired, as it is written in Deuteronomy (Deut. 25:18); he was therefore afraid of them, and needed all of this prayer and pleading.

Perhaps Moses was afraid that they would triumph by the power of the sword, since they are a sword wielding nation, as the Elder had blessed them, "and you shall live upon your sword" (Gen. 27:40). For this war from this family is the first and last for Israel, for Amalek are from the seed of Esau (Gen. 37:12), and he is the source of war from the inception of the nations (Num. 24:20), and Esau's descendants brought us exile and the final destruction, as the Sages stated, that today we are in the exile of Edom (b. *Gittin* 57b); and when he is dominated and weakened, him and his allies among the nations (Eze. 38:22), we will finally be delivered forever, as it says, "Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau, and the kingdom will be the Lord's" (Ob. 1:21).

Thus, everything that Moses and Joshua did to them at first, shall be done by Elijah and the Messiah from the seed of Joseph for their descendants; therefore Moshe intervened vigorously in this conflict. (Nah. Ex. 17:9).

In the war against Amalek, alongside Joshua's conventional combat, Moses is described exerting exceptional efforts on behalf of Israel: He stands at the top of

²⁴ Halbertal, *supra* n. 3, p. 226.

²⁵ Ben Meir, *supra*, n. 8, p. 547, claimed that Moses was a unique case; Nahmanides "attributed to him – something absent from previous examples – awareness and acknowledgement of the power of his deeds." However, she apparently overlooked Nahmanides' formulation in his commentary of Jacob's actions. Halbertal, *ibid.* p. 240, also related to Moses' awareness: "Moses' efforts in this war are a conscious attempt to construct the talismán structure that serves as a mold for future events."

a hill with the staff of God in his hand, and with the support of Aaron and Hur, he holds his hands aloft through the entire battle. Nahmanides, focusing on the “action performed by Moses,” offers a number of explanations for the prophet’s extraordinary efforts: the strength of the enemy; the lack of military experience and ability of the refugees from Egypt; as well as Isaac’s blessing to Esau for success with the sword. Nahmanides concludes with an interpretation based upon his typological method. Because Moses was aware that this war, the first fought against the descendants of Esau, was to foretell the final war against Israel, he “intervened vigorously,” knowing that the results of the war would determine the fate of the nation at the end of days.

Nahmanides ultimately binds Moses and Joshua’s actions, as in the phrase beginning “Everything that Moses and Joshua did....” However, for Nahmanides, it seems that only Moses was aware of the long term significance of this battle, and therefore “intervened vigorously,” employing unconventional tactics. It is noteworthy that the phrase “therefore” (ועל כן), indicating Moses’ intention to influence the future of the nation, is unique to this comment of Nahmanides. The phrase is absent from the description of similar deliberate attempts by Jacob to effect the future of his offspring.

Transition and Significance

As demonstrated above, Nahmanides’ typological interpretative method shifts from characters who are unaware of the ramifications of their actions at the outset to personalities that deliberately guide their actions in order to influence the future of their descendants. This shift occurs in the commentary on the Biblical account of Jacob’s life and also appears in Nahmanides’ interpretation of Moses’ war against Amalek. The reason for this change in approach – specifically with regards to these biblical personalities – requires explanation.

An examination of the common ground shared by these two figures within the context of Nahmanides’ typological exegesis shows that both allude to a future struggle against Esau’s descendants, perhaps explaining the shift in his interpretation of their actions. Generally speaking, Nahmanides views the wanderings of the three forefathers as alluding to the three exiles that befell their descendants – at the hands of Egypt,²⁶ Babylonia,²⁷ and Rome.²⁸ The motif of going into exile and returning to the land is one of the central means through which Nahmanides establishes an affinity between the deeds of the patriarchs and the history of their descendants. According to Nahmanides, the lives of²⁹ Abraham and Isaac foreshadow the experience of the first two empires – Egypt and Babylonia. While the memory of those exiles had long passed when Nahmanides was writing his commentary, he views the struggles of Jacob and Moses against their common foe – Esau and his descendants³⁰ – as symbolizing

²⁶ Nah. Gen. 12:10.

²⁷ Nah. Gen. 26:1.

²⁸ Primarily Nah. Gen 43:14; 47:28; and commentary throughout Gen. 22-23.

²⁹ Halbertal, *supra*, n. 3, p. 228.

³⁰ This identification originates in rabbinic literature. See: Y. Heinemann, *Darkei ha-Agaddah*, Jerusalem, 1974, pp. 32-34. Yuval believes the identification between Esau, Rome, and Christianity is a response to the early Christian typology that identified the nation of Israel with Esau; see: I. Yuval, *Shnei Goyim be-Vitnekh: Yehudim ve-Notsrim Dimuyim Hadadiyim*,

the third Roman Empire and the ensuing exile with its Christian rule. Therefore, when Nahmanides refers to the third exile, he is relating to his own state of exile: “For Jacob’s descent to Egypt alludes to the third exile, the exile we experience today at the hands of the fourth beast (Dan. 7:7), that is, wicked Rome” (Nah. Gen. 47:28).

Nahmanides’ formulation is more distanced, even objective, when he describes the first two exiles, as in “the exile of Egypt” (Nah. Gen. 15:12); “the first exile” (introduction to Ex.); “the Babylonian exile” (Nah. Gen. 26:1); “the First Temple exile” (Nah. Deut. 4:25:26). In contrast, his own subjective historically-situated perspective becomes apparent when he discusses the third exile under which he and his people continue to suffer. When describing his own exile, Nahmanides uses the plural possessive pronoun *נו*, denoting “our” as in “Our exile in the hands of Edom” (Nah. Gen. 43:14) and “Our exile today in the hands of the fourth beast” (ibid. 47:28; Deut 28:42). And further, Nahmanides writes: “This alludes to our exile and the redemption we shall experience [...] this is our exile today, that we are scattered from one end of the world to the other [...] this exile of ours” (Nah. Lev. 26:16). And again: “Our exile among the nations, we are Judah and Benjamin, we have no honor among the nations, and we are not considered a people or a nation at all [...] in our current exile [...] and we have no escape [...]” (Deut. 32:26-27).

Nahmanides’ distinction between the different exiles stands out in the conclusion of his sermon, “Torat Hashem Temimah”:

The deeds of Abraham are all an allusion and sign for the first exile,
And those of Isaac for the Babylonian exile,
And Jacob’s for our exile.³¹

Tel Aviv 2000, pp. 16-34. A comprehensive survey of the origins of this identification can be found in: G. D. Cohen, “Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures*, Philadelphia 1991, pp. 243–270. Nahmanides reinforces the rabbinic identification by emphasizing the religious link between Edom and Rome which adopted Christianity: “Let it be known that we, who rely on the positions of our Rabbis *z”l*, believe that we are currently experiencing the exile of Edom [...] for the Edomites were the first to erroneously follow that man, who claimed he was the messiah, and they considered him divine, and they arrived in the land of Edom, and their mistake spread to Rome which was near to them. It was established there in the days of King Constantinople [...] This is the primary reason that Rome and Edom are considered one; while they are separate nations, they are close, and they have become one nation and one land through their common belief” (The Book of Redemption, in: C. B. Chavel, *supra*, n. 6, vol. II, pp. 284-285). This statement serves as part of a polemic against Ibn Ezra, who identified the fourth beast described in Daniel with Islam (*ibid.* p. 283). See also Ibn Ezra on Daniel 7; Gen. 16:12; 27:40; Ps. 137:7. Nahmanides also finds allusions to Rome in the detailed list of names describing the chieftains among Esau’s descendants: “The [events that occurred to the] first ones (the forefathers) were an allusion to their offspring; there are ten chieftains including Magdiel, indicating that ten Kings of Edom would serve in the fourth monarchy (Dan. 2:40); they will rule over Edom, and the tenth will rule over Rome, and from there their monarchy will spread throughout the rest of the world. This is alluded to in the name Magdiel, who will rise above all these” (Nah. Gen. 36:43). See also the Josephus tradition mentioned by Nah. Gen. 49:31.

³¹ Dvir, *supra*, n. 17, p. 511.

The actions of Jacob and Moses, foreshadowing the present exile, entail their personal involvement in the march of events, in which they are moved to play their part as parties directly affected, even as the divine plan is in the process of unfolding.

In the introduction to his commentary, Nahmanides declares that his exegesis is intended “to reassure the students, wearied by the exile and its troubles, who read the weekly and holidays portions”³². For this target audience, bending under Esau’s yoke, the personal involvement of the patriarchs in facing their common enemy may well have served as a source of strength and comfort.

The Talmudic Sages had already emphasized the affinity between the lives of the patriarchs and the future of their descendants as a means of offering encouragement to their own contemporary communities:

Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin said: God gave a sign to Abraham to the effect that everything that was to happen to him would also befall his descendants. How so? He chose Abraham from all the house of his father, as it says, “You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham” (Neh. 9:7). And he chose his sons from among seventy nations, as it says, “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord your God chose you to be his treasured nation, out of all the peoples on the face of the earth” (Deut. 14:2) [...].

Just as God went to combat Abraham’s enemies, as it says, “Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow” (Is. 41:2), so too God will do for his sons, as it says, “Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle” (Zach. 14:3).³³

³² M. Cohen, *Mikraot Gedolot ha-Keter, Genesis I*, Ramat Gan 1996, p. 36. Nahmanides similarly explains the authorship of the Book of Redemption (*Sefer ha-Geula*) (in: C. B. Chavel, *supra*, n. 6, vol. I, p. 261): “For we are obligated to reinforce our strength, and show those who are weary from exile the message of redemption” (based on Is. 50:4). This essay served as an anti-Christian polemic regarding the future redemption. Nahmanides proves his position with citations from the Pentateuch, the words of the prophets, and the Book of Daniel. Nahmanides’ typological interpretation in the Book of Redemption is clearly polemical, and the very same interpretations that are embedded in his exegetical work on the Torah are presented in the Book of Redemption with an unequivocal polemical edge (see *ibid.* pp. 262-268; 292; 295). Similarly in Nahmanides’ sermon “Torat Hashem Temima” (*supra*, n. 17, pp. 410-423), allusions to the future provide a proof of future redemption “against the beliefs of heretics” (*ibid.*, p. 512). It is noteworthy that Nahmanides affirms on various occasions throughout his Torah commentary that the verses represent “the promise for future redemption” (e.g. Gen. 22:16-17; Lev. 26:16; Deut. 28:42). However, he only reveals that the statement is indeed polemical in his concluding remarks to the Song of Haazinu: “Therefore, this song is an explicit promise for future redemption, against the beliefs of heretics” (Nah. Deut. 32:40-41).

³³ Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha 9 [Vilna ed. p. 54].

The midrash lists ten parallels between Abraham and his offspring. The tenth and final parallel, and the climax of the midrash, relates to the deliverance of the nation from the hands of their enemies. This link between the forefather and his sons is meant to be a source of hope for future generations, providing evidence that divine providence accompanies the nation throughout history. Just as the patriarchs, having suffered during their lives, finally saw ample blessing and good fortune, so in the future would their descendants.

This midrashic trend, upon which Nahmanides based his commentary,³⁴ is apparent throughout his typological interpretations of the deeds of Abraham and Isaac:

But ultimately his sons will overtake them, and they will all fall in their hand, and they will return their captives and possessions” (Nah. Gen. 14:1).

And the third he named Rehobot (Gen. 26:22) – this is the future Temple that will be built, hastily in our time, and this one will be done without disagreement or quarrel, and God shall broaden our borders” (Nah. Gen. 26:20).

The trend is all the more evident in his interpretations of Jacob’s narrative:

The exile has become very long, its end is not known as it was with the other exiles, and it is as if we are dead inside it, saying, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone” (Ez. 37:11); And all of the nations will bring us as an offering to the Lord (Is. 66:20), and they will grieve deeply when they see our honor return, and we shall see the vengeance of God, who will raise us up and we shall live in his presence (Hos. 6:1)” (Nah. Gen. 48:28).

Of all the patriarchs, Jacob embodies the current exile; therefore, the interpretive transition is evidenced most fully with regard to him.

³⁴ See Nah. Gen. 12:6-7, and at the beginning of this discussion.