

*The Inspiring Story of Rabbi Avner, the Sinner*<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman,<sup>2</sup> commonly known as Nachmanides, and also referred to by the acronym Ramban, was a leading medieval Jewish scholar in the 13th century, in Girona, Catalonia.

The Ramban had a disciple, Avner, who strayed from the path of observant Judaism, left his community, and became an important official in the government.

One Yom Kippur, Avner sent guards to the synagogue, ordering the Ramban to appear before him. In his palace, before the eyes of his former teacher and master, Avner slaughtered a pig, roasted it, and ate it on this holiest of fast days.

The Ramban couldn't contain his anguish and cried, "What caused you to fall so low?! What compelled you to abandon the holy teachings of your ancestors?"

"It was you, my master!" Avner roared derisively. "Your teachings completely disillusioned me and caused me to reject Judaism.

"You were once teaching the Torah portion of *Ha'azinu*," he explained. **"You taught us that in this brief Torah portion of fifty-two verses, the Torah encodes all the details of the long history of the Jewish people until the coming of Moshiach. You claimed, too, that encoded in its verses are the names of every Jew to have ever lived.**

"This is obviously preposterous!" Thundered Avner. "How could 4000 years of history and millions of names be compressed in 614 words?"

"What I said is absolutely true," declared the Ramban. "If so, then I must be found there too. Where is my name and where is my fate?"

The Ramban's expression grew serious. He prayed silently to G-d to reveal this secret.

"Your name, Avner, can be found in verse twenty-six. Tell me what is the third letter in these words: Ama**R**ti (Resh) Af**E**ihem (Aleph) Ash**B**ita (Beit) Me'e**N**osh (Nun) Zich**R**om (Reish)."

אִמְרָתִי אֶפְאִיֵהֶם אֲשֶׁבִיתָהּ מֵאֲנוֹשׁ זִכְרוֹם:  
(amarti af-ei-hem ash-bitah me-e'nosh zich-rom)

In this verse, G-d is rebuking the Jewish people for turning away from the path of the Torah and becoming so evil that He wanted to destroy them.

The verse reads: "I (G-d) said in my heart, that I would scatter them, causing their memory to cease from mankind."

Avner turned a deathly white and began to wail bitterly.

"Is there any hope for me?" he begged. "Is there anything that I can do to rectify my terrible sins?"

The Ramban looked compassionately at his former student. "The verse itself has provided the rectification. It says that G-d will scatter them till their memory is erased. You must run away, never to be heard from again."

Avner boarded a ship and was never seen again.

—In one version of the tale, Abner became a devoted disciple of the Ramban and a diligent scholar of Torah; in another, he set out upon the sea with neither oarsman nor oar and was never seen again.<sup>3</sup>

The third letter, in each of the words of this verse, spell out R. Avner, Rabbi Avner.

Notice that the name encoded is not Avner, but includes the prefix "R," which stands for Rabbi Avner. Even though up until this point, Avner lead a life that was the complete antithesis of what a rabbi stands for, the Torah calls him Rabbi.

**Avner had free choice to choose whether or not he would repent.** But the Torah is confident that ultimately the holiness of his soul will shine through and that through repentance, he will have transformed himself not only into an Avner, but an illustrious Jew, a rabbi.

"G-d devises means so that no one shall be forever banished from him." (II Samuel 14:14) Ultimately, the holiness and greatest potential of every Jew will emerge.

1 Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/Bamidbar/Devarim*, (Chabad.org), pp. 303-305.

2 Moses ben Nachman (1194–1270), commonly known as Nachmanides and also referred to by the acronym RaMBaN was a leading medieval Jewish scholar, Sephardic rabbi, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator. He was raised, studied, and lived for most of his life in Girona, Catalonia (North-eastern Spain). He is also considered to be an important figure in the re-establishment of the Jewish community in Jerusalem following its destruction by the Crusaders in 1099.

3 This tale shows evidence of having been constructed in the aftermath of the conversion to Christianity of one Rabbi Abner of Burgos ... The Ramban was influential in opposing this (development) and paid dearly for it. Because of the mortal danger associated with openly attacking Jews who had converted to Christianity, especially in Spain, may such tales were constructed in semi-disguised form. In reality, Abner rose to a high position within the Spanish ecclesiastical hierarchy—Jeffrey Santinover, M.D., *Cracking the Bible Code*, (William Morrow and Company, Inc., p. 4.

Through these encrypted verses, the Torah teaches us how we must view every Jew—with the confidence that even a great sinner like Avner can, and will, become a great rabbi.

1. "You taught us that in this brief Torah portion of fifty-two verses (*Ha'azinu*), the Torah encodes all the details of the long history of the Jewish people until the coming of Moshiach. You claimed, too, that encoded in its verses are the names of every Jew to have ever lived.
  - a. The traditional (Jewish) view (of Inspiration) is that the Pentateuch in its entirety emanated from God, **every verse and letter being consequently inspired**; hence the *tannaitic*<sup>4</sup> statement that "he who says the Torah is not from Heaven is a heretic, a despiser of the Word of God, one who has no share in the world to come" (Sanh. xi. 1; *ib. Gemara*, 99a) is expressly explained to include any one that says the whole Torah emanates from God with the exception of one verse, which Moses added on his own responsibility, or any one that finds verses like Gen. xxxvi. 12 and 22 too trivial to assign to them a divine origin (Shab. 99a, b) ... Moses wrote the whole Pentateuch at God's dictation, **even, according to R. Simeon, the last eight verses, relating to his own death** (B. B. 14b) ... Every letter of the Torah was fixed by the Masorah and counted by the Soferim (Kid. 30a) ... R. Ishmael said to R. Meir while the latter was occupied with the professional work of a scribe, "**Be on thy guard concerning thy sacred task, for if you omit or add one single letter to the Law you destroy the whole world**" (Er. 12b). This whole view of plenary inspiration was in the main (though the passage regarding the counting of the letters by the Soferim, Kid. 30a, includes the Prophets and Hagiographa) strictly held only in regard to the five books of Moses—the Torah. Upon the absolute completeness of the Torah rested the fundamental rabbinical principle, "**No prophet after Moses was allowed to change anything in the Law**" (Shab. 104a; Yoma 80a; Meg. 2b; based upon Lev. xxvii. 34 or Num. xxxvi. 13). **Whatever is written in the other holy writings must therefore, somewhere or somehow, have been alluded to in the Torah** (Ta'an. 9a) ... All the canonical books are "kitbe kodesh" = holy writings" (Shab. xvi. 1), and were read at divine service as the divinely inspired Word ("Mikra" = "the recited Word of God"). The prophetic and hagiographic books are implicitly included in the Torah (Tan., Re'ch, ed. Buber,

<sup>4</sup> "Repeaters," "Teachers"—term used to designate rabbinic scholars of the first two centuries CE. Prior to definitive publication of the *Mishna*, rabbinic tradition had been transmitted primarily orally, with a heavy emphasis on memorization of precepts formulated by eminent Jewish sages of previous generations.

p. 1), **but the Torah is the standard by which their value or holiness is judged and gaged** (see Shab. 13b, 30b; Meg. 7a; Ab. R. N. i.; Tos. Meg. iv. 19; Yer. Meg. iv. 73d). The final composition as well as the writing of the Hagiographa was ascribed to the "men of the Great Synagogue," who also were regarded as working under the influence of the Holy, or prophetic, Spirit, having among them the last of the Prophets (B. B. 15a; see Synagogue, Great).<sup>5</sup>

1) Matthew 5:18

<sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, **not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.**

Luke 16:17

<sup>17</sup>It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear **than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.**

a) Psalms 119:89

**Your word, LORD, is eternal**; it stands firm in the heavens ... <sup>152</sup>Long ago I learned from your statutes that **you established them to last forever.**

b) Isaiah 40:8

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but **the word of our God endures forever.**"

c) 1 Peter 1:24-25

<sup>24</sup>For, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, <sup>25</sup>but **the word of the Lord endures forever**" (Isa 40:6-8). And **this is the word that was preached to you.**

2. Avner had free choice to choose whether or not he would repent.

a. Deuteronomy 31:16

<sup>16</sup>And the LORD said to Moses: "You are going to rest with your ancestors, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. **They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them.**

1) Romans 11:11-12

<sup>11</sup>Again I ask: **Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? NOT AT ALL!** Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel **envious** (better, "jealous").  
<sup>12</sup>But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, **how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!**

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8126-inspiration>

b. Shabbat 104a

*Kof* (ק) signifies "holy (*kadosh*)." *Resh* (ר) signifies "wicked (*rasha*)."

Why is the face of the *kof* averted from the *resh*?

Because the Holy One says, "I cannot bear looking at the wicked." And why is the upper tip on the crown over the *kof* turned toward the *resh*? Because the Holy One says: **If the wicked (*rasha*) repents, I will bind a crown over his head like the crown over the *kof*.**

And why is the leg of the *kof* detached from its upper part? **To show that when the wicked man (*rasha*) repents, he can enter through the opening between the two parts of the *kof*.**

c. Shabbat 153a and Ein Yaakov

When R. Eliezer said, "Repent, even if only one day before your death," his disciples asked him, "Does any man know what day he will die?" R. Eliezer: **"Then all the more reason that he repent today ...** In his wisdom, Solomon also intimated [the need to repent] when he said, "Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment" (Eccles. 9:8).

d. Sanhedrin 97b

How redemption is to come about is also disputed among the *Tannaim*. For R. Eliezer said: **If Israel repents, they will be redeemed; but if not, they will not.** R. Joshua retorted: You say they will not be redeemed if they do not repent. On the contrary, **they will be redeemed, for the Holy One will raise up against them a king whose decrees will be as cruel as Haman's, so that Israel will be driven to repentance, and thus He will bring them back to the right path.**

e. Midrash Tehillim 90:12; Genesis Rabbah 1:4

R. Abbahu bar Ze'era said: **Great is repentance, for it preceded the creation of the world**, as is said, "Before the mountains were brought forth ... Thou turnest men to contrition" (Ps. 90:2-3).

1) Pesachim 54a (cf. Genesis Rabbah 1:4)

Seven things were created before the world was created, and these are they: The Torah, **repentance**, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the throne of Glory, the Temple, and **the name of the Messiah** ... The name of the Messiah, as it is written, *His* (i.e., the Messiah's) *name shall endure forever and has existed before the sun!* (Ps. 72:17).<sup>6</sup>

f. Exodus Rabbah XIII: 3

3. FOR I HAVE HARDENED HIS HEART (x, 1) ... R. Simeon b. La<sup>ch</sup>ish (said) ... when God warns a man once, twice, and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then does God close his heart against repentance so that He should exact vengeance from him for his sins. Thus it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since God sent five times to him and he took no notice, God then said: 'Thou hast stiffened your neck and hardened thy heart; well, I will add to your uncleanness'; hence FOR I HAVE HARDENED HIS HEART.<sup>(3)</sup> What does '*hikbadi*' imply? That God made his heart like a liver (*kabed*)<sup>(4)</sup> ... and he did not receive the words of God.

(3) In his commentary of the Pentateuch Rashi observes (Ex. VII, 3) that in connection with the first five plagues the word used (indicates that) ... **Pharaoh's heart was hardened of his own accord.** It is only after that, that Scripture writes ... and He (God) hardened his heart.

(4) This derives *hikbadi* from *kabed*, "liver"—the liver is full of bile.

g. Lamentations Rabbah 3:44, #9; Midrash Tehillim 65:4

R. Hanina bar Papa put the following question to R. Samuel bar Nahman: Since I have heard that you are a master of *Aggadah*, [tell me] what is signified by the verse "Thou hast covered Thyself with a cloud, so that no prayer can pass through" (Lam. 3:44). He replied: Prayer is likened to an immersion pool, while repentance is likened to the sea. Even as an immersion pool is at times open and at times barred, so the gates of prayer are at times barred and at times open. On the other hand, the sea is always open, so that whoever wishes to bathe in it bathes in it whenever he wishes. **So, too, the gates of repentance are always open.** R. Berekhiah and R. Helbo said in the name of R. Anan son of R. Joseph: **In truth, the gates of prayer too are never barred.**

h. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:15, #1; Yalkut, Job, #906

"When a wicked man dieth, his hope shall perish" (Prov. 11:7). **As long as a man lives, the Holy One expects him to repent.** But once he is dead, the hope that he will repent is gone. The matter may be illustrated by the parable of a band of robbers confined in a prison. What did they do? They dug an opening and escaped. One alone remained behind—he did not escape. When the warden came, he began beating the prisoner with a stick, saying to him, "Ill-starred and hapless wretch! **There was an opening before you, and you did not escape!**" **So, too, in the time-to-come, the Holy One will say to the wicked, "Repentance was before you, and you did not repent!"**

1) Hebrews 9:27-28

<sup>27</sup>**Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,** <sup>28</sup>so Messiah was sacrificed once to take away

<sup>6</sup> The idea that all these came before the creation described in Genesis is based on Prov. 8:22, Ps. 93:2, Hos. 9:10, Ps. 74:2, Jer. 17:12, Ps. 72:17, Ps. 90:2-3, Gen. 2:8, and Isa. 30:33. See also TdE (Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah), ed. Friedmann, p. 160.

the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

i. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana<sup>7</sup> 24:16

According to R. Isaac, the Holy One told Jeremiah: Go, say to Israel, "Vow repentance." When Jeremiah went and exhorted them, they replied, "Our master, how shall we vow repentance? With what countenance may we come into the presence of Him who is everywhere? Have we not provoked Him? Have we not vexed Him? Those mountains and hills where we sacrificed to idols—are they not still standing?" When Jeremiah came into the Holy One's presence and reported Israel's reply, God said to him, "Go tell them this: **If you come to Me [in repentance], will you not be coming to your Father in heaven?**"

1) Song of Songs Rabbah 5:2, #2; Yalkut, Song, #988

"Open to Me, My sister" (Song 5:2). According to R. Yose, the Holy One said to Israel: My children, **open to Me in penitence an opening as small as the eye of a needle, and I shall make an opening in Me for you so wide that through it wagons and coaches could enter.**

2) Exodus Rabbah 19:4

"The stranger need not lodge outside" (Job 31:32). The Holy One declares no creature unfit—He receives all. **The gates [of repentance] are always open, and he who wishes to enter may enter.**

3) Berachot 7a

He who says, "**I will sin and then repent, I will sin and then repent,**" **will be given no opportunity to vow penitence.**

j. Hebrews 6:4-8

<sup>4</sup>It is **impossible** for those who have once been **enlightened**, who have **tasted** the heavenly gift, who have **shared** in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup>who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age <sup>6</sup>and who have **fallen away, to be brought back to repentance**. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

<sup>7</sup>Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that **produces** a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. <sup>8</sup>But land that **produces** thorns and thistles is worthless and is **in danger of being cursed**. In the end it will be burned.

<sup>7</sup> Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, one of the oldest of the homiletic Midrashim. The word *Pesikta* means "the section" or "the portion." The *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* contains homilies on portions of the Torah and *haftarah* readings for the festivals and special Sabbaths.

1) *'enlightened ... tasted ... shared ...*

a) φωτίζω (*photizo*)—to give light, to shine, **to enlighten**, light up, illumine, to bring to light, render evident, to cause something to exist and thus come to light and become clear to all, to enlighten spiritually, imbue with saving knowledge, to instruct, to inform, teach, give understanding to.

b) γεύομαι (*geuomai*)—to taste, to try the flavour of, perceive the flavour of, partake of, enjoy, to feel, make trial of, **experience**, to take food, eat, to take nourishment.

c) μέτοχος (*metochos*)—sharing in, partaking, **a partner** (in a work, office, dignity).

2) *'and who have fallen away ...*

a) παραπίπτω (*parapipto*)—properly, to fall beside a person or thing; to slip aside; hence, **to deviate from the right path, turn aside, wander** (Thayer Greek Lexicon).

1] Ezekiel 15:8 (KJV)

And I will make the land desolate, because they have **committed** a trespass, saith the Lord GOD.

2] Ezekiel 18:24

"But **if a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will they live? ... Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die.**

3] Wisdom of Solomon<sup>8</sup> 6:9

Monarchs, my words are meant for you, so that you may learn wisdom and not **fall into error**.

4] Galatians 5:4 (CJB)

You who are trying to be declared righteous by God through legalism have severed yourselves from the Messiah! You have fallen away from God's grace!

<sup>8</sup> The *Wisdom of Solomon* ... claims to have been written by Israel's celebrated monarch (see 7:1-14; 8:17-9:18; compare 1Kgs 3:6-9; 2Chr 1:8-10). This book is part of the late wisdom tradition and is comparable to Sirach and parts of Proverbs. It was originally written in Greek and probably derives from Alexandria of the first century BCE. It warns the wicked, praises wisdom, provides examples of God's mighty acts in history, and ridicules idolatry. It also exhorts the Jewish people to remain faithful to its religious heritage, eschewing the enticements of paganism. At some points there are close parallels to Paul's thought. Bruce Metzger (*IA* 163) remarks that "**there can be little doubt that the Apostle had at one time made a close study of the book of Wisdom**"—Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*, (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 14.

b) **מַעַל** (*ma-al*)—In almost all the biblical references where it occurs, *ma-al* is used to designate **the breaking or violation of religious law AS A CONSCIOUS ACT OF TREACHERY**.

1] The victim against whom the breach is perpetrated is God ...an almost formulaic phrase is **מַעַל בְּיְהוָה מַעַל** (*m'alah ma-al b'Adonai*) **“to commit a trespass against the LORD”** (Lev 6:2 [H 5.21]; Num 5:6; Josh 22:31; 1Chr 10:13; 2Chr 12:2; 2Chr 26:16; 2Chr 28:19, 22; 2Chr 30:7) occurs thirty-five times, always in the Qal stem. It occurs most frequently in 2Chr and in Ezk. Among the prophets, only Ezekiel uses this word (excluding Dan 9:7).

3) <sup>4</sup>*impossible ...* <sup>6</sup>*to be brought back to repentance*.

a) Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 24:16 (see above)

According to R. Isaac, the Holy One told Jeremiah: Go, say to Israel, "Vow repentance." When Jeremiah went and exhorted them, they replied, "Our master, how shall we vow repentance? With what countenance may we come into the presence of Him who is everywhere? Have we not provoked Him? Have we not vexed Him? Those mountains and hills where we sacrificed to idols—are they not still standing?" When Jeremiah came into the Holy One's presence and reported Israel's reply, God said to him, "Go tell them this: **If you come to Me [in repentance], will you not be coming to your Father in heaven?**"

b) Song of Songs Rabbah 5:2, #2; Yalkut, Song, #988

"Open to Me, My sister" (Song 5:2). According to R. Yose, the Holy One said to Israel: My children, **open to Me in penitence an opening as small as the eye of a needle, and I shall make an opening in Me for you so wide that through it wagons and coaches could enter.**

c) Exodus Rabbah 19:4

"The stranger need not lodge outside" (Job 31:32). The Holy One declares no creature unfit—He receives all. **The gates [of repentance] are always open, and he who wishes to enter may enter.**

d) Hebrews 6:4-6 (CJB)

<sup>4</sup>For when people have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become sharers in the *Ruach HaKodesh*, <sup>5</sup>and tasted the goodness of God's Word and the powers of the *'olam haba*—<sup>6</sup>and then have fallen away—it is impossible to renew them so that they turn from their sin, **AS LONG AS for them-**

**elves they keep executing the Son of God on the stake all over again** and keep holding him up to public contempt.

1] These verses have been commandeered into (the) service of the most amazing variety of theological positions. Armenian's ... take them as proof that it is possible for someone who has once been a believer to fall away from faith irretrievably. Calvinists interpret them in such a way as to make that a practical impossibility.<sup>9</sup>

2] Arminianism is based on the theological ideas of the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). The "five points" of Arminianism<sup>10</sup> are:

a] Election (and condemnation on the day of judgment) are conditioned by the rational faith or non-faith of man.

b] The Atonement, while qualitatively adequate for all men, **was efficacious only for the man of faith.**

c] Unaided by the Holy Spirit, no person is able to respond to God's will.

d] **Grace is NOT irresistible.**

e] Believers are able to resist sin but **are not beyond the possibility of falling from grace.**

3] Calvinism<sup>11</sup> (also called Reformed theology) is based on the theological ideas of John Calvin (1509-1564). The "five points" of Calvinism are:

a] Total depravity—every person born into the world is enslaved to the service of sin. **People are not by nature inclined to love God with their whole heart, mind, or strength**, but rather all are inclined to serve their own interests over those of their neighbor and to reject the rule of God. **All people** by their own faculties **are morally unable to choose to follow God** and be saved because they are unwilling to do so out of the necessity of their own natures.

b] Unconditional election—God has chosen from eternity those whom he will bring to himself not based on foreseen virtue, merit, or faith in those people; rather, it is unconditionally grounded in God's mercy alone. God has chosen from eternity to extend mercy to those He

9 David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, (Jewish New Testament Publications), p. 677.

10 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arminianism

11 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism

has chosen and to withhold mercy from those not chosen. Those chosen receive salvation through Messiah alone. Those not chosen receive the just wrath that is warranted for their sins against God.

c] Limited atonement—Yeshua's substitutionary atonement was definite and certain in its purpose and in what it accomplished. This implies that **only the sins of the elect were atoned for by Yeshua's death.**

1} John 3:16-17

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whoever believes** in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but **to save the world through him.**

d] Irresistible grace—the saving grace of God is effectually applied to those whom he has determined to save (that is, the elect) and, in God's timing, overcomes their resistance to obeying the call of the gospel, bringing them to a saving faith. **When God sovereignly purposes to save someone, that individual certainly will be saved.** The doctrine holds that this purposeful influence of **God's Holy Spirit cannot be resisted**, but that the Holy Spirit, "graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Messiah."

e] Perseverance of the saints—all who are set apart by God, and not just those who are exceptionally holy, canonized, or in heaven. Since God is sovereign and his will cannot be frustrated by humans or anything else, those whom God has called into communion with himself will continue in faith until the end. **Those who apparently fall away either never had true faith to begin with or will return.**