YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**

**By Dr. Avigail Rock**

**Lecture #23:**

**Abarbanel**

1. **Introduction**

R. Yitzchak Abarbanel was born in Lisbon, Portugal in 1437 to a prestigious family from Seville, and he died in the year 1508 in Venice (and was buried in Padua). The Abarbanel family had a tradition of being descended from the Davidic dynasty.[[1]](#footnote-1) Abarbanel began at a young age to compose a commentary on the Torah (specifically, the Book of *Devarim*), as well as a philosophical work (*Ateret Zekenim*), but these endeavors were cut short due to familial obligations.

Abarbanel’s family had great influence in the royal palace. His father, Yehuda, was the treasurer for Alfonso V, King of Portugal, and in his youth, Abarbanel was forced to set aside his spiritual development and help his father with his business affairs. After his father’s death, Abarbanel also served in the royal court; he was in charge of the treasury. This period is described as the happiest period of his life, a period in which Torah and greatness resided in the same place.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This period ended with the reign of Alfonso V’s son and successor, John or João II (1481-1495). King João was worried about his nobles rebelling against him; in the year 1483, he executed eighty of them. Abarbanel managed to escape over the border to Spain, but he was forced to leave all of his possessions in Portugal. He describes this experience as an extremely difficult period,[[3]](#footnote-3) in economic as well as theological terms, but Abarbanel overcomes and reaches the conclusion: “God is righteous, for I have rebelled against his word” (*Eikha* 1:18). He makes a spiritual audit, concluding that the loss of his status and wealth is a punishment for spending too much time on physical acquisitions and not investing sufficiently in spiritual acquisitions.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A short time after settling in Spain, while he was still writing his commentary on the Book of *Melakhim* (March of 1484), Abarbanel was summoned to serve “the Catholic Monarchs,” Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon. [[5]](#footnote-5) After nine years of faithful service, in 1492, the Alhambra Decree was issued, expelling all Jews from Castile and Aragon. Abarbanel did everything he could to prevent this edict from going into effect, even proposing a prodigious tribute to convince the monarchs to annul it, but to no avail.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The privations and suffering of the expulsion are described by Abarbanel in his commentary on the Haggada**,** *Zevach Pesach,* in which he includes the dramatic sentence: “I have seen God face-to-face, fighting His nation, the lot of His inheritance.”

Abarbanel left Spanish soil together with 300,000 Jews and reached Naples. King Alfonso II of Naples assumed the throne in early 1494 and recruited Abarbanel as a royal adviser. In the beginning of 1495, King Charles VIII of France invaded, deeply affecting the Jews of the city; Abarbanel explains that many of them lost everything and became paupers and captives, many others were forced into apostasy, and others died.[[7]](#footnote-7)

After the French invasion, King Alfonso II fled to Sicily, and Abarbanel accompanied him as a counselor. A year after the king’s death, Abarbanel left Sicily and settled for a short time on the island of Corfu, and afterwards in the port town of Monopoli on the Adriatic. While he was in Monopoli, Abarbanel was preoccupied with the overwhelming sense of hopelessness in the wake of the Expulsion from Spain; he was concerned about his fellow Jews despairing of the redemption, and he witnessed that many abandoned Judaism totally. In response, Abarbanel wrote a number of compositions dealing with the redemption: an explanation of the Book of *Daniel* (*Ma’aynei Ha-Yeshua*), a commentary on certain prophecies of *Yeshayahu* (*Mashmia Yeshua*[[8]](#footnote-8)), and an explanation of Talmudic lore dealing with the Messiah and the redemption (*Yeshuot Meshicho*).

Abarbanel explains his motive in writing these books:

I have said to myself that there is a time to act for God, to grasp weak hands and to bolster weak knees, to give consolation to those who stumble in exile…(Introduction to *Ma’aynei Ha-Yeshua*)

In 1503, Abarbanel settled in Venice, where he lived until his death.

1. **Biblical Commentary**

**Structure**

Abarbanel wrote a commentary on most of the books of *Tanakh*. He generally opens his commentary on each book with a preface dealing with questions of the “Intro to Bible” nature. Thus, for example, in his introduction to the Book of *Yirmiyahu,* Abarbanel deals expansively with the question of the relationship between the Masoretic text and the traditional reading. In the introduction to the Book of *Shmuel*, he deals with identifying the author of the book. In the introduction to the Book of *Yehoshua*, he deals with the arrangement of the books of *Nevi’im* and the nature of the distinction between *Torah*, *Nevi’im* and *Ketuvim*. In the introduction to *Melakhim*, he defines the relationship between it and *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

Like the Ralbag, and following the *Akeidat Yitzchak* of R. Yitzchak Arama,[[9]](#footnote-9) Abarbanel does not explain the verses using a running commentary for every verse; instead, he divides the portion into topics, and he explains the unit with a comprehensive explanation. Sometimes, he relates also to individual verses and difficult words.

Abarbanel’s trademark is presenting questions at the beginning of each unit of study. (This also follows in the footsteps of R. Yitzchak Arama, who introduces every chapter with a list of “doubts”.) Sometimes, Abarbanel brings more than forty questions at the beginning of a given unit.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the beginning of every passage, Abarbanel sets out the questions and difficulties raised by reading it, and afterwards he presents at length his solutions, noting at the end of each one, “By this, we have resolved question number X.”

**Characteristics of the Commentary**

Abarbanel’s style is direct and clear. He will generally base his explanation on *peshat*, but sometimes he notes elements of *derash* as well. Abarbanel aims to understand the biblical narrative, the motivations of the characters, and the structure of the passages. For example, Abarbanel expands on the question of the order of the Ten Plagues and the Ten Commandments. Similarly, he deals in a very broad way with the reasons for the *mitzvot*, and he is precise about the meaning of the *mitzva* in all of its details.[[11]](#footnote-11) Abarbanel deals also with matters of philosophy, but he avoids dealing with questions of grammar and linguistics. Here, we will present a number of questions of the Abarbanel for *Parashat* *Korach* (*Bamidbar* 16), questions from different disciplines:

The first question is that it says, “And Korach took,” without the verse explaining what he took. The Sages have expounded it in this way (*Sanhedrin* 109b): “He took for himself a bad purchase.” In *Midrash Tanchuma*, we have: “He took himself to one side,” as Rashi explains. R. Avraham ibn Ezra, on the other hand, explains that he took people with him. Ultimately, according to all of these views, the essential element has been omitted from the text…

This is a question about understanding the *peshat* of the verse.

The sixth question is how Korach and his company agreed to the test of the incense and did not think of the wonders which they had seen. Did they not know that Nadav and Avihu were incinerated when they brought incense? How did they not fear for their lives?

This is a question about the characters’ motivations.

The fifteenth question is about the statement, “And if God creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth” (*Bamidbar* 16:30). Why did Moshe pray that the earth’s mouth would open and swallow them, and not pray that the fire would consume them? What did he see to ask for the earth to open its mouth to swallow them, and what is the connection to the punishment for their transgression? The burning was a punishment corresponding to their intruding to perform the service and to offer incense against God’s law, but the swallowing [by the earth] is not so.

This is a philosophical question.

In his commentary, Abarbanel displays a comprehensive knowledge of the biblical exegesis preceding him, and similarly demonstrates that has a thorough knowledge of philosophy, history, and geography. Many times, Abarbanel relates to the commentaries of his predecessors; sometimes he accepts their views, and sometimes he rejects them with clear evidence. Oftentimes, Abarbanel brings the explanations of his predecessors without letting his readers know that the explanation is not his own.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Interpolations**

Abarbanel’s commentary is full of biblical and Midrashic interpolations[[13]](#footnote-13) — there is almost no piece free from them. For example, in the following paragraph, from his introduction to the Book of *Devarim*, Abarbanel deals with the question of whether *Devarim* is the direct word of God or Moshe’s composition. Note the great number of biblical interpolations that appear in this short paragraph:

“My petition and my request” (*Esther* 5:7): was the digest of “the Torah which Moshe put before the Israelites” (*Devarim* 4:44) — I mean to say, the Book of *Devarim* — “from God, from the heavens” (*Bereishit* 19:24), and were the things which are in it said by Moshe from God’s own mouth, as with all the words of the Torah, from “In the beginning” until “before the eyes of all Israel”? Or was this book, this digest of the Torah, said by Moshe, composing and voicing it on his own, explaining what he understood… according to the way of “showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed” (*Daniel* 1:4)? Did he compose a whole book dedicated to “the difficult matter” (*Shemot* 18:26), to those things (cf. *Yeshayahu* 23:18 and *Daniel* 7:9) which were covered up by the Ancient of Days?

**Juxtaposition of Passages**

Abarbanel spends a great deal of time dealing with the significance of the order of the passages and commandments; he even takes a wider look in the structure of the entire Pentateuch. For example, Abarbanel relates to the order of passages in *Parashat* *Re’eh*, chapters 13-15 of *Devarim*. In the first part (13:2-19), we find the prohibitions of idolatry, such as the laws of the inciter and of the straying city; in the second part (14:3-21), we find the laws of forbidden foods; in the third part (14:22-15:23), we find the laws of tithes, charity, severance, etc.[[14]](#footnote-14) Apparently, there is no link between the passages, but Abarbanel writes:

In the first passages, Moshe Rabbeinu warns the Israelites that they must serve God in matters of faith and the soul; afterwards, he turns to foods and bodily matters. This fulfills what it says: “You shall love Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim* 6:5). Now, in this passage, it comes to teach us how to serve Him with one’s money and crops (*ibid.*): “and with all your might.”

In other words, these units parallel the verse, “You shall love Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (a verse which appears earlier, in the beginning of the Book of *Devarim*). “Your heart” corresponds to the ritual commandments, the prohibitions of idolatry, which appear in the first unit; “your soul” corresponds to the prohibitions of forbidden foods, which appear in the second unit; “your might” (understood by the Sages in *Berakhot* 54a and elsewhere as a reference to “your property”[[15]](#footnote-15)) corresponds to the commandments which relate to monetary matters, which appear in the third unit.

**Original Interpretations**

In Abarbanel’s commentary, one may find countless original interpretations. For example, explaining *Shemot* 7, Abarbanel establishes via a number of convincing proofs that the *tzefardei’a* plague in Egypt consisted not of frogs,[[16]](#footnote-16) as is usually assumed, but rather crocodiles:

Concerning what is written here, we have many proofs. One of them is that it says (7:27), “If you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your borders with *tzefarde’im*.” The term “plague” is reserved for lethal strikes…

All of this proves that these *tzefarde’im* are not small, croaking aquatic creatures, but rather the gigantic aquatic reptile which is known as *al-timsāḥ*, which has a form similar to that of a *tannin*, and a mouth that opens by the movement of the upper jaw. This creature is a great predator, able to consume a whole calf or human child…

These creatures came out of the Nile to seek food due to the contamination of the river, when they were unable to sustain themselves from the fish that died and were decomposing (*ibid.* v. 18), so they went out to the dry land to find food…

The only question that remains is whether these *tzefarde’im* were in the Egyptian Nile previously, or if they came there by way of miracle from another source.

This is only a small part of his commentary, but we may observe not only his great knowledge of many disciplines, but also his comprehensive view; after the claim that these are crocodiles, Abarbanel deals with the question of whether crocodiles existed in the Nile before this or they were transported miraculously.

An additional original explanation, also based on the verses, is his explanation of the severe punishment decreed against Moshe and Aharon in light of the sin of Mei Meriva (*Bamidbar* 20:1-13). Abarbanel cites ten different approaches and rejects them all, and afterwards he writes that the sin of Moshe and Aharon at Mei Meriva was not a complete sin; the severity of the punishment is based on their culpability for other sins. Thus, Aharon is punished for the sin of the Golden Calf, and Moshe is punished for the sin of the Spies. In these two sins, their involvement was significant, but for the sake of their honor, their punishment is not mentioned at the time of the people’s punishment. Here, at the sin of Mei Meriva, God finally calls in the debt.

1. **Response to the Expulsion**

Abarbanel cannot be removed from his era. Abarbanel, as a spiritual and national leader in a time of crisis, uses sources from *Tanakh* in order to encourage his contemporaries, both those who were expelled and those who converted under duress, the *conversos*. For example, he expounds *Devarim* 4:28, “And you shall serve there human handiwork, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.” As a witness to the awful atrocities of the Inquisition, Abarbanel explains:

Due to the horrible troubles, many of them will leave their faith and worship forms of the stars of the heavens, “human handiwork.” They do not believe them, because they know that in their knowledge and their recognition they are “wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.” They will only perform this service in order to escape death… and they will keep God’s Torah in their midst, while they serve the nations’ gods out of fear.[[17]](#footnote-17) This is not mentioned here to portray a sin, but rather a punishment:[[18]](#footnote-18) this was the greatest of evils, recognizing and feeling the belief of the true God in their hearts while they serve idols with their mouths, and their tongues will betray them, and they will be killed for this. About this it is said (*Devarim* 28:64[[19]](#footnote-19)), “And you shall serve there other gods.”

Abarbanel also relates to the question of the status of the *conversos* from a theological standpoint. Some believed that the *conversos* had no option to return and repent, but Abarbanel explains his view in his commentary to *Devarim* 30:2-3, the passage dealing with repentance:

Because faith in exile is divided into two parts: the small part of them who keep the faith and follow the Torah of God, and they are called by the name of Israel, and they are a special few left of many. The other part is the majority of the people; they change their religion out of distress and the weight of the exile…

Therefore, it was said corresponding to the two parts of the people (30:1-2): “And you shall call them to mind among all the nations where Lord your God has driven you, and return to Lord your God…” The first statement is said about those compelled to leave the faith. It says “among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you,” meaning that they are mixed in with them and considered like them, but in their heart they will return to God… And when they return to God and go after Him… everyone according to his status and his ability, he promises that Exalted God will bring them close to Him…

In other words, in the view of Abarbanel, the verses talk specifically about the status of the *converses*. They cannot serve God openly, but only in their hearts; even so, they are included in the passage of repentance, and they are considered to be penitents.

1. **Relationship to Monarchy**

Abarbanel’s attitude toward the institution of monarchy is directly influenced by his life experience with monarchs. For example, the passage of the king (*Devarim* 17:14-20) may lead the reader to understand that there is a *mitzva* to appoint a king. Abarbanel explains that there is no *mitzva* to appoint a king, but if the nation wants a king, there are a number of conditions (specified in that passage). This is comparable to the paragraph of the “woman of beautiful form” *(eshet yefat to’ar)* which appears in the Torah at the beginning of *Parashat Ki Teitzei* (*Devarim* 21:10-14). There is no *mitzva* to take a captive for a wife, but if one wants to do this, he has limitations put on him, as enumerated there.

Similarly, in his explanation of I *Shmuel*, ch. 8, Abarbanel explains at great length the reason for Shmuel’s opposition to the monarchy. Abarbanel is well aware of the dangers for the country when it is led by a hereditary power structure, when all of the powers are centralized in the hands of one man who answers to no one - tyranny and bloodshed. According to Abarbanel, the king is never satisfied with the legitimate power given to him by the people; he will go further and further beyond the accepted legal norms, until he establishes an authority of tyrannical despotism.[[20]](#footnote-20)

After the Expulsion from Spain, Abarbanel became familiar with the aristocratic republics of Italy. Abarbanel praised this form of government (see continuation of his commentary on *Shmuel*), and he prefers it to a monarchy. In his view, the ideal government is a republican form of government, in which the people choose the leaders for short, predetermined times.

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Abarbanel died penniless and alone in the year 1508, and he was buried in Padua, in an unmarked grave. In the year 1893, the local Jewish community erected a monument to his memory in the cemetery. On one of the sides of the monument, the following epitaph appears in Italian:

Philosopher and linguist, a pioneer of exegesis, spreading his wings over the Jewish spirit, in matters of ethics, in issues of society, in matters of faith, he revealed them all in the holy books. He leaves blessing to the coming generations in his many works, a treasury of wisdom and faith.

On the other side is engraved:

In this graveyard rests eternally Don Yitzchak Abarbanel…

1. Thus, for example, Abarbanel writes in his introduction to the Book of *Yehoshua*:

I am the man, Yitzchak, son of a vital man, of great exploits in Israel; his name is renowned, Lord Yehuda ben Yosef ben Yehuda of the Sons of Abarbanel, all of whom were people at the heads of the Israelites, scions of the Davidic dynasty. He was a national prince and commander, *zt”l*.

We should note that in academic research, this fact is in doubt; see, for example, Ephraim Shmuel, *Don Yitzchak* Abarbanel *ve-gerush Sefarad* (Jerusalem, 5723). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These are his words:

Once I was in my home, with the estate and wealth that I inherited from my ancestors, an abode filled with God’s blessing in illustrious Lisbon, metropolis and capital of the Kingdom of Portugal… I built myself houses with wide porticoes, and I made my home a meeting-house for scholars… In my house and in my walls, there was great abundance and charity… Torah and greatness… I was luxuriant in the court of the mighty and noble King Don Alfonso… When he grew strong in his wealth, God took account of his people to give them bread. Deliverance and salvation arose for the Jews. I delighted to sit in his shade; I was close to him, and he relied upon me.(Introduction to the Book of *Yehoshua*) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. With the passage of time, it became clear to Abarbanel that this era was really a short period in relation to other events which he experienced over the course of his life. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is what he writes (*loc. cit.*):

You have not sought beyond God’s book to hear of learning… You have been moved by words of falsehood among kings and counselors of the land, which are lost at the time of their accounting… You have put your confidence in gold… You have gone after the great vanity and the might and the glory, but if you have forgotten your God’s name, these will be forgotten as well.

In the end, Abarbanel comforts and strengthens himself with the following message:

If you will only seek God early and meditate in His law day and night… God will return to rejoice over you for good… Indeed, I have shaken out my lap, and I arise to perform the labor of the King, God of Hosts is His name: the explication of these books… [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This arises from the introduction of Abarbanel to *Melakhim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Abarbanel very creatively describes this year based on *Yirmiyahu* 31:9, “the Disperser (*mezareh*) of Israel will gather it up.” The word *mezareh* (*mem*-*zayin*-*reish*-*heh*) in *gematria* is 40 + 7 + 200 + 5, totaling 252. He also refers to the famous phrase “For you have been strangers (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt” (*Shemot* 22:20, 23:9; *Vayikra* 19:34; *Bamidbar* 10:19), as the word *gerim* (*gimmel*-*reish*-*yud*-*mem*) in *gematria* is 3 + 200 + 10 + 40, totaling 253. The year 1492 began in the Jewish year 5252 and concluded in 5253.

And in the ninth year, the year of the Disperser of Israel, the King of Spain captured the entire realm of Granada… “And Esav said in his heart” (*Bereishit* 27:41), how shall I achieve God’s favor to give me strength in victory… if not by bringing in under his wings the people who go in darkness, the scattered flock of Israel, and by returning to his faith and belief the wayward daughter. Otherwise, I shall cast them to another land, from upon my face; they will no longer reside in my land… “Get up, leave from among my people” (*Shemot* 12:31), from the lands of Spain and Sicily, Majorca, and Sardinia which is under my rule and over the course of three months. “Not one hoof will remain” (*ibid.* 10:26) from whatever is called by the name of Yaakov or by the name of Yisrael in all of the provinces of my kingship…

When I was there in the king’s court, I expended every effort by calling… to the king three times… to say, “Save us, O King, why should you do so to your servants?” (II *Shmuel* 14:4; *Shemot* 5:15). Like the deaf adder that stops its ear (*Tehillim* 58:5), he would not respond to me at all. The queen “was standing at his right hand as an adversary” (*Zekharya* 3:1)…

“And I was in the midst of the exile” (*Yechezkel* 1:1). I have come with all the members of my household; “the children are my children and the flocks are my flocks” (*Bereishit* 31:43). I have come here to the illustrious city of Naples, the kings of which are kings of kindness.

This year, the year of “You have been strangers,” I have spoken to my heart, “What I have vowed, I will fulfill” (*Yona* 2:10) to write a commentary on the Book of *Melakhim*, which I have not done up until this point.(Introduction to the Book of *Melakhim*) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See his Introduction to the Book of *Devarim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In this composition, Abarbanel claims that some of the prophecies of redemption and consolation in *Yeshayahu* do not relate to the Return to Zion during the Second Temple Era, but to a later period. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Yitzchak Arama (1420-1494) was one of the Spanish sages of the generation of the Expulsion, and he has become known as one of the great medieval exegetes. He served as a rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Zamora, in northern Spain, and from there he became a rabbi in Tarragona in southern Catalonia. At the time, Spanish Jews were compelled to attend churches and to listen to propaganda speeches by priests, which were delivered in an impressive philosophical style. In light of this, R. Yitzchak Arama saw a need to organize and deliver his lecture according to philosophical style. After some time, he gathered these homilies and compiled his famous book, *Akeidat Yitzchak*, and that is how he earned the title *Ba’al* *Ha*-*Akeida*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The challenging questions of Abarbanel are no less important, and perhaps more so, than his answers. For example, Nechama Leibowitz, in dozens of places in her works, presents the question of Abarbanel and afterwards demands: “Answer his question!” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. An excellent example of this is his explanation of the portions dealing with the Tabernacle. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is difficult to argue in Abarbanel’s defense that he is not aware that these ideas were said by others, since we are talking at times about full quotations of lengthy interpretations. R. Meir Arama, the son of R. Yitzchak Arama, describes in a furious letter the relationship between his father and Abarbanel. R. Yitzchak Arama and Abarbanel were friends, and Abarbanel even had the custom to visit R. Yitzchak Arama and to study with him. Afterwards, however, Abarbanel took advantage of these study sessions, and he published R. Arama’s interpretations under his own name without citing his father at all.

It happened to befall us that God led us to the house of a man of authority and Torah, of the greatest caliber, towering above the peaks, tall as God’s mountains. Known to the kings and counselors of the land… his name is Don Yitzchak Abarbanel…

Over the course of many days, his heart grew haughty in God’s ways… He made books and composed works to make it heard outside, streets and markets… He has called them new, sweet and deep — but these words are *attikim*!

The concluding phrase comes from I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 4:22; it means that they are not novellae, but rather taken from others. The term “*attikim*” can mean “ancient,” but it can also mean “relocated”, “transferred” or “copied.”

Yair Hass, in his essay, “*Le-Va’ayat Himutzut Divrei Rabbi Yitzchak Arama Be-Khitvei Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel*,” *Sinai* 134 (5767), pp. 154-9, argues and works hard to prove that Abarbanel does not attempt to “steal” the ideas of R. Yitzchak Arama. Instead, it is characteristic of Abarbanel’s style to interpolate the words of the exegetes into his commentaries, either to preserve the beauty of language or perhaps to add emphasis to his words as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. An interpolation is the use of partial or full quote, without mentioning explicitly that it is a quote or noting its source. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Abarbanel even explains the order of the law in the unit itself, and he claims that these laws deal with the generosity a person is supposed to exhibit as regards his property:

It started with the easier one, and it went on to the more difficult one. Whatever comes later in these passages is harder, in terms of the amount of generosity required, than that which precedes it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Rashi*, Devarim* 6:5.*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rabbeinu Chananel raises this possibility, but Abarbanel proves it conclusively.

Translator’s note: In Modern Hebrew, *tzefardeia* is the word for frog, while *tannin* is the word for crocodile. Both terms appear in the Torah, but their definition is unclear. Abarbanel argues that *tzefardeia* in the Torah is the species known as *Crocodlyus niloticus*, and he uses the Arabic term *timsāḥ* to make the reference clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This appears to be a cynical allusion to the Cutheans, “the lion converts” (see II *Melakhim* 17:24-41), who convert and worship God out of fear of lions, but continue to serve their own gods. Jews in exile, on the other hand, may serve idols (at least before the naked eye) out of the fear of non-Jews, but they will continue to serve God in their hearts. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Many exegetes have difficulty understanding this verse, since the content of the verse appears to be a description of a sin of idolatry, but the context of the verse is a description of the punishment of the Israelites. According to Abarbanel, there is no difficulty: the verse in truth talks about idolatry, but it is part of the people’s punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See his commentary to *Devarim* 28:64. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Indeed, this happened to King Ferdinand: his power so corrupted him that he ultimately expelled all the Jews from Spain. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)