

# Abravanel's 'World of Torah' on the eve of Sinai

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This past week's Parasha, Kedoshim, contained a restatement of the essence of the Ten Commandments. This reading, coming halfway between Pesach and Shavuot, helps us better prepare ourselves for the upcoming festival, the *Zman Matan Torateinu*, the time of the giving of our Torah.

This week's essay is on a booklet of 58 pages that deals with the excellent commentary on the Ten Commandments by one of the least-known of the classical commentators, Don Yitzchak Abravanel, entitled, "Abravanel's World of Torah: A Structured Interpretation — Sinai Rules" translated by Zev Bar Eitan.

## Who was Abravanel?

"Don Yitzchak Abravanel (1437-1508) was born to an illustrious and erudite family of court advisors in Portugal," write Eitan. "A formidable scholar, he taught and surrounded himself with a cadre of dedicated students. At this same time he arose professionally through the ranks to become one of Portugal's, and later Spain's, key and trusted financial advisors to royalty. Personal success, comfort and security crashed abruptly when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella unleashed the Inquisition. He was an eyewitness and experienced the expulsion of 1492. After much travail he settled in Italy where he resumed his learned writings. He passed away in Venice in 1508."

Eitan continues:

"Abravanel penned one of the greatest commentaries on the Bible. In addition, he wrote other important works including his Pesach Haggada and Pirkei Avot commentaries and an extensive critique on the Rambam's Guide to the Perplexed."

"In essence, Abravanel's writings are an educational foray par excellence into worlds of wisdom. This is, at least in part, due to the wealth of Jewish and Gentile sources he brings to bear. ... When reading Abravanel in the original, one senses he has entered into the study of a true master and renowned authority."

In my reading of this commentary on the Ten Commandments by Abravanel, in English translation, I noted the non-literal style and use of terminology that give the text a modern context, leaving the reader with the distinct impression that this is interpretive.

I shared this impression with the author who responded to me as follows:

"Abravanel is a major commentator and thinker, really unlike any other of the great Rishonim. From what I can tell, he's essentially unknown in the Orthodox world. While his name is famous and people might be able to rattle off a random sentence or two, his Tanach commentary is not studied and it's never been translated in the way that Rashi, Ramban or others have been.

"My goal is to make Abravanel more accessible so that if someone reads my *sefer*, they will have an excellent understanding of his approach, ideas, comments, etc. Or, if someone wanted to learn him in the original, they could use my *sefer* as a companion to get them over the rough patches.

"This translation is a structured interpretation. That means, that the content is really



Abravanel but the language is contemporary. I've added graphics, tables, charts, bullet points with that in mind: Making Abravanel more cohesive and user-friendly."

The openness of the author to my queries was refreshing and this attitude is reflected in his scholarship and approach to further enhance your appreciation of this teaching as we approach the Shavuot holiday commemorating the receiving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

With this in mind let me quote further

from the author's introduction:

"The Shulchan Aruch, quoting the Talmud, strongly encourages Jews to actively prepare for festivals by reviewing *halachot* associated with the [holiday]. Of course, preparation need not be limited to *halacha*. ... Turning to Shavuot, Jews are fortunate that many related topics present themselves, making for excellent Yom Tov aids and enhancers."

Thus, this newly published excellent and sophisticated commentary on the Ten Commandments taken from the Abravanel's commentary on Sefer Shemot, Parashat Yitro, will prove to be a most welcome added addition to your home and shul library. And, a truly excellent prep for the Shavuot festival.