



P R E F A C E

Don Isaac Abravanel (Abarbanel, Abrabanel, Bravanel, Brauanel, or Braunel) was born in Lisbon in 1437 and died in Venice in 1508. He was active during a period of great changes and crises that shaped not only the course of his own life and thought but also, to a large extent, the face of the early modern era as a whole. This book presents an intellectual biography of Isaac Abravanel while at the same time exposing readers to the great historical drama taking place behind the development of his philosophy and thought. To begin, I would like to briefly acquaint the reader with the man and the subjects that constitute the backbone of the present biography.

Don Isaac's seventy-one-year-long life can be divided geographically into three periods: the Portugal phase (1437–83), the Castile phase (1483–92), and the Italy phase (1492–1508). The present book is similarly divided into three sections, each dedicated to one of these periods. As will be explained, in every phase of his life, Don Isaac Abravanel enjoyed impressive successes. And in every phase, these were snatched away from him by the hand of fortune—or, more precisely, by the tides of history. Isaac Abravanel was born and grew up in Lisbon, in a family of rich Jewish bankers and merchants who had immigrated from Castile to Portugal in the aftermath of the pogroms of 1391. During his forty-six years in Portugal, he became one of the richest Jewish merchant bankers in the kingdom, as well as a community leader and an intellectual who actively participated in both Jewish and Christian discourses in Portugal. He also enjoyed close ties with the nobility and King Afonso V. He served the nobility by giving loans, taxing their lands, and conducting trade. In exchange he received privileges and large estates—as well as the title of don. For many years he gave lessons on Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* from his house in Lisbon. In addition, he wrote several works and carried on correspondence with both Jewish and Christian scholars. If testimonies are to be believed, his views and ideas on various issues were held in high esteem. It seemed that nothing could cast a shadow on this economic, intellectual, and social prosperity. But in 1481, with the death of King Afonso V, his good fortunes would come to an end: Over the course of just two years, the new king, João II,

managed to reverse and eliminate all of the achievements of the Abravanel family in Portugal. Don Isaac was forced into exile to Castile.

Arriving in Castile in 1483, Don Isaac, by then no longer a young man, was forced to rebuild his reputation in a new, if nevertheless somewhat familiar, environment. Documentary evidence demonstrates that within two or three years, Don Isaac had once again resumed his role as a community leader and a court Jew—now serving the Castilian nobility. The scope of his writings during this relatively short Castilian period (nine years in total), as well as the sums of money that he lent and the scope of his activity as a tax farmer, all point to his talent for surviving and his exceptional creativity and initiative. For the second time in his life, Don Isaac managed to climb the ladder of Jewish and Christian society, all the while weaving together a unique synthesis of Jewish and Christian thought. But a new and unexpected trial would soon irrevocably change the course of his life—not to mention the lives of thousands of his coreligionists.

In 1492, the Jewish status quo in Castile and Aragon collapsed. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella signed the expulsion edict, bringing an end to the largest and most important Jewish community in Europe and scattering it across the Mediterranean over the course of a mere three months. Don Isaac did his utmost to avert the harsh edict. But when he realized that the court Jews in Castile and Aragon would be unable to change the decision of the rulers who were later called the Catholic monarchs, he—unlike many other Jewish courtiers—resisted the temptation to convert to Christianity and departed with his family and coreligionists for exile. At age fifty-five, Don Isaac was forced to abandon his historical environs and the cultural and political world in which he and his family had succeeded in establishing their status over generations.

In the last sixteen years of his life on the Italian peninsula, Don Isaac searched for a new home—for himself, his family, and some other members of his community. At first, he was greeted with open arms in the city of Naples. But in 1495, the French invasion of the Italian peninsula and the Italian wars that ensued put an end to his plans to make the southern Italian kingdom his new home. For eight years he wandered between Sicily, Corfu, and the Venetian port city of Monopoli. He finally settled in Venice, where he died in 1508.

The instability that characterized the last years of Don Isaac's life was a fate he shared with many Iberian exiles. But this did not stop his literary creativity, business ventures, or political activity. On the contrary: Don

Isaac composed the vast majority of his exegetical oeuvre under the specter of uncertainty and itinerancy. During these years, Don Isaac succeeded in making a place for himself in the historical and religious consciousness of the Sephardic exiles. His literary activity and political endeavors toward the end of his life made him the hero of these exiles and their descendants, as well as elevating him to the status of a historical and spiritual figure who continues to attract profound interest from Jews and Christians alike. His successes in the face of harsh conditions and international turmoil are an impressive testament to his talents at survival and resistance, the nucleus around which his legendary image as both a leader and a writer was created.

The full and active life led by Isaac Abravanel in no less than four states and four courts (Portugal, Castile, Naples, and Venice) brought him into close contact with great developments, innovations, and crises in the realms of economics, politics, religion, literature, philosophy, and geography. He was not simply a courtier and merchant who participated in the social and economic life of his time. He was also a scholar and an author who responded to the historical shifts that affected his life and that of the Jewish community, both in the Iberian peninsula and, after the expulsion of 1492, in the Jewish communities in Italy and the Sephardic diaspora. It is true that Don Isaac was a wealthy merchant and moneylender who served noblemen and kings alike. But at the same time, he was an intellectual with an extremely diverse education: Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and classical. He was a teacher and exegete who composed an impressive series of commentaries—on scripture, rabbinic literature, and Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*—as well as philosophical tracts.

These are just some of the factors that made Don Isaac one of the most exciting Jewish personalities of the late Middle Ages and the early modern era. The historical line that defined the contours of Don Isaac Abravanel's life begins with the pogroms and mass conversion of 1391 in Castile and Aragon that displaced his father, continues through the internal changes within the Iberian kingdoms that led to the expulsion and forced conversion of the Jews, and reaches to the great Italian crisis that began at the end of the fifteenth century. Abravanel was the son of an immigrant, who himself immigrated time and time again due to events that convulsed the Christian kingdoms in the Iberian and Italian peninsulas throughout the fifteenth century. In this sense, but also in a more positive sense that we will discuss in this book, Don Isaac was the product of a period of flux—a period

that brought an end to existing structures and institutions and saw the rise of new world powers and new modes of behavior and thought.

Two different portraits of Don Isaac Abravanel have been etched into Jewish collective memory and the memory of modern scholars, respectively. The first is that of a leader of exiles during the period of the expulsion at the end of the Middle Ages and the end of Iberian Jewish history. The second is that of an innovative Jewish thinker who adopted modern republican views drawn from the literature of humanism and the Renaissance. The gap between the traditional image of Abravanel and his image in modern scholarship points to the difficulty in pigeonholing him in a single period, movement, or role. Don Isaac's loyalty to his religion and community gave him legendary status and turned him into a symbol of Jewish resistance and survival, even in the era of the expulsion. By contrast, his innovative political views and economic success in the courts of Iberia and Italy prompted some scholars to see him as a new sort of Jewish figure, a forerunner of the modern Jew of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The question thus arises: Was Don Isaac a hero who defended Judaism and Jews as the modern era dawned, perhaps protecting Judaism from modernity itself? Or perhaps was he a Jew imbued with the spirit of modernity (or early modernity), who internalized new conceptions and new modes of behavior and expression?

The question of Don Isaac's conservatism or modernity has occupied scholars of Abravanel since the first studies dedicated to him, and even today, scholars continue to debate the issue. In some senses, Don Isaac remains a mystery and a challenge for historians and readers alike. Is this mystery bound up in the complicated period in which he lived, a period of great innovations and discoveries but also of expulsions, forced conversions, discrimination, and severe violence? Do Don Isaac, his life, and his works reflect an ambivalence that challenges our ideas about the relationship between Jewry and modernity? In this book I hope to answer these questions by describing both the course of Abravanel's life and the literature he produced. However, this book also aspires to share with its readers the irresolvable complexity of Don Isaac Abravanel. To this end, I have endeavored throughout to allow different voices to speak from his work as well as from the cultural environment in which they emerged.

In every part of the book, I have tried to understand the unique and exciting connection between Don Isaac's life as a merchant and court Jew and his career as a philosopher, exegete, and writer. My goal has been to

combine a description of his economic and literary activity with an understanding of his personality and the trends of his time. My choice not to sharply separate discussions of Don Isaac the merchant and community leader from those of Don Isaac the thinker and author is born of a view that sees the social and literary dimensions of his life and works—even though tensions do exist—as complementary facets of his personality, each one shedding light on and enriching our understanding of the other. It bears mentioning that the information available about the first period in Abravanel's life in Portugal is the most detailed, allowing us to more precisely describe his cultural and social profile at that stage. For this reason, I have put greater emphasis in this first section on sociopolitical issues as a context in which to understand his literary, exegetical, and philosophical writings. These discussions are introduced with a historical overview of Portugal at the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth. In providing this context, I hope to give the reader a better understanding of the political and cultural framework to which the Abravanel family immigrated and in which they thrived and prospered.

In the second part of the book, I emphasize the literary and social paths traversed by Abravanel in his efforts to overcome his harrowing flight from Portugal and rebuild his status in Castile from scratch. These efforts are the background for Don Isaac's first achievement in this period, a commentary on the Former Prophets that includes innovative historical, political, and literary ideas. The third part of the book is focused on the many commentaries composed by Don Isaac after the expulsion. The reason for this is not just the sheer scope of his writings during this period but also the dearth of documentary evidence that can give us a glimpse into his personal life—with the exception of his autobiographical accounts in the introductions to his works. In our discussion of Don Isaac's commentaries after the expulsion, we will see how his writings combine an aspiration to reestablish his personal status with the goal of reviving Sephardic Jewry as a whole. Adopting the role of a leader, in the last years of his life he composed numerous commentaries and works, many of which included various apologetic defenses of Judaism. At the end of this impressive, sixteen-year-long literary effort, Don Isaac had managed to establish his place as a great apologist for Judaism among the Sephardic exiles. The path leading from a rich and learned merchant in Lisbon to an advocate of Judaism after the expulsion in Italy is the story I wish to tell in this book.