The Disputation of Barcelona comes alive on stage in "Divine Right"

The antecedents (left) Howard Mez, Bernard Valer, Shmuel Goldstein, Scott Haperberg and Aaron Nathaniel. (Photo: Chava Goldstein)

The Theater of the Earth presents a new stage production called "Divine Right" at the Klezmer Theatre in L.A. The play tells the story of the 1295 Disputation of Barcelona, when Jews were forced to face the Christian community in a public debate to prove their faith.

By AMIEL DOMINIQUE HINDESMAN

N aubianides Rabbi Moishe ben Nathani, more commonly known as the Ramban, was a major figure in Jewish history, the Disputation of Barce- lona in 1293. The disputation was a formally ordered debate between Dominicans and Christian convert Pope Christian III and the Ramban, held at the palace of King James I of Aragon and followed by the meeting. It was an honor to play the Ramban, certainly one of the central figures of Jewish history, Rabbi Prof. David Goldstein says. "He contributed important works to every area of Judaism. He was also revered by non-Jews as a leader of the Jewish people, which is why he was chosen to represent the Jews to the Disputation."

There are three central points of contention on the disputation agenda: whether the Messiah had already appeared, whether he is human, and whether Judaism or Christianity is the true faith. The debate never got to the first topic, and was an example of both the immense biblical knowledge of the Ramban and the Ramban's rich theological, philosophical and profligate knowledge of both the Talmud and the Bible. The Christians did that was new was to bring to public debate in the Ramban. But the Ramban refused each of the Christian's attempts, by pointing out that he was either displaying a taste out of context or misunderstanding the Hebrew.

"The Disputation of Barcelona had far-reaching implications for Spanish Jewry," Goldstein adds. "The king was already involved as the judge. You had the Ramban versus this monk, who was fanatical. These monks went on to lead the Inquisition in Spain. Who's amazing is that the Ramban was guaranteed freedom of speech by the king."

"The Christians say that the Ramban fled, but that is not what he wrote in his accounts of the event. He remained in Barcelona for another week and then the king and the Christians gave a non-sacramentary sermon in the synagoga where he was for Mahzor. The Ramban replied to it in sermon as well."

The disputation ended after four sessions in four days. It is difficult to say that there was a clear winner, although it could be argued that the Ramban emerging from it alive was a triumph in itself. The Christians claimed victory, but the king punished the Ramban with 300 gold coins on the day following the disputation's conclusion. The Ramban then went home to Verona.

"The results of the debate were not good, even though the Ramban acquitted himself very well," Goldstein states. "The Jews were not immediately persecuted at that time, but Raymond Lattes went on to write one of the most famous anti-Semitic works of all time, called Pigus Zadik, in 1280. It became a major tool of anti-Semitic propaganda, a guidebook for those who wished to attack Judaism."

"Another problem that arose was that the king cooperated in allowing the Dominicans to give consistory ser- mons to the Jews. They also ordered the Jews in cases anything relating to Jesus from the "atred" and rabbinic literature. They burned copies of the Shulhan Arukh. In later publishings, the anti-Christian passages were censored so that the books wouldn't be burned."

"The Ramban made allies in 1257, established in Jerusalem the historic Ramban synagogue and died there three years later. It was the negative implications of the disputation that led the Ramban to move to Italy. They also caused the strengthening of the Spanish Inquisition, which caused the expulsion of the Jews 200 years later."

That story from 750 years ago is being told once, with its debtor production in Jerusalem, is semidocumentary in its telling, by Professor, Divine Right's producer, tells of how he came to write the script as pure divinity."

"It was all orchestrated from above," Doliner says.

Doliner was staying in Manhattan years ago and was invited to be the announcer and host of a Jewish radio show. One of his first interviewees was with Fred Hyman Maccoby, who was preparing his own book, a translation of all the major disputation from the Middle Ages. At the same time, someone had given a large donation to the Jews for Jesus movement."

"So we had phony Jews on almost every street corner, trying to get Christians to convert."

"I was like trying to cross a minefield every day in going to and from work, I read the translation of the Disputation of Barcelona and thought, wow, this is what's going on every day here in Manhattan."

"When I saw the incredible theatricality of the situation and the amazing responses of the Ramban, I knew it needed to be a play." Divine Right received many honors, with gala openings and stagings readings of the script at the Jewish Museum of New York and the Sephardic Center of New York, but it never had a full production, until now.

"I was the one that said, 'let's have its debut here at the Klezmer Theatre, right in the heart of Jerusalem.'" Doliner exclaims. "This is better than I could have hoped."

The show will run for five performances as at the Klezmer, and then to produce demand, an extra performance was added in 8th Street. "They're hearing their friends, neighbors, and local stragglers that they can't wait to
see this,” Doliner continues. “Sephardic Jews tell me that they are not as well represented in theater as the Ashkenazi story, so they are really excited.”

Doliner admits that the challenge with this production was twofold. First, there was the need to dramatize the scenes, because the debate, however engaging, cannot be the entirety of the production. Second, there was the esoteric nature of the disputation itself, which, if left unaltered, might alienate today’s audience.

“This is not word-for-word what happened in the courtroom,” Doliner explains. “One of the many reasons for that is that these people were so immersed in the Bible. It’s like the old joke about the Jewish comics just calling out numbers because they know all the jokes so well. Here they’re saying, ‘Oh yeah, well what about Psalm 110?’ That’s not going to fly if I want it to be accessible to a general audience. So it’s a mix of the actual transcripts plus a lot of modern arguments of would-be missionaries. It’s old and new. I also put in what was going on historically behind the scenes.”

What is perhaps equally enticing to Jerusalem theater-goers about Divine Right is the lecture series held after each show, something that director Yael Valier feels passionately about. The first two performances will be followed by a talk from historian Dr. Hannah Davidson. Davidson wrote a seminal paper on the topic of the disputation.

“It will be really exciting for people who want to know more and want to know if this is really how it happened,” Valier says. “She’ll be able to answer those questions. It matters to me that people will be able to access the show in a way that is meaningful to them.”

For those more interested in the interfaith aspect of the subject matter, the following two shows will be feature a discussion between Doliner and Father Martin Kleespies.

“The play is very well written and leaves the window open for interfaith work by not just portraying the church as the attacker, which it was mostly, but there were streams within the church that were not in agreement,” Valier adds. “That point of view is shown in the play. Father Kleespies will be able to look into that more and how it applies today.”

The final performance in Jerusalem will feature a talk by Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo. As a philosopher, Cardozo will address a number of theological issues that arise throughout the play. What do you do when your conscience goes against religious law? Is there only one truth? Can and should religions work together? How much should one bend before the rest of the world and how much should one stand strong?

These are questions that the Ramban was dealing with in the 13th century, and that many of all faiths still wrestle with today.

Divine Right opens on May 9. To purchase tickets or for more information: www.theaterandtheology.com