



THEATER

# DIVINE DISPUTATION

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

• By ARIEL DOMINIQUE HENDELMAN

**N**ahmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman), more commonly known as the Ramban, was many things in his lifetime: esteemed rabbi and scholar, author of halachic writings, Torah commentary and commentaries on other classic Jewish works, physician and central figure of medieval Spanish Jewry. Now, with the debut of *Divine Right*, the Ramban will also be a figure on stage.

*Divine Right* explores one of the most compelling and important legal cases in Jewish history, the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263. The disputation was a formally ordered debate between Dominican friar and Christian convert Pablo Christiani and the Ramban, held at the palace of King James I of Aragon and officiated by the king.

"It's an honor to play the Ramban, certainly one of the central figures of medieval Jewish history," Rabbi Prof. David Golinkin says. "He contributed important works to every area of Judaism. He was also viewed by non-Jews as a leader of the Jewish people, which is why he was chosen to represent the Jews in the disputation."

There were three central points of contention on the disputation agenda: whether the Messiah had already appeared, whether he is human or divine, and whether Judaism or Christianity is the true faith. The debate never really got past the first topic, and was an example both of the immense biblical knowledge of the times and of the Ramban's agile, philosophical mind and prodigious knowledge of Torah and Talmud. What Christiani did that was new was to bring in rabbinic sources, in addition to biblical. But the Ramban refuted each of Christiani's attempts, by pointing out that he was either taking a verse out of context or mistranslating the Hebrew.

"The Disputation of Barcelona had far-reaching implications for Spanish Jewry," Golinkin adds. "The king was directly involved as the judge. You had the Ramban versus this monk, who was fanatical. These monks went on to lead the Inquisition in Spain. What'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 conversionary sermon in the synagogue where he was for Shabbat. The Ramban replied to this sermon as well."

The disputation ended after four ses-



Exploring 1263's Disputation of Barcelona: (from left) Howard Metz, Bernard Valier, Shmuel Goldstein, Scott Kuperberg and Aharon Nalman. (Photos: Chana Goldstein)

sions 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 rewarded 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," Golinkin states. "The Jews were not increasingly persecuted at that time, but Raymond Martini went on to write one of the most famous anti-Jewish works of all time, called *Pugio Fidei*, in 1280. It became a major tool of anti-Jewish polemics, a guidebook for those who wished to attack Judaism."

"Another problem that arose was that the king cooperated in allowing the Dominicans to give conversionary sermons to the Jews. They also ordered the Jews to erase anything relating to Jesus from the Talmud and rabbinic literature. They burned copies of the Mishne Torah. In later publications, the anti-Christian passages were censored

so that the books wouldn't be burned."

The Ramban made aliya in 1267, established in Jerusalem the historic Ramban synagogue and died in Israel three years later. It was the negative ramifications of the disputation that led the Ramban to move to Israel. They also caused the strengthening of the Spanish Inquisition, which caused the expulsion of the Jews 200 years later.

"That this story from 750 years ago is being retold now, with its debut production in Jerusalem, is serendipitous in its timing. Roy Doliner, *Divine Right's* playwright, tells of how he came to write the script as pure divine providence.

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

Doliner was staying in Manhattan years ago and was invited to be the announcer and co-host of a Jewish radio show. One of his first interviews was with Prof. Hyam Maccoby, who was promoting his new book, a translation of all the major disputations from the Middle Ages. At the same time, someone had given a large donation to the Jews for Jesus movement.

"So we had phony ex-Jews on almost every street corner, trying to get uneducated Jewish people to convert," Doliner recalls. "It was like trying to cross a minefield every day 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 evenings and staged 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 guess it was waiting to have its debut here at the Khan Theater, right in the heart of Jerusalem," Doliner exclaims. "This is better than I could have hoped."

The show will run for five performances at the Khan, and due to popular demand, an extra performance was added in Gush Etzion.

"I'm hearing from friends, neighbors, and total strangers 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 a 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 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](http://www.theaterandtheology.com)