Social and Political Ideas in Early Modern Jewish Philosophical Commentaries on the Story of the Tower of Babel

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Introduction
Biblical commentaries have long provided thinkers with a medium to convey ideas to their contemporaries while grounding them in religious tradition. In this paper I will explore the interpretations of the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) written by two leading thinkers living in the Spanish Jewish community in the generation of the Expulsion (1492), Isaac Arama and Isaac Abravanel. I will focus on how each commentator perceived the actions of the builders of the tower, to be more precise: on the negative correlation between the devotion to political activity and the level of intellectual capacity and religious commitment. While Abravanel made frequent use of Arama’s book of sermons on the Torah, 'Aqedat Yizḥaq (The Binding of Isaac), at times incorporating whole passages from this work in his writings, their commentaries on this story differ significantly. I will suggest that one of the main reasons for their diverging approaches is rooted in the fact that Abravanel, above and beyond his vast personal political experience, was deeply influenced by Humanistic ideas. The broader question I will address is to what extent, if any, the political and social events taking place during the time of the writing of the commentaries may have had an impact on the views they express. While both commentaries can be evaluated independent of their social context I will try to show that the political and social events occurring during

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1 The following paper is based on my Ph.D. dissertation, ‘Medieval Jewish Philosophical Commentaries on the Story of the Tower of Babel’, which has recently been composed in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

the period of their composition could well have influenced their content.

The Maimonidean-Tibbonite Tradition

In order to better appreciate these commentaries on the Tower of Babel story, we should first examine a motif obtaining in several medieval Jewish philosophical commentaries to the story and which comprises an important element in the approaches of both Arama and Abravanel. This motif is found already in the Talmud\(^3\) and is extensively developed by Maimonides (1138-1204) in the first chapter of his ‘Laws of Idolatry’, part of the opening book of his great legal compendium, the *Mishne Torah*.

Maimonides delineates the intellectual and religious decline of humanity since the days of Enosh, which led to the worship of celestial bodies as intermediaries between God and the world. According to Maimonides, by the time of Abraham, this intellectual deterioration had reached its last phase, humanity having forgotten God completely and conceiving of the celestial bodies as the deity.\(^4\) Abraham, however, by his common sense and philosophical acumen, arrived at the conclusion that there is one God and that He is the incorporeal mover of the supernal sphere. In reaction to Abraham’s efforts to spread this knowledge within his society the king attempts to kill him. Abraham is miraculously saved and escapes to Canaan.\(^5\)

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*,\(^6\) Maimonides repeats this story but adds a number of significant details. He describes Abraham as being brought up among the Sabians, who believed ‘that there is no Deity except for the celestial bodies’ especially the sun and the moon. The Sabians, according to Maimonides, presented arguments that were based upon the perception of the senses.\(^7\) He depicts Abraham as being jailed by the king and eventually exiled from his country,\(^8\) in order to prevent

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\(^3\) BT Shabbat 118b (according to Genesis 4: 26).
\(^4\) Except for special individuals such as Hanoch, Metushelach, Noah, Shem and Ever. For the genealogical lists from Enosh till the flood and then from Noah till Babel, see Genesis 5:9 - 6:8; 10.
\(^5\) Compare *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:13.
\(^7\) A low level of perception compared to an abstract-intellectual one.
\(^8\) *Pirque De Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 24 (G. Friedlander trans., London 1916, pp. 168
him from threatening, even from his state of confinement, the stability of the king’s reign, which was based on the Sabian faith.

No explicit mention of the Tower of Babel is made in either Maimonidean text. Yet, in Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s composition, *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim* (Treatise on the Gathering of the Waters),9 Maimonides’ account of the false faith of the Sabians influences the writer’s allegorical interpretation of the story of the building of the tower.10 Ibn Tibbon claims that the biblical description of the tower doesn’t merely refer to its physical construction, but also serves as an allegory to the ladder of sciences11. Accordingly, the tower symbolizes humanity’s level of knowledge at the time. The fact that the head of the tower is depicted as reaching the sky indicates that the people could not elevate themselves beyond knowledge of entities that are perceived by the senses – that is, the heavens and the celestial bodies. Therefore these were considered supreme and regarded by the people as the deity. This is what the Sages meant when in the midrash they ascribe to the builders of the tower the intent to slay God.12 The Sages’ homily implies, in Ibn Tibbon’s reading, the limited intellectual perception of the people of the period and shows their incapability of grasping the existence of the Separate Intellects, which are not corporeal and do not exist in bodies; nor could they conceive of an incorporeal Deity who is ‘above’ (in a hierarchical sense) the heaven and governs all the entities of the universe. Hence, the homily is not to be interpreted literally but is itself to be treated as an interpretation in the form of an allegory of a story that itself is an allegory. The slaying of God to which the Sages refer is not in the physical sense, but rather in the conceptual one – the absence of the true notion of God from the minds of most of humanity in those days, except for Abraham.

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11 For a discussion of this concept, see, for example, A. Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, London 1969, p. 58.

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In the year 1300, another Provencal scholar from the Maimonidean-Tibbonite circle, Menahem Ha-Meiri, begins his commentary on the tractate Avot by outlining the history of humanity in a vein similar to that of the Mishneh Torah. Like Maimonides, he charts the religious and intellectual deterioration of humanity throughout the ages. Yet, unlike Maimonides, Ha-Meiri specifically mentions the generation of the Tower of Babel, and sees Maimonides’ depiction of the last stage of the deterioration of humanity as referring to that generation. Ha-Meiri’s view of the sin of that generation is based on Ibn Tibbon’s allegorical interpretation, which as we shall now see also provides the starting point for the approaches of our two Spanish exegetes.

Isaac Arama

Isaac Arama served as a rabbi and preacher (darshan) in both Castilian and Aragonese Jewish communities in the 15th century, until his exile to Naples in 1492, due to the Spanish Expulsion. He struggled against radical rationalism, yet adopted certain philosophical patterns of thought and terminology. Arama composed his book of sermons on the Torah, Aqedat Yitzhaq, in the 1480’s in order to promulgate his religious ideals, criticizing the social and moral situation within contemporary Spanish Jewry. In it he offered an exegesis of the biblical text and pointed out its contemporary applications. Arama also attempted to

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14 Ha-Meiri presents a philosophical-allegorical commentary also to another homily on the story of the Tower of Babel (BT Sanhedrin 109a). There too he regards the tower as an allegory for the ladder of knowledge. According to Ha-Meiri, the generation of the tower was unable to perceive the Separate Intellects, it perceived the system of the spheres incorrectly, and was able to perceive correctly only the sub-lunar world.
15 Since the aim of this paper is to focus on later commentators, I will leave an in-depth analysis of the approaches of Maimonides, Ibn-Tibbon and Ha-Meiri to a future study.
18 Heller-Wilensky (above, n. 2), p. 30; Y. Dan, Sifrut ha-Musar veha-Derush, Jerusalem 1975, p. 179
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dead with the philosophical and theological challenges of that turbulent era in Spain, during which the local Jewish communities were confronted by the approach of the extreme rationalists as well as by strong Christian pressure to convert.19

In his discussion of the generation of the Tower of Babel, Arama presents the conceptual mistake of that generation as having primarily a political dimension:

Since the people of that generation realized that they shared a common language and common desires, they arrived at the conclusion that their special perfection lies in the creation of an organized political society that would enable them to preserve their mutual cooperation and solidarity in an optimal manner. They also believed this to be the supreme human perfection.20

According to Arama, the people realized that they were a homogenous society on both the lingual and ideological levels. As a result they drew the mistaken conclusion that human perfection is political: the creation of an organized political society that would enable them to maintain their homogeneity and preserve their social situation. They regarded ideological uniformity and social unity as humanity’s supreme end, and considered the utmost human perfection to be in the realm of social and political activities.

Up to this point, Arama’s interpretation deals only with the sublunar world. Yet, in what follows Arama adds an astronomical dimension to the generation’s mistaken views:

They found support for their conception by looking to the heavens and gaining knowledge of all the celestial entities and their perpetual activity. This activity has no purpose other than to order the temporal entities by the rotations and movements of the celestial bodies. They said: what is the advantage of a human

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19 See Baer (above, n. 17).
20 Arama, Aqedat Yizhq, vol. 1, Warsaw 1911, p. 172 [the translation is my own]: אישים הדור ההוא, למה שהרגישו בעצמם المصرם על שפה אחת כולם, גם ברצון מוסכם על דברים וועניינים אחדים, גזרו בדעתם התכלית המיוחד להם הוא הקבוץ המדיני בשיותן הסדר בו לשתてくる ביניהם השיתוף והחברה, ושזה המעולה שבתכליות האנושיות. They said: what is the advantage of a human
being if not to use intellect in order to imitate that which is superior and closest to him in the hierarchy of being?  

Arama appears to be influenced by the Maimonidean-Tibbonite tradition concerning the limited level of perception of the builders of the tower.  

His remarks are based on the prevalent astrological belief concerning the influences the motions of the celestial bodies have over the earth. The builders of the tower, in his opinion, found support for their conception about the supremacy of politics by observing the celestial entities and concluding that the purpose of this activity was essentially the creation of order in the sub-lunar world. Furthermore, they mistakenly believed that the spheres are superior to humans in the hierarchy of being, and that therefore humanity is supposed to imitate their ‘political’ activity. Thus, that generation felt all the more obligated to dedicating all its abilities, including the intellectual ones, to the creation and maintenance of an organized political society.

Following in the steps of the Maimonidean-Tibbonite tradition, Arama stresses the limited intellectual perception of the builders of the tower. Yet, in fact, the thinkers belonging to this tradition regarded the spheres as an existence superior to humanity, believing their rotation to result from the intellectual activity of their Separate Intellects. Arama breaks with this dominant medieval philosophic view in certain places in ‘Aqedat Yiḥ qaq, when he regards the spheres as spiritless entities or as ones whose intellect serves their bodily movement, and therefore they are inferior to human beings, whose bodies serve their intellects. Thus, according to Arama, the builders’ misconception consists not

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21 Arama, vol. 1, p. 172: ונשא סמכ דינעמתڡה ונשא עיניה המשיחיה ומזריה עיןשוב: ומציינו אדריכליות יהל רוחים עינם המדותיהם ונקיף אף ולא יידעו רוחים שין חלול און, אך שטרפוקס הלא hüküm נ сентא ראן מנה מתור היי און והקרט המניון ועמד מנה וצל און ידע און זר רוחים מנה עניפשVirginia

22 The building of the tower in Arama’s commentary, however, is described as part of a political project, with no allegorical meaning being given to the tower itself.

23 Arama regards the spheres as spiritless entities in ‘Aqedat Yiḥ qaq, vol. 1, pp. 72-73, 75-77, as Heller-Wilensky [(above, n. 2), pp. 113-115], and Menachem Kellner ['Gersonides and his Cultured Despisers Arama and Abravanel', The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 6 (1976), p. 277] have noted.

24 Arama describes the souls of the spheres as serving the rotation of their bodies, whereas the human intellect is served by the human body. See ‘Aqedat Yiḥ qaq, vol. 2, ch. 63, pp. 85-86.
only in the conscious ‘political’ activity they attributed to the celestial orbs, but in their philosophic conception that they are superior to humanity. While the Maimonidean-Tibbonite philosophers identified the builders of the tower with Sabian beliefs, it is significant that Arama ascribes to them Aristotelian notions as well.

Arama concludes his discussion on the issue of the builders’ level of perception by claiming that the error of the generation of the tower was not in thinking that socio-political activity is important, but in regarding it as a goal in itself instead of a means towards the greater purpose of spiritual perfection. Thus the generation of the tower distracted their thoughts from God.25 Since the cause for the misconception of the builders was lingual uniformity, it was necessary to eliminate this uniformity in order to undermine the basis for their false belief and make them realize that the real human end is spiritual perfection26 and strive for its attainment.27

Arama’s innovation is not only in the political nature of the ideas he ascribes to the builders, but also in their theoretical content. As opposed to Maimonides’ characterization of the Sabians, Arama does not describe the builders as worshipping the celestial entities – if one can speak of idolatry on their part, the idol would be politics itself – but rather as mistakenly regarding these entities as superior to humanity.

Breaking with the medieval philosophical tradition, Arama saw the

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25 ‘Their sin was … merely in settling there and regarding that activity as a goal in itself, instead of a means for a greater purpose, which is spiritual perfection … By doing so, they were distracted from the First Cause, blessed be His name, and they did not reach Him in their speculation’ (‘Aqedat Yizbaq, p. 172): ‘הם לא חטאו … אלא במה שישבו שם וראו זה negócio תכלית לעצמו ולא שמוהו דרך אל תכלית גדול מהם. ב…”ב לב הiram יתברך שמו, ולא הגיעו עדיו בעיונם.’

26 This is due to the fact that lingual diversity not only creates a communication gap between people, but also indicates that universal political unity is not essential to humanity. A different common human characteristic, namely spiritual-intellectual attainment, should be acknowledged the key to human perfection.

27 It should be noted that the confusion of tongues directly eliminated only the social phenomenon from which the misconception of the builders evolved. Arama does not describe how the astronomic misconception, concerning the necessity to imitate the spheres, was corrected. Thus, it seems that Arama considered the astronomic misconception as an outcome of the social one, although the builders used the latter in order to justify the former.
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perfection of the human soul as the goal of creation, and the human soul as superior to the material spheres or their souls.

One can trace the roots of the tension between the social activity and the spiritual one, which Arama describes, back to the Nicomachean Ethics’ discussion of the relation between the vita activa and vita contemplativa. It can also be traced back to Maimonides’ discussion in the Guide 3: 54 on human perfection. Nevertheless, it seems to have had a special meaning in the days when Arama wrote his Aqedat Yizhak. Arama did not hesitate to remark upon the importance of religious observance as against the materialistic life which many of his contemporary co-religionists had adopted, and dedicated an entire composition, Ha’azut Qashah to the struggle against contemporary Averroistic trends.

As a preacher (darshan), a religious judge (dayan) and the head of a Yeshiva Arama was deeply involved in the social life of his Jewish community in Calatayud. Therefore, his description of the builders...
of the tower may also be viewed as a thinly veiled criticism of the socio-political situation within the Jewish communities in Spain, where since the 13th century rich Jews tried to obtain prominent positions, without proving themselves of high religious character. He may have been thinking of certain figures in Spanish Jewry who took part in the general Spanish political activity while neglecting their commitment to the Jewish religion. This was particularly true of converts to Christianity, such as members of the de la Caballeria family, who as a result of their conversion gained important political positions. By ascribing to the builders a major flaw in their theoretical thought, Arama may be subtly alluding to Averroism as well. Hence, his commentary on the story of the Tower of Babel may be viewed as part of his struggle to strengthen the religious faith and the loyalty to traditional Jewish practice of contemporary Hispano-Jewish society.

Isaac Abravanel

Arama’s view regarding the sin of replacing religious perfection by political activity, is developed in a later commentary on the Torah.


37 Baer (above, n. 17), pp. 253-259.


39 Isaac Abravanel, Commentary on Genesis (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1964, pp. 174-181. According to Netanyahu this commentary was probably composed in the first half of 1505; see B. Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher, Philadelphia 1982, p. 289, n. 16. David Ben-Zazon, who is writing a dissertation on Abravanel’s commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed, informed me orally that Netanyahu may be correct as to the date of the completion of the composition, yet its writing began at the latest while Abravanel was still in Spain.
written by his younger contemporary, Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508). Abravanel was politically and financially active in Portugal, Spain and Italy, and was a major figure in Spanish Jewry at the eve of the expulsion. He is considered to be one of the last medieval Bible commentators with a philosophical leaning, and among the first Renaissance exegetes – being strongly influenced by Iberian humanism, which combined ideals of Greek and Latin classical writings with Scholastic ones. Abravanel’s political thought is known for its anti-centralistic, and especially anti-monarchic, character, and

40 In Portugal, Abravanel was engaged in government finance, yet he eventually (1483) had to leave the country due to a death penalty set against him for supposedly being involved in a conspiracy against the king. In Castile, Abravanel was involved in tax collecting and was on good terms with the Spanish monarchs. Yet, at the time of the Expulsion of 1492, he chose to leave the country rather than convert to Christianity. After the Expulsion, Abravanel primarily settled in Naples. Later on, he moved to the Republic of Venice, after the French occupation of the Naples. In Venice, where he eventually died, Abravanel was involved in the attempt of the republic to create commercial relationships with Portugal. See Baer (above, n. 17), pp. 318-321; Netanyahu (above, n. 40), pp. 3-91.


42 According to Eliezer Gutwirth and Ram Ben-Shalom, because of the fact that Abravanel spent most of his mature life in the Iberian Peninsula, one can expect even his ‘Italian’ writings (especially the early ones) to express ideas he had developed prior to the expulsion. See E. Gutwirth, ‘Don Ishaq Abravanel and Vernacular Humanism in Fifteenth Century Iberia’, Bibliotheque d’Humanisme et Renaissance 60 (1998), p. 645-646; R. Ben-Shalom, ‘The Image of Christian Culture in the Historical Consciousness of the Jews of Twelfth to Fifteenth Century Spain and Provence’ (Hebrew), Ph.D. Dissertation, Tel-Aviv University (1996), vol. 1 p. 20. See, however, S. Feldman, Philosophy in a Time of Crisis, London 2003, pp. 152, 155, 166. Feldman regards Abravanel primarily as a medievalist.


44 L. Strauss, ‘On Abravanel’s Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching’, in: H. Loewe and J. B. Trend eds., Isaac Abravanel, Cambridge 1937, pp. 109, 114; A. Ravitzky, Religion and State in Jewish Thought (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1998, pp. 69-74. According to Ravitzky the other essentials of Abravanel’s political theory are: (a) Romantic criticism of technical and materialistic civilization (see also Y. Baer, ‘Isaac Abravanel and his Attitude to Problems of History and State’ [Hebrew], Tarbiz 8 [1938], p. 253; J. Guttmann, Philosophies of Judaism, D. W. Silverman trans., New York 1964, p. 255); (b) A messianic vision which combines theocracy and anarchy, as well as aspirations for a charismatic leadership
therefore is usually regarded as reflecting his negative political experience\textsuperscript{45}, side by side with contemporary Humanistic political thought.\textsuperscript{46} These principles, together with ideas from Arama’s commentary, appear in Abravanel’s commentary on the story of the Tower of Babel.

Abravanel explains the sin of the builders of the tower as part of humanity’s deterioration from a spiritual disposition to a political and materialistic one.\textsuperscript{47} In accordance with his anti-technological stance, Abravanel describes the generation of the tower as one which was supposed to enjoy the plenitude of Nature given by God to humanity, and which sufficed for its existence. Hence, the generation of the tower did not have to struggle to produce the commodities necessary for its survival and should have occupied itself only with perfecting their souls.\textsuperscript{48} Yet, instead, the people of the generation put all their efforts into inventing the crafts that would enable them to build a city\textsuperscript{49} with a tower in its midst, ‘in order to unite there and to become political animals’.\textsuperscript{50}
When Abravanel explains that the founders of the city desired to create a political society because they believed political association to be the highest of human ends, he quotes Arama nearly word by word, but without revealing his source. Yet, unlike Arama, Abravanel regards the actions of the builders of the tower not as the result of a conceptual mistake, but rather of their greedy aspirations for the negative by-products of political association. According to him, urban life creates the desires for political power and material possessions, which result in unrestrained violence. Hence, unlike Arama, Abravanel claims that besides the damage that was caused to humanity’s spiritual level by these political and materialistic developments, a socio-economic deterioration, endangering physical existence also took place:

When they started to develop crafts in order to build the city and the tower, they abandoned fraternity and common possessions became private property. They fell prey to increasing polarization, because of their desire to take and to possess things for themselves,

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51 ‘They thought that their distinctive end was political association in order to maintain inter-cooperation and society. They believed this to be the highest of the human ends, together with that which results from it’ (Commentary on Genesis, p. 176):

52 As mentioned above, this is a common phenomenon in Abravanel’s writings. See Heller-Wilensky (above, n. 2), pp. 50-57. One should not overlook the possibility that in this specific case, Abravanel intended to make the same social criticism as Arama, alluding to the same contemporary phenomena.

53 Namely, ‘fame, office, rulership, imaginary honors, the delight of gathering possessions, and the violence, robbery and bloodshed that follow them’ (p. 176):

54 In accordance with his anti-monarchic ideology, Abravanel explains, that rulership is an art opposed to nature, which created men free and equal by birth: ‘The third category of crafts goes against nature, like throwing a stone upward or causing fire to go downward. Similar is the attempt of some to dominate others and to subjugate them, though nature has created humans free and equal by birth’ (pp. 177-178):

Abravanel’s approach echoes Augustine’s City of God, XIX, 15.

55 ‘All of this is unnatural superfluosity that hinders and frustrates in attaining the true perfection of the soul’ (p. 176):
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saying: ‘What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours’. 56 Thus they became estranged from one another. 57

Abravanel explains that as the people of the generation began developing artificial means for building the city and the tower, they abandoned the positive and natural social circumstances which humanity had enjoyed ever since the flood, one of brotherhood and common possessions. Instead, they now developed the principles of private property, which created a rupture among them. Thus, whereas Arama describes the building of the city and the tower as an act which was intended to preserve social solidarity, Abravanel emphasizes the damage that was caused to this solidarity by the desire of each of the builders to individually gain as many material possessions as possible.

Abravanel explains the punishment of the confusion of tongues and the scattering of humanity all over the world as a preventative act: The establishment of the universal state would have necessarily led to the return of the catastrophic moral conditions preceding the flood. Hence, God prevented such deterioration in advance by the scattering of the human race. 58 Abravanel describes an original state of fraternity in which all humanity spoke one divinely created language, Hebrew, 59 and shared all material possessions. 60 The confusion of tongues resulted from the need to create a new conventional vocabulary for the artificial

56 This is the manner in which the tractate of Avot (5:14) describes the ideology of the people of Sodom or of mediocre people.
57 Commentary on Genesis, p. 179 (translation from I. Zwiep, Mother of Reason and Revelation, Amsterdam 1997, p. 187): כשנטו לחידוש המלאכות בבניין העיר והמגדל והנחלות פרטיות ובאו לידי חילוף וייחוד מתוך חמדתם לקחת הסירו עצמן מן האחווה ונעשו הקניינים
58 According to Abravanel, God's punishment was proportional to humanity's sin. The builders of the tower were originally one natural nation, yet they wanted to turn this unity into a political one. Thus by confusing their tongues God deprived them not only of the ability to create political unity, but also of their natural one.
59 See Judah Halvei, Kuzari, II, 68.
60 Compare: Plato, The Republic, V, 464; Netanyahu (above, n. 40), p. 305, n. 13. Abravanel seems to be influenced by the Augustinian conception that all humans were created equal and in their original natural situation they were all free and shared the ownership of all possessions (City of God, XIX, 15); See Netanyahu, pp. 153-155, 306 n.27. See also: Gutwirth, 'Conversions' (above, n. 39), p. 106, n. 29.
life style adopted by man. God created disagreement among the different families/nations concerning these new words and thus new languages were created. The variety of languages was the cause for the split into nations, which in turn led to the scattering over the earth. In Abravanel’s view this disagreement was caused by a change in divine providence. God removed his immediate providence from humanity and transferred the exercise of providence to the angels. From now on, not only did every nation have its own ‘guardian angel’ and different conventional vocabulary, but they were also deprived of the ability to attain human perfection. Only the Jews, who were loyal to the original human end, subsequently enjoyed immediate divine providence and also adhered to the Hebrew language.

Having been an experienced statesman, fully aware of the political arenas on both the national and communal level, Abravanel developed resentment towards the by-products of political life, which he ascribes to the builders of the tower. Whereas Arama accepted the Aristotelian political tradition which regards politics at least as a necessary means for attaining spiritual perfection, Abravanel came to reject this concept. His commentary on the story of the Tower of Babel draws from a wealth of sources reflecting his broad philosophical knowledge and intensive political activity: (a) His description of humanity’s political and socio-economic deterioration echoes a medieval theological approach, both Christian and Jewish, of man’s fall from a divine nature to a political and beastly one. (b) Influenced by the Humanism of the

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62 Except for a few righteous individuals who remained loyal to their original spiritual goal, namely Noah, Shem, Ever and Abraham.

63 If till then humanity’s negligence of its supreme end was the result of its own initiative, from then on it was permanently deprived of this end, except for the Jews. Abravanel does not deal with the question whether new words were invented also in Hebrew, due to universal technological progress and the political character adopted also by the Jews (yet in a restrained manner and by divine permission, according to him). He uses a metaphor from Kuzari (I, 47, 95, 103; IV, 15, 23), describing Abraham as the ripe fruit of humanity, whereas the other nations are its peel.

64 That is to say, a fall from divine life in Paradise to a materialistic one in our
Renaissance, Abravanel often borrowed from classical thought. Therefore, it should come to us as no surprise that there are certain parallels between his ‘proto-natural’ and common ownership ideas and those which appear in Greek and Roman literature, such as in the writings of Plato and Seneca. (c) Abravanel’s discussion may also be alluding to the accusations of greed, corruption and a pursuit of power, often raised within pre-expulsion Spanish Jewish society against rabbinical authorities, as well as by contemporary (non-Jewish) poets related to the royal court against the Christian clergy. (d) As in the case of Arama, Abravanel’s commentary may be read as a condemnation of those among his contemporary co-religionists who had decided to convert rather than surrender their materialistic possessions and/or political status. Abravanel himself serves as an example of a Jewish...
who preferred to remain loyal to his religion at the expense of losing his political position and many of his possessions. As opposed to Arama, however, Abravanel was much more radical in his anti-political and anti-materialistic stance, in the spirit of one of the trends of Renaissance Humanistic thought.

**Conclusion**

It may be concluded from this discussion, that one can find in the philosophical commentaries on the story of the Tower of Babel general political ideas and others that are more relevant to the commentator’s social and political context. This is true of the commentaries of Isaac Arama and Isaac Abravanel, both of them written during the era of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. In their respective ways these thinkers dealt with the relation between humanity’s level of intellectual perception and political activity. They employed commentaries on this scriptural story as a medium for subtly conveying their attitude towards the contemporary situation to their co-religionists.

Arama adopted the Maimonidean-Tibbonite tradition stressing the limited perception of the builders of the tower. While the concern of the thinkers belonging to this tradition was to show the false view the generation of the tower held of God, Arama utilizes the idea of their limited intellectual capacity in order to criticize the perception of politics as humanity’s supreme end, as well as the conception concerning the superiority of the spheres. Arama regards the perfection of the human soul not only as the goal of the human being but of the entire creation; he sees the human soul as superior to the spheres and their souls. In short, some of the false speculative views he ascribes to the builders of

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70 See Netanyahu (above, n. 40), pp. 59-60.
the tower had been accepted by Maimonides, a fact that many of Arama’s readers would certainly have discerned and interpreted as the negative influence of Aristotelian philosophy on Maimonides’ own thought.

*Aqedat Yizhaq* was composed not long before the Spanish Expulsion, and therefore it is not surprising that the commentary contained in it is of bearing to the dispute which took place within Spanish Jewry, over the question of human perfection and whether its attainment necessitates preserving a traditional Jewish way of life. This was a period of great activity of the Spanish Inquisition against Conversos who were suspected of secretly observing Jewish rites, and a time when the Christian pressure on Jews to convert was on the increase.71 Averroism, which regarded the adherence to Aristotelian ethics as sufficient for gaining human perfection, helped Jews rationalize the decision to convert and completely abandon Jewish practices.72 Arama played an active part in this struggle, especially in confronting the Averroistic camp within the Jewish society. By means of his commentary he sought to counter some of the forces weakening Jewish commitment by ascribing their erroneous views to the builders of the tower.73

Isaac Abravanel spent much of his life engaged in political activity; he also had vast philosophical knowledge. His commentary, which in part reflects the lessons he drew from his experience, stresses the negative aspect of political activity not merely when it is preferred to spiritual perfection, as Arama had described, but as fundamentally antithetical to both the spiritual and physical dimensions of human existence. This is caused by the ‘non-natural’ political dominion of one man over another. We also find in Abravanel’s commentary an

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71 See Baer (above, n. 19), pp. 324-423.
72 Baer, pp. 254-258.
73 If we understand Arama as describing the creation of a political ideology with a significant metaphysical component, he may also be implying that the growing aspiration of the contemporary Spanish government to create a religiously homogenous Spanish society was not a demonstration of religious piety, as it appeared to be, but rather a means for strengthening the absolute regime. Thus, Arama’s primary discussion of the builder’s misconception can be interpreted as criticizing certain circles within Hispano-Jewish society, but his conclusion might relate to the Spanish government as well.
example of his negative attitude towards human technical progress and private possession. Hence, Abravanel, unlike Arama, considers the political actions and materialistic goals of the builders of the tower as a human tragedy not only on the spiritual, but also on the social level.

Though Abravanel completed the writing of his commentary to the book of Genesis after the Expulsion, his anti-centralistic approach is present already in his Iberian writings. Therefore, one may question the extent of the impact of the Expulsion on this specific commentary. Abravanel’s critique of politics and materialism was pertinent to the situation prior to the Expulsion; the relevance of the critique only increased with its occurrence. The generation of the Spanish Expulsion was confronted by a reality in which many Jews decided to convert rather than surrender their materialistic possessions and/or political status,74 and the phenomena of corruption and thirst for power penetrated even the rabbinic establishment.75

Arama and Abravanel belonged to the same ‘camp’ within Spanish Jewry at the generation of the Expulsion and shared a common battle against forces from outside as well as from within Spanish Jewry who threatened the adherence to traditional Jewish life. One of the main reasons for the differing approaches of Arama and Abravanel may be the fact that Abravanel was deeply influenced by Humanistic ideas, which, in conjunction with his vast political experience, led him to detest the evil outcome of politics and materialism not only on the spiritual level, but also on the physical one, an outcome culminating in the tragedy of the Expulsion in 1492.

74 Baer, pp. 433-439.
75 Gutwirth, ‘Conversions’ (above, n. 39), pp. 97-121.