

RABBI MENAHEM HAMEIRI - HIS LIFE AND WORKS

By Norman Lamm

PREFACE:

In this study of the life and works of Menahem Ha'Meiri, one of the comparatively recently discovered "Rishonim" (Talmudists of the Middle Ages), I will attempt to present not so much a comprehensive biography of the man as a summary of his works and opinions, showing how he was affected by his environment, how he affected others and his proper place among the Rishonim from the historical perspective. In this case it is the lack of information about Meiri's personal life that prevents me from giving a detailed biographical picture of the man. In the case of one like Meiri, however the paucity of strictly biographical material is excusable when we realize that he put his life and energy into his works and major decisions. It is from a study of his system, his attitudes towards philosophy, certain methods of interpreting the Bible and other paramount problems in Jewish religion and theology that contemporary scholars have come to know and respect Meiri. It is through these works and decisions that Meiri has won immortality, and it is because of these that he is so avidly studied by logic-loving students of the Talmud.

Menahem ben Shlomo (Solomon) ben Meir, most popularly known as Meiri (after his grandfather Meir), was born on the third of Ellul, 5060 (1249 C.E.) in the Provencal city of Perpignan, which today is in France.¹ In Provencal, Meiri was known as "Don Vidal Solomon," the "Don Vidal" serving as an honorary prefix to names of people of respectable station.

Little or nothing is known about Meiri's early life and family. Gross, in his *Gallia Judaica* (history of French geography famous in Jewish history), however, writes about some manuscript found in Perpignan which indicates that Meiri's father was a city clerk, a fact which carries much weight since the position of city clerk was, in those days, reserved for the intellectuals. This would also mean that Meiri's father had a secular education, also a fact of great importance. Gross also records discovery of another manuscript which indicates that Meiri was a nephew of R. Simon ben Isaac, a well-known commentator on Isaac Alfasi. The prominent researcher Azilui (R. Chaim Yosef David, also known as "Chida") asserts that Meiri was a disciple of the famous R. Jonah Gerundi. Azilui bases this opinion on the fact that Meiri, in his B.H.*, refers "רבינו", (Rabeinu), meaning "our Rabbi," a title customarily applied to one's teacher (Azilui, *Shem Ha'gedolim*, Menahem ben Shlomo). Stern (one of the first publishers of Meiri's works) disproves this point by showing that Meiri applied to all great rabbis, including those chronologically impossible of having been his teachers, the title "Rabeinu." Stern² goes on to prove that Meiri was the disciple of R. Reuben ben Hayyim of Norbonne. Azilui also claims that Meiri was a חבר (close friend) of R. Solomon b. Aderet (רשב"א "Rashba," his popular name), one of the greatest men of his age and of whom we shall have occasion to speak later. Stern

¹ See end of Beth Ha'behira, Abot.

² Introduction to Beth Ha'behira, Berachot.

* "B. H." will from here on be used as the abbreviation of "Beth Ha'behira."

agrees to their contemporaneity, but states that Rashba was קשישא טובא, much older. Stern is evidently right, since there exists amongst the Responsa of Rashba (Responsa Rashba Vol. III — No. II) one response addressed to "Rabbi Menahem of Perpignan." If this is Meiri, and it evidently is, then we must assume that Rashba was much older than Meiri since it was Meiri who sent the question (in Halacha) to Rashba, which would not have occurred had Meiri been older. Also, from the following quotation from B.H. at the end of the introduction to Abot, we learn that Meiri first wrote his works after the greatest of Rashba's had already been published. Meiri writes; "ועל ידן (חבורי הרשב"א) החזקנו". לבאר כמה הלכות עמוקות. (Rashba's) writings we have learned the explanation of many profound (thoughts and) Halakaa."

Meiri's main work was the בית הבחירה (Beth Ha'behira) literally meaning the "Chosen House," an analytic commentary on 37 tractates of the Talmud. It was first seen by Azilui about two-hundred (200) years ago, and published by Stern in the beginning of this century. The fact that Meiri's works were first published in the twentieth century accounts for the fact that he is very rarely mentioned by the later Talmudists (אחרונים).

Meiri classifies all works in Halaka, written till his day, into two groups. The first group includes those works written according to מסכתות (tractates; that is, those that follow the text of the Talmud in consecutive order. These works usually deal only with הלכות השייכות לזמן הזה (laws applicable in these days of exile). The second group is represented by Maimonides' system. Maimonides removed many laws from their original places in the Talmud text and arranged them so that the laws were classified under general and appropriate headings. Thus he did not follow the text order. Maimonides presented pure laws without dialectic, without debate, without everything else not concerning the actual פסק הלכה. Maimonides included laws found in the Talmud of Jerusalem, Tosefta, gaonic verdicts and other sources. Laws applying to non-exilic times are also included.

Meiri, however, does not desire the elimination of the Talmud as the source of all Halacha. He objects to the dogmatic flavor in Maimonides' writing, saying that they prevent and hinder "דרכי החקירה באופן חפשי" (ways of research in the free and liberal manner). For the nature of the scholar is that he wishes to reach a comprehension of an idea through research into the faults and merits of the idea itself, to weigh and balance the various conflicting ideas. Then, and only then, can a code like that of Maimonides be of any use.

Meiri's B.H., will, therefore, follow the order of the Talmud text, include a discussion of the dialectic, and finally lead up to a פסק הלכה a verdict. Discussions of הלכות שאינן שייכות לזמן הזה, laws not applicable to our present-day system of life, will also be included. References to all related sources in other tractates will be included in the discussion on the original source. Ambiguous terms and foreign sounding words or phrases will be explained. The system of and opinions expressed in Maimonides' פירוש המשניות ("Peyrush Ha'Mishnayot," commentary on the Mishna) will serve as a guide for Meiri in the writing of the B.H. Meiri will keep in mind the fact that the Talmud was written on the Mishna, thus replacing, to an extent, some of the emphasis placed on the Talmud at the expense of the study of

the Mishna. Also, and this is very important since it contributes to the analytic aspect of his book, an introduction will be given to every tractate dealing with the general aims, purposes and laws stated in that tractate, with the special intention of placing it properly among the other tractates of the Talmud. This will be repeated before every chapter of every tractate.

Thus will the merits of both styles prevalent in his age be combined by Meiri in his B.H., and, taken from as purely objective a viewpoint as possible, one can say that Meiri succeeded to a greater extent than he himself thought he would.

However, this writer believes that both Meiri and the recent historians and bibliographers overemphasized the "פסק הלכה" (verdict) part of Meiri's writings. Though there is generally a Psak Halaka after the dialectic discussion, something for which he is unique, not always does one notice the stress laid upon the Psak Halacha. It has many times seemed to me that it was more a clarification of the dialectic than a practical decision of jurisprudence that Meiri intended.

We shall now discuss that decision of Meiri, which was a result of his entire outlook upon life (his entire sort of "Weltanschauung"), and which, together with the B.H. makes Meiri a living symbol and an unforgettable name in Jewish history. That is, his attitude towards the study of philosophy by the tradition-observing Jews of his day. (Most Jews were then tradition-observing.) Before giving a detailed history of Meiri's attitude and decision, we must first present a very brief summary of the history of Jewish philosophers and study of philosophy by Jews till Meiri's days.

All Jewish philosophers, with very few exceptions, from Philo to the end of the Middle Ages, attempted to bring about a reconciliation between Jewish theology and Gentile, whether Greek or any other, philosophy. This was their main goal, and their sole criterion of success was a perfect blending of both. Philo-Judaeus of Alexandria, who flourished about 20 B.C., was the first to attack the problem. He managed to reconcile both systems by reinterpreting the Torah allegorically (besides its original meaning as set down by the Rabbis) thus giving the right of way to philosophy without encroaching upon the written Word of G-d. Philo, however, was neglected by the Rabbis, and until very recently was studied mainly by non-Jews (his works were all written in Greek).

The second great Jewish philosopher to attempt a reconciliation was Saadia, Gaon of Sura, who was evidently acquainted with Aristotle only through the Arab Aristotelians. When Saadi's ספר אמונות ודעות ("Sefer Emunoth Ve'Daoth") Book of Beliefs and Thoughts, first appeared, it drew much mingled comment from Rabbinic circles. Some praised it highly while others already began to object to the entire idea of Jewish Philosophy. They saw in it a great danger, a danger of the detrimental effect of philosophy on the half-learned. They already then objected to the study of Greek Philosophy, and subsequently to the writing of books conciliating religion and philosophy, on the grounds that one not well-learned in Torah and the Oral Law would fall prey to the attractive logic and rationalism of Greek Philosophy. They felt that one who had not lived through every word of Torah, one who had felt only very little of that burning enthusiasm and ecstasy of the Torah-true Jew, would

find it very easy to abandon something he knew very little of for a system of thought which appealed to him by its abstract generalities.

Then came Moses ben Maimon, known as Rambam or Maimonides, by far the greatest of all his contemporary gentile philosophers. As in his Halaka, Maimonides showed a full and thorough comprehension of the deepest and profoundest of Greek thought as well as of Torah and Oral Law. It was he who finally closed the seemingly incorrigible breach between religions and philosophy. He applied plain logic to his philosophy, and even to his Torah-interpretation, with impunity. For no one was able to challenge his knowledge of Torah, since he was Maimonides, the greatest Halaka scholar and the most famous name for centuries after his death, if not until the present day. Maimonides' fame as a Rabbi (and, incidentally, as a medical doctor too) plus the unimpeachable logic and profundity of his "Guide for the Perplexed" (מורה נבוכים), his philosophical work written in Arabic and translated into many foreign languages, lent a great prestige to the idea of the study of philosophy. He was the first to make a really profound impression. The ascendancy, the greatness of Maimonides brought to a forefront the problem of the right or wrong of the popular study of philosophy among traditional Jews.

Now, immediately after popularization of the "Guide," began the great polemics between the Maimunists and the Anti-Maimunists. The fight went further than anathema and counter anathema, excommunication and counter excommunication. The arm of the Church Inquisition was invoked and the altar of a Parisian Church furnished the torch which set on flame the pages of Maimonides' "Guide" in the French Capital.

All the mentioned struggles had taken place towards the end of Maimonides' life. But the bitter debates and polemics were not to subside for a long time. About one hundred years after the printing of the "Guide" in Arabic in 1190, when Meiri was Rabbi of Perpignan, Rabbi Abba Mari, one of the חכמי לונל (wise men of Lunel), who was by no means an ignorant man and who, besides his excellent knowledge of the ethical and legal teachings of the Torah and Talmud, was well acquainted with all philosophy, set out upon a crusade against all study of philosophy or its study among Jews. It seems that the intense dislike of philosophy, or its study among Jews, by Abba Mari and his like had a double root. They were against the philosophy itself for its agnosticism in the case of gentile philosophers, and its occasional aberration from tradition in the case of Jewish philosophers. The second cause for their animosity towards philosophy was its effects upon the תלמידי חכמים the general students. They thought that philosophy was primarily a revolution, and, still in its infancy, it had not yet learned to discriminate between good and bad, between right or wrong. They thought that one with a mind not completely matured would easily fall under the influence of philosophy to the detriment of their faith and religion. Whether philosophy was right or wrong, it can, and has, sown seeds of discontent in the minds of its students.⁶

⁵ See S. M. Chunem's Toldoth Ha'posekim, on Meiri.

⁶ In Minchat Kenaot, Chap. 14, Aba Mari pays his proper respects to Aristotle and his "friends". In fact, he likens Aristotle to the patriarch, Abraham. His main objection, he says there, is the attempt of many Jews to bend the words of the Scriptures so that it proves their speculative conclusions.

Abba Mari was, then, a mortal enemy of philosophy. He, and his followers, sent letters to all the great and eminent rabbis of his day asking them to cooperate with him in anathematizing students of philosophy and science (with the exception of medicine). The most important of the Rishonim, at this time, was R. Solomon ben Aderet (called "Rashba"). All his correspondence Abba Mari compiled and edited, entitling the book *„מנחת קנאות„* ("Minhat Kenaot" — "Offering of the Zealous"). Abba Mari found, in many rabbis, ardent support.

As a result, preparations for the solemn event, the calling of the ban, were made in all great synagogues and town halls in Spain, France and Germany. In the traditional ceremony, which was covered by a blanket of solemnity, evil was invoked upon all who indulged in the profane studies. The ban was thus announced in all Jewish towns and cities. The original certificate of the anathema was signed by many great people, which served to increase the tempo of the great struggle surrounding this event.⁷

One very important name, however, was missing from the list of signatures attached to the text of the ban. That was Menahem ben Shlomo Ha'Meiri, Rabbi of Perpignan.

Meiri's decision regarding the ban, and his strategy employed throughout the entire polemic, was the greatest decision Meiri had ever made; and it is because of this that he is remembered by students of Jewish History. It is a decision whose depth, profundity and essential sagacity reflects upon the mind and character of its creator. It is a brave and courageous decision in that it satisfied neither side; it is indicative of genius of mind and strength of character in that was a result of a careful study of the matter, an exact weighing of the issues and people concerned.

Abba Mari, who loved and respected Meiri, wrote to him asking him to add his voice to those supporting the anathema. It is evident that Abba Mari strongly desired the complete consent of Meiri, considering the fact that Meiri was already known as nurturing a somewhat liberal attitude towards the study of philosophy, (this was evident from many remarks in the B.H.), and his consent would have meant definite success for Abba Mari's group.⁸

Meiri's complete response to Abba Mari is lost, only fragments remain, but there is absolutely no doubt as to the nature of his opinion. Meiri, holding true to his general character, compromised, not for the sake of compromise but for the sake of rightness and justice. Infinite respect that he had for Maimonides, both as Rabbi and as philosopher, and somewhat of a philosophical person himself, as pointed out previously, from his writings in B.H., Meiri could not consent to the interdiction proposed by Abba Mari. He knew that philosophy would eventually come to the same conclusions as religion, that study of philosophy was an unimpeachable right of the intellectual.

However, Meiri also clearly saw that study of philosophy, with its agnostic implications, before a thorough knowledge of Torah with its Talmudical interpreta-

⁷ See Abba Mari's "Minhat Kenaot"; main correspondence concerning the ban, to and from Rashba, plus the text of the ban. See Responsa Rashba, Vol. I, Nos. 413-417. No. 418 is Yedaya Beadrasi's apologetic protest. The anathema of the Rashba was, incidentally, placed *only* on the Jewish community of Barcelona, since all its members were willing to accept it.

⁸ See Minhat Kenaot, No. 93, p. 172.

tions, would lead one astray. He feared that philosophy, a revolutionary and novel thing, would attract those who see only the superficial; they would leave Torah, religion and faith behind them and attach themselves only to philosophy whose **intrinsic** values and meaning they never grasped. So, Meiri advised a thorough knowledge of Torah and Talmud as a prerequisite to the study of philosophy. It was one in whom both cultures were combined, Torah with Talmud, and philosophy, with Torah and Talmud holding the upper hand, that Meiri envisaged as the perfectly mentally and spiritually developed Jew.

Abba Mari was definitely dissatisfied with Meiri's decision, and though he continued to respect him, he did not bother to answer Meiri personally, but left it to one of his proteges, Simon ben Josef.

We now come to another important phase of discussion about Meiri, namely, his method of Biblical exegesis and Agadda interpretation.

Meiri (B.H., Abot III No. 14) criticizes the ultra-allegorical figurative exegetes, without mentioning names. It is very possible that he meant those of Philo's class, although it is highly improbable that he had ever heard of Philo himself. Meiri writes that they do wrong in the eyes of G-d who: **המוציאים דברי תורה ממשומם**,

והשאירו רק רמזים שכלים. "Those who interpret the words of the Torah in a manner other than their literal meaning, leaving in these words only philosophical hints." It is even doubtful whether Meiri was thinking about those of Philo's type when he wrote the above passage, since he explicitly indicates only those who **entirely** detached the interpretation from the literal meaning. Meiri, in the above mentioned place, goes on to present an outline of all various groups of **מצות**, commandments, in the light of the method to be used in interpreting them.

Meiri, however, as evidenced from his works on Psalms and Proverbs, and his commentaries (in B.H.), on the Agadda, tried his utmost to give a logical, systematic exegesis, depending upon and using the Midrashim occasionally. These works bear the regular Meiri stamp of conciseness, systematic and basic logic. They are not a rehashing of old and trite themes, but novel exegesis that are near as possible to the literal meaning.

In the year 1306, the year the Jews of France were faced with a planned and systematic persecution, Meiri, Rabbi of Perpignan, died. French, indeed World Jewry was shocked by the news of the death of the great man. For one year after his death, Perpignan mourned their beloved Rabbi, teacher and guide, and at all weddings were signs of mourning to remind the population of their great loss. Abba Mari, who had been repudiated by Meiri, yet loved and respected him, writing, upon **ומה אנחנו למחות דמעת עשוקים ואין להם מנחם**, hearing the news of his death: (based upon a sentence in Kohelet IV:1), meaning, "And how shall I console (dry the tears of) the bereaved, when there is no consoler" (Menahem). (The word "consoler" is, in Hebrew, "Menahem," — Meiri's first name).

In the letter to the community of Perpignan, in which he laments the death of his friend and the persecution of the Jews by the king of Majorque (of France), Abba Mari writes: "...the community lost an experienced guide, science an illustrious representative and I — the best and noblest of all friends" . . .