

Rabbi Malbim - Bible Commentator [1,-8091,880]

Yahrzeit date – first of Tishri, 1880

Not many know but the name "Malbim" is not a family name. It is an acrostic of: **Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michael**". His real family name is "Weisser" (See the biography of Malbim, written by the historian **Noach Rosenblum**, published by Mossad Harav Kook, 1988, page 23).

He wrote one of most logical commentaries to the Torah. How so? Since he decided that there was not one superfluous word in the Bible, certainly each and every word had an individual importance; attention must be paid to each repetition. For instance "simcha" and "sasson" cannot be really synonyms. He checked the tens of places that the words are used and found that "simcha" is a condition of the heart, of thought (see psalms 4, 8) but "sasson" is external manifestations, like dancing and clapping hands. That is why a bridegroom has "sasson" with his newly acquired wife (Isaiah 62, 5). It is not a mere heartfelt condition but requires external expression. Therefore when both expressions are used together, it is not a mere repetition.

There were others who preceded Malbim with this approach, but he was the first to utilize it in explaining 22 books of the Bible (We don't have his commentaries to Eicha nor to Kohellet. Possibly he didn't conclude his project). In 1,892 the Malbim's work "**Yair Or**" to explain 662 synonyms, was published. At that period (1900), a very adept talmid chacham called Joseph Greenbaum put out his collection of articles on the subject of synonyms culled from Malbim's voluminous writings, under the name "**haKarmell**".

In the same way he analyzed carefully the switch of verbs which the Bible constantly does. He found deep implications. When Samson, the muscular hero, requested of the Philistine boy to help him approach the pillars of the building, so that "ve-shaen Alehem" (Judges 16, 26) afterwards the Scriptures relate "va-yisomech alehem" (Judges 16, 29). Are these two verbs interchangeable? Certainly not! When the person accompanying his sacrificial offer to the High Holy Altar of the Temple must perform "semicha", it must be "b'chol kocho" (with all the weight of his arms and shoulders). If Samson would have even hinted to the boy, or revealed any inclination to lean on the pillars with all of his formidable weight, the boy would

have shied off. To the contrary, he used the Philistine counterword for "sha'inah" which is only laying a hand to rest on the pillar, not his full weight.

So too the Malbim pays great attention to syntax, the proper formation of words of the sentence. The first sentence of Va-yikra will serve as a good example. "He called to Moshe and G-d said unto him". Wouldn't it be simpler to phrase it "G-d called unto Moshe from Ohel Mo'ed"? From all these changes (there are hundreds of them to which he called attention to in his commentary) he verified the many halachot that Hazal taught us in Sifra. The Hafetz Haim notes many a time (in his commentary to Torat Kohanim) to see the words of the book "**Hatorah ve'hamitzva**" (the name of the Malbim's commentary). It is also for this reason that many of the "maskilim" in his period admired him and thought him to be entire dissimilar to the other Orthodox rabbis of his generation who (a) had little knowledge of grammar (b) didn't take the time to form a methodical commentary to the Bible, utilizing "Pshat".

The Malbim composed a long list of rules for checking syntax and grammarian problems and called it "**Ayelet Hashachar**" (he lists 613 points to check). This is published at the beginning of his commentary to Va-Yikra. The intense power of analysis and concentration involved there arouse great fascination.

His first book (1836) was "**Arzot ha-chaim**", a commentary to the Shulchan Oruch, till chapter 31 (Tefillin). This book is composed of two parts: "Hameir la'arezt" which reveals the Talmudic sources for the law, and "Eretz Yehuda" new amplifications based on many "Achronim". In the hasskamah that the Gaon Hatam Sofer wrote to this work, he says that the Malbim is close to the ultimate truth of the Torah, veering clear of farfetched pilpulim, which at that time were quite current (so he writes there). In 1938 a New York scholar called Rabbi Shlomo Drilich put out collected articles by the Malbim, on suggyot of the Talmud (republished in Jerusalem, 1966).

At a very young age (18) Malbim decided that he couldn't properly understand the Torah if not knowing the Inner Wisdom of the Kabbalah. For this purpose he travelled to the distant house of the Hassidic Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Ziditchov, who was considered to be most proficient in this field, and studied by him for many weeks. We find at the end of the Malbim's commentary to Shir Hashirim a slim condensation called "**Hacharash ve-hamasger**" which puts in capsule form all of

the teachings of the Kabbalah. So too in his commentary to Parshat Terumah and Parshat T'zaveh" he wrote a lengthy article ("**Rimzei Hamishkan**") revealing many of those secrets. The Hebrew Encyclopedia mentions his published work on this subject called "**Megillat Starim**".

Following which he published a volume of nine sermons called "**Artzot Hashalom**". These discuss topics of reward and punishment, of proper dedication to G-d etc. These sermons are phrased in extreme florid language and apparently he intended thereby to make an impact on those with modern cultural and literate tendencies.

After filling the position of Rabbi in Wereshna (Posen, Germany) for 7 years, in 1846 he accepted a new rabbinical position in Kempen, Prussia. This proved to be a bed of thorns. There were much assimilation there, and they attempted to harass him. In his public sermons he constantly fought their ideas in very harsh language, proving the incompetence of the Reform leaders in understanding Bible or Talmud. The calm toned language that we find that he used in his writing was the counterpart to the impetuous vituperations that he used in oral pulpit sermons. He went out to full, direct battle, unwilling of any compromise, of any flexibility.

Afterwards he was offered the position of Chief Rabbi of Bucharest (Roumania) in 1858. As he himself writes in his series of auto-biographical articles (called "**Shnat ha-Yovel**" published in the periodical "Halvanon" in 1865) he was warned by many not to accept that offer of the rabbinical position. The abovementioned historian Rosenbloom delves into the many dissensions in Bucharest, politically and culturally (pp. 43-46). The area was in upheaval due to external Gentile forces causing great distress.

The Malbim had not the proper personal character to act as a centrifugal force, welding together his community. Being raised with the attitude of eighteenth century Polish Judaism, he had no patience with the new spirits. With bitter incisiveness he made short shrift of their hopes and ambitions of merging with modernity and German liberality. We have here a dichotomy, since in his books he utilizes many of the ideas of the German philosophers, especially Kant (see Rosenblum, pp. 38, 179-206). So too he many a time uses ideas taken from scientific finds (ibid. pp. 213, 232-277). Rosenblum proves that Malbim was well read, saw many writings of his contemporaries (Maskilim) and merged their ideas in his commentary (see pp.

136-140). But all this was only in his written works. Verbally he took a most non-compromising stand. Unlike his fellow Rabbis Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsh, or Rabbi Ettlinger (author of "Oruch la-Ner") who gave public sermons in high polished literate German, Malbim insisted on sermons in Yiddish, which was then well detested by all modernists. Even when the gentile government representative was present in the synagogue, he didn't accede to the popular requests to alter the language. In fighting the Reform people he barred monies from their elementary school and also prohibited the local "shochatim" (who of course observed the Kashrut laws) from serving their Reform congregants. This came to the wild reaction that for Purim the Reform people sent him a present: scorpion and swine flesh. So to say if he denies them kosher meat, they have no other alternative what to eat. Many were the complaints sent to the government that Malbim was antagonistic to all cultural progress (all the above, Rosenbloom writes).

Malbim wished to be the head of the Bucharest Rabbinate since he felt a heaven ordained mission and challenge to stem the inroads of the assimilations Reform movements. He thought that with his undoubted abilities, he could best them in debate. (We know that Malbim wrote a booklet "**Mashal u'mlitzah**" castigating all kinds of flattery. He certainly complied with what he wrote.). The founding assembly of the Reform movement (Braunschweig) in 1844 was the battle cry of those who considered Orthodox Judaism as outdated and primitive. Rabbi Malbim felt a surge of Heavenly inspiration that he had the writing abilities to show all of the authenticity of the Torah and of its Hazzalic interpretations. It was then that the idea formulated and crystallized in his mind of writing a full Bible commentary, proving how correct and logical were the "drashot" of Chazzal.

However, if perhaps he did influence some of the common folk, he had slight chance of influencing the communal leaders of Bucharest, who due to financial riches, family interests (many were linked to influential Reform leaders) and government ties could not change their modernistic behavior. These slandered him to the Gentile authorities, claiming that he was not loyal to the Roumanian government since he was an alien citizen. The height of the outrageous anti-Semitic behavior of the police was that he arrested and imprisoned during his sermon on the day of Shabbat, taken in handcuffs from the Synagogue itself! This was the same government that Montefiore had to intervene to halt "blood libels".

Be that as it were, the famous Mayor of London, Moses Montefiore intervened and the Roumanian government commuted his sentence to eternal banishment from Roumania. From there he went on the long and tiresome road of wanderings, being for short periods the Rabbi of Luncitz (where his father in law held previously the rabbinical position), Harsoon, Mohilev (where once again he was slandered, and the Russian police ordered him to leave the city within 24 hours!). He spent three years with the Koenigsberg community. In all of these positions he was harassed both by the Reform people, and so too by the Hassidic elements, who thought him to be too "modern". They took umbrage at his adding to his Torah commentary philosophical and modern scientific findings. Many of the philosophical ideas he dwells upon at length in his commentary to Job (see Rosenbloom, pp. 165-170). So too in his commentary to Shir Hashirim.

Shortly before his death, the Orthodox community of New York offered him the position called "Chief Rabbi of all of the United States". However his aged, weak body could not bear the long trans-Atlantic ship journey and he had to decline the offer.

Let us get back to his literary output.

In order to properly reach the youth of his day, the Malbim decided to forsake the flowery language that he used in "Arzot HaShalom". In his Introduction to "Hatorah veHamitzva" he claims that he will not resort to drush nor to Meckar, nor to Sod or Remez, only "Pshat Pashut" (He subsequently put out "Eretz Hemda" (1891) where he resorts to Drush and Sod.). However, several times he does slip into these fields, with the footnotes "Torah Or". Originally he thought to precede each chapter with questions, in the manner of Rabbi Abravenal. But after several parshiot he abandons that.

An important contribution of Malbim is his resolving (in tens of verses) the contradictions between the materials in Book of Kings to Divrei Hayomim (Chronicles). By this he voided the attacks of the Bible critics. So too he explains the reasons for the many duplications in the Bible (such as the Ten Commandments repeated twice. So too he explains why the differences between the two versions). It is well known that many proper names of individuals or places are altered, from sefer to sefer. So too

many numbers are drastically changed. The Malbim makes it a point to discuss and resolve each difference (Rosenbloom, page 118).

So too there are many historical problems, chronologically. Malbim makes it his duty to explain them (see Rosenbloom, page 121). Most of the time he doesn't do that by arousing the question, and if a reader is not acquainted with Bible criticism he will not pay attention to the contribution that Malbim with his typical genius, has availed us. It is good to cite as example, the many mythological fantasies, of Assyrians or so too the Greeks and Romans. Malbim due to his widespread readings was familiar with those, and unlike his fellow commentators, takes the point to teach how the Torah dispels these fantasies. (Rosenbloom, p. 131).

The Malbim took the time to calculate the year of the impending arrival of Messhiach. According to his commentary to Daniel, this should begin **1,913** and we will reconstruct the Holy Temple in **1,928**. Oddly enough, the Hafetz Haim too saw the outbreak of World War One as a harbinger of the Geula, and when hearing of the Balfour Declaration (1917) joyously responded "Now it is beginning!" But as his biographer Rabbi Shmuel Greiniman writes ("Hafetz Haim al ha-torah"), the generation can muff their chance, if they don't respond properly to G-d's proffered Hand. Therefore the great miracles of our present era show that in a general way, Malbim was right in his conjectures (see Rosenbloom, pp. 154-160).

We also have Malbim's book "**Yesodei Hochmat ha-higayon**" (published 1900) and his pamphlet "**Alim leTrufa**" concerning the Rambam's medical advice in Hilchot De'ot, chapter four, and co-coordinating their differences with the teachings of Hazzal on those subjects.

Summing up, we find that Malbim was a great Gaon. He was fully proficient in Torah she-ba'al peh and could have been one of the Poskim of the generation. But nevertheless he made the brave decision to forsake his beloved study, and put all of his talent, energy and intellectual capacity towards "conquering the citadel" of Torah she-biktav.

Altho many of our medieval Rabbis (Radak, Abravanel, Akedah, Sforno) spent much time in studying Bible, in the Modern period (1750 onwards) most of the Orthodox Rabbis forsook this study (I refer here to Pshat, not Drash works) and the abandoned field was seized

by the Maskilim, many of whom scorned the words of Hazzal. Malbim was one of the few great Rabbis who thought to "rescue" this field of Jewish study, and perhaps thereby rescue Jewish youth who were misled by "smooth talkers". Due to his inability to bridge between his Polish type Orthodoxy, with the Modernistic German congregants, he suffered many personal mishaps, many vicissitudes. His personal lot was one of anger and chagrin. Nevertheless he bravely undertook the battle against immense odds, thinking "l'shem shomayim" to rescue. All the while, during his immense suffering, he consistently continued penning his lengthy work on the Torah, doing his utmost to rescue his contemporaries.

May his merit stand to our stead.