

## **RABBI ME'IR OF ROTHENBERG** (Bavaria, Germany)

Died 19<sup>th</sup> of Iyar 1,293 but was buried 4<sup>th</sup> of Adar 1,307

This great sage was the teacher of the Ros"n and was the foremost authority in France and Germany of his day. He himself studied at the yeshiva of Rabbi Isaac (author of "Or Zarua") and so too by many of the major Tosafists, such as Rabbi Yechiel of Paris. His acumen and complete mastery of all Talmudic literature was proverbial. His piety is indescribable (as we will recount a point or two, further on in this article).

His leadership of his widespread community (all of Ashkenazic Jewry, which covered thousands of small towns, h

undreds of thousands of Jews) in the most tragic of all antisemitic eras (except for the most recent Nazi holocaust) was tremendous. He witnessed the terrible destruction of Jewish libraries, when the Christian persecutors burnt all Talmud manuscripts that they could find (in 1,242) and he then penned a heart wrenching elegy "Sha'ali serufa be'esh" which made its mark till the present day, and is read publicly on Tisha be'Av.

He then forsook France and returned to Germany, settling in Rothenburg, for over 40 years. Thousands of students (throughout the decades) flocked to hear his lectures, which were considered to be all authoritative.

We have today copies of his Response, over a thousand letters, which are more than what we have from all other ba'alei Tosafot in his period combined. These were re-ordered in three volumes, by Rabbi Dr. Isaac Ze'ev Kahane (published by Mossad Harav Kook, 1960) and an accompanying volume, only on matters of Eruvin, edited by Rabbi Eliezer Klein, and published by the above. Many of his minhagim were compiled and published by his student Rabbi Shimshon ben Tzadok, in the book "Tashbat"z", published in year 1,556 (not to be confused with the giant book Tashbat"z, same name but by a different author and with no connection to Rabbi Rothenberg). Another compendium is "Sefer ha-Parness" (published in Vilna, 1875). The famous Hagahot Maimuniot (a commentary on Mishna Torah of the Rambam) was penned by his student and includes many of his rulings. So too R. Y. Alphenbein collected many of his rulings in Sefer ha-Minhagot (New York, 1935).

Rabbi Me'ir also wrote a collection of Tosafos to 18 Tractates of the Talmud. Till this date they have not been published (Hebrew Encyclopedia, volume 22 p. 72) except for those on Tractate Yoma, published in the Vilna edition.

Rabbi Me'ir also composed commentaries on the Biblical Massorah (complete and or lacking spellings of the words) and these are published in Rabbi Kahane's edition (aforementioned).

Rabbi Me'ir was asked legal questions even by the world famous Rashb"a (of Spain). His language is always short, clear and to the point.

One of his major tenets is to avoid all bickering and personal hatred. This moralizing crops up again and again in his writings. A lot of his rulings deal with Avelut, so too hilchot kiddush hashem. An interesting point that he makes is that those who are killed by the Gentiles, due to their religious beliefs, do not suffer pain (Teshuvot, vol. Two, para. 136). Apparently the rapt attention to their inner thoughts, their complete dedication and devotion, dull their physical sensations.

With the passage of time, the attitude of the Gentiles towards the Jews deteriorated even further. King Rudolf I, decided that they were not citizens, but only chattels or serfs, and that all of their possessions belonged to the king. He put his hands on all that he envied. Many Jews of the period attempted to forsake Germany, to wander to other countries. This infuriated him even more. During the year 1,286 Rabbi Me'ir attempted to leave, reaching Lombardia on his way to the Holy Country. However an apostate Jew there recognized his visage, slandered him to the local duke, who informed the tyrant king, who gave the order to transport him back to Germany. The king's fire was something terrible. Rabbi Me'ir was placed in prison in the Tower of Ansisheim and the king ordered the Jewish community to pay an exorbitant fine (20,000 thalers) so to ransom their great leader.

The community was willing, but the pious Rabbi Me'ir forbade them to be docile and submit, since the Talmud forbids ransoming any captive for more than his

initial worth (Gitten 45a; see there the lengthy exposition by Rabbi Maharshah, in Yam Shel Shlomo, Gitten). Rabbi Me'ir did not want the king to get into the habit of capturing Jews and asking for exorbitant ransom. This decision in itself is certainly a regular Talmudic ruling. However the startling fact that arouses our excitement is that the full price for observing this rabbinical enactment is that Rabbi Me'ir languished in captivity **for over seven years!** Certainly since the Jews were fully willing to pay, and certainly since he could have availed and benefited thousands of prospective students to hear his Torah lectures (and possibly taking into account that he could have possibly stipulated a condition of the ransom payment, that he be permitted to continue his journey to Israel) it is feasible to find many possible loop-holes so to permit the ransom transaction. Especially so since Maharsha"l dryly remarks that there was a question of "bitul Torah", since he had no access to his generous library of manuscripts and to the conditions of Bet ha-Midrash. Nevertheless, the Rabbi took a stubborn stand, taking into account future prospective. This is certainly great piety and self denial. This story is incomparable to most other anecdotes about great Tzaddikim. Especially so when we consider the primitive and barbaric condition of prisons (dungeons) in those ancient days, and also considering his advanced age!

As told till this point, the story is remarkable. But there is a sequel. Rabbi Me'ir died in prison, but the Gentile king was not only cruel, but was avaricious. He claimed that he didn't want to lose a pfennig of the sum "owing" him. He forbade burial of the Rabbi until the "debt" be paid. Now of course it was then very difficult to amass the staggering sum involved, since it already didn't entail his freedom but only his burial. And more so, perhaps the Rabbi's prohibition of ransoming him for more than "his worth" was still in effect? **Fourteen years** had to pass until a rich Jew called **Rabbi Alexander Wimpfen of Frankfort, sold all of his possessions** and personally paid the fantastic sum. At which Rabbi Me'ir at long last reached a Jewish burial.

Another story of his piety (recorded by Rabbi ha-Lachmi ("Hachmei Israel", copied from the She'elot u'tshuvot Rashba, telling about Rabbi Me'ir) is that while yet unimprisoned, he forbade his gentile servants from heating up his study room on the Sabbath, even during the most severe Northern European winters. Since he observed that unobtrusively, his heathen maiden servant would heat up the room by putting wooden logs in the stove, for an hour or two before his usage of the room, he ordered a special padlock to be placed on the entrance door, to which only he alone had the key and not any heathen (even though they intended his benefit) so that no Rabbinical prohibition would be infringed.

For more material, see "Ba'alei ha-Tosafot", by A. A. Auerbach, pp. 405-446. May his great merit serve to our stead and be our inspiration.