

MAHARSHA

Rabbi Shmuel Edelles

Born 1555, / Yahrzeit date: 5th of Kislev 1631

The first interesting point to mention about this great personality is that his family appellative is feminine; it is the name of his mother in law. How so?

It is since she (as a rich widow) supported financially the upkeep of Rabbi Shmuel's yeshiva, for over 20 years. Only at her decease, and the aid was halted, did that yeshiva cease to exist. Then it was that he received a rabbinical position. In order to show due regard and gratitude, he constantly signed his name by adding thereto her name ("Adelle"). It is also true that his wife was a descendant of the world famous Maharal. (Encyclopedia Otzar Israel, ed. by D. Eisenstein. Some of the forthcoming material in our article we culled from that work).

This great rabbi wrote one of the most important commentaries to be able thereby to understand the abstruse Talmudic dialectics. The gaon "Hazon Ish" advises each and every Yeshiva student to make full use of this Maharsha commentary ("Letters", beginning of article one; end of article 20) and to paraphrase his words:

"It is a boon grant for Kllal Israel, to aid all subsequent generations in the task of understanding the Torah properly".

Maharsha was a genius in logical explanations, and detested false Pilpul, which was rampant in his period (and was also despised by the Sha'loh, Masechet Shevuot, and so too by the Maharal, in his commentary to Avot, pp. 305-306). He charges that false "Hillukim" deter a person from the truth, since each disputant is only vehemently interested in "winning the debate" and is negatively impassioned to disprove the dissenting opinion (Commentary to Bava Metzia 85a "Delishtakach").

Maharsha permitted himself some degree of a rational approach and assents to Rabbi Bahya's dictum that in matters of faith; one should also be able to support his faith via scientific rationale (Commentary to Hagiga 13a "be-Mufla", so too he quotes ancient scientists re Hullin 27a).

He claims that Hazzal were proficient in medical knowledge (Commentary to Gittin 68). Yet he is careful to emphasize that although other sciences are important and of value, yet they are only precursors of Torah, thresholds and stepping stones thereby to arrive at true spiritual cognizances (commentary to Horayot 10a).

Much of the Hazzalic Aggadic literature appears to be far fetched, or based on sheer fantasy. On these items Maharsha takes the position that the topics there discussed were seen by the Rabbis during a prophetic dream stage, and **are not** to be understood literally at face value at all (commentary to Berachot, beginning of Chapter three, Hagiga 14, Megilla 7, Bava Metzia 29).

This avenue of explanation was first proffered by Rabbi Abraham, the son of the Rambam, in his article on the Aggadot, published at the beginning of Ein Ya'akov (five volume edition).

Concerning the Principles of Faith, he doesn't take the Rambam's approach that there are thirteen, but quotes Rabbi Yoseph Albo (author of "Sefer ha-Ikkarim") that there are really three: G-d's existence, The Divine source of the Torah, and Reward and punishment. (Commentary, end of Tractate Rosh Hashono).

Maharsha himself was a student of Kabbalistic lore, (see Comm. to Berachot 21a; so too page 58a "Ma'aseh Bereshis"; Hagiga 12a, Bava Metzia 86a) and we know that he was a firm believer in the principle of transmigration of souls ("gilgul", commentary to Shabbat, p. 152; Mo'ed Katan, p. 15).

Yet he was derogatory and derisive unto those who spent all their time doing Kabbalistic study, even more so he was against those who studied at a premature age (Commentary to Hagiga 13a, "Tah Agmercha").

So too he is against those who teach unto others that what they know of Kabbalistic lore (ibid. Article "Iy Zakai Gemirna"). Apparently the true Kabbala is only that what a person grasps mentally by personal inner inspiration and intuition. It just cannot be transmitted from person to person. (This truism is taught too by the **Baal Shem Tov**, in his book "Keter Shem Tov", so too by **Rebbe Tzaddok** in his "Likkutei Ma'amarim", p. 90).

Many a time, in order to understand a tosafos one must apply to the words of the Maharsha. However, since he attempted to the best of his ability to be concise and brief, he sometimes leaves a point unexplained, summing up with an abbreviation "**Ve-duk**" (an acrostic for "Analyze and you will find simple"). In our day and age this is not that simple! A great contemporary of ours, **Rabbi Haim Kanyeovsky** (the son of the renowned Steippeler) composed a slim pamphlet (republished in his book "Si-ach ha-Sadeh", published in year 1997) called "Yishuv Ha'da'at", where he resolves each and every time in the Maharsha's commentary where the word "Ve-duk" appears.

One of the important innovations of our topic figure is that he places great weight with the Aggadic teachings of our sages. He writes in his foreword to the Commentary on Tractate Berachot (Article concerning Hiddushei Halachot) that he regrets penning his commentary to the Aggadot separate and distinct from the commentary to the Halachot. He recognizes the (spiritual) weakness of his contemporaries that they shy away from the study of the Aggada and **therefore he requests** of the future publishers of his work to republish both of these sections together, halacha and aggada, so that no student skip or delete one or the other.

Odd to say, all subsequent publishers (even until our present day and age) flaunt his request and differentiate between the two, putting the former in large letters and the latter in small letters. This being so, the reader can easily skip that section that "he is not interested in". This goes counter to the wish of the author! (And we see by Hazzal themselves, he writes, that they merged together halacha and aggada throughout the entire Talmud!).



Let us cite a few interesting points from his writings. (8 Points:)

A] Maharsha was a democrat. He writes that we are not to be prejudiced against the majority of the nation who are not scholarly. Since G-d has created only some of the population with studious minds and feasible psychological dispositions for that aptitude, it is not justifiable to honor those or love those alone, and not the ignoramuses of the community (commentary to Berachot 17a, "Ve-shema Tomar Ani Marbeh").

B] So too he writes that we should not exaggerate in the value of Torah study per se, if it is not tied closely to awe of G-d and His service. Maharsha writes that the entire goal and efficacy of Torah study is only if it is geared and calculated towards this aim (Commentary to Tractate Berachot 17a, "Koreh ve-Shoneh").

C] Maharsha taught that one should set up his prayer schedules so to be prompt. Especially Mincha prayers should be said shortly after noontime (and not postponed to just before sunset) and thereby one is "Zaheer" (commentary to Berachot 6a, "Bitfillat ha-Mincha"). Certainly so writes Rabbi Saadia Gaon in his Siddur, that by Mincha too "Zrizim Makdimim le-Mitzvot". **But the moral point is** that if you have something important to say to the Creator (whether for your own personal benefit, or for that of any other human), why postpone it? If you think that by your words uttered you can attain some beneficial effect, by what justification are you tardy?

D] Maharsha says that it is better to be well proficient in knowing well the pertinent laws, and thereby permit unto yourself some relaxations, rather than be stringent (a "machmir") and therefore deny yourself some of the pleasures of life. He who has mastery and knowledge of practical religious Law, will enjoy our physical world (because he can partake of it with a free conscience) and so too will eventually enjoy the future World of Souls, since he has dedicated himself to Torah study, which is a great Mitzva.

But he who is intensely over-Orthodox, and due to doubt of what is truly prohibited he has to live a severe regimen of self-privation, is lacking the joys of our physical world (due to his deprivations) and cannot expect to receive true reward for that in the World to Come, since due to his ignorance he has prohibited what is actually permitted. (Commentary of Maharsha to Berachot 8a "Godol ha-nehenna"; so too his commentary to Tractate Hullin 44b, "Haroeh Terefa le-atzmo").

E] Maharsha was wide awake to the fact that adding some years of "life" to an aged individual, is not of great value if that person's body is so weak and frail that his suffering remains intense or constant (commentary to Berachot 47a "ha-Ma'arich be-amen"). This is really a modern concept, acclaimed by many medical practitioners today, that it is questionable if to make extreme efforts to artificially prolong life of a very aged individual (as for example an oxygen tent etc.), if that person is so mentally damaged that he is no longer capable of ever putting life to good use. (But this decision must be made in each case, by the competent Rabbis consulted). See She'elot u'tshuvot Tzitz Eliezer, Rabbi Waldenberg, vol. 13 chapter 89.

F] During the day of Maharsha, some of the Rabbis purchased their official positions by bribery (giving "enviable" gifts to the community officials in charge of the decision, choosing which Rabbi will get the job). To the best of his ability, Marsha fought this corruption.

So too he was angry at the prevalent custom to confer the honor on a candidate due to his "Yichuss" (ancestral pedigree), (Commentary to Baba Batra 73b, "achvei metei Midbar").

We can only imagine how the great Maharsha would react if he could witness the present system whereby a Hassidic Rebbe, or a local town Rabbi, continues in the office of his deceased father, since he is his heir, even if is not up to the Rabbinical standard of the departed.

True this is the present day custom, acknowledged by the Hatam Soifer (She'elot u'Tshuvot, O'rach ha'im, article 12), who cites the Halachic dictum in Avot (chapter two) that Torah doesn't pass by inheritance, and this is stressed strongly by Hazzal (Tractate Nedarim 81a, that most of the time a Talmid Haham doesn't have sons who are Talmidei Hahamim. Possibly that may be since they rely upon the laurels of their parents, and don't exert the required individual effort required). The reason given by the Hatam Soifer is that anyhow in our period "Rabbinate" is not a function of "Torah study" alone but it is also a communal service (officiating at weddings, passing ritual rulings, giving sermons etc.) and it is this latter part which passes by inheritance.

But sad to say, perhaps due to this custom (frowned upon by the Maharsha) we have a lower spiritual level of Rabbis that could have been otherwise if not for this custom. The Encyclopedia Otzar Israel (p. 150) notes that in 1590 Maharsha signed on the Rabbinical Synod Decree that no Rabbi could "purchase" his position by bribery.

G] So too Maharsha is strongly against the present custom to deliver religious rulings as per the famous "Shulchan O'ruch" (Maharsha's commentary to Tractate Sotah, "Yereh es Hashem b'ny vo-melech"). He says that one should decide practical halacha only via genuine Talmud study, and not by perusing "pre-digested" material offered by famous Poskim. This attitude is ventured too by the Maharal (commentary to Avot, page 305; Netivot O'lam, Torah, end of chapter 15).

H] Maharsha negates the present custom that there is a prearranged "school vacation" during the summer season (Commentary to Tractate Shabbat, 119b "ve-amar Rabbah loh Charva Jerusalem"). He taught that Torah is a full time occupation. If a person is ill, or has to tend to some duty, of course he is free to "break off". But if here is no pressing issue at hand, by what right do we officialize this study gap? Is this not "Bitul Torah"? (This opinion is pressed too by the famous "**Shaloh**", Amsterdam ed. p. 259b; so too **Maharal**, Derashot, p. 66).



One more point. When David was persecuted by his rebellious son Absalem, Hazzal tell us that he intended doing idolworship (Tractate Sanhedrin 107a). This David did so to minimize the Hillul Hashem that a Tzaddik like David should be so unfortunate that his son attempt to kill him. David, for the great intense love of G-d, preferred to be maligned as an idolworshipper, so to "cover up", as it were, for this calamity. See the explanation on this subject by Rabbi Malbim (in his work "Eretz Hemda" Parshat Vayera).

But Maharsha feels that this teaching of Hazzal is too strong to be taken literally. In his commentary to Sanhedrin (107a , "La-avod Avodah Zara") he says that the intention here is that **he planned leaving Eretz Israel**, which is equal to idolatrous worship (Tractate Ketubot 110b).

I wish to add an explanatory note to the Maharsha's words.

David wished to excuse G-d's act of setting up this horrible situation that a son attempts patricide (to murder his father). David said that since many a time, during his military forays against neighboring nations, David left the boundaries of Israel, therefore the son that he begat was influenced by Gentile cultures (as we see too today by many who live in exile and therefore suffer subsequent distress at seeing progeny who leave the fold).

But the Gemarra continues that the real cause for Absalem's defection was due to his **gentile mother**. The Rambam (hilchot Issurei Bi'ah, chapter 13, paragraph 15) teaches that many proselytes during the glorious period of David and Solomon, became Jewish due to wrong reasons, and not due to true religious conviction. So too, Absalem's mother was not a true Jewess (out of genuine conviction), and mistreated her son. But the gist of all this is the Maharsha's teaching, that to leave Israel is to be considered a wicked act, just like idolatry.

We find in his commentary to Tractate Shabbat (end of chapter seven) that he skips over several pages without recording any Hiddushim. He excuses himself by saying that since he was at that period in another city he had not the opportunity to give Torah lectures to his students in the Yeshiva, There was no occasion for questions and answers, and therefore he had no opportunity to add commentaries. We are really sorry at this Torah loss. So too we find that the Hiddah (Rabbi Azulai) in his bibliographical work "Shem ha-Gedolim" cites the fact that he saw many manuscripts of the Maharsha's Hiddushim, at present still unpublished. We are sorry at this loss.

The Encyclopedia Otzar Israel (p. 150) cites ancient chronicles that testify that the Maharsha put a sign on his door, citing the phrase from the book of Job (chap. 31, verse 32), "No wayfarer shall dwell roofless" (In other words, he invites all and sundry to be his guests, if necessary).

The book "Hachmei Israel" (written by R. David ha-Lachmi) p. 60 claims that at the convention of the greatest Rabbis of that period ("Va'ad of four Nations") the Maharsha was the leading figure. Certainly in understanding the acute dialectics of the Talmud, he held a most dominant position.



We have attempted to show in this article that so too in Mussar training and education towards attaining a noble character, he held great distinction.

May his great merit serve us.