

Luminaries

Personalities
in the
Rebbe's Torah

By:
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לעילוי נשמת
הרה"ח הרה"ת השליח ר' שמואל בן הרה"ח
הרה"ת ר' חיים הלל ע"ה
נלב"ע י"ב מר חשוון ה'תשע"ה

ולע"נ זוגתו
מרת בתי' בת הרה"ח הרה"ת שד"ר ר' בנימין ע"ה
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אזימאוו
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נדבת משפחתם שיחיו

Rebbi Meir

Rebbi Meir was one of the foremost Tannaim of the Mishnah and a vital link in the transmission of *Torah Sheba'al Peh*. He is the largest contributor of teachings in the Mishnah. Many of his teachings are recorded in his name, but many more are anonymous, as the Gemara famously asserts, "*Stam Mishnah Rabbi Meir hee* - Anonymous Mishnah records are in reality by Rebbi Meir."¹

His true name was Nehorai, but he was called Meir for "illuminating the Sages' eyes (*meir einei chachamim*) in halacha."²

His wisdom was so exceptional, that even though he would explain himself to his colleagues, they could never completely understand his reasoning and would be forced to disagree. Thus, in halachic disputes with his friends Rebbi Yehuda and Rebbi Yosi, the halacha follows the majority, usually not in Rebbi Meir's favor.³

He was part of the fourth generation of Tannaim and a prominent member of the Sanhedrin when it reopened in Usha after Yavne was shut down, following Hadrian's anti-religious decrees and the crushing of the Bar Kochva Revolt. He was a close *talmid* of Rebbi Akiva, and also studied with Rebbi Yishmael and Elisha ben Avuyah (*Acher*).

Rebbi Meir's wife, Beruriah, was an extraordinarily wise Torah scholar in her own right. Her father was Rebbi Chanina Ben Tradyon, one of the *Assarah Harugei Malchus*. Rebbi Meir's own family descended from *Geirei Tzedek*, most notably, the Roman Emperor Nero.

Rebbi Meir's *talmidim* included Sumchus, Rebbi Dostai ben Rebbi Yannai, and Rebbi Yehuda Hanasi (Rebbi). Rebbi Yehuda Hanasi famously said, "I am sharper than my friends

because I saw Rabbi Meir from behind (I sat in the row behind him – Rashi). Had I seen him from the front, I would be even sharper.”⁴

Rebbi Meir was a giant not only in halacha, but in *aggadah* as well. He was known as a great *darshan*, and lauded as a master of *meshalim*. The Mishnah in Sotah says that when Rebbi Meir passed away, *moshlei meshalim* (creators of wise parables) were lost.

Stories about Rebbi Meir abound in the Gemara, many covering his interactions with philosophers and Roman officials. Perhaps the most well-known story tells of how he went to save his sister-in-law from Romans captivity. He bribed a guard to set her free but the man was concerned that he would be punished. Rebbi Meir told him that if he was ever in trouble he should say the prayer, “*Eloka d’Meir aneini*” (G-d of Meir answer me) and he would be saved, and that is exactly what happened.

In honor of this miracle, Rebbi Meir is called Rebbi Meir *Baal Hanes* and tzedakah collections for the inhabitants of Eretz Yisroel are given in his honor.

After this episode, Rebbi Meir was forced to escape the Romans and flee to Bavel, where it seems he passed away. Nevertheless, Rebbi Meir is buried in the Galilean city of Teveriah, where he lived and taught Torah.

The Great Tanna

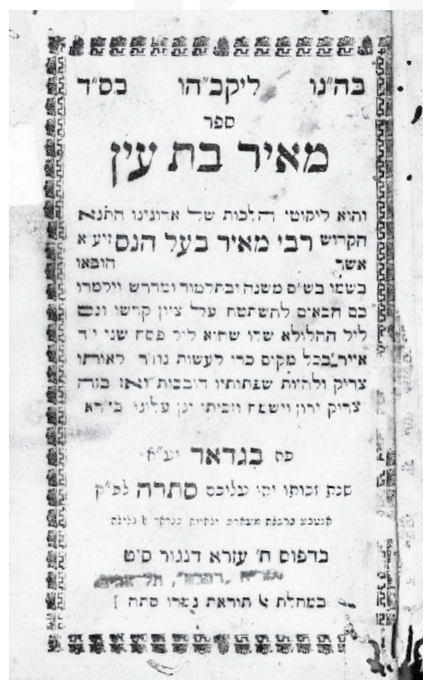
Rebbi Meir’s place in the transmission of *Torah Sheba’al Peh* was pivotal. He was one of the seven students that Rebbi Akiva gathered and taught after the death of 24,000 students.⁵ It was in the hands of these select *talmidim* that *Torah Sheba’al Peh* was entrusted and transmitted.⁶

As a *talmid* after this tragedy, Rebbi Meir emphasized, both in his life and his learning, a devotion to *ahavas Yisroel* and respect for others. He emphasized the aspect of *avodas Hashem* called “*shuv*,” return, meaning to bring *Elokus* down into the world, and exemplified *mesiras nefesh* that brings about *Tikkun* in place of *Tohu*.⁷ He and his colleagues also excelled in *kabbalas ol*, and, as a student of Rebbi Akiva, he placed strong emphasis on the *middah* of *emes*.⁸

The post-*churban* era was a tumultuous time. Rebbi Meir’s father in law, Rebbi Chanina Ben Tradyon, and his teachers Rebbi Akiva and Rebbi Yishmael, were killed by the Roman regime, included in the list of the *Assarah Harugei Malchus*.

Rebbi Meir’s *semicha* and induction into the ranks of prominent Tannaim was itself an act of *mesiras nefesh*. The Romans banned *semicha*, decreeing that anyone granting or receiving *semicha* would be killed, and that the town in which

A UNIQUE SEFER
PRINTED IN
BAGHDAD IN 5665
(1905) COLLECTING
ALL THE TEACHINGS
OF REBBI MEIR
BAAL HANES
THROUGHOUT SHAS
AND MIDRASHIM.



it happened would be destroyed. Rebbi Yehuda ben Bava, also one of the *Harugei Malchus*, gathered five *talmidim*⁹ in a secluded area far from any town, and proceeded to give them *semicha*, assuring the continuation of the *mesorah*. Rebbi Yehuda Ben Bava made certain that the *talmidim* escaped, at the cost of his own life.¹⁰

When the persecution eased up somewhat, the Sanhedrin was reinstalled in the town of Usha. There, Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel was appointed *Nossi*, Rebbi Nosson, *Av Beis Din*, and Rebbi Meir, *Chacham*.

The Gemara at the end of Horayos tells us that Rebbi Meir and Rebbi Nosson once tried to have Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel removed as *nossi*. When it was discovered, they were evicted from the Beis Midrash and penalized: their Torah would not be said in their name, but rather Rebbi Meir would be quoted as “*Acheirim omrim* (others say),” and Rebbi Nosson as “*Yesh omrim* (some say).” Rebbi Nosson later apologized, but Rebbi Meir did not.¹¹ (The Rebbe explains their *machlokes* based on the debate of *Sinai* vs. *Oker Horim*, see below).

Rebbi Meir lived and taught Torah in the Galil – the new center of Torah in Eretz Yisroel. For a time he lived in Teveriah¹² and taught in Cheimes¹³, and we find him visiting Tzipori, Tivon, Aradiskos and Beis Shean. In these cities and towns, Rebbi Meir taught halacha and *aggadah*, specializing in *meshalim* and *drashos* and passing on the holy *mesorah* to his *talmidim* and the entire Jewish people.

Rebbi Meir - Maor

Rebbi Meir is a very interesting Tanna. On the one hand, he is described as above the level of his colleagues. As mentioned, the halacha doesn't follow his opinion, because his friends could not fully grasp his ideas, which are too spiritual to be explained in the material world.

At the same time he is the basis of the entire Mishnah—"s-tam Mishnah Rebbi Meir." His name, which means to illuminate, also shows us that he had a profound influence on the world around him.

This dichotomy is highlighted in the Rebbe's Torah as well.

The Rebbe explained that the primary mission of most *tzaddikim* is to bring G-dliness into the world – uplifting the mundane and inspiring the physical.

However, Rebbi Meir also comes across as being entirely beyond the world, heavenly, and spiritual, representing not the "*tachton*" but the "*Maor*," the Torah as it is above.

His name¹⁴ Meir points to *Maor*, the source of light. In him shines the original divine light of the Torah before it is invested in this world.

Not only did Rebbi Meir possess an exceptional *neschama* and spiritual character, he also reached a powerful level of *birur*, refinement of light, as is reflected in the name of his life partner, Beruriah. In this highly refined state, Rebbi Meir could see a deeper perspective. With this perspective, even things that seem *tamei* to everyone else, are in reality *tahor*. On this exalted level, *Maor*, there is less emphasis on the lower realms, and less tolerance for the mishaps and mistakes of the mundane world. Rebbi Meir's friends studied Torah on a more basic level, and couldn't even 'grasp his coattails.' The Mishnah therefore uses the term "*modim*" when they agree with him ("*modim Chachamim l'Rebbi Meir*"), showing that their agreement was with *hoda'ah* (submission) rather than equal agreement.¹⁵

In more Kabbalistic terms, Rebbi Meir's represents *Chochmah*, Divine Wisdom, which is why he had the title of *Chacham*. He represented the level that Chassidus calls *Yisroel*, while Rebbi Akiva represented the more earth-bound '*Yaakov*.'

Rebbi Meir, therefore, was less keen on tolerating mistakes and allowing *Tikun*, mending, because from his lofty view, the confines of the lower realms are too much, and there is no room for failure.¹⁶

Rebbi Meir's strong association with *Ohr* (divine light) can also be seen in the Sefer Torah that he wrote. Rebbi Meir replaced the *Ayin* in *Kasnos Ohr* (garments of leather) with an *Alef*, changing the meaning to garments of light, symbolizing



THIS PICTURE FROM 5654 (1894) SHOWS THE TZIYON OF REBBI MEIR BAAL HANES AND A YESHIVA BUILDING ON SITE BUILT APPROXIMATELY 25 YEARS PRIOR.



THE TZIYON OF REB MEIR BAAL HANES AS IT APPEARS TODAY.

his direct connection with the source of light, not with lower, filtered levels.

Although his lofty stature makes him seem more removed from this lowly world, the opposite is true. He ended up having an even greater impact thanks to the incredibly powerful Divine light that he drew down. He never forgot that the ultimate purpose is to transform the world. The Rebbe points out that the afore-mentioned principle, that the halacha does not follow Rebbi Meir, applies only to rulings in which he is quoted by name. *Stam Mishnayos*, on the other hand, are followed. In other words, it is on the level of his 'name' that Rebbi Meir is removed from his colleagues. But in the rulings where his essential source, beyond his name, is evident, the halacha accords with him and his exceptional ability to bridge the gap between Heaven and Earth, the purpose of halacha.¹⁷

REBBI MEIR FACTS AND STORIES:

Oker Harei Harim - “Anyone who sees Rebbi Meir in the Beis Midrash, would see him uprooting ‘mountains upon mountains’ and grinding them together.” Rebbi Meir is described as one who learns Torah in an analytical and penetrating way, going through each point, and asking questions, arguing, and taking it apart until reaching clarity.¹⁸

This style of learning is in line with his emphasis on *eichus* over *kamus*, quality over quantity. There is a well-known question as to whether quantity overrides quality, explored at length by Reb Yosef Engel in *Lekach Tov*. The Rebbe connected the dispute between Rebbi Meir and the *Nossi*, to the quantity vs. quality debate. Their real disagreement, the Rebbe explained, concerned the proper method of learning. Rabban Shimon was in the category of ‘*Sinai*,’ with its emphasis on broad knowledge of Torah. This side of the debate sees the main goal as knowing as large a *quantity* of Torah as possible, in other words, everything given at Sinai.

Rebbi Meir, on the other hand, was an “*oker harim*,” someone who takes the ‘*Har Sinai*,’ the repository of knowledge and ‘grinds them together,’ probing and analyzing in order to reach the best *qualitative* understanding.¹⁹

Furthermore, the Rebbe said that while Rabban Shimon penalized Rebbi Meir and decreed that his Torah not be repeated in his name but rather as ‘*Acherim*,’ this is only when the subject at hand is based on this disagreement of quality vs. quantity. In all other cases, however, he is still referred to by name.²⁰

Student of Acher – One of Rebbi Meir’s teachers was the famous Elisha Ben Avuyah, one of the *Chachamim* who abandoned Torah and *mitzvos* and became known as “*Acher*,” the other.

The Gemara compared Rebbi Meir’s learning from him, using the example of a pomegranate. Rebbi Meir discarded his teacher’s ‘peel’ and ate the fruit.

Rebbi Meir’s greatness as a Tanna lay in being able to find, and learn from, the good that was inside Elisha ben Abuyah. Additionally, the Gemara tells us that Rebbi Meir promised to bring a *tikkun* to his *neshama*, and after Rebbi Meir passed away, smoke began to rise from Elisha ben Avuya’s grave, showing that the process of *teshuva* had begun.

The Rebbe explained that Rebbi Meir was able to bring him to *teshuva* due to the strong element of positive light that he possessed, similar to the light of the Alter Rebbe, whose name also means light, (*shnei-ohr*), and the Baal Shem Tov whose teachings of Chassidus are the *Maor* of Torah and allow every single person to return.²¹

Ben Geirim - Rebbi Meir came from a family of converts.²² The Gemara says that when the Roman emperor Nero was on his way to conquer Yerushalyim, he asked a young boy to recite a *possuk*, to which he responded “*Venosati nikmasi b’Edom*—and I (Hashem) will have my revenge on Edom (Rome).” Hearing this he decided to run away and convert. His descendant was Rebbi Meir.²³ The Maharasha quotes Sefer Yuchsin that this story fits with the stories commonly told about Nero whose last days are shrouded in mystery.²⁴

Rebbi Meir’s greatness came specifically from this descent from *geirim*. The Rebbe explains that a *ger*’s choice to embrace Yiddishkeit reaches into the depths of the *yeridah* (descent) of the nations of the world, and results in an even greater *aliyah* (ascent).²⁵

TORAH OF REBBI MEIR:

רַבִּי מֵאִיר אָמַר כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה לְשִׁמָּה, זֹכֶה לְדַבְרִים הַרְבֵּה. וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שְׂכָל
הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ כְּדֵי הוּא לוֹ.

Rebbi Meir said: All who occupy themselves with Torah lishmah, for its own sake, merit many things, and not only that, but the entire world is worthy for him. Avos, 6,1.

As explained in the previous section, Rebbi Meir was an otherworldly sage, yet, at the same time, specifically because of his high state, he was able to draw from the greatest spiritual levels down into the simple and the mundane.

The Rebbe explains how this can be seen in Rebbi Meir's opening line to *Perek Vov* of *Pirkei Avos*: "All who toil in Torah lishmah, for its own sake" - referring to Rebbi Meir's heavenly way of learning - "merit many things" - will receive infinite *hamshachos* (manifestations of Divine energy) from on high." Then the focus shifts to "the entire world is worthy for him." Rebbi Meir drew down these limitless *hamshachos* into the materiality of the world.²⁶

בְּעֶשְׂרִים בּוֹ בְּנֵי פַחַת מוֹאֵב בְּן יְהוּדָה. תָּנָא: בְּנֵי פַחַת מוֹאֵב בְּן יְהוּדָה — הֵן הֵן בְּנֵי
דָּוִד בְּן יְהוּדָה, דְּבָרֵי רַבִּי מֵאִיר. רַבִּי יוֹסִי אָמַר: הֵן הֵן בְּנֵי יוֹאֵב בְּן צְרוּיָה.

On the twentieth of Av, the wood offering was brought by the descendants of Pachas Moav ben Yehuda. The Tanna taught: The descendants of Pachas Moav ben Yehuda are the descendants of Dovid ben Yehuda. This is the statement of Rebbi Meir.

Rebbi Yosei says: These are the descendants of Yoav, son of Tzruiah. Taanis 28a.

The Rebbe connects their *machlokes* with a Gemara that says that if not for Dovid's learning, Yoav would not be able to do battle, and if not for Yoav going to war, Dovid would not be able to study Torah.

The Rebbe framed their *machlokes* as a disagreement about the ideal state of *bittul*. Is Dovid's commitment to Torah the higher level, or is Yoav's battle with the mundane world, conquering materiality and transforming it the ideal? Rebbi Meir as the heavenly figure that he was, saw Dovid's *bittul* in *limmud haTorah* as higher than, and the true cause of, Yoav's impact on the world.²⁷

רַבִּי מֵאִיר אָמַר, אַל תִּסְתַּכֵּל בְּקַנְקַן, אֶלָּא בְּמָה שֶׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ. יֵשׁ קַנְקַן חֲדָשׁ מְלֵא יֵשֶׁן,
וְיֵשֶׁן שְׂאֵפְלוֹ חֲדָשׁ אֵין בּוֹ:

Rebbi Meir said, don't look at the flask but at what is in it: there is a new flask full of old wine, and an old [flask] in which there is not even new [wine]. Avos 4:20

Firstly, it is interesting to note that in most editions of *Pirkei Avos*, the Tanna quoted here is not Rebbi Meir but Rabbi. In his Siddur, the Alter Rebbe added Meir, and taught that this Mishnah is actually from him.

The Rebbe connects this teaching with the previous part of the Mishnah, and explains why Rebbi Meir learned from Elisha Ben Avuyah: The Mishnah begins with Elisha Ben Avuya's parable about grapes and wine, touting the advantage of learning at a young age, something he had done. Rebbi Yosi Ben Yehuda follows by saying, using a similar analogy of grapes and wine, that one should learn from an older, more mature teacher, rather than from a young one. Rebbi Meir follows by saying that

one should not judge wine by its flask, and he felt it necessary to learn from Elisha ben Avuya, who had the advantage of learning from a young age.

The Rebbe also connects this to the *teshuva* and *tikkun* that Rebbi Meir brought to Elisha ben Avuyah. The *possuk* says וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנְקָה [and clean, He shall not clean] which implies that there is no room for *teshuva*. Rebbi Meir says, don't just look at the קנִקֵּן – the *Kuf* and *Nun* in each word, but at the other letters, which spell out Hashem's holy name – the name “מֶה” that is inside it. Even in the place of judgment, Hashem waits with open arms for His children to return.²⁸

LESHITASO

The Rebbe explains many of Rebbi Meir's *dinim* and opinions in *machlokes'n* based on consistent approaches of his (*l'shitaso*).

A few examples out of many:

- Rebbi Meir considers the minority factor. He does not however consider a minority of a minority.
- Rebbi Meir would judge cases of *Garme'i* – causation.
- The current state of affairs overrides the future.
- The community overrides the private person.
- Details (*protim*) need to be on the same level as the rule (*klal*) – therefore teachers need to transmit their entire understanding – this fits with Rebbi Meir's unique and lofty way.
- Rebbi Meir holds *eichus* (quality) prevails over *kamus* (quantity), and therefore *Oker Harim* trumps *Sinai*.
- Rebbi Meir examined the meaning of names.
- He holds that things stay the way they are for a long time.
- A guest must follow the conduct of the host.
- When Moshiach comes there will be both the drawing down of spirituality and uplifting of the mundane, but not simultaneously.²⁹

1. Rav Yochanan. Sanhedrin 86a.
 2. Eiruvim 13b.
 3. Ibid.f 46b.
 4. The Rebbe quoted this in context of looking at the Baal Tokei'ia after Tekios (second day Rosh Hashanah 5752).
 5. Breishis Rabbah 61:3, Yevamos 62b.
 6. Likkutei Sichos, vol.7, pg. 126.
 7. Likkutei Sichos Chelek 22, pg. 138.
 8. Lag Baomer 5711.
 9. R. Meir, R. Yehuda, R. Shimon, R. Yose, and R. Elazar ben Shamua. According to the Amora Rav Avia, R. Nechemiah was also part of the group.
 10. Sanhedrin 14a. This is the opinion of Rav.

There is another opinion that he got semicha from his Rebbi, R. Akiva.
 11. Horiyos 13b.
 12. Yerushalmi Chagigah 77b.
 13. Yerushalmi Sotah 164.
 14. Likkutei Sichos vol. 18, pg. 75.
 15. Maamar Deu Ki Hashem 5731.
 16. Reshimos, Choveres 117.
 17. Sefer Hasichos 5751, Chelek 1, Pg. 13.
 18. Sanhedrin 24a.
 19. The Gemara places the Sinai vs. Oker Harim dispute right after the Rebbi Meir vs. Rabban Shimon story, showing that there is a connection.
 20. Likkutei Sichos vol. 12, Bechukosai 1.

21. Chai Elul 5743.
 22. The Rambam says about Rebbi Meir that he was Ben Ger Tzedek, which would seem like he was the actual son of Niron.
 23. Gittin 56a.
 24. Maharasha ibid. Sefer Yuchsin Maamar Rishon, Elef Hareviei.
 25. Maamar Ani Hineih brisi itach, Lech Lecha 5744.
 26. Sefer Hasichos 5749 vol. 2, pg. 482-3.
 27. Likkutei Sichos vol. 4, Chof Av, pg. 1106.
 28. Sicha Emor 5742.
 29. For detailed sources of these sichos, see Mishnas Menachem, compiled by Pesach Fishman, Johannesburg, 5780.