

# How a Lover of Wisdom Returns



*What a medieval thinker can teach us today about guilt, remorse, and becoming ourselves.*

Yehudah Mirsky

## Hibur Ha-Teshuvah

*Menachem Ha-Meiri, ed. Moshe Zuriel  
Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2018, 538 pp.*



SOMETIME IN THE LATER DECADES of the thirteenth century, Menachem Ha-Meiri tells us in the Introduction to this volume, a gentile (presumably Christian) acquaintance remarked to him on the Jews' obliviousness to the true meaning of repentance.

One might have expected any self-respecting rabbi in the Middle Ages to respond with a treatise arguing against Christian notions of atonement and sin. Instead, the leading Talmudist in Provence took up the challenge and wrote a remarkable treatise on repentance called *Hibur Ha-Teshuvah*. Drawing on the length and breadth of Rabbinic literature and the philosophical writing of the time, the book weaves together metaphysics, moral philosophy and psychology, and extensive textual and legal-halakhic interpretation, all in elegant Hebrew prose. That Meiri responded in this way says a great deal about him, his time, and his understanding of religious life.

## MEDIEVALS & MODERNS

Today, the world of the medieval philosophers seems impossibly remote, even more so than the world of the Bible, with its all-too-familiar heaps of lust, violence, and unbearable longings. Yet precisely as the world of 2021 reels in confusion, attention deficit,

**Yehudah Mirsky** is Professor of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Israel Studies at Brandeis University. He is the author, most recently, of *Towards the Mystical Experience of Modernity: The Making of Rav Kook, 1865-1904* (2021).

monetized outrage and other afflictions, the medievales merit a closer look, if nothing else to allow us to take the measure of the distance between their achievements and ours.

Much of the burden of Meiri's circle was to translate the austere beauty of Maimonidean thought into meaningful terms of religious life and practice, with just enough poetry and myth to get the job done. The result, in Gregg Stern's wonderful formulation, was "philosophical spirituality in a halakhic key."

"Philosophy" and "spirituality" are terms that don't often go together these days. Yet, the abstractions of modern philosophy notwithstanding, "philosophy," after all, means "love of wisdom." The late Pierre Hadot, former priest and prominent historian of ancient thought at the College de France, showed that from its Socratic beginnings, philosophy sought to liberate the self from both egoism and despair. Argument and analysis acted not as ends in themselves but as means to a moral life and human community. Only by reckoning with what and where we are in the world can we begin to grapple with who we are and what we are supposed to do.

In some ways, philosophy never quite vanished. Maimonidean thought circulated in Eastern Europe, even where Kabbalah took hold, well into the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, and provided much internal scaffolding for mystic philosophers like Rav Kook, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and

others.

Still, modernity, to put it mildly, disrupted medieval philosophy's sway. A well-ordered cosmos gave way to a boiling soup of chance; an eternal God revealing eternal truths to a cosmic watchmaker; and the idea of a well-ordered individual to a seething mass of contradictory thoughts and feelings driven by neurons firing in multiple directions. And all that even before Sigmund Freud had graduated from medical school.

Not for moderns the medieval sense that the truth was not within, but without. Even deep traditionalists, such as the Hasidic masters, took philosophical religion as a jumping point for turning inward

their differences.

Meiri's works lay long in obscurity. But once they began to appear over the last century or so, it didn't take long for readers to notice his striking view, congenial to modern Jewish ears, that Biblical and Talmudic strictures against associations and commerce with idolaters did not apply to "nations bounded in the ways of *datot*." But what are *datot*? Certainly not "religion" in the contemporary sense. Jonathan Decter, a Brandeis professor of Jewish thought in the Islamic world, has recently written that *dat* connoted "an expression of obligation within a system." In other words, societies with a recognizable moral code.



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into the recesses of the self, where God was to be found; even if they thought, as did Meiri, that the tools to work towards the eternal truths were in human hands, and, more importantly, minds.

Medieval philosophers, like most everyone else, took for granted all manner of structural injustices rightly rejected today. That is not a reason to cast them aside but to read them more attentively, with an eye to what they may still have to teach us: that personal virtue matters; that God respects His creatures; that human reason is at one and the same time a reflection of God in the world, and a harrowing peril should it fail to acknowledge its own limits; and that Jewish life and teaching rests on a common foundation with other traditions, who can learn from one another while respecting the integrity of

### MEIRI'S LONG-LOST MANUSCRIPTS

The Jewish community of Languedoc (today's Occitan, in the south of France) included not only Talmudists and philosophers, but astronomers, mathematicians, and physicians. By the time Meiri came of age, the region's Jews had been reading Maimonides for generations, since the *Guide's* first rendering from Arabic into Hebrew in 1204. And not only Maimonides; they commissioned

a remarkable range of translations from Arabic into Hebrew, works that appear, by name, in the pages of their works.

This was the milieu into which Meiri was born in 1249. By age fifty, he had completed his remarkable treatise (ostensibly a commentary) on the Talmud, *Beit Ha-Behirah*. He would spend much of the rest of his life, till 1315, navigating the controversies that swirled around Maimonides' rationalist religion.

Meiri's works, though reverently cited by various successors, were lost for centuries. In the eighteenth century, the peripatetic Jerusalem bibliophile Hayim Yosef David Azulai reported seeing a partial manuscript of the Talmud commentary in Modena; later, a complete manuscript surfaced in Parma. Starting in the 1790s, Meiri's commentaries to Talmudic

tractates began to appear, one by one, as well as his commentaries to Proverbs, Psalms, and other works. This rediscovery continued through the mid-twentieth century. It was too late for Meiri to have left his mark on Halakhic jurisprudence, which had moved along in the half-millennium since he'd written. But his flowing Talmud commentary, written in crystalline Hebrew, quickly gained adherents.

Meiri's *Hibur Ha-Teshuvah*, written, he tells us, in his early decades, first appeared out of manuscript in 1950—two manuscripts, to be exact. In 1938, Yitzhak Bulka of Nuremberg, a refugee in Warsaw, began publishing a copy of a manuscript known from the Vatican and the British Museum. Bulka didn't survive the war, but several of his galleys miraculously did. My grandfather, Samuel Kalman Mirsky—Hebraist, religious Zionist, professor at Yeshiva University, and a devotee of Meiri—published them in his Hebrew journal, *Talpiot*. Soon after, the United Restitution Organization located and sent him Bulka's manuscript. Armed with the photocopy of another manuscript from the Vatican, he was about to publish when Abraham Sofer, editor and publisher of many of Meiri's works, told him he was about to publish too, after long, hard work, from a different manuscript. My grandfather deferred to Sofer. Some years ago, the Israeli scholar and educator Rabbi Moshe Zuriel concluded that Bulka's manuscript was better, my grandfather's annotations valuable and, rightly, that he himself had much to add here and took upon himself the large task of this new, beautifully annotated edition.

### RESTORING THE SELF

Meiri's book, like others of the Provençal circle, presents itself as at one and the same time a work of philosophy and law, seamlessly joined in the person of the believer. This intertwining of philosophy and law follows a narrative arc through the month of Elul, to Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. This main section is titled *Meishiv Nefesh*, "Restorer of the Self."

Each section begins with an interpretation of a Biblical verse that becomes a touchstone for the ensuing discussion. Meiri's reflections on repentance open with Psalm 25:9-11:

*He guides the lowly in the right path and teaches the lowly His way. All God's paths are steadfast love*

*for those who keep the decrees of His covenant. Like Your name, O God, forgive my wrongdoing, great though it may be.*

What is God's name doing here? Commenting on that verse, Abraham ibn Ezra says: "the correct interpretation is that His name is 'forgive.'"

Come again?

Meiri later discusses Moses' request to God after the sin of the golden calf—*make known to me, pray, Your ways* (Ex. 33:13) and *show me, pray, Your presence* (Ex. 33:17). He notes that Moses had, as Scripture says (Ex. 20:18), drawn near the cloud in which God's presence was manifest. And what truth does God reveal to Moses? Forgiveness.

God's name is His unknowable essence. True to the contours of Maimonidean thought, we cannot know God's essence but can perceive His attributes, mercy and forgiveness chief among them. Here is where metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics meet. Humility, both personal and intellectual, is submission before the infinitude of God, and of His image residing in people. Crucially, though, for Meiri (as for Maimonides and Saadya before him), submission, yes, but blind obedience, no. To think is to acknowledge both the reach and limits of one's thought – and that double movement is itself Wisdom.

In detailing the service of Yom Kippur, Meiri voices disapproval of lengthy laundry lists of sins. He urges us not to be too self-mortifying – there is no virtue to asceticism for its own sake, only for the sake of fostering contemplation, or as the prophet Daniel puts it (10:12) *to understand and to fast*.

Contra Rousseau, Meiri holds that virtue is something not that we're born with, but that we learn; purity of heart doesn't come by us naturally but is something achieved through thought wedded to action. One of those actions is prayer, which we practice "to soften one's nature and subdue one's thoughts till one returns."

In a deep sense, prayer isn't for God, but for you. As the source of all good, God wants you to work your body and mind like an artisan works their medium, and thereby to achieve yourself.

God's name reappears at the climax of the services of Yom Kippur, which recounts the High Priest's uttering it out loud in the Temple. This, Meiri says, is meant to rouse in us deep philosophical

contemplation of God and His attributes, which are themselves teachings of morality.

### FRACTURING ARROGANCE

In his treatise's second and much shorter section, dedicated to the laws of public fasts and private mourning, Meiri repeatedly connects mourning with humility. This part is appropriately titled *Shever Gaon*, "The Fracturing of Arrogance." The idea that mourning seeks to break our egos runs counter to so much of our therapeutic culture today. It is hard to take – unless perhaps we think not of self-flagellation, which Meiri abhors, but of an awakening to what really matters and endures.

Humility is for Meiri the central virtue, from which all else flows. Arrogance, in contrast, is the forgetting of God, "and without doubt that forgetting of God is the underlying principle of all sins." If arrogance is the root of sin, the dreadful things we do to others, and ourselves, are its bitter fruit.

In connecting arrogance to forgetting God, Meiri mentions an astounding story about the thirteenth-century French halakhist Moses of Coucy. On omitting arrogance from his list of sins mentioned explicitly in the Torah in his monumental *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, he was told in a dream: "you have forgotten the most important thing." And he was reminded of the verse *lest your heart swell up and you forget the Lord your God* (Deuteronomy 8:14).

One form of arrogance is worshipping one's own worldly success, which, fatally, blinds us to introspection (hence the linkage in Proverbs and Psalms between poverty and insight). Meiri calls not for self-abnegation but for self-realization. The truest success is to bestow good on another. What makes this more than some Polonius-like nostrum is that for Meiri, to bestow good on another is to live out the divine wisdom that is the truest stuff of being.

Another form of arrogance is self-righteousness, a standing temptation for those who criticize others. The very point of criticism, Meiri says, is not to satisfy oneself but to help better the person we criticize. With arrogance come jealousy, lust, anger, impudence, imperviousness to criticism, and cruelty. Working to overcome them is the work of return.

Crucially, humility is not weakness but the deepest kind of strength,

not lowliness of spirit, but a virtue pointing to submission of the heart...which also entails being brave and standing up when seeing ugly things, to undo and stand against them with a strong heart and courage.... until the other seeks him out, admits his sin and understands his foolishness... And the general principle is that every exercise of fearlessness and ascendancy with desirable intention is also "humility."

Taken together, Meiri's religion, unlike so much Jewish thought today, is far from Romantic. The three fundamentals of *teshuvah* are removing the sin from heart and mind; confession, regret, and mourning for what we have done; and committing to ourselves "never to return to do evil as at the beginning." There is nothing valuable about having sinned and then returned. There is no moral life without shame, without learning how to dwell in regret. If Meiri puts emphasis on the individual's own moral self-cultivation, it is a different sort of existentialism than the one we know.

Today, when guilt features so prominently in our culture and politics, we seem to have lost sight of the notion that guilt is also about regret and mourning. This is perhaps why we seem so lost about how to deal with it and move forward. Indeed, so much of Meiri's thought seemingly cuts against the grain of modern celebrations of revolution. Though I'd say it depends on what you are rebelling against: those who try hard not to be angry, jealous, or violent in word or deed, not to lose sight of the humanity of the people we criticize and the temptations of our own self-righteousness, are today's real revolutionaries. And this is one revolution that every generation needs to launch over and over again.

Meiri richly studs his book with references from Hebrew translations of Muslim and Christian moralist writings of the time. One is a remarkable passage from *Musarei Ha-Philosophim*, a Hebrew rendering of the ninth-century Baghdadi Christian translator and scholar, Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-Ibadi:

Every existent is designated for oblivion, their coming to be is the cause of their dissolution. If there is a creature that should weep, shouldn't it be the skies for their stars, the seas for their fish, the tree for its branches, the earth for its plants and the man for himself?

As there is no refuge from death, Meiri concludes, neither our mourning nor our celebration of living should be unbounded. This is a familiar Stoic equanimity, but one grounded in hope.

#### JOINING OF THE RETURN

In the hopeful closing pages of the work, Meiri says the “listening” of the Israelites’ momentous *Na’aseh ve-Nishma* (the “we will do and we will listen” of Exodus 24:17) means three things: auditory listening, acceptance, and contemplation. Contemplation is itself an act of faith, buttressed by other sources: intuition, consensus, analogy, tradition. His word for “tradition” is “kabbalah.” The term’s literal sense, “reception,” neatly brings together both revelation from heaven and tradition transmitted over time. By “contemplation,” he seems to be bringing together reasoning and intuition, or what we would call moral sense.

Tradition is no substitute for wisdom; rather, it makes possible a good life within our very real limitations.

Should one have not enough time, or his nature won’t lead him to understanding it all, and he suffices with knowing just part of (the Torah) ... for in keeping faith with the tradition are all the moral ideas fit to be believed in by the way of contemplation, such as God’s existence, unity (and) incorporeality.

What then is revelation? It is something that cuts against the grain of this world yet enables us to make sense of our deepest moral intentions.

Try as we might to absorb it, much of Meiri’s philosophical religion is still very hard to take. Having moved well beyond medieval cosmology, we moderns can easily imagine a world without a Creator, a world of mechanistic and (a la Darwin) random proceedings, and even worse (a la Marx and Freud) material evil bred in the bone with no God to redeem us. (The true Nietzschean terror.)

Meiri did not try to discern larger meanings in historical development as such, as we today so regularly do. Meiri, good Maimonidean that he is, instead offers a naturalistic understanding of Providence: one who has attained knowledge of God in thought and action is necessarily aligned with the Divine Mind and so is in tune with the beneficence of Being.

One wonders what Meiri would have said if the Christians around him had not been friendly conversation partners but the Crusaders who mercilessly butchered the Jewish communities of Ashkenaz, or for that matter the Parisians to the north who literally and publicly burned the Talmud to a crisp a little less than a decade before he was born. Nor does the creation of the State of Israel offer a guaranteed remedy to the annals of anti-Jewish viciousness. As Meiri says, the spiritual properties of the Land of Israel entirely depend on the quality of justice and goodness enacted there.

I would suggest that after the Shoah, believing in the possibility of human goodness is perhaps itself the leap of faith. But faith does not leap *over* ethics, faith leaps *into* ethics. The radical stepping into a good will amidst eternity makes possible the idea of radical, transcendent goodness, even in our temporal, ultimately good, yet broken world.

Only on putting down this book did I ponder a lovely play on words nestled in the title: *Hibur Ha-Te-shuvah* literally translates as “the joining of the return.” Repentance joins our disparate parts together, restores them to a primal wholeness that lies dormant within us all along. That faith in wholeness, in repentance as return, enfolds Meiri’s deepest answer to his Christian interlocutor: not original sin, but original goodness, not crucifixion but restoration. The Christian doctrine of original sin may offer an awfully good explanation of the course of human history, particularly in the last century or two. In the hands of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, it has served as a much-needed brake on utopianism and idealistic violence. But for Meiri, to despair of human beings is to despair of their Creator—which is to say, of good itself.

Our sinfulness isn’t so deep that it must be atoned for by the sacrifice of God Himself; we just need to work at becoming who we may be. As far as God is concerned, we already, *in potentia*, truly are. ■



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