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# MALBIM—

The Man and  
His Work

—BY—

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## MALBIM— The Man and His Work\*

The subject of this essay is probably unfamiliar to most of those here present; some of you may not have even heard of his name. If you look for him in the Jewish Encyclopedia you will find—as in the case of a great many other illustrious defenders of the Holy Law—but a few insignificant lines. There is no monograph on him in any of the modern languages—English, German, French, Russian or Italian, and to one unacquainted with Hebrew his works are a sealed book. And yet, consciously or unconsciously, we are, every one of us, that is, every lover of the Torah and defender of its eternal truths, imbibing Malbim's teachings and following the paths he opened up; for Malbim in Hebrew and Samson Raphael Hirsch in German are the two greatest Jews of the last half century, who have done most to

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show the perfect consistency and stability of the Torah in the light of modern science, who indeed reconciled and strengthened the divine truths of the Torah with the best that the entire domain of modern science can offer, and who have routed every foe from within or without who dared to lay an unholy hand on the sacred bulwarks of traditional or historical Judaism.

Who was Malbim? What did he write? What did he accomplish?

Rabbi Meir Lebusch ben Yechiel Michael, or, as he is more commonly known from the initials of his name (Mem, Lamed, Beth, Yod, Mem), Malbim, a name now borne by some of the most religious and cultured families in Russia, was born in the little town of Volochesk, in the province of Volynia, in Poland, or more strictly speaking, Southwestern Russia, in the latter part of the Hebrew year 5569, or 1809 of the common era. His father, Rabbi Yechiel Michael, was the most learned man of his town, and was known as a scholar abroad. His mother, nee

Simzi, was a cultured and withal a humble and God-fearing woman.

Like Maimonides and Rashi and Luzzatto and a great many other famous Jews, Malbim had the inestimable advantage of imbibing the spirit of the Torah and seeing good Jewish examples—in other words, of laying the foundations of a proper education—at home. Well could he say in the words of Solomon:

“Yea, I was a son unto my father, a tender and only child before my mother and he instructed (“showed”) me and said unto me: ‘Let thy heart grasp firmly my words; observe my commandments (the commandments of God) and thus live.’” (Prov. iv, 3, 4.)

The child was taught the *aleph beth*, the various *berachoth* and the first *mizvoth* by his father, who was extremely cautious about entrusting the education of the tender child to any and everybody. The little boy at a very early age showed signs of a remarkably bright intellect and admirable memory. At the age of five his father taught his *chumesh* with Rashi, and at six he is said to have

been quite familiar with the whole Pentateuch.

Unfortunately, Malbim's father died very young, in 1816, leaving his seven-year-old boy on the hands of his mother. On his deathbed, Rabbi Yechiel had just time enough to utter his last will. He charged his wife to take care of their only son, "to be a father to him as well as a mother," and to give him as thorough an education as possible.

His wife scrupulously carried out his last request. She devoted herself to the child entirely and rejected numerous suitors for the sake of her son. It was only when Rabbi Leibl of Volochesk proposed to take her for his wife that she consented, knowing full well that with such a step-father little Meir would not be in want of ample education. Rabbi Leibl loved Malbim dearly and regarded him as his own child. He first began to teach him himself, but very soon finding that in his busy capacity as a rabbi he could not do justice to the boy, he sought a suitable teacher, and his choice fell upon Rabbi Moshe Halevi Hurwitz. A bet-

ter choice could not have been easily made. Rabbi Hurwitz was not only well versed in the Talmud, but was a proficient Biblical scholar and grammarian. He was familiar with philosophy and was the author of a well-known work, "Emek Hassidim." It was from him that Malbim learned his *Gemara* and *Tenach*, the *Hovoth Halevovoth* (Duties of the Heart) of Bachya, the *Emunoth w' Deoth* (Reason and Faith) of Saadia Gaon, and the *Moreh Nebuchim* (Guide of Perplexed) of Maimonides; and it was then that the hidden strains of his inexhaustible energies sprung open and his keen intellect, deep insight and marvelous memory began to bear fruit. At the age of twelve he already knew, thoroughly, too, Sedarim of Gemara with Tosefoth, and was the author of a number of works. He wrote commentaries on portions of the Talmud, composed poetry, and, in particular, was framing commentaries to the Tenach. He knew the Scriptures to the letter.

Thirsty for knowledge and chancing upon some Kabbalistic works, which he could not understand, Mal-

bim determined to get acquainted with the mysteries of the Kabbalah, and extract out of it whatever good he could. There was no opportunity to do so at home, but he heard that in the town of Zuschub there was a certain Rabbi Hirsch, who was learned in Kabbalah. So off Malbim went to Zuschub to imbibe of the Kabbalah. "*Yogato Mozoso*"—"If thou labor, thou wilt succeed"—the stepping-stone to success, was Malbim's motto. Rabbi Hirsch was a learned man, and the author of a number of works—*Attereth Zevi*, *Peri Kodesh Hillulim*, *Sur Mera* and others. Malbim studied under him about a year, and gained a pretty good knowledge of Kabbalah. Indeed, his teacher would often ask him for an opinion, and the disciple always had a ready answer.

At the age of fourteen Malbim had studied through the whole *Shass* or Talmud. What that means only those who have at least tried to study a portion of Gemara can appreciate. His name was now known far and wide. He was spoken of as the young *Ilui* or genius. He was also known as the *Melitz* or poet, and he was

famous for his beautiful Hebrew letters, rich in poetic thought and expression.

While he was yet a tender youth engaged in studies and corresponding with such prominent men as Rabbi Akiba Eger, Rabbi Moses Sofer and Rabbi Mordecai Benet, his parents persuaded him to marry the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in town. This Malbim did reluctantly, for he had a loathing for riches and "rich people" in general. The union turned out to be an unfortunate and an unhappy one. His wife seems to have been "noisy and ungovernable." She wanted him to cast aside his studies and engage in business. He was finally compelled to divorce her. After this he remained in his native town Volochesk a year longer, assiduously engaged in literary work. About this time he wrote 500 pages of commentaries or *Hiddushim* on the Talmud. Life in Volochesk, however, now became unbearable, and disgusted by the adverse criticism and lack of appreciation which a volume of his poetry received, he left the town and went to Warsaw.

On coming to the Polish capital, the young man directed his steps to the house of the then famous Rabbi Zalmon, author of the work *Hemdath Shelomo*, and introduced himself, stating that he was familiar with the whole Talmud. The aged rabbi eyed the stripling with suspicion.

"When hast thou had time to learn it?"

"Excuse me, Rabbi," said the boy, "but you do not seem to remember well the Mishna. 'Therein we read,' Rabbi Meir used to say, 'look not at the flask, but at what it contains; there may be a new flask full of old wine, and there is many an old flask that has not even new wine in it.'"  
Then Malbim, "pulled out" a manuscript containing some of his brilliant pieces of Pilpul or Talmudical argumentation and handed it to the rabbi. On looking over it the aged rabbi pronounced the blessing:

"Blessed art Thou Who givest wisdom to flesh and blood."

The Ilui's name was soon on every lip. On Sabbath day, when he came to Shul and humbly sat down way back near the door, he was imme-

diately recognized and escorted to a place near the Ark, and the rabbi had him called up *Shelishi* to the reading of the Torah—that is, he was called up in the rabbi's place, at the rabbi's own request.

His fame spread through Poland, but he did not remain long in Warsaw. Rabbi Chayim Auerbach of Lunzich, author of the work *Divre Mishpat* sought to make our young rabbi his son-in-law, and Malbim accepted his daughter's hand. This second union was a very happy one. Malbim settled in Lunzich, where his livelihood was assured, and where he could peacefully devote himself to study and work. In the morning he would learn a *Shiur* of Gemara in the spacious Beth Hamidrash of Lunzich, and in the evening he used to lecture to large audiences. The rest of the time was spent in private study and writing. It was in Lunzich that he wrote various commentaries and *Sh'aloith u' tshuboth* (Responses), and it was there that he prepared one of his chief works: *Arzoth Chayim*, or commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, a work highly praised by his

contemporaries, and in particular by Mordecai Benet and Rabbi Solomon Tiktin, with whom Malbim kept up a lively correspondence. They declared that work to be one of the greatest of the time, and they showered honors and praises upon the young rabbi. The *Argoth Hachayim* was published in Breslau, the residence-place of Rabbi Tiktin.

In 1838 the city of Wereshna, in Russia, was looking for a rabbi. On inquiring of Rabbi Tiktin, he quickly recommended to them the young Malbim. Malbim was extended a call to Wereshna, which he accepted, and he officiated there as rabbi for seven years, bringing blessings upon the community. At this time he was invited to come to Posen and fill the place of the famous Rabbi Akiba Eger, who just died, but he declined.

From Wereshna Malbim was called to the city of Kempen, and it is well to remember the city of Kempen in connection with Malbim's name. It is as "the Kempener," or "Rabbi of Kempen," that he became known to Jews all over the world, for it is there that he composed his greatest

and monumental work—his commentary on the Tenach—that is, the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Holy Writings (Hagiographa). These were published in Warsaw.

In Kempen Malbim lived fifteen years, zealously working and consulted by such men as Rabbi Meisel of Warsaw, Rabbi Kluger of Brody and Rabbi Nathanson of Lemberg. In 1860 he became Chief Rabbi of Bucharest, Roumania. But, *Zaddikin en lohem Menuchah*, Zaddikim are not destined to have rest. Malbim underwent many hardships in Bucharest, and was glad to get away alive. He seems to have been too pious and too straightforward for Bucharest. At any rate it is so hard to please everybody. Quarrels and intrigues arose, and his enemies succeeded in having him cast into prison. Were it not for the intervention of Sir Moses Montefiore, Heaven knows what would have become of the illustrious Gaon. After five years of suffering he was released, and left Bucharest in 1866. He returned to Lunzich, the home of his father-in-law, Rabbi Chayim Auerbach, who



in the interim had died. Malbim was chosen to fill Rabbi Auerbach's place, but he did not maintain long his position. Disgusted by the strifes between the *Chassidim* and *Misnagdim*, he left for Kherson (in 5629) and thence was extended in 1870 a call as rabbi to the city of Mohilev.

In Mohilev Malbim had hoped to spend in peace the rest of his days, but it was not destined to be so. Here, too, troubles with the *Chassidim* arose. One of the *Ashirim* or the "opulent" townsmen seems to have conceived a grudge against the rabbi. Possibly he was not honored enough or flattered enough by Malbim. (Malbim, as I have said before, was not inclined to worship Mammon.) At any rate, the rabbi was secretly and slanderously denounced to the Government, and was ordered to leave Russia in forty-eight hours.

What was to be done? Malbim went to Germany, and was hospitably received by the Jews of Königsberg. He was made Chief Rabbi of Königsberg and Meklenburg. But here, too, he had his opponents among those who did not relish his sincerity and

whom his *mussor* touched to the quick. To illustrate the undignified and rude treatment to which he was sometimes subjected, we may relate the following anecdote:

One Purim day an enemy of Malbim's wanted to expose the rabbi to ridicule in public. So he sent Malbim as *Shelach Monoth*—a sugar pig. When the present was brought Malbim's house was full of guests, who became very indignant at the mean trick. Malbim, however, did not get angry. He accepted the present and remunerated the messenger. He then took one of his own pictures and sent it to the scrounder with a note, saying that Malbim thanks the sender for his image which the respectable gentleman was kind enough to send the rabbi, and that in return he sends his own likeness.

Once an *Apikores*—a would-be philosopher, a Jew who discarded the faith of his fathers for his own convenience—tried to "poke fun" at the rabbi. He told Malbim he had a question to ask him. "We are told," he said, "that when a rabbi passes by us, we should rise, and we are also

told that when a dog runs by we should sit down. Now, would you tell me what is to be done when one meets a rabbi and a dog at the same time?"

"That is easily determined," replied the Gaon. "Let us both go out together, and see what people will do when they see Rabbi Malbim and you."

Though the anecdotes may be amusing, we see that the Gaon's path in life was not bestrewn with roses. Many bitter experiences, many trials and many sufferings did he encounter in his walk to life eternal, where alone the Zaddik gets his just reward.

While in Königsberg Malbim received a call to Krementschug, which he declined. About the same time he was invited by the Jews of New York to become Rav Hakolel or Chief Rabbi. He was offered quite a big salary (\$5,000.00), but he was not a lover of money, and feeling himself too old to undertake a long voyage he declined.

In 1879 he went on a visit to Wilna. He was met with cheers by the most prominent Jews of the city, and was urged to become their rabbi, but the

Governor, recalling the Mohilev affair objected, and the Gaon had to go. This hastened the sickness, from which he never recovered. He died in Kieff, whither he came for a short visit, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, 5640, or 1880, at the age of 69.

Among Malbim's works I may mention the following:

(1) *Sha'aloth u' Thshuboth*, or various responses and decisions.

(2) *Ayyeleth Hashachar*, a grammatical treatise.

(3) *Arzoth Hachayim*, a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch.

(4) *Arzoth Hasholom*, a book of sermons.

(5) *Segulath Sessorim*, a book on Kabbalah.

(6) *Moshol u' Melizah*, a book of poetry, said to have been written by Malbim while traveling on a train.

(7) *Yoir Or*, a treatise on Hebrew synonyms.

(8) Commentaries on the Talmud.

(9) *Life of Ramabam or Maimonides*.

(10) Last, but most important of all, and the work by which Malbim

is best known—his commentary on the Tenach, or the *Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa*.

It is difficult to convey an idea of Malbim's work to those who have not read at least a part of them. On opening his commentary on the Tenach, we are introduced into a new world. The great truths and narratives of the Scriptures are not treated either in the old aggadic way, or in the dry-cut apologetic style of the modern grammarians, but are explained and elucidated in the light of the entire sum of modern science and philosophy, and that in a delightful and convincing manner. His writings inspire the common mortal, the everyday man, to shake off his heavy slumber, to awake from the callous lethargy of "I don't care," to be alive and conscious; to think, observe, reflect; to look upon reviving nature and in it to behold the wonders of creation; to see in every flower, in every creeping thing, in every star, the hand of God, and to *remember* 'tis He that shapes our destinies and rules the world; to know that God of Israel is God of all, the Moving Force

of History and Nature. Malbim combined his Torah with *Derech Erets*, as we say; that is, he combined his deep erudition in the Holy Scriptures and Talmud with his extensive secular knowledge, and made the two supplement each other. To Malbim, in the words of the poet:

The spacious firmament on high,  
With all the blue ethereal sky,  
And spangled Heavens, a shining frame,  
Their Great Original proclaim;  
The unwearied sun from day to day,  
Does his Creator's power display,  
And publishes through every land  
The work of an Almighty hand.

Soon as the evening shades prevail,  
The moon takes up the wondrous tale,  
And nightly to the listening earth,  
Repeats the story of her birth,  
While all the stars that around her burn,  
And all the planets in their turn,  
Confirm the tidings as they roll,  
And spread the truth from pole to pole.  
What, though in solemn silence all  
Move round the dark terrestrial ball?  
What, though no real voice or sound,  
Amid the radiant orbs be found?  
In *Reason's* ear, they all rejoice,  
And utter forth a glorious voice,  
Forever singing as they shine:  
"The hand that made us is *Diving*."

Malbim, with his contemporary, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, each working for the most part independently, but with the same end in view, both strived to tell their brethren and to the world at large that great truth of which every intelligent Jew is *convinced*, and of which every faithful Jew is *conscious*: that Torah and Nature are both Revelations, both the work of God; that Torah is *Truth* and Science is *search for Truth*, and that between the two there *cannot* be a conflict. The two run in converging lines, gradually approaching each other. 'Tis true, we may not see the missing link, but that is no reason for rejecting either. We must remember, however, that of the Torah we are sure, as history has shown, but that our science is only in its infancy. To quote the words of one of our great scientists, W. B. Cannon: "Knowledge grows like the picture in the dissected puzzle. Every addition must fit the parts already arranged, in order to possess significance, and also every addition makes possible the fitting of new parts whose position in the enlarging picture becomes thereby

suddenly revealed." (Science N. S., Vol. XXXIV, No. 864, p. 68.) The solution of the puzzle, the aim to be attained, the picture to be constructed, the bearings to be borne in mind in fitting the blocks together, are given us by the Torah. The Torah points out to us the goal, and indicates the boundaries to be avoided, lest we wander off and get lost in the vagaries of wild speculation or sink inextricably in the deep sea of selfish passions and emotions.

Of Malbim we may truly quote the verse from Mishle (Prov. xxviii, 5):

*Aushay ra lo yobinu, mishpat;  
U'mvakshay Adonai Yobinu Kol.*

Men of evil do not understand even laws of justice, but those that seek the Lord understand everything.

If you would get an idea of Malbim's erudition, then read his commentary on Leviticus; if you would see his knowledge of physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, mathematics, then read his commentary on Genesis; if you would like to have an example of his philosophic acumen, then read his notes on Job. To appreciate his

fine poetic feeling, his nice sense for the beauties of the Sacred Tongue, his lofty ethical conceptions, consult his commentaries on Isaiah, or the Psalms, or the Proverbs.

As a grammarian and Hebraist, Malbim deserves especial distinction. Nothing illustrates this better than the precision with which he discriminates synonyms or words related in meaning. He is almost always successful here. Of course, I am speaking from a strictly Jewish point of view. Malbim's method of discriminating synonyms is, I think, a natural and scientific one. Thanks to his wide acquaintance with the Hebrew literature, he compares passages in which the same word occurs according to the traditional and reliable interpretation, and in that way tries to define the exact meaning or shade of meaning of the word. Our enemies' criticisms are sometimes our best praises. Perhaps the best compliment that could be bestowed on Malbim is a criticism of a writer in the *Litteratur Blatt des Orients*, No. 35. The critic upbraids Malbim for assuming that every word in the Torah—the

"word" of God—means something! Why not? Do we not analyze and dissect and ponder over every word and verse of Shakespeare or Goethe or Dante? Why should we weigh every word and expression of Milton's "Paradise Lost," and not reflect upon the significance of every word of the Divinely inspired Book? How much more is true if we read the Bible in Hebrew—a language so concise and pregnant with thought that it is, as it were, semi-symbolic language. "It describes but little, but through the rich significance of its verbal roots it paints, in the word, a picture of the thing. It only joins for us the predicate to subject, and sentence to sentence; but it presupposes the listening soul so watchful and attentive that the deeper sense and profounder meaning, which lie not upon the surface, may be supplied by the independent action of the mind itself. With wakeful eye and ear, and with soul roused to activity, it must be read; nothing is told as of such superficial import that we need only, as it were, accept it with half-roused dreaminess; we must strive

ourselves to create the speaker's thoughts, to think them over, or the sense will escape us." (Samson Raphael Hirsch; the XIX Letters; Letter II.)

Yes, Malbim does assume that every word in the Torah has a significance. He does more than assume it: he proves it. Yes! Malbim does assume that. With all his sacred and secular knowledge and learning, with all his Tenach and Mishna and Gemara, with all his physics and astronomy and mathematics and chemistry and philosophy, Malbim remembers that (Prov. ix, 10):

*Te-chillath Chochmah yir as Adonai,  
W' da'as Kedoshim Binah.*

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and clear understanding or *binah* is that understanding which regards all knowledge or *da'as* as *da'as Kedoshim*, or knowledge of things regarded as holy.

He also remembers that

*Yir'as Adonai mu'ssar chochmah  
W' lifnay Kobod anobah.*

(Prov. xv, 33.)

The fear of the Lord is the correction of Wisdom, and before honor there must come humility.

Like unto Moses Malbim was modest. Well, therefore, may we close this, our sketch, with the following lines, which I translate from Malbim's preface to the Book of Psalms:

Why art thou sad, my soul?  
Why art thou troubled?  
Wherefore afraid?  
What is't thou darest?  
Trust in thy God,  
To Him stretch forth thy hands!  
And hope in His assistance!  
Stand firm upon this holy ground;  
Take off thy shoes!  
Draw nigh the awful cloud,  
And strike the waters so they part:  
Arise! Pass over!  
Be not afraid! Approach the cloud!  
Ask, search and ponder!  
But—  
Take great care  
The stone is there,  
The stumbling stone of error:  
Beware of every lying thought,  
Lest thou defile the holy name of God.

Arise my psalter, awake my harp.  
The morning star will I awake with pleasant songs to God;  
To Him I'll sing for granting me all this,  
For having showered kindnesses upon me;  
On me, a worm, He graciously had mercy,  
To Him I'll sing, who gave me wisdom.

Oh! let my prayers be accepted!  
Oh! let Thy kindnesses continue!  
Be Thou my help!  
I love Thy Law; it is my daily bread;  
Thy testimonies are my counsellors and  
my delight,  
Oh! Let me live that I may praise Thy  
name, my God!

