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The Poet's Rabbi

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Why did eminent Victorian poet and playwright Robert Browning (1812-1889) name his famous poem on aging "Rabbi Ben Ezra?" The question is straightforward; the answer less so.

The poem—a dramatic monologue or soliloquy comprising 32 stanzas (sestets)—was published in the collection *Dramatis Personae* (1864), and begins with an optimistic exhortation to not only live life to the fullest, but to brave life's duration, and embrace one's golden age, with faith in the divine plan:

> Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
> Our times are in His hand
> Who saith "A whole I planned,
> Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

The speaker is apparently meant to be the peripatetic medieval exegete, grammarian, and philosopher Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1089-1164 or 1092-1167), known colloquially among Jewry as "Ibn Ezra," because he was the preeminent exemplar of an illustrious dynasty; the audience is apparently a synagogal congregation (though some construe the listener as the speaker's younger wife). The rabbi holds forth and

espouses his deep-seated philosophy of life, advocating courage in the face of life's sundry trials and travails:

> Then, welcome each rebuff
> That turns earth's smoothness rough,
> Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
> Be our joys three-parts pain!
> Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
> Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

He accents the importance of gratitude to God for granting one the opportunity to exist, grow, and gain experience—to make sense of life and the world through one's senses and intellect:

> Yet gifts should prove their use:
> I own the Past profuse
> Of power each side, perfection every turn:
> Eyes, ears took in their dole,
> Brain treasured up the whole;
> Should not the heart beat once "How good to live and learn?"
>
> Not once beat "Praise be Thine!
> I see the whole design,
> I, who saw power, see now love perfect too:
> Perfect I call Thy plan:
> Thanks that I was a man!
> Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what Thou shalt do!"

From the sage's perspective, old age is, in a sense, the guerdon for surmounting the myriad challenges inherent to youth:

> Therefore I summon age
> To grant youth's heritage,
> Life's struggle having so far reached its term:
> Thence shall I pass, approved
> A man, for aye removed
> From the developed brute; a god though in the germ.

Indeed, the rabbi reminds his hearers that aging is akin to a purification process, that with senescence comes refinement, discernment, and wisdom:

> Youth ended, I shall try
> My gain or loss thereby;
> Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:
> And I shall weigh the same,
> Give life its praise or blame:
> Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.

Later, the sage adjures listeners to dispense with the dispiriting notions of transience and impermanence, and with the benighted Epicurean tenet of *carpe diem*, whose emphasis on the temporal distracts focus from the eternal, employs a famed biblical metaphor from the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah to make his point:

> Fool! All that is, at all,

Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
Time's wheel runs back or stops:
Potter and clay endure.

He fixed thee mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance,
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

The sage urges his fellow(s) to maintain a positive outlook and to transcend worldly concerns, for all beings have a purpose and form part of God's grand design:

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips a-glow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou with earth's wheel?

The rabbi closes by addressing God directly as a creature appealing to his Creator to burnish his handiwork until achieving perfection in a preordained process that terminates in decease:

But I need, now as then,
Thee, God, who mouldest men;
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,
Did I,—to the wheel of life
With shapes and colours rife,
Bound dizzily,—mistake my end, to slake Thy thirst:

So, take and use Thy work:
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in Thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

Just as easily, Browning might have called the poem something along the lines of "An Elder Imparts Spiritual Advice" or even "The Jew's Wisdom," etc., but instead he gave it the specific title "Rabbi Ben Ezra," although nothing in the poem reveals why.

What exactly is Robert Browning's connection to, and preoccupation with, Ibn Ezra?

The mystery deepens further when we realize that this poem wasn't the first in Browning's oeuvre to feature Abraham ibn Ezra—but, in point of fact, the second.

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Almost a decade prior to the publication of "Rabbi Ben Ezra," Browning published the poetry anthology *Men and Women* (1855), which included the poem "Holy-Cross Day"; judging by its overtly Christian title, one would be forgiven for not assuming that its verses featured a revered rabbi. This poem—also a soliloquy—is prefaced with a bracketed diary entry, ascribed to a Catholic bishop's secretary and purportedly dating to 1600, regarding an annual conversionist sermon preached before the Jews of Rome, whose attendance was mandatory. But what the poem mainly limns is the defiant attitude of the Jews compelled to endure this despicable and deeply resented practice, a form of ecclesiastical persecution imposed on Roman Jewry and Jewish communities in the Papal States, that lasted until its abrogation by Pope Pius IX in 1846 (it was only briefly revived thereafter).

In "Holy-Cross Day," while they are supposed to be a rapt audience attuning to the bishop's homily, the Jews instead recite under their breath what Browning calls "Ben Ezra's Song of Death":

> For Rabbi Ben Ezra, the night he died,
> Called sons and sons' sons to his side,
> And spoke, "This world has been harsh and strange;
> "Something is wrong: there needeth a change.
> "But what, or where? at the last or first?
> "In one point only we sinned, at worst.
>
> "The Lord will have mercy on Jacob yet,
> "And again in his border see Israel set.
> "When Judah beholds Jerusalem,
> "The stranger-seed shall be joined to them:
> "To Jacob's House shall the Gentiles cleave.
> "So the Prophet saith and his sons believe.

In this pair of stanzas can be seen the reason why this poem is highly problematic: it combines Jewish affirmation with supposed Jewish transgression and guilt regarding Jesus of Nazareth. Browning places in Ben Ezra's mouth words that imply Jewry erred in not recognizing the divinity of Christ: "In one point only we sinned, at worst." The poem suggests that Jews were given the divine word to safeguard, but only "Till Christ at the end relieve our guard." And in one stanza, a contrite Ben Ezra addresses God directly:

> "Thou! if thou wast He, who at mid-watch came,
> "By the starlight, naming a dubious name!
> "And if, too heavy with sleep—too rash
> "With fear—O Thou, if that martyr-gash
> "Fell on Thee coming to take thine own,
> "And we gave the Cross, when we owed the Throne—
>
> "Thou art the Judge. We are bruised thus.

Indeed, Jews have been bruised and much more—not by the blemish of guilt or sin, however, but by misguided followers of Jesus who tormented them throughout the centuries. Browning has his Ben Ezra concede that Jewry's denial of Christ was an outrage for which Jews have made amends through their oppression and persecution at the

hands of the more numerous and dominant Christians, the heirs of Rome, over the millennia:

> "By the torture, prolonged from age to age,
> "By the infamy, Israel's heritage,
> "By the Ghetto's plague, by the garb's disgrace,
> "By the badge of shame, by the felon's place,
> "By the branding-tool, the bloody whip,
> "And the summons to Christian fellowship,—

"Ben Ezra's Song of Death," and the poem itself, conclude, at least, by reaffirming Jewish pride and Jewry's providential destiny to return to its ancestral homeland:

> "We boast our proof that at least the Jew
> "Would wrest Christ's name from the Devil's crew.
> "Thy face took never so deep a shade
> "But we fought them in it, God our aid!
> "A trophy to bear, as we march, thy band,
> "South, East, and on to the Pleasant Land!"

"Holy-Cross Day," per the late American literary critic and Yale professor Harold Bloom, "is not one of Browning's masterworks." Bloom was being diplomatic; the poem, which includes doggerel verses (e.g., "Fee, faw, fum! bubble and squeak!" and "Bow, wow, wow—a bone for the dog!"), does not rise to the spiritual or philosophical plateaux of Browning's later dramatic monologues. Of course, the historical Ibn Ezra never uttered such self-flagellating drivel as he is made to do in this poem, because he never thought it. Admittedly, the hypocritical Christians portrayed in the poem come off even worse than its Jews, but by ostensibly imposing on Jewry the burden of sin and guilt for Calvary, and thereby inadvertently justifying persecution of Jews in the centuries since, Browning did the Jewish people no favors. What he had intended as a satire on the misconduct of conversionist sermons nonetheless incorporates false charges of, and imputes a bogus sense of culpability for, deicide. Browning had meant to defend Jewry against the Catholic Church's heavy-handedness, but the ham-handed manner wherein he did so contains offensive elements. Perhaps we may speculate that Browning, upon reflection and after receiving feedback from Jewish readers, recognized that in one point he had sinned, and was bruised thus. It would take him nine years—when he recast Ibn Ezra in a more fitting role in "Rabbi Ben Ezra"—to make amends.

Browning biographer C. H. Herford (*Robert Browning*, 1905) similarly suggests that the poet countered his earlier "Ben Ezra's Song of Death" in "Holy-Cross Day" with the later poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra," which is "a great song of life, bearing more fully perhaps than any other poem the burden of what he had to say to his generation, but lifted far above mere didacticism by the sustained glow in which ethical passion, and its imaginative

splendor, indistinguishably blend. It is not for nothing that Browning put this loftiest utterance of all that was most strenuous in his own faith into the mouth of a member of the race which has beyond others known how to suffer and how to transfigure its suffering. Ben Ezra's thoughts are not all Hebraic, but they are conceived in the most exalted temper of Hebrew prophecy; blending the calm of achieved wisdom with the fervour of eagerly accepted discipline, imperious scorn for the ignorance of fools, and heroic ardour for the pangs and throes of the fray."

And yet, even if Browning's second depiction of Ibn Ezra can be explained by his first, our original mystery remains unresolved: why did Browning connect specifically to the personage Abraham ibn Ezra in the first place?

Browning's father had a library containing Hebraica, which may have included works by Ibn Ezra. Both Browning and Ibn Ezra were spiritually-minded poets; both sojourned in Lucca, Italy (Ibn Ezra in 1145, Browning in 1849, 1853, and 1857); both were residents of London (Browning for decades in his youth and again in his later years, Ibn Ezra in 1158-1159). Ibn Ezra is believed to have died in Calahorra (Spain), but a fanciful anecdote mentioned by Moses ben Hasdai Taku (fl. 1250-1290) in his partly extant polemical treatise *Ketav Tamim* (c. 1220) claims that Ibn Ezra died in England from an illness after encountering a pack of black dogs—which were, in fact, demons—standing and threatening him as he rode through a forest. The veracity of this anecdote aside, it is possible that Browning heard of this legend, which may have cemented Ibn Ezra as a figure in his consciousness.

There were, therefore, several affinities between the two men. According to later Browning biographer Clyde de L. Ryals (*The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography*, 1993), "Browning almost never wrote a poem that was not a vehicle for self-display." Ibn Ezra, therefore, became Browning's preferred surrogate when it came to imparting religious messages to his audience via dramatic monologues. And Browning may have admired his peripatetic forebear's intrepid but pious lifestyle: "He was attracted to his Jewish characters for the same reason that he was attracted to his Orientals, Italians, Spaniards, or medieval alchemists. They all had something adventurous, strange, romantic and profound to offer. And the profundity lay always in the humanity," according to David Goldstein, former curator of Hebrew books and manuscripts at the British Library ("Jews and Robert Browning: fiction and fact," *Jewish Historical Studies*, 1987-1988).

Ultimately, absent the Victorian versifier himself, or any existent material disclosing the reason for his preoccupation with the medieval sage, we are left to conclude that Robert Browning must have felt himself a kindred spirit with Abraham ibn Ezra, regardless of the seven centuries separating them, such that he repeatedly enlisted him as his literary proxy—his mouthpiece for urging abiding faith despite persecution, his spokesman for advocating life-affirming hope.

Meiri, Rabbi Dr. Haym Soloveitchik, and the Yerushalmi

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> *Close to forty years ago, I was privileged to be a student in R. Dr. Haym Solovietchik's Talmud class at YU; unlike every other* shi'ur *at YU that one semester (it was supposed to be a year-long* shi'ur*, but ran only one semester), we learned* Yerushalmi Terumot*. To the best of my knowledge, this was the only time a tractate of* Yerushalmi *was taught as a regular Talmud* shi'ur*. It was a remarkable experience, and it taught me rigorous Talmudic skills I had not previously encountered, from manuscript work to the methodology of both* Seder Zera'im *and the* Yerushalmi *and so much more. Furthermore, the unique pedagogical style of R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik was on full display. It was something singular and special, and I am in his debt.*

The greatest tribute to a Torah scholar is engagement with their ideas, and I write this short piece in that spirit to engage with R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik's work.

The great historian of medieval Ashkenazi *rishonim*, R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik, makes the following observation about Meiri in his famous essay entitled "Rupture And Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," in note 54. He writes:

> Meiri is the only medieval Talmudist *(rishon)* whose works can be read almost independently of the Talmudic text, upon which it ostensibly comments. The *Beit ha-Behirah* is not a running commentary on the Talmud. Meiri, in quasi-Maimonidean fashion, intentionally omits the give and take of the *sugya,* he focuses, rather, on the final upshot of the discussion and presents the differing views of that upshot and conclusion. Also, he alone, and again intentionally, provides the reader with background information. His writings are the closest thing to a secondary source in the library of *rishonim.* This trait coupled with the remarkably modern syntax of Meiri's Hebrew prose have won for his works their current widespread use. It is not, as commonly thought, because the *Beit ha-Behirah* has been

> recently discovered. [1] …. Rather, Meiri's works had previously fallen stillborn from the press. Sensing its alien character, most scholars simply ignored them, and, judging by the infrequent reprintings, if any, they also appear not to have found a popular audience. They have come into their own only in the past half century.[2]

This footnote, often cited and even centrally featured in the Meiri entry on Wikipedia, is important. Yet, I do not think this valuable suggestion as to why Meiri disappeared from rabbinic discussion for close to 700 years and yet has come back in the last century is the full story. (Meiri is the only *rishon* to disappear and come back as a mainstream source.[3])

In the spirit of keeping the conversation open and exploring further directions, I propose in this article a few additional ideas that I suspect were also important factors in explaining both why Meiri disappeared for centuries and why his works have returned to the front and center of Torah discourse in the last century. This is not to argue that the unique intellectual approach of Meiri was not a factor, but that it was not the only important factor in Meiri's being discarded and then revived.

1. Far more than any other *rishon*, Meiri deeply and regularly quotes the *Yerushalmi* on every tractate. His work, more than that of any other *rishon*, closely compares the reasoning of the *Bavli* with the flow of the *Yerushalmi* in ways that, for one

[1] This continues with the following prooftext: "True, the massive Parma manuscript has been in employ only for some seventy years. However, even a glance at any Hebrew bibliography will show that much of the *Beit ha-Behirah* on *Sefer Mo'ed,* for example, had been published long before Avraham Sofer began his transcriptions of the Parma manuscript in the nineteen twenties. (E.g. *Megillah* Amsterdam, 1759; *Sukkah* Berlin, 1859; *Shabbat* Vienna, 1864.)" The text then continues as above.

[2] Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," Tradition 28:4 (Summer 1994): 120-121. This one long paragraph is elaborated on and explained in more detail in Haym Soloveitchik, "The Riddle of the Me'iri's Recent Popularity," in Collected Essays III (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020), 393-401. R. Dr. Soloveitchik's "Rupture and Reconstruction" is available online at https://traditiononline.org/rupture-and-reconstruction-the-transformation-of-contemporary-orthodoxy/ and was recently republished in book form along with responses to criticism as Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Modern Orthodoxy (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021).

[3] For example, the Bar Ilan Responsa project (v. 31) lists (1) Rashi, (2) Tosaphot, (3) Ramban, (4) Rashba, (5) Ritva, (6) Ran, (7) Meiri, (8) Tosaphot Rid, (9) Mordechai, and (10) Shita Mekubetzet and Kovetz Shitat Kamai as the primary *rishonim*. It then lists more than forty additional *rishonim* (under the term "Other *Rishonim*").

who thinks that the *Yerushalmi* is hardly a core text, makes Meiri hard to use and of much less value and interest. [4] *Hakhmei Ashkenaz* (Ashkenazi *rishonim*) and others generally thought the *Yerushalmi* was not a core text and hardly learned it.

2. Meiri has many *Yerushalmi* texts that we do not have, such that even if one has a *Yerushalmi* and cared about it – as for example, Ritva seemed to[5] – the text used by Meiri did not match the standard text of others. For example, any reasonable read of Meiri's commentary on *Rosh Hashanah* 4a, s.v. "ehad ha-nodeir" concludes that Meiri had a whole *Yerushalmi* tractate on *Menahot* (which, as far as I can see, no one else had), and he has countless other references to either *Talmud Ma'arav* (Western Talmud) or *Yerushalmi* that others do not have.[6]

These two reasons combined made his work less interesting to many early scholars, because he quoted a primary text that they did not agree was primary, or he used a text different from their own in significant ways.

3. Meiri uses a cryptic citation system in which he does not reveal either the name of the authority he is discussing or the location of the

[4] For example, Rami Reiner notes (in "The Yerushalmi in Rabbeinu Tam's Library", REJ 178 (2019) https://doi.org/10.2143/REJ.178.3.3287130) that Rabbeinu Tam has no real familiarity with the Yerushalmi, and all of his citations are derivatives of the works of others, and the same is true for most of the Ashkenazi rishonim, who either did not have a Yerushalmi or did not care what it said. According to the Bar Ilan Responsa Project CD (v. 31) there are 1,968 references to the "Western Talmud" and 210 to the Yerushalmi in the works of Meiri, for a total of 2,178 references. There are 472 in Rabbeinu Hananel, 123 in Rif, 938 in Rosh, no more than 65 in Rashi, and 835 or so in Ramban. I want to add that, in the context of Meiri, in my subjective opinion, the Yerushalmi is employed in a far more complex, involved, and regular way than in any other rishon I have seen, for deeper analytical comparison. Indeed, Meiri actually wrote a commentary on one volume of the Yerushalmi (Shekalim), the only established rishon to do so.

[5] There are 1,851 references to the *Yerushalmi* in Ritva on the Bar Ilan Cd (v. 31)--fewer than Meiri, but close!

[6] As Wikipedia notes simply, "Unlike most *rishonim*, he frequently quotes the Jerusalem Talmud, including textual variants which are no longer extant in other sources." Indeed, it is possible that Meiri had whole tractates of *Yerushalmi* that we are lacking. It is possible that Ra'avad had such as well. See Ra'avad commenting on Rambam, *Bikkurim* 2:6. (Ra'avad is also a product of Provence and made extensive use of the *Yerushalmi*. His commentary on the Talmud is not extant.) For more on this see Shmuel K. Mirsky, "R. Menachem Meiri: His Life, Outlook, and Works" [Heb.] *Talpiot* 4:1-110 (1944), at pages 43-46. This excellent work was also published as an introduction to some editions of Meiri's work on repentance. More on the *Yerushalmi* issue will follow below in the text accompanying note 12.

page/chapter/tractate to find the work. This bizarre mode of non-citation (one of his unique linguistic features, not found in any other *rishon*) makes integrating Meiri with the other commentators around him considerably more complex. [7] As R. Dr. Soloveitchik himself notes: "Since readers had no way of knowing who advanced a specific doctrine, they were at a loss as to what specific weight should be assigned to it."[8]

4. The Provencal rabbinic literature to which Meiri belongs is deeply insular and not well-cited (other than Ra'avad's comments on Rambam). Much of it functionally disappeared from the mainstream rabbinic tradition (consider for example *Sefer Ha-Hashlamah* of Rabbeinu Meshulam, the novellas of R. Avraham Min Ha-Har, or *Sefer Ha-Mikhtam* of Rav David ben Levi of Narbonne and more, many of which were published only recently by Yehonatan Blau as part of his *Shitat Ha-Kadmonim*). Maybe Meiri simply suffered the same fate as others in his and neighboring Provencal

[7] It is easy to miss how different this citation system is from that of everyone else, since we now all use the critical editions of Meiri prepared over the last eighty years, in which the notes provide both the code for whom is being cited and the location of the work. Without the notes, Meiri is difficult to learn. (This makes, by the way, Meiri's use – unique among authorities in the late nineteenth century—by the *Mishnah Berurah* worthy of more study. For example, there are just two references to Meiri in the *Arukh Ha-Shulhan, Orah Hayyim*, but there are more than 400 in the *Mishnah Berurah*.)

On the question of why Meiri uses this system, no satisfying explanations have been produced. See R. Nissan Alpert's introduction to Meiri, *Bava Metzia*, at page 5 for one speculative approach, and R. Mirsky, "R. Menachem Meiri: His Life, Outlook, and Works", 47-48 for another speculative approach. Dr. Gregg Stern, in *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture* (Routledge Jewish Studies Series, 2009), 76-77, proposes as follows: **"**Our puzzlement at this name usage is perhaps lessened by consideration of Meiri's expressed desire to incorporate many of the literary features of *Mishneh Torah* into *Bet ha-Behirah*. By obscuring the relationship between individual interpretations and specific historical figures, Meiri produced a summary of Talmudic interpretation with an air suggestive of an apodictic code. By the use of sobriquets, Meiri may not have wished so much to characterize the interpreters whom he cited as to maintain an aura of authority that befits the 'testimony' style for which *Bet ha-Behirah* was named." This is also very speculative. Dr. Susan Einbinder suggested by email to me that this might have been a cultural norm in the community around him, and pointed to medical work from that era that does the same. But, in truth, it remains a mystery why Meiri adopted this unique and exceedingly awkward reference system. No scholar since him has adopted it, as far as I am aware.

[8] Soloveitchik, "The Riddle of the Mei'ri's Recent Popularity," 399n2. See also, Stern (cited in note 7) in note 56 on page 100 who also notes how early authorities were unsure who was being cited and this "give[s] some indication of the difficulty that the reader frequently experiences in discerning to whom the Meiri refers."

> communities, which can be attributed to the increasing French persecutions beginning in 1306, and their lack of continuity elsewhere, rather than anything else.[9]

Scholars have offered two additional, less flattering, explanations.

One is that Meiri's writings were lost because he was not stellar – 'big pen, small mind' is the quip. For example, R. Dr. Shlomo Pick subtly proposes this in his dissertation, [10] writing "One must conclude that despite all his writings, Meiri was *at most a local sage*, himself appealing to Rashba on Halakhic issues." Pick proposes this since (1) Meiri wrote almost no responsa, so he seems not to have been a major communal decisor; (2) "For the most part, he is found in the position of *questioner* in some of the Rashba's responsa," and (3) Other major sages — even within Provence — did not turn to him.

A second theory, advanced by the always thoughtful Dr. Moshe Halbertal, is that the lack of use of Meiri was the conscious result of antagonism to Meiri's view of Maimonidean philosophy by Rashba and others in that era. Dr. Halbertal's thesis might well be correct in the context of its time and the relationship between Meiri and Rashba, but I am unpersuaded as to the value of this explanation in the context of a discussion of why Meiri was not used for nearly 700 years and yet is now widely used, since at best this explains the approach of the school of Rashba and not centuries of abandonment or his modern revival.[11]

[9] R. Dr. Ephraim Kanarfogel suggested this reason to me in electronic conversation. Thanks to him for these wise comments. This explanation does not fully explain his revival.

[10] Shlomo H. Pick, The Jewish Communities of Provence before the Expulsion in 1306, PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 1996. Something close to this is expressed by Ephraim Kanarfogel, in the name of Rav Soloveitchik in "The History of the Tosafists and their Literary Corpus According to Rav Soloveitchik's Interpretations of the Qinot for Tishah B'av," in Scholarly Man of Faith: Studies in the Thought and Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, eds. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Dov Schwartz (Yeshiva University Press, 2018), 75-107 at pages 76-77, in note 5: "The Rav also noted that the method and content of the Beit ha-Behirah (including the lack of clear citations and its relative verbosity) suggest that its author was not as highly regarded as someone such as the contemporary Rashba." See also the statement on page 77: "Some have suggested that the Rav's dismissal of the Meiri actually had more to do with Meiri's broad method of summation."

[11] See Moshe Halbertal, *Bein Torah le-Hokhmah: Rabbi Menahem haMe'iri u-Va'alei Halakhah Ha-Maimuniyim Be-Provence*, (Magnes Press, 2000), 217–22. R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik in note 6 of the work cited above disagrees with

In truth, more than one factor might be at play at one time, and no single factor accounts for why Meiri was discarded or revived.

Meiri's Modern Revival

Each of the following factors helps explain the revival of Meiri in the last century.

First, the return of Jewish learning to Israel revived the study of the *Yerushalmi* in our current generations: serious Torah scholars in rigorous institutions in Israel learn all of the *Yerushalmi Zera'im* and much more. At least five commentaries on the entire *Yerushalmi* have appeared in the last few decades, and manuscript work abounds showing variations in the *Yerushalmi*. [12] That change makes Meiri's comparative work between the *Bavli* and the *Yerushalmi*, and his citations to missing *Yerushalmi* volumes, fascinating rather than distracting.[13]

Second, Meiri's cryptic citation system, while once obscure, has become intelligible thanks to the one critical edition of each of the many Meiri tractates with their notes that identify every nickname and provide referenced sources for nearly all *rishonim*

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this hypothesis as well, as does an unpublished paper by Dr. Gregg Stern graciously shared with me. If pressed to explain Dr. Halbertal's thesis and its application here, I would propose that this view explains why so few manuscripts of Meiri survived, and that lack of manuscripts contributed to Meiri's lack of use over the centuries. The reply to that view is R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik's observation that even when Meiri was published "Meiri's works had previously fallen stillborn from the press" even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[12] See (1) the Artscroll commentary (translation), which is not yet complete at 24 volumes; (2) the complete *Yedid Nefesh* commentary (translation) of R. Yechiel Avraham Ha-Levi Bar Lev; (3) the commentary of R. Chaim Kanievsky (complete); (4) the *Ohr Le-Yesharim* commentary (which is incomplete) and (5) the *Toledot Yitzhak* commentary of R. Yitzhak Isaac Krasilschikov. On top of that, of course, there is Dr. Jacob Neusner's (rarely used outside of academia) translation and R. Ze'ev Wolf Rabinowitz's *Sha'arei Torat Eretz Yisrael*, a significant early twentieth-century commentary on many tractates. In short, more has been published on the *Yerushalmi* in the last century than in the five hundred years before, I suspect.

[13] See for example *Shavuot* 10b, *Megillah* 29a and so many more. The problem of missing *Yerushalmi* citations has fascinated many great scholars. For a classical review of this issue, see R. Avigdor Aptowitzer, "Nechte Jeruschalmizitate," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 55 (New Series 19, July/Aug 1911): 419–425 (German) (which I have not read) and his summary of his review of this argument again in his *Sefer Ra'avyah* (Jerusalem 1938). See also the classic analyses of Saul Lieberman: *Al Ha-Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem, 1929), especially the introductory chapters, documents cases in which *rishonim* preserve *Yerushalmi* traditions absent from extant manuscripts; *Ha-Yerushalmi Kifshuto*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Darom, 1934), in the introduction and early methodological chapters, develops a framework for reconstructing the *Yerushalmi* from parallel rabbinic corpora and assessing the evidentiary weight of medieval citations; and Yerushalmi Neziqin*, Sources and Studies in Rabbinic Literature*, vol. 15 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, 1983), especially the introductory essays and textual notes, offers detailed case studies of missing or divergent *Yerushalmi sugyot*. Everyone who is interested is aware of the fact that Meiri cites *Yerushalmi* passages that we do not have. When all is said and done, a fast count of the citations to the *Yerushalmi* in Meiri (by checking references and looking at the notes in many volumes) indicates that about 4% of the citations to *Talmud Ma'arav* are unknown. (This estimate is necessarily impressionistic rather than statistical in the modern sense: it reflects a hand-count of Meiri's *Yerushalmi* citations across multiple tractates, excluding cases of clear paraphrase or loose allusion, and counting only those passages for which no parallel exists in known *Yerushalmi* manuscripts, Genizah fragments, or early printings when so noted in the notes.)

he is citing. Now, understanding the views Meiri is synthesizing is easy since the code has been broken. The code – which impeded learning for centuries – is not an important impediment any more.

Third, in line with the view "that Meiri's popularity owes more to his prolific pen than to deep originality," Meiri's revival in the last century is explained by the contemporary halakhic fixation (by *Mishnah Berurah* and others) to counting *rishonim* rather than deeply analyzing them. The prolific pen of Meiri became popular because he wrote on much and had opinions easy to understand and classify. This helps explain why *aharonim* who *analyze* quote Meiri much less frequently than Rashba, for example, but *aharonim* who *count* cite him much more frequently. [14] Similarly the revival of modern Jewish philosophy in the Maimonidean model has made Meiri's philosophy even more appealing, and his philosophical approach hardly disqualifies; indeed, it is now normative.

Finally, the wide availability of digital and printed editions of the *rishonim* has made Meiri's extensive commentaries far more accessible. Unlike so many other lost *rishonim* manuscripts which were published, Meiri wrote on nearly the whole Talmud. It is for good reason that he joins Rashba, Ritva and other great *rishonim* in string citations in the Encyclopedia Talmudica so many times.[15]

I suspect that these factors–as much as the methodological comments of the great R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik–likely contributed both to the disappearance of Meiri and his modern resurgence. Of course, there is no definitive hard data on any of this, and no distinct prooftext supporting any theory.

In the end, the deepest tribute one can offer to R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik is precisely this kind of sustained engagement with texts, methods, and historical puzzles—an intellectual posture that he himself has modeled for decades with unmatched rigor and grace. His reading of Meiri, like so much of his life's work, exemplifies a rare synthesis of philological precision, historical imagination, and fearless methodological clarity, illuminating not only a single *rishon* but the very contours of how Torah history is written and understood. Few scholars have so profoundly reshaped the questions we ask of our tradition while remaining so deeply rooted in its sources, languages, and lived realities. For generations of students and readers, R. Dr. Soloveitchik has taught us that genuine reverence for Torah is expressed not through preservation alone, but through

[14] Consider for example that there are 76 references to Meiri and 1,220 to Rashba in *Iggerot Moshe* (a 1:16 citation ratio), but 2,315 references to Meiri and 5,426 to Rashba in *Yabia Omer* (a 1:2.3 citation ratio). This explains the contrast cited in note 7 above about the uses of Meiri in *Mishnah Berurah* as opposed to in *Arukh Ha-Shulhan*

[15] Which, in volume 31 of Bar Ilan, contains 702 citation references which list Ramban, Rashba, and Meiri in a string cite form. This is a tribute to Meiri's influence on modern Jewish law.

disciplined, courageous, and loving inquiry—and for that, the world of Torah scholarship stands enduringly in his debt. I look forward to many more years of insightful contributions from the erudite R. Dr. Solovietchik.

Shirah Hadashah: A Review of Three Jewish Poets' Inaugural Collections

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When the definitive account of American Jewish poetry in the early 2020s is one day written, it will no doubt call attention to the turbulence of the period. The poets labor in an environment of pandemic, existential war in Israel, politically-charged culture wars, retrenched nationalism, and an increasingly mainstream antisemitism. It will also account for the publishing environment: While outfits like Teaneck-based Ben Yehuda Press's "Jewish Poetry Project" expand opportunities to write for an intra-community audience, broader hostile trends in English-language publishing eliminate opportunities to reach beyond this audience.

Three recent works of English poetry by American Jews–covering a spectrum of styles and areas of focus–reflect the impact of these forces. What comes through clearly from each is a sense of unbridgeable distance, in which physical precariousness leads to spiritual instability.

Review of Tikva Hecht, *Tashlikh* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2024).

The introductory poem of Tikva Hecht's inaugural collection acts as a signpost of sorts, warning the reader that the verses that follow will not maintain static boundaries between time, space, and abstraction. Here, "you find the hours on your clothes," and the "freedom of circling seagulls" is "grating against your body" ("Afterwards," 14).[1] The poems, which place Jewish ritual, theology, and emotional pain into open conversation and conflict, also give no respect to the boundaries between lines and stanzas. This is free verse territory.

Hecht takes different approaches to different poetic subjects, but all are provocative. In examining the nature of the human being, she imagines a conversation between cannibals about the properties of mind and spirit: "Suck out the marrow, you say / but don't pray to it—the empty bone / and the shiver, that's the good stuff… I still long / for the glimmer and sorrow / of an infinite heart, crafted / from the finest materials / of an enchanted world, unfettered / by cravings or the cold" ("The Dispositions of Cannibals," 28). Other poems, working through first-person reminiscences, adopt the visual format and

[1] Parenthetical citations refer to the page numbers of each poetry collection.

interpretive style of the printed Bablyonian Talmud's *tzurat ha-daf* ("Tashlikh," 8; "On Misplacement," 52; "Félix Fernández García," 56).

Most provocative of all, though, are the collection's various approaches to God. At one point, the speaker's attempts to conceive of God lead to spiraling, oppressive thoughts: "I will tell you every conception of god is a false god made in the image of god. Which is to say every conception of god is a conception of self. And every self the mirage of god posing as a false god and so—you do the math. I am tired of this logic and its aesthetic. Please god, let me be rid of you" ("Configurations of Worship," 40). Elsewhere, she seeks to plumb the meaning of traditional personifications of God: "God used words, / only words they say / to make all this, but then / is it even words we mean, / or inclinations? And what can those / ever effect?" ("The Angel Made of My Thoughts Uses Her One Phone Call," 70). In yet another, aptly titled "Theology," the institutions of worship are an immutable fact of creation, guarded by nature against the humans that seek to destroy them: "So you say, burn your temples / and I will burn mine / but dutiful is the rain / and nothing will catch" (63).

Tashlikh provides a powerful artistic statement in familiar Jewish language, with special emphasis on themes of the High Holidays (*e.g.*, "While Looking at the Portrait of Patience Escalier Between Mincha and Ne'ila," 66; "Songs of Creation and its Infidelities," 73). It is, however, challenging reading for those not already inclined to free verse poetry.

Review of Brian Rohr, *Shaken to My Bones: A Poetic Midrash on the Torah* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2024).

For all of the advantages of an early childhood *parashat ha-shavua* education, it presents one notable disadvantage: because students gain familiarity with the stories before the onset of critical thinking—sometimes even before the onset of long-term memory!—they are deprived of the opportunity to encounter the *parashah* for the first time as mature readers, to feel the drama of the story without knowing how it ends.

In the darkness of the COVID lockdown era, poet and storyteller Brian Rohr undertook to read the entire Torah for the first time (79), privileged with the opportunity to form initial reactions to its weekly portion as an adult. His project evolved into a commitment to compose a poem on each *parashah*, and this commitment evolved into his inaugural published collection: *Shaken to My Bones*. The collection also prefigures Rohr's subsequent undertaking, "The Stafford Challenge," a selective cohort that commits to write a poem each day for a year and to convene for events and discussion groups.[2]

Shaken to My Bones does not consistently

[2] *See* https://staffordchallenge.com/.

resonate, but its themes and cadence are intriguing and reveal Rohr's highly sensitive religious personality. Encountering the Creator as an often troubled character in the narrative of the *parashah*, the poet is driven to empathize. First, as a struggling composer: "like a writer tossing incomplete / pages into the bin, half thoughts / disappointed ideas, / God destroys this work to start fresh" (*Noach*: "A Second Life, Retold," 7). Next, as an imperfect parent: "Even God lacks patience. / It is like my own child as we prepare to move, / stubborn, obstinate and with physicality / he lashes out towards those he trusts. / And I, like God, send demerits, / rather than what was truly needed" (*Beha'alotecha*: "Their World Was Uprooted Once Again," 52). And even as a personality with unmanageable feelings: "transitions bring great emotions, / amongst humans and amongst God" (*Haazinu*: "It Makes Me Wonder and Question Thus," 75).

The COVID environment—a presence so overwhelming at the time but difficult to reconjure today—tinges Rohr's experience of the *parashah*. On reading of the "angels bearing news" to Avraham, the poet recounts: "Years ago, in the before times / loved ones on the couch / or standing in the kitchen / told of pregnancy, of laughter, / of unbelievable events" (*Vayera*: "My Longing," 10). On encountering Pharaoh's intransigence, he considers the resonance of "Those in power playing reckless games / with our lives. / Community condensed / into family units, condensed. / Singing through walls, / as air itself feels unsafe" (*Bo*: "Some Days My Heart Too is Hardened," 27).

Rohr's preoccupation with bones is perhaps the most unique feature of the collection. The bodily impact of the biblical drama is described as being wrought on his bones in the title and in his poems on *Vayetzei* (13), *Emor* (45), and *Eikev* (65). His poems revisit the bones of Yosef (addressed in *Bereishit* 50:25 and *Shemot* 13:19) repeatedly in reference to *parashiyot* that do not explicitly concern them. The ultimate arrival of Yosef's bones in Canaan is foreseen as a symbol of emotional closure: "Seeing you cry reminds us of our own deepest longing. / Yet even then, your feet never fully touch the ground. / They never do, until your bones are carried / to the land of your fathers" (*Vayeshev*: "You Are Blessed, Not Through the Love," 16). Later, the bones are viewed as a talisman of national fortune. The children of Israel are "blessed and chosen because they *are*. / Because of promises made long ago. / Because of the bones they carry and his ancestors" (*Balak*: "Wisdom Finds Passion and Forms into Action," 56). The patriarchs themselves here are considered secondary sources of Israel's merit; most important are the bones.

Just as Rohr experienced the Torah through the poetic prism of COVID, we now experience and interpret his verse in the context of the cautious optimism of 5786. The bones of murdered hostages, our contemporary Yosefs, are slowly carried back from Gaza into their own land, and

we pray that their return ends our latest period of hopeless wandering.

Review of Eden Pearlstein, *Nothing is for Everyone* (Ayin Press, 2024).

Eden Pearlstein is a writer, musician, editorial director of Ayin Press, and self-styled "trickster-teacher of Jewish text, thought, and practice" (xi). The mischievous demeanor and fast rhythm of his poetry live up to this title. While Hecht (considered above) turns written verse into a visual medium, Pearlstein's debut collection employs it as music.

The first section, "stranded in paradise," riffs heavily on the theme of the Garden of Eden—an unsurprising source of interest for a poet who bears this garden's name as his own. In one early example, the man named after paradise tells of the end of humanity's stay in a paradise full of names: "*Until one day they ate a name / Off a branch of the name / That had been named by The Name*" ("Jewish Geography (Tikkun HaShem), 4). A later poem conceives of humanity as enduringly foreign to the world following our creation and banishment from Eden, "bad astronauts / crash-landed in / paradise" ("Squatters' Rites," 11). Proper fulfillment of our religious duty requires us to recognize our alienness: "For God's sake / make things / more beautiful / Than they were / before you got / here—then / Vanish. / Anything else is / trespassing." (Ibid.).

The essential meaning of being human is that we cannot return to Eden, but must live and strive in perpetual exile: "The palace stands inside a square that has been long deserted / With a sign slung from a gate on purpose poorly worded / written in a cryptic script / familiar and strange / welcoming or menacing / depending on the sage / For those inclined to take the time to scale the outer wall / A snake awaits inside the gate to make sure that they fall" ("words/myth," 27). This reference to "those inclined" to seek a return to Eden acknowledges the existence of different religious types: some are inclined to pursue the secrets of Creation in mysticism, and others are not. Regardless, neither will find those secrets.

That brings the poet to the Torah, the revelation that follows us into exile. The Torah is simultaneously a collection of minutiae and an expression of infinity: "Everything is / A big deal for / The God of small things. / Torah is a thesaurus / With infinite entries / For only one Word. / With this many / Windows, why have / Walls at all?" ("Home in Exile, 51).

Unlike Rohr's collection, *Nothing is for Everyone* makes no explicit promise of guiding readers through *parashat ha-shavua*, but its playful, transgressive pages escort us from Creation to Sinai. One hopes that Pearlstein's next collection will guide the Israelites through the wilderness that follows.