R. Menâ€œm Ha-Meâ€™iri: Aspects of an Intellectual Profile*

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I.

R. Menâ€œm ha-Meâ€™iri (14th century, Provence) is one of the most discussed of all medieval halakhists; indeed, I suspect most would agree that he has received more attention than many whose significance in the history of halakhic culture was far greater. This attention has been focused on a very narrow range of Meâ€™iri’s halakhic activity: his evaluation of contemporary gentiles, their culture and religion.¹ This topic—and Meâ€™iri’s apparently

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¹ J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 114–130; E. E. Urbach, “The Doctrine of Tolerance of R. Menachem Meiri: Its Source and Limits,” in *Pesekim be-Toledot ha-Floresh ha-Yehudit, ... Megasekim le-Professor Yaakov Katz* (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 34–44; J. Katz, “More on ‘The Religious Tolerance of Meiri’” (in Hebrew), *Zion* 46 (1981), pp. 243–246; Y. Blidstein, “Me’iri’s Attitude Towards Gentiles—Apologetics or Internalization?” (in Hebrew), *Zion* 51 (1986), pp. 154–166; D. Novack, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism* (Toronto, 1983), pp. 351–356; G. Blidstein, “Maimonides and Me’iri on the Legitimacy of Non-Jewish Religion,” in L. Landman, ed., *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction Between Judaism and Other Cultures* (New York, 1990), pp. 27–35. Z. Hillman has recently claimed, in his “Me’iri’s Formulations That Were Written As Replies to the Gentiles (in Hebrew),” *Efronet* 1 (1989), pp. 65–71, that Me’iri was indeed engaging in apologetics; Hillman—who is extremely hostile to recent scholarship on this topic and represents a conservative reaction to the claim that Me’iri rethought Judaism’s attitudes to the gentile world—has produced a rich collection of sources (some 47 items), though he has also omitted other materials found in the work cited above. The historical materials given in Katz, *Exclusiveness*, pp. 106–113, might also provide a background for such an evaluation of Me’iri; see Blidstein, “Me’iri’s Attitude,” p. 165, nn. 39–40, as well. E. Waldenberg had argued against such a reading of Me’iri some forty years ago, but he considered only a small part of the corpus; see his Hebrew introduction to H. D. haLevi, *Bein Yisra’el la-Amin* (Jerusalem, 1954), pp. 16–17. Hillman’s position has been adopted, in part, by J. D. Bleich, “Divine Unity in Maimonides, the Toseftists, and Me’iri,” in L. Goodman, ed., *Neo-Platonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany, 1992), pp. 237–254. Surprisingly, little note has been taken of Me’iri’s disclosure that his *Ihnbber ha-Teshuvah* (ed. A. Sofer [New York, 1930], p. 2) was written when “a gentile sage (profeti meyseer ha-amim) spoke to me and revealed to my ears” that the fact that Jews do not respond to their tribulations by repenting of their sins, was due to the lack of appropriate literature encouraging repentance.
unique attitudes—have received wide attention due to the intellectual and social agenda of the 19th and 20th centuries. But other aspects of Me'iri's oeuvre have remained in the uncultivated state common to the academic study of halakhic thought in general. Thus, little has changed since Jacob Katz, in his seminal essay on Me'iri, pointed out that "an analysis of his [halakhic] method has not yet been attempted."2 Nor, we may add, has much been done on Me'iri's substantive contribution or on his literary achievement.

Me'iri's halakhic oeuvre is indeed vast, even if we speak of the material which is available to us. We have the Bet ha-Behira to thirty-six Talmudic or Mishnaic tractates, and we also know that Me'iri wrote a companion volume of novellae to those same tractates. This paper, then, will merely scratch the surface.3

But what a surface it is! Me'iri was not only self-conscious as to both method and substance—perhaps many of his contemporaries were similarly aware, contrary to the popular wisdom on the subject—but also eager to present this self-consciousness to the scrutiny of his reader. It is true that many of his disclosures are not found at their obvious address in the Talmudic sugyah, but are rather located in specifically methodological discussions (a phenomenon that is itself of significance in the work of so self-conscious a literary craftsman as Me'iri). Yet once found, we hear Me'iri speaking quite openly of goals, methods, and principles—of the paths taken and of those not taken. So the surface, that is to say, what can be learned with virtually no analytical labor but simply by reading attentively, is indeed rich and inviting.

It ought to come as no surprise, incidentally, that Me'iri, so aware of the methodological origins of his own work, is similarly aware of the methodological implications of the work of others. Thus, his discussion of Maimonides' Code leads him to reflect on the impact of the codificatory form in general, and to comment that the halakhic code is always a commentary on the Talmudic passage that is its source. Indeed, he confesses, uncertainty as to the concrete normative implications of a passage most likely indicates

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2. Exclusiveness and Tolerance, p. 115, n. 1. Katz cites the earlier research on Me'iri.
3. In addition, Me'iri wrote—and I note the halakhic work only—a collection of responsa in defense of Provencal custom (Magen Avot), a monograph on the preparation and use of sacred scrolls (Krikat Sefer), and self-contained essays on ritual hand-washing (integrated into Bet ha-Behira to Hullin) and on mourning (integrated into his massive Hilhur ha-Teshuva, which also deals at length with other halakhic topics such as shofar and the law of Yom Kippur).