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# DARK MATTER:
# MALBIM’S EXEGETICAL PEDAGOGY

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# Abstract

Malbim (Meir Leibush Weisser, 1809-1879) was one of the most industrious biblical exegetes in Jewish history—providing exhaustive commentaries to all but two of the twenty four volumes of the Hebrew Bible.

Previous scholarship has treated him as a polemical figure—seeing him as part of a school of exegetical apologists for rabbinic tradition, who offers idiosyncratic interpretive reactions to assaults from the burgeoning movement of the *Haskalah* and Jewish Reform. The premise of this work is that something deeper defines and comprises Malbim's biblical commentaries: Malbim is an anti-romantic who harnesses Scripture to teach his readers, in a consistent and systematic way, to steer clear of the romantic spirit and work toward intellectual purity and a sense of duty beyond the self.

The first chapter will outline the multiple crises that arose as a result of Jewish emancipation—from the political and social to the hermeneutic and exegetical—and detail which crises most effected the traditional Jewish communities, and how. The second chapter, through a survey and analysis of Malbim's eight biblical introductions, will show that—in contrast to views taken by traditional contemporaries—he saw the romantic appropriation of Scripture as a far more alarming threat than the one looming over the ostensibly irrational character of rabbinic tradition. This chapter will exhibit the three central pillars of Malbim's biblical hermeneutics—which define what he perceives as a divine dialect—concision, precision, and sublimity.

The third chapter will survey and analyze three of Malbim's early sermons, in an effort to unpack the central ethical and theological teachings that make up Malbim's notion of sublimity—and the fourth chapter will show how those teachings inflect his exegesis in ways that are evident though unseen. The unseen yet influential quality of these teachings is what leads me to describe

them, using a cosmological metaphor, as Malbim’s ‘dark matter’ (an invisible substance that exerts a huge impact on the physical dynamics of the cosmos)—as these teachings, though never self-evident in Scripture or laid out systematically in Malbim’s exegesis, lead him to take unique exegetical avenues to resolve marked hermeneutical problems, often against the grain of the text and in opposition to his Jewish predecessors and romantic contemporaries.

In sum, this work argues that Malbim is, more than a traditional polemicist, an exegetical pedagogue.

# Chapter One: Introduction: From *Ghetto* to *Goethezeit*

## Thesis: From Polemicist to Pedagogue

Born in 1809, Meir Leibush Weisser (known, both now and in his adulthood, simply as ‘Malbim’[1]), went on to become one of the more illustrious and industrious rabbinic figures of the age—and it is his contribution to modern Jewish biblical exegesis that is the subject of this study.

His works, penned in Hebrew, have never been fully translated, though partial translations[2] and accessible summaries[3] have been produced; and his work, as a whole, has not been treated in English before. There are several treatments in Hebrew—some academic and others reverential—that explore his biography, exegetical methodology, philosophy, and historical context. My intention is to both build on these treatments, and recast their conclusions, positioning Malbim, and his exegesis, in an entirely new light.

From a reading of the range of Malbim’s exegetical writings, one cannot deny his polemical proclivities; he states them in the open—in sermons, introductions, comments, and letters. One can plainly see his ire and alarm at the march of a Jewish reform that seeks to unseat rabbinic authority and weaken the weight of tradition, and his dogmatically determined denominational passion leaves its mark on his hermeneutic maneuvers—his attention to every biblical inflection and presumption of semantic saturation is rooted in his traditional commitments and is harnessed to produce an exquisite exegetical display intended to oppose those tending toward modern biblical criticism.

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[1] A number of theories have been proposed for this moniker; Malbim is the vowelized pronunciation of the acronym of his full Hebrew name—Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel. It has also been suggested that it is the approximate Hebraized version of his European family name, Weisser, meaning ‘Whitener’; a theory given credence by the Romanian documents that record his name as ‘Malbin,’ a more accurate rendering of ‘Whitener’ in Hebrew. For a fuller discussion see Rosenbloom, Noah H. *Ha-Malbim: parshanut, filosofyah, mada‘ u-mistorin be-khitve ha-Rav Me’ir Leybush Malbim*. Yerushalayim: Mosad ha-Rav Ḳuḳ, 1988, 24.

[2] See, Malbim and Z. Faier. *Malbim: Rabbenu Meir Leibush Ben Yechiel Michel : Commentary on the Torah*. Malbim: Rabbenu Meir Leibush Ben Yechiel Michel : Commentary on the Torah, v. 1. Hillel Press, 1978 (5 vols.); Malbim, C. Wengrov, and A.G. Zornberg. *משלי: The Commentary of Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim on the Book of Proverbs*. Torah Classics Library. Feldheim, 1982; Malbim and S. Kurtz. *Malbim on Ruth*. The Torah Classics Library. Feldheim Publishers, 1999; Pfeffer, J.I. *Malbim’s Job: The Book of Job*. KTAV Publishing House, 2003; Malbim, M.L.J.M., H. Weisberg, and Y.Y. Kazarnovsky. *The Malbim on Iyov*. Israel Bookshop Publications, 2012; Weinbach, M. *Turnabout: Megilas Esther According to the Malbim*. Targum Press, 1990.

[3] Subar, R., M.L.J.M. Malbim, and M. Weinbach. *The Essential Malbim: Vayikra*. ArtScroll Series. Mesorah Publications in conjunction with Jewish Learning Library, 2010.

But I will contend that Malbim's interpretive energies are not exhausted by this preoccupation, nor even chiefly driven by them. There are traces leading back to Malbim's early sermons, where he does express distress at the growth of reformist attitudes, but primarily exhibits a very particular set of ideas concerning ethics and theology. Malbim does not revel in the internecine antagonism, he is not driven or fueled by wholly defensive reflexes, but by a set of values that he sees as core to the human calling and at risk in the dawning of Jewish reform and the romanticization of culture. And as Malbim ages, the medium of his pedagogy changes—shifting from thematic sermons to biblical commentary.

Much has been noted about Malbim's defense of rabbinic interpretive tradition (*derash*), and how he folds it into what he considers to be the texts plain-sense (*peshat*)—something that we will explore more deeply in our second chapter; but other than some vague intuitions that Malbim channels fractals of the Enlightenment through his eclectic exegesis, little to no attention is paid to Malbim's positive pedagogy. As noted in the coming pages, he has been portrayed as a defender of the old ways, wading into waters that inevitably overwhelm him—tackling modern phenomena with medieval tools, endowed with a brilliant mind but ultimately overcome. His exegesis is variously praised as meticulous and denigrated as fastidious, but unanimously seen to be inconsistent, privileging his local reaction to the biblical text over any coherent outlook. In a sentence, Malbim's contribution is viewed through the prism of method over message—hermeneutics over pedagogy.

I will claim that there is more. There are in fact three hermeneutic threats to the traditional Jewish reading of the biblical text simmering at the time of Malbim's exegetical activity—which shall be described below—and Malbim's response to the third is essentially ignored. I will contend that there is a whole arm of Malbim's exegetical practice that has been elided—he is seen chiefly as a defender of the biblical text, but I will also suggest that he is, consistently, a teacher of the Jewish soul. He is not merely an exegete, but a pedagogue—and that at times, when his interpretive choices seem to be deviating from plain-sense (*peshat*), there is in fact a deeper pedagogy at work; they are products of what I shall call his hermeneutic 'dark matter.'

In much the same way that Louis Althusser spoke of textual 'symptoms'[4] indicating an unseen authorial or ideological force, I speak—in terms that, unlike Althusser's, eschew any connotations of disease—of hermeneutic 'dark matter' that exerts a pull on Malbim's interpretive hand. Beneath Malbim's exegetical anomalies, irregularities, and nonconformities—depicted by the scholars above as part of Malbim's unbridled polemics or gratuitous eclecticism—lies a coherence absent in his commentaries' explicit semantics; he indeed draws on science, mysticism, philosophy, and symbolism, and often without apparent rhyme or reason, but overwhelmingly Malbim's choices are driven by the pedagogical impulse at the core of his thought. This coherent vision, not explicitly developed of exhibited in his commentaries, holds Malbim's exegetical universe in situ, and draws the ostensibly sprawling interpretive strands into a single weave.

Malbim's exegesis is thus not a single-minded, elaborate, exercise in apology or denominational combat—it is a work of independent pedagogical purpose, driven by a vision that Malbim seeks to impart. Biblical heroes are reshaped, biblical narratives are remade, and biblical verses are reread—not as the desperate gestures of an old-hat exegete, but as delicate measures to produce a message for the perplexed of his age.[5]

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[4] See Althusser, Louis, Etienne Balibar, and Ben Brewster. *Reading Capital*. London: Verso, 2009; and Chapter 2 of Nesbitt, Nick. *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

What his vision is, and what his messages are, will be presented and defended in the chapters ahead. The rest of this chapter, introductory in nature, will be devoted to elucidating the various crises faced by newly emancipated European Jews around the turn of the 19th century, and the biography of Malbim himself. First, however, we will survey the scholarship devoted to Malbim's life and legacy thus far, with the purpose of providing context for the originality of this study's thesis and show how it aims to alter the prevailing view of Malbim's exegetical contribution.

## Surveying the Scholarship

### First Impression: Exegetical Retrograde

In his 1952 slim-volume survey of biblical commentary in the Jewish tradition, Moshe Hirsch Segal—a 20th century Hebrew philologist and the first chair of Bible Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem—divides history into three exegetical epochs, roughly corresponding to the ancient, medieval, and modern periods.[6] The ancient period covers intra-biblical commentary and the exegesis of the rabbinic sages and their contemporaries; the medieval period covers geonic literature, and the Jewish grammarians, philologists, and philosophers of Europe; and the final period covers the interpretive work of the so-called 'Jewish Enlightenment'—the *Haskalah*—which we will both describe and discuss in far more detail later in this chapter.

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[5] Nahman Krochmal, also a defender of traditional Judaism at the time, published a work, playing on Maimonides' title, called "The Guide for the Perplexed of the Age." We'll return to him in a note at the start of the second chapter.
[6] Segal, M. H. (Moses Hirsch). *Parshanut Ha-Miḳra: Seḳirah ʻal Toldoteha Ṿe-hitpatḥutah*. Jerusalem: Ḳiryat sefer, 1952.

Though Segal sees the second epoch ending with the fifteenth century commentary of Don Isaac Abravanel, he considers the interpretive efforts of the three centuries that followed to have failed to break new ground[7]. The biblical glosses produced by Jews in those years were few and far between, and those that were, exhibited a resonating mediocrity in relation to the ambitious works of the medieval giants. For Segal, we could call this three-hundred-year-era the 'dark-ages' of Jewish biblical interpretation—where one creative epoch had ended but the next had yet to begin. He brands this inferior phase 'The Age of the Ghetto'—where Jewish commentators operated behind cultural blinders, unacquainted with the wisdom of the day and unskilled in the art of modern exegesis.

Segal does not fault the commentators of the dark ages for their flawed exegesis, and in fact excuses their interpretive blindness by pointing to the conditions in which they lived—"Ghetto life was horrid and dismal, distant and far removed from the light and song and nature of the world of Scripture."[8] In his view, ghetto figures desecrated the biblical text by applying it to the lives that they lived—transforming soaring narrative into raw material for the analytics of insipid legal abstractions, converting words into acronyms and numerals and homilies, and muscular heroes into cerebral figures in the grip of scholastic pedantry. And the exemplar that Segal choses to illustrate the exegetical imperfections of this age is none other than Malbim.[9]

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[7] Most scholars continue to share this view. See Breuer, E. "Jewish Study of the Bible Before and During the Enlightenment" in Brekelmans, C., M. Saebø, M. Haran, M.A. Fishbane, J.L. Ska, and P. Machinist. *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation: II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, 1996, 1007; Halivni, Daṿid. *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 28. Though, where Segal attributes this to historical circumstances, Halivni appears to blame this on the inadequacy of the rabbis of the time: "The commitment was there, but the talent was not." Breuer expresses it as follows: "The quality of the scholarly contribution paled in comparison with the attainments of the medieval exegetes…[it was] unoriginal and highly dependent upon earlier scholarship…[there was a] general lack of pedagogic and scholarly interest in serious Bible study."

[8] *Parshanut Ha-Miḳra*, 111.

[9] *Parshanut Ha-Miḳra*, 111-113.

Moses Mendelssohn—the 18th century architect of the first modern biblical translation and commentary—is the opening subject of Segal's section on the third epoch of exegesis, having spurred and inspired new ways of reading Scripture. And though Segal confesses that Malbim (1809-1879) lived after Mendelssohn (1729-1786), he felt Malbim to be so exegetically retrograde that he was compelled to contort chronology and relocate him to the 'Age of the Ghetto.'[10]

Segal characterizes Malbim's exegesis as comprised of a jumble of 'ghetto' methods, amounting, in toto, to a form of interpretive scrupulosity, commonly identified with the sophistic rabbinic style known as *pilpul*.[11] And what is worse, as far as Segal is concerned, is Malbim's 'naïve' belief that he bequeaths his readers a genuine plain-sense exegesis of the biblical text. "In truth," Segal professes, "Malbim does not recognize, at any level, the difference between plain-sense and homiletic interpretation, and his commentary could not be further from the plain-sense."[12]

Segal contests that Malbim's linguistic rules are philologically unviable and his construal of biblical narrative is a callous disfigurement of its profundity. He offers six examples of what he considers to be Malbim's exegetical carnage—ridiculing his interpretive efforts as anachronistic and unfeeling. The case he regards to be the crowning illustration of Malbim's ghetto-inflected

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[10] He does note that Malbim was impacted by the *Haskalah*, but asserts that it left no methodological impression on his exegetical project. He might have even conceded that, as Berger puts it, Malbim produced his exegetical work "to prove that modern attacks on the divine authorship of the Bible and the oral law are not based on genuine scholarship and that, on the contrary, a more profound understanding of grammar and logic can demonstrate the validity of tradition. Thus, Malbim decided to use the tools of the Enlightenment to oppose its anti-Orthodox". But Segal gives short shrift to Malbim's engagement with the *Haskalah*, and sees him as a figure still defined by ghetto-like exegetical sensibilities.

[11] Halivni characterizes this style as employing "farfetched casuistic deductions", see *Peshat and Derash*, 28. For fuller discussion of this term, and a reassessment of its subject, see Daniel Boyarin's '"Pilpul": The Logic of Commentary' in Boyarin, Daniel, and Tal Hever-Chybowski. *The Talmud—a Personal Take: Selected Essays*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2017, 47-68.

[12] *Parshanut Ha-Miḳra*, 112.

"emotional numbness" ["קהות הרגש"] concerns a conversation between Jephthah the judge and his daughter (Judges 11:35-38).

Following an improbable military victory, Jephthah turns his attention to heaven and takes an oath, committing himself to sacrifice whatever he should see first upon returning home. But his pledge came to haunt him, as his unqualified words, in the end, committed him to slaughter his daughter, whom he saw before any animal when arriving home. In this scene of deep misfortune, where a father's sworn gratitude sours into tragedy, Malbim alleges that the two figures affected began to deliberate halakhic regulations—as found in the Talmud—surrounding the annulments of vows.

Using this, and his other examples, as evidence of Malbim's ghetto-inflected exegetical proclivities, Segal ends his assessment of Malbim's interpretive contribution without even trying to hide his disdain:

> This sophistic commentator does not sense, nor feel, that his prattling about the laws of vows, violates the sanctity inherent in the sublime sorrow of this suffering father and blameless yet brave daughter.[13]

For Segal, Malbim's late-date is incidental to his work, even inconvenient for historical purposes—he is a relic of late-medieval and pre-modern interpretive mediocrity, confusing dogma for drama and law for lore, bequeathing his readers a commentary filled with digressions and fueled by a shallow and impoverished imagination.

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[13] *Parshanut Ha-Miḳra*, 113. Translation mine.

## Second Glance: Eclectic Polemicist

In the decades after Segal's appraisal, others re-assessed Malbim's work—though often agreeing with his suggestion that Malbim twists the biblical text's plain-sense—arguing that his post-Mendelssohnian historical context is crucial to understanding his exegetical project. For example, Halivni positions Malbim within a nineteenth-twentieth century "apologists' school,"[14] thus indicating that his exegetical work cannot be extricated from his era, him being part of a larger movement.

In an essay published in 1966, David Berger establishes that Malbim had a broad exposure to enlightenment ideas, both in science and philosophy, and was driven by a need to oppose the movement to reform religious life that had, having festered for some time, boiled over in the early 1840s. Berger depicts Malbim as a defender of tradition who employed his mental energies, and vast learning, toward this end. So, veering away from Segal's scorn and historical plasticity, he positions Malbim as a figure deeply entrenched in the issues of his day, and deeply engaged with the wisdom of the age: "Malbim could never have exercised the influence he did without his secular learning, for his life's work expressed itself in the use of science, logic, philosophy, grammar, and poetry to further and defend religion."[15]

Where Malbim fails, Berger argues, is in his application of, and his commitment to, his stated aims. He notes and cites a number of times when he feels that Malbim "lapses into a homiletical excursus" and "flagrantly violates the plain meaning of the text".[16] And the reason that Berger initially proffers, to explain Malbim's exegetical lapses, is the latter's attempts to navigate the hazards of “trying to satisfy completely his own orthodoxy and his orthodox readers and yet remain within the framework of secular scholarship”[17]—in other words, Malbim was forced into inconsistency and breeches of his own methodology in order to conserve his dogma. And beyond the fetters of creed, Berger also suggests that Malbim was, at some level, the victim of a mission too large for his talents—“trying to completely satisfy his extremely orthodox audience and to employ fully the tools of modern linguistics and research was a task too great even for a man with as fine a mind as Malbim”.[18] In fact, Berger argues that Malbim was victim not only of the enormity of his charge, but also of his own literary appetites, plainly stating that “Malbim himself often gets carried away by homilies and loses sight of his resolution to approach texts in a straightforward manner.”[19] Ezra Melamed makes a similar insinuation—though more obsequiously—writing, in 1967, that,

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[14] *Peshat and Derash*, 31-32.

[15] Berger, David. "Malbim's Secular Knowledge and his Relationship to the Spirit of the Haskalah", in *Cultures in Collision and Conversation: Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews*. Judaism and Jewish Life. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011, 188.

[16] *Ibid*., 181.

> …It is impossible to subscribe to the entirety of his commentary…the plain-sense is mingled with homily and philosophy and mysticism, and it is difficult to sift between them. And the cause of this is Malbim’s profound expertise with the totality of our literary treasury. This giant was fluent not just with the sum of Scripture and Talmudic and Midrashic works, but also with science and philosophy. He was proficient in the Zohar and all the works of kabbalah, and with the works of grammar and linguistics from the earliest analysts to the latest. He was indeed a polymath: a giant of Torah, a connoisseur of religious philosophy, and an expert in matters of grammar.[20]

For both Berger and Melamed, Malbim produced an undisciplined commentary, an exegetical work admirable in its ambition though ultimately inadequate—steered off course either by the sheer magnitude of the task or the irrepressible erudition of the author, and we are left with a brilliant figure leaving his readers an altogether impressive but ultimately erratic work. Neither scholar suggests that Malbim suffered from an ill-gotten ghetto-inflected emotional-deficit, but they do accede to the view that he was trapped by a world of tradition that hampered his exegetical objectives.

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[17] *Ibid.*, 188.

[18] *Ibid.*, 182.

[19] *Ibid.*, 189. It is worth noting that Berger liberally cites both Malbim’s published commentaries and his posthumous notes as evidence of his claims. While valuable as an insight into Malbim’s thought as a whole, this practice does in fact make a stand-alone assessment of Malbim’s published exegesis impossible.

[20] *Sdeh Ilan: Memorial Volume in Honour of Arye Ilan* , חמו"ל, 1967, 82 (Hebrew).

In 1988, however, Noah Rosenbloom published the most comprehensive account and analysis of Malbim's life and work, and he—together with those who have followed him—took a slightly different view, imbuing Malbim with considerably more vision and self-control. For Rosenbloom, Malbim is not a victim of historical circumstance, forced to take untenable exegetical postures, nor is he so constitutionally weak that his polymathy forces him to breech his own rules. Using the exact cases noted by Segal—and many more besides—Rosenbloom argues that Malbim elides the more plain-sense readings and interpolates abstract rabbinic legalese for one specific purpose: polemic. "There are places where Malbim seems to intentionally attempt complicated, even convoluted, interpretations…even when there is no need to do so".[21] This alone serves as evidence, for Rosenbloom, that Malbim is very deliberately weaponizing exegesis as a tool in the battle against Jewish reform; verses and scenes are misconstrued, plots and people are purposely misunderstood, so as to stave off the wave of religious change.

For Rosenbloom, Mendelssohn's aesthetic hermeneutics seeped deep into the interpretive imagination of the next generation of biblical readers, and no orthodox alternative existed—so Malbim intended to contend with Mendelssohn, offering a rebuttal to his biblical translation and commentary. Malbim was no ghetto-obscurantist but the author of an eclectic polemic in the guise of enlightened exegesis:

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[21] *Ha-Malbim*, 127.

> Malbim did not employ halakhic material due to an inclination toward sophistry, but out of a desire to emphasize the antiquity of the oral tradition, which many were challenging. Ultimately, more than he sought to disentangle problematic biblical passages, he sought to stress and accentuate that everything in Scripture was rooted in *halakha*. The halakhic legalese that Malbim puts in the mouths of biblical figures, does not arise from a lack of historical understanding or an inability to differentiate between now and then. On the contrary, particularly due to his awareness of these matters, he felt the urgency to prove that the Oral law was known to the ancients, and that only through its lens, can one explain their actions and behaviors.[22]

Rosenbloom excavates all sorts of references from Malbim's exegesis—from Leibnitz to Kant—and dedicates chapters to his use of science and poetry. Malbim, for him, is an extraordinarily well-read orthodox polemicist[23] in the fight for traditional Judaism's survival, and harnessed his analytic and interpretive prowess to defend vulnerable dogma. Rosenbloom provides the most detailed, and scholarly, overview of Malbim's entire biography[24]—which we'll outline in more detail below—offering a glimpse into a life that was anything but insulated.

Those who have followed Rosenbloom have largely relied on his work, Michal Dell and Jay Harris in particular[25]. Dell, in her comparison of Malbim and a slightly earlier biblical commentator, Yaakov Tzvi Meklenburg[26], shows to what degree the two figures are influenced by their respective cultures and to what degree they fight against it. She states, unequivocally, "They both understood the language of the changing world in which they lived, and were able to use it and exploit it for the purposes of polemicizing against ideas and views they considered to be specious."[27] For these reasons, according to Dell, Malbim frequently offers "explanations that veer from that which we'd consider plain-sense"[28]. Harris, in his overarching study of the condition of rabbinic exegesis, also pairs these two figures in a chapter on "Midrash and Orthodoxy," noting Malbim's motivating drive to "to undermine the intellectual foundations of the basic orientation of the Reformers."[29] Harris then suggests that Malbim's most interesting work is that which results from his efforts to defend against Reform, and that Malbim's working assumption was that the rife abandonment of Jewish ritual life was linked solely to Jewish Reform ideology[30]—two notions that I shall resist in this dissertation.

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[22] *Ha-Malbim*, 127

[23] According to the written testimony of a close acquaintance in Paris—Shneur Zaks—Malbim was fluent in reading both Kant and German poetry – see Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 165.

[24] Yakov Geller goes into far more detail surrounding Malbim's time in Bucharest in a number of works, see Geller, Jacob. *ha-Malbim: ma'avaḳo ba-haśkalah uva-reformah be-Buḳareśṭ (1858-1864): ʻal-pi kitve-yad ṿe-teʻudot sheṭarim pursemu*. Lod: Orot Yahadut ha-Magrev, 2000.

[25] Also see, Ellenson, David Harry, and Michael A. Meyer. *After Emanicipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004, 168-170.

[26] See Breuer, Edward. "Between Haskalah and Orthodoxy: The Writings of R. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 66 (1995): 259–87; Breuer and Gafni, "Jewish Biblical Scholarship," 297. For more on his broader sensitivities see Amos Frisch, "R. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg's method in the issue of the Patriarchs' sins," Journal of Jewish Studies 53,1 (2002): 107-119.

In a slight deviation from Dell's posture, Harris lays the blame for Malbim's failure to gain traction beyond the observant community on his inability "to speak the 'language' of acculturating Jews in the nineteenth century" or to "address the needs of even Orthodox laypeople, let alone the non-Orthodox"—and in a nod back toward Segal, he calls Malbim a rabbi of the "old school." Harris is indeed correct that Malbim's larger systematic vision hasn't caught on in any identifiable community—but I shall suggest that it is not due to a lack of fluency in the modern tongue, and that Malbim's exegetical works should be, for us, far more than what he refers to as mere "historical phenomena".[31]

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[27] Dell, Michal. "Parshanot Ortodoḳsit le-Torah ba-'idan shel temurot: ha-pulmus be-ferushehem shel R.I.Ts. Meḳlenburg u-Malbim," PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2008, 152.

[28] "Parshanot Ortodoḳsit," 56. Dell provides examples of Malbim's deviation from plain-sense, some of which amount to halakhic anachronisms, as per Rosenbloom's description—for which she says, almost in the same terms, was not a product of historical misapprehension on Malbim's part, but a wish to paint halakha as ancient and vital to Jewish life. Some of her examples, however, describe not halakhic insertions but mystical leaps, see page 57.

[29] Harris, Jay Michael. *How Do We Know This?: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 220.

[30] *How Do We Know This?*, 221.

[31] *How Do We Know This?*, 223.

So overwhelming is the view taken today that Malbim failed to live up to his aims, that his work is at times elided entirely in discussions of the Jewish exegetical efforts of the 19th century—even when the specific subject is the orthodox contribution[32]. In Breuer and Gafni's contribution to the formidable "Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation" series, Malbim does get his due attention, but their conclusion remains: "Although there is much evidence regarding Malbim's extensive awareness of *maskilic* literature and at least some of the broader cultural and intellectual developments unfolding in Europe, his commentary represents a traditionalist turn away from contemporary ideas in favor of an almost exclusive immersion in classical rabbinic and medieval writings."[33]

In this school of thought, broadly speaking, Malbim is seen as a brilliant but ill-equipped warrior in the fight against religious reform, attempting to harness the tools that are assaulting Scripture to defend it, but in the end taking refuge in what amounts to nothing more than classical rabbinic literature. He is a man standing alone in the face of change, with only his wits to resist the inevitable. This characterization moves past Segal's ahistoricism, but only just. Malbim is no longer seen as an emotionally numb, biblically illiterate reader interpreting from behind the blinders of the ghetto; but he is an old-school rabbi, seeing a new world emerge and resisting it with all his might—twisting verses, distorting stories, warping history all in an eclectic effort to defend tradition that, in the end, fails to cohere.

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[32] See, for example, Schwartz, Baruch D., "The Pentateuch as Scripture and the Challenge of Biblical Criticism" in Benjamin D. Sommer, et al. *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 2012. Also see Shaviṭ, Yaʻaḳov and Mordechai Eran. *The Hebrew Bible Reborn from Holy Scripture to the Book of Books: A History of Biblical Culture and the Battles over the Bible in Modern Judaism*. Vol. Bd. 38. Studia Judaica: Forschungen Zur Wissenschaft Des Judentums,. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007, where in the section "Jewish Orthodoxy and Bible Criticism," 140, Malbim gets the most fleeting mention.

[33] "Jewish Biblical Scholarship between Tradition and Innovation," in Saebø, M. *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. III: From Modernism to Post-Modernism: Part 1: The Nineteenth Century - a Century of Modernism and Historicism*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012, 298.

## A Different Spin: Ultra-Orthodox Maskil

In an appraisal that appears to come out of nowhere, Eliezer Schweid characterizes Malbim in the following way: “Malbim was not only a hermeneutic theoretician and modern philosopher but a unique and outstanding paradigm of an ultra-Orthodox maskil who played the vital role of cultural middleman.”[34] Unlike the ultra-orthodox published reverential biographies, and even the scholarship we’ve so far surveyed, Schweid positions Malbim not in opposition to the *Haskalah* but as a *maskil* himself (even one patterned after Naphtali Herz Wessely[35])—and to do this he makes an all-important distinction between the *Haskalah* and Reform:

> The orthodox opposition to the new curriculum that the *Haskalah* proposed was justified in his view, but he saw this proposal not as expressing malicious intent against Torah Judaism but rather as seduction by the attractive power of the Emancipation. The early Maskilim failed the test and sinned, unlike the Reformers, who in his view were guilty of the malicious intent to uproot the belief in the revealed *Torah* and the halakhic life-style.[36]

For Schweid, though Malbim vehemently opposed Reform—something he did from “the humanistic ‘rearguard’”[37]—he was open to broader culture and reserved his primary energies for educating the traditional Jew, creating “tools to spread general enlightenment that would fit the special needs of Orthodox readers.”[38] For Schweid, Malbim was more than a polemicist and was rooted firmly in the enlightenment era; he was a cultural conduit for the orthodox, allowing traditional Jews to experience enlightenment filtered through a rabbinic sieve. That being said, Schweid maintains that Malbim did not forge a holistic outlook, as "he saw no reason to develop a comprehensive philosophical doctrine."[39] Schweid's contention is that Malbim's area of creative invention was in the realm of hermeneutics—bridging the biblical text and halakha with humanistic culture in what Schweid terms an "integrative approach."[40]

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[34] Schweid, E., and L. Levin. *A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy: The Birth of Jewish Historical Studies and the Modern Jewish Religious Movements*. A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy. Brill, 2015, 211.

[35] *A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy*, 198. Wessely was one of the founding figures of the Haskalah, known primarily for his manifesto for a realignment of educational priorities within traditional Jewish circles, “*Divrei Shalom ve-Emet*”. A comprehensive biography can be found in Israel Zinberg’s *History of Jewish Literature*, 8:59-74. See also, Breuer, E. “Naphtali Herz Wessely and the Cultural Dislocations of an Eighteenth-Century Maskil” in Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin, et al. *New Perspectives On the Haskalah*. London ; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001, 27-47; and Feiner, Shmuel. *The Jewish Enlightenment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennyslvania Press, 2002, 87-105.

[36] *A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy*, 199.

[37] *Ibid*, 198.

[38] *Ibid*, 211.

One striking omission on the part of Schweid is any account or acknowledgement of Malbim's second published work—a group of nine sermons, which we shall use as a major resource for garnering Malbim's religious vision to suggest precisely that Malbim did have a comprehensive philosophical doctrine. And while Schweid's assessment seems so at odds with the rest of the literature, much of what he argues—as he himself notes—comes from the much earlier dissertation of S. Z. Schaechter[41].

Looking at Malbim's work through a more historical lens, Schaechter sought to unearth Malbim's foundational methodology and interpretive proclivities. And being less attentive to his polemics, Schaechter reads Malbim's work as forward looking and of the modern era, pursuing an ever-necessary intellectual synthesis. Malbim's aim, Schaechter claims, was "to wholly align Judaism with the spirit of true science and enlightenment, and…to prove that their Judaism was…not as a relic of the past, but relevant to the present".[42] For him, when Malbim ignores historical time in his exegesis—suggesting that the biblical patriarchs observed rabbinic traditions for example—it is not for the sake of changing reformist minds, but out of a staid conviction of its inconsequence for the teaching of faith.[43] For Schaechter, as for Schweid, Malbim's eclecticism is less about polemicizing the opposition and more about synthesizing for those holding on to tradition—"Malbim tries to forge an assimilation of the word of God into his world of the *Haredi-Maskil* [Ultra-Orthodox-Free-Thinker]; he is methodically eclectic as part of the push to develop synthesis."[44] He concludes that Malbim's legacy is the construction of a creative pedagogical edifice made from traditional materials—all to "direct the path of faithful Judaism in the world."[45]

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[39] *Ibid*, 210.
[40] *A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy*, 201.
[41] Schaechter, Schoël Zvi. "Mishnato shel ha-Malbim," PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1983.
[42] "Mishnato shel ha-Malbim," 263.

Some of the more recent work on Malbim steps away from the broader questions relating to his oeuvre and political situation, and performs a more narrow analysis of his exegetical method. There is a dissertation dedicated to the study of Malbim's principled rejection of biblical synonymy[46] and some essays exploring his interpretive methodology[47], with James Kugel placing his theory at loggerheads with Robert Lowth's notion of biblical poetry[48]—all rich and insightful.

As noted, this study will—in the chapters ahead—stand on the shoulders of the scholars above and draw on them all, but also offer a new and distinct portrait of Malbim and his exegetical work. First, we turn to the unique constellation of 19th century hermeneutic crises that confronted the newly emancipated traditional Jews of Europe.

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[43] "Mishnato shel ha-Malbim," 263.

[44] "Mishnato shel ha-Malbim," 273.

[45] "Mishnato shel ha-Malbim," 273.

[46] Eshkoli, H. "Synonymy in Biblical Hebrew According to the Method of Malbim: (A Critical Examination of His Semantic Method in the field of Synonymy)" (Hebrew), PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2009.

[47] Frisch, A. "From Distinguishing between Synonyms to Revealing the Coherence of the Literary Unit: On the Interpretive Method of Malbim." Judaica, 69 (2013), 393-429; Frisch, A. "Characteristic Features of Malbim's Interpretive Method in the Light of his Commentary to I Samuel 8," Revue des études juives, 175 (3-4), juillet-décembre 2016, 367-390.

[48] Kugel, J. L. "A Metrical Afterword", in *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. Yale University Press, 1981, 287-304.

## Crises of Modernity: The Three Threats

Following the so-called scientific revolution of the 17th century[49], and what Paul Hazard has termed the "Crisis of the European Mind," a number of disparate factors—political, economic, social[50]—came together to unseat speculative faith or revelation as the source of truth, and birth the European Enlightenment, marked, perhaps most, by its belief that persistence in science will reveal all. It was in this age, the "Age of Reason," that public intellectuals, identified in France as *philosophes*[51], forged groups to foment changes in culture—seeking to bring the same level of rigor, analysis, and predictability to human affairs as Newton and others had brought to nature. It is in this context of radical rationality threatening the core of confessional faith that universalism was born and the fight for civil rights came into being.

This age of European Enlightenment brought its share of changes for the Jews of Europe. For centuries they had been walled-off from their gentile neighbors—with restrictions on economic productivity, political power, and cultural access—and as the ghetto walls began to fall, for an assortment of reasons beyond the scope of this work,[52] Jews had to choose how to live in a new world. And some of the choices that were made sent tremors through the infrastructures of traditional Jewish life.

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[49] Henry, John. 1950-. *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997; Shapin, Steven. *The Scientific Revolution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996; Cohen, H. F. *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994; Wootton, D. *The Invention of Science: A New History of the Scientific Revolution*. HarperCollins, 2015.

[50] See Paul Hazard, *The Crisis of the European Mind*, 2013; Gay, Peter. *The Enlightenment, an Interpretation*. New York: Knopf, 1966; Israel, Jonathan I. (Jonathan Irvine). *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; and Makari, George. *Soul Machine: The Invention of the Modern Mind*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015.

[51] See Gay, P. *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism*. Enlightenment. Norton, 1995, 3-19; Torrey, N.L. *Les Philosophes: The Philosophers of the Enlightenment and Modern Democracy*. Perigee, 1980; Berlin, I. *The Age of Enlightenment: The 18th Century Philosophers*. Age of Philosophy Series. New American Library, 1984.

[52] See Katz, Jacob. *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973; Chamiel, Ephraim. *The Middle Way: The Emergence of Modern Religious Trends in Nineteenth-century Judaism : Responses to Modernity in the Philosophy of Z.H. Chajes, S.R. Hirsch, and S.D. Luzzatto ; Editor, Dr. Asael Abelman ; Translator, Dr. Jeffrey Green*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014, Volume I, 3-6, especially footnote 3.

Around the last quarter of the 18th century, primarily in the Prussian cities of Berlin and Königsberg, a cadre of figures that came to be labelled Maskilim launched a movement that came to be known as the *Haskalah* (most often translated as the "Jewish Enlightenment"[53]), which both challenged the rabbinic elite's authority and sought to bring about a Jewish cultural revival[54]. Both deeply entranced by modern European (especially German) thought and culture and haunted by a sense of Jewish scholarly inadequacy, these figures aimed to alter the nature of Jewish learning and society. In addition to encouraging an intellectual exposure to European thought and secular sciences, they promoted the study of the Hebrew language and, after centuries of mainstream Jewish neglect,[55] refocused religious education on the Hebrew Bible (as opposed to Talmud, Midrash, and strict *halakha*).

The encounter that the Maskilim urged was, of course, not without its tensions. Jewish life that had been sustained in relative continuity due to its social, political, geographic, and economic isolation, did not neatly align with much of modern European thought; and the dissonant contact led, as noted, to a multitude of crises. The most potent crises were, as noted, in the social and political arena, where traditional power structures of the past three centuries—with chiefly rabbinic control over educational and cultural matters—came under threat. But beyond these pervasive threats on the ground, three particular threats emerged against the traditional Jewish modes of reading Scripture—two as a result of the Enlightenment and another as a result of the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment.

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[53] This translation has been recently challenged by Olga Litvak in Litvak, Olga. *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012—and her challenge will be an acute concern of ours later in the chapter.

[54] See Sorkin, David Jan. *The Berlin Haskalah and German Religious Thought: Orphans of Knowledge*. London : Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000; Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin, et al. *New Perspectives*, 2001; Feiner, Shmuel. *Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness*. Oxford [England] ; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002; Feiner, Shmuel. *The Jewish Enlightenment* (2002); Pelli, Moshe. *Haskalah and Beyond: The Reception of the Hebrew Enlightenment and the Emergence of Haskalah Judaism*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2010.

[55] See Breuer, E. "Jewish Study of the Bible," 1007; Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 89; Eran and Shavit, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 46-53, see entire first chapter "Back to the Bible: The Biblical Revolution in the Nineteenth Century"; I. Twersky, "Talmudists, Philosophers, Kabbalists: The Quest for Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century", in Cooperman, Bernard Dov. *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*. [Cambridge, Mass.]: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies : Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1983, 431-44.

It was in response to these hermeneutic crises, in particular, that the giants of rabbinic learning—including Malbim—penned their exegetical, philosophical, theological, homiletical, legal and polemical writings, seeing themselves as warriors in a battle where the new hermeneutic assumptions threatened the death of Scripture and the state of the modern Jewish soul. To truly appreciate the position that these figures found themselves in, we first take a step back to examine the ripples that ripened into the tidal waves of these nigh-paralyzing intellectual crises.

## Enlightenment: Threats Against Text and Tradition

For over one thousand years Jewish and Christian scholars shared a common view of the bible as the living word of God. Though they employed different modes of reading that resulted in markedly divergent, often reciprocally hostile biblical semantics, they shared a view that the biblical text was sacred and thus inviolate and morally binding. Whether the text was subjected to the hermeneutic torsions of allegory, typology, atomic moralism, or an esoteric cipher, the text was culturally seminal to both cultures in every sense of the word.[56]

It was, in the eyes of at least one account[57], when Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus read the critical notes of Lorenzo Valla that everything began to unravel. Valla is perhaps most known for using philology to prove *The Donation of Constantine* to be a forgery. But he used those same philological tools to analyze and annotate the Vulgate New Testament, evidencing problems of translation and grammar. In 1505 Erasmus, an avid reader and admirer of his work, published a new edition of Valla's biblical notes, thus inaugurating an era in European Christianity in which the text and authority of the Christian Bible came into question. While not his central intention, Eramus' work deeply destabilized the control that the Church possessed over Scripture's meaning, and while he came to distance himself from the consequences of some of his criticism—understanding that the instability threatened not only the Church but Scripture itself—it was his contemporary, Martin Luther, who used the critical thrust to confront the Catholic Church and launch a religious reformation—defaming the Vulgate as a corruption of truest Scripture and the Catholic Church as morally bankrupt.

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[56] See Kugel, J. L. “The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship” in Kugel, James L. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. New York: Free Press, 2007, 8-24; HaCohen, Ran. *Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible: German-Jewish Reception of Biblical Criticism*. New York: De Gruyter, 2010, 8-22.

[57] See Legaspi, M. “From Scripture to Text” in Legaspi, Michael C. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 11-17.

Initially, Luther's reforms made no conscious shift in its assessment of the sacred nature of Scripture—in fact, the ideological rallying cry for "Sola Scriptura" sought to position the text itself as the source of ultimate power, serving as the indisputable guide to matters of theology and morality. In this way, all Christian readings of Scripture still shared the long-held common belief that the biblical text was inviolate and authoritative. In the latter-half of the 16th century, however, the Catholic-Protestant schism had some major consequences that went on to shape the biblical non-confessional scholarship of the modern era, especially as it emerged in 18th-century Germany.[58]

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[58] For a thorough overview of the hermeneutic changes that took place following Luther's reformation, leading up to the birth of modern biblical studies see, Breuer, Edward. *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-century Study of Scripture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies : Harvard University Press, 1996, 77-107; Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005, 1-25; James Kugel's *How to Read the Bible*, 24-46; see also, Eran and Shavit, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 22-35. Much of what follows is drawn, at least in part, from these works.

What had been seen as minor orthographical matters occupying the interest of a small group of priests, transfigured into heated disputes regarding the reliability of the Masoretic text as a whole—the Masoretic Text (MT), being the Hebrew version of Scripture authorized and used by Jews. To reassert the authority of the Vulgate, Catholic scholars focused on the late addition of vowels to the MT and accused Protestants of investing a Jewish tradition with more legitimacy than a Christian one. In order to maintain the claim of 'Sola Scriptura,' and keep the biblical text's meaning from the hegemony of Catholic priests, Protestant scholars defended the MT, arguing that it was a perfect preservation of the original Scripture, vowels included.

This debate, on what amounted to an academic question—the quality of a text's historical veracity—set the stage for the secular biblical scholarship that would emerge later. Both Catholics and Protestants were forced to employ scholarly tools to defend their hermeneutic postures, which lead to a vast increase in the study of Semitic languages, and the drive to unveil more ancient manuscripts; and, with the 1616 discovery of a complete Samaritan Pentateuch, the MT was cast by Catholics as the lesser of the two, leaving Protestant scholars in a bind.

In response, Protestant scholars split into two camps: those who continued to defend the relative perfection of the Masoretic text, and those who suggested that despite its imperfections, the reconstruction of the original bible from the MT was still possible—thus abandoning the critically unsustainable bearing of their peers, while maintaining an ideological rejection of dogmatic Church interpretation.

These disagreements lead perhaps inevitably to what has been variously called the 'death' or 'desacralization' of Scripture. Under the pressure of critical analysis, both philological and historical, the incontestable quality of biblical authority began to fade; no more did Scripture have the final say, for what exactly it said was up for debate—its meaning was no longer found in the mouths of Heaven's Priests, but in the hands of blemished human beings.

With the application of critical tools to Scripture, interpretive traditions came under scrutiny—and the rabbinic sages, in particular, were considered not only biblically illiterate but complicit in hermeneutic gerrymandering, wringing meaning from the text that simply wasn't there. Richard Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, at the end of the 17th century, essentially argued that the rabbinic interpretive tradition ought to be disregarded for its absolute lack of credibility—as far as modern readers of biblical text were concerned, he wrote, Jewish interpretive scholarship had very little to offer.[59] It was at this stage that figures such as Spinoza and Hobbes rebuffed the authority of the biblical text, and reshaped how it ought to be read[60].

Come the 18th century, and the hermeneutic hostility toward rabbinic tradition in Europe only intensified. In France and England, new translations were published and emendations made—the MT was carved up to produce what was seen as a more coherent and intelligible text, eroding any sense of reverence for the integrity of the original text. By the 1780s an indubitable embrace of biblical criticism became a hallmark of scholarship—making the rejection of rabbinic tradition a prerequisite of modern study.[61] The new standard for biblical semantics developed a deep attachment to context—both textual and historical, and the atomized moralizing of early rabbis was transformed from something merely alien to something scorned and derided. Karaites were used as models of Jewish learning to stress the view that rabbinic tradition was considered an interpretive disfigurement even within its own culture.[62]

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[59] See Breuer, *Limits*, 86. Paul Hazard's magisterial work on the period leading into the enlightenment, uses Richard Simon as a pristine example of a 'dryasdust' inconspicuously planting the seeds of reason in European minds, leading to the war on tradition and the desacralization of faith writ large; see "Richard Simon and Biblical Exegesis", in Hazard, Paul. *The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680-1715*. New York: New York Review Books, 2013, 180-197.
[60] See Preus, James S. (James Samuel). *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Breuer, *Limits*, 84; Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 27.
[61] Breuer, *Limits*, 87; Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 27-53.

Germany was a little different, being, for the most part, insulated from the scholarly developments of France, England, and the Netherlands until relatively late. Initially German biblical scholars rejected Simon's ideas, and others like his, but by the middle of the 18th century critical notions found their way into mainstream German thought; there was a sudden absorption of English and French ideas, and a cultural revival of sorts. German critical, linguistic, and textual analysis erupted and soon overtook the creativity and production of the scholars from other countries.[63]

A central figure in this revolution of German biblical scholarship was Johann David Michaelis, not to be confused with his great-uncle, Johann Heinrich Michaelis, who was a biblical scholar party to 'pre-critical' German culture.[64] Though he trained in conservative interpretive methods, J.D. Michaelis gravitated toward the cutting-edge and forged ahead in the development of a new biblical semantics—seeing the text as a gateway toward an ancient Civilization which differed, and in many ways rose above, the civilizations of Greece[65]. His own biblical translation, intended for a popular readership, exhibits his perspective on tradition, showing him more than willing to depart from the MT when semantically expedient. In the two decades prior to his death, he published much research and work on the historical context of Mosaic law—again, placing his interpretive focus on the moral legacy of the bible rather than its spiritual currency. As part of his work, Michaelis dismissed the rabbinic sages as guilty of distortion and compared their claims of interpretive authenticity to those of Catholic Priests—both being guilty of hermeneutic abuses. In the 1780s it was Johann Gottfried Eichhorn[66] who first introduced the idea of a documentary hypothesis concerning the book of Genesis, indicating the continuing preoccupation that German scholars had with critical dissection of the text, and thus buttressed accusations of rabbinic illiteracy.[67]

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[62] Breuer, *Limits*, 91, 104.

[63] Breuer, *Limits*, 92-95; Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 54-92.

[64] Breuer, *Limits*, 93; Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 60.

[65] For more on his radical re-orientation of Scripture, and how non-confessional biblical scholars, still so culturally defined by the biblical text, refashioned its currency, see Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 182-217 ("Chapter 7: History: The Archival and Alien Old Testament"); Legaspi, M. *Death of Scripture*, 129-153 [Chapter 6: "Michaelis, Moses, and the Recovery of the Bible"]. It is worth nothing that Michaelis' reworking of Scripture as the gateway into a sublime ancient culture, should not be mistaken for a reverence for his contemporary Jews. The ascription of the Hebrew Bible to the Hebrews, had no bearing to the current day Jews ('depraved and corrupt'), and actually served to exclude "the Jews from their religious patrimony by transforming the Bible into an archive of an alien people" (Sheehan, 214-15). In fact, he has been blamed by some for beginning the modern form of racial-antisemitism that was later adopted by the leaders of the Third Reich—see Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 104; Manuel, Frank Edward. *The Broken Staff: Judaism Through Christian Eyes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992, 252-262; Hess, Jonathan M. *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002, 51-89 [Chapter 2: "Orientalism and the Colonial Imaginary: Johann David Michaelis and the Specter of Racial Antisemitism"]. For a broader view of the perception of Jews in Germany see, Low, Alfred D. *Jews in the Eyes of the Germans: From the Enlightenment to Imperial Germany*. Philadelphia: Institute for the study of Human Issues, 1979, 54-63.

Following the biblical scholars' critical assault on Scripture came an interest in new ways of reading the biblical text, and perhaps the most prominent example of a textual theorist applying his studies to the Bible is Johann Gottfried Herder[68]. Not known primarily for his biblical scholarship, Herder focused less on textual critical issues—which he called meaningless pedantry—than on broader aesthetic and literary concerns, building on the work of scholars such as Robert Lowth who developed the idea of parallelism in biblical poetry[69].

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[66] See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 90; Breuer, *Limits*, 99; Eran and Shavit, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 114-116; Reventlow, Henning Graf, "Towards the End of the 'Century of Enlightenment: Established Shift from *Sacra Scriptura* to Literary Documents and Religion of the People of Israel," in Brekelmans, C., M. Saebø, M. Haran, M.A. Fishbane, J.L. Ska, and P. Machinist. *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation: II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, 1996, 1051-1057.

[67] This follows the French scholar Jean Astruc's contention, in his 1753 writings, that Moses spliced two separate documents to build the Pentateuch. See Kugel, J.L. *How to Read the Bible*, 39; Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 116, and more broadly "Chapter 4: Philology: The Documentary Bible"; Jarick, John. *Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc*. New York: T & T Clark, 2007, 157-248.

[68] See Breuer, *Limits*, 100-101; Reventlow, Henning Graf. "Towards the End," 1041-1050.

[69] For an overview of Lowth's work see Sheehan, Jonathan. *The Enlightenment Bible*, 148-181 [Chapter 6: "Poetry: National Literature, History, and the Hebrew Bible"]; James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*; Jarick, John. *Sacred Conjectures*, 1-156.

And with these new historical, critical, and aesthetic lenses hanging over Scripture in German biblical scholarship, the inherited, dogmatically driven, anti-Jewish polemics, evolved into a scholarly and rationally justified anti-rabbinic ridicule. The biblical readings offered in midrashic literature were understood as confused and undisciplined, unlearned and petty[70]. The idea, held by traditional Jews, that the rabbinic sages of the *Talmud* and *Midrash* sat in continuity with Scripture, was heavily scorned—with some scholars suggesting that the sages drew their hermeneutics and rituals from outside of the Semitic context (Greece and elsewhere), while others argued that the sages were simply overestimating the semantic density of the biblical text. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), for example, took the latter view, writing in 1780:

> Every Primer is only for a certain age. To delay the child, that has outgrown it, longer in it than it was intended for, is hurtful. For to be able to do this in a way in any sort profitable, you must insert into it more than there is really in it, and extract from it more than it can contain. You must look for and make too much of allusions and hints; squeeze allegories too closely; interpret examples too circumstantially; press too much upon words. This gives the child a petty, crooked, hair splitting understanding; it makes him full of mysteries, superstitions; full of contempt for all that is comprehensible and easy. The very way in which the Rabbis handled their sacred books! The very character which they thereby imparted to the character of their people! A Better Instructor must come and tear the exhausted Primer from the child's hands. Christ came![71]

This was the state of biblical scholarship that greeted the Jews of Europe when their ghetto walls came down. Beyond a couple of isolated cases[72], the Jews of Europe appear to have been entirely in the dark concerning the contiguous death of Scripture and the arrival of radically new modes of biblical reading, and as Maskilim and others labored to embrace portions of German thought in conjunction with launching a revival of Jewish culture, they found the dissonance trying.

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[70] Breuer, *Limits*, 101-103.

[71] Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *The Education of the Human Race*. London: Smith, Elder, and co., 1858, 44-46. See Breuer, *Limits*, 104.

[72] Breuer, *Limits*, 111-115; Breuer, E. "Jewish Study of the Bible," 1008-1009; Feiner, Shmuel. *The Jewish Enlightenment*, 21-36; Ruderman, David B. *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, 198-201.

Thus, as a result of the Enlightenment, two major threats loomed over Scripture as read by traditional Jews—first, the integrity and authenticity of the Masoretic Text, and, second, the rationality of the rabbinic sages.[73] Without embracing these two implicit tenets of modern German biblical criticism, Jews could not hope to be counted as cultured and enlightened; and without defending them, they could not maintain continuity with their own tradition; and if they were to revive Jewish culture through what Richard Cohen calls a "process of repossessing" the Bible[74], these questions could not go unanswered. The first figures to struggle with and tackle these challenges were Moses Mendelssohn and Naphtali Herz Wessely.

Both of these figures trailblazed in a number of significant ways[75], but for our purposes, all that is pertinent is their stance on this ensuing hermeneutic crisis. The first tenet—that the Masoretic Text is unreliable and in need of emendation, was plainly denied. Though remaining quiet on the issue in public, Mendelssohn wrote in private letters to sympathetic friends—both Jewish and Christian—that biblical criticism inducing emendation is not only unacceptable, but by the very standards of the enlightenment, unreasonable and perverse—an "audacity" in fact[76]; and though he corresponded with J.D. Michaelis and other biblical scholars who accepted the need for biblical emendation as fact, Mendelssohn never commented on their work, nor allowed them to sway him[77]. Most importantly in this context, Mendelssohn's biblical translation and commentary[78] never addressed the question of textual authenticity, designed to provide modern Jews a sophisticated work steeped in their tradition.[79]

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[73] Breuer, *Limits*, 109.

[74] Cohen, Richard. "Urban Visibility and Biblical Visions: Jewish Cultures in Western and Central Europe in the Modern Age," in David Biale, et al. *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002, 762-784.

[75] For some of the more recent works on Mendelssohn's life and work, see Feiner, Shmuel. *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010; Gottlieb, Michah. *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-political Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Freudenthal, Gideon. *No Religion Without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012; Arkush, Allan. *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*. SUNY Series in Judaica. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994; Sacks, Elias. *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017; Sorkin, David Jan. *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996; Sorkin, David. "Moses Mendelssohn's 'Vital Script'," in Sorkin, David Jan. *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics From London to Vienna*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008; Mendelssohn, Moses, Edward Breuer, and David Jan Sorkin. *Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

The major challenge facing Maskilim at this stage was the second tenet, however, where every rational reader could see the widening chasm between a plain-sense rendering of the biblical text and the readings offered by the rabbinic sages; here the gap between reason and tradition was close to untenable and in need of an urgent response. And the response of traditional rabbinic figures, and how Malbim's differs, is the subject of our second chapter.

In brief, Mendelssohn sees Scripture as a polysemous text—one where both the modern contextual and rational readings, and the ancient atomic and imaginative readings co-exist. He admits that Scripture generates more than one meaning, only one of which belongs to the sages—which liberates his interpretive hand to align his exegesis with modern sensibilities, in most cases.[80] By allowing for this dual track of meaning, Mendelssohn vindicated the use of poetic aesthetics, drawing on Lowth and Herder, in his plain-sense translation and commentary—in fact, permitting the inclusion of any scholarship that could augment Judaism's sophistication and accessibility while leaving the integrity and authority of Scripture intact.

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[76] Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* 12-2, 1976, 33.

[77] Breuer, *Limits*, 116-124.

[78] The commentary was not all written by him—Solomon Dubno penned the commentary on Genesis, Wessely wrote the commentary for Leviticus, Aaron Jaroslav wrote on Numbers, and Hertz Homberg wrote on large portions of Deuteronomy.

[79] Breuer, *Limits*, 175.

[80] It is worth noting, as Breuer does (*Limits*, 193-4), that the strength of Mendelssohn's posture is that his claim for biblical polysemy is rooted not in a confessional presupposition concerning the sanctity of Hebrew or Scripture, but in an evident truth of human language—there are colloquial expectations of casual semantic attention, and more precise semantics generated in more intensive circumstances.

But Mendelssohn's solution, while elegant, leaves a number of tensions in its wake.[81] The most pressing being, of course, why there are instances where the secondary meaning necessarily excludes the primary meaning—i.e. why there are instances where the text's author supposedly intends something other than the plain-sense of the words.

Following in Mendelssohn's footsteps, a later orthodox-identified exegete, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Meklenburg (1785-1865), published a biblical commentary[82]—and suggested that the apparent clash between the plain-sense and rabbinic readings is to test the devotion of the righteous to tradition and the rabbis.

Another prominent rabbinic figure following in the wake of Mendelssohn was Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888)[83]. Known primarily for his antagonism with the Reform community in Frankfurt[84], he penned one of the most influential biblical commentaries of the age and in some ways went further than Mendelssohn[85]—publishing not only a German biblical translation, but one printed in German, as opposed to Hebrew, characters, accompanied by a German language commentary. Hirsch also addressed the tension at the heart of the hermeneutic crisis—the chasm between plain-sense and rabbinic *derash*, and his solution was the most radical yet. He conceded that the plain-sense readings of the German biblical scholars were the most natural and intuitive semantic assessment of Scripture; however, for him, the biblical text is not designed to be semantically generative. The biblical scholars of the modern age have fallen into a generic misconception and have missed the truth that Scripture has never been the source of its own meaning, and merely serves as the mnemonic primer for an external body of knowledge—the oral tradition. They are not wrong to deem rabbinic readings exegetically unjustified, they are simply wrong to read them as exegesis. Hirsch's dynamic inversion saves rabbinic tradition at the cost of Scripture's semantic value, its function as a text is now narrowed to that of a prop in Jewish intellectual and spiritual life, prompting the memory of something more meaningful and whole.[86] In this way Hirsch's exegetical style departs from the plain-sense that enlightenment readers might expect, offering an almost thoroughly homiletical commentary[87].

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[81] It, along with the entire project of the *Biur*, was outright rejected by a number of the most traditional rabbinic figures of the time. See Hildesheimer, Meir. "Moses Mendelssohn in Nineteenth-Century Rabbinical Literature." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 55 (1988): 79–133; Hildesheimer, Meir. "The Attitude of the Ḥatam Sofer toward Moses Mendelssohn." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 60 (1994): 141–87; Lowenstein, Steven M. "The Readership of Mendelssohn's Bible Translation." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 53 (1982): 179–213; Greenberg, Moshe. *Parshanut Ha-Mikra Ha-yehudit: Pirke Mavo*. Yerushalayim: Mosad Byalik, 1983, 119-120; Eran and Shavit, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 73-4.

[82] *HaKetav VeHaKabbalah*, 1839 1st edition, 1852 2nd edition.

[83] Mordecai Breuer, "Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888)" in Jung, Leo. *Guardians of Our Heritage: 1724-1953*. The Jewish Library; 7. New York: Bloch, 1958, 265-299; Rosenbloom, Noah H. *Tradition in an Age of Reform: The Religious Philosophy of Samson Raphael Hirsch*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976; Chamiel, Ephraim. *The Middle Way: The Emergence of Modern Religious Trends in Nineteenth-Century Judaism: Responses to Modernity in the Philosophy of Z.H. Chajes, S.R. Hirsch, and S.D. Luzzatto; Editor, Dr. Asael Abelman; Translator, Dr. Jeffrey Green.* Studies in Orthodox Judaism. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014, 2 vols.. On his rejection of biblical criticism, the first crisis of modern biblical studies see, Ganzel, Tova. "Explicit and Implicit Polemic in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's Bible Commentary." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 81 (2010): 171–91. For information on the how Hirsch viewed Mendelssohn's work see Breuer, Mordechai. *Modernity Within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 57-59.

[84] See Katz, Jacob. *A House Divided: Orthodoxy and Schism in Nineteenth-Century Central European Jewry*. Vol. 27. The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series ; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998, 257-278.

Thus Mendelssohn, Meklenburg, and Hirsch all concede to the reasonableness and cogency of modern biblical aesthetics (though vehemently oppose any criticism of Scripture's authenticity), including the claim that rabbinic *derash* diverges substantially from the ostensible plain-sense, and manage to salvage rabbinic tradition by diminishing Scripture's independent semantic power.

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[85] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 109.

[86] Breuer and Gafni, "Jewish Biblical Scholarship," 299; Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 235; see Hirsch's commentary to Exodus 21:2. For a direct comparison with Malbim's view, see Yequtiel Y. Neubauer, "Parshanut HaMikra shel Malbim VeR' Shimshon Raphael Hirsch," in Neubauer, Jakob. *Ha-Rambam ʻal Divre Sofrim: Shiṭato Ṿe-shiṭat Mefarshaṿ*. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Ḳuḳ, 1956, 168-173.

[87] Even while arguing the plain-sense merits of Hirsch's commentary, Jonathan Jacobs, in his "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch as a Peshat Commentator: Literary Aspects of His Commentary on the Pentateuch 1." *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 15, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 190–200, concedes that "the literary elements of Hirsch's commentary are heavily outnumbered by what can be defined as derash" (190).

Wessely charted a different path, one that preceded him in time, and one that Malbim later embraces; he argued that an accurate and in depth reading of biblical grammar would engender nothing other than the rabbinic rendering. The sages were not biblically illiterate or interpretive contortionists, exploiting a straightforward text for their imaginative pleasure—they were the definition of serious readers, extracting the precise semantics of a wholly unambiguous text. One of Wessely's teachers, Solomon Hanau, made a similar claim in the introduction to his work, *Tzohar HaTevah*,[88] but neither he nor Wessely successfully plotted out an extended defense of their contention; neither penned an exegetical tract that practically manifested their theory. This is where Malbim steps into the fray, as we shall show in our second chapter.

### Romanticism: The Appropriation of Scripture

Beyond the two hermeneutic threats engendered by the Enlightenment—against the integrity of the biblical text and the legitimacy of the rabbinic tradition—a third emerged as a result of the cultural reaction to the Enlightenment referred to as Romanticism. Romanticism, manifesting differently in different places, erupted all over Europe[89]. Figures such as Kant[90] and

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[88] See Breuer, E. "Jewish Study of the Bible," 1009; Breuer, *Limits*, 133-136.

[89] See, Berlin, I., H. Hardy, and J. Gray. *The Roots of Romanticism: Second Edition*. Bollingen Series (General). Princeton University Press, 2013; Furst, Lilian R. *Romanticism in Perspective; a Comparative Study of Aspects of the Romantic Movements in England, France, and Germany*. New York: Humanities Press, 1970; Furst, L.R. *The Contours of European Romanticism*. University of Nebraska Press, 1979; Hoffmeister, G. *European Romanticism: Literary Cross-Currents, Modes, and Models*. Wayne State University Press, 1990; Ferber, M. *A Companion to European Romanticism*. Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture. Wiley, 2008; Breckman, W. *European Romanticism: A Brief History with Documents*. Hackett Publishing Company, Incorporated, 2015; Dupré, L. *The Quest of the Absolute: Birth and Decline of European Romanticism*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2013; Hamilton, P. *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford University Press, 2016.

[90] See, Lestition, Steven. "Kant and the End of the Enlightenment in Prussia." *The Journal of Modern History* 65, no. 1 (1993): 57–112; Macmurray, John. "Kant and the Romantics" in *The Self as Agent*. Gifford Lectures. Faber & Faber, 1995, 39-61; Black, J.D. *The Politics of Enchantment: Romanticism, Media, and Cultural Studies*. Cultural Studies. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006, 23; See also Berlin, *Roots*, 79-106 ("The Restrained Romantics").

Rousseau[91] brought the 'Age of Reason' to an end and inaugurated the 'Age of Feeling' that followed in their wake—the mechanistic vision of rational enlightenment that believed in scientific truth, a primitive past, and inevitable human progress started to peel away[92], and the raw emotions neglected and reviled by the *philosophes* and their work burst upon the scene.

First came the '*Sturm und Drang*' literary movement in German lands,[93] often translated as "Storm and Stress," primarily consisting of dramatic plays and novels, perhaps the most renowned of which is Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*" (1774). One of the leading figures of this movement was the very same Johann Herder whom we mentioned above concerning the shift in biblical hermeneutics that demeaned rabbinic tradition. The outlook of one of Herder's formative teachers, Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), has been described as follows:

> He despises analysis; he stands for faith against reason, inspiration against craftmanship…Natural spontaneity, the only spontaneity which is worthy of esteem, is manifested in the feelings and the passions, and they are expressed in images. That is why poetry is the mother tongue of the human race.[94]

This emphasis on the feelings and passions, as opposed to reason and intellect, came to define the thrust of the Romantic movement that swept across Europe, even as the *Strum und Drang* itself ran out of steam. This is how the psyche of the next generation has been described:

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[91] See Graeme Garrard, *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Philosophes* (State University of New York Press, 2003); Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Routledge, 2017).

[92] In the Prussian context in particular, the cause of this peeling of enlightenment rationality appears to be a slew of social, political, and economic crises, and a failure of the leading thinkers to address them—see Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth Century Prussia*, 98. Brunschwig at one point hangs the success of Prussian Romanticism on the threat of unemployment (184), while noting elsewhere that, temperamentally speaking, enlightenment thought was an imposition on many "who by nature need passion and have an instinctive propensity toward everything calculated to appeal to and excite their emotions," 89.

[93] See James N. Hardin and Christoph E. Schweitzer (eds.), *German Writers in the Age of Goethe: Sturm und Drang to Classicism*, Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 94, 1990; Bruce Duncan, *Lovers, Parricides, And Highwaymen: Aspects of Sturm und Drang Drama*, 1999; David Hill (ed.), *Literature of the Sturm und Drang*, 2003.

[94] Brunschwig, 92-3. See pages 87-95, for description of *Sturm und Drang* movement as a whole.

> Without realizing it, they deviate from the paths traced out by their elders…they are troubled, nerve-ridden, a prey to a yearning for the "sublime", the "infinite", the "miraculous", abruptly summoned to some vocation, stricken by love at first sight as if by lightning, astounded by the most commonplace encounters.[95]

This primacy of emotion over thought developed from impulse into ethos and forged what Colin Campbell has termed a 'cult of sensibility' and an 'ethic of feeling,'[96] where, in his words, there was a "tendency to judge the soul of a man by the degree of emotion he displayed."[97] In a striking formulation, Campbell notes that this emphasis on feeling—pursued also for its pleasure—was not seen as a descent into barbarism, but as a moral ascent, thus "sound ethical justification was provided for an emotionalist hedonism."[98]

Along with this focus on sentiment and passion, came a new attachment to the individual self[99] and a new type of literary hero who embodied this attachment; in the words of Harold Bloom: "In the Romantic quest the Promethean hero stands, finally, quite alone, upon a tower that is only himself, and his stance is all the fire there is."[100] These heroes—sometimes referred to as Byronic or Faustian—were cast variously as melancholic, isolated, bookish, itinerant, outcasts and creative prodigies in the clutch of passion.[101] And with this new focus on feeling and the self, came a concomitant return to untamed nature—not simply as an escape from cluttered cities, but as an echo of divinity[102].

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[95] Brunschwig, 223.

[96] Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism,* 138, 139.

[97] 141. See entirety of chapter 7, "The Ethic of Feeling."

[98] 141.

[99] See Gerald N. Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution, and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787-1802,* 3-6. Who shows how Georg Simmel and others distinguish the 'uniqueness' of self of the Romantic era, from the 'singleness' of self of the Enlightenment era—what Izenberg calls 'individuality' and 'individualism' respectively.

[100] Harrold Bloom, "The Internalization of the Quest Romance" in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism,* 9.

[101] See James D. Wilson, *The Romantic Heroic Ideal* (1982), 1-26; Walter L. Reed, *Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1974), 1-33.

The Romantics were not averse to faith, in fact in many ways they embraced it—depicting the detached and abstract analytics of enlightenment rationality as a slayer of the soul; perhaps best exemplified in a line of John Keats' narrative poem *Lamia*: "Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings// Conquer all mysteries by rule and line." The German and Prussian Romantics not only adopted this passionate defense of mystery but took the Hebrew Bible as their inspiration, defending it against the assault of the rationalists: "They regarded the Bible and its doctrine of revelation—not Greek philosophy—as the *prisca sapientia*, man's eternal spiritual foundation."[103]

This defense of Scripture, however, did not involve a passive reception of text. Building off Hans Frei's celebrated *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*,[104] Stephen Prickett argues that the Hebrew Bible endured a "profound refashioning" attended by a

> shift in reading and interpretation so radical as to make it virtually a new book from a hundred years earlier. Even as formal religious observance was by the end of the century declining towards a nadir unequalled at any time since, the prestige of the Bible as a literary and aesthetic model had risen to new heights. Not merely was Romantic thought in England, Germany and even France, steeped through and through in biblical references but, less obviously, Romantic criticism, its accompanying concept of 'literature' and even the theory of hermeneutics was no less biblically derived. The Romantic Bible was at once a single narrative work, an ongoing tradition of interpretation, and what I have called in these pages a

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[102] See, M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971); Walter L. Reed, *Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1974), 11; James C. McKusick, "Nature," in *A Companion to European Romanticism* (2005), 413-432—especially his bibliography on page 432.

[103] Eran and Shavit, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 34. It is worth noting that this embrace of Scripture was not an embrace of Jews—in fact a conscious division was made, as mentioned above regarding Michaelis, between the Ancient Hebrews and post-biblical Judaism/present day Jews.

[104] See, Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study In Eighteenth And Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 1974.

> 'metatype': a kind of all embracing literary form that was invoked to encompass and give meaning to all other books.[105]

Through the eyes of romanticism, the Hebrew Bible was remade into a work of pure drama and passion—and far from being blemished by simplicity, as Lessing seems to have seen it,[106] Scripture's simplicity became a mark of the sublime and its poetic virtue.[107] This is where Lowth's parallelism and Herder's aesthetics played into more than a critique of rabbinic hermeneutics, and molded Scripture into a work of modern European resonance: "Herder did what no other poetic Bible translator succeeded in doing: he detached the poetry of the Bible from theology without demoting the Bible to irrelevance."[108]

This is the culture, Olga Litvak argues, into which the *Haskalah* came into being—it was not a Jewish Enlightenment, but a Jewish Romanticism—and scholarship has failed to see that, suffering, under the effects of a critical mistranslation.[109] Citing the work of Uzi Shavit,[110] she demonstrates that the word '*Haskalah*' in fact tracks onto the German *Bildung*, not *Aufklärung*—used by German Romantics to identify "a new all-embracing ideal of culture," that seeks to "redeem humanity" from the failures of Enlightenment.[111] She describes how an identification of the *Haskalah* with the Enlightenment is wrongfooted on the simplest of terms—emerging both in the wrong time and in the wrong place,[112] and notes how even a "cursory glance at the strongest attachments of the *Haskalah* reveals connections with Romanticism."[113] As noted, Scripture proved to be among the most significant texts for the Romantic culture, and Litvak adds, wryly, "the notable Biblicism of the Haskalah is not merely a fortuitous coincidence."[114]

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[105] Stephen Prickett, *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* (1999), 1. See also page 7: "One of the most significant facts about the Romantic appropriation of the Bible was its freedom from any ecclesiastical or doctrinal control, Protestant or Catholic." This shift in meaning making perhaps made the Romantic Bible far more a threat than any Christological reading, as it did not issue from or speak for an obviously alien or hostile doctrine.
[106] See above.
[107] See Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 155-179—for example, concerning John Cramer's translation of the Psalms, "scriptural odes would set the modern soul aflame with the passions of the Hebrews," 155, and Herder's Song of Songs aims to preserve its "ancient Hebrew simplicity," 169; Murray Roston, *Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism* (1965), 142—part of a chapter entitled: "The Bible Poetized"; Frank E. Manuel, *The Broken Staff: Judaism Through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 271—"Herder recognized the poetry of a pristine simplicity." See Karin Schutjer, *Goethe and Judaism: The Troubled Inheritance of Modern Literature* (2015), 187—"[T]he Hebrew Bible is no remote or quaint document for Goethe: it is a challenging, resonant, polyvocal compilation that in many ways becomes his template for modern literature."
[108] 172.
[109] See Olga Litvak, *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism*, 3.
[110] "'Hahaskalah' Mahi? Levirur Musag HaHaskalah Besifrut Ha'Ivrit," *Mehkerei Yerushalayim Besifrut 'Ivrit*, 12 (1990).
[111] 28.

What Litvak describes as the Maskilim's "biblical fetish"[115] were part of their vision to found a "new Romantic religion" where "Biblical language…would provide a form and a means of expression for modern Hebrew culture, in which all the irreconcilables of the Romantic imagination would fuse."[116] Even Mendelssohn, part of the Berlin *Aufklärung*, exhibits Romantic proclivities, Litvak says, living, as he did, "on the edge of a period that German literary scholarship…renamed…"the Age of Goethe" (Ger. Goethezeit)."[117]

Some have noted that Litvak's argument is not fully borne out in her findings, but concede that the *Haskalah* is shown by her to be far more complex than merely a Jewish version of the broader European enlightenment.[118] This complex culture still rippling with enlightenment and romantic energies greets the Jewish populations as their ghetto walls fall. So, beyond the critical hermeneutic assault on the integrity of Scripture and the rationality of the rabbinic exegetical imagination, a more pervasive threat to the biblical text dwelt in the new call for feeling and sentiment and passion over intellect.

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[112] Chapter 1: "Wrong Time, Wrong Place," 3-22. Moshe Pelli evidences the acceptance of Herder—a primary influence on Romantic thought—in the literature of the Haskalah, see, "The Reception of Herder in the Hebrew Haskalah" in *Haskalah and Beyond: The Reception of the Hebrew Enlightenment and the Emergence of Haskalah Judaism* (2010), 109-132.

[113] 34.

[114] 31.

[115] 34.

[116] 32.

[117] 45. For a similar claim see, Ehrhard Bahr, "Goethe and the Concept of *Bildung* in Jewish Emancipation" in *Goethe in German-Jewish Culture (Klaus L. Berghahn and Jost Hermand eds.)* 2001, 26.

[118] Daniel B. Schwartz, "Romancing the Haskalah" in *Jewish Review of Books*, Summer 2013.

And this third threat is, in many ways, the most potent because it threatens not only the text or tradition but heralds a very specific view of the human condition to be disseminated by Scripture itself. And where the rationalist threat came from an explicitly anti-confessional source, openly hostile to religious faith, this romanticization of Scripture embraced faith and the Bible, and spoke of the soul in a devout vernacular. The threat was less assuming, and thus could be seen by some to be far more dangerous.

And while this cultural movement builds momentum, there is a simultaneous—even complementary—shift in the material economies of Europe. Colin Campbell in his above-quoted *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, argues that the emotional hedonism of Romanticism grew with a material hedonism, something that Shmuel Feiner traces within the Jewish community—separate from the changes in intellectual climate—in his *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (2011). Citing Roy Porter, he notes that though the pursuit of physical pleasure has formed part of the human condition for the sweep of history, something changed in the 18th century—there was a "new accent upon the legitimacy of pleasure…as a routine entitlement of people at large to seek fulfilment in this world rather than only heavenly salvation, to achieve the gratification of the senses, not just the purification of the soul."[119] This was something fundamentally distinct from the intellectual innovations of the *Haskalah*, and something rooted in a more popular and mass movement toward the pursuit of material pleasure. These are Feiner's words:

> If the Maskilim's rebellion against control of the rabbinical elite over knowledge, education, and culture resulted from the awakened desire for knowledge and new values and frustration in the face of narrow-mindedness in an era of dramatic

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[119] Feiner, 40; Porter, ''Enlightenment and Pleasure," in Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (eds.), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*. New York (1996), 3; also see, Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*. London, 2003.

> scientific and philosophical innovations, here it was triggered by temptations of the flesh and fashion and the desire for happiness and freedom of life and thought.[120]

This hermeneutic crisis facing the traditional Jews of the late 18th and early 19th centuries was thus two-fold, both intellectual and material, both abstract and concrete, both literary and economic—it pitted centuries of tradition against the pursuit of now, and pitted the rabbis who led them against their own senses.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch—Malbim's contemporary mentioned above—took one road to resolve this crisis, embracing emotion while forging borders to its reign. In his work on three major Jewish figures at the cusp of modernity, Ephraim Chamiel, calls Hirsch a "romantic educator"[121]—even a "romantic fundamentalist who had internalized Haskalah,"[122]—though at one point he softens his characterization, in the context of noting Hirsch's rejection of mysticism and enthusiasm, calling him a "neo-romantic."[123] His very own student, Kaufmann Kohler—in the post-romantic age that turned somewhat back toward the promise of progress—called him a "romanticist" whose teachings, after the application of scientific method, proved no more than "a fabric of cobwebs."[124]

Hirsch pens poems praising creation in romantic terms,[125] spoke fondly and deferentially of Schiller's work,[126] and blames diasporic persecution for the contemporary lack of natural sentiment among Jews—claiming that,

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[120] 256.
[121] *The Middle Way: The Emergence of Modern Religious Trends in Nineteenth-century Judaism : Responses to Modernity in the Philosophy of Z.H. Chajes, S.R. Hirsch, and S.D. Luzzatto*, Volume 1, 392.
[122] *The Middle* Way, Volume 2, 38.
[123] *The Middle Way*, Volume 1, 395.
[124] HaCohen, Ran, *Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible*, 153.
[125] S. R. Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel: Being a Spiritual Presentation of the Principles of Judaism* (1899), 17-41.
[126] See Marc B. Shapiro, "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Friedrich von Schiller," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* (15/2008-09), 172-187.

> Nature meant us to be men of the fields and flocks. The *Galuth* [diaspora] has made us into wandering traders. Oh, that we could turn our backs on this occupation which has been artificially imposed on us, that with our children we might flee away to the simplicity and peace, temperance and love, humanity and joy, enthusiasm and happiness dwell with us.[127]

Time and again Hirsch returns to the theme of nature and passion[128]—noting starkly, at one point, the moral case for embracing sensual desire[129]—restrained only by the fact that Reform Judaism conceived of faith as rooted in feeling and sentiment,[130] and thus calling for the railings of reason to curb emotional excess. Chamiel depicts Hirsch's exegesis, in summary, as "rabbinical commentary is intermingled with the values of Enlightenment culture and romantic idealism such as freedom, equality, human rights, ethics, progress, development, devotion, self-sacrifice, altruism, and more."[131]

Malbim takes a very different path. First, it is worth noting that, contrary to Segal's chronology and others' ambivalence, Malbim quite clearly breathed in his surrounding culture—and a number of signals, including the published testimony of at least one confidant and defender[132], indicate that he imbibed romantic culture.

He appears to be the first rabbinic author to depict life on Earth through the metaphor of water— four times calling our material existence "*Yam HaChaim*," "The Ocean of Life," on one occasion noting that the metaphor is common in mouths of poets.[133] And while on the surface this may not seem particularly striking, the detailed work of Howard Isham makes clear that the idea of life's voyage taking place over an ocean was an image deeply, and to a unique degree, associated with the romantic age.[134] Marine imagery suffused poetry and visual art across the continent and beyond—think Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and Goethe's "The Sea-Voyage" in Germany; think Thomas Cole's four-part masterpiece depicting *The Voyage of Life* in America; think Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in Britain; and think the gamut of Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky's 'Ninth Wave' and rousing seascapes in Russia.

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[127] S. R. Hirsch, *The Collected Writings*, Volume 2, 318.

[128] See his commentary to Genesis 1:11-13, Genesis 2:9, Genesis 24:35-38, Genesis 39:6-7,

[129] See S. R. Hirsch, *The Collected Writings*, Volume 7, 425/427, and Volume 8, 254. See Chamiel, 281-282, 392-402.

[130] *The Middle Way*, Volume 1, 394/396.

[131] 405.

[132] See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 165, noting the farewell essay penned upon Malbim's departure from Paris by the poet and scholar Shneur Zaks. He notes, reflecting upon his harsh treatment in Bucharest, which we'll note below, that complaints about Malbim's ignorance are unfounded, as "he understands German works and language, and grasps their poetry and allegories, and the…esteem philosopher Kant" (*HaLevanon*, Volume 7 [29th March 1865], 108).

This is, of course, not to claim or intimate any direct textual influence of any particular poet or artist, but to argue that Malbim's spiritual imagination engaged with *Goethezeit*. We see this again, in an autobiographic introduction to his first published work, *Artzot HaHayim*, where, at the age of 29, he describes his adolescence along the lines of a romantic hero:

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[133] Commentary to Exodus 2:3; for the other references see, Introduction to commentary to Leviticus; Introduction to commentary to Psalms; Introduction to *Artzot HaShalom*. It has come to my attention that, again, as far as I can tell, only one other rabbinic author has picked up this terminology in the wake of Malbim's work, that being Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook. Perhaps a study of Kook's work and context would shed some light on this commonality.

[134] *Image of the Sea: Oceanic Consciousness in the Romantic Century* (2004). See Chapter 1, "The Romantic Floodtide: Seastorms, Shipwrecks, and Revolution," in particular. Pertinent quotes include: "It was in the setting of enlightenment and revolution that the oceanic consciousness came to manifest itself—under the same historical circumstances that gave rise to European romanticism" (12); "The world was in transition…So was the European stage set for the age of romanticism, which burst forth in waves of deeply personal emotions, in new dynamic architectures of thought and images…an important ingredient of romantic expression, visual, verbal, and musical, was the subjective feeling of flowing, ever-changing reality that had lodged in the recesses of the postrevolutionary mind. By virtue of new freedoms from old customs facing the individual, the romantic vision was to express itself in many voices, images and sounds, but flowing through much of this expression can be discerned an oceanic consciousness, which helped to define the voyage of life in the romantic century."(31-2); "as nature became the preeminent concern of romantic writers and artists, the sea and all its moods and conditions became the image of that reality on which the voyage of life was travelled." (33); "The oceanic consciousness of the nineteenth century was not limited to the maritime nations alone. The sea offered a strong metaphor for the environment of life itself" (40). See Samuel Baker, *Written on the Water: British Romanticism and the Maritime Empire of Culture* (2010), for more concerning the British context.

> At age thirteen I was as a solitary bird upon the nest of wisdom alone; I was without friend or companion, my soul roused to the lyrical sound of learning's yearning ringing in my ears. The soul of *Torah* which roamed in the midst of my fathers' primordial, stirred my spirit as a man awoken from his slumber; I awoke and behold a pen in hand, the staff of an eager scribe in my right clasp, I wrote, I originated, I explained and I explicated, and the hand of God was firm upon me.[135]

Here Malbim presents himself as solitary, bookish, and industrious in the presence of God—and as he continues, he describes the invasion of pain into his life, harnessing nature to depict despair:

> If the eyes of God are not upon a home, only breath in the hand of man support it. If the spirit of God does not steer a ship, vain are the sails and compass in the seaman's hand. See! A morn without clouds, the sun rises in the East as a fiery lantern; as a crimson night across the face of heaven, a purifying light in essence; to your right the fig blossoms, and to your left the tree of olives…Awake now and arise, for the spirit of God goes. Rush—protect your soul for behold the storm. Woe to the sound of fear! All overturns in terror, darkness across the face of heaven. The clouds blacken, to your right thunder and your left sparks fly. The wind breaks mountains, raging fiercely around you. There stones of sleet, hail and flashing fire; here a sweeping rain, a flood and thick gloom; here an unrelenting dripping on a rainy day etc. (Yebamot 63b)[136] smites the four sides of the house. My soul fails from the peaks of my roiling; I have drunk from the hand of God's a goblet of agitation.[137]

Again, he uses the maritime metaphor, and now turns to nature more broadly. One cannot escape the themes and symbols of romanticism that reverberate at the core of this writing, invoking storms and sunrise and hail and rain—this is a figure whose imagination is awash with the world around him. He continues in this vein in the introduction to his next work, a series of nine sermons, published only a year later (*Artzot HaShalom*). In this introduction he again employs images laden with nature to depict a figure in despair, now reawakening to hope. These are not the poems of ghetto-cloistered medieval retrograde; these are the poems of one who has come of age in a world aflame in romanticism.

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[135] Malbim, *Artzot HaChaim*. *Machon LeHotza'at Sifrei HaMalbim*: Jerusalem (2008), 37-42.

[136] This overt reference to rabbinic literature is found in the 1st edition of Malbim's publication (1837)—somewhat shortly after the collapse of his first marriage. The Talmudic passage he references associates the verse alluded to here (Proverbs 27:15) with difficult spousal relationships—"Rava said: A bad wife is as troublesome as a day of heavy rain, as it is stated: "A continual dropping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike" (Proverbs 27:15)". Malbim makes an explicit effort to ensure that his mental associations are not lost in the oblique allusions of his poetry, something further assured by his inclusion of the adverb etc., inviting his reader to look up the verse—the storm he describes is life with his first wife. It is also worth noting, that in this volume's second publication, in 1860, Malbim removed both the parentheses and the "etc.", burying and obscuring the reference.

[137] Malbim, *Artzot HaChaim*, 37-42.

But the association of Malbim and his age does not define his response to it. The exegesis he provides and guidance he preaches in the sermons and legal norms that follow these introductions promote a deep resistance to natural emotion—something we will explicate in great detail in our third chapter. And even these poems seem more complex than a cursory glance implies. Though his semantic referent is the world of nature, his semiotic source is the world of Scripture; his poetic reflections amount to a subtly woven biblical textile, with verses from across Scripture severed from their context and smelted together. In the relatively short introduction to his volume of sermons, Malbim cites or paraphrases (without reference) the Hebrew Bible close to four hundred times—making almost every sentence a patchwork of verses. So, while Malbim's semantic referent is profoundly romantic, his semiotic referent is deeply traditional—he offers, to adapt Mark Hulliung characterization of Rousseau, an 'autocritique' of romantic theology.[138]

Despite Malbim's fluency in and familiarity with romantic culture, and a degree of participation in it, he sees the romanticizing of the biblical text and its heroes, and the romanticism of the individual writ-large, as perils that threaten the Jewish future. Malbim refuses Hirsch's romantic balance, and promotes a life of dispassionate obedience, seeing both emotional urges and material pleasures as base and corrupting and illusive. He sees the romantic readings of the Hebrew Bible as a literal manifestation of the devil citing Scripture for his purpose—a human hermeneutic justifying hedonistic ends. In his exegetical commentary, he embraces a hermeneutic that rejects the raw dramatization of Scripture, at once attending to every semiotic inflection—thus ridding it of the perils of parallel poetry and offering readings of narrative figures as free of natural passion and feeling as interpretatively possible. When he objects, as above, to Jewish Reformers treating Scripture as an ancient myth, he is repelled not only by the historical criticism but by a hermeneutic that turns the Bible into a piece of romantic literature.

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[138] *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes*, noted above.

Malbim sees the ethic of feeling, the valorization of passion, as threats to spiritual living—a movement that will crush the true soul and leave an empty self in its wake; he promotes enlightenment science and analytic philology, he embraces the study of ancient history, but the poetization of the biblical text and the romanticization of the human condition is beyond his pale. He sees a profusion of material indulgence and the shattering of rabbinic power, he witnesses the reformation of an ancient faith and feels the need to stand in the way—but not simply out of dogmatic attachment or denominational allegiance, Malbim's assaults do not arise from an unexamined defensive reflex, but a considered critique of what he perceives as a threat to spiritual life.

The exact parameters of his critique will be seen and examined in our third chapter—where we will discuss his aspiration to go beyond saving the text of Scripture and turning his attention to saving the soul of his reader; and the way in which Malbim employs it in his exegesis will be demonstrated in the fourth chapter. For now, we come to final section of our first chapter, turning to the available details of Malbim's life, to exhibit his personal story and get a sense of his character.

## Malbim's Life

Following his passing in 1879, a widely distributed, Orthodox-affiliated, Hebrew language newspaper—*HaLevanon*[139]—made an announcement under the headline, "Colossal Loss in Israel":

> There aren't enough words in our tongue to describe the vastness of the loss that has befallen the house of Israel with the passing of this great man…a prince of Torah and a great of the age has fallen…Who has not heard the renown of the giant Malbim? Who does not cherish the second Abravanel? Who does not recognize the *parshan-datta* [expositor of faith] of our generation?[140]

Effusive admiration and reverence define this reaction to Malbim's death—and in the space of two conjoined rhetorical sentences he is compared to both Don Isaac Abravanel[141] and Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (*Rashi*[142]), two of the most enduring and venerated biblical exegetes from any time in Jewish history. However, the newspaper announcement continues and, in no uncertain terms, exhibits the tension at the core of Malbim's career:

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[139] See Lewin, I. *ספר אוצר כתבי־עת תורניים: ביבליוגרפיה של כתבי־עת תורניים שהופיעו בארץ ישראל, מזרח ומערב־אירופה, רוסיה, סין (שנגהאי), צפון אפריקה וצפון אמריקה בשנות תנ״א־תש״ח*. המכון לחקר בעיות היהדות החרדית, 1980, 162-167; Kouts, Gideon. *Ma'arikhim U-mikhteve 'itim: 'iyunim Be-toldot Ha-'itonut Ha-'Ivrit Ṿeha-Yehudit*. Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan, 1999, 9-38, 128-132; idem, *Ḥadashot Ṿe-ḳorot Ha-yamim: Meḥḳarim Be-toldot Ha-'intonut Ṿeha-tiḳshoret Ha-'Ivrit Veha-Yehudit = News and History : Studies in History of the Hebrew and Jewish Press and Communication*. [Tel Aviv]: ha-Sifriyah ha-Tsiyonit: ha-Makhon le-ḥeḳer ha-'itonut shel ṿeha-tiḳsoret ha-Yehudit 'al shem Andre'ah ṿe-Ts'arls Bronfman, Universiṭat Tel-Aviv, 2013; Beer-Marx, Roni. *'Al Ḥomot Ha-neyar: 'iton Ha-Levanon Ṿeha-ortodoḳsyah*. Yerushalayim: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2017.

[140] *HaLevanon*, Year 16, Volume 10, October 1st 1879. Translation mine, parentheses added.

[141] For most current assessment of his contribution see, Lawee, Eric. *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. The original academic study of his life and work, still relevant is, Netanyahu, Benzion. *Don Isaac Abravanel, Statesman and Philosopher*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953.

[142] Rashi is perhaps the most well-known, and most widely read, of the medieval commentators. For two of the most recent comprehensive studies see: Grossman, Avraham, and Joel A. Linsider. *Rashi*. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012; and Kamin, Sarah. *Rashi: Peshuṭo Shel Miḳra U-midrasho Shel Miḳra*. Yerushalayim: Hotsa'at sefarim 'a. sh. Y.L. Magnes, ha-Universiṭah ha-'Ivrit, 1986. He was designated, in a poem attributed to Abraham Ibn Ezra and elsewhere, as the *parshan-datta* (translated variously as "Interpreter of the Law," "Interpreter of Faith," ""Expounder of the Law," "Commentator par excellence" and, here, as "Expositor of faith"), an invented appellation made from the bifurcation of the name belonging to one of the sons of Haman (Book of Esther 9:7). See Liber, M., A. Szold, and Jewish Publication Society of America. *Rashi*. Jewish Worthies. Jewish publication society of America, 1906, 104, 249; Singer, I., and C. Adler. *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day, v. 10, Funk and Wagnalls, 1916, 327; Skolnik, Fred., and Michael Berenbaum. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA in association with the Keter Pub. House, 2007, v. 17, 104; Heide, A. van der. *'Now I Know': Five Centuries of Aqedah Exegesis*. Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Philosophy. Springer International Publishing, 2017, 82.

> The Rabbi, the Giant Malbim authored many treasured works, and taught God's truth in many towns; but much severe pain also filled his days. Though we do not know whether he declined over time or died suddenly, this we do know: there are people who will some day have to pay for spilling his blood like water, for embittering his life and trampling on his peace, for, because of them, this saint passed before his time.

From a single, limited, obituary we see Malbim's legacy—an exegete, a preacher, a publisher and teacher, who spent many days in suffering at the hands of those around him. He did indeed produce one of the most comprehensive biblical commentaries in our possession and served in several rabbinic posts—a number of which ended in acrimony—and it is this combination of trauma and devotion that captures the contours of his life.

## Early Years

On March 7th, 1809, Malbim was born to parents Yehiel Michel and Simacia, in Volochysk[143]—a small town with a population of approximately a thousand Jews.[144] Around this time, the religious culture of the Jews living there was decidedly traditional, and most, if not all, were impoverished, thus Malbim grew up enveloped by a Jewish culture suffused with traditional piety and subsisting on modest means.

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[143] Today Volochysk can be found in western Ukraine, though at the time it straddled the borders of the Russian and Austrian empires.

[144] Much of this biography is drawn from the opening chapter of Rosenbloom, N. *Ha-Malbim*. A number of reverential biographies have emerged from the current traditional segments of the Jewish community—some of which can be relied upon for historical purposes, and some of which participates in venerating hyperbole. See Sorski, Aharon *בסופה ובסערה: ראשי פרקים במסכת חייו הסועדים של ... רבי מאיר ליבוש מלבי״ם, זצ״ל*. Zeitonim, Bnei Barak, 1999; Yashar, Moshe Meir. *הגאון מלבים: חייו, משנתו, מאבקיו ומפעליו*, 1974.

At the age of six Malbim's father passed away, for reasons unbeknown to us, leading, in time, to his mother marrying the town's, similarly widowed, emeritus chief halakhic judge, Rabbi Yehuda Leib. Rabbi Yehuda Leib was himself a prestigious figure,[145] in many ways testifying to the pedigree of Malbim's parents in an era of strictly arranged marriages. In the autobiographical reflection introducing his own halakhic work, noted above, Malbim bespeaks a deep reverence for his father, mother and step-father, praising their saintliness, intellect, and devotion[146].

Other than his father and step father, the first person we know to have taught Malbim is Rabbi Moses Levi Horowitz, the chief judge who succeeded Rabbi Yehuda Leib in Volochysk. He authored a number of works, [147] in their totality exhibiting a distinct fluency in Jewish mysticism, philosophy, and Talmud, while also revealing a staunch religious conservatism and deep suspicion of secular studies. By the time he took the helm as chief judge of the town, his capacity to invest in teaching was severely restricted by the responsibilities of the office, but he taught his own son and took Malbim under his wing—indicating his early scholarly promise.[148]

At the age of fourteen Malbim married a local heiress, but by the time he was twenty the marriage had ended, leaving behind a son, a daughter, and a whole host of psychological scars brought to the fore, once more, in the introductory poem cited above. The emotional trauma that he conjures with the poetic patchwork of biblical citations refers, as per above, to the catastrophic experience that was his first marriage.

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[145] He was among a handful of esteemed Hasidic thinkers, to be invited to provide an introductory approbation to the late 18th century, posthumous, publication of Rabbi Menahem Nahum's esoteric essays on Scripture—see, Nahum, of Chernobyl, and Arthur Green. *Upright Practices ; The Light of the Eyes*. New York: Paulist Press, 1982, 23-4.

[146] One more, for a detail annotation of the introduction see the appendix.

[147] See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 4.

[148] Despite Malbim's romantic protestations of youthful solitude, noted above, friendship does appear to have blossomed between Malbim and Rabbi Horowitz's son, Ephrayim—something evidenced by the inclusion of Ephrayim's introductory approbation to the very same work, despite the exclusion of the approbations of a number of admired rabbis due to the need to economize on the size of his publication. See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 10-11.

Following this marital breakdown, Malbim travelled west and ensconced himself in study under the tutelage of the noted mystic and Talmudist Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Eichenstein, the founder of the Zhydachiv Hasidic dynasty. Though he didn't adopt a Hasidic identity, he found refuge in Zhydachiv and was granted the chance—rare for a person of his age—to engage kabbalistic material due to his uncommon intellectual prowess.[149]

## First Work

At the age of twenty eight Malbim published his first work, *Artzot HaChaim—Lands of Life*, a halakhic compendium. In his introduction, beyond the poetic intimations of his evolving personal drama, he also describes a litany of works that he had produced though not brought to publication—novellae on the Talmud, a treatise on Maimonides, compendia on the rules of sanctity and ritual purity, responsa and novellae on various areas from across the spectrum of Jewish law, numerous sermons, exegetical work on Scripture, a number of slimmer volumes on secular studies, a commentary on Jedaiah Bedersi's renowned *Bechinat Olam*,[150] and a kabbalistic work entitled *Megillat Setarim*—deciding instead to focus on this one book, highly practical in its thrust and thus serving a public good.

This work—*Artzot HaChaim*—is in three-parts, dealing with the opening thirty-one chapters of the ubiquitous 16th century code of Jewish law *Shulhan Arukh*[151]. The three parts serve distinct textual and conceptual functions and appear together on each page, aesthetically presented as two parenthetical commentaries on a central text. The central text details the legal norms of the *Shulhan Arukh* and later halakhic authorities, and of the two commentaries, one records the early rabbinic sources on which the codifiers depended, and the other offers a philosophical and kabbalistic reading of some of the practices and laws noted.

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[149] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 12-13.

[150] See Halkin, A. S. "Yedaiah Bedershi's Apology", in Altmann, Alexander, and Brandeis University. Philip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies. *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967;

[151] See Davis, Joseph. "The Reception of the 'Shulhan 'Arukh' and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identity." *AJS Review* 26, no. 2 (2002): 251–76; "The Shulḥan Arukh and Its Mappah 1564–1565, 1571" in Marcus, Jacob Rader, and Marc Saperstein. *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*. Pittsburgh: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015; "General Methodology of Codification of Jewish Law" and "History of Codification" in Broyde, Michael J., and Ira Bedzow. *The Codification of Jewish Law: And an Introduction to the Jurisprudence of the Mishna Berura*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014.

Though Malbim claimed that his aim with this work was to provide a public service, Rosenbloom suggests that the choice to publish was in, fact, to serve *his* purposes—aiding him with attaining a public renown, and thus augmenting the chances of him securing a rabbinic post. As a young man without money or clout or experience or a spouse,[152] Malbim would have found it exceptionally hard to find rabbinic work, so disseminating his innate talents would have been his best hope of finding work—and to do that he was in desperate need of impressive rabbinic approbations;[153] so began a long trek through Jewish Europe.

First Malbim made his way to Topoľčany to seek the support of Rabbi Benjamin Wolf Löw (listed as the Rabbinic leader of the community of Kolín in the approbation he provided), who signed his seal on the 8th of September 1834. From there he went, it appears, directly to the city of Nikolsburg (now Mikulov), where Rabbi Menahem Nahum Trebitsch, the 'Landesrabbiner' of Moravia, resided; he signed an approbation on October 6th 1834. On the 15th of October, 9 days later, Rabbi Moses Schreiber (known more commonly as Rabbi Moses Sofer[154]), the rabbinic head of the city of Pressburg (now Bratislava), signed a note of praise for Malbim’s character and a testimony to his scholarship (though, the timing of Malbim’s visit made it difficult for him to have read the entirety of the work). Malbim notes that he continued to elicit approbations from a number of rabbinic leaders—including Rabbi Benjamin Zev Wolf ha-Kohen Rapoport of Pápa, Rabbi Aaron Worms of Metz,[155] and Rabbi Akiva Eger—but due to lack of space selected not to print them[156]. His travels took him through Triste[157] and Amsterdam, where he secured the support of Rabbi Samuel ben Berish Berenstein on the 12th of February, 1837.

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[152] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 18, suggests that Malbim was trying to find a spouse to redeem the 'stain' of divorce, something Malbim explicitly prays for in the middle of his introduction.

[153] For more on the uses of approbations in Jewish printing see Berlin, A. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2011, 61.

[154] See Katz, J. "Towards a Biography of the Hatam Sofer," in Katz, J. *Divine Law in Human Hands: Case Studies in Halakhic Flexibility*. Magnes Press, 1998; Leiman, Shnayer Z. "R. Moses Schick: The Hatam Sofer's Attitude Toward Mendelssohn's Biur" *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*24, no. 3 (1989): 83–86; Hildesheimer, Meir. "The German Language and Secular Studies. Attitudes towards Them in the Thought of the Ḥatam Sofer and His Disciples." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 62 (1996): 129–63; Schreiber, Aaron M. "The Ḥatam Sofer's Nuanced Attitude Towards Secular Learning, 'Maskilim', and Reformers." *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 11 (2002): 123–73.

After what appears to be continuous travel, Malbim settled in Breslau (now Wrocław), for close to a year, where he preached in the synagogue under the supervision and care of Rabbi Zalman Tiktin, to whom he grew close—the latter issuing an approbation to Malbim’s first publication on the 20th of August, 1837.[158] Breslau, at the time, underwent the initial tremors of Jewish reform, with a growing segment of the community arguing for the religious leadership to be split between Rabbi Tiktin and a younger more reform-minded scholar, Abraham Geiger.[159]

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[155] For more on this figure, see Szajkowski, Z. *Jews and the French Revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848*. Ktav Publishing House, 1970, 792; Berkowitz, Jay R. “Authority and Innovation at the Threshold of Modernity: The Me'orei Or of Rabbi Aaron Worms of Metz,” in Fleischer, E. (Ezra), Gerald J. Blidstein, Carmi Horowitz, Bernard Septimus, and Isadore Twersky. *Me’ah She‘arim: ‘iyunim Be-‘olamam Ha-ruḥani Shel Yiśra’el Bi-yeme Ha-benayim : Le-zekher Yitsḥaḳ Ṭverṣḳi*. Yerushalayim: Hotsa’at sefarim ‘a. sh. Y.L. Magnes, ha-Universiṭah ha-‘Ivrit, 2001, 249-285; Berkovitz, Jay. “Jewish Scholarship and Identity in Nineteenth-Century France.” *Modern Judaism*18, no. 1 (1998): 1–33; Berkovitz, Jay R. “The French Revolution and the Jews: Assessing the Cultural Impact.” *AJS Review* 20, no. 1 (1995): 25–86.

[156] Rabbi Akiva Eger was known for not issuing approbations, but he would send letters of support if requested. For more on him, see Judith Bleich, “Rabbi Akiva Eger and the Nascent Reform Movement,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 9.B3 (1986), 1–8; Ferziger, Adam S. *Exclusion and Hierarchy: Orthodoxy, Nonobservance, and the Emergence of Modern Jewish Identity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, 77–83; Sinason, Jacob H. *The Gaon of Posen: A Portrait of Rabbi Akiva Guens-Eger*. Jerusalem ; New York: Feldheim Pub. Ltd., 1991.

[157] The Rabbi of the town mentions Malbim’s presence in a responsa that he later published. See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 21. There are claims that he travelled to London, England as well, but Rosenbloom considers it rather unlikely.

[158] This is our source of Malbim’s preaching in the town—we have no extant records of the sermons he presented.

[159] See, Heschel, Susannah. *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998; Koltun-Fromm, Ken. *Abraham Geiger's Liberal Judaism: Personal Meaning and Religious Authority*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006; Geiger, A., and M. Wiener. *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism: The Challenge of the Nineteenth Century*. Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962; Hill, Harvey. “The Science of Reform: Abraham Geiger and the Wissenschaft Des Judentum.” *Modern Judaism* 27, no. 3 (2007): 329–49.

The reverential biographies depict public disputations between Malbim and Geiger,[160] but beyond the language barrier between the two men, as Rosenbloom notes,[161] the dates for such disputations do not seem to compute—Malbim left Breslau months before Geiger held a public position (26th July 1838), to take the helm at his first post, as Rabbi of Wreschen (now Września).

## First Post

Wreschen was a small town in Prussia, including around 1300 Jews, to which, through the assistance of influential friends in Breslau and his now budding scholarly reputation, Malbim immigrated to occupy the seat of rabbi and head judge of the Jewish court. He signed a three year contract on the 10th of December 1837, which provided a meager wage accompanied by various ritual privileges and communal accolades, including serving as the head of a small *yeshiva*. As an addendum to the contract, which he signed within five days of its receipt, Malbim included his right to terminate his employment should he be offered the post of head rabbi of Posen (now Poznań), a much larger city under the auspices of the highly regarded, previously noted, Rabbi Akiva Eger until his passing on 12th October 1837.[162] This addendum itself exhibits Malbim's confidence, despite being young and vocationally inexperienced, to lead a substantial Jewish community in the wake of a towering rabbinic personality.[163]

Like many of the previously-Polish Prussian towns at the start of the 19th century, the Jewish community of Wreschen exuded a very traditional religious culture only starting to wrestle with the early stages of reform.[164] In 1815 the town was annexed by Prussia—having been officially allotted to it in the second of the three partitions of Poland[165]—and though this shift of national status did not immediately alter daily Jewish life, there was a slow emerging difference between previously-Polish Prussian towns and towns beyond Prussian borders, especially regarding attitudes toward modern education and German culture. It was here that Malbim was first party to the cultural shifts, where Jews were becoming increasingly more economically mobile, as noted above, and thus confronted with the ostensible opposition between a heavily blinkered tradition and an open future steeped in freedom. As the younger elements of the Jewish community experimented with the latter—drawn to the allures of German culture, the older generations resisted and held tight to tradition, and as the levers of power remained wholly in their hands—with the elders still filling the communal establishment—Malbim, as rabbi, received their wholehearted support. The elders gave Malbim the full reigns of rabbinic authority, even going as far as to procure him Prussian citizenship, a feat beyond rare for that time, considering that in 1835 only 76 Jews had Prussian citizenship.[166]

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[160] Yashar, Moshe Meir. *הגאון מלבים: חייו, משנתו, מאבקיו ומפעליו*, 1974.

[161] *Ha-Malbim*, 22.

[162] See Kemlein, Sophia. *Die Posener Juden 1815-1848: Entwicklungsprozesse Einer Polnischen Judenheit Unter Preussischer Herrschaft*. Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 1997.

[163] The post was taken up by Rabbi Eger's son (age 51).

[164] See, David Biale, "A Journey Between Worlds: East European Jewish Culture from the Partitions of Poland to the Holocaust," in David Biale (ed.), *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.

While Rabbi in Wreschen, Malbim did indeed find a wife in Chaya, widow of Yakir Rosenthal-Lifshitz[167] and daughter of Feivel Opoczyński—a wealthy figure living in Luntschitz (now Łęczyca). Following their wedding, Malbim requested a raise in salary to cover their growing expenses, which he was granted, triggering a number of complaints due to a depletion in communal resources. Though Malbim wrote an apologetic letter and returned the funds, complaints continued, giving a sense that more about Malbim than his expenses gave them concern. The collective voice of the younger segments of the Jewish community in Wreschen grew louder, and the cultural distance between Malbim and his congregation grew wider—his traditional garb and

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[165] Lukowski, Jerzy. *The Partitions of Poland: 1772, 1793, 1795*. London ; New York: Longman, 1999.
[166] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 28.
[167] Son of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Lifshitz (1765-1839)—Chief Rabbi of Warsaw and author of Halakhic work, *Hemdat Shlomo*.

Yiddish tongue gave the Jews riding the rising tide of reform a sense of deep dissonance and revulsion, leading eventually to Malbim not being paid as per his contract.

While facing the economic strain and communal tension in Wreschen, Malbim published his second work, *Artzot HaShalom*—*Lands of Peace,* the introduction to which we noted earlier. It is unclear whether this work is a collation of formerly preached sermons, or whether it is comprised of essays specifically penned for publication. What is clear, however, is that Malbim's work was being read outside of purely traditional circles, as it was treated to a review in the journal '*Tzion*', produced by progressive Jewish figures—and though it raised a number of methodological and genre related objections, it offered deep praise for Malbim's sophistication.

## Second Post

After seven years in Wreschen, Malbim took up a position as head rabbi of Kempen (now Kępno), where he received double the salary. Kempen was a large town in the Grand Duchy of Posen, including around three and half thousand Jews,[168] and the events leading up to Malbim's appointment are, in this case, pertinent to his experience.

On the 21st of November 1836, Rabbi Joseph Samuel Landau—the long serving rabbi of Kempen—passed away, bequeathing the position to his son, Rabbi Israel Jonah Landau. The latter Landau, however, passed away at the young age of 37 leaving the community in a state of grief and reluctant to immediately refill the position—allowing a local rabbinic figure, Rabbi Jacob Simcha Rehfisch to function as a locum.[169] Four years passed, and the community was divided as to how to proceed—whether to promote Rabbi Rehfisch to the position permanently, or to hire Malbim from the outside. An election among community stake-holders favored Malbim—if only marginally (138 against 106)—and his Prussian citizenship also made him the government's preferred candidate, but the opposition to his appointment did not dissipate overnight. Petitions were issued to the government and propaganda was propagated depicting him as unpatriotic, uncultured, unlettered, xenophobic, zealous, and anti-social, also suggesting that he abandoned his first wife and children and changed his name in bad faith. Deeming Malbim's previous employment as rabbi in Wreschen dependable as a signal of good character, the governmental authorities presumed this to be no more than parochial infighting, so ignored the petitions; this in turn led the opposition to eventually soften, or at least cease their vocal dissention. Though tension continued to overshadow Malbim's tenure—on at least one occasion he compared his opponents to the Hellenist rebels who fought the Maccabees—no major outbursts occurred and attempts at break-away communities (both Hasidic and Reform) failed during his time there. In fact, when Malbim decided to leave for another, more prestigious post, the community of Kempen asked him to stay—Malbim himself reports that he left the town with an escort of supporters and well-wishers; and it is in fact the case that leaders of the Kempen community came to Malbim's defense later in life, during a particularly challenging time, to which we will shortly turn.

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[168] For a study of the Jewish community in Kempen, see Łapa, Mirosław. *Kępińscy Żydzi*. Kępno: [Wydawn. Tygodnika Kępińskiego "Pismak"], 2008. References to Malbim's time in Kempen appear on pages 122-5 and 154-155.

[169] For a study of his role in the community, including his tension with Malbim, see Lewin, D. *Rabbi Jacob Simchah Rehfisch and the Jewish Community of Kempen (Posen).*, 1962; Łapa, Mirosław. *Kępińscy Żydzi*. Kępno: [Wydawn. Tygodnika Kępińskiego "Pismak"], 2008, 154-155.

Regarding Malbim's published work, Kempen appears to be a place of intense productivity and the locus of a major shift in his thinking—his attention turns from halakha and homily to systematic biblical exegesis. Rosenbloom argues that the intellectual climate building around Malbim in Kempen led him to evolve in his sensibilities; as, though in a number of ways Kempen was similar to more Eastern Polish and Russian Jewish communities, it was far more significantly influenced by changes happening in the Jewish communities of Prussia and Germany more broadly.

One indication of Malbim's self-conscious shift can be found in a letter he wrote to the Jewish community of Újhely (now Sátoraljaújhely)[170]. It seems from extant correspondence that Malbim was asked to assume the rabbinic position of the town, after the passing of Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum in 1841 and the ousting of his son a year later. A number of the lay members felt that Malbim projected a powerful blend of traditional scholarship and the capacity to fend off the threats of reform, and Malbim's written response—apparently declining the offer[171]—gives us an insight into his challenges in Kempen and his views on the cultural shifts of the age. He notes how his employ in Kempen offered him a comfortable standard of living, but that segments of the community lived with a spiritual and intellectual tension that troubled him—the young people didn't come to the study halls and exhibited far more curiosity about secular matters than Jewish ones. This cultural evolution presumably goaded Malbim to acknowledge the need for a reorientation of traditional Judaism to keep its appeal to the young, including the necessity of moving away from the production of halakhic literature. Malbim thus turned more attention to the study of Kantian philosophy and science, in order to best engage and assuage his congregants' curiosity, all the while lamenting the lack of yearning for in-depth Talmudic learning, no longer of interest to his audience.

It was three years after his arrival in Kempen, in 1844, when the first of the three reform conferences met in Brunswick, which, as noted earlier, spurred Malbim into action. He didn't respond with protests or political pronouncements, but with a weapon he could wield with ease:

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[170] For more on the fate of the Jewish community of the city see, Sas, Meir. *Vanished Communities in Hungary: The History and Tragic Fate of the Jews in Újhely and Zemplén County*. Willowdale, Ontario: Memorial Book Committee, 1986; Katz, Jacob. *A House Divided*, 56-57 and notes.

[171] See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 36-8.

exegesis. here began Malbim’s near comprehensive biblical work, first with the publication of his commentary on the book of Esther, in 1845, and then on Isaiah, in 1849. To have the time and mental clarity to craft works of such caliber, the community structures must have permitted Malbim plenty of free-reign to study, research, think and write beyond his rabbinic duties, which makes his decision to move on to Bucharest, as Chief Rabbi of Romania, all the more astonishing.

## Third Post

Malbim’s tenure as Chief Rabbi of Romania was to be his most exasperating and tense, with the largest consequences, ending six years after it began with an unceremonious and vicious expulsion from the country.

All of Malbim’s vocational experience thus far have been in Prussian Jewish communities, which, despite some slight border-alterations and the tremors of Germanization, maintained the cultural and economic status quo on the whole; rabbinic authority remained largely unchallenged and commitment to Jewish practice remained largely in force. Bucharest, however, by 1858, had undergone massive shifts, both writ-large and within the Jewish community.

Two years before Malbim’s arrival, the 1856 *Congress of Paris* settled the Crimean War between the Russian and Ottoman empires, leaving the city of Bucharest, and the larger areas of Moldavia and Wallachia (which would, in 1859, come to be known as the “United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia,” under the rule of the *Domnitor*, Alexandru Ioan Cuza), as vassal states under the jurisdiction of Turkey. Despite its European neighborhood the region was an enclave of Asian feudalism, ruled over by oppressive tyrants—and the constant vacillation between ruling empires meant that forging a stable national culture was fundamentally problematic.[172]

The political status of the Jewish community—double in number to the Jewish population of Kempen—remained uncertain. Despite promises during the "Spring of Nations", in 1848, that Jews would receive full civil rights, no such rights were granted. And Jews continued to be considered alien, as per the *Regulamentul Organic* adopted in the 1830s under Russian authorities. In general, major economic, political, social, and religious upheavals resulted in a worsening of conditions for minority Jewish communities. All this said, there was still a major influx of Jewish immigrants to Bucharest, and the broader Romanian territories, fleeing persecution and the Russian draft.[173]

The internal make-up of the Jewish community was also far more heterogenous than Malbim would have seen before; there were Turkish Jews, Greek Jews, and Eastern Jews; Prussian, Russian, Polish, and Romanian Jews—and the latter was divided into the more elite families under foreign protection, known as *Sudiți*, and those more common families under local control, known as Pământeni. There was no set system for the appointment of a single Chief Rabbi, and internal rifts in Jewish Bucharest were rife. Rabbi after Rabbi from the end of the 18th century left Bucharest due to intra-communal disagreements,[174] and under the *Hahambaşı* system of rabbinic jurisdiction in the Ottoman Empire, there were no clear rules for a rabbinic appointment in the Romanian lands. This web of complications meant that a tenure as Chief Rabbi in Bucharest would be fraught for any candidate, and Malbim wasn't any candidate. He later reflected in the autobiographical poem published under the title, *Shenat HaYovel*,[175] that he had been warned of the contentiousness of the Bucharestian community, but had felt that he might succeed where others had failed.[176] His notes describe three main groups: an insular and observant group of Sefardim (which, in this context, may refer to Hasidim[177]), a cultured group of Ashkenazim, and a large group of uneducated and unobservant masses. The latter group was incredibly resistant to rabbinic imposition and expressed deep antagonism toward any top-down religious authority.

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[172] For more details see, Hitchins, Keith. *The Romanians, 1774-1866*. Oxford: Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996; Georgescu, Vlad, and Matei Călinescu. *The Romanians: A History*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991. For more on the role of Domnitor Cuza, in particular, see Treptow, Kurt W. *A History of Romania*. Boulder, Colo.: Iași: New York: East European Monographs ; Center for Romanian Studies ; Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1996; and

[173] For more details on the status of Jews in Romania around this time see: Feldman, Eliyahu. "The Question of Jewish Emancipation in the Ottoman Empire and the Danubian Principalities after the Crimean War." *Jewish Social Studies* 41, no. 1 (1979): 41–74; Green, Abigail. *Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, 339-349; Voicu, George. "The Ideal of Emancipation of the Romanian Jews: From the Proclamation of Islaz to the 1866 Constitution." *Holocaust. Studii Şi Cercetări* VI, no. 07 (2014): 93–105. For details of conditions under Absolutist Russian rule see, Biale, D. *Power & Powerlessness in Jewish History*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010, 87-117.

[174] Geller, *ha-Malbim,* 38-49.

Malbim's initial impression of Bucharest, according to the reporting of a Jewish weekly[178], must have been overwhelmingly positive—being welcomed by a crowd of Jewish congregants, rabbinic functionaries, government officials, and military personnel all eager to see and dignify the new Chief Rabbi. Soon enough though, tension began to build—a tension that Malbim himself credited to his early reaction to laxity in Sabbath observance.

Without recourse to punitive authority, Malbim insisted that ritual-slaughterers took an oath to refuse to cater to those in breach of the Sabbath—something they were averse to doing, and something they resented being forced to do. Additionally, as the head authority on Kosher standards, Malbim decreed that ritual-slaughterers were to inspect each other's knives to ensure their acceptability—an order that also generated bitterness and suspicion between butchers, leading to a small-scale rebellion against the Chief Rabbi. Two of the butchers rejected Malbim's orders, throwing the community into chaos, which even left those who were committed and traditional stunned by Malbim's imprudent tactics. A coalition of disparate figures came together in common opposition to Malbim, and everything soon began to sour—on his first *Purim* in Bucharest, a day usually bristling with camaraderie and alimentary gifts, he was sent pig's meat as a gesture of utter derision and irreverence.[179]

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[175] See, Malbim, יחזקאל רוטנברג, אהרון סורסקי, and מוסס מיינדס. / *ספר המלבי״ם:: מאה שנה לפטירתו, ראש־השנה תר״מ־תש״מ*. נצח, 1979, 83-116.

[176] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 47.

[177] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 49.

[178] *HaMaggid*, Year 2, Volume 33, August 25th 1858; see Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 50-56. For more on HaMaggid see, Diament, Carol. "The First Hebrew Newspaper and its Significance." *Hebrew Studies* 25 (1984): 104–25.

A small but influential group of reformers, lead by Dr. Juliu Barasch,[180] began to advocate for changes in religious education and synagogal practice. Malbim underestimated the clout of the group and decided upon a path of direct confrontation—using his powers to cut off communal funding for schools adopting reformist ideas and for the construction of the Choral Synagogue, giving his full support to traditional institutions. In 1859 a publication against the new Chief Rabbi spread through the city, and Malbim's once more authoritarian response hardened his opposition.[181]

Where some of the other traditional rabbis facing reform uprisings at this time had a groundswell of support rooted in long-nurtured friendships, Malbim—a newcomer—had no base of loyal defenders and was too easily seen as interfering with local affairs that predated him and fascistically suppressing parts of the native culture. Around three years into his tenure, new elections were held to appoint lay leadership—each synagogue having a strict number of proportionate delegates—and reformers won a huge representation. A wave of communal protests broke out against the over representation of reformers, but the government favored their positions so refused to interfere.

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[179] Rosenbloom. *Ha-Malbim*, 51-55; Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 81-88.

[180] See L. Z. Herşcovici, "Yehudah ben Mordekhay (Julius) Barasch (1815–1863) as a philosopher of Judaism," in Stanciu, I., Institutul de Istorie "Nicolae Iorga", and Merkaz Goren-Goldshțain le-toldot ha-Yehudim be-Romanyah. *The Jews in the Romanian History: Papers from the International Symposium, Bucharest, September 30 - October 4, 1996*. Silex, 1996; Herşcovici, Lucian Zeev. "Judaism And Its Relationship To Other Religions According To Yehudah Ben Mordechay (Julius) Barasch." *Studia Hebraica*, no. 6 (2006): 149–61; Farcaş, Simona. "The Impact Of The Haskalah Movement On The Romanian Jewry During The 19th Century" *Studia Hebraica*, no. 2 (2002): 97–105. Also see Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 20-30.

[181] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 57.

It is worth noting that as all this was happening, Malbim was undergoing some intensely traumatic events in his personal life—in particular the loss of his teenage son, Aharon,[182] in 1862, and what appears to be the mental breakdown of his wife, who would run through the streets shrieking baseless accusations and make demands from Malbim for money he didn't have, after spending all that he did. So difficult did the situation get that Malbim's supporters sent a letter to his father-in-law begging for assistance before the procedure for a court annulment was put in motion.[183]

The most fraught issue that arose from these elections was a deal agreed to between the head-delegate and government authorities, that foreign-born Jews would be evicted to relieve the strain on communal resources, though an exemption for those able to pay a hefty fine was instituted. Malbim describes the panic among the common people as foreign-born Jews brought money to the authorities and the poor were expelled. He notes how one Sabbath an 80-year-old and a band of disabled Jews were threatened with expulsion to extort more money from the community, and how he cried in the streets to affect a stay of the edict. He blamed the delegates for this turn of events, which led them to seek to further silence him, to forestall an uprising against them from within the community. By 1862, Malbim's opponents convinced governmental authorities to suspend him from his post and prohibit him from delivering sermons.

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[182] It is very unclear from the records how many children Malbim fathered during his second marriage. Some genealogical documents appear to indicate that he had up to five children, all of whom but one passed away in childhood. Some scholars indicate that Aharon was his only son from this marriage, but various publishers of post-humous works claim to have bought the manuscripts from Malbim's surviving son, and the obituary in *HaLevanon*, asks communities to send funds to support Malbim's widow and son. More research on this front is required.

[183] This is all recorded in letters and documents assembled by Geller in Geller, ha-Malbim, 129-133; Geller, Jacob, "New Documents on the Malbim Affair and His Struggle with the Maskilim," (Murciao, Y. trans.) in Vago, R., P. Cernovodeanu, J. Krausz, L. Rotman, C. Iancu, and H. Watzman. *The History of the Jews in Romania: The Nineteenth Century*. Pirsume Ha-Makhon Le-Ḥeḳer Ha-Tefutsot. Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University, 2005, 231-258. See 255-258 specifically regarding Malbim's marital difficulties.

On the 24th of January 1862, Malbim was due to address the congregation on a major national occasion, celebrating the formal unification of Moldavia and Wallachia into the Romanian United Principalities, with Bucharest as its capital—but his suspension meant that he could not. By May 12th of that year, Malbim's supporters succeeded in getting his suspension withdrawn, and he presented the speech he was supposed to give in January—with Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the *Domnitor*, in the audience. In the midst of his presentation he veered off script, airing complaints and demanding apologies, and then concluded with a patriotic prayer for the life of the *Domnitor* and the peace of the realm.[184]

His opponents did not apologize, nor did Malbim's speech inaugurate the peace he claims to have sought. While, in the months prior to his expulsions, Malbim turned his attention to founding a traditional study hall within his synagogue's walls[185]—he was pained, he claims, by the lack of Jewish learning—his opponents set about finding new ways to unseat him. The rift between Malbim and his opponents eventually became unbridgeable, with the crisis coming to a head early on the morning of Friday 18th March 1864—a weekend coinciding with *Shabbat Zakhor*, a sabbath traditionally designated to recall the brutal and archetypally anti-Jewish assaults on Israel by Amalekite thugs in the Sinai desert.[186]

The exact details that led to Malbim's arrest and incarceration are unknown, though it is suspected by Malbim and others[187], that his Jewish opponents reported him to the Prime Minister,

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[184] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 61-63; the prayers are printed in Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 106-110.
[185] Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 101-105.
[186] See Deuteronomy 25:17-19.
[187] See Geller, Jacob, "New Documents," 250-251; Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 64.

Mihail Kogălniceanu, a known anti-Semite[188] who was more than happy to orchestrate the arrest of a prominent Jew. Despite protestations to the Prime Minister upon rumors of Malbim's prosecution, the authorities moved against him. Malbim depicts the masses on his side, as his house was surrounded by police, all the while presuming that he would be executed. He was taken forcibly from his home, early that Friday morning and sat in a carriage with armed soldiers around him. Startled supporters were slashed with swords, crying in the streets, and Malbim was sent first to Giurgiu, on the southern Romanian border, and then shuttled by boat, to Rusçuk (Ruse) in Ottoman Bulgaria.[189] Fortunately for Malbim, though deposed from his post, separated from his family, and in possession of only two bags, he was greeted in Rusçuk by Abraham ben Israel Rosanes (known by the acronym *Abi"r*[190]), an affluent traditional Jew, who gave Malbim a room of his own, access to a large library, and two servants.

Of the more remarkable elements of this episode that culminated in Malbim's expulsion—Rosenbloom observes—is that Malbim managed to publish anything at all, never mind comprehensive biblical commentaries along with a rigorous set of six hundred and thirteen hermeneutic principles. If anything this productivity clues us in to the power of Malbim's focus and will, and the extent of his devotion to the project.

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[188] See "The Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania | Www.Yadvashem.Org." Accessed August 15, 2018. international-commission-on-romania-holocaust.html; Ciachir, Nicolae, and Constantin Bușe. *Mihail Kogălniceanu*. Bucharest: Meridiane Pub. House, 1967.

[189] See Geller, Jacob, "New Documents," 250-253.

[190] Father of historian, Solomon Rosanes, and brother of Mordecai, who financed paving of the western wall area in 1874. For more on the larger family see, *Encyclopaedia Judaica.* Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 17. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. p421-422.

## Exile

Though a number of petitions were launched by those sympathetic to Malbim's predicament—including the Jewish communities of Vilna and Kempen[191]—his fate was sealed. Malbim and his defenders in Bucharest and around Europe enlisted the aid of the Alliance Israélite Universelle,[192] in Paris, Sir Moses Montefiore in Britain,[193] and the Prussian authorities, but their protests were also to no avail. Rabbi Eliyahu Gutmacher of Grätz[194] (now, Grodzisk Wielkopolski) solicited the signatures of Rabbis Zvi Hirsch Kalischer,[195] Yaakov Tzvi Meklenburg,[196] Esriel Hildesheimer,[197] and Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer,[198] but their letter also failed to generate a reversal of the Romanian position. Malbim's circumstances wove their way into the Jewish Press, but, again, without much redemptive impact.

Eventually Malbim departed Rusçuk for Constantinople (now Istanbul), to lobby the Ottoman authorities, which still officially had dominion over Romania. Six months later—on September 3rd 1864—having had no success, Malbim arrived in Paris penniless, seeking assistance from the Alliance Israélite Universelle in person toward his reinstatement. He sent more letters of support from the Parisian community directly to Domnitor Cuza, but was ignored for reasons unknown. While there, Malbim befriended Yehiel Brill, the editor of the above mentioned *HaLevanon* newspaper, who went on to publish Malbim's autobiographical account of the events of his expulsion from Bucharest (*Shenat HaYovel*) and more.

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[191] See Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 141-142.; Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 68.

[192] For more on the Alliance see, Leff, Lisa Moses. *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-century France*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006, especially pages 157-199.

[193] There is a widely held legend that Montefiore intervened somehow which saved Malbim's life, however, there is no evidence of him intervening in the case at all (Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 147 n.30).

[194] Geller, *ha-Malbim*, 164-165.

[195] For more on him, see Myers, Jody Elizabeth. *Seeking Zion: Modernity and Messianic Activism in the Writings of Tsevi Hirsch Kalischer*. Oxford, UK; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003.

[196] Noted above.

[197] For more on him, see Ellenson, David. "A Response by Modern Orthodoxy to Jewish Religious Pluralism: The Case of Esriel Hildesheimer." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 17, no. 4 (1979): 74–89; Ellenson, David. "Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Quest for Religious Authority: The Earliest Years." *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 3 (1981): 279–97; Ellenson, David Harry. *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990; Sinason, Jacob H. *The Rebbe: The Story of Rabbi Esriel Glei-Hildesheimer*. Jerusalem; New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1996.

[198] See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 18. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, 741; Ferziger, Adam S. 2010. Sofer, Avraham Shemu'el Binyamin. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sofer_Avraham_Shemuel_Binyamin (accessed August 15, 2018).

In Paris, Malbim developed a large following of devotees, who would stream to hear his lectures, including the prominent scholar Senior Sachs,[199] who, upon Malbim's departure—on 7th March 1865—wrote admiringly of Malbim's philosophical, poetic, and scholarly gifts and talents, also scolding the Bucharestian community for evicting him.[200] Though Malbim claims he was offered more money to stay in Paris than he had ever been paid in Bucharest, he left for his wife's home-town—Luntschitz (Łęczyca)[201]—where, we presume, she had been living since his expulsion.

## Brief Peace and Four more Posts

Malbim arrived in Luntschitz in 1865, following the passing of his father-in-law, where the bequest inherited by him and his wife offered him freedom from rabbinic employment; so, for the first time in decades, he turned his full attention to exegesis. The Jewish community of Luntschitz welcomed him with open arms, and over a calm four-year period Malbim published commentaries to the entirety of the early prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Psalms, Daniel, and more. During this interval Malbim's wife supervised their funds, only to be deceived by a business partner who stole everything. In the days that followed Malbim interrupted Sabbath services, as

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[199] For more on him and his writings see, Nir, Aaron. *Shne'ur Zaḳs*. Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at "ketuvim", 1928.

[200] He is the above noted source for Malbim's familiarity with Kant and German poetry.

[201] Luntschitz was one of the oldest Jewish communities in the Łódź Province, and by the 19th century Jews made up about half its population and worked across a variety of professions. Luntschitz had a storied rabbinic past—with figures such as Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (often referred to by the title of his biblical commentary, *Kli Yakar*) born there and various members of the Auerbach family serving as religious leaders until 1846. See Cygielman, Arthur, and Danuta Dombrowska. "Leczyca." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 12, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, 594-595.

Jewish law permits,[202] to curse the man and publicize his betrayal. In the wake of their bankruptcy, Malbim was forced to return to work in 1869, and the Jewish community of Kherson, in addition to that of Luntschitz, invited him to serve as their rabbi.

As Malbim weighed his options, a major factor was an episode he was party to while a private citizen in Luntschitz. Due to his expertise, and disinterested position, he was asked to sit on a rabbinic tribunal resolving a dispute involving the city's rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Leib Morgenstern (known to his congregants as "the Blind Rabbi"). The verdict of the tribunal was that Rabbi Morgenstern should leave the city and receive severance pay, a number of his supporters seeing this as a major miscarriage of justice. As a result of the tension, Malbim decided that he would take the position at Kherson, and then, only after a year, return to serve as rabbi of Luntschitz.

Malbim arrived in Kherson via Odessa, once more greeted with a festivities and fanfare, this time, as in Paris, developing a large group of followers. Unfortunately for Malbim, in this instance, the Russian authorities saw the popularity of any traditional Jewish leader as a threat to assimilation efforts, so Malbim came to their attention. A local rabbinic figure by the name of Shraga Feivush Blumenfled occupied the post of religious administrator, employed by the government (using taxes collected from the Jewish community)—and he viewed Malbim's appointment as an affront to his standing; in fact, it was widely suspected that a highly negative assessment of Malbim, appearing in an Odessa magazine under a Christian name, was penned by Blumenfeld to bring Malbim down.

In Kherson, the failure of Jewish lay leaders to seek legal status for Malbim in Russia, was a massive disservice, and that with the combination of his lack of linguistic fluency and his

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[202] Geller, *ha-Malbim,* 133.

Prussian citizenship meant that the government sided with Blumenfeld, eventually suspending Malbim from his post and prohibiting him from delivering sermons. After a back-and-forth Malbim was reinstated, but with the lesser title of "Assistant Rabbi." Having lost the will to fight for his rights, Malbim returned to Luntschitz to serve as the Chief Judge in the winter of 1869, before the year was up.

Upon his return to Luntschitz, he was greeted again with fanfare, celebration, and a governmental delegation. However, for a number of Rabbi Morgenstern's devotees, the passage of time had not healed their wounds and they remained indignant at his expulsion, still harboring ill will toward Malbim. Almost at once Malbim was attacked as a clandestine member of the *Haskalah*, and a bitter feud erupted—so intense did it become that open opponents of Malbim were buried in a separate section of the cemetery.[203] Disinclined to participate in one more episode of communal acrimony, Malbim sought employment elsewhere and left soon after, bound for the town of Mogilev.

Sitting on the eastern edge of Belarus, Mogilev had a large Jewish presence of around 20,000, making up around fifty percent of the entire town's population. Communal unity was, as yet, unshaken by the winds of change blowing in from the west, and for forty years Rabbi Meir Berlin[204] served as the community's religious leader, bequeathing the post to his son, Chaim. Following the decades of steady rabbinic leadership, feuding communal factions emerged each seeking their own preferred candidate, until eventually Malbim was selected as a compromise. In 1870 Malbim took the position and immediately—beyond some popular reservations about the height of salary, relative to the previous rabbis—he ruffled feathers.

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[203] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 80.

[204] He was uncle to the famed Netziv, about whom see, Perl, Gil S. *The Pillar of Volozhin: Rabbi Naftali Ẓvi Yehuda Berlin and the World of Nineteenth-century Lithuanian Torah Scholarship*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012.

During his first sermon in the city, Malbim caricatured two important groups—scholars and the wealthy. He appeared to have blamed the affluent for both provoking Christian jealousies and abandoning the needy, and then went on to accuse the academically inclined of misleading the masses with philosophical abstractions and dialectics. Those in the ritual profession—slaughterers, halakhic judges, and teachers—also felt unsettled by Malbim's appointment, due to his dictatorial and uncompromising reputation. And beyond the pulpit, Malbim wrangled with a local halakhic judge—with a number of family connections throughout the town—concerning a case of Jewish matrimonial law, and animosity started to fester. Some of the more traditional Hasidic figures in Mogilev—who had initially opposed him as too radical—now offered Malbim their support; but all that meant was that officials who were wary of the Hasidic hindrance to assimilation now sought Malbim's ouster too. In 1871, Malbim was expelled from Mogilev by the city's governor as a political criminal,[205] and was left once more to wander.

Leaving Mogilev with no place to go, Malbim lodged with his daughter from his first marriage, Freida,[206] in Smolensk. Shortly thereafter, Malbim agreed to serve as the rabbi of a small community of Russian and Polish immigrants in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad)—which had the advantage of being in Prussia, and thus offering him some sense of familiarity. Here Malbim stayed out of public communal disputes, likely seeing the post as temporary until larger positions opened up, which they did. In 1879, Malbim was offered posts as Chief Rabbi of New York (including some 24 congregations of Russian and Polish immigrants; with a further 25 ready to join) and as Chief Judge of Kremenchuk, electing to take up the latter.[207] On his way to Kremenchug, Malbim traveled via Brisk (Brest, Belarus)—where he was greeted by the sage Rabbi Yosef Dov

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[205] See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 81-85.

[206] Freida had been married to Rabbi Elijah Halperin of Vilna until his passing in 1868, at this stage being married to Rabbi Yehoshua Zelikin.

[207] Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 85-86.

Soloveitchik[208] and his entourage—and on to Kobryn, where he became deeply ill. He journeyed on toward Kremenchuk stopping in Kiev, where, at eight o'clock on the 18th of September—also the first day of Rosh Hashana—Malbim passed away.

## Overview

What emerges from this biographic sketch—and what makes it so important for our purposes—is a man whose life was marked by tragedy, controversy, and acrimony, while punctuated by brief flashes of respite. He had two marriages, both with their challenges, child(ren) lost in their youth, seven rabbinic posts, and moved across Europe with itinerancy as routine. He travelled far and wide, from Prussia to Paris to Kempen and Constantinople, and knew of the Enlightenment and the romantic reaction. And despite Segal's characterization of Malbim as emotionally stunted, his life and writings bespeak a figure familiar with the depths of feeling.

In his written work, Malbim uniquely weaves his exegesis to rebuff both hermeneutic and cultural crises—pushing back against the will to dilute Scripture's sanctity and semantic generativity, while also paving an interpretive path that critiques romanticism from within. He confronts those who would turn the Hebrew Bible into an artefact, and those who would replace the soul with the heart; Malbim is thus not merely in the business of saving the text, but also a pedagogue striving to save the soul. We have conclusively escorted Malbim from the age of the ghetto to *Goethezeit*, our challenge shall now be to prove it.

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[208] Inaugural rabbinic figure in the so-called 'Brikser' dynasty. Some have claimed that Malbim travelled through Vilna on the way to Kremenchuk, so that he could attend his grandson's (Michael, Freida's son) wedding, but he never made it. While at Vilna, he was told—according to Moritz Steinschneider—they would have hired him, but the local authorities prohibited it due to his status as a political criminal in Russia (from his time in Mogilev). See Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, 87 n.10.

In the coming chapters we will examine Malbim's Scriptural hermeneutic and his exegetical pedagogy, respectively detailing the mechanics of his ambitions. First, we'll analyze his idea of *Peshat*, and how it diverges from those both before and around him. Then we'll track his spiritual vision, as evident from his early published sermons, culminating with a survey of how this vision serves as the dark matter behind his exegesis.

There is a legend told by traditional Jews, defending Malbim's preoccupation with Scripture—a preoccupation seen by some, even to this day, as suspect, and certainly subsidiary to Talmudic study. The legend speaks of Malbim accidently sitting in the seat of Rabbi Moses Sofer, his elder and senior, drawing the surprise and ire of onlookers—Rabbi Sofer supposedly responds, "Let him stay where he is," which was taken both as amnesty and a subtle curse that Malbim's thus far untapped potential remain forever repressed.[209] Hence, it is said, Malbim dealt with Scripture and was never able to generate the mental power or devotion to provide Talmudic analysis or commentary.

The truth, however, is that Malbim exhibits a deep fluency with the Talmud but saw Scriptural study as not only redemptive but necessary. Perhaps Malbim would have (quite ironically) seconded the words of a liberal rabbi and professor, Ludwig A. Rosenthal, when he said:

> We, the warriors on the battlefront of the Bible, in the name of the spirit of the Bible and the divine demands made upon the people of Israel and humankind, must not permit the Book of Books to fall from *our* hands. We must not allow its value to be denied, thereby diminishing *our* value; it is *our* duty to restore the holy words to their rightful status and to cry out the magic, healing watchword: *Back to the Bible*!"[210]

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[209] Cited by Mordechai E. Feuerstein, *Mentor of Generations: Reflections on Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Zev Eleff, ed.), 262-263, and elsewhere.

[210] Eran and Shavit, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 81, citing L.A. Rosenthal, *Zurück zur Bibel!*, Berlin, 1903, 9. See Eran and Shavit, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 538 for more on his biography.

# Chapter Two: Saving the Text—Malbim's Plain Sense

## Introduction

Over the course of the previous chapter, beyond Malbim's biography, the history of scholarship around his life and work, and the social crises that faced the Jews of Europe in the wake of their emancipation, we catalogued three distinct threats against the biblical text, as it had been read for centuries by traditional Jews—the threat against the integrity of text itself, the threat against the rabbinic exegetical tradition, and the threat of the romantic appropriation of Scripture.

The first of the three threats went largely ignored by the traditional rabbinic intellectual leadership for a whole range of reasons. One reason was the deep belief in the profound inviolability of the text—deemed to have been dictated to Moses by God—making even an acknowledgement of the threat a doctrinal menace and its very mention feel like a heresy. Additionally, it was felt—by Mendelssohn, among others—that critical scholarship suggesting either faulty transmission on the part of scribes or the depiction of Scripture as a patch-work project of various redactors, was speculative and lacked any evidence beyond critical instinct. Mendelssohn went as far as to suggest it was a passing phase, better to be waited out than engaged.

The second threat, though targeting a less sacrosanct oeuvre—the work of the rabbinic sages—was far more potentially persuasive and pernicious, culturally speaking. It was more persuasive for it produced evidence for its case—asking rational readers to believe their own eyes and minds over the claims of the sages, which, at times, can seem rather far-fetched. And it was more pernicious for rabbinic tradition was the backbone of Jewish life in practice—the laws pertaining to food, sabbath observance, synagogue ritual, family purity, and beyond, all hang on a body of legal readings of Scripture transmitted by the rabbinic sages. If these exegetical convictions were undone, traditional Jewish life would cease to be. That is why the focus of many of the rabbinic leaders of modern Europe turned their attention to defending the sages—and that is why this chapter will begin with an analysis of their claims. As we shall see, however, Malbim seems far less animated by this second threat than the third—with the major exception of one particular context—and appears to allow for a confessed gap between rabbinic exegesis and the plain-sense of Scripture for, what will become clear, is the higher purpose of insulating the text from the threat of romantic appropriation.

## The New *Peshat* of the Nineteenth Century Mendelssohn, Wessely, Meklenburg, Hirsch

As part of our exploration of the modern rabbinic reaction to the second threat against Scripture, two key terms are '*peshat*' and '*derash*'—often translated as the 'plain-sense' and the 'rabbinic interpretation,' respectively. First appearing in a hermeneutic context in rabbinic literature, the terms have evolved over time—and there are distinct and traceable shifts in the usage of the term '*peshat*' in particular, that can be mapped in clear chronological terms.[1]

In the pages of the Talmud and midrash, its meaning differs radically from the colloquial usage of today, a transformation that began in roughly the tenth century in the work of Saadia Gaon. By the nineteenth century, '*peshat*' had come to take 'the simple meaning' or 'the surface meaning' as its universal definition, standing in stark contrast to the rabbinic readings of Scripture, '*derash*'—the latter being depicted as fantastical or ludicrous manipulations of the text's evident semantics, as noted in the previous chapter. Thus, the modern war between *peshat* and *derash* was set in motion.

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[1] For more detailed descriptions of this conceptual and linguistic evolution see: Halivni, Daṿid. *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 52-88; Faur, José. "Basic Concepts in Rabbinic Hermeneutics." *Shofar* 16, no. 1 (1997): 1-12; and Cohen, Mordechai Z.. *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu*. Brill, 2011, 31-86. Also see Fishbane, Michael. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*. United Kingdom: OUP Oxford, 2002.

And in an age of reason, when *derash* was being cast into the ashes, this war threatened to upend Jewish life. While for centuries it had served Jews of all stripes as an indispensable key to Scripture's often cryptic semantic, in the modern age it came under assault. Rabbinic thinkers and leaders stepped into the breach to defend *derash* by bridging the biblical text and its traditional cipher, fending off varied accusations of the sages' philological ignorance, historical naïveté, hermeneutic sophistry, and base illiteracy: this cadre of commentators—labeled an 'apologist school' by Halvini[2]—offered different defenses of *derash*, each with their own emphases and assumptions. In the coming pages we shall survey some of the key defenses offered by a small group of traditional scholars who refused to concede to the premises of the new biblical critical scholarship—Moses Mendelssohn, Naphtali Wessely, Yaakov Meklenburg, and Samson Raphael Hirsch.[3]

## Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786)

Moses Mendelssohn, despite his controversial standing among the most conservative Jewish rabbis of the time,[4] strikes a deeply traditional balance between *peshat* and *derash*. The two places where he deals most explicitly, and in most detail, with this tension is in his introductions to *Megillat Qohelet* (1770)[5] and the Pentateuch (1783)[6]. In the former he lays out his hermeneutic theory, and in the latter, he explains his choices as a translator.

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[2] *Peshat and Derash,* 31-32.

[3] There are, of course, many more Jewish thinkers who reacted to these hermeneutical threats to Scripture, and sought to refute the critical evaluation of the sages—our survey is a sampling of some of the more pertinent defenses to provide context and contrast with Malbim. A major figure who also engaged these issues is Nachman Krochmal, offering his own creative defenses of the sages, suggesting that there shared many of the assumptions of critical scholarship. For more on Krochmal see Harris, Jay Michael. *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age*. New York: New York University Press, 1991 (especially chapter 4).

[4] See, for example: Hildesheimer, Meir. "Moses Mendelssohn in Nineteenth-Century Rabbinical Literature." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 55 (1988): 79-133; Hildesheimer, Meir. "The Attitude of the Ḥatam Sofer toward Moses Mendelssohn." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 60 (1994): 141-87. While a number of treatments of Mendelssohn's life and work have appeared over the last decades, the major source remains, Altmann, Alexander. *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973.

For Mendelssohn, *peshat* and *derash* both derive naturally from the text—neither being "contrary to the ways of reason and logical thinking, nor strange and astonishing to the human intellect"[7]—but operate on different semantic planes. *Peshat* relays the paraphrastic sense and *derash* attends to specific verbal implicature; the former he calls the "primary meaning," *Kavanah Rishona*, and the latter he calls the "secondary meaning," *Kavanah Sheniyah*. In oral communication, Mendelssohn claims, one often attends to the calls of rhetorical convenience and poetic elegance at the expense of semantic particularity—where the general intended sense of the message is clear without the need for, or want of, a deliberate analysis. However, he argues, a skilled orator may—within the bounds of rhetorical elegance—select a particular expression to communicate a more specific message to an attentive listener. His defense of tradition thus amounts to a claim that the sages were acutely sensitive to linguistic subtlety—a subtlety that, crucially, resides not only in biblical diction but in every use of natural language. In his words, "there is no difference between the veracity of *peshat* and the veracity of *derush*"—the text generates both semantics, one simple being more veiled than the other.

The challenge that Mendelssohn faces in maintaining his theory is its implementation in the mechanics of translation. He deals with this, as noted in our first chapter, in his introduction to the *Be'ur* (the colloquial name for his biblical translation and commentary)—where he valorizes tradition as not only more subtle than *peshat*, but, when at odds, ultimately triumphant. In his first section, Mendelssohn addresses the challenge inherent in the Bible's unpunctuated and non-vowelized Hebrew text—at least as it appears in Torah scrolls, the seat of Jewish scriptural authority. And in resolving this tension, Mendelssohn claims that Moses—despite having been given precise guidance on the matter, and his choice leaving the potential for semantic uncertainty—left the text bare of enunciative and syntactic markings to bequeath oral tradition the status of a deep necessity. Already, Mendelssohn indicates a locus of authority beyond the text of Scripture—to the point that, for him, the Mosaic script itself embraces an intentional opaqueness that directs attention toward an external key.

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[5] Edward Breuer, and David Sorkin. *Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2018, 123-141.
[6] Breuer, *Hebrew Writings*, 241-270.
[7] *Ibid.*, 111.

Then, in his second section, Mendelssohn confronts how his theory of dual intentions leads, by definition, to a translator's dilemma. The primary and secondary intentions—while "both are equally correct"[8]—are, necessarily, different; it follows then, apart from cases in which the destination language is capable of concealing "the second meaning in the shadow of the primary one as it appears in the language before us,"[9] that the translator is forced to choose a semantic plane to favor. And here Mendelssohn tips his traditional hand, as he divides between two orders of difference: 'divergence' and 'contradiction.' In cases of *peshat-derash* 'divergence,' he, as translator, elects to follow the *peshat*—the primary intention—reserving the subtlety for the reader capable of deciphering the original Hebrew. In these instances, there is a loss when reading in translation, but not a misapprehension. However, on occasions of *peshat-derash* 'contradiction'—the very existence of which, it seems to me, threatens his theory—Mendelssohn suggests that he has no choice but to privilege the tradition, for "we rely only on the received tradition of our Sages, and 'in their light we behold light' (Psalms 36:10)."[10]

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[8] *Ibid.*, 291.
[9] *Ibid.*, 293.
[10] *Ibid.*, 294.

On reflection, what Mendelssohn achieves in his defense of a rational tradition is only partial—seeing in the sages' interpretive activities an expert linguistic sensitivity, but only in cases where their readings do not fly in the face of the more straightforward reading. Mendelssohn has narrowed the critique quantitatively, but has left the critics' accusations undisputed in cases where he depends solely on *derash*, showing that despite an attachment to rational linguistics, his ultimate commitment is to rabbinic tradition.

## Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725-1805)

As with the commentary sections on portions of Genesis and the entirety of Numbers and Deuteronomy, the commentary accompanying the Leviticus volume of Mendelssohn's biblical translation was provided by someone other than Mendelssohn—in this instance, by Naftali Herz Wessely. And it is in Wessely's introduction (1782), drawing on an approbational ode that he penned in advance of the entire publication[11], that new hermeneutical ground is broken.[12] He argues that:

> If the way to effect a bridge between the *peshat* and the *midrash*—which appear to be far from one another—is narrow, I said there is hope only if God favors me to understand clearly the meaning of the grammatical roots; if we reflect upon them, it will become clear that the words of the *midrash* are nothing but the depths of the *peshat*, and matters far apart will be made close.[13]

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[11] The poem was titled, 'Mehalel Re'a' [In Praise of a Friend], and can be found in, Mendelssohn, Moses, Fritz Bamberger, and Alexander Altmann. *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe in Gemeinschaft Mit F. Bamberger [et Al.]*. [Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt]: F. Frommann, 1971, xv(i), 8-14. Cited below as *GSJ*.

[12] See Harris, Jay Michael. *How Do We Know This?: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 142-145.

[13] The original Hebrew is found in *GSJ*, xvii, 4; the translation can be found in Breuer, Edward, "Naphtali Herz Wessely and the cultural dislocations of an eighteenth-century Maskil," in Feiner, Shmuel, and David Sorkin, eds. *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*. Liverpool University Press, 2004, 33-4.

Acknowledging the present tension between rabbinic tradition and the surface semantics of Scripture, Wessely makes a radical identification between them by redefining *peshat*. He inaugurates the notion that has since been referred to, variously, as 'profound *peshat'* or '*peshat*-in-depth.'[14] For Wessely, unlike Mendelssohn, *peshat* and *derash* at no point differ—they do not contradict or even diverge, they are in every sense indistinguishable. *Peshat* does not mean 'surface' or 'simple' reading in a superficial way, but—however unintuitive or convoluted—the intended meaning of the biblical text. When modern scholars see a gap between rabbinic tradition and Scripture, their ridicule is misplaced, as the gap is of their own making, a result of *their* linguistic incompetence; the *derash* is the *peshat*. Where Mendelssohn merely narrowed the target of rational criticism, Wessely's defense dismantles the premise of the rational assault on traditional hermeneutics—endowing the rabbinic sages with a uniquely heightened linguistic sensitivity and accusing modern scholars of a fundamental biblical illiteracy.

### Yaakov Zvi Meklenburg (1785-1865)

In the years following the publication of Mendelssohn's *Be'ur,* numerous editions were republished with new introductions and super-commentaries—and one such edition, under the name *Mekor Hayim*[15], bore the endorsement of Rabbi Yaakov Zvi Meklenburg. While many of the followers of Mendelssohn and Wessely grew far less traditional over time, a number of scholars maintained their conservative hermeneutics—transitioning from what Jay Harris calls an "unreflective traditionalism" to a "self-conscious orthodoxy"[16] that stood in opposition to their more reform minded co-religionists. Meklenburg was perhaps the first of these so-called orthodox commentators—and his anxieties over the loss of tradition lie at the core of his endorsement.

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[14] See Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 32,48; Harris, *How Do We Know This?*, 142. See also William Braude's essay, "Midrash as Deep Peshat," in Brunswick, Sheldon R., and Leon Nemoy. *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica, and Islamica*. Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1982, 31-38. Braude's notion however, is distinct in a very particular way from the position of Wessely and, later, Malbim—for the former the text retains in polysemy, capable of producing multiple plain-sense readings, all developed through midrashic methods; for the latter two, in most cases, there is a single plain-sense reading of the text, which the sages of the midrash do reach for, but are not in every case successful (in many cases, for example, Malbim will side with one view in the midrash over the others in his commentary; in some other cases, Malbim will find ways to depict midrashic debates as complementary and in concert. For an example of the latter, see his footnotes to his comments on Genesis 6:9).

[15] Heinemann, Jeremiah, and Moses Mendelssohn. 1831. *Ḥumash meḳor ḥayim: 'im Targum Onḳelos, perush Rashi, targum Ashkenazi u-ve'ur Rambaman ṿe-ḳitsur Tiḳun sofrim la-Rashad ... ṿe-'im be'ur ḥadash ... be-shem Be'ur la-talmid ... ṿe-nilṿu elaṿ ha-hafṭarot ṿeha-megilot be-ve'ur ṿe-targum ḥadash*. Berlin: [publisher not identified].

> It is to the young of this age that I open my lips—those who embrace foreign tongues but cast our sacred texts to the floor. And those who do look to them, seek only to discern the verbal surface in accord with the *peshat* of Scripture's narrative…not one of them seeks to shoulder our *Torah*, or give glory or grandeur to the commandments, statutes, and laws—by explaining them when they see them, and arranging the laws of our holy Torah in line with their roots, founded upon sockets of truth as we have inherited them…[17]

Meklenburg's explicit apprehension, in this approbation, is the disinterest of the youth of his day in traditional Jewish law—seeing them as ignoring all of Scripture but the stories, and attending only to the surface of those tales. However, in his own biblical commentary—in a series of three introductory passages—Meklenburg goes beyond his concerns and outlines his full hermeneutic theory. Even the title of Meklenburg's work does more than insinuate his position: *HaKetav VeHaKabbalah*, which translates as 'The Text and The Tradition.' Of the three introductory passages, the first two were published together—one a poem and the other prose, and the third was a prose introduction to his later-published second edition.

His introductory poem is written as if by the hand of Scripture itself, offering a defense of its own verbal terseness—and the consequent necessity for an accompanying oral tradition—

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[16] Harris, *How Do We Know This?*, 211.
[17] Toward the end of the approbation [unpaginated in the text].

Scripture, in the poem, offers two separate arguments.[18] First, it adopts the Mendelssohnian view that just as pithiness and concision are respected on Earth—with orators, poets, and rhetoricians prizing brevity—it is in heaven as well. Scripture thus defends its semantic compactness—and its relative opacity—on the basis of a professed rhetorical aesthetic. However, Meklenburg's ventriloquized Scripture then speaks to the benefits of an accompanying oral tradition by noting the boon of orality; the spoken word, channeled through a human speaker, has a broader semantics than any 'cadaveric' script—gesture, tone, tenor, and inflection all signal a message's true intention. The biblical text's density, in this view, is a self-veiling maneuver designed to shield its fullest meaning in the far more efficient medium of oral transmission. Where Mendelssohn saw Moses' choice to opt for Scriptural ambiguity as a way to secure tradition's necessity, Meklenburg offers a functional motive for the move—communicative efficiency.

In the first of his prose introductions,[19] Meklenburg is more candid about the challenges of rational modernity. He notes how Scripture is comprised of two primary genres—narrative and law—and, despite the valiant efforts of medieval grammarians, much of the material making up the former remains ethically and theologically problematic for the common, modern, *peshat* oriented reader. Thus he claims:

> …There lies a duty on every Israelite, who wholly loves the truth, to lend his knowledge and his heart to expound and explore lest he find a smooth path to understand, in the mode of *peshat* and in accord with the rules of grammar, in a way that will not disaffect the common reader.[20]

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[18] Meklenburg, Jacob Ẓevi, and Mosheh Tsuri'el. 2015. *ha-Ketav veha-ḳabalah: be'ur 'al Ḥamishah ḥumshe Torah*, 37-54.
[19] *Ibid.*, 27-32.
[20] *Ibid.*, 28.

Meklenburg then notes, concerning Scripture's legal sections, the prevalence of apparent discrepancies between the biblical text and rabbinic tradition—at times seeming as though tradition expands on what is explicit in Scripture, and at times curtails it. There has, in the history of Jewish biblical exegesis, Meklenburg declares, been only a single commentator whose interpretive stance alleviates this tension—Naftali Herz Wessely: "In his commentary, he explains to us the alignment and unity of the *peshat* of these sections of Scripture with the views of our rabbis."[21]

Every intelligent person, Meklenburg goes on to say, sees the threats that emerge from the dearth of this sort of integrative exegesis—with the center of his concern focused, once more, on "our children today."[22] In the light of rabbinic tradition, the *peshat* of Scripture glistens with dissonance—alienating the young, estranging them from the treasured legacy of our sages: "They are all drawn after nothing but the *peshat* of Scripture, and they discard the golden jewelry handed to us by our rabbis..."[23]. It is Meklenburg's stated aim to join in Wessely's fight and mitigate, to the extent that he can, this dissonance between text and tradition—explaining these passages as close to their plain-sense, or *peshat*, as possible.

Meklenburg acknowledges the colloquial definition of *peshat* as the 'surface' or 'simple' reading, and endeavors to bridge the gap between the text's rational cipher and the meaning gleaned by tradition—motivated, at root, by the youths' casting off of observance.

In his second edition, in notes that he provided to his original poetic introduction,[24] Meklenburg hones his defenses of the traditional hermeneutic and implicitly concedes that his earlier arguments were less than compelling. His suggestions of aesthetic preference or communicative efficiency do not answer why a Divine author would leave a text riddled with such ambiguity, so highly dependent on a nonintuitive interpretive tradition—why not simply abandon the aesthetic and elongate Scripture in a bid to keep its meaning in a manifest, rationally demonstrable, textually accessible form? What is the virtue of communicative efficiency if it comes at the cost of textual clarity? To this end, Meklenburg offers two suggestions, the first being ontological and the other theodical.

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[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Ibid., 33-36.

It is the nature of all created matter, Meklenburg claims, to have a corporal and spiritual dimension—the equivalent of a body and soul—the latter being, despite its imperceptibility, the true essence of the thing. Through this lens, the oral tradition is the text's spiritual dimension—its fundamental essence; and just as a keen and astute observer can detect the essence of people's souls from their material nature, a perceptive reader—employing the thirteen hermeneutic rules of tradition—can see the essential meaning buried beneath the letters of the biblical text. There is an intentional subtlety, an ontological obscurity, that resides at the core of every created thing—an essence that resists direct perception, and arises only under the pressure of a close and experienced seer. And to this rule, for Meklenburg, Scripture is no exception—which leads him to his final suggestion, a last ditch effort to explain why God would *not* make an exception for Scripture, and present the text's meaning in as clear a way as possible.

For Meklenburg, there is something more imperative, more vital, than a universally intelligible and semantically indisputable Scripture—and that is the piety of the pious. The reason for Scriptural ambiguity, put simply, is "to augment the achievement of those who follow God's Torah, according to its true intention."[25] The advantage humankind has over every other creature on Earth is our capacity to choose right over wrong—and the more obstacles in the way of doing good, the more virtuous is the choice to do so. Injustice and evil persist precisely for this purpose, Meklenburg claims, to set a visual hurdle to piety before the eyes of the pious—deepening their valor by adding an external resistance to the ever-present internal opposition to virtue. In a word, the gap between justice and reality is a test—and so, for Meklenburg, is the gap between tradition and the biblical text.

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[25] *Ibid.*, n.3, 39-40.

> [Scripture] wasn't written in a clear, incontestable idiom, for then the battle for choice in the hands of man, would reside solely within the self…now, however, that the language of Scripture can be understood in various ways, only one of which conforms with the view of the giver of Torah…the faithful who rouse themselves to follow nobly the ways of Torah, according to its true intention…beyond the internal battle to go against one's nature, there is the battle against an external force…promoting a meaning opposed to the truth. Behold, herein lies a truly great award—for the heavier a war is upon a person, the greater the value of his triumph.[26]

For Meklenburg, Scripture's innate ambiguity lends itself to misapprehension *intentionally*—as its author seeks to place a hurdle on the path to piety. The text does not—on its own—generate the semantics ascribed to it by tradition, as rabbinic exegesis is merely one among many ways to make meaning of its words. The text's intended meaning comes about only as a result of an appeal to external faith and a trust in tradition. For Meklenburg, Scripture's equivocality—and tradition's apparent dissonance with the plain-sense—is simply one more way in which modernity tests the soul.

### Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888)

In the decades following Meklenburg's commentary came the exegetical contribution of the Hamburg born Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. His particular stance on the semantics of

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[26] *Ibid*.

Scripture seems to have evolved over time—expressed in markedly different ways in his early and later writings. Initially, in a celebrated epistolary volume entitled *Nineteen Letters*—designed both as a rough condensation of Hirsch's outlook, and as a trial-balloon for his later and more voluminous *Horeb*, Hirsch describes a semantic theory that echoes Wessely's sentiments.

> We must…read the Torah in Hebrew — that is to say, in accordance with the spirit of that 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 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 but below the surface, may be supplied by the independent action of the mind itself. It is, as it were, a semi-symbolic writing. With wakeful eye and ear, and with soul roused to activity, we must read; nothing is told to us of such superficial import that we need only, as it were, accept it with half roused dreaminess; we must strive ourselves to create again the speaker's thoughts, to think them over, or the sense will escape us…[27]

Here Hirsch appears to endow Scripture with the same profound *peshat*, one that resides within the recesses of the text, awaiting the notice of an attentive reader. He insinuates that the language of Scripture, its vernacular, produces its inimitable semantics, in that Hebrew possesses a uniquely visual vocabulary—capable of disclosing the author's intentions to the reader. Here Hirsch stands in distinct opposition to Meklenburg's claim that Scripture fails to communicate the thoughts of its author—always leaving an ambiguity in its wake. That said, in his later biblical commentary (comments to Exodus 21:2), Hirsch appears to acknowledge the cavernous gap between the text's plain-sense and its rabbinic exegesis—and by means of a radical inversion, Hirsch sees tradition as the source of all meaning that feeds into an entirely reliant text.

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[27] Hirsch, Samson Raphael, and Bernard Drachman. *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel: Being a Spiritual Presentation of the Principles of Judaism*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1899, 14-15.

> The primary source of Jewish law is not the written word, the "Book," but the living teachings of the oral tradition; the "Book" serves only as an aid to memory and a resource when doubts arise…The relationship between the written Torah and the oral Torah, is like that between brief written notes taken on a scientific lecture, and the lecture itself. Students who attended the oral lecture require only their brief notes to recall at any time the entire lecture. They often find that a word, a question mark, an exclamation mark, a period, or the underscoring of a word is sufficient to bring back a whole series of ideas, observations, qualifications, and so forth. But for those who did not attend the instructor's lecture, these notes are not of much use…The non-initiate who will attempt to use these same notes in order to construct (as opposed to reconstruct) for himself the lecture he did not attend, will dismiss what seems unclear as baseless mental gymnastics and idle speculations leading nowhere.[28]

Scripture, in this description, is defined by its utility as a mnemonic device, designed purely to occupy an auxiliary position of authority. The biblical text is in no way semantically generative, and thus the gap between its surface reading and traditional exegesis dissolves—in fact, the very identification of rabbinic tradition with exegesis is misplaced; Scripture is merely a shadow of tradition, which, in turn, is the font of meaning. Where biblical scholarship scorns tradition for its perceived illiteracy, Hirsch turns the tables by suggesting that scholars have made a fatal generic error in seeing Scripture as the source of its own meaning rather than as a cipher informed by an external semantics.[29]

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[28] Hirsch, S.R., and D. Haberman. *The Hirsch Chumash: Sefer Shemos*. The Hirsch Chumash: The Five Books of Torah. Feldheim, 2000, 363-364.

[29] A similar hermeneutic tension appears in the work of Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (know commonly by the acronym, Netziv). In the introduction to his biblical commentary, he speaks of the poetic qualities of the biblical text (cited in Leibowitz, N and Moshe Sokolow. *On Teaching Tanakh: Three essays*, New York: Torah Education Network, 1986, 2-3): "How can the whole Torah be called a poem when it isn't written in the language of poetry? Rather, we must say, perforce, that it has the nature and unique properties of poetry. As everyone knows, the poetic idiom differs from narrative prose. In poetry, the subject is not described as fully as in a prose narrative, and marginal notes are required to explain that this verse refers to this, and that to that. This is not homiletics, but the nature of the poem, even the simple one. It is also well known that someone who knows what brought this idiom about appreciates the poem all the more than one who doesn't…This is the nature of the Torah in which not all stories told are in full details, rather it requires notes, interpretations, and linguistic analysis. All this is not *derush* (homiletics), but the *peshat* of the verse." However, within the body of his commentary (on Exodus 13:16), he compares the written text of Scripture to a sword's sheath, and the oral tradition to the weapon itself—suggesting an entirely Hirschian reliance of the former upon the latter: "In the case of a sword, the sheath only serves as ornamental when the sword is stored within it—having no purpose at all, even ornamental, when there's no sword inside. This is not so with the sword

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The ‘New Peshat’ of the nineteenth century thus grapples with the second threat to Scripture—the gap between rational *peshat* and traditional *derash* which threatens the premises of Jewish life as lived—finding ever more creative ways to bridge rabbinic readings of Scripture with the text’s apparent plain-sense. Mendelssohn, Meklenburg, and Hirsch all defend the alignment of text and tradition using arguments applicable to all forms of natural language—either by means of emphasizing the polyphonic character of language or by a generic recharacterization of Scripture. Wessely alone appears to defend tradition as both true exegesis and also Scripture’s only cipher—he sees the biblical text as semantically generative and, when read properly, committed to producing only a single intended meaning. For him, the Hebrew vernacular of Scripture possesses a unique linguistic quality—one beyond the cultural competence of modern scholars. Wessely, however, never produced a comprehensive commentary allowing his theory to manifest in practice—nor did he provide a more elaborate or detailed theory for how his hermeneutic would operate; this, for many scholars, is where Malbim steps in, adopting a very similar hermeneutic posture, but offering a far more detailed theoretical defense and practical demonstration.

It is true that Malbim does that in his introduction to Leviticus, but—as we shall now see—the picture is far more complicated.

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itself, however, as it serves the same purpose with or without the sheath—only being less glorifying to the wearer without one. So too, the purpose of the written Torah [i.e. the text of Scripture], only functions when one believes in the oral tradition…and without it, it fails to serve its purpose. With the oral tradition, however, even if one never looks inside the written Scripture, it functions…though with less majesty…We thus learn that the written Scriptures are useless without the oral tradition” (translation mine). Here the implication of Netziv’s metaphor is that the potency of Scripture resides squarely in the tradition that accompanies the written text—its meaning and purpose deriving solely from that external semantic, with the text itself merely being an aesthetic manifestation. For more on Berlin see, Perl, Gil S. *The Pillar of Volozhin: Rabbi Naftali Ẓvi Yehuda Berlin and the World of Nineteenth-century Lithuanian Torah Scholarship*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012.

## Malbim’s Plain Sense

Though chronologically speaking Malbim’s first work involving biblical exegesis is a series of nine sermons published in his late twenties, first we turn to his theoretical introductions to various volumes of Scripture—published over the course of the latter half of his life. The reason for this chronological inversion is that the sermons exhibit a far less explicit use of exegetical techniques and very little hermeneutic theory—as they are focused on ethical teachings organized by theme rather than around Scripture. Our third chapter will be devoted to a study of the first three of these sermons, seeing them as the key to unlocking Malbim’s exegetical pedagogy—where the ethical teachings in his sermons can be seen to inflect the exegesis of his commentaries. It is to the introductions of his explicitly exegetical commentaries that we now turn, as they provide the clearest insight into Malbim’s reaction to the modern threats against traditional readings of Scripture.

Most scholars, noted toward the beginning of our first chapter, have given almost singular attention to only one of Malbim’s biblical introductions, namely Leviticus. And in treating his introduction to Leviticus as the epicenter of his hermeneutic theory leads them to see Malbim’s view as an extension of Wessely’s, positioning him among the rabbinic apologists of the nineteenth century—seeking to defend the sages and rabbinic exegesis as a reflection of the true meaning of Scripture. As we survey all eight of Malbim’s biblical introductions it will become clear that his introduction to Leviticus, which we will discuss below, is not the epicenter but, in many ways, an outlier. Malbim does not defend the sages on the back of the biblical text, in fact, quite often he dismisses the sages for the sake of saving the biblical text. Malbim’s worry—we will see—was not the threat against tradition (with the exception of the case of Leviticus) but the romantic appropriation of Scripture. Recasting Scripture’s inimitability along purely aesthetic and sentimental lines, for Malbim, was the primary cause of major spiritual concern—a concern that we will see emerge in his sermons as well in our next chapter.

We do not have a clear idea of why Malbim published his biblical commentaries in the order that he did. Having said that, it seems clear to me that he selected Isaiah to be his first major commentary, together with methodological and hermeneutic introductions, as a response to the well-known commentary to Isaiah produced, with a methodological introduction, by Robert Lowth. Lowth, as noted in our first chapter, not only challenged the integrity of the text of Scripture—pointing to what he saw as the unreliable transmission of Jewish scribes—but triggered the meteoric rise of the idea of biblical parallelism, re-defining Scriptural sanctity in aesthetic terms. As we will see, though he doesn't name him, it is hard to imagine that Malbim's reaction is to anyone else—showing us, again, that Malbim's major worry was not defending tradition at any cost, but protecting Scriptural sanctity from the snare of comparative aesthetics.

After exploring Malbim's introduction to Isaiah we will survey the other seven introductions, following the order in which they were published: Song of Songs, Leviticus, Joshua, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Job, and Psalms. And following our review of these introductions, we will examine a single piece of his exegesis from the opening of the eighth chapter of Proverbs, the only piece of Malbim's exegesis in which he identifies Scripture's subject as relating to its own hermeneutic structure.

### Introducing Isaiah: Three Rules of Reading

Malbim's commentary to the Book of Isaiah, published in 1848, was the second installment of his prolific exegetical oeuvre, following only his commentary to the Book of Esther. And his introduction to Isaiah, signed on 18th November 1847, offers us the first comprehensive and self-conscious outline of his interpretive theoretics.[30] He opens the introduction with a ‘mosaic’[31] interlacing of biblical verses—from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Exodus, Amos, Zachariah, Job, Joshua, Judges, Jeremiah, Genesis, Samuel, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs—that serves as a potent exhibition of both his poetic expertise and scriptural fluency, in which he declares to his intended audience: “Not to the wise, to the gate-dwellers; nor to the understanding, the linguists and poets…but to the masses, to the whole nation, to the house of Israel.”[32] As we progress through Malbim’s introductions, we shall see that this target audience will become central to what he considers *peshat* to be.

After five paragraphs of highly stylized and abstruse mosaic poetry, Malbim then addresses his reader directly:

> Do not be astonished, or stunned, or startled, my dear reader! For now I shall speak to you like a person, like a person of your age; from now I shall speak to you in a language that you can understand; from now you shall no longer hear an unfamiliar vernacular.[33]

In the wake of this widening, if condescending, appeal to his desired swathe of readers, Malbim does indeed switch into a more accessible idiom, and describes his methodology as follows:

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[30] The text consulted for this study comes from a more recent edition: Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Chazon Yishayahu*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew].

[31] The style of poetry, with its origins in the medieval poets of Spain, that inlayed biblical verses into the text, is variously referred to as *shibbuts* (=inlay), mosaic, depending on whether the citations are merely ornamental or substantive semantic allusions, the former now identified primarily by the term *shibbuts*, and the latter, by *mussivstil* or *melitza*. See HaNagid, S., and P. Cole. *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid*. Princeton University Press, 2016, 159; Boaz Shahevitch, “Beyn Amur La-amira: le-mahuta shel ha-Melitza” [Hebrew]. Ha-Sifrut 2(3): 664-668. Shavit, Uzi. 1981, 1982; Kronfeld, Chana. *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 114-142; Girsht, Yehuda Loeb. *Tachanot besifrut yisrael: Toldot sifrut am yisrael mizman chatimat hatalmud im antologya mevo’eret* [Hebrew]. Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Yeshurun, 1958, 46-48.

[32] Malbim, *Chazon Yishayahu*, 1. All translations of Malbim are mine from the Hebrew.

[33] *Ibid*.

> This commentary…follows, both in its tenets and its details, the path of *peshat*—levelled for the many. It pursues the way that best approaches the true intention of the divinely inspired seer, and his thoughts—and as it seeks it, it strives for the truth and pursues the plain *peshat*, which must always come first.
> It does not stray along the trails of the homilist [*doresh*], or dig with the philosopher's pick, it does not disinter every shoot and seedling from the roots implanted in the ancient past, it does not spin gossamer to mask hollow views and recent scholarly inventions. You shall not find in it *derash*, or philosophy, or mysticism, or allegory, but only the plain *peshat*; and all this departs from the practices of the commentators of the past and stands apart—distinct from them as a lone mast on a mountain-top.[34]

Here Malbim is emphatic that his exegetical ground is Scripture's *peshat*, a category that he repeatedly frames as the 'plainest plain sense,' the *peshat hapashut*, to the exclusion of any other branch of interpretive methodology. From the little we've read, we can already see that, for Malbim, *peshat* possesses three distinct qualities—it is for the many as opposed to an elite group, it conveys the text's true intention as opposed to a reader's impression, and it has modal priority before any of the other exegetical registers. It is of note that as part of his theoretical pitch, Malbim makes sure to state his utter originality, putting himself at a distance from any other exegete.

Malbim appears to respond to the same sense of exegetical urgency that drives Mendelssohn, Wessely, Meklenburg, and Hirsch—all feeling a deep biblical vulnerability, in light of new standards of reading. Where he stands out, however, is precisely in the specifics of his theoretical hermeneutics, the details of which he now begins to unfurl. For Malbim, there are three cardinal exegetical tenets: concision, precision, and sublimity.

Firstly, he claims, there can be no repetition, redundancy, or excess congesting the biblical text. Embracing an extreme version of the long held rabbinic attachment to what Alexander Samely calls scriptural implicature[35] and others have called 'omnisignificance'[36], Malbim dismisses the theory of biblical parallelism and insists that every textual inflection has a unique semantic purpose. Second, the presence of every such semantic inflection is essential—no word or sentence or sentiment is expendable or replaceable; "Every word of celestial expression is weighed in the scales of wisdom and knowledge—sorted, totaled, tallied, and counted with the meter of higher wisdom, which alone can succeed, with its power, to speak in such a way."[37] Third, there is no textual ornamentalism, because no earthly poetic or rhetorical aesthetic could ever serve a celestial objective—every semantic packet is riddled with what he calls 'sublimity,' pointing beyond itself to something of profound and transcendent worth. At this stage, it is worth noting, that though the first two hermeneutic pillars traffic in quantifiable terms, Malbim does not, as of yet, define the kind of 'sublime' or 'transcendence' to which his third tenet refers—which will be the subject of our third chapter.

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[34] *Ibid.*, 2.

His defense of this hermeneutic set rests, for him, on a simple theological logic:

> To all who believe whole-heartedly and unequivocally that [Scripture's words] are words of the living God—is it conceivable that the sublime speech that commanded heavens into existence, Earth into formation, and light into being, was, in the mouths of prophets, no more than shabby rags to disguise sordid songs and sonnets? Can you imagine that the living speech, with which He propelled vital souls into corpses, has reverted back to inert and lifeless forms in the mouths of God's messengers and living prophets.[38]

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[35] See: Samely, Alexander. "Scripture's Implicature: the midrashic assumptions of relevance and consistency". Journal of Semitic Studies 37,2 (1992) 167-205.

[36] Kugel, James L. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*; Yale University Press: New Haven, 1981, 104; Elman, Yaakov. "The Rebirth of Omnisignificant Biblical Exegesis in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 2 (2002), 1-42.

[37] Malbim, *Chazon Yishayahu*, 2.

[38] *Ibid*..

The idea that founds Malbim's inimitable, almost unnatural, particulars of Scripture's *peshat*, is the matchless nature of Divine speech. His defense of his plain-sense hermeneutics relies on an appeal to faith—but where, for Meklenburg, faith is the means of achieving the traditional reading of an objectively ambiguous text, Malbim sees faith as framing the text as plainly unambiguous and wholly self-reliant. The very idea that Scripture's language would operate like any other, defies its divinity; that the biblical text could be exegetically flexible threatens, for Malbim, its sacred identity.

To put it simply, for Malbim Scripture isn't written in regular Hebrew but in a unique dialect—a divine dialect if you will—of Hebrew, which operates by means of regular grammar, syntax, and punctuation, but has a very specific semantic pattern. In the 'mouth' of the being that spoke the cosmos into being and breathed life into the first human being, words wield immense power. Imagine the difference between a child hammering a nail—and Thor; the mechanics and the physics are the same, but the measure of power is beyond a mere difference in degree. At root, Scripture cannot be seen as a species of poetry—it is not human speech, comparable to the work of the ancient Greeks, it is the word of God. The Hebrew text is thus inflected by a divine dialect that communicates in a more compact, more exact, and an unalterably exalted way.

For Malbim—having not yet mentioned rabbinic tradition, or the tensions between *peshat* and *derash*—biblical exegesis differs from the reading of any other text. There is no Mendelssohnian division of primary and secondary intentions, for Malbim's Scripture abhors the aesthetic and embodies an unflinching semantic exactitude; there is no Meklenburgian test of faith, for Malbim's Scripture transmits meaning quite rationally from the text's native and sacred poetics; and there is no Hirschian inversion where a now diminished and entirely dependent Scripture receives its meaning from a preceding and more comprehensive external source.

Malbim's Scripture produces its own meaning by the means of an incomparable celestial poetics, in every instance concise, precise, and sublime. We see, quite clearly then, that Malbim's greatest aspiration is not bridging Scripture and rabbinic tradition at all costs but saving Scripture's purchase as a self-expressive text.

Following the overview, Malbim then offers an example of his exegetical mechanics regarding the apparent semantic excesses of the opening verses of Isaiah, and then reinforces, what he considers to be, the reasonableness, even necessity, of his hermeneutic posture.

> Should you meet a foreigner, and he ask you to relay, in his tongue, the contents of verses four to ten, then—if you aren't a blatherer—all you'll have to say is "God speaks, Israel grievously sins, and are thus struck with calamities and violence." And if he then asks for the contents of verses ten to sixteen, will you answer, "God says 'I hate your sacrifices, holidays, pilgrimages, and prayers"? Questions like these will now nestle in your heart if you aren't heartless, regarding every passage, every utterance, every book from beginning to end, and you'll declare "It is beyond my grasp, it's a mystery that I cannot fathom; I am incapable for it is sealed—I am illiterate."[39]

For Malbim, the feeling that a paraphrastic Scripture is insufficient, even inexplicable, is the only logical posture for a reflective and believing reader. The sheer magnitude of the biblical text's ostensible superfluity—when read through a supposedly rational lens—should trigger an acute bewilderment and sense of ignorance, both mental states that Malbim promises to resolve. On the one hand, Malbim offers an acknowledgement of a crisis facing traditional Jewish readers, while, on the other, he brands the solution offered by modern scholars as mere blather. The crisis that he faces has nothing to do with the sages or tradition; his focus is on the aesthetics of Scripture and the character of the biblical text.

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[39] *Ibid.*, 3.

Having set the stage and induced a baited suspense in his readers, Malbim then proceeds to defend his credentials before producing his solution: "Before I lead you among the rows of the vineyard that I've planted…bear with me for another moment to hear how I came to make this vineyard, the immensity of effort I expended in preparing its fences and hedges as I pruned, preened, and protected it."[40] Before embarking on his exegetical expedition, Malbim declares, he spent time imbibing, defining, analyzing, and categorizing biblical grammar and vernacular—exploring eight distinct avenues of linguistic consequence, the specifics of which lie beyond the scope of this study.

Malbim then elaborates on the concrete application of his three core hermeneutic axes with examples from Isaiah—dividing apparent repetitions into those of the synonymous and non-synonymous type, offering an extensive exposition of contextual relevance, and then expanding on the kind of sublimity that Scripture, by necessity, exhibits. The latter, being the most naturally in need of definition, is worth citing in full:

> Beyond the explanation of repetitions, heretofore explored, this commentary is entirely novel. Every instance of interpretive struggle is explained with ease, every instance when it seems that the seer speaks like an average man, I show how his words are sublime and highly powerful, both in their formulation and in their deeper meaning—such that I shall instruct dry bones to come to life, and they shall live and stand upon their feet as a great host robed in beauty, garbed in splendor and glory.
>
> So too, in relation to speeches and themes, I have distanced myself from the path of the *meva'arim*[41], to the point that most matters are read differently in my readings than those of the commentators that have preceded me—such that, on the one hand, every word of prophecy is filled with beauty, grace, and the most pleasant poetic feeling, and, on the other, there is a logical and meticulous sequence, and philosophical declarations filled with wisdom and erudition.[42]

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[40] *Ibid*., 3.

[41] Literally "commentators," but the particular term appears to reference Mendelssohn's students—those producing works under the banner of the *Be'ur*. This reference is made explicit in his appendix to Song of Songs, as we'll note later.

[42] *Ibid*., 9-10.

For Malbim, his exegetical efforts compare to the revival of the dead—a convenient alignment with how his work combats what we have seen being called the ‘death of Scripture.’ Perhaps, at one level, his choice of metaphor means for us to see his exegesis as both revolutionary and a form of recovery, but by all accounts it speaks to the extent of his exegetical ambition—he does not see himself as providing mere notes or annotations, but a near supernatural interpretive intervention that animates an otherwise lifeless set of letters. Once more, he appears to acknowledge the unresponsive state of Scripture as it is read in the modern era, but at the same time suggests that his commentary is the only solution. On its own, it seems, the plain-sense is out of reach—which amounts to a confession that, for Malbim, though *peshat* may reside on the ‘surface’ it certainly isn’t ‘simple.’

Turning to the parameters of textual transcendence or sublimity, Malbim offers two traits. Every passage of Scripture, he contends, exhibits both an expressive splendor and semantic profundity, thus being worthy both in its form and its content. Malbim does not go on to give thematic or stylistic examples of what qualifies as poetic splendor or conceptual profundity, and thus leaves this particular hermeneutic pillar as the most amorphous in its nature—serving, at this stage, to shore up the status of Scripture’s sanctity by claiming that, beyond its unique and divine linguistic cipher, it comprises a consummate aesthetic and semantic quality. And while the formal sublimity is somewhat subjective, our next chapter will be devoted to the pursuit of Malbim’s idea of sublime substance.

Malbim concludes his introduction with a short section outlining the method of his presentation, one largely dictated by efficiency—in his words—to save the courier, the buyer, and the reader unnecessary expenditure. He has, he says, divided his comments into two separate columns, one offering a lucid elucidation of the text, and the other delving more deeply into the distinctions between apparent synonyms. The former requires little explanation, but Malbim goes on to catalogue five features of the latter: he only deals with the synonyms present in any particular verse, he only details the differences that pertain to that particular instance, he only offers a couple of proofs, he only deals with a particular set of synonyms once, and, finally:

> Matters have forced me, in many places, to write in scholarly terms, in the idiom of philosophers and logicians, as the nature of the issues requires them to be clothed in scholarly terminology. And know, that despite the fact that many commentators have preceded me in distinguishing between synonyms, some of whose work I have in my possession—being *Gan Na'ul*[43] and *Yeriot Shlomo*[44]—I have not relied in these matters on anyone else, but have analyzed everything independently, confirming that every verse works according to the path I have trodden on my own…and if it is found that another reader agrees with my reading, this is merely a signal that the plain and straight sense appeals to every intelligent reader in the same way.[45]

Despite the profundity of Scripture's meaning and the complexity of its linguistics, Malbim directs his work to the layperson—one who wishes for the briefest of explanations and the most accessible. And while speaking to the need of making his work accessible, Malbim apologizes for the need to employ modern terminology—some of which he gleaned from Wessely and Pappenheim among others—to express what is for him an ancient hermeneutic, while simultaneously avowing his utter originality.

In this first introduction, we have the beginnings of Malbim's plain sense. *Peshat* is defined as the intended meaning of the text, as it speaks to the masses. It isn't simple—indeed, its complexity can be seen in its three key hermeneutic pillars—though it is on the surface, as the text speaks unambiguously once it is properly deciphered. Overall, Malbim's plain-sense sees a Scripture that is concise, precise, and both aesthetically sublime and thematically transcendent—and his main argument for such a sophisticated hermeneutic, is a profound conviction that it could not be otherwise; how could God *not* speak in such a way.

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[43] *Gan Naʿul* (Amsterdam, 1765–66) was a two-volume work published by Wessely, that analyzed the differences between Hebrew roots.
[44] *Yeriot Shlomo* was a work that also studied the differences between synonyms, authored by the philosopher and scholar Solomon Pappenheim of Breslau (1740–1814).
[45] Malbim, *Chazon Yishayahu*, 11.

The complexity of the text—even on the level of its plain-sense—is precisely what makes it sacred, and Malbim sees it as his duty to save it. The mere attempt to poeticize Scripture—to cast the prophets merely as ancient rhetoricians—whether at the hands of Lowth or Mendelssohn, is, for Malbim, culturally incompetent and incompatible with true faith. As Malbim begins this fight, it is worth noting once more, that the threats hanging over rabbinic tradition attended to by Mendelssohn, Wessely, Meklenburg, and Hirsch, are ignored, even exacerbated, as he distances himself from the commentators of the past, differentiates *peshat* from *derash*, and stakes his position as innovator; for now, it seems, Malbim sets his attention solely on protecting the biblical text and the threat posed by those seeking to appropriate the text rather than shred it.

### Introducing Song of Songs: Parabolic *Peshat*

Malbim's next biblical introduction is affixed to his commentary to Song of Songs, published in 1855[46]. Unique among his commentaries, it includes a hermeneutic excursus titled *HaHeresh Ve'Hamasger* [*The Smith and the Gate-Keeper*[47]], originally printed after the biblical text. This introduction, grappling with what Malbim considers the most hermeneutically challenging text of Scripture, offers us a very helpful demonstration of the mechanics of Malbim's *peshat*, and the nature of the threats which most concern him.[48]

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[46] The first edition has no printed place or date of publication, but Schaechter places it in Konigsberg in 1855, see: Schaechter, Sh. Zvi. 1983. *משנתו של המלבי"ם*. PhD. diss.: Hebrew University, 15.

[47] Reference to Kings II 24:14,16 and Jeremiah 29:2 (translation mine, based on comments of Rabbi David Altschuler to II Kings 24:14, and the context of Malbim's usage). Malbim doesn't go on to explain the title of this essay, though it appears, based on his comments on Song of Songs 1:4 and Isaiah 3:3, that he refers to the intellectual and material dimensions of the human person.

He opens with a rhythmic depiction of the book's singularity, and its traditional status as the most cherished and sacred biblical text, and then launches into an interrogative paragraph that questions every cryptic reference:

> What is the secret of this song, and to what and to whom does its allegory refer? Who are its prophets and about what do they prophesy? Concerning whom are these deeply wondrous words and visions expressed? What is its premise and in what is it embedded?[49]

Malbim asks who the young lover represents, who corresponds to the desert residents, whom the myrrh-scented and gazelle-breasted friend references, and more. The text is peppered with evocative images—including vines, valleys, and doves, pomegranates, locks, and foxes—which have been gleaned for meaning since first read, but Malbim sees all previous readings as misconceived: "All of these are hidden riddles and sealed secrets, noble wisdoms and concealed enigmas—the ancient sages raked its trails but failed to find its secret, and modern scholars hoed its ground but have not found its sheaves…"[50]

Malbim specifies the misapprehension of two groups in particular. First, he dismisses those he refers to as '*meva'arim*'—a moniker for those following the *maskilic* tradition, based on a connection to Mendelssohn's *Be'ur*—who see the song as a lyrical ballad between Solomon and his lover or a shepherd and his significant other. He accuses these readers of sequential neglect, poetic incompetence, and basic interpretive imprecision. Then Malbim turns to the readings of midrash and the medieval commentators—readings that largely see the song of this text expressing the relationship between God and Israel—and characterizes them as variously idiosyncratic and inconsistent, often contrived. In some ways, for Malbim, both groups fail to grasp the text on its own terms.

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[48] For an introduction to Malbim's innovative reading of this biblical work see, Fishbane, Michael A. *Song of Songs =: Shir Ha-Shirim : The Traditional Hebrew Text With the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015, 253-4.

[49] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim (New Publication)*, V. 3, Vayikra I; Bnei Barak, 1999, 1 [Pagination starts fresh at the back, where Song of Songs is printed separately].

[50] *Ibid*.

> In the end, most commentators and interpreters are residents of the scorched[51] far-northern[52] forests, they are lodged in the realms of *remez* and *derush*—far from the settled city[53] of *peshat*—the textual mold has no cast[54], it is the crucible of metaphor that refines[55]. And though we know that the word of God has seventy faces and a thousand meanings, nonetheless, the plain sense (*be'ur hapeshati*) is the beginning of wisdom[56], it is the key which opens the gates before we enter into the chambers—the inner sanctum[57], the royal palaces[58]. Thus, I have come forth to enlighten you with understanding[59]; bend your ear and heed, behold I shall open a new gate for you, in it your soul shall see light and you shall find tranquility[60]—for the light is sweet and it is good for the eyes to see the sun[61].[62]

For Malbim, neither Maskilim nor midrashists allow the biblical text to do the talking—the former impose an anachronistic aesthetic that smothers Scripture's divine dialect and semantic density with an alien lyrical simplicity, and the latter never intended to present the text's plain-sense, but read in another register. Thus, Malbim distances himself from past and present readings and positions himself as in possession of the singular truth of the text itself, the *peshat*.

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[51] Jeremiah 17:6. Here I note a number of the biblical allusions to exhibit the extent of his mosaic craft—the lift is not exhaustive.
[52] Ezekiel 39:2
[53] Psalms 107.
[54] I Kings 7:46.
[55] Psalms 12:7
[56] Proverbs 1:7.
[57] Leviticus 10:18.
[58] Proverbs 30:28.
[59] Daniel 9:22.
[60] Jeremiah 6:16
[61] Ecclesiastes 11:7
[62] *Ibid*.

As part of his hermeneutic confession Malbim concedes to the pervasive rabbinic belief in Scriptural polysemy, but structures the text's semantic multiplicity as diachronic and hierarchical rather than synchronic and egalitarian; *peshat* comes first. For Malbim there is a base level, plain-sense reading generated naturally by a competent and rational exegesis. Malbim stance differs from Mendelssohn's, in that the latter's view is that *derash* operates within regular linguistics, only more subtly—for Malbim *derash* is detached from context and generated rather than revealed; the text itself has only a single contextual intention, and that plain-sense intention could itself barely be more subtle. Once more, Malbim's lack of concern for the gap between the biblical text and rabbinic tradition couldn't be more clear. He is worried, it seems, not about the viability of rabbinic tradition in a rational age, but ensuring the biblical text's inimitable celestial character.

At some level, Malbim's metaphors for the various hermeneutic lenses are also instructive—*derash* and *remez* being signified by a scorched and isolated forest, with *peshat* denoted by a settled city. The former, more cryptic lenses resemble a truth that is rhizomatic and unpopulated, whereas *peshat* captures a structured and popular truth. The text has many clandestine intentions, but only one that follows structure and is public—only one that truly unlocks the text as an integrated and coherent body of civic meaning. *Peshat* allows the text itself to speak, where other planes employ the letters for the purpose of an external meaning; the former opens the way to wisdom, the latter comes later. Touting light and tranquility as the results of his reading speaks volumes as well—exhibiting Malbim's appreciation for the angst experienced by those seeking a plain reading of Scripture, and his, possibly polemical, possibly sympathetic, appropriation of the symbol of enlightenment, employing the Hebrew term *lehaskilha* (evoking the root of the term *haskalah*) in the same breath. For Malbim, *peshat* is more than the simple meaning—it offers both beauty and virtue.

Despite this opening, however, the rest of Malbim's introduction speaks to the specifics of his reading of Song of Songs rather than his larger interpretive theory, for which we turn to his excursus, which opens with a reflection on the essential difference between Song of Songs and the rest of Scripture.

> Surely it is known that when spiritual and godly matters descend from their sanctity on high to traverse among the lowly, they place a veil upon their heads and surround themselves in shrouds; hallowed souls don bulk and bodies when they descend…so too angels of the spirit rest beneath trees and eat as they roam the Earth, so too do the secrets of Torah envelop themselves in a stitched and woven robe…
> However, it is easy to see that the shroud and veil[63] cast over this sacred song is different to the cover spread over the rest of Scripture. The biblical texts all wear precious robes, and come adorned in ornaments, for the stories which have their secrets cooked into them, are all sacred, and are all products of the living God; they all radiate splendor and shine, and are filled with wisdom and ethics, teaching guidance and piety and redemption, and edify the unwise. Not so this song. It wears a hairy mantle and is covered in ash and sackcloth—appearing as a love song, as the chorus of robbers, and the melodies of drunkards[64].[65]

Here Malbim begins with a mystical premise that spiritual realities descend into the material realm in disguise—bodies cloak souls and sacred texts cloak divinity. This notion is first disseminated in the writings of medieval mystics[66] who defend the apparent aesthetic mediocrity of Scripture by casting the biblical text and its tales as the husk of an unseen celestial profundity, a weft of unassuming linguistic fibers that clothe eternal truths—but here Malbim, while conceding to the principle, argues that the plain-sense reading of Scripture's textual surface is itself more than worthy. The *peshat* offers wisdom and piety and radiates an edifying splendor. The core term here is "teach"—for Malbim, *peshat* is more than the most convenient or simple reading; it has a deep pedagogic aspiration. Scripture's plain-sense is more than mere stories or rhyme, most of all it seeks to teach.

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[63] Isaiah 25:7.

[64] Psalms 69:12-13.

[65] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 94 [End pagination].

[66] See Fishbane, Michael A. *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*. 1st Midland book ed. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992, 34-5. See also, Fishbane, Michael A. *Song of Songs: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015, 291-304.

The Song of Songs, however, with the unrivaled coarseness of its surface semantics, threatens the profundity of biblical *peshat*. The carnal quality of its imagery, the sensual tenor of its poetry, renders the text Scripturally aberrant and borderline sacrilegious. And while the status of this text has been a source of tension since the time of its canonization,[67] Malbim seeks a new—and intricate—resolution. First though, he turns parenthetically to what he sees as the misreadings of his day.

> The *meva'arim* and translators of German Bibles, have gone along paths of no peace [*Netivot Lo Shalom*[68]], as they profane the sanctity of this song; they explain it in line with its outer form, its shell, and see it as a harlot's chant—they do not know its plain-sense meaning, so have splintered it into pieces and ripped it to shreds; for them, the enchanted waters result in bitterness[69], and they say, 'This is grafted from various and multifarious songs—a drinking-song, a love-song, a spring-song, a dancing song and more.'[70]

Malbim vilifies those inspired by the spirit of the modern scholarship as biblically illiterate and, accuses them of, in the course of their illiteracy, shredding and desecrating Scripture. There is a profound *peshat* to be unearthed, one that exhibits the text's coherence and integrity, and bequeaths it with an honorable quality, and these readers have missed the mark on both counts. Instead, Malbim treads a very different path—seeing the song's carnality itself as a signal of exceptional spiritual depth.

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[67] See Fishbane, Michael A. *Song of Songs: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015, xix-lv.

[68] This is a direct reference to the *Netivot Shalom* [Paths of Peace]—the formal title of Mendelssohn's *Be'ur*.

[69] Numbers 5:24.

[70] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 94 [End pagination].

> In truth this [carnal surface] is a sign of the song's majesty, a signal of its supreme grandeur and sanctity. For even the cloak which envelops it[s eternal truths] is a sacral linen tunic[71], a garment of splendor[72]; and due to its brilliant and radiant intensity, even the cloak—in its luminosity—cannot be seen without a cover; thus He made darkness its screen[73] and draped it in haze[74].[75]

So celestially-intense are the text's inner truths that a single disguise would still shine too brightly—for Malbim, the hidden mystical material of this section of Scripture is so sensitive that it requires more than one tier of veneer. The numinousity of this song's inner meaning necessitates two layers of textual concretization to provide the average reader with palatable access, which is why this song is so much more 'materialized,' manifesting a far more fleshly and somatic semantic than the rest of Scripture. And it is precisely this bistratified disguise, Malbim claims, that leads him to divide his exegesis into two sections—'*Melitza*' and '*Mashal*.'

> …The commentary that I've called '*Melitza*' relates to the surface narrative of this sublime song, which is in truth a parable as I shall explain. And the commentary which I've called '*Mashal*' relates to the external shell surrounding the fine robe, covering the precious mantle…the '*Melitza*' is sacred and the '*Mashal*' is secular; the '*Melitza*' is the plain plain-sense, and the '*Mashal*' is a parable to it. The '*Melitza*' is a parable to the hidden secrets concealed in this sacred song, and the '*Mashal*' is a parable to the parable, a garment over the garment, sackcloth over a regal gown, robes of leather over robes of light, as I will go on to explain.

Malbim feels that this biblical text, uniquely, requires a double exegetical decryption due to its semantic complexity, where the sublime *peshat*—which in this context he labels the '*Melitza*'—hovers between a carnal allegory, the '*Mashal*,' and a transcendent truth. At this juncture, Malbim returns to the question hanging over this entire hermeneutic abstraction—what on earth, in concrete terms, can this carnal narrative be hiding? In other words: if not the Mendelssohian ballard or the midrashic allegory, what is this text?

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[71] Leviticus 16:4
[72] Isaiah 61:3
[73] Psalms 18:12.
[74] Job 38:9.
[75] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 94 [End pagination].

> Now, if a person asks you what this song—according to its plain-sense—concerns, and what it symbolizes, guard yourself and really guard your soul lest[76] you tell him that according to its plain-sense it is the words of a shepherd and a lover, a maiden and her beloved, words of affection and desire—God forbid and Heaven forfend! This is what you must tell him: "The narrative's allegory, according to its plain-sense, is the experience of a sacred love—King Solomon's soul, peace be upon him—and its struggles with its beloved in heaven, during five occasions on which it departed from the pit and removed its cloak of captivity, arriving in a state of sacral splendor at the inner courtyard of the King's palace." That is the narrative, that is the parable, and that is the plainest plain-sense.[77]

First, Malbim's insertion of a third party—a figure quizzing Malbim's reader—may, once more[78], speak to the stakes of Malbim's work. While of course it may simply be a stylistic technique, it's also possible to see in this tack a sensitivity to Malbim's authorial goals—ones which aim to address a public hunger, provide traditionalists with confidence and lucidity, and confess a biblical illiteracy at the core of the modern condition. As a rule, one's understanding of any subject is best tested in one's ability to teach it, but in Malbim's age this is more than a self-imposed assessment—understanding the biblical text is not, for him, a private matter. Scholars and intellects prey upon traditionalist ignorance, and he hopes to equip a consortium of faithful voices with the competence that they need.

Beyond the stylistic implications, however, Malbim proposes a stunning possibility—that this segment of Scripture, the Song of Songs, is King Solomon's spiritual autobiography. There is no romantic ballad, no love-song in the carnal sense—this text's plain-sense, its *peshat*, is the chronicling of a soul's fivefold interdimensional expedition. And precisely how Malbim casts this as the plain-sense of the text, involves an assumption about human language, which he goes on to unfurl.

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[76] Deuteronomy 4:9.
[77] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 94 [End pagination].
[78] Malbim employs this style in his introduction to Isaiah, as we noted earlier.

> In that this holy narrative is highly precious, it is loftier and distinct from the rest of Scripture, as they all relate events of the lower material world and matters of the senses, which every person can perceive…Not so this song, which speaks of the experiences of the godly soul and matters of the spirit; concerning its ascent, and its descent into its bodily residence, its link with the celestial realms and its connections to the powers of the body, all of which are hidden, concealed, and supernatural matters—all pertaining to the intellect rather than the senses, for the soul and its essence is invisible to the eye and inappreciable to the senses. Therefore, even a wordsmith must depict its adventures in plain terms, for there are no nouns or terms or adjectives that reference, in essence, spiritual matters…all the words which make up language are drawn from the senses, and all refer to matters of this material world alone….[79]

The contents of the Song of Songs, for Malbim, are biblically unique—they touch on matters beyond matter and speak to experiences beyond the senses. Where every other biblical narrative deals with terrestrial and material episodes, this work depicts a series of physically imperceptible incidents; and it is from this substantive uniqueness that the work's semantic distinctiveness follows. Malbim argues that human language is, at its core, drawn from conscious experience, and thus can only directly reference the world encountered by embodied human beings. There are literally no words or terms that can accurately refer to noumenal phenomena—there is only metaphor. In this context, our natural, earth-bound language leaves even our greatest writers with their tongues tied to an allegorical semantics. The Song of Songs reads as it does because there is no more direct a way to depict a soul's disembodied journey—there is no less romantic, somatic, and carnal vocabulary to weave this narrative's surface-fabric; that is why the plain-sense of this text, for Malbim, is truly King Solomon's spiritual voyage. The rest of Scripture appears to be so much more nobly composed, for its subject can be effectively referenced within the confines of our linguistic limits, unlike the subject of this song.

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[79] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 94-95 [End pagination].

Having made his innovative argument, Malbim goes on to claim his total originality and independence, and castigates the traditional commentators as insufficient.

> According to these words and truth I have strayed from the path of the commentators in their entirety, for according to their path the plain-sense of this song is as a love-song between a lover and his beloved, with only its inner meaning portraying the loving struggle between God and his chosen people, etc. According to their reading, the inner meaning is sacred and the shell is secular—like a High Priest in soiled clothes, or an angel of God in the fire of the burning bush. According to their readings, the inner meaning only appears through the lenses of *derush* or *remez*—far removed and distant from the bounds of *peshat*, so much so that if a person asked, "What is the plain plain-sense?", the only possible answer is that it's a love-song. Not so according to the path I have trodden; the *peshat* is sacred and the garment is pure, for the plain-sense of this song is as the words of struggle between the soul and God, its beloved. The external garb is sacred and pure—and it and nothing else is the plain *peshat*.[80]

Having already dismissed the Mendelssohnian efforts as misguided, Malbim turns to the traditional commentators whose exegetical efforts, while admirable, have resulted in the secularization of Scripture. Faced with the challenge of Scriptural carnality, they took refuge in an allegorical realm, leaving a secular text behind; the words penned by Solomon are sullied by their terrestrial referents, greeting the reader as no more than dirty robes or an unintelligible fire. For Malbim, the readings of the past do not pass muster in an age when the biblical script is under siege—it is made to deliver meaning only under the pressure of interpretive extraction and with the application of the particular tools of *derush* and *remez*. The Song of Songs, in their hands, has become a sensual, almost erotic text, with nothing but symbolic idiosyncrasies left to the faithful.

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[80] *Ibid*., 95.

Once more, Malbim's motivating anxiety appears to be the disservice done to the unschooled questioner seeking Scripture's true meaning—in this case being told that, indeed, this song is a romantic ballad. For Malbim, the text itself is sacred—and not just due to its canonical status, but its natural semantics. His theory refuses to concede to the claims of textual carnality, because, for him, the text exhibits a referential dissonance—due to the limits of human language—not a semantic one. This poetic narrative does not signify anything sensual or corporeal, it speaks of the soul—the text which cloaks unspeakable truths is itself sacred, and Malbim could not be more insistent that his reading is the text's plain-sense. Having now made his claim as clear as day, Malbim catalogues four conditions of *peshat*.

> The definition of *peshat* and its conditions are as follows: (1) The content of the work accords with the author and his experience. (2) The meaning of the narrative arises without a stretch in accord with the rules of grammar. (3) That it accords with the entire narrative, and the textual context from beginning to end. (4) That it takes its premises from the plain intellect and not far flung places, for then it transitions into *derush* or *remez*.[81]

Where Malbim delineated three hermeneutic principles in his earlier introduction to Isaiah, here Malbim frames those unique principles of biblical literacy within a broader, more universal interpretive system. As a sacred text written in a divine dialect of Hebrew, Scripture is definitionally concise, precise, and sublime, but in order to call a reading the text's plain-sense, it must also abide by the general rules of rational semantics. For a reading to be considered plain-sense it must, at the same time, align with the author's context, employ the ordinary rules of grammar, be grounded in reason, and maintain a sense of textual continuity—which, he goes on to explain, are principles adhered to across his ‘*Melitza*’ reading of the Song of Songs. It aligns with the life of Solomon and reads as a coherent narrative—as it is the chronological chronicle of his five spiritual excursions; and it relies on reason and the ordinary rules of grammar—as he indicated above, concerning the absolutely non-allegorical but necessarily indirect semantics of its language.

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[81] *Ibid*.

The central motive for Malbim's exegesis—and his insistent suggestion that it is the plain-sense of the text, emerges most clearly in the following lines of this introduction.

> And through this I expel the shame of Egypt[82] from these Scriptures, from their having said that it is secular; there shall not be a *peshat* in a way that tramples sanctity—for behold they do not understand the guidance of God nor his wisdom, for evil sits before their faces[83].[84]

Malbim sees his exegesis as a rehabilitative exercise intended to eviscerate the shame becoming increasingly attached to the biblical text. The *peshat* developed by both latter-day biblical scholars and the more traditional commentators, hollows this section of Scripture of its holiness, and Malbim's central aspiration is to unfurl a plain-sense reading that upholds the sanctity of the text—to hermeneutically presume a comprehensive intersection of semantics and semiotics, of the text's prime meaning and its script.

To this point, Malbim is still yet to address the tension between text and tradition, as he lays his focus on protecting the text itself. To some degree, as before, he even exacerbates the tension, painting the sages' interpretive efforts, though defensible, as distinct from the plain-sense.

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[82] Joshua 5:9
[83] Exodus 10:10.
[84] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 95 [End pagination].

While rabbinic readings are the target of modern mockery, the romanticization of Scripture appears to be the more urgent threat, where Malbim is desperate to rebuff the assault while accepting the need for a plain-sense reading.

Malbim's next biblical commentary however, appears to undergo a dramatic shift in this respect—where his attention seems to fall squarely on the apparent rift between Scripture and tradition.

## Introducing the Pentateuch: Turn to Tradition

In 1860, while Chief Rabbi in Bucharest, Malbim published his commentary to Leviticus, which he called *HaTorah Ve'HaMitzvah* (*The Torah and The Command*[85]). This commentary differs from the commentaries he'd previously published, most conspicuously in its aesthetic presentation—offering the reader two sections of primary material, one biblical and the other rabbinic, to which he appended his exegesis. In Jay Harris' reading,[86] the aesthetic itself makes a hermeneutic argument, suggesting that the two textual strata—biblical and rabbinic—are semantic reflections of each other. And in this way Malbim makes an explicit shift—in hermeneutical terms—moving closer to those who defend tradition against what we termed the second threat of modernity.

Of the three sections of his introduction, the first remains untitled, the second is labeled 'Introduction' (*Hakdama*), and the third is called 'Work's Contents' (*Toḥen HaMakhberet*). Beginning with the untitled foreword, we first see his defense of tradition and its alignment with the plain-sense of the biblical text.

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[85] Drawn from Exodus 24:12, where he notes that the former refers to the written law, and the latter to the oral tradition.
[86] Harris, *How Do We Know This?*, 222.

> In this commentary I have paved a new path…to explain the words of the sages and their codes…according to the principles of language and the rules of logic and interpretation, in new, wondrous, and precious ways. In it I have clearly shown that the sages, had in their hands, storehouses and warehouses filled with wisdom and knowledge; they had, in their hands, grand principles and fixed rules of grammar, linguistic and logical tenets, most of which have been lost and hidden from the eyes of all the wise who have followed them—hence their ways have been lost and their paths are unknown. I have clearly shown, with trusted wonders, that the *derush* is the plain *peshat*, necessitated by and rooted in the depths of grammar and the principles of the Hebrew language. The entire Torah, handed down by oral tradition, is written explicitly in the script of God's Torah; apply the intellect and see in Scripture the entirety of the tradition handed down at Sinai…[87]

At this stage in Malbim's exegetical labor, his focus lies squarely on defending the rabbinic sages; his attention appears to have shifted from the biblical text and its attendant tensions, and turned toward the assault on rabbinic tradition—against which he presents an uncompromising position. His commentary contests the allegations of a gaping fissure between Scripture and tradition—despite him having exacerbated them in his introduction to Song of Songs—as he pledges to both exhibit and employ the linguistic laws and the logic that undergirds rabbinic readings. For him it is clearly both a question of justifying their literacy and lucidity, where accusations of rabbinic fantasy and ignorance are rebuffed, and their competence and reason are bolstered.

To do this Malbim revives Wessley's radical claim, though not in his name, that the plain-sense of Scripture and the traditional exegesis of the sages are one and the same—that the *derush* is the *peshat*. Key to his argument, though he continues to promote himself as entirely original, is that—unlike in his reading of Song of Songs—he is in the position of methodological *re*discovery rather than invention. The sages of the rabbinic era, in Malbim's historical imagination, were in possession of Scripture's unique linguistic cipher—a cipher which has since been mislaid—and employed it to extract its intended semantics. There is no ambiguity in the text's plain-sense, as its meaning is entirely unequivocal, and there is no need to take refuge in an external system to generate its meaning—the sages, being in possession of a deep linguistic competence, understood exactly what the biblical text meant and intended.

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[87] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 1.

In the paragraph that follows, not cited here, Malbim offers a pithy outline of his hermeneutic rules (which he says will comprise of 613 principles) and indicates who his enemies are ("Karaites"[88])—exposing the polemical energy that undergirds this exegetical endeavor. Malbim then begins his introduction proper.

> This volume, the book *HaTorah Ve'HaMitzvah*, which I set before you today, Enlightened of the people[89], is the result of much devotion and the yield of great labor. I have worked in the field of knowlegde and in the vineyards of reflection for many days, and with the exertion of the soul I have unlocked this allotment and harrowed its land with the toil of my hands…[90]

Malbim admits an extensive investment to produce his commentary, and with a smattering of agricultural metaphors he positions his toil as both biblically resonant and natural. Malbim's formualtions argue that there is no artifice here, no manufactured grammatical anachronistics—this is a labor of historical re-cultivation, an effort to unearth a system of elemental and organic linguistic truths. And Malbim's intended audience, once more, appears to be the enlightened of the people—a phrase with both biblical and modern valences—suggesting at once that Scripture speaks to the rationally inclined of the age and that it always has. He then transitions into the section entitled ‘Work’s Contents,’ and details his work’s three central aspirations.

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[88] A term referring to a pre-medieval group of Jewish separatists who objected to the hermeneutics of rabbinic tradition—often colloquially depicted as objecting to the very notion of an exegetical tradition in general. The term thus indicates a number of things—first, that Malbim's enemies are Jewish, second, that they oppose rabbinic tradition, and third, that Malbim seeks to reduce that radicalism by incorporating them into a history of 'heretical' separatists.

[89] Daniel 11:33.

[90] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 1-2.

> This volume which comes to you today, will teach you the secrets of wisdom, for its wisdom is manifold. Firstly, it will explain and elucidate the words of the *Sifra*—the palace, the primal work in which the fearful dwelt from the start. In it, the builders, the first teachers, established the foundations of the oral law and the pillars of tradition, in *mishnayot* and *beraytot*[91] organized by the order of the Torah and appended to the verses—they hanged on them like mountains suspended by a hair, and they expounded them with the thirteen hermeneutic principles of Torah study. Every one of them a warrior manning the frontlines at the gate—the fountain[92] from which comes strong waters[93], which sends springs into the valleys that run between the mountains[94]—and they filled the sea of the Talmud and it rose over all its channels and flowed over all its banks[95], and all the waves of their torrents and billows and analysis went over it.[96]

Malbim prioritizes, at least chronologically, the explanation of the traditional readings—the threat that he deems to be most imminent at this stage, or at least most urgent, surrounds the validity of rabbinic exegesis. He indicates that if one seeks the meaning of Scripture, one must inhabit the readings of the sages—their exegetical texts are where one must dwell if one hopes to read well. He employs talmudic similes, such as mountains hanging from hairs, and biblical militaristic and marine imagery, to conjure a rabbinic culture and character that connotes precision, commitment, power, intricacy, attention, and weight. The texts that contain *derash*, are—in Malbim’s prefatory imaginarium—not the fantastical or sloppy annotations of inattentive fanatics, but the accrued wisdom of diligent, relentless, sensitive, and formidable specialists. In fact, later in his discussion he refers to the grammatical principles employed by the sages in specifically enlightenment-laden terms: “They are 613 shining, sparkling, shimmering, lights, like the stars on the face of the heavens; they illuminate all darkness, and brighten all shadows in the lands of the living.”[97] What is again made clear here, is that *peshat* is neither simple nor always visible on the surface—exegetical efforts must be applied in order to mine the text’s intended meaning. Malbim then turns to his second purpose.

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[91] Mainstream and external teaching units.
[92] Zechariah 13:1
[93] Exodus 15:10
[94] Psalms 104:10
[95] Isaiah 8:7
[96] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah ’Im Peirush Malbim*, 2-3.

> Secondly, it comes to explain the verses according to the depth of plain-sense in line with the fundamentals of grammar, with a measuring rope[98], plumb line[99], and weights[100] at hand. It weighs every word and levels every inflection of meaning[101]; it deliberates and inspects, deciphers and assesses every word and saying by means of the measures of grammar and the principles of interpretation and logic…[102]

Though the rabbinic text is Malbim’s point of exegetical departure, his commentary—he promises—will also offer an analysis of Scripture itself. His metaphoric attention here revolves around tools of structrual analysis, fashioning an implicit image of the biblical text as a linguistic edifice fit for scientific valuation. Malbim concretizes the idea that Scripture is cogently composed and written in a way that invites rational analysis. Then he turns to his third task.

> Thirdly, it will be the middle-bar bridging from one end to the other[103]—linking the text and tradition[104] into hinges[105], resulting in a single Tabernacle[106]. It will explain the words of the sages and their riddles, the words of the rabbis and their traditions, according to the fundamentals of grammar and the principles of interpretation and

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[97] *Ibid.*, 5.
[98] Zechariah 2:5
[99] Amos 7:7
[100] Ezekiel 5:1.
[101] Proverbs 5:21.
[102] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah ’Im Peirush Malbim*, 3.
[103] Exodus 26:28.
[104] Here the Hebrew phrase is ‘*HaKetav VeHaKabbalah*’, the title of Meklenburg’s biblical commentary, which it is impossible to imagine that Malbim didn’t consult. Yet Malbim never acknowledges any influence or even awareness of his work.
[105] Exodus 26:11.
[106] Exodus 26:6.

> logic, in new, wondrous, and precious ways. The seers will see, and the erring will glean[107] that fortified and formidable treasure-houses sat in the hands of the sages, with grand laws of grammatical tenets, linguistic and logical mechanics—rules fixed like rooted pins. Plumb lines and bricks were in their hands to grant intention to the heaven's craft, to level with scales every word and utterance, and to expound with expertise every elucidation received from Sinai—every word of tradition and oral law is explained in the text and correlated with the depths of *peshat* and interpretation. Through it, they that murmur shall learn instruction[108], fools shall learn understanding, and scoffers faith, for the *derush* is the plain *peshat*, and all the words of the sages are embedded and necessitated by the depths of grammar and the fundamentals of the Hebrew language…[109]

The third and perhaps central purpose of Malbim's work here, is to link Scripture's linguistics with the sages' exegetics—to exhibit their common semantic habitat, and thus simultaneously show Scripture's singular poetics and the sages' analytic expertise. Malbim proffers the dual aspiration of spiritual and scientific enlightenment—one that reveals the rationality beneath ostensible chaos, and justifies faith in the face of skepticism; one that seeks to edify a public yearning for knowledge and suggests that the Enlightenment itself—at least in this regard—lacks rigor. Unlike Meklenburg, who uses faith to justify his reading, Malbim argues that his reading will produce more faith. The introduction then veers toward a sympathetic look at the anxieties of rationalists—anxieties, Malbim claims, that have been a long time in the making.

> However, hearts have been confounded and wellsprings devastated; over this, moderns have been astonished and the ancients befuddled, saying, "This *Torah*, that we call the oral *Torah*, what is its basis and where is the residence of its glory? Who determined its measures?[110] Who set its cornerstone and upon what are its sockets secured?"...For in most of their (the sages) words, it seems that not only does the plain-sense of Scripture not necessitate the *derush* extracted from it, but sometimes it seems the contrary that the deep-*peshat* even contradicts the *derush* and opposes it! Most of the time they drape heavy-armor on gossamer and hang major legislation on a single word or letter, about which a person could expend all

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[107] Proverbs 21:16.

[108] Isaiah 29:24.

[109] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 3.

[110] Job 38:5

> their energies and never discover how that word or letter lead to that matter…Sometimes they expound a *derush* in one place, and in other places they expound the opposite from the same letter…and when we ask elders about this, we see that they've answered that the words of verses brought as proof for laws are simply mnemonics and cues…while the essence of the laws were received orally by hand. But this is a quite a stretch, as we see them always ask, 'Where do you get this from?', and answer such-and-such a verse; then they ask, 'But that verse is required for another teaching?', and they continue back and forth; it's inconceivable that they interrogate like this over a matter that is merely mnemonical…[111]

Malbim admits, it seems, that, at the very least, there is an unintuitiveness to Scripture's linguistic expression and that many have read the biblical text and see deep inconsistencies in rabbinic exegesis. The sages' readings seem in places arbitrary and erratically pedantic, and as a system they appear unsustainable due to a profound interpretive unevenness. Unlike Nietzsche's metaphoric edifice of lies,[112] where cobwebs lend the struture its balance of dexterity and stregnth, here the webby connections lead to a structural failure, as the weight they are made to carry makes them cave. And beyond the metaphor's evocation of flimsiness, there is a conceptual dissonance, where military objects are hung upon something quite quotidian. The weakness is not simply in the apparent capriciousnous of the exegetical practices, but also the irrationality of tying foundational principles to insignificant linguistic signals.

Malbim then outlines two misguided solutions. First, some—such as Hirsch, whom he doesn't mention—have suggested that the webby connections are in fact indicative of an artificial link reverse engineered by those in possession of a indisputable tradition, concluding that rabbinic exegesis is not exegetical in the slightest. The flaw in this solution, for Malbim, is that the level of rabbinic cross-examinations throughout midrashic and talmudic literature—where sages subject interpretation to laborious analytic scrutiny—signifies a gravity far beyond a search for easy recall. He then turns his ire on the solution taken by the hyper-rationalists of his time.

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[111] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 3-4.

[112] *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*.

> And the radicals among our people have raised themselves up to establish a vision, but they've stumbled.[113] Karaites and insurrectionists have emerged from them, who've broken the yoke and burst the bands[114] and smashed the mighty and pious people[115]… Behold, also some among the enlightened have stumbled, to refine and purify and whiten[116], yet they hover over two views[117]; sometimes they incline toward linguistics and the plain-sense of Scripture, seeing the *derush* as strange…and sometimes they are drawn after the *derush* and tradition and reject any logical attempts to understand Scripture—these two brothers, *peshat* and *derush*, fight together, grumbling in their tents[118] without a savior…[119]

Malbim seems less concerned with the views expressed by the Christian and secular biblical scholars of modernity than their embrace by his co-religionists. While he sounds forgiving, or at least less aggressive toward the Jews who started the revolution in biblical studies—possibly Mendelssohn in particular, Malbim lambasts those who came later as rebels and heretics. While perhaps admirable in their attempts to resolve the apparent tensions between Scripture and the sages, rationalists have failed—in Malbim's view—to craft a consistent hermeneutics. For many, *peshat* and *derash* are in constant conflict, and thus both suffer. Malbim then points to a very specific event, which, by his account, impelled him to publish—and catalogues the two threats he specifically seeks to resist.

> And it was in the year 5604 [1844] from creation, we heard a sound like a woman in pain, a shriek like a woman in labor—the sound of God's law gasping for breath

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[113] Daniel 11:14.
[114] Jeremiah 5:5.
[115] Daniel 8:24
[116] Daniel 11:35
[117] I Kings 18:21.
[118] Psalms 106:25.
[119] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 4.

and spreading its hands[120]; its tears on its cheeks for its friends had betrayed it[121], for some of its German friends have become brutish and scoffed at God. They gathered to abolish religion and law, and conspired against its keepers[122]. Crowds of shepherds arose and ate the sheep of their charge; rabbis and preachers and cantors smote themselves and slaughtered their congregations. All these figures gathered in the city of Braunschweig, to the valley of demons[123], they shattered the empty vessels and unveiled the torches[124], they assembled small foxes[125] and their flaming tails[126]—and fire went out[127] and devoured briers and thorns[128], it scorched from the corn to the sheaves to the olive groves[129], and burned in the Temple of God—it burnt between the poles and charred the ark of the covenant, and threatened to raze the tablets of stone and brand every sacred place on Earth[130]. In those days, at that time,[131] I saw and decided[132] that it was time to act for God[133], time to make for the written and oral Torah a fortified wall[134] with drawbars and bolts[135] to keep rogues from profaning it[136]. Whether for the written Torah, which this evil congregation[137] considered as one of the works of ancient civilizations, its songs and verses it compared to the poems of Homer and the Greeks; or whether for the oral Torah, which is for them mere epigrams and idioms[138] that they reject and deny[139]. They scorn its sages, saying that they knew not the plain-sense of Scripture nor recognized the rules of grammar. They went on a crooked and perverse[140] path, mocking and laughing all day long[141]. From then, as a warrior, I girded my loins[142] and began to pen my biblical commentary…, the method and workings of which I have already made known in my introduction to Isaiah and the *Mevaser*[143] that I published in 5608 [1847-8]. And I have founded a shelter for the oral law and built it a safeguarded tower and impenetrable fortress[144]…for all the words of the oral law are necessitated by and rooted in the plain-sense of the text and the depth of

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[120] Jeremiah 4:31.
[121] Lamentations 1:2.
[122] Psalms 83:4.
[123] Genesis 14:3
[124] Judges 7:16
[125] Song of Songs 2:15
[126] Isaiah 7:4.
[127] Ezekiel 19:14
[128] Isaiah 9:17
[129] Judges 15:5
[130] Psalms 74:8
[131] Jeremiah 33:15
[132] Ecclesiastes 8:9
[133] Psalms 119:126
[134] Isaiah 2:15
[135] Chronicles II 8:5
[136] Ezekiel 7:22
[137] Numbers 14
[138] Deuteronomy 28:37
[139] Leviticus 5:22
[140] Deuteronomy 32:5
[141] Jeremiah 20:7
[142] Job 38:3, 40:7
[143] 'Pronouncement', unable to find a copy.
[144] Isaiah 25:12.

> grammar; the *derush* alone is the plain *peshat* founded on the true and clear rules of language. Whenever the sages engage in a *derush*, there is some exceptional grammatical inflection, and the *derush* restores the verse's stability in line with the laws of language.[145]

Repeating again his interpretive posture—aligning *peshat* and *derash*, Malbim outlines the two hermeneutic errors or heresies of the nascent Jewish reform movement. The second error, impugning the sages, is what fuels his defense of tradition in Leviticus, but it is the first error—as we see in all the other introductions—that motivates his commentary writ large. And here we can see that beyond the conceptual dimensions of this dispute, Malbim insinuates a character issue too—there is too much laughter among the reformers, too much mirth in their blind revolt. What Malbim sees being lost in this misguided glee is God's law; virtue and observance are fading as sacred texts are debased—commitment to traditional ethics and ritual practice is precisely what screams as it is squashed in the stampede toward vanity. To stave off this moral decay, Malbim dives in to save the text and buttress its unique divine dialect. For him, once the plain-sense is secure, the text will teach again.

What emerges from this theoretical introduction is a tension with Malbim's earlier introductions—and, as we shall see, with those to come—where the sages are painted as detached from Scripture's plain-sense, if not entirely mistaken. In some sense this tension is intractable—but toward the end of the chapter we will have a suggestion, seeing his shift in Leviticus as a cultural and social necessity and an exception to his broader more universal stance.

Over the course of the five books of Moses, Malbim alternates in his exegesis between the dual aesthetic—bridging *peshat* and *derash*—and his more prevalent 'method of doubts,' sporadically probing the text with questions and subsequently addressing them. For no other part of these five books, however, does Malbim offer a separate introduction—thus there seems to be no deep distinction between the hermeneutics of his exegesis in regard to the legal and narrative sections of these chief volumes of Scripture.

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[145] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim*, 4-5.

## Introducing Joshua: Generic Divisions

Malbim's next published introduction—the reason for the sequence being unknown—was signed on the 9th of July, 1866, as he sat in Luntschitz, without the burdens of a rabbinic post. He does note, however, a surge in the Jewish interest in Scripture's prophetic and hagiographic sections, evident from the eruption of ever-new translations and commentaries—everyone seemingly unsatisfied with the work of former commentators.

Malbim then presents a defense of his exegetical predecessors, suggesting that their less than comprehensive commentaries are the result of the novelty of their endeavor—the literature of the prophets and hagiographa had never before been subjected to a consecutive and rigorous reading. The medieval readers of Jewish Europe knew biblical syntax and style, but were applying their knowledge to a largely untilled soil. Malbim catalogues a couple of the more central figures—crediting Rashi with the field's dissemination and David Kimchi with its initial fruition.

He notes how these medieval figures focused on the plain reading of the text by means of the basic and local elucidtion of the words, but neglected the transcendent ideas residing within them. For Malbim—as we've seen—this medieval mode of exegesis fails to go beyond paraphrastic translation, and does not produce a true *peshat*, one that leads the reader to the text's fullest meaning. For him, part of Scripture's sanctity resides in its moral pedagogy.

Malbim then makes his case for his more complicated and comprehensive commentary, arguing precisely for Scripture's opacity; these texts are not human texts and cannot be understood, in Malbim's conception, with a regular human cipher—the words are encoded for a high purpose by means of a divine author and requires specific tools for reliable semantic extraction. And then, for the first time, Malbim introduces a new biblical genre, one that he associates with the early prophets: historical narrative.

> I have not called you here to greet you[146], for you to heed me, to listen to my sayings regarding my commentaries on lyrical and parabolic sections of Scripture, to edify your understanding of the recesses[147] of the exegesis on those books, to inform you of how I built up the highway and cleared it of stones[148], placing there a new pathway—which shall be called a sacred path[149]. For now is not the time, and here is not the place to speak of this…For now I come only to awaken your ears to listen like disciples[150] to that which I'm inclined to sew and plant in this field that is first to ripen—the section of the early prophets, which is constructed entirely in plain terms and in a narrative and story-like style. This is lest you imagine that there is nothing to add to the commentators regarding them, since the words are plain and easily understood by every sensible student. Yet it is a mere whisper that you glean from them[151]—thus I give into your hands an honest plumb-line, scales, and balances[152], that you may measure and see with the scales of your wisdom that in these verses depart from their paths too—you do not know their hidden and concealed meaning until you take my words as a candle for your feet and my exegesis as a light for your trail.[153]

Malbim explicitly delineates a difference between rhetorically crafted sections of Scripture and the early prophets, which for him are comprised of more accessible narrative. But lest one see that apparent accessibility as an indication of semantic transparency, Malbim—now once again distancing himself from his traditional precursors—warns that it is only with his tools and analysis that the truth of the text can be seen. Plain-sense is, again, neither simple nor visible on the surface;

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[146] Proverbs 7:15
[147] I Kings 6:6.
[148] Isaiah 62:10
[149] Isaiah 35:8
[150] Isaiah 50:4
[151] Job 26:14
[152] Proverbs 16:11
[153] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Nahalat Yehoshua*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], unpaginated introduction.

it is hidden if not for Malbim's help. And beyond the less than exhaustive nature of other commentators' exegesis—and far more problematic—is the fact that, for Malbim, their work, however inadvertently, belittles Scripture.

> Also, if you compare or equate the narratives of these historic works with secular narratives written by historians who know the events of every age and the affairs of nations from time immemorial, it will already appear in the eyes of the reader that these sacred works have been diminished—when read according to the interpretation of the commentators—below the value of the these narratives…and compare unfavorably to them in all their details. For all who write historical chronicles, condition the works integrity and aesthetic as follows:
> 1) The author sets a singular purpose before him, serving as the organizing principle of the work…And the author must unwaveringly ensure that every detail of the words appearing in his work, coalesce together with this purpose, to which they all aim. 2) He must preserve the sequence of events—both in chronology and causation, and avoid a disordered or disorganized narrative. 3) he must weigh his words on precise scales, not to hold back information from the reader, nor expand on anything irrelevant. 4) he must select a thoughtful[154], clear, and lucid idiom[155], and words that are sweet and pleasant to the listening ear.
> And yet, if we examine the words of these sacred texts—according to the interpretations of the commentators—in combination with these standards, we see, (1) the purpose toward which the writers of these stories aim, and it is abundantly clear that their goal is to show how God's providence accompanies His chosen people at all times through those generations—and how they rise and fall, succeed and fail, according to their actions, whether good or bad; and how all their fates are wondrous, miraculous, and Godly (beyond the ethical and behavioral matters, and legal and theological issues, woven into the narrative). And yet, we find in the course of the stories numerous things which distract from this purpose, with a number of episodes mixed in without any known goal—neither ethical nor behavioral, legal or theological. (2) Most texts come disorganized, without sequence, and occasionally skipping from topic to topic—turning to other, irrelevant, or previous matters in the middle—thus, he moves his hand back and forth all day.[156] (3) it repeats words and topics without need and is verbally profuse concerning small issues. (4) it speaks in a strange idiom and unsophisticated language—sometimes picking up an issue and then dropping it, starting without completing it, and so many more dumbfounding things in each and every paragraph.

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[154] Job 15:5

[155] Lamentations 4:7

[156] Lamentations 3:3.

Listing a four-part formula for high-quality historical-narrative composition, Malbim leans toward what Meir Sternberg would later call, ideological literature.[157] He does not cite a source for this formula but suggests it is an objectively held one. First, he describes the need for a single organizing principle that both determines and seeps out of the content of the work. Second, causational and sequential chronology is central, in addition to a rhetorically sensitive hermeneutic of semantic concision and accessibility. And on this basis—if one reads only the exegesis of medieval readers—the early prophetic Scriptures pale in comparison to other works of literature. On a superficial reading these biblical works are chronologically chaotic, thematically sporadic, semantically expansive, and rhetorically dull—seen in simple contrast to other cultures' narrative chronicles, Scripture is reduced to a lesser work. It seems clear, through this comparison, that though Scripture is hermeneutically unique—written in a divine dialect and requiring Malbim's expert exegesis—it functions as a regular text, held to the self-same standards.

To resolve this problematic posture, Malbim offers his own commentary.

> If you read the questions that I've arranged on each topic—from the window of the questions you will see a sight, and your heart will recognize, that deep wise waters reside within the depths of these stories, and a man of understanding can draw from them. You will draw living, pure, cold, flowing waters from the exegesis that I've made; you will feed all the trees of the Lord[158], the cedars of heaven[159], in Eden the garden of God[160]; you will water deserts, wildernesses, and steppes, and it will blossom like a rose[161]; you will nourish your wearied soul[162], and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail[163]; it shall fulfill the blessing of God, and your soul shall bless me[164]. For after I call every hidden thing to

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[157] Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. 1st Midland book ed. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.
[158] Psalms 104:16.
[159] Psalms 80:11
[160] Ezekiel 28:13.
[161] Jeremiah 50:12, Isaiah 35:1.
[162] Jeremiah 31:24
[163] Isaiah 58:11
[164] Genesis 27:19,31.

> account, behold in my commentary—drawn up in full and secured[165]—I have made the rugged level and the ridges plain; no repetition or deficiency, no disarray or disorder, for all of Scripture is filled with wisdom of the heart and much understanding, and the words testify for themselves that they are the words of the living God, said with the spirit of God by people possessed of that spirit, and the tablets are work of God.

Malbim's exegesis is thus, for him, not simply explicatory but redemptive—as he goes about explaining the words, he saves the text; he aims to endow the stories with both a depth and a purpose. His water-based metaphors speak to his conception of Scripture as both personally edifying and broadly invigorating. Malbim's *peshat* is not simply about rendering the text's intended meaning, but giving the text a moral function—and doing so in a way that makes the text speak for itself. Malbim frames his exegetical questions as vehicles of revelation, as critical ways to make the reader see the truth of Scripture—and he frames his exegesis in the same way, helping the reader to see the truth of faith.

It is almost impossible, in reading this introduction too, to avoid the conclusion that, for Malbim, Scripture employs a hermeneutics of obscurity, at least from the perspective of the modern reader. Intuitive rational faculties fail to hew the truth of the text, to which Malbim's new exegesis offers the only access. The text, to the untrained, is rugged and ridged, it is repetitive, untidy, and dim—and Malbim's elucidatory labor sheds unique light on the dark and uninviting, deceptively complex text. Malbim then speaks to the style and sources of his own exegesis.

> And I have arranged the words of the commentary to be incredibly succinct and in an easy idiom, in order to allow every reader to speed through it and understand it for his edification—if he reads my words with the application of intelligence and without rushing[166]. And I have turned to the commentators which explained Scripture after Kimchi—heroes, who have always been people of God—but none of them braced to imbue the living spirit into Scripture in the path of *peshat*, with

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[165] II Samuel 23:5
[166] Ecclesiastes 5:1

> the exception of the chieftain, our teacher, Rabbi Isaac Abravanel and a group of his peers living in his age. And I have drawn out gems from the depths of their words, in places where their words arise before, and I've gathered them into a house in their name, because all the commentators, besides them, turn to *derush*, which we're not dealing with currently, and the latter-day explainers [*meva'arim*] have nothing new in their mouths, and some of them are lifted by the East wind and the wind feeds upon them[167].

As Malbim aims his work at the broadest Jewish audience, he could not be more clear that his attention has returned to the text of Scripture alone, and moved away from bridging it to rabbinic tradition. He argues that following the work of David Kimchi[168], no one—with the noted exception of Isaac Abravanel, whom he refers to deferentially—engages in what he calls *peshat*. Every other reader employs the mode of *derash*, wresting the text for an external purpose, decontextualizing it for the sake of moralizing with it—without attending to its intended plain-sense. And regarding the work of his less traditional contemporaries, Malbim has very little time at all—simply dismissing them as insipid and warped. Malbim's primary aim, in this introduction, is to position his exegesis as a redemptive agent, saving the text of the early prophets from the realms of lesser literature, while explaining how the divine dialect has a sacred message for now.

### Introducing Ezekiel: Deepening Colloquiality

Just over six months after the publication of his Joshua commentary, Malbim signed off on his introduction to Ezekiel on January 7th, 1867—the second work in what seems to have been an incredibly industrious year. Following his commentary on Ezekiel came one on Jeremiah, signed in April, then Job in July, and Psalms in November. As noted in the first chapter, this appears to have been the most peaceful time in Malbim's life, where his wife's business successes permitted him to study and publish without the need for a pulpit position.

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[167] Jeremiah 22:22.

[168] For more on Kimchi, see: Talmage, Frank. *David Kimchi, the Man and the Commentaries*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Malbim opens this introduction by noting its ostensible superfluity—pointing to the theoretical hermeneutics outlined in his earlier works, Isaiah in particular.

> The principles that I outlaid in the introductions to my commentary on the Book of Isaiah—upon which I built a silver battlement and a protective wall in its chambers concerning the words of Scripture said in the poetic and figurative[169] genres—aren't specific to the explanation of that book alone. They are the basic principles, firm rules, and general conventions of all prophetic and hagiographic works filled with the spirit of God in the power of poetry and the glory of metaphor—they all share a vernacular[170], and a single spirit glittering within them, a sacred, strong, sublime, majestic, and awesome spirit, one that keeps these three conditions: (1) No synonymous repetition appears in the words of this sacred poetry, in the words of the living God. (2) No words appear or are absent without a specific purpose. (3) No passage appears empty of a sublime idea. These are the three immovable iron pillars, upon which lies the drive to understand all that's hidden in Scripture…as I've clarified in the introduction to the aforementioned book, which is a general introduction to all words of Scripture which appear in the form of poetic or figurative form.[171]

Reinforcing his generic distinctions within the body of Scripture, Malbim sees all poetic and figurative texts as hermeneutically similar, organized by the three 'iron pillars' of the divine dialect. Once again Malbim emphasizes his drive to uncover what lies hidden within Scripture, pointing to a hermeneutic of obscurity and an exegesis of simultaneous exposure and preservation. But the apparent simplicity of Ezekiel's vernacular is precisely, for Malbim, in tension with this notion, and is precisely what warrants a separate introduction.

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[169] The Hebrew word here is *melitza*, variousl translated. Moshe Pelli suggests that for many of the age of Haskalah the term meant 'rhetoric,' though for Malbim it refers to metaphoric or figurative terms. See: Pelli, Moshe. *Haskalah and Beyond: The Reception of the Hebrew Enlightenment and the Emergence of Haskalah Judaism*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2010, 146-7. He suggests that for Mendelssohn it suggested rhetorical expressions that move one inwardly, see, 145.

[170] Genesis 11:1,6.

[171] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Mareh Yehezkel*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 1.

> However, the figures of speech of this majestic seer—holy is he unto God—which we deal with in its commentary, are very distinct; different from the expressions of his prophetic peers…this seer, our prophet, does not speak with might or power, nor with poetry or metaphor, but like a man speaking with his peer…straightforward and easy words…(hence they don't call this well 'argument'[172], for the latter day explainers and scholars do not quarrel with it as they do with the book of Job or Isaiah and other sacred wells of water flowing from the Sanctuary—some of them came to *Mara* and cast in their woods, embittering the water; and some of them block it up and fill it with dirt. But the well-waters of this prophet of ours, goes untroubled by the foot of man, and the foot of the explainer, explorer, and scholar does not befoul them…).
> However, despite this, after weighing the words of our book with just measures…we do not find enough sustenance in the words of the commentators who precede me—for even though there is not much repetition of words or synonymy in this work, as there is in Isaiah and others written in poetic and figurative style—there is widespread and broad repetition of ideas…and every passage one explores and reads attentively from beginning to end, turns out having its content repeated two or three times…and its words are thus conceptually blank—protracted expression and elocution without content…[173]

What Malbim considers to be Ezekiel's overwhelming colloquiality, his smooth idiomatic accessibility, positions him as unique among his prophetic peers. The ease with which his words make meaning leads, in Malbim's view, the scholars of modernity to take a less combative and more cordial attitude toward the commentators of the past in the context of Ezekiel's work; in relative simplicity, it seems, lies exegetical peace. Having said that, Malbim's view of the divine dialect as the key to understanding Scripture's plain sense, runs up against an ostensibly repetitive text. Though he notes that there are very few instances of intra-verse, word-for-word synonymy, there are multiple large-scale conceptual duplications—leaving whole swathes of Ezekiel's work, through the lens of Malbim's hermeneutic, as a semantic void.

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[172] Genesis 26:20.
[173] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Nahalat Yehoshua*, 1.

Malbim then goes on to argue that reading Ezekiel simply, even for those who do not share his exegetical hermeneutics of Scriptural concision, risks literarily diminishing the prophecies:

> And if one doesn't pay attention to these deficiencies when it comes to poetry and metaphor, for they are semantically empty but aesthetically beautiful…it cannot be the case when studying this book, which doesn't employ the adornment of poetry and the frills of sublime metaphor—for if one presumes that it is semantically empty, then surely one is comparing its value in our eyes against the value of other works…as the value of an empty vessel against one of gold or silver….
>
> And in line with these sentiments my heart guarantees…that it is not in arrogance or brazenness that I pitch the tent of my commentary far indeed from the camps of our rabbis, the holy commentators…it is not to denigrate the honor of the early ones that I have spoken…but only to put out the eyes of fools—who are sages in their own eyes—who say that the eloquence of prophets is found in their pronouncements, who say that they too, like prophets, conjure poetry and elevate with their rhetoric; to put out the eyes of rebels, who say that the Greeks triumphed in their songs over the songs of God, as did Homer with his rhetoric and fools with the praise of the idols…
>
> Behold my commentary maintains…that there is no redundancy or repetition in the words of God, that there are no empty shells or dead bodies without living souls—but rather an intelligent intention hidden in every statement…until all flesh know that the living God does not speak like man…[174]

Scripture's text can be half-saved at times, Malbim admits, for its soaring rhetoric and poetic power—though, of course, Malbim presumes that reading biblical poetry parallelistically fails to capture its intended semantic density. But in Ezekiel's case, there is no transcendent poetry, no rhetorical craft, no ostensible semantic parallels to misappropriate in favor of Scripture's grandeur; read this way, Ezekiel's words appear conversational, ordinary and dry, and leave the reader unimpressed and unmoved in light of the craft of comparable secular works.

At this stage Malbim tenders a defense of his interpretative novelty and validates his divergence from generations of traditional commentators. The exigencies of the age, he says, forced his exegetical hands away from the sages of the past—but not to degrade or debase them.

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[174] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Nahalat Yehoshua*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 2.

Malbim’s hermeneutic innovations come purely to save the text of Scripture from the fools of modernity—to extricate it from the grip of those who would unfavorably contrast it with Greek or modern verse. And in Ezekiel’s case especially, Malbim’s interpretive activity rescues Scripture from the perils of an insensitive desacralization at the hands of those he sees as spiritually incompetent rebels; he breathes life into the written word and reveals its hidden meaning, maintaining, this time in explicit terms, the unique nature of Scripture’s divine dialect: “God does not speak like Man.” Once again, unveiling Scripture’s plain-sense involves acknowledging the unique density of divine speech and the need for a skilled exegete to extract its intended message.

In the concluding paragraphs of this introduction Malbim details Ezekiel’s inimitable prophetic receptivity, pointing to the parabolic terms and symbolic gestures that God’s inspires in him. He also notes the collapse of Maimonides’ Aristotelianism in the modern age, employing Kantian philosophy in his exegesis of Ezekiel’s visions, while keeping some of what he considers the more esoteric portions from the public. In the end, this introduction adds to Malbim’s contention that his plain-sense hermeneutic will save the text from the central threats of modernity. For him it is not rabbinic tradition that needs saving but the text of Scripture itself, even at the cost of severing it from the rabbinic exegesis.

## Introducing Jeremiah: To Err is Human

Signed off in March or April of 1867, Malbim’s introduction to the book of Jeremiah tackles a very particular issue and takes on a very specific medieval commentator—one he deeply admires. Though revering Abravanel’s exegesis, and in many ways seeing him as a model for his own work, Malbim takes him to task for his assessment of Jeremiah’s linguistic proficiency. Abravanel suggests that much of the book’s grammatical incompatibility comes down to the prophet's lack of competence—and, employing a play on a verse from Job, Malbim recognizes his predecessor's greatness, even piety, but draws the line on what he sees as hermeneutically heretical:

> And behold I say (and to the master who is among the flawlessly faithful of Israel, apologies), the good we shall accept from him, but the bad we shall not.[175]

The entire edifice of Abravanel's evaluation rests on the premise that prophets author their own work—that prophets plan as they pen the words Scripture. Nothing could more threaten the inviolability of the biblical text, for Malbim's notion of the divine dialect, than the presumption that they are the products of human composition. The text's sanctity depends on Scripture flowing as the result of prophetic dictation, where no whim or decision making, of any kind, is supplied by the writer. A major issue of contention among modern biblical scholars—one that Malbim has so far managed to ignore—is that of textual emendation, as we have noted elsewhere. But Abravanel's assertion regarding Jeremiah's lack of linguistic expertise, one that seeks to defend the coherence of Biblical Hebrew, comes at the expense of Scripture's very integrity.

> If you think that one can attribute an error or mistake to the prophet's words or work, surely then everyone can start amending Scripture as they see fit—to fix a metaphor or straighten twisted expressions—and then the books of Scripture become like a breeched, wall-less city…and we are exhorted never to alter even a single letter, the *Mesorah* was made as a fence and barricade around Scripture…and if one sees a divergence from prophet to prophet in the linguistic style or rhetoric, it is due to the will of God, who inspired each of them to speak in that particular style. For no two prophets prophesy in the same style…and you are entitled to say that it relates to the training of the prophet, or that God inspired the differently, but not to say that they are deficient or flawed…and if it appears to you that one of the prophetic passages has a verbal deficiency or rhetoric imperfection, attribute it to

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[175] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Tohahat Yirmiyah*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 1.

> your own lack of understanding not to the perfect and flawless words of the living God…[176]

Where Mendelssohn defended the *Mesorah* from the shredding of non-Jewish modern scholars, Malbim defends it against the apparent hermeneutic indifference of one of Jewish tradition's supreme medieval commentators—employing protective and martial metaphors. Once again, Malbim dives in to save the text of Scripture, to shield it from critical desecration and argue its inimitable celestial composition. Malbim does admit that there must be prophetic differentiation—the styles of Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah diverge in ways that make it impossible to suggest otherwise—but he does so in a way that leaves the text's semantic competence and divine dialect untouched. Stylistic differences, linguistic preferences, divergent cultural references are to be found across the gamut of biblical texts, but—for Malbim—they all arise as a manifestation of divine intention. It could be that a prophet's particular sensitivities led to the necessity of a different order of inspiration, it could be that a stylistically richer Scripture is in fact a divine aspiration, but in no way can one say that a flawed linguistic competence, on the part of any prophet, produced a defective text.

Malbim goes on to address Abravanel's alleged evidence of Jeremiah's compositional imprecision—from the mixing of prepositions, to the wandering chronology, to the multiplicity of cases where the text is read differently to the way that it's written (*Keri*/*Ketiv*[177]). But in each instance, Malbim dismisses the accusation, in fact, arguing that the surface imprecision invites the attentive reader to dig deeper. Grammatical inaccuracies, linguistic inconsistencies, apparent gaps between text and recitation, all point—for Malbim—to a hermeneutic of semantic latency, where the text's plain-sense requires exegetical attention. Once again, Malbim's plain-sense has little to do with the surface or simple reading, but is identified with what he considers to be the text's true intention, as read as the word of God, however much toil it might require to find.

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[176] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Tohahat Yirmiyah*, 1-2.

[177] Malbim notes that he approaches this issue differently to the Abravanel, among others. He sees the read version as the *peshat*, and the written as reserved for the *derash*. Thus the more semiotic dissonance the higher the density of semantic saturation.

Malbim's introduction here pushes back against Abravanel and positions itself once again in the posture of protection—aiming, above all, to save the text. This time Malbim saves the text from the threat of emendation and alteration, arguing that true and competent biblical literacy delivers a stable Scriptural meaning; to err is human, but Scripture's hermeneutic is divine.

## Introducing Job: The Heresy of Paraphrase

On the 4th of July 1867, a few months after signing off on his introduction to Jeremiah, Malbim completed his introduction to the Book of Job—and in this instance, though his focus is very narrow, his argument is quite revealing. He opens with the assertion that the text self-evidently exhibits the qualities of a staged debate between multiple parties on the subjects of providence and theodicy. Having said that, the positions staked out by the various parties are anything but self-evident—and an exegete is charged to sift out and systematize the views presented and contested by Job and his peers, which amounts, at least on the surface, to a chaotic philosophical jumble. Malbim notes that many commentators—including Maimonides—have seen this text in this way and yet have failed to deliver a coherent, comprehensive commentary.

> And it is known that this work is written in the style of a disputation (dialogue), in which different people speak and debate one another—and there are as many views as there are debaters, where each member of the cast has a unique view that he outlines…and so Maimonides in the *Guide*, and many upright after him, tried to align each one of the friends with a particular view. However, once they entered

> the work, to explain and elucidate its words in this way, no man of valor found their hands…[178]

Malbim's major contention is that paraphrastic exegesis is easier sketched than drawn, and centuries of attempts to align the Joban litigants with specific positions has been more akin to a procrustean bed than an honest commentary. Where Abravanel prioritized the coherence of the Hebrew language over the integrity of the biblical text, Maimonides and others, in this instance, have shredded the text to produce neat philosophical platforms. Once more, then, Malbim sees himself as Scripture's textual protector.

The interpretive tensions surrounding the Book of Job include the speakers' shifting ideologies, the narrative's ambiguous chronologies, questions that go ignored and answers that appear unprovoked, and recurring avenues of investigation—and despite these conceptual and structural complications, the poetic language itself borders on the impenetrable; for these reasons Malbim sees the Book of Job as a text shrouded in darkness—one that he seeks to illuminate.

> The path I have trodden in explaining this work will lead the reader directly to a habitable city; it will bring him to rest and calm, and find hidden riches of secret places[179] and lips of knowledge—a precious jewel[180]. Behold, it will open before him now a book penned by a sage unlike any other…with the spirit from above, it was authored by a man the likes of which shall never again arise in Israel. [181]

Accepting one of the views promoted by the sages—that the Book of Job was authored by none other than Moses, and used as a tool of consolation during their era of Egyptian enslavement—Malbim pledges to provide a light with which to navigate this biblical text. He sees his exegesis as offering a sense of calm and the riches of a deep truth—where there is no repetition, clear argumentation, and constant semantic motion. Once more, in this case against the threats of a pressing need for easy reading, Malbim dives in to give the text an exegetical integrity even at the expense of neglecting tradition; and once more, *peshat* is both hidden and, like a city, bearing broad civic purchase.

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[178] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Keshet U'Magen*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 1-2.
[179] Isaiah 45:3
[180] Proverbs 20:15
[181] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Keshet U'Magen*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 2.

## Introducing Psalms: The Anatomy of Scripture

Four months later, on November 20th 1867, Malbim concluded his introduction to the Book of Psalms. He depicts the work as part liturgical, part meditation, expressing deep yearnings and assessing the standing and purpose of humankind in relation to heaven. Responding to the musicological conjectures of modern biblical scholars, Malbim employs the image of floating towers built on air and critiques the entire speculative endeavor—noting that his work will focus on the text itself.

Malbim begins this introduction by stating that his broad hermeneutic theories have already been said—and that the Psalms are part of the larger group of poetic and figurative biblical texts, such as Isaiah and Song of Songs. But while he sees no need to repeat the principles of his poetic exegesis, he does go on to note that the Psalms in particular demand an introduction due to a unique set of three interpretive concerns, as will become clear.

> It is perhaps redundant to add anything to this matter, the rules and principles of which I have made known in introductions to works that ripened first; nonetheless, the work of explaining this book is vital in my eyes, and more weighty than my exegesis of other works for a number of reasons.
> This matter should not be strange in your eyes, for so you will find in our sages that Hizkiyahu said '*Hallel HaGadol*'[182], and aligned it with the miracles of the age of

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[182] A rabbinic name for Psalm 136.

> Sanherib; and so too will you find that in the early commentators—those who always follow the path of *peshat*. And I write this to relieve us of the claims of the scoffers who say, 'How is it possible that in the days of David—while the Kingdom was at its Zenith and Israel was on their land, and no decree had been passed—that they are singing on the stage about the fall of the kingdom and the exile of Zedikayah, in chapter 89, and their sitting on the rivers of Babylon and their misery in Babylon, and about the Edomites who had not yet sinned or erred…therefore I have explained in line with the plain sense, to silence the agitators and demolishers; for also concerning what the sages said about this book being authored by ten elders—including the sons of Korah and Asaf…—there is no necessity to say that every reference made is to the days of David; for as long as prophecy persisted in Israel…the faucet was open and the singing Levites soar with the spirit of God, and their words were sacred until Ezra sealed Scripture…
>
> All this is only according to the path of *peshat*, which we have followed in our exegesis which I have employed for the purpose of firing arrows at the company of *meva'arim*, whose intention is to degrade the honor of Scripture.
>
> However, for us faith dictates that there are seventy dimensions to Torah, and according to the ways of *derush*, *remez*, and *kabbalah*, every one of these psalms was already seen…in the days of David, and were hidden away in the hands of men of the spirit of each generation, until the matter had come to pass—and was then said for all to hear on the stage, each one in its time. And one should not ask how he sang of them sitting on the rivers of Babylon or the wickedness of Babylon before it materially came to be or before the decree was made, for concerning these matters and more we have words of *derush*…however, in understanding them according to the plain sense and meaning, it does not detract from the splendor of Scripture or its power, if they are inaugurated by an inspired Levite in the days of David or the days of Hezekiyah—for it is the spirit of God, and his word roamed in those days with the same sacred splendor…and thus one can say with all of these, that they were initially said in secret in the early days, and then later established in public and handed over to the entire people of Israel in the canon of Scripture, enough said.[183]

Firstly, Malbim sees the need to provide the Psalms with a *peshat* exegesis as all the more urgent in the modern age—specifically in light of the scholarship around the dating and authorship of the text. The traditional notion that the Psalms were penned at the hand of King David was seen as quaint and misguided, in light of—among other things—the simple reason that many of the Psalms seem to use the present tense to reference events that occurred after David's death. Malbim blunts the force of this argument by claiming that it has long been believed that many of the Psalms speak—at least, according to their plain sense—to episodes taking place after the life of David. For him, there is no need for any exegete to maintain a plain-sense Davidic intention for every part of the Psalms—even the sages themselves suggest that others were involved in penning the text. But this simple admission then becomes complicated, as Malbim engages in a somewhat strained balancing act.

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[183] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Tefillot David*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 1-2.

To maintain the text's Davidic origin while simultaneously conceding to their later formulation, Malbim suggests that David penned all the words of the Book of Psalms as part of a prophetic dictation, but parcels of the text were sealed and only later disseminated by the historical figures of the age in which they became plainly relevant. The way in which Malbim holds this posture is by turning to and embracing Scripture's polysemic nature. The words inspired by God and only inscribed by the hand of man are multiple in their meaning and are in no way restricted to their plain-sense intention—despite the fact, that for urgent purposes, the plain sense is Malbim's major exegetical concern. From the days of David on, the poetic texts of the Psalms had purchase in the realms of meaning beyond the plain—they conveyed moral, mystic, and meditative messages and were studied in secret by the select sages of each age, only to be unveiled when the plain-sense meaning could be aired publicly.

The reason, according to this introduction, that Malbim attends to the plain-sense—despite the richness of the other semantic registers—is in order to battle critical biblical scholarship. His exegetical aspiration, he seems to suggest, centers on guarding against the assaults of "scoffers" and "demolishers", and striking at the claims of "*meva'arim*" and "agitators"—who all seem to detach the text from a divine source. Although in earlier introductions, he depicts his focus on the plain-sense as a part of an ideal incremental pedagogy—where the plain-sense opens up the text and leads the way into the other realms of meaning—here he lays an emphasis on the polemical necessity. Despite this declared necessity, however, Malbim goes on to defend the power of the plain-sense, and presents his efforts as far more than merely a part of an obligatory doctrinal battle—the *peshat* of Scripture, in Malbim's thought, bears the very same splendor and sanctity as any other semantic plane. And beyond Malbim's particular exegetical motivation, what continues to emerge from his position is the quality of *peshat* as not being related to a simple or straightforward reading, but the meaning intended for the public—often accessible only through the work of an interpretive expert.

> In most psalms, nearly all, the utterances—which are sections of the psalm—appear distinct from each other without any connection or continuity or relation at all. The intention of the singer thus perplexes the reader and appears beyond comprehension—for in every psalm he finds countless lifeless bones scattered everywhere; thus I have toiled a great labor until I have found the axis and core of every psalm, and until the bones had come together—then I prophesied the spirit, saying, 'Come spirit, blow into these sacred bones that they may live'. Then they lived and stood on their feet as a very great host[184]—all of them beloved, all of them worthy, all of them heroes, all of them telling the praise of God…[185]

On a surface reading, most of the Psalms appear, at best, to flow by means of an obscure stream of consciousness, and, at worst, not to flow at all. Within a single passage the text will meander from topic to topic, offering an ostensibly disjointed meditation on a catalog of disconnected matters. Where the medieval commentators simply offered the meaning of individual words, Malbim seeks the structure of the passages as a whole, only out of which will arise the more phrase-centric meanings. Employing a prophetic metaphor from Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones—one he used in his very first introduction—Malbim positions himself as the revivor of a dead and splintered text. He sees his exegesis as bringing Scripture to life, where his commentary unveils the text's sacred coherence for those otherwise culturally incompetent. The plain sense is no less worthy than the esoteric tiers of meaning, it speaks in a song that voices a deep divinity—like a legion of resuscitated skeletons, chanting in awe of their creator. Though the plain sense is historically contingent and often references a specific moment in time, its meaning is fresh and resonant—the Psalms are not merely ancient hymns or poetic relics, they are ever-pertinent ruminations that speak out of history to every human moment.

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[184] Ezekiel 37:9-10.

[185] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Tefillot David*, 2.

For the second of his three reasons that an exegesis of Psalms is so desperately needed, Malbim turns to the text's specific ambiguity. Beyond the often evasive structure, the semantic quality of the Psalms—seen as poetic-chronicle—is less accessible than ever. Broadly speaking, he claims, poetry conveys history in a far more condensed way than prose, often capturing whole episodes in half-phrases, thus allowing facts and details to be blurred if not forgotten. Malbim rhetorically asks how one can, in our time, reconstruct history that has long been lost, and contends that it was with extreme exertion—and the help of Heaven—that the text itself unveiled its intentions to him. With a deep exegetical sensitivity and a measure of providential succor, Malbim found minor textual inflections pointing the way to their plain-sense meaning—despite the difficulty, Malbim assures his readers that his commentary never verges into eisegesis:

> On this too I toiled with the help of God, as I knocked on the doors of each poem and its words. Every single word said to me, "I will instruct you and show you the way in which to go, I will counsel you—my eye is upon you"[186], and every utterance that I saw winked with its eyes and pointed with its fingers[187]; it was for me as eyes to see through the primordial lattice…[188]

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[186] Psalms 32:8.
[187] Proverbs 6:13.
[188] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Tefillot David*, 3.

The third reason that Malbim sees Psalms as so exegetically sensitive is its poetic style; beyond the structural ambiguity and historical condensation, the very composition transcends simple translation. He contends that more than any other poetic text in Scripture, the Psalms speak in a highly sublime—and thus more complex—mode. He employs a number of biblical metaphors suggesting a text measured to celestial perfection, surrounded by a semantic mist that only an exegetical expert could pierce.

Taken together these three reasons exhibit, once more, Malbim's conviction that a text's plain sense conveys a profound depth, and despite being driven by the need to counter the profanation of modern scholars, the result of his exegesis is one that seeks to see sacred text in a divine dialect teach an intended truth. Malbim acts, this introduction argues, to save the text from desecration, misinterpretation, and over-simplification—the sanctity of the text and its plain-sense is at stake in his interpretive labor; a sanctity that does not inhere in the mere tradition of its divine origin, but in its concision, precision and profundity.

## Proverbs 8: Plain-Sense in Practice

Having surveyed the core theoretical arguments of Malbim's biblical introductions, getting a feel for his notion of *peshat* and the divine dialect of Scripture, we now turn to the only place in his commentary where he sees the biblical text's plain-sense as addressing the different tiers of Scriptural meaning. This will give us the opportunity, not only to further refine his hermeneutic theory on the subject, but to simultaneously witness his interpretive activity—thus giving us a window into his plain-sense in practice. The target text here is the opening three verses of the eighth chapter of Proverbs.

The seventh chapter of Proverbs depicts a meeting between an ignorant youth and a lady of the night who leads him astray, and then the text turns to the calling of wisdom.

> (1) Is not Wisdom calling and Understanding raising her voice? (2) At the topmost heights by the wayside at the crossroads, she stands. (3) Near the gates at the city entrance at the entryways she shouts…

The first verse here presents a perfect specimen of biblical parallelism, where a semantic synonymy is concretized rhetorically through semiotic variation: "Wisdom calls," "Understanding raises her voice." One can feel the machinery of Malbim's exegetical imagination already beginning to churn—seeking to save the text from a poetic aesthetic that embraces rhetorical excess as a signal of textual beauty. The second and third verses appear to describe two distinct locations, and this is how Michael V. Fox, speaking of 'Lady Wisdom,' describes them:

> She preaches in two distinct areas of similar character: at the high places within the city, whence the lanes branch out, and outside the city wall, at the entries to the gates…This means that the chapter is describing not a unique incident or sequence of events but an ongoing, typical occurrence. The scene and events are atemporal: Wisdom addresses mankind in all cities, inside and outside the city walls, in high places and low grounds, repeatedly and forever. Her city represents every city, and even the entirety of the inhabited world. Ancient Near Eastern mythology often represented the cosmos as a city…Wisdom…delivers her message where the competition is fiercest…from the everyday distractions of business, politics, and disputes. Far from being esoteric or academic, Wisdom plunges into the midst of the hustle and bustle to reach people where *they* are" [189]

Fox, following a number of other scholars, reads the scene here as a manifest metaphor for wisdom's universal aspiration and radical reach. Through a static image of wisdom simultaneously preaching in two essentially synonymous places, the message of the author of Proverbs is that wisdom speaks to everyone, everywhere. Once more, we could imagine Malbim's hermeneutic sensibilities bristling at this reading, which appears to see these two verses through the prism of a parallelistic aesthetic; he, as we might expect, reads this text quite differently—though he does accept that the medium of meaning in this context is metaphor. These are his comments:

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[189] See Fox, Michael V. *Proverbs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 2000, 267. He then compares this message with the spirit of the verse in Deuteronomy 30:11-14, noting the radical human accessibility of divine wisdom.

> (1) **Is not Wisdom calling**. Unlike the harlot who arrives under the cover of darkness, Wisdom calls out in public. It has already been explained [1:21] that 'giving voice' is smaller than 'calling'—for Wisdom comes from above, in that it's received from God, the giver of wisdom, and it calls to the person that he may hear the rules of wisdom and receive them. **And Understanding raising her voice**. For this emerges from the mind of the person and gives voice to make heard that the power to understand and analyze is found within a person—and a person feels this voice in the depth of his soul, as it calls to understanding and draws it out of his mind.
> (2) **At the topmost heights**. In contrast to how the harlot exited her house to go out to the streets, wisdom is depicted as descending from on high, and, at the start, stands on the peak of the heights by the great wayside—the path which is a public thoroughfare, and then **At the crossroads she stands**. It stands at the small crossroads, where lone individuals walk, one person at a time, toward the city; and then she stands (3) **Near the gates at the city entrance**—at the gate of the city, through which one enters the city; and then **at the entryways she shouts**—she shouts out at the doorways of individuals.[190]

Malbim's first exegetical move is to pan out and see this chapter as part of the larger work—specifically as a contrast to the preceding depiction of a seductress and moral decay. This is not an insignificant move on Malbim's part, as he has indicated that any plain-sense reading has to account for the flow of the text and the verse's immediate and broader context in order to maintain the integrity of Scripture. Having attended to the bigger picture, Malbim then hones in on the intricacies of each verse, refusing, at every juncture, to permit a poetic aesthetic that endorses or accepts semantic excess; these three verses cannot be reinforcing or projecting a single, simple message—however unobjectionable the message may be.

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[190] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Mussar Hokhmah*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 33.

He divides the first verse into two segments, which is then made to depict the descent of a heavenly Wisdom from on high and the rising call of latent human insight from within—for Malbim, this verse paints the quest for moral rectitude as relying on a blend of divine guidance and human initiative, the gentle collision of descending and ascending voices to drive the human will toward virtue. The nouns of each half of the verse are in no way synonymous, nor are the verbs ascribed to them—there is no parallelism, nor any rhetorical poetry; the poetics of Scripture for Malbim are determined by his conception of the divine dialect, ruled by his hermeneutics of concision, and require an expert exegete to extract what is hidden.

Turning to the second verse, Malbim echoes the point that this depiction contrasts with the previous chapter, cementing his idea that there is a logical flow to the plain-sense, and that his comments are more than the medieval practice of merely translating uncommon words. The call of wisdom and the seduction of the harlot—both metaphoric to an extent—traverse opposite trajectories; the latter leaves a place of privacy and intimacy and emerges into the streets, the former begins its journey at the most exposed and public place, and we shall shortly see its destination.

Once more, Malbim divides the apparently parallelistic verse into a semantic sequence, where not only do the two halves convey different messages, but they do so in a narrative progression. One of the key ways in which Malbim generates meaning in these compact verses, is not only to separate the apparent synonyms, but to treat the verse's linguistic iconicity as a form of conceptual chronology—where the very movement of time helps to forge new meaning. The 'topmost heights' and 'crossroads'—the latter being more secluded than the first—are two distinct stations along a journey toward the most private wisdom; wisdom begins at the most visible and universal level, making its way to a path where people walk alone.

Another one of the interpretive traits exhibited here, is Malbim reading straight through verse-breaks, seeing two separate verses as an elongated sentence. He overcomes the break by continuing his comments from one verse to the next without a pause, as he does in this instance, where, once again, he divides the verse into two semantic pockets—one, where wisdom speaks at the city gates, a more secluded place that the crossroads, and the second, where wisdom calls at the doorways of individual homes, more secluded still.

Having explained the basic semantic production of these three verses, Malbim then offers a novel reading of the metaphor, where wisdom's four-phase journey translates to the four orders of sacred reading known colloquially as *Pardes*[191]. As Malbim makes this interpretive move, there is no indication that he is no longer producing the plain sense reading of the verses, thus maintaining his position that *peshat* is not necessarily the surface or simple reading, but the text's intended one.

> And the meaning here is as follows: at the beginning, wisdom comes in plain-sense matters and rules taught to the masses as a whole. The metaphor being that she stands on a public path where the entire world walks—this being the plain-sense of Scripture and plain-sense stories and the commandments according to their plain-sense, which are handed to the entire people equally. After that she stands at the crossroads, upon which only private individuals walk—this referring to matters of Torah that aren't handed over to the masses, but to the sages who walk upon the crossroads alone, for example the *derush* or *muskal* modes of reading Scripture, and the hasidic mode of interpreting the commandments, and the speculation of the rationale behind various commandments. And after that it stands by the gates at which the Supreme Court and justices sit—that being the Scriptural rules handed to the Supreme Court and the great thinkers of the age who received the entirety of oral law, from among whom rulings disseminate to the entirety of Israel. After that it shouts in the doorways in which individuals sit in secret in study rooms—that

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[191] Malbim is not the only, or first, exegete to see the verses as depicting a four step journey that corresponds to four orders of learning. Moses Alsheikh, 16th century mystic and biblical commentator, also reads the text in this way—though his specific metaphoric ground, or, to use Julian Jaynes' term, metaphrand, differs from Malbim.

> being the secrets of Torah, matters of creation and prophetic visions for example, which are not expounded upon in public, but only by individuals in the presence of select individuals. And these four matters correspond to *Amon Pedagog*, *Amon Rabbati*, *Amon Mekhusa*, and *Amon Mutznah*[192]—PRD"S[193], as is known.[194]

The first order of wisdom includes, "דברים פשוטים וחקים המסורים לכל ההמון," which translates, in rough terms, to "plain-sense matters and rules taught to the masses." These are then further broken down into three categories: the plain-sense of Scripture, plain-sense narratives and ritual practices as explained in line with their plain-sense—the uniting factor being that they are equally shared with the entire public. The second order of wisdom corresponds to the quieter crossroads—including the moralistic and philosophical interpretations of Scripture, and the symbolic rationales attached to ritual behaviors through a sage's exegesis. The contours of the metaphor here do not appear to indicate a hierarchy of prominence, merely a progressive narrowing of the four orders' audience; the latter exegetical registers—not defined by Malbim other than by name and by identifying their practitioners—are handed to far fewer than the universalized *peshat*. The next order of wisdom is less about the mode of reading Scripture or understanding ritual practice, and more about legislative and judicial know-how; this third order is handed to the judges and courts who weigh cases and law and broadcast their verdicts and conclusions to the people. The fourth and final order of wisdom encompasses the esoteric and mystical truths studied in secret by a select cadre of sages.

Malbim then makes his final association of these verses, aligning these four orders of the metaphor with *Peshat*, *Remez*, *Derash*, and *Sod*, which form together the acronym coined by thirteenth century mystics: *PaRDeS*.[195] *Remez* comprises the decontextualized moralizing and philosophizing of thinkers, *Derash* involves the employ of judicial procedures to form law, *Sod* includes the mystic traditions, and *Peshat*—the plain sense—is the meaning of Scripture and ritual, as intended for the public. What seems to define *peshat*, as opposed to the other—more esoteric or protected—orders of wisdom, is not its simplicity or 'plainness' but its reach. The intended audience of Scripture's *peshat*, even if it requires—which it often does—a skilled exegetical intermediary, is the entire public. The plain-sense mode of Scripture, for Malbim, is not connected to the intuitive reading of text but the dissemination of public virtue—it is in this mode that Scripture functions as '*Amon Pedagog*,' a pedagogical guide. This term, taken from a midrashic meditation on the nature of Scripture, serves as Malbim's shorthand for a mode of reading that promotes public virtues as the plain-sense intention of the biblical text.

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[192] Midrash – four kinds of guide.
[193] See n.194 on *PaRDeS* below.
[194] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Mussar Hokhmah*. New York: *Mishor*, 1990 [Hebrew], 33.

In fact, in one of Malbim's Pentateuchal footnotes—labelled *Torah Or* [='Scripture as Light']—appended to an early section of Genesis, he employs this same term to describe the exegetical focus of his biblical commentary.

> Even the supernal wisdom has its place, but not according to the plainest plain-sense; for in the mode of plain-sense, in which the Torah is referred to as 'Pedagogical Guide,' it does not inform us of the secrets of creation at all—nothing other than the world known to us all…
> For the Torah comes not to teach us about science—how many stars and suns He created, and how they orbit and interact—nor the matters of angelic hosts and *seraphim*, and the rest of mysteries handed over to prophets by mouth, and then passed person by person to those who fear God. However, in the [mystical] mode of *nistar* [the Torah] speaks along two tracks—and there are golden apples through silver filigree…[196]

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[195] PaRDeS is the fourfold system of study initiated by mystics of the 13th century, in a bid to promote Jewish mystical study of the bible as the most profound—the four tiers are *Peshat*, *Remez*, *Derash*, and *Sod*. For more on the subject see: Idel, Moshe. 1995. "PaRDeS: Some Reflections on Kabbalistic Hermeneutics." In *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, by John Joseph Collins and Michael A. Fishbane, 249-268. SUNY Press; van der Heide, A. 1983. "Pardes: Methodological Reflections on the Theory of Four Senses." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 147-159; Scholem, G. 1965. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism.* New York: Schoken Books, 53-62.

[196] Malbim, Meir Leibush, *Torah 'Im Peirush Malbim (New Publication)*, V. 1, Bereishit; Bnei Barak, 1999, 6-7.

Malbim admits the polysemic semantics of Scripture but notes that his exegesis is only engaged in the plain-sense mode of reading, one that has no interest in science, homiletics, or mysticism—only in public pedagogy.

## Overview

Having now surveyed Malbim's set of eight biblical introductions, together with an excerpt of his exegesis from Proverbs, we have a deep feel for Malbim's theory of the plain-sense of Scripture—his definition of *peshat*.

Despite his distinction between the poetic and prosaic portions of Scripture—as seen in his introductions to Joshua, Isaiah, Song of Songs, Ezekiel, and Psalms—he sees the whole of Scripture united by a set of three rigid hermeneutic pillars: concision, precision, and [both aesthetic and ethical] sublimity.

The nature of this plain-sense hermeneutic here arises from the biblical text's identification with the divine dialect of Hebrew, and the assumption that God does not speak as human beings do—His idiom is more compressed and precise, His substance is more pedagogical and sublime. Malbim's exegetical motive, in these texts, seems clearly to be the preservation of the hermeneutic distinctiveness of Scripture, saving the text from any resemblance to human literature. On more than one occasion Malbim's theoretical defense depends upon the assumptions that Scripture, if read like any other text, would pale in comparison to human craft. As a result of this insistence on Scripture's deceptive complexity, the text, when read simply, can often seem obscure—thus necessitating an expert exegete to extract the text's intended meaning.

At the same time that Malbim maintains this hermeneutic of plain-sense complexity—of a profound *peshat*—he argues that the plain-sense aims its message at the masses, the audience at which Malbim aims his commentary too. We are left then, somewhat oddly, with a celestial message that broadcasts through a medium that requires skilled arbitration—the plain sense of Scripture is intended for public consumption but is, by necessity, inflected by a divine elocution. Malbim thus embarks on an exegetical quest to save Scripture from desecration, by balancing its inimitable celestial diction with its broad civic appeal.

Despite Scripture's unique semantic cipher, however, the general standards of literary structure apply—it is a divine dialect but it is still plain speech. The text must flow, either chronologically or logically, in a sequence that forms a coherent whole. The contents must match the intentions of the author and the author's context, and must emerge through the means of rational premises and a consistent grammar. Malbim's plain-sense modality, despite its complexity, does not participate in polysemy—the text has a single semantic intention and a solitary, if often composite, meaning.

As noted, he sees the genre of narrative chronicle as being ordered around a slightly different set of literary standards. The standards for narrative—including biblical narrative—involve sequential logic, expressive splendor and clarity, semantic precision, and a single organizing ideological principle. Malbim's emphasis on attentive exegesis applies no less in these texts and preserves their sanctity through the maintenance of a cryptic and inimitable, though grammatically consistent, linguistic cipher.

In these introductions Malbim resolves the tension between *peshat* and *derash*—between the biblical text and rabbinic tradition—by simply distinguishing them. The rabbinic exegetical imagination was never engaged in plain-sense reading for Malbim—at least in these texts; it was preoccupied with decontextualized moralizing, that bore messages that were in concert with the values projected by the plain-sense, but not arrived at through the same hermeneutic method. Malbim appears to see the urgency of saving Scripture's sacred superiority as eclipsing the need to paint the sages as rational readers of text. Where Mendelssohn, Meklenburg, and Hirsch, all sacrificed Scripture on the altar of rabbinic tradition, Malbim aims to save the biblical text even at rabbinic tradition's rational expense.

Having said that, Malbim's introduction to Leviticus—the one most noted in contemporary scholarship—appears to lean another way. It is in this introduction that Malbim takes an about turn and identifies two of Scripture's hermeneutic tiers with each other—embracing the most extreme version of what has been seen, by Halivni, Harris, and others, as exegetical apologetics. Malbim, in the context of Leviticus, argues that the plain-sense is identical with the rabbinic interpretation in every way—the *derash* literally is the *peshat*. He does not relinquish the hermeneutic keys of concision, precision, and transcendence, but Malbim exerts immense interpretive efforts to back-trace the rabbinic readings into Scripture.

In this particular introduction, Malbim makes clear that he is driven, in part, by the scorn borne by the rabbinic sages in his age, and credits them with the linguistic knowledge that only he now shares with his readers—permitting himself to be cast as hermeneutic archeologist rather than inventor. Where in other introductions he makes frequent reference to his innovation and repeatedly distances himself from the commentators of the past—including the sages—here he allows the sages' exegesis to overshadow him. He does note that he is simultaneously fueled by the drive to save Scripture from misguided defilement—to shield the text from the attacks of the illiterate and ignorant; but ultimately his mission is to align a sublime Scripture with the body of *derash*.

There is no escaping the particular polemical energy that flows within Malbim's exegesis of Leviticus, and it is in line with this view that most contemporary scholars conceive of his interpretive work as having two parts, along the lines of the division made by Meklenburg: law and narrative. Breuer, Gafni, and Melamed all see Malbim's exegesis as divided along these lines and categorize the methodological hermeneutics accordingly. Breuer notes the identification of *peshat* with *derash* in Malbim's exegesis of legal portions of Scripture, and depicts his work on the biblical narrative as follows: "the classical categories of *peshat* and *derash* were not so much collapsed as they were blurred"[197]. Melamed agrees, describing Malbim's narrative exegesis as "a blend of *peshat* and *derash*" [198].

That said, as noted above, nowhere does Malbim make this methodological division between law and narrative. It is true that his interpretive method differs in cases where the biblical text has an accompanying halakhic midrash[199]—he presents the rabbinic text alongside Scripture and appends his comments to the former, justifying and clarifying the rabbinic interpretation. And it is also the case that in those contexts—in places across Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the binary printed aesthetic makes a hermeneutic claim for *peshat-derash* identity too[200]. But the conclusion reached by these scholars, that Malbim's legal exegesis is consistent and neat—however artificial[201] or apologetic—and that his narrative exegesis is blurry and mercurial, appears to me to be misguided.

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[197] "Jewish Biblical Scholarship between Tradition and Innovation," in Saebø, M. *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. III: From Modernism to Post-Modernism: Part 1: The Nineteenth Century - a Century of Modernism and Historicism*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012, 298.

[198] *Sdeh Ilan: Memorial Volume in Honour of Arye Ilan* , חמו"ל, 1967 [Hebrew], 79.

[199] Body of rabbinic exegesis known for reading Scripture in line with religious legal and ritual practice, as opposed to oeuvres that focus on narrative or myth. See: Kahana, M. I. 2007. "The Halakhic Midrashim." In *The Literature of the Sages: Second Part*, by Peter J. Tomson, Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai and Joshua Schwarz, 3-77. Fortress Press.

[200] See Harris, *How Do We Know This?*, 222.

[201] *Ibid*.

These scholars seem to have set Leviticus as the point of hermeneutic departure and marked Malbim as an apologist for tradition, seeking in every instance to align *peshat* and *derash*. From this angle, Malbim's narrative exegesis does indeed seem capricious and untethered—allowing Melamed to paint him as a polymath whose irrepressible erudition got the better of his discipline.[202] Seen this way, it would be quite natural to expect Malbim to exegetically flounder in cases where the sages do not offer interpretive direction.

Malbim's work makes far more sense if we see these scholars as working backwards. Malbim's introduction to Isaiah should serve, when assessing Malbim's perspective, as the hermeneutic point of departure. The aspiration to align tiers of meaning could not be less in line with Malbim's hopes in that introduction—*peshat* has nothing to do with *derash*, and the sages and commentators through the ages have missed the power and perfection of Scripture's coherent and celestial composition; they have, for Malbim, failed to see the divine dialect that defines the plain sense. Leviticus, and cases of biblical law, are the loci of Malbim's hermeneutic deviation, not vice versa. His interpretive prefaces are warped in the face of law, not the other way round. Malbim has never been an apologist for tradition, he is a defender of the text. So naturally we need to explain the deviation in the case of Leviticus.

It seems to me that in the case of Leviticus it is a polemical necessity that drives Malbim away from his regular hermeneutic posture and forces him to collapse the division between *peshat* and *derash*. In addition, however, we could also suggest that in cases of law the *derash* coincides with Malbim's definition of *peshat*. Scripture's plain sense, for Malbim, is never simple and always concerned with public pedagogy. In poetic texts the lessons may be more heavily theological or spiritual, while in others they may be more ethical; but in cases of ritual and law, the lessons are ritualistic and legal. The sages, in the reading of Scriptural law, produce the *peshat* that Malbim sees everywhere. For Malbim, perhaps, it is the sages' who display, though justifiably, an exegetical inconsistency—offering the plain-sense of biblical legal texts and going astray everywhere else. For Malbim, Scripture's plain-sense is all about public pedagogy—and that premise never changes; his *peshat* is always profound, and in cases of law it happens to overlap with what has traditionally been called *derash*.

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[202] *Sdeh Ilan*, 82.

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Having determined that Malbim's plain-sense hermeneutic sees Scripture as a deceptively complex celestial text defined by a compact and transcendent divine dialect that seeks to teach proper ethics and theology, our question then becomes: what does Malbim consider to be proper ethics and theology? A notion of these ideas will be at the back of nearly every exegetical decision that Malbim makes, steering his interpretive hand to read the text's complexities in their direction. These ideas are the 'dark matter' that holds Malbim's commentary together—it is often hidden from the reader but exerts a vast gravitational force on Malbim's reading. What these ideas are, is the subject of our next chapter.

# **Chapter Three: Saving the Soul—Malbim's Dark Matter**

## Grasping the Third Pillar

Our first chapter outlined the specific contours of Malbim's life, in addition to the major threats that modernity posed to the newly emancipated Jews of Europe. In particular, we noted the following three hermeneutic threats against the traditional Jewish understanding of the biblical text: first, the threat against the text itself—critiquing its apparent internal inconsistencies and promoting claims of imprecise historical transmission; second, the threat to traditional Jewish exegesis—deemed by modern scholars to be rationally unsound or hermeneutically groundless; and third, the threat to the generic character of Scripture—where the romantic appropriation of the Bible recast its characters and narratives as dramatic and impassioned, less didactic than theatrical.

In our second chapter we outlined a series of responses to these threats from a cluster of traditional rabbinic scholars, who all focused their energies on defending against the second threat in particular—showing a deep concern for the fate of rabbinic tradition, and the damage its dissolution could do to the future of Jewish life. We then turned to Malbim's reaction, which was pointedly mixed and radically different. In the overwhelming majority of his theoretical introductions, he seemed quite comfortable to accept that traditional rabbinic exegesis was at a remove from the plain sense of the text and, in fact, never intended to elucidate that semantic plane.

For Malbim, the major threat against Scripture was to the text itself—relegating the fate of the sages to a lesser concern. His concern was the spreading romantic aesthetic lens applied to the biblical text, which, to Malbim's mind, diminished Scripture's inimitability—reducing a divine work of revealed truths to one of many varied volumes in a human library of ancient works. As we saw in his introduction to Song of Songs, nothing was more anathema to Malbim—not even claims that the sages misread Scripture—than the idea that the biblical text includes romantic ballads, of the sort akin to classical Greek poetry.

In his introduction to Leviticus, Malbim did align the exegesis of the sages with the plain sense of Scripture, but it seems clear, as we demonstrated, that this was an exception—a theoretical 'coincidence'—rather than the rule. In the case of Leviticus, the sages' reading mapped onto the plain sense of Scripture for it did not engage in allegorical or homiletic exercises—as it does in the case of the Song of Songs—but extracts meaning on the basis of the rules of grammar, syntax, reason, and context, while teaching law and virtue. For Malbim, the hermeneutic anchor for the plain-sense of Scripture across the canon, one that saves the text from becoming an amorphous cipher at the whim of competing exterior forces, is its mutually bound divine dialectic and pedagogic tenor—captured succinctly in his three 'iron' exegetical pillars first stated in his introduction to Isaiah and repeated often.

Where others were willing to forsake the text for the sake of tradition, Malbim sought to save the text with a set of three concrete exegetical tenets: (1) concision, (2) precision, and (3) sublimity. These three commitments translate to the following hermeneutic realities: (1) No words or phrases or episodes are unnecessarily repeated—there is no textual excess. (2) No words are synonymous, and no phrases or episodes are replaceable. (3) The biblical text is at once poetically supreme, while never straying from its mission to impart moral teaching.

The first two of these rules are, in many ways, self-explanatory and easily traced in Malbim's commentaries. His application of interpretive pressure to every word and turn of phrase, and his insistence on verbal distinctions and episodic necessity, all compute quite naturally from the tenets against excess and synonymy. Malbim's third pillar, however, the tenet that insists upon aesthetic and pedagogic sublimity remains rather vague and undefined. His view of sublime aesthetics relates, necessarily, to the poetics of computation outlined in the first two rules, while allowing for some subjectivity; but the second half of the third hermeneutic pillar, tying the substance of biblical semantics to ethical and theological teaching, seems to rely entirely on Malbim's conception of the proper ethics and theology.

Grasping this third pillar is the key to unlocking Malbim's exegetical pedagogy, where his interpretive energies press the text into secreting lessons for the moral life. And while there are hints as to the substance of this moral vision in Malbim's exegetical corpus, it is most explicitly depicted in his volume of nine published sermons or *drashot*, entitled *Artzot HaShalom*—a body of work he goes on to cite throughout his life and weave into his later verse-by-verse biblical commentaries. It is the aim of this chapter to examine a representative selection of three of these sermons, offering insight into both his pedagogic techniques and early exegetical strategies, but, most centrally, mapping the substance of his moral vision.

## Introduction: The Lands of Peace

*Artzot HaShalom*—translated as "The Lands of Peace"—was first published in 1839 while Malbim was serving as a Rabbi in the village of Wreschen. It is prefaced by a complex mosaic autobiographical proem which, in its substance, suggests an eruption of creativity and hope in the wake of crisis on Malbim's part.[1] Following this introductory proem, which interlaces more than three hundred Scriptural citations and insinuations into a confessional weft, Malbim speaks to his reader, offering a simple piece of guidance: he notes that each of the nine sermons—individually titled—will be preceded by a dense but brief poem linked to the subject but entirely independent of and unnecessary to grasping the sermon's message itself.[2] These brief poems are indeed dense, and show the extent to which Malbim loved to play with language and sought to exhibit his skill as a wordsmith and a poet.

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[1] See Rosenbloom, Noah H. *Ha-Malbim: parshanut, filosofyah, mada‘ u-mistorin be-khitve ha-Rav Me'ir Leybush Malbim*. Yerushalayim: Mosad ha-Rav Ḳuḳ, 1988, 389, for a description of potential influences on Malbim's style of pessimistic poetry. However, Rosenbloom's contention that Malbim's poetry was more stylistic than representative of Malbim's inner state is difficult to assess.

Beyond the brief poems, each sermon starts with a title verse or verses—a homiletical object referred to historically as the *Noseh*[3]—followed by the body of the sermon, which employs exegesis of biblical episodes, analyses and supporting anecdotes, rhetorical questions and didactic prose, all contributing to Malbim's pedagogic purpose and exhibiting the central elements of the ethical and theological ideas that the purpose of this chapter is to expose. It is our aim to disinter from these sermons what Malbim feels to be the proper ethical and theological convictions of the human person, as a means toward understanding his reading of Scripture.

Only one scholar gives more than scant attention to these sermons[4] and though they represent an early layer in Malbim's thought, they also exhibit the core of his deepest and most lasting ethical and theological commitments, as we shall see.

If one were to offer a central theme to these sermons—as one scholar has[5]—it would be the distinction between the physical and spiritual elements of being and the need to strive to lean toward the latter. Each sermon wrestles with its own problem and offers its own thesis, but they do intersect. The first sermon grapples with the question of the highest human good, the second wrestles with the question of how that highest good is best performed, and the third wrestles with the human condition on the basis of the theses of the first two sermons. And on this basis, I have selected to conduct a deep dive and analysis of theses first three sermons, which are, in many ways, representative of the key theses articulated and the central methodologies employed by Malbim across the work as a whole.

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[2] This is with the exception of the eighth sermon, which has no preceding poem.

[3] A direct translation of the Latin '*thema'*, in formal usage at the start of Jewish sermons since the fifteenth century. For more details on the history of sermon style, with reference to the role of the '*noseh*', see Saperstein, Marc. *Jewish Preaching, 1200-1800: An Anthology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 66. Though an examination of the differences between Malbim's sermons and those that preceded them would be fruitful, for our purposes, it is the substance of his sermons, taken on their own terms, rather than the development of the genre that is most pertinent.

[4] Schaechter, Schoël Zvi. "*Mishnato shel ha-Malbim*," PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1983, 59-64.

[5] Ibid, 63-4.

As we shall see, the philosophical result of Malbim's first three sermons is the commitment to pursuing wisdom for its own sake in the context of impediments, in order to demonstrate the power of the soul. With a moral conception so concerned with the state of the self—where the central ethic is the attainment of spiritual wisdom and equanimity—the fourth sermon explores why God designed a world in which we exist with others. The thesis of that sermon is indeed that others are—in an ideal sense—redundant, but a necessity as a consequence of the first human sin. In a perfect world we would all live forever, perpetually exhibiting our equanimity in the pursuit of wisdom—but the degenerative nature of our material elements, augmented by our embrace of their urges, leads human beings to need progeny to ensure at least 'special' (as opposed to 'individual') permanence.

The end of the fourth sermon marks a turning point in *Artzot HaShalom*, as the sermons turn their attention to the questions of theodicy and providence. In sermons 5-7 Malbim wrestles with the question of where and when divine justice takes place—whether reward and punishment are dispensed in this world or the next. The central thesis arising from these three sermons—and solidified in the eighth sermon, which is essentially a running commentary to the narrative of the Manna in Numbers 11—is that spiritual reward and punishment are far more lasting and important than any material pains or gains. In these three sermons he argues for a celebratory attitude in response to material suffering and offers a series of three reasons to have a bleak outlook toward any material reward in this world. The final sermon, which, in the words of S. Z. Schaechter, serves as the connective tissue—*habariach hamavri'ach*—for the previous sermons, wrestles at more length with the question of providence and free will and why the rewards and punishments promised in Scripture are of a material nature.

Much of Malbim's discussion at this stage of his life, as we shall see in the three sermons that we will explore in more detail, employs the vernacular of medieval philosophy—building on a combination of Aristotelian and mystical concepts—but the result is an outlook that he maintains throughout his life and resists the cultural shifts of his age. The focus on the world of the mind as opposed to the urges of the flesh, pushes back against the sentimentality and embrace of instinct that defines much of the romantic imagination—as per Rousseau's conclusion to his first discourse, blaming the rise of arts and sciences for a decline in morality:

> O virtue, sublime science of simple souls! Are so much effort and so much preparation really necessary to know you? Are your principles not engraved in all our hearts?[6]

Against this conception of virtue, Malbim channels the enlightenment commitment to the pursuit of truth and knowledge, though of course within the framework of Jewish tradition. And it is our aim, in this chapter, to show that Malbim's view of virtue that emerges from these sermons, which spurns the romantic spirit, serves as the basis on which Malbim's later exegesis rebuffs the romanticization of Scripture. For Malbim, we shall show in the next chapter, it is the ethical and theological ideas that emerge from these sermons that serve as the substance of the third hermeneutic pillar concerning the sublime content of the biblical text—ideas that, we shall show in our next chapter, Malbim teaches via the means of his later exegesis. But first, we turn to the sermons themselves.

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[6] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, Susan Dunn, and Gita May. *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002., 67. For more on Rousseau and the romantic movement generally, see the discussion in our first chapter.

### Sermon 1: The Ends of the Earth

Malbim gave every one of his nine sermons their own title, each of which involves the Hebrew word *Aretz*, meaning ‘Earth’ or ‘Land’. He called the first sermon in the compendium *Afsei Aretz*,[7] roughly translated as “The Ends of the Earth.” While it was almost certainly not his intention to make this pun, the conceptual problem with which Malbim wrestles in this sermon is the apotheosis of terrestrial ethics—the ultimate human endeavor.

The sermon is divided, conceptually and chronologically, into two segments. The first segment determines the necessary condition under which any act is deemed ethical or virtuous—the presence of a pure intention. While the second segment explores the supreme ethic or virtue—the pursuit of wisdom. Combined, this sermon’s essential thesis is that the greatest good that a human being can perform—that which every person is called to aspire toward—is the pursuit of wisdom for its own sake.

Following his title verse, Proverbs 19:8, Malbim opens this sermon with an unequivocal declaration—echoing the character of Aristotle’s discussion around the so-called great-souled man:[8]

> We know how very easy it is…for the man endowed with spirit to perform wonders, at a moment when a praiseworthy or virtuous act is presented to him—to cast his soul into the act notwithstanding the bodily or fiscal harm it may bring him—due

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[7] This is a phrase which appears thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible—in Deuteronomy, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Zechariah, Proverbs, and Psalms.

[8] The ‘great-souled man’ is discussed in book 4, chapter 3 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. And Malbim, as we’ll note, does in fact reference Aristotle’s *Ethics* later in the sermon.

> to the impassioned soul's drive to pour its essence into midst of the good act, as a result of its goodness and virtue. And undoubtedly, reward or compensation of any sort in exchange for his behavior would never occur in the mind of this noble actor—for the virtue of the act itself is far greater than any material prize, to the extent that if he were offered heaps of gold and silver in exchange for his behavior, he would see it is a mockery, compensating him for something for which he had already been fully paid.[9]

It is a given, in Malbim's ethical imagination, that great people are capable of great sacrifice purely for the sake of doing good. But while it is a given, Malbim then turns to a figure who he deems to be a hero of Scripture as a model of this ethic and employs exegesis as a prism through which to preach this truth. In this context, it is both the method of Malbim's exegesis—appearing years before the publication of his first biblical commentary—and the content of his message that interests us.

The figure whom Malbim identifies, in this context, as a model of greatness is King David, though the scene in Scripture that he turns our attention to unfolds years before he became King. Citing a passage in I Samuel[10] that describes the young shepherd facing his first and, in many ways, his most overbearing adversary—Goliath—Malbim raises a pointed question on the text.

The first two verses run as follows:

> And a man of Israel said, "Do you see that man coming out? He comes out to defy Israel! The man who kills him will be rewarded by the king with great riches; he will also give him his daughter in marriage and grant exemption to his father's house in Israel."
> David asked the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills that Philistine and removes the disgrace from Israel? For who is that uncircumcised Philistine that he dares defy the ranks of the living God?!"

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[9] All references to Malbim;s sermons will be to the most accessible and recent edition—Malbim. 1994. *Artzot HaShalom.* Bnei Barak: Mishor, 19. Translation mine—as are all following translations of Malbim's sermons, which are currently only available in the original Hebrew.
[10] 17:25-27

Malbim's reaction to the conjunction of these two remarks is quite simple: "David's question is rather astonishing…it is redundant…because the man of Israel already announced the reward in all its detail?!"[11] Having been present for what appears to be an official proclamation that addresses the very subject of his rather material curiosity, David gives the impression of an absentminded and avaricious character. In what follows, however, Malbim reimagines David's tone and recalibrates the text's grammar and tenor—and in letting his question land without allowing it to settle for too long, Malbim goes on to swiftly transform David from a petty and inattentive adolescent into a saint and a teacher.

> David reveals here the greatness of his soul, in that the great deed in and of itself…struck his heart and his soul more than vast wealth and a princess's hand—so much so, that he stood in bewilderment and shock at the common Israelite man, who, due to a shallow sense of duty to do good for its own sake,…did not imagine that he would find a man willing to give his life to fight the Philistine…without stirring within him the desire for great wealth and power…[12]

Before offering his reading of the biblical text itself, Malbim startles his readers with a radical refashioning of the Davidic figure—a model of nobility and responsibility, not intrigued but initially speechless in the face of the apparent need to coax Israelite soldiers with pledges to feed their venal tempers. Without even alerting us to his interpretive maneuvers, Malbim recasts the "Man of Israel"—whom one might have presumed to be an official representative of the King speaking to the troops—as a base figure, a mere 'man of Israel,' appealing to his peers on the basis of their self-interest rather than merely announcing the King's pledge.

Malbim then explains how, in response to this vain incentivization, David preaches:

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[11] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 19.
[12] Ibid., 19.

> “What will be done for the man who kills that Philistine?!” [This is] as if he said, ‘Do you really think that there is any sort of reward…that for its sake, rather than the sake of the noble deed itself, a person would risk their life? Surely there is no prize that could compare to the deed itself?![13]

Malbim reads David’s inquiry as a rhetorical question—not himself interested in the reward but appalled at the interest that others exhibit. How—David wonders—at a time of crisis, faced with the chance to fulfil one’s duty, could one flinch only to be swayed by the guarantee of material payment?! Malbim here uses Scripture as a springboard to project his moral teaching—one in which David serves as both a model and an expositor, and the sermon depicts as exegetically inevitable. Malbim’s tacit interpretive maneuvers in the sermon take second place to his overt moral pedagogy—where the hermeneutic mechanics are on display but presented less as innovative than evident.

In this vein, Malbim goes on to explain the content of David’s elongated question as a substantive extension of his initial claim—once more, not having raised the semantic excess as a textual problem. David’s rather wordy response to the man of Israel elucidates, in Malbim’s reading, three ways in which fighting the Philistine would represent a deed of such nobility as to require no reward beyond its own execution. First, there is a gain in reputation for having fought and defeated a giant like Goliath; second, there is the patriotism of avenging national ignominy; and third, there is the most noble aim of defending one’s faith. These three qualities that define the fight against Goliath as noble, unfold through what Malbim transforms into David’s now atomized statement: “who kills *that*[14] Philistine,” speaks to the first quality; “removes the disgrace from Israel,” speaks to the second; and “that uncircumcised Philistine that he dares defy the ranks of the living God,” speaks to the third—the length of which Malbim justifies, with an exegetical digression through II Kings, Psalms, II Samuel, Deuteronomy and Genesis, as David intentionally accentuating the vast disparity between the uncircumcised and celestial parties.[15]

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[13] Ibid., 20.

[14] Emphasis added for clarity.

While Malbim then goes on to explain the now strange answer presented in response to David's lesson—"Such and such he will do for the man who strikes him down"[16]—through a shift in emphasis, it is the quality of David's character, exposed by his question, that evokes Malbim's ethical idea and serves as the conduit for his pedagogy.

The sermon then turns to another exemplar of this nobility, Abraham, who Malbim casts as the font of all virtue—"the source of living waters."[17] Examining Abraham's rejection of plunder in the wake of a military victory against a slew of Canaanite kings (Genesis 14:21-23)—citing and exploring a passage from the *Ethics of the Fathers* on this occasion[18]—Malbim describes the same trait of greatness, in which the biblical hero sees the fulfilment of moral duty as its own reward. This first half of the sermon is then capped with the declaration that after Abraham "the righteous followed in his footsteps," with Elisha the prophet serving as just one example of many.[19]

Through the interweaving of exegesis and parables—using David and Abraham as his biblical models—Malbim concretizes the first part of this sermon's thesis; that greatness inheres in the integrity of acting for the sake of the good itself, seeing any sort of material compensation or remuneration as a petty gesture that cheapens virtue.

At this stage, though not formally marked as such, the sermon pivots to its second segment—declaring that, "If we search the gamut of human deeds for the most worthy act and the venture more noble than any other…we will find that a preoccupation with the pursuit of wisdom rises above the rest."[20] Malbim then employs three distinct citations from Proverbs as prisms through which to claim that seeking wisdom transcends every other human endeavor, specifying two other achievements often seen as worth pursuing: wealth and power.

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[15] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 20.
[16] I Samuel 17:27.
[17] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 21.
[18] 5:13.
[19] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 22.

For illustrative purposes, here is one such verse, followed by Malbim's reading:

> Know—such is wisdom for your soul; If you attain it, there is a future; Your hope will not be cut off.[21]

In the wake of our analysis of Malbim's hermeneutic introductions—in our previous chapter—we might well expect a parallelistic verse, laden with ostensible textual excess to trouble him. Yet, Malbim does not, at this stage, engage on the level of hermeneutic theory or even mention the exegetical tension, he merely exhibits his inclination—disinterring three layers of meaning from the verse as if it were the only reasonable interpretive option. For him, the first third of this verse ("such is wisdom for your soul") makes the claim, evoked in medieval neo-Aristotelian Hylomorphism,[22] that wisdom—as opposed to any other object—assimilates into the soul and remains distinct from the material body. The middle segment ("If you attain it, there is a future"), argues that wisdom not only assimilates into the core of our being, but lasts for eternity. And the last third ("Your hope will not be cut off"), asserts that in the pursuit of wisdom, results are guaranteed—"Not all who seek wealth, achieve it; not all the lame heal; not all soldiers triumph…" but all those who seek wisdom find their prize.[23]

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Proverbs  24:14.
[22] He cites Isaac Arama's biblical sermons (see note 23), who sites Aristotle's *Ethics* on this subject.
[23] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 23.

Relying on the conceptual work of Isaac Arama, medieval Jewish homilist and thinker,[24] Malbim employs his exegetical energies to transform a verse apparently governed by a parallelistic aesthetics into a compact series of philosophical clauses. And those clauses contend that wisdom is more assimilable, lasting, and accessible than any other object of human pursuit—thus determining it to be the prime good.

Based on positions taken by Aristotle in his *Ethics*[25], Malbim then explains biblical verses and passages from the rabbinic sages as all claiming that pursuing wisdom for wisdom's sake is the only true path to wisdom's realization. Seeking wisdom for the sake of honor or any other material advantage stains that wisdom with the quality of transience, diluting its force and compromising its longevity. And through Malbim's exegetical lens, this requisite integrity in the pursuit of wisdom is precisely what Joshua was warned about on the cusp of his conquest in the first chapter of the book bearing his name. It is, however, the final exegetical turn before returning to the title verse, in which Malbim solidifies this second part of his opening thesis through the reading of a series of verses. The subject of the verses is Solomon's first reported dream as King—and they run as follows:

> At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask, what shall I grant you?" Solomon said…"Grant, then, Your servant an understanding mind to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad; for who can judge this vast people of Yours?" The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. And God said to him, "Because you asked for this—and you did not ask for long life, and you did not ask for riches, and you did not ask for the life of your enemies, but you asked for discernment in dispensing justice—I now do as you have spoken. I grant you a wise and discerning mind; there has never been anyone like you before, nor will anyone like you arise again. And I also grant you

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[24] For more on Isaac Arama see Bettan, Israel. *Studies in Jewish Preaching: Middle Ages*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987, 130-192; Wilensky, Sarah Heller. *R. Yitsḥaḳ 'Aramah U-mishnato*. Yerushalayim: Hotsa'at Mosad Biyaliḳ ṿe-Ḥevrat "Devir", 1956; Assis, Yom Tov, and Yosef Kaplan. *Dor Gerush Sefarad: Ḳovets Ma'amarim*. Yerushalayim: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-toldot Yiśra'el, 1999, 1-24.

[25] 3:5.

> what you did not ask for—both riches and glory all your life—the like of which no king has ever had. And I will further grant you long life, if you will walk in My ways and observe My laws and commandments, as did your father David."[26]

Having just ascended to the throne and, with a strategic assassination, secured his reign, the young Solomon travels to Gibeon to offer a sacrifice at a local shrine, and, that night, receives an unforeseen vision. God, genie-like, offers to grant the new King a single wish. Solomon responds with a blend of humility and wonder, and choses to ask for the capacity to judge his subjects wisely. His wish is not only granted but received with approbation and praise, God declaring that for making such a sound request, Solomon would be presented with wisdom and the rest—wealth and glory.

Citing the verses, Malbim turns his exegetical attention to what he deems to be a logical gap in the text. Presuming, in line with biblical citations and rabbinic tradition, that the attainment of wisdom not only outlasts every other feat but leads to them as well—and, vitally, that Solomon knew this—Malbim wonders why on Earth God appears particularly impressed with Solomon's wish. To choose to wish for wisdom, Malbim argues, is to choose to wish for everything—for with wisdom comes wealth and power and renown. Solomon's choice then suddenly becomes not saintly or sacrificial but strategically sound. "Behold, that Solomon found grace in the eyes of God as a result of his wish is rather surprising…for he chose wisdom, with which comes every other desire—riches and glory…?"[27] By way of illustration Malbim presents a parable—that of a King offering his general a choice between a precious gem or a precious-gem incrusted Torah scroll. What sort of regal grace should result from choosing the latter—a decision which is quite simply predictably rational?

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[26] I Kings 3:5-12.

[27] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 26.

Driven, once more, in this instance less by a breach of his sense of biblical poetics than a question of ethics, Malbim turns his attention to pressing the text's excess for a more compelling meaning. Consistent with his pattern of presentation thus far, Malbim first provides a synopsis of his reading and then his exegetical rendering of the verse. For him, Solomon earned celestial favor in this case not for simply wishing for wisdom, but for wishing for wisdom for wisdom's sake alone.

> Solomon…despite knowing that [wisdom] brought with it temporal benefits, they played no role in his decision, and he wished for wisdom only for the sake of wisdom itself, even imagining to himself that it would induce pain and shave years off his life, as we see in his request, in which he asks for wisdom—not for any external purpose…but purely for the purpose of discerning justice and distinguishing between good and evil…and God recognized the purity of his intention, as [the verse] says, "The Lord was pleased *because*[28] Solomon had asked for ***this***[29]", meaning [God was pleased because] he asked for *only* this, wisdom alone, without any other accompanying intention for other benefits. And this is why God says, "Because you asked for this," i.e. wisdom alone, "and you did not ask for yourself" [within your wish for wisdom,] "for long life" [and riches and glory—only asking for wisdom for the purpose of] "discernment in dispensing justice, I now do as you have spoken."[30]

Solomon crafted his wish in such a way, despite not being awake, so as to make clear that his desire for wisdom could not have been less narcissistic, and was absent any ulterior motive—his concern was purely for the purpose of nurturing a just society and propogating ethics. Again, Malbim's characteristic hyper-attentiveness to potential textual excess, functions as the means through which precisely this intention is seen in the biblical formulation.

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[28] JPs translates 'that' – '*Ki'* can be because, that, only, however. See explanation that follows.

[29] Emphasis added

[30] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 26.

Malbim then goes on to re-read a rabbinic midrash that, on its face, appears to endorse the problematic rendering of Solomon's wish that led him to initially pull his exegetical trigger; and Malbim does so in a way that maintains his idea of ethical integrity. The midrash reads:

> It is comparable to a King who said to his friend, "Ask me for any wish," to which the friend thought 'If I ask for gold or silver, he'll give to me; gems or pearls, he'll give to me; therefore I'll ask for the princess's hand and everything else will come included.'[31]

On its face the sages perceive Solomon wishing for far more than wisdom, and seem to see his choice as entirely strategic. However, Malbim writes, "In their words there lies an inner sense, intricately tied to the phrase 'he'll give to me'…in that after he marries the princess, he'll request wealth and glory for her sake, not for his."[32] The friend of the King here ponders what to wish for, and thinks that if I were selfish I'd ask for wealth or riches—as the King would give them 'to me,' but if I were pious I'd ask for the princess's hand and then use all those same means for the sake of her maintenance and protection. Solomon's request—even in the eyes of the sages, who see an interest in wealth beyond wisdom—is for wisdom's sake alone: "As he asks for the gift of wisdom, he asks for ephemeral benefits for its sake—in order to give him the freedom to invest in study and analysis."[33]

To buttress the sages' grasp of Solomon's wish, Malbim returns to text and offers a second re-reading of the scene. "This is why [Scripture] says, "Because you asked for this, and you did not ask for long life *for yourself*," meaning, even though your wish included a desire for longevity and wealth and glory, you did not wish for them 'for yourself'—for your own sake—but for wisdom's sake."[34] Read this way, Solomon's intention becomes multilayered but pure—he is not naïve enough to imagine that a desire for wisdom alone would suffice; in a world of material conditions, wisdom needs space and maintenance.

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[31] Song of Songs Rabbah 1:1.
[32] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 26.
[33] Ibid., 26-27.

What is so striking here, as noted, is that Malbim's exegetical energies are invested in saving the soul and not the text, for the text is read and reread and left entirely, if cunningly, equivocal—a state his later hermeneutic postures would never willingly sanction. Malbim's feats of exegesis and analyses all serve the larger purpose of moral pedagogy—in which Malbim's ideas of ethical sublimity come to the fore. The final paragraph of the sermon then returns to the *Noseh*, the title verse, in a bid to exhibit Scripture's commitment to this ethical idea—and here, for the first time, Malbim offers a description of his view of biblical poetics as is later reflected in his hermeneutic introductions.

Playing off the sages' description of a miracle that took place in the vicinity of the Temple—where the streets, otherwise teeming with throngs of people, expanded in response to their ritual kneeling, giving them all plenty of room[35]—Malbim depicts Scripture as a verbal condensation with a crammed semantics, in which latent meaning unfolds in the act of pressing letters into interpretive submission: "All these matters stand compacted, yet prostrate with space, in Scripture."[36] In this spirit, and in support of his sermon's thesis, Malbim then proceeds to unpack the title verse:

> He who acquires wisdom is the lover of his soul; He guards understanding and attains goodness.[37]

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[34] Ibid., 27.

[35] For a fuller description of this legend, see Ethics of the Fathers 5:5.

[36] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 27.

[37] Proverbs 19:8.

For Malbim this verse articulates—by means of an exegetical decompression—his very thesis, that the pursuit of wisdom is the highest human good when it is pursued for its own sake alone. Wisdom is described as an object of acquisition, for "it brings the pre-material [hylic] soul into being, becoming an eternal independent existence"—and one who pursues wisdom is the "true lover of the soul, for they refuse to leave it in an unfulfilled [hylic] state that perishes with the body."[38] However, the verse's second half—having already enshrined the pursuit of wisdom as the prime virtue—adds the condition upon which that virtuous pursuit depends. That wish for the acquisition of wisdom must be shielded from ulterior motives—"One need guard oneself in that one seek wisdom for its own sake, not to find pleasure or benefit by means of the wisdom, as will be further explained in the coming sermon with God's help."[39] And if one maintains this balance—the search for wisdom while ensuring that the search itself is for wisdom's own sake—then, God pledges, true goodness shall be found, and "there shall be peace in the land."[40] Here ends the first sermon.

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While, throughout this sermon—at times quite explicitly—Malbim's later conception of biblical poetics is in play, it is very much in the background. His object here, as opposed to in his commentaries—as we saw in the preceding chapter—is much less about saving the biblical text and far more about saving the human soul; it is more about teaching his reader than shielding Scripture. And these soul-saving ideas—expressed through the varied media of exegesis, discursive prose, parabolic illustration, and biblical citation—foregrounded in his sermons, are precisely the ‘dark matter’ that holds together the fabric of his commentaries’ exegetical universe, as we shall see in the next chapter, where his text-saving principles are inflected by the ethics taught in his sermons. Though the method of the sermons is the inverse of the commentaries—with its focus less on the biblical text than the ethical message—the message is the same.

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[38] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 27.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

And what Malbim articulates in this first sermon—scripted against the backdrop of the rise of romanticism—is a form of cerebral altruism, where the highest human good is the pursuit of wisdom for wisdom’s sake. Read thus, this sermon insinuates the sort of sublime content that Malbim expects the biblical text in its divine dialect to furnish across the canon—which offers us a key to the sort of interpretive pressures that we can expect him to exert on Scripture. For now, we turn to the second sermon.

### Sermon 2: The Recesses of the Earth

Malbim’s second sermon is titled *Yarketei Aretz*, a phrase that appears four time in Jeremiah[41], and loosely translates as ‘Recesses of the Earth.’ It follows conceptually from the first sermon, as the last lines of the previous sermon do suggest. In fact, in many ways the first and second sermons function as a pair—the latter explaining and expanding on the first; the central problem simmering beneath this second sermon is how best to manifest the ethical idea at the core of the first.

The thesis that Malbim proposes in this sermon is that intentional integrity in the pursuit of virtue—that is, pursuing an ethic for its own sake—is best and most nobly expressed in the context of potential ulterior motives. After an introductory discussion of human vulnerability,

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[41] 6:22, 25:32, 31:7, and 50:41.

Malbim leads his reader through four critical biblical scenes and a whole slew of biblical verses and rabbinic creeds, to establish his claim that the highest demonstration and purest form of intentional integrity comes in cases when that integrity overcomes the clear and present appeal of base desire.

Following this sermon's two-verse *Noseh*—Psalms 19:11-12—Malbim's opening poem leads straight into the sermon, which opens with a declarative statement as to why human beings are so quick to ignore reason and so easily swayed by impulse and ego.

> The sages have already offered four causes as to why human beings heed the counsel of desire rather than reason, three of which are tied to the nature of material itself—quality, quantity, and nativity—and the fourth, due to the question of 'when.' First, the forces of desire are in constant operation, for the instigating force that rouses them never ceases stirring the forces of desire for pleasures and leisure, among others desires; and the imaginative force rouses him constantly for a love of personal gain—for wealth and glory, and other longings—which the outer senses flood him with. Not so, with the love of good that arises from the intellect—for it does not rouse itself; many days may pass and weeks ensue while this cerebral force appears like a sleeping man, unless one stands guard.[42]

For Malbim, the will to pursue good begins at a disadvantage, for it is not innately constant—unlike the ceaseless passions of desire—and requires conscious cultivation. Though still cloaked in the vernacular of medieval thinkers and mystics—he specifically references Jedaiah ben Abraham Bedersi's fourteenth century poem, *Beḥinat Ha'Olam*,[43] as a source—Malbim's argument suggests an opposition between the head and the heart that strikes at the core of the cultural tensions of his age, between philosophes and romantics—in which he portrays the passions at a tactical advantage over reason.

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[42] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 28.

[43] For more on Bedersi (1270-1340CE approx.), see Pines, S. *Wolfson Jubilee Volume* (1965), 187–201 (Hebrew section); and Tobias Goodman. *An Investigation of Causes Arising From the Organization of the World, in Which Man Is Particularly Interested*. Brooklyn: [s.n.], 1951.

He goes on to details the three other ways in which crude desire exerts more power than the will to pursue good—first, that desire lives in every fiber of the body and partners with every limb, while the will dwells in the mind alone; second, that material desire is native to this material plane, while the intellect is a guest from heaven; and third, that base desire gestates in the womb and begins to breathe right after birth, while the intellect takes years to form and grow. Here is Malbim's description of this last distinction:

> The rousing force begins to reign over the person's faculties from the moment that he emerges from his mother's womb—as does the force of imagination. For at that moment the senses have already begun to function; the infant that suckles from his mother is already drawn to shiny gems, and from the sounds of song detects beauty and splendor, and is stirred to seek them out. The force of the intellect, however, which instructs him to choose the good and virtuous, does not open its inner eyes until he reaches maturity—then when he seeks to implant the good and virtuous in his heart, making them his second nature, it is already filled with the roots of gall and wormwood, the fruits of craving and desire, the crop of loving the gains of material success, which embedded their roots in his youth making them his first nature. And there is no doubt that residents of the soul grow in strength once inside, and make any guest that arrives do their bidding—crushing the force of the intellect beneath their feet, making it incapable of defying their direction, turning it into a slave.[44]

In Malbim's description, human nature is, from the first breath, riddled with desire and the craving for sensory pleasure, which, over time, entrenches itself in the soul and subjugates the person to its calls. Only with time does the will or intellect emerge, weakened in the face of native instincts by its infancy and foreign origins.

Still to invoke a single verse—though he alludes to a number of them with his signature mosaic style[45]—Malbim instead lays his focus on a depiction of the human condition, for which he will seek to provide an ethical remedy. At this juncture in the sermon, however, Malbim does

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[44] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 29.

[45] E.g. "Roots of gall and wormwood" is a reference to Deuteronomy 29:17.

turn our attention to a pair of verses—Genesis 6:5-6—which he breaks down into three segments, aligning each with the first three human qualities above, and seeing them as the source of God's remorse over creating humanity. Genesis 8:21 is then cast as the expression of God's clemency, recognizing that the human drive toward desire and vice—which never rests, pervades the flesh, and sees this Earth as its home turf—only triumphs so often due to its time advantage.

> In truth, if it was the case that the eyes of the intellect opened as the person was born, flooding him with structures of the intellect—at the same time as the external senses began to stream their structures into the soul—the person would heed the counsel of the intellect, for the nature of the soul leans toward absolute goodness. The difficulty is only that the intellect delays the march of its chariots onto the grounds of the soul, and the structures of the senses settle their as citizens—branding it with its first nature—so, when the armies of the intellect come to drive them out of their territory, they do not succeed, for the first impressions are deep. For even when impressions and traits are acquired by the soul from an outside source—such as bad neighbors or peers from whom one learns—it is hard to expel them without repeated great efforts.[46]

Once more, Malbim pits instinct against the will, impulse against the intellect—the earthy and heavenly senses respectively—and sees the battle between them as inevitable and fair only as a result of the delay of the latter. In simple terms, Malbim maintains the spiritual equivalent of Eugene Braunwald's cardiological principle, 'time is muscle'—suggesting that the more time the senses have to populate the soul, the harder the fight to save it. And on the basis of this he suggests that Israel's four-decade long wilderness itinerancy was purely to purge the nation of the second nature that Egyptian culture had lodged in its collective soul.

In this first part of the sermon, his primary vision of the human condition is that of a clash between impulse and reason—where the latter is the path to virtue—and here again, the biblical text is not presented as threatened by an apparent excess but is deployed as a pedagogic pivot for depicting an ethic. But then the sermon the shifts into its second phase, in which, following the premise established in the first, Malbim declares the central thesis of the sermon:

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[46] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 29.

> The rousing and imaginative powers…retain some of the soul's territory even in old age—even once the intellect reigns over its dominion and leads the soul according to its counsel, to choose—with wisdom, with faith, and with action—the upright and the righteous. And the most central element of all these is for him to perform them purely for the good found in them; to study wisdom for the sake of the love of wisdom alone, to hold on to faith for the good of faith itself, and so with every good act that he does, they should be done solely for the sake of the good and virtuous found in the essence of the act—purely for the sake of God who commanded them, He being the absolute good and true virtue. One should not blend in one's mind any other intention or ulterior interest, whether pleasure or benefit, which he hopes to achieve through the means of wisdom, or a price for good acts—as explained in the previous sermon. Thus, he will best succeed in doing so in cases where there is no pleasure or benefit to be expected presently from the good act—for example, one who studies wisdom in a place where scholars aren't respected, all the more so in a place where they're scorned; or one who acts piously in a place that ridicules their behavior—for then he will certainly be studying wisdom for the love of wisdom and the sake of the ethic alone, and so will he follow the commandments with that in mind, as there are no possible ulterior motives for benefit or gain. This is not the case when the external senses can presently expect a benefit or pleasure—from wealth or glory etc.—to be achieved through the means of wisdom or virtue. All the more so, if he feels concurrent with the virtue, the pleasures of bodily desire—as, for example, in cases of commandments which entail eating of enjoyment, as we'll explain—it is incredibly difficult for human nature to eradicate these from the heart and not consider them in one's soul at all, doing the good solely for the good alone…For the servile rousing and imaginative faculties, have already learned to take their share first—as the external senses start to operate before the internal senses awaken to sow in the soul the images of good and virtue which exist in the act.[47]

What Malbim refers to as the 'external senses'—the cluster of innate material desires—prey upon the soul from the start while the 'inner senses' remain latent, and thus exert a force far in excess of their otherwise spiritually alien nature. The external senses' early conquest leaves scars and footholds on the soul for the rest of its sojourn on earth, and interfere in every act—no matter how altruistic or pious—that happens to have a material incentive, by sullying the actor's intent with a near inexorable ulterior motive. In a sentence, the thesis of this sermon is this: the purest act of virtue is one performed solely for the sake of that virtue, a purity usually feasible only in instances where no material incentives exist—thus, the greatest challenge is to disregard the powers of desire when they have a clear and present incentive.

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[47] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 31.

In the wake of this thesis, Malbim proceeds to lead his readers through four biblical scenes in which the protagonists face cases of a virtue involving attendant material incentives. In these textual encounters, Malbim surreptitiously uses his exegetical ingenuity to weave explicit lessons for the residents of modernity, seeking to use Scripture to teach his readers and save their souls.

The first biblical scene involves a return to the King whom Malbim began his first sermon with—David—and his bid to build the Temple in Jerusalem. The focus of this episode, for Malbim's purposes, is God's rejection of David's bid, as expressed retrospectively by his son Solomon—where he, parenthetically, invites us to note a threefold repetition (bolded below). Here are the verses:

> Solomon sent this message to Hiram: "You know that my father David could not build a house **for the name of the Lord his God** because of the enemies that encompassed him, until the Lord had placed them under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me respite all around; there is no adversary and no mischance. And so I propose to build a house **for the name of the Lord my God**, as the Lord promised my father David, saying, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house **for My name**.'[48]

There is an evident obsession, on the part of Solomon, in seeing a prerequisite for the building of the Temple as it being done *for the name of God*—David could not, he says, build it

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[48] I Kings 5:16-19.

‘for the name of the Lord,’ but Solomon, as promised, will. And this obsession on Solomon’s part is not incidental for Malbim, but central to his ethical idea.

Though he admits the near-impossible standard inherent in his current thesis—that virtue exists only in acts driven exclusively by an interest in the virtue itself—Malbim suggests that, in reality, there may be times in which heaven rewards acts of otherwise incentivized virtue. However, he says, the construction of the Temple is not one of those times. Based on Solomon’s words and an array of verses from Ezra and Exodus, Malbim claims that, in building the Temple, every plank and stone must be laid, every thread and fiber must be stitched, every beam and joint must be set, with an utterly unadulterated intention, driven solely by the wish to manifest divinity on Earth. And it is for this reason that David’s dream was rebuffed. In Malbim’s words:

> Since it would be impossible for God to manifest His presence in a dedicated space, if any ulterior motive or personal incentive were intermingled in the minds of the builders, the reason to stop David—peace be upon him—building the Temple seems only logical. If we return to the premise around which this sermon revolves, that it is intensely difficult in human nature to perform any virtue—when faced with direct accompanying material incentives—for the sake of good and righteousness and God alone. And David, peace be upon him, had already been assured, by the prophet Nathan, at the time when discussing the building of the Temple…that though before the building of the Temple there would be no respite from enemies, which would provoke war all day long, building the Temple would generate respite from war…
>
> Therefore, if the Temple was to be built in the days of David—still embroiled in all sorts of wars—and the builders knew that through the building of the Temple, they would instantly receive the great temporal benefit of reprieve from war, it is inconceivable that they would build the Temple with pure intention for the sake of God; the imaginative forces in the recesses of their souls would not neglect to inform them of the material benefits that would accompany this building…Not so in the days of Solomon, once enemies had already been subdued…and they would see no direct material benefit in their building, and would easily build it for the sake of God alone.[49]

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[49] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 33.

In Malbim's view, Solomon's confession to Hiram does not concern his material advantage but his spiritual privilege. It is not that the lack of war offers him the time to build the Temple, but that the reign of peace denudes him of any ulterior motive or material incentive to do so—Solomon suggests, in this attentive reading, that David's unsuitability for building the Temple was nothing to do with war's conflicting itinerary but its inhibitive mental preoccupation. Read this way, the common reading of God's denial to David—that his bloodshed disqualified him from tending to matters pertaining to sanctity—is inverted; it was not David's ties to war but his dreams for peace that made him incapable of overseeing the Temple's assembly in a state of mental purity.

The near inability of human beings to suppress their awareness of present incentives means that acts of pure virtue are near-impossible when they benefit the actor—and David, for Malbim, is no different. Solomon's treble repetition of the phrase "for the name of the Lord" is the exegetical springboard for this reading, yet it is the ethic that appears front and center; once more, in these sermons, the illumination of the biblical text is not the end, but the means to teaching the reader and saving their soul—a technique repeated in the next biblical scene that Malbim cites, the inauguration of the second Temple generations later.

Looking to the text of Ezra 3:12-13, Malbim sees a chronological easing in the ability to achieve intentional integrity in regards to building the Temple—just as purity of mind in the age of Solomon was simpler than in the age of David, purity of mind was simpler in the age of Ezra than in the age of Solomon.

> In the days of Solomon, in which the Temple was grand and majestic, drawing to it the esteem of the nations—it was easy for a corrupt intent to enter the mind of the builders, out of a love for the glory or beauty achieved by their building. Not so in the age of Ezra, in which it drew the scorn and mockery of their neighbors, leading them to build for the sake of God alone.[50]

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[50] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 33.

And it is precisely this lack of material incentive that Malbim then reads into the biblical text, where priests laugh and cry at the sight of the second Temple—only some of whom, for Malbim, understood the spiritual advantage of their dire material situation. The verses run as follows:

> Many of the priests and Levites and the chiefs of the clans, the old men who had seen the first house, wept loudly at the sight of the founding of this house; many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices. The people did not recognize the shouts of joy from the people's weeping, as the people raised a great shout, the sound of which could be heard from afar.[51]

Without problematizing the text too much, Malbim simply states that, despite the fact that only those who cried are described as having seen the first Temple, those who rejoiced had seen it too. Those who cried, cried due to having seen the first Temple—before its demolition—in all its glory, and now had to see the second relatively meagre instantiation. But those elders who rejoiced, for Malbim, also saw the first Temple and celebrated now because they were the more spiritually attuned souls:

> They rejoiced over the fact that the fundamental intention and purpose of the building of the Temple had been entirely for the sake of heaven—since this Temple had no majesty or splendor, their hearts were certain that the builders had acted purely for the sake of God.[52]

In the eyes of the spiritually sensitive elders, the geopolitical and material decline had cleansed the builders' minds, leaving them in no doubt that their intentions were refined and focused wholly on pursuing virtue. While a superficial reading of the scene may leave the reader seeing those in tears as the pious, sober, and historically conscious heroes of the piece, Malbim suggests a subtle reconfiguration—where those who cry, mourn shallow aesthetics, and those who laugh, reflect a deeper ethic and see that the collapse of regional prominence and apparent providence as a gateway toward higher virtue, where intentions are stripped of incentives and driven by a desire for God alone.

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[51] Ezra 3:12-13.

[52] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 34.

The second verse, on the surface, portrays a confused multitude inundated by sound, unable to clearly hear the cries and tears due to the shouts of joy. Malbim, however, paints a picture of a far less passive mass, who saw both lamentation and celebration and elected to embrace the latter—though, in Malbim's reading, without knowing why.

> The masses of people, who saw some crying and some rejoicing, did not understand the cause of the joy. This is why it says, "The people could not recognize [that][53] the shouts of joy from[=were because of] the people's weeping"—meaning, they did not recognize that the reason behind the shouts of joy was the sounds of people crying; that it was precisely the fact that some were crying that caused the latter to rejoice, for it meant that the building had been built for the sake of God.[54]

Malbim's exegetical pressures are so subtle as to seem almost imperceptible, yet he weights this verse in radical ways. He inserts a conjunction ("that") and renders the contextually ambiguous Hebrew letter *lamed*—translated here, by most commentators,[55] as "from"—in this case as "due to." And it is as a result of his exegetical decisions that this scene yields his ethical teaching—the text takes a back seat here to his pedagogy, where it is, once more, the means to saving his readers' souls.

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[53] Necessary interpolations for the purpose of understanding Malbim's reading.

[54] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 34.

[55] See David Kimchi (RaDaK) and Solomon Yitzchaki (RaShI).

Malbim then explores the consequence that facing an absence of material incentive, though less heroic, paves the way to approachable virtue—and contends that it is precisely this ethic that leads to a counterintuitive sociological truth.

> The words on my tongue right now are the inverse of its previous intuition, as convention suggests that the one who becomes a saint during an age of vice is to be praised more than the saint who rises in a time of piety—for the former has no one to learn from and the latter does. But with my ethic as of now, I search my soul and find the contrary to be the case—for that presumption is based entirely on the perspective of the saint's behavior; but from the perspective of the saint's intention for the sake of heaven, which infuses any righteous act with its life-force…than it is the opposite. For the one who pursues righteousness purely for the sake of heaven in an age of piety, when righteousness is praised and applauded—and thus may be tempted to act out of a desire for admiration or glory—is far greater than one who acts piously solely for the sake of heaven in an age of vice, when it is derided and reviled.[56]

Malbim argues that there are two vital components to acts of piety—the act itself and the intention, and he puts emphasis on the latter. In fact, in the middle of the ellipses that I inserted for the sake of a smooth citation, Malbim reads a section of Scripture as making the identical claim. Ecclesiastes 7:20[57] appears to serve as a warning or source of comfort to human beings that perfection is impossible—that despite a desire for piety, human beings will always sin. And ordinarily this verse is read as suggesting that no matter how often people may practice piety, everyone also makes mistakes—sin is inevitable and inexorable and not a single person lives on earth without committing misdeeds. Malbim however, exerts interpretive pressure on the final clause of this verse, suggesting that it is best read as 'who does good and does not *at the same time* sin'—for him, this verse in Ecclesiastes argues that there is no one on earth who does good without sinful incentives intermingling in their mind; the definition of sainthood is the ability to pursue virtue solely for its own sake, and on earth such virtue is virtually impossible.

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[56] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 34.

[57] "For there is no righteous man on earth, who does good and does not sin."

With an emphasis on the latter component of piety—intention—Malbim then introduces the counter-intuitive consequence of his ethic: a true saint in an age of saints is more praiseworthy than a true saint in an age of sinners. While acts of virtue in an age of depravity go against the grain and risk alienation—perhaps even danger—attaining purity of mind under such circumstances is relatively easy, because there are no incentives to pursue such ends beyond heaven's sake. So, while acts of virtue in such an age are to be praised, the mind faces far fewer enemies than the body. Consequently, acts of virtue are far less difficult to pursue when they are the norms, but far harder to pursue with purity of purpose. When embodying a moral life leads to public praise and esteem and widespread admiration, it is far harder to rid the mind of those material motives and think solely of God.

This position then leads Malbim to resolve an apparent quarrel among the sages regarding the character of Noah. He is described in Genesis 6:9 as "A righteous man, perfect in his generation," and the rabbinic sages[58] appear to disagree on whether the qualifier "in his generation" is to accentuate his praise or to mitigate his piety. Does Scripture seek to stress that *even* in his age, surrounded by sinners, Noah managed to live a life of piety, or that *only* in his age, compared to his impious contemporaries, would he even be deemed pious? Malbim, however, suggests that the readings are complementary and both flow from the text and speak to a different dimension of Noah's character.

> Some interpret this to his praise and others interpret it to his detriment, but they do not argue with each other for they are speaking about different things. The adjective "righteous" speaks to righteous behavior itself, and "perfect" speaks to that

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[58] Famously cited by RaShI in his commentary to Genesis 6:9.

> behavior being done purely—not for the sake of the self or honor etc. Thus, here the description “righteous” implies more praise in an age of sinners than in an age of saints; and the description “perfect” implies more praise in an age of saints than sinners, as explained.[59]

Noah, in Malbim’s view, exhibited great righteousness in an age of vice by living a life of virtue and risking ostracization; but without obstacles to pure intention, praise of his perfect motives is capped—by definition. In one fell-swoop Malbim resolves a rabbinic dispute, sees his ethical idea as the intention of the biblical text, and exhibits his other two exegetical principals of concision and precision as well. And yet, again, the focus in these sermons is not Malbim’s exegetical rescue of Scripture—which feels almost playful—but his moral pedagogy.

Malbim then pushes his ethic further, moving from the realm of abstract or detached material benefits, such as wealth and honor, to the realm of sensory pleasure.

> We have determined that it is greater to perform a virtue, which has one of these attendant benefits, while isolating the intention for the sake of God alone, than performing a virtue, which has no attendant benefits, solely for the sake of God. Thus, we can then transplant this notion into the realm of commandments that have attendant benefits—such as the obligations to have pleasure or eat and drink on special days, sabbaths, and festivals. For it is much easier to forswear the imaginative forces, upon which the soul can place reins and controls to halt them, than to ignore the effects of flavor or sensation, which are the means to taste and pleasure. And who among men could possibly strip themselves entirely of the physical senses, so as not to feel bodily pleasure or corporal benefit—delighting in God with spiritual pleasure, with the bodily delights seeming not to exist…[60]

While the impulse for wealth or affluence or glory almost inevitably infects, when present, every pure intention, the mind has at least some measure of control over these ambitions—but the pleasure derived from food is something we ordinarily conceive of as entirely involuntary; one cannot switch off one’s taste buds or rid the mind of the chemistry that delights in flavor. Malbim thus imagines that the commandments to eat or drink are ostensibly impossible to perform with an entirely pure intention; with the exception, he claims—basing himself on a view of the midrashic sages—of the case of a singular biblical figure. In his words:

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[59] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 34.
[60] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 34.

> Abraham sealed a covenant with the evil inclination…reaching this sublime level. To the extent that even at moments in which he engaged with bodily pleasures—those in which desire and the evil inclination have a share, e.g. eating and drinking etc.—he retained the capacity to strip his thoughts of physical sensation, so that his intention could be solely for the sake of God.[61]

Abraham, the first patriarch, had the capacity—in Malbim’s estimation—to shut down his sensory system, eliminating all potential incentives, and engage with commandments, even of the corporeal variety, with a pure ethic of divine compliance. On this basis, Malbim then claims that there are cases in which God prefers the merriments of sabbaths and the festivals to the sobriety of the day of atonement—and not because divinity is more jovial than somber. He writes:

> In this vein we can rightly say that greater is the one who delights in sabbaths and festivals for the sake of God, than one who abstains from food on a fast day also for the sake of God. For one who takes pleasures on sabbaths and festivals, which the body certainty desires…yet fortifies against the force of such desire, to the point of not sensing or coveting bodily benefit rather only the spiritual and devout feeling of fulfilling the will of God—this is on the level of angels.[62]

It is far harder to eat and celebrate and take pleasure for the sake of God alone, than to refrain from joy and pleasure with that same pure intention. So, one who is capable of suppressing the innate corporality of the human condition and eat and drink without tasting or sensing the pleasure of feeling full, is far greater than the ascetic who afflicts the body for the sake of heaven.

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[61] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 34-5.
[62] Ibid., 35.

We now see a rather more vivid picture of Malbim's moral universe, in which the pious drain the world of color and taste and sensation and replace it with complete cerebral concentration on divinity and virtue. To rid the character of greed or vanity is one thing, but to seek to purge the world of every physical sensation is quite another—and here Malbim shows his idea of sublimity to be a creed that seeks to free human experience of every sensory, temporal, social, and mortal pleasure. And having established that view, Malbim turns to the apotheosis of this sermon's thesis—his reading of Abraham's trial at the binding of Isaac.

Malbim begins the sermon's antepenultimate paragraph with these words, playing off verses in Isaiah (13:2) and Psalms (60:6): "Let us raise a banner upon a bare mountain for rallying, regarding these matters, in the context of the trial of Isaac's binding that sought to test Abraham our father, peace be upon him."[63] He then opens with what he deems to be a sweeping question—why is the call to sacrifice his son the means by which God seeks to test Abraham and raise him as an exemplar to the world? Besides that fact that many of Abraham's descendants faced the same trial over the course of Jewish history, making Abraham's test less exceptional, who on earth would not run to obey an order given directly by God Himself?

While Abraham's swift obedience may be seen as the central mark of his piety here, Malbim's resolution relies upon this sermon's thesis. For him, Abraham's trial was two-fold, and the more pivotal element had nothing to do with his behavior and everything to do with his intention. A man of Abraham's spiritual caliber should comply with God's command, and should do so swiftly—but what would he be thinking as he does? The purpose of this instruction was, "to test his pure heart and singular intention to love the name of God, without any ulterior motive or distortive egocentric intention mingled in his heart."[64]

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[63] Ibid.

However, if the central element of the trial was to examine the purity of Abraham's intention, the binding and slaying of his son could not possibly be the subject of the test—as in the context of fasting or abstinence what other possible motive could there be for such an act. As Abraham treks across the desert and climbs Mount Moriah, knowing that he must slaughter his son—despite his reputation for opposing child sacrifice, despite his ambition of spawning a nation, despite his dream of rearing a son—what other possible incentive could he have other than following the will of God? Malbim thus insists that the test was not the binding of Isaac itself.

> The central test lay in the second command, when God said to him, "Do not lay a hand on the youth"—for at this point human nature dictates that a great joy would erupt in his heart in that his son was saved from the fate of the sword, and it would be very difficult to act without feeling personal benefit or corporal joy.[65]

Abraham's test, in Malbim's reading, was not the binding of Isaac, but his unbinding—it took place not at the moments before, but at the moments *after* Abraham was asked to stop the sacrifice. In this moment, Malbim suggests, Abraham was called to ignore his feelings as a preacher and potential patriarch and father—to *not* feel relief in that his reputation as an ethicist would stay intact, to *not* feel relief that his hopes to sire a nation remained intact, to not feel relief that his beloved son would live, to feel nothing other than the joy that comes from serving God. This is how he puts it:

> And God, who can see all that is hidden, saw and reported that in that moment Abraham did not experience the feeling of material joy, but saw the instruction to

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid., 36.

> kill and not kill in the same light—for he did the two acts with a perfect intention, solely to follow the will of God; and in both he felt joy in his heart for following a command from on high, without any complementary joy for himself or his son. This was the greater test.[66]

A human being stripped of ego and self-interest, even self-awareness beyond the soul—that is Malbim's conception of the ideal. To pursue the good for the sake of the good when faced with a range of auxiliary incentives—that is the greatest good a human being can do, and that is the thesis of this second sermon. Malbim goes on to show how the biblical text in Genesis 22 can be read to reflect this perspective, involving all the creative exegetical pressures that we might expect; but again, here, the exegesis is almost incidental to the lesson—saving the text comes second to saving the soul.

And to complete the sermon—after casting King David as eventually capable of achieving this Abrahamic corporal stasis, through a reading of Psalms 119:59—Malbim weaves his thesis through the verses that served as his *Noseh* (Psalms 12:12-13): "[The laws of the Lord are] More desirable than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb. Also, Your servant pays them heed; in obeying them there is much reward." These two verses, for Malbim, are a Davidic claim of Abrahamic achievement.

> Beyond the good and true virtue that lies within the body of the *Torah* and commandments, there also lies benefits and pleasures. Concerning the benefits he says, "More desirable than gold, than much fine gold," and concerning pleasures he says, "sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb." However [, David says], 'I have already reached this great level, at which though I am aware and know all the attendant pleasures of acts of virtue, I do not pursue them for these corruptive purposes.' "Your servant pays heed to **them**"—to *them* for *their* sake, not for the sake of that which arises from them; for "in obeying **them**"—for their own sakes, there is already "much reward." For no reward in reality can compare to the preciousness of wisdom and virtue done for their own sake…[67]

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 37.

In this final passage of this second sermon, Malbim asserts that a single pair of sentences from Psalms 19 encapsulates the sermon's thesis in the voice of King David. And here David is read as suggesting that the life of virtue itself is designed to test the soul—and in two ways: first, as to whether it will be pursued, and second as to whether it will be pursued for the sake of virtue despite its attendant benefits. A life of virtue is not, for Malbim, an ascetic praxis, for the study of Torah and the observance of divine commandments, he claims, generates all sorts of material pleasures—but despite its pleasures, a life of virtue is only truly virtuous if it is experienced as ascetic, where every joy and every pleasure is felt and sought solely for the sake of God and good itself. To choose to live a life of virtue is a challenge, but to pursue that life for the sake of virtue is the true test.

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The first two of Malbim's sermons, as noted above, serve as a conceptual pair. The first sermon argues that the greatest good a human being can perform is pursuing the good for its own sake, and the second argues that the greatest manifestation of that greatest good is in the context of overcoming clear and present incentives. And while Malbim cloaks his arguments in the vernacular of medieval Hebraic neo-Aristotelianism, the thrust of his ethic castigates many of the cultural forces at play across Europe in his age, as they make inroads into its newly emancipated Jewish population.

And though these two sermons offer us an insight into Malbim's moral universe, they have also exhibited his exegetical pedagogy—where Scripture's verses have served as semiotic springboards for producing the semantics of his ethic; where the biblical text is not an end in itself but a means to deflecting the forces of spiritual vice. Though his exegetical pressures foreshadow precisely the principles of precision and concision that he will come to codify in his biblical introductions—as we have shown in the previous chapter—the details of these principles are as yet unstated, as they are instruments of an extra-textual objective as this stage. Biblical figures have been employed as moral exemplars—both in their successes and their flaws—as Malbim uses Scripture as a vehicle to craft what will become the second half of his third hermeneutic pillar: spiritual sublimity.

But before turning to our fourth chapter, in which we will explore the employ of this exegetical pedagogy in the context not of sermons but biblical commentary, we turn to Malbim's third sermon, which breaks new ground and offers us the bridge between his ethical and theological teachings.

## Sermon 3: The Borders of the Earth

Malbim's third sermon, titled *Gevulei Aretz*—a biblically inflected phrase that does not appear explicitly in any of the books of the Hebrew Bible and translates roughly as "Borders of the Earth"—pivots from the first two in major ways. Where the first two sermons ask 'what' questions—specifally, what the greatest human good is, and what its greatest manifestation is—this sermon asks a 'why' question. And beyond the type of question it seeks to answer, the subject of Malbim's teaching is different now as well, as he builds a theological foundation beneath the ethical edifice of the first two sermons.

The central question upon which this sermon turns is why God put human beings on Earth. If the combined theses of the first two sermons are true—that the greatest good is pursuing virtue while ignoring its innate material pleasures—life can seem cruel. Why would God structure material existence in a way that forces human beings to struggle to reach for perfection all the time? And the thesis of this sermon—which Malbim will argue through the prism of a parable and then through a reading of a range of verses pertaining to the Tabernacle, Moses, David, and Jacob—is that only through this terrestrial struggle can one truly see a soul's spiritual quality. And as a result of the shift in the sort of problem that this sermon wrestles with, its epistomology and style shifts too.

The sermon itself is divided into three conceptual segments. The first poses the central problem and an initial abstract thesis, while leaving a practical question open—how does the thesis come to be in reality. The next two segments provide two parallel answers to this question, one in a national context and the other on a personal level. This sermon has far less exegetical activity than the previous two, and embodies a more mystical epistemology—indicating, once more, that the fate of the biblical text is far less an urgent concern for Malbim in this work that the fate of his reader's soul.

Beneath his *Noseh*—Exodus 25:9—which he will return to, and a relatively lengthy esoteric poem, Malbim opens the first section of this sermon with a striking question—expressed in a highly allusive poetics (see the footnotes):

> If we glance across this lowly vale upon[68] which we live, it must be evil in the eyes of its master[69], who has decided against stationing glory within it—such as divine light or spiritual power—as He has in the heavens[70]. There I see the spirit of the creature within the wheels[71]; like mares in heaven's chariots not turning when they

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[68] Ezekiel 37:2.
[69] Exodus 21:8.
[70] Psalms 148:14—and here the reference is pointed, for the original text declares God's presence in both the heavens and the earth, but here, Malbim's observation leads him to question the declaration and see God's apparent presence as in the heavens alone.
[71] Ezekiel 1:20-21.

> moved.[72] But the earth is silent and still, bereft of any spirit[73]. Upon the heavens is the glory of God and the sheen[74] of his light, yet the earth is bare, vacant, and dark[75]. There God pours out a bowl-full of the dews of light and rains of charity[76] to drench them with blessing[77]; yet all the earth is arid.[78] And my intuition asks me, why has God done this to this land—covering it with the shadow of death? Have you but one blessing my father? Bless me too my father![79] Lord my God, your spirit is goodness[80]—why have you not bestowed blessing upon me too[81]? [82]

Referencing Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones and Esau's reaction to paternal disposession, Malbim channels an existential challnege to God—why is the Earth so devoid of divine presence? Where his first two sermons open with what he sees as declarative truths—first, that pious people decline renumeration, and second, that the human condition tends toward moral failure—here he begins with a problem. Without citing a verse explicitly, his oblique mosaic evokes the ruminations of theodicy. If it is true that God seeks human good and human goodness lies in the pursuit of unadulterated cerebral virtue—why does God abandon humankind to a plane of dark matter?[83]

Before addressing the question directly, Malbim introduces a contrast between physical and metaphysical dynamics, where the nestling of a soul in a body is deemed not simply as mirculous but quite unnatural—for in physical dynamics, fragments drive toward the whole (whether dust settling in the earth, or water descending to the deep, or heat rising up), yet in metaphysical-dynamics God drives fragments of His spirit into separate bodies—"as if He were the fragment, and we were the whole."[84] Malbim then reads this dynamic into the words of two verses—one from Psalms, the other from Song of Songs—taking his readers into exegetically buttressed mystical territory before turning to a more accessible parabolic answer, comparing God's attitude toward the soul with that of one in possesion of a precious gem:

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Habakuk 2:19.
[74] Job 18:5.
[75] Genesis 1:
[76] Psalms 68:10
[77] Malachi 3:10.
[78] Judges 6:37.
[79] Genesis 27:38.
[80] Psalms 143:10.
[81] Genesis 27:36.
[82] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 38.
[83] Pun intended.

> At a moment in which the owner of the gem wishes to exhibit its beauty and clarity, he closes it in a dark chamber within a dim collonade—entirely closed in without a ray of sun. He then opens a sky-light in the roof above the dark room, concentrating the sun's rays specifically on the gem—magnifying its clarity at the moment in which the sun's rays refract and beams of light scatter, filling the room entirely with light; the shafts of light then break through the room's windows and crevices to the outer dim collonade filling it with light. Then it is known that the preciousness of the stone is truly great.
>
> So is it, when God wishes to exhibit…the light of the emerald soul…He closes it inside a dark room, the murky body, surrounded by a vast dark colonnade, the general lowly world—which is an entirely dark and dense, gloomy, desolate wasteland[85]—and at the moment at which sun's rays rise and the spiritual divine light shines, breaking through the pockets of the souls and its pathways, igniting its flames with the light that bounces off it…then the entire house fills with brilliance, scattering light over the totality of reality, shining rays of justice over every part of the created universe, as it brings down divinity and spirituality to the valley of distress, to the opening of hope…this is how it is known that the preciousness of the soul is truly great.[86]

Malbim's thesis in the face of his theodical crisis is that God appears to abandon us on Earth—amidst the gloom and void of material existence—in order to let our souls shine. Souls, Malbim claims, are shards of divinity, metaphysically splintered and stored in flesh, so that as celestial energy runs through them, their prismic quality permits an exhibition of spiritual illumination that would be invisible in the realm of heaven. In the Godly surrounds of heaven, a single soul's pious shine would fail to register and any recognition of its greatness would be impossible. For Malbim, God puts souls on Earth to test their clarity; human beings' purpose on Earth is thus to channel divinity and showcase the quality of their cut.

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Job 30:3.
[86] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 39.

And while Malbim's parable may make his metaphysical claim sound like an allegory of sorts, he sees his description as the simple truth[87]—as we will discover—in that a person's soul can literally refract divinity over material existence. The question which remains for Malbim—having declared his thesis—is of a more practical nature: "Who can find a gem as precious and great as this…that would be able to illuminate this great collonade?"[88] Malbim wonders, who on Earth, with their solitary soul, could refract the volume of divinity needed to fill the world? And to this question, he offers two distinct answers, which make up the remaining two segments of the sermon.

His first answer is that precisely because finding a soul capable of such vast refraction is near impossible, human beings need to come together in a very specific way.

> One who has many small precious stones, and places them together in a dark room, aligned with a skylight beneath the sun, and arranges them in the right way—using wisdom and knowledge…so that they harness the entire range of the sun's rays…the sun's light will be dispersed in its fullness…so too is the case with the sacred stones—the precious souls—designed to capture spiritual light and the presence of God to disperse them across existence, which not a single solitary soul from the gamut of the Israelite nation can succeed in doing…[89]

Continuing his geological parable, if a single soul fails to provide the luster needed to capture a world's-worth of divinity, a cluster—arranged wisely—can magnify each other's power.

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[87] The idea that the soul is worked upon on Earth, in literal terms, was of course current in medieval religious circles, but was also prevalent among romantics and others in Malbim's historical context. Ten years before Malbim published his sermons, John Keats wrote a letter to his brother and sister—George and Georgiana—describing this world as a "Vale of Soul-making," in which he claimed that the mission of human beings on earth was to forge their soul through suffering, and described the specifics of the process. See: Mellor, Anne K. *English Romantic Irony*. Reprint 2014. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 103-4.

[88] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 39.

[89] Ibid.

Malbim then continues to elaborate on the metaphysical dynamics of souls, turning to what he admits is a metaphor—depicting every soul, each shard of divinity, as related to each other as limbs of a larger spiritual organism, fully functional only when working in concert as part of a collaborative system.

On this basis, Malbim claims that the rabbinic sages were in possession of a metaphysical science—*chochmah ha'elohit*—that dictated how many souls were needed to generate various concentrations of divinity. It takes, he says, at least 22,000 souls to refract the full force of the divine presence (based on a passage in the Talmud):

> For in the combination of the private lights stored in each and every one of these souls—derived from the divine essence—which in their totality amount to the number of souls needed to relate to the entire structure in all its details…they become in their aggregate like a collosal precious gem designed perfectly for the purpose, corresponding in all its pieces to the size, quality, and quantity of the sun, so that they can capture every single sunray, kindle its flame like a magnificent sunrise, illuminate every corner of creation with its brilliant beams of light, and God shall be a King over the entire world.[90]

For Malbim, the project that necessitates material existence is manifest divinity. And souls, which are shards of God mined from bedrock of heaven, are the vehicles of such manifestation—capable in their nature of capturing divine light. But to capture God's radiance on a large enough scale so as to engender a global efflorescence of his presence, requires amassing a whole host of souls. And while 22,000 may sound like an arbitrary threshold (one that he doesn't explain, beyond it being a product of rabbinic wisdom), Malbim argues that the science of divine refraction is not binary, and the more souls the more shine.

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[90] Ibid., 40.

To bolster this claim, he steers his readers through a number of rabbinic passages, one of which determines that different sized groups (10, 100, 10,000) have different formulations for the liturgical introduction to the grace after meals—a result that he claims stems from a presumed intensification of the presence of God. And then he leads his readers to the ultimate medium of manifest divnity:

> With an increase of gathering, the glory intensifies, and the illumination spreads…and there is no doubt, that it grows to its zenith at a time when the entire nation, 600,000 strong, gather together in a single place—for then the heavens will open and the divine presence will be indisputable, revealing the glory of God before the eyes of the entire people.[91]

Here Malbim translates the political, cultural, sociological force of congregation into theological terms. For him, the body politic does more than amass bodies in mass assemblies, it generates the finest conditions of manifest divinity—where each gemstone of a soul, enhances the range and augments the shine of the divine light that the others refract.

So far, this sermon evinces an entirely different style and epistemology than the first two. Barely any Scripture has been involved—neither as proof nor as a pivot, nor as a means to make exemplars out of biblical figures—only woven into the allusive vocabulary to ground the theology in Scriptural terms (furthering the sense in which Scripture serves here as a means rather than an ends of the sermon's pedagogy). And now the sermon segues into an explanation of a section of Scripture—or more truthfully, a facet of Jewish faith, without as yet referencing the biblical text. Malbim will argue that both the Tabernacle in the wilderness and then the Temple in Jerusalem were in fact designed precisely to facilitate this ultimate project of manifest divinity.

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[91] Ibid.

> It was for this purpose that God ordered the construction of a material house for him—the Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem…to which all the souls of Israel would flow from the scattered places…this was the house in which gathered all the crown jewels, the precious gems, hewn stones—souls of Israel; and there was the open skylight in the roof of the chamber—the gate of heaven, through which poured the great and sublime light, the divine light stored for the pious; and there the battlements of gem-souls became as precious stones and saphires—and the wise ones shone like the shine of the skies; the great light which streamed and flooded and gushed by means of their souls over the whole of creation.[92]

For Malbim, the hallowed structures that were the Tabernacle and the Temple, served as platforms for the Israelite body politic to assemble and disseminate manifest divinity. And, in Malbim's reading, these structure were so apt for the mechanics of human generated spiritual refraction because they modelled—precisely—the human body in architectural form.

The human body can be divided—and has been by philosophers, as Malbim notes—into three subsections, which in turn are host to three dimensions of the soul. First, he says, the lower portions of the body responsible for digestion and excretion (including organs such as the stomach, the intestines, the kidneys, and the liver etc.), host the *nefesh hativit*, the 'natural soul.' The next section of the body is the chest—holding the lungs and the heart—which is responsible for the functions of the respiratory and circulatory systems; and this hosts the *chiyonit*, the 'life force.' The final section of the body—the head—holds the brain, which is the material home for the *nefesh hamaskelet*, 'the intelligent soul.' These three subsections, in turn, organize the cosmos writ large—built up of inorganic matter, celestial objects, and the upper realm of the separate intelligences—and will be, momentarily, shown to be the substructure of the Tabernacle and Temple too.[93]

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[92] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 40-41.
[93] Ibid., 41.

Before tracing the parallel, however, Malbim turns to a tradition—one that, by his account, transcends the shallow wisdom of scientists—that suggests two further tiers of the soul, respectively called *chaya*—'life,' and *yechida*—'singularity.' Malbim defends the existence of these components of the soul on the basis of a reading of Psalms 103 and 104 performed by the rabbinic sages[94]—in which Malbim casts the psalter's fivefold poetic repetition of the phrase "bless my soul"[95] as coded increments of mystical truth.[96]

Malbim then outlines the ways in which the design of ritul sacred space—the layout of the Tabernacle and Temple—capture these divisions, allowing the structures to serve as the platform for the national soul of the Israelite body politic. In his words:

> Just as the body of a person—which is a garment for the forces of the soul—contains vessels and limbs that the soul's faculties make use of, to manifest external behavior, so too in the Temple—which is a garment for the national person, that being the entire people which now coalesces to assume the character of an individual person—contains all the vessels and segments of an individual person.[97]

The Temple is not an arbitrary ritual edifice but a system of structures patterned after the same archetype as the human form with three primary realms—the courtyard, the hall, and the holy of holies. The courtyard—containing the altar upon which sacrificial meat and grain burns—resembles the digestive portion of the body along with the degenerative realm of the cosmos. The hall of the Temple—containing the incense altar and the candelabrum—resembles the respiratory and circulatory sphere of the body (where the incense's aroma aligns with the heart's life giving character and the candelabrum's seven branches parallel to the seven folds of the lungs).[98] And thirdly, the holy of holies—containing the Ark of the Covenant—resembles the head and brain. The two further traditional strata of the soul are captured in the two—slightly different—cherubs sitting atop the ark.

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[94] Berakhot 10a.
[95] Psalm 103:1, 2, 22; Psalm 104:1, 35.
[96] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 41-42.
[97] Ibid., 43.

And though I say 'resemble', for Malbim these cosmic fractals have more than a mere resemblance. For him, this description is no metaphor—the realms of the Temple that parallel parts of the body actually perform a scaled-up version of the same function. And this functionality, for Malbim, resolves the quandary around God's request for a material home for His presence—while simultanesouly addressing the decision to place humanity on Earth.

> Everything that is found in Scripture, suggesting that God's presence dwells within the Temple, does not mean that it dwelled within the building itself—on the wood and stone…Rather, it is just like how physical food is the primary cause toward the presence of the intelligent soul in the human body—as we see that if one fails to eat, they die in hunger. And the science of how the intelligent soul is tied to material forces by means of physical food is hidden from us…[99]

Despite a confession of a level of ignorance concerning the mechanics of the soul—Malbim projects a monist creed, in which he contends that the food that human beings eat gives strengh not simply to the body but the soul. There is no clean seperation, for Malbim, between body and soul—they both lie on a spectrum of matter in which the ingestion of one feeds the energies of the other, in turn attracting or repelling a measure of God's presence. This is the premise upon which Malbim will argue that just as the material activities of the body impact the character and vitality of the soul—the physical ritual around the Temple invigorates the national soul upon which divinity rests.

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[98] At this point Malbim confesses to providing only a superficial survey of the parallels—which he does, in fact, complete in a supplementary commentary to the sections of Exodus detailing the Tabernacle's design.

[99] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 43.

Performing his first extended exegetical exercise in this sermon, Malbim reads Isaiah 66:1-3—using his principles of precision and concision—as making precisely this case. He suggests that the text first cites God's request for that Temple, and then has the prophet question the request—concerned both with the insinuation that God has physical properties and thus needs a physical home, and, second, the appearance of a deficiency that He needs human beings to fill by doing something that He can't. The resolution to these two concerns, which Malbim reads into the biblical text is that the former is a misperception while the second in indeed the case. First—God's presence does not dwell on stones or wood or bodies in a way that fills physical space: "When God's presence rests in the Temple, it is the fact that it comes to manifest in a material space, in a house of cedars; rather it manifests on the souls of the people of Israel which have come and gathered at the Temple."[100] And in response to the second concern, Malbim argues that God does indeed need humanity to do something which He cannot—to chose for themselves between good and evil.

Malbim takes an ostensibly repetitive and aesthetically poetic set of three verses and transforms them into a compressed dialogue—raising the implied heresies of the Sanctuary's presence and then projecting the corrective theology. He does this with exegetical verve and intepretive subtlety, but, once more, does it *not* in the context of saving Scripture but teaching his readers and saving their souls. The Temple ritual is the equivalent of human ingestion and exercise; as the latter invigorates the indiviudal body with energy and the associated soul with power, the former transforms the separate souls of the amassed nation into a celestial mesh primed to refract vast amounts of divinity.

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[100] Ibid., 44.

Malbim then utilizies this theory to read a biblical verse as a clear instantiation of his argument. Exodus 25:8—"They shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell within them"—contains a seemingly peculiar grammatical shift, and would have more simply said "They shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell within it." While one may resolve this question grammatically or homiletically, Malbim reads it quite literally—with the Temple built, the assembled mass's souls can coalesce into a collosal spiritual structure for the purpose of refracting divinity. God's presence does *not* dwell within the Temple, which is merely a material means to merging distinct souls into a compound celestial receptacle—God's presence dwells within the nation. Then citing the next verse (Exodus 25:9)—"Exactly as I show you, the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, so shall you make it"—Malbim suggests that God's insistance on strict obedience to the details of construction of the Temple and its vessels is not simply a divine pedantry or inscrutable test; the need for precision in the Temple's construction is about sound mechnical engineering—but metaphyscial rather than physical mechanics.

Malbim does confess that the science of his monist claims remains a mystery—"hidden from human intelligence"[101]—but he goes on to lay out how every material act impacts the soul and how every biblical prohibition and responsibility is designed to calibrate the soul for the paramount refraction of divinity. To further explain, he turns to Leviticus 11:43-44, and the biblical dietary proscriptions:

> It is not because these foods harm the body, as Maimonides thought, that they are proscribed…but because they impart an impure and sordid imprint on the Jewish

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[101] Ibid., 46.

> soul—in ways that repel spiritual sanctity from upon it and make it impossible for God to unveil His presence to them and dwell within them.[102]

As part of his monist theory, Malbim maintains that even in cases where material ingestion has no adverse impact on the body it can harm the soul—not as an instantaneous punitive measure for disobedience, but as a direct consequence of the material property's spirtiual toxicity. Dietary proscriptions are neither driven by an outdated assumptions or a capricious despot, but the result of divine expertise in the realm of cosmic science—and who are human beings to question Him.

> And whether we understand these details at all, this is the directive of the King that he will only rest his presence in this way…and who knows the qualities of the soul and its character—the things that elevate it and desecrate it—other than He, may He be blessed, who made the soul.[103]

When it comes to matters of the soul, God is the specialist and human beings—if they seek His presence—must obey. And on this basis, Malbim turns his attention, for the first time in the sermons, toward those who've sought to discard religious traditions under the guise of reason.

> And now the mist and dark have enveloped the breachers among our people, who have begun to call every religious defector a 'philosopher,' and those who eat their fill of non-kosher and filthy foods 'scientists'…[104]

This is the first indication that we have from Malbim that he sees himself providing ethical and theological teachings not in a vacuum, but against the backdrop of a decline in traditional Jewish ritual observance. His thesis in this sermon—as abstract and esoteric at it is—is driven at an audience that he sees walking away from lives of virtue due to the appeal of material or secular life. And his defense of faith as aligned with reason is that ritual restrictions and obligations are not indiscriminate or primitive but are designed with precision to elevate the whole person, which at its core is the soul.

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[102] Ibid., 48.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 49.

For Malbim, we are beings that may feel abandoned to a material plane—as far from the heavens as one could imagine—but we are on Earth to unleash the sheen of our souls through manifest divinity, and it is the observance of Jewish law as proscribed by Scripture and the sages, that gives our soul its polish and sheen: "Most of the practical commandments are to order our bodies and souls on the model of the Tabernacle and its vessels, and in this way, have God's presence dwell within."[105]

Malbim then pivots to the last segment of this sermon, and the second answer to his earlier question—can a single soul truly refract the vastness of divinity required to illuminate the world? His first answer was no, and suggested that it was precisely for that reason that God required people to assemble around the Temple and thus arrange their individual souls into a national mesh of celestial gems. His second answer, however, is yes—a single soul can refract the amount of divinity ordinarily channeled on a national scale, but only the souls of certain saints.

> Everything that we have stated up to this point…only speaks to the average Israelite masses—but certainly an individual person who can prepare their heart with enormous spirit, equal to the entire house of Israel, can be found… Moses…and the prophets…and the three patriachs…and King David…are the whole ones who have no need of the Temple since they themselves are temples—that in their bodies there is such an order and integrity to the point that these individuals are equal to an entire nation.[106]

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[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.

Malbim's second answer proposes that there are indeed such great characters that shape their souls to refract almost infinite divinity—and he does so by invoking oblique traditions found in the sages and reading verses against the grain. Genesis 12:2, 17:2, and 18:18 all comprise a promise on the part of God to turn Abraham into a great nation—and Malbim reads this not as a slow-release pledge to grant Abraham autonomous progeny, but a vow to augment Abraham's individual powers into the equivalent of a nation's. In Exodus 25:40 God tells Moses to instruct the people to build a temple as he had seen on the mountain, which Malbim understands to refer to the temple that Moses had made *of himself* on the mountain. Malbim then weaves a number of biblical and rabbinic texts togther to serve his thesis—that human beings are put on Earth to attract divinity and refract its power across the globe, with great figures having the power to do so on their own.

Once more, where Scripture's text is ambiguous, Malbim's focus is less on its protection than on its capacity to bear a message, and Malbim's final passage of this sermon then presents two scenes of Scripture that he reads in ways that share his ideas about how to save the soul.

The first scene is from Genesis 28, when Jacob wakes from a dream that involved angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. His first spoken reaction to the prophetically tinged vision is "Behold! God is in this place, and I did not know it."[107] But Malbim exegetically intervenes and alters the subject of Jacob's ignorance—first he explains his rendering and then he offers an interlinear exegesis.

> He did not comprehend the greatness of his soul—which was capable of prophecy—he himself being the platform for the presence of the eternal one…his status being higher than the status of the place… "Jacob awoke"—he realized that until this point he did not comprehend the truth of his soul and its power; "And he said, 'Behold!'"—meaning, 'Behold, I have erred in my imagination to think…';

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[107] Genesis 28:16.

> “God is in this place”—that this place  is what caused God’s presence to dwell here, but; “and I”—me knowing the truth that I caused all this, that I myself was the platform for divinity, this “I did not know.”[108]

At this dramatic moment, in which the text apears to exhibit a figure stirred by the sacral weight of the place in which he slept, Malbim reconfigures Jacob’s awakening. Jacob, in Malbim’s reading, knew about the spiritual receptivity of his chosen lodging—what he did not know, was that he was capable of manifest divinity independent of the place. Seeing the fact that “God stood on him”[109] not merely as a spatial reference but as a causal connection, Jacob recognized the advanced sheen of his soul.

The second scene that Malbim reads here, reports a similar theme in relation to King David, who in being rejected as the architect of the first Temple is offered compensation by God. On its face the compensation appears rather odd—promising David a “house” in place of his wish to build the Temple—seeing as David’s desire was to manifest divinity not to improve his legacy or estate. Yet Malbim suggests that the compensation was “a true consolation”.[110] Read properly, he says, the pledge was not simply to give David a new house or progeny—but to grant David his wish by different means.

> Nathan the prophet…said to him, “God says to you that He will make you a house,” as if to say, ‘Do not be pained about this, for you do not need the Temple. He will make a house out of you yourself—in that you will be a house for God on your own.’[111]

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[108] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 49-50.

[109] Genesis 28:13.

[110] Malbim, *Artzot HaShalom*, 51.

[111] Ibid.

Though David would not build the stone edifice around which the nation would assemble, he would not need to in order to manifest divinity—David, in his spiritual greatness—would some day be capable of doing that all on his own. For the very great souls, in Malbim's theological universe—one that he cements in his fourth sermon, as noted in our introduction—there is no need for other people or a temple; they are both merely means to manifest high quantities of divinity, an ends that can be achieved by dint of thse great souls' own reflective power.

Malbim rounds out this third sermon with a return to the *Noseh*, which he now reads in a way that compresses much of this sermon's thesis into a sentence. Exodus 25:9 is transformed from tautological insistence that Israel follow the parameters of their instructions, into a guide for self-perfection. When God says, "Like all that I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so shall you do," He is in fact asking the Israelites not simply to do as their told but to use the Tabernacle as a model for their bodies—to try to turn their bodies into temples that can refract divinity on their own.

The central problem of this third sermon—why human beings are put on Earth—is resolved through a prolonged argument based on a monist assumption that physical matter is linked to spiritual matter and that it is in this realm of physical matter that the soul's power can best be seen. In the course of this sermon, Malbim has shown—again—that his arguments are not organized around Scripture but conceptual issues, pressing on questions relating not to the biblical text but the human condition. He makes use of exegesis—often in ways that are radical and innovative, and constitutive of his later work—but his focus in this corpus is not on resolving textual issues, but on teaching ethics and theology.

## Overview

Malbim's ethical and theological teachings, which we suggest serve as the unspoken content of his third hermeneutic pillar of the divine dialect in which Scripture is written—sublimity—have become clear from a detailed survey of first three sermons and a summary of the other six. Though it is true that the sermons were first published when Malbim was young, he did republish them with only minor changes[112] thirty years later and referenced them throughout his biblical exegesis for the rest of his life—showing his life-long alignment with their teachings.

Overall the ideas that arise out of a coalition of these sermon's disparate theses are emphatically cerebral—one in which the world of the mind, or soul, is the center of spiritual and ethical attention. The highest good that human beings can achieve is the suppression of every material urge beneath the weight of wisdom and virtue—to surrender the innate physical cravings to the ethics which polish the sheen of the soul.

Against the rise of romanticism—as per our discussion in our first chapter—Malbim channels an enlightened vision, bereft of the visceral energies of the flesh and concentrated on the more ethereal substance of the soul. Though of course Malbim rejects, implicitly, the enlightenment's dismissal of tradition, he embraces the reverence and adoration of the life of the mind and the concomitant condemnation of raw instinct.

A review of Malbim's sermons was published in 1841 in an explicitly non-traditional publication,[113] in which the author praised Malbim's exegetical and pedagogical ingenuity, but claimed that his talents would be better used in the genre of biblical commentary. We have no evidence that Malbim read the review, but it seems quite clear that he shared the view that it was time to turn his attention to the biblical text—not simply for personal expedience but to address the urgent hermeneutic crisis outlined in the previous chapter.

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[112] The details of the changes are beyond the scope of our study.

[113] See Rosenblum, *Ha-Malbim* , 29-31.

The next chapter will argue, through a series of examples, that Malbim's proclivity toward saving the soul was not simply replaced by an urgent compulsion to save the biblical text, but was brought to bear on his exegetical project—in which he both sought to save the text and continue to save the soul. In this way, Malbim bequeathed his readers a complex product engaged both in attentive reading and ethical and theological teaching—methodically resulting in what we are calling exegetical pedagogy—in which the ethical and theological ideas serve as the 'dark matter,' the unseen though potent force, which steers his interpretive hand.

# Chapter Four: Malbim's Exegetical Pedagogy

## Gravitational Mapping

In this chapter we arrive at the apogee of the argument that makes the case for the thesis of this dissertation—that Malbim's exegetical project is more than a reactive salve to hermeneutic threats against the biblical text, or a scattershot attempt to rebuff reformers, but is inflected in a consistent pattern by a specific pedagogical vision.

In our first chapter, we outlined the crises that beset the newly emancipated Jews of Europe—who, for at least three hundred years, had been on the extreme periphery of European cultural life. As civic freedoms were incrementally granted, the cultural dynamics of the Jewish community began to shift—in the realm of politics, education, and the allure of the newly available pleasures of city-life. And beyond the social threats to the status quo, the foundational document of Jewish life came under threats of its own—three to be precise.

First, as a result of the Enlightenment's reliance on and expansion of the scientific revolution—and the rise of philology, archeology, and critical history—the integrity of the very text of Scripture came under heightened scrutiny. The reigning theories contended that the Masoretic text was riddled with grammatical and syntactical inconsistencies, likely due to inadequate attention in the process of transmission, and errors in interpretation by unschooled clerics. The second threat—seen as the most pernicious by a number of traditional Jewish scholars—came in the form of an assault on rabbinic exegesis, which was castigated as fantastical and incoherent, scorned for being irrational in the age of reason. The third threat arose as a result of the response to the Enlightenment from European romantics, who sought to rehabilitate the

Hebrew Bible but did so in a way that remade it—replacing the centuries-long polysemic hermeneutics of theologians with the dramatic semantics of novelists and poets.

Our second chapter outlined the responses of a number of traditional rabbinic figures to the threats against Scripture in particular—from Moses Mendelssohn and Wessely to Jacob Meklenburg and Samson Raphael Hirsh—before turning its attention to the interpretative hermeneutics of Malbim himself. Where the former three figures all hollowed out Scripture's independent semantic for the sake of saving rabbinic tradition, Malbim put his efforts into saving the biblical text—he was far more concerned with the third threat against Scripture than the second. We surveyed his eight introductions to a range of biblical volumes, only one of which he uses to defend rabbinic tradition as being necessarily identical with the surface reading of Scripture. In each of the others he projects a poetics of a dense biblical semantics, due to what he deems to be the divine dialect in which Scripture is written. While he notes a number of exegetical strategies, the common thread of his theory is a set of three foundational pillars: concision, precision, and sublimity, And while the first and second principles can be executed in a somewhat objective sense—seeking a rigid semiotic abbreviation simultaneous with a high semantic concentration, the third principle left us in need of more information.

Our third chapter was devoted to unearthing the substance of Malbim's third pillar—the conceptual content of his hermeneutic sublimity and the ethical and theological ideas that he seeks to exhibit as part of the Scriptural program. Piecing together the first three of his nine sermons, we saw that his central concern was deeply cerebral and in opposition to an ethic of self-interest, instinct or impulse. Using a homiletic structure, Malbim harnessed Scriptural verses, rabbinic tradition, parables, and analysis to paint a moral and theological outlook concentrated on the purity of mind—where virtue is defined by pursuing the good for goodness sake against the forces of seductive interior and ulterior motives.

It is the aim of this chapter to employ all that we have garnered in the previous three, to demonstrate how Malbim's biblical commentary is a work of consistent pedagogy more than a conceptually indiscriminate and reactive polemic. We will explore a series of biblical passages—varied in their genre—in which Malbim's exegesis relies on all three pillars of his hermeneutic theory, accounting for both apparent textual excess and ostensible moral hollowness, exhibiting how Malbim's interpretive program seeks to defend Scripture's integrity but, more so, to portray it as generating a relatively coherent ethos and theology. In this way we seek to show that Malbim's commentary embodies an exegetical pedagogy—serving as an interpretive work that seeks not simply to resolve hermeneutic issues, but to simultaneously impart a system of teachings to the reader. And this where our metaphor of 'dark matter' comes in.

If we treat Malbim's commentary as an exegetical universe that observes rules and follows patterns, the substance of the previous chapter can be seen as his interpretive 'dark matter'—dark matter being the invisible cosmic substance that exerts a colossal impact on the physical dynamics of the universe and accounts for all sorts of apparent peculiarities. It should be stressed, that in no way do I intend to suggest that Malbim's ethical and theological ideas are 'dark' in a pejorative or negative sense—simply that they are an invisible but dominant force behind many of Malbim's exegetical decisions.

It is true that this 'dark matter' of Malbim's exegetical universe deems the material plane of existence to be inferior to the less dense spiritual matter—using a parable in his third sermon where the material world is referred to as a realm of darkness, designed to allow the soul to shine—but Malbim's ethos and theology is not pessimistic or cynical; the 'dark matter' behind his hermeneutic sublimity, which steers much of his Scriptural interpretive activity, seeks to teach his reader that human beings have the power to manifest divinity, at their best, through effort and reflection.

And to continue the cosmic metaphor, the astronomical procedure of detecting 'dark matter' through identifying its impact on the visible universe is called 'gravitational mapping,' and it is the hope of the chapter to identify and showcase the impact of Malbim's ethical and theological teachings—his 'dark matter'—in his biblical exegesis. In this way, we intend to show that, unlike Segal's hypothesis—stated at the start of our first chapter—far from being an occupant of a retrograde intellectual ghetto, numbed or dulled to the modern human condition, Malbim is in the business of alleviating it by recognizing its tensions and positioning Scripture as the source of remedial instruction.

## Method

To demonstrate that Malbim's commentary is in fact a coherent body of exegetical pedagogy—offering a vision opposed to the materialistic and instinctive ethos of romanticism—we will examine passages from different sections of Scripture, varied by genre, subject matter, and context, but all allied in their illustrative capacity. We'll first lay out the respective biblical passage itself. Following, we'll suggest the questions that might disturb an interpreter, with an in-depth discussion of Malbim's exegetical reaction together with, when available and productive, a contrasting view either among traditional Jewish commentators or a contemporary romantic reading.

We begin our assessment with four narrative episodes, followed by an analysis of two poetic moments. First we'll explore the case of Cain and Abel, followed by the pain of the Jacob, the birth and emergence of Moses, and the lament of Naomi. Then, to exhibit Malbim's exegetical pedagogy in the context of biblical poetry we turn to the first and forty second Psalms.

## Case Studies

### Cain and Abel

Perhaps the most visceral moment in the opening episodes of Scripture—one that has captured the imagination of writers and artists from the rabbinic sages to the romantics[1]—is Cain's assault on his brother. In the space of eight verses humanity goes from procreation to fratricide, from the birth of the first child to the perpetration of the first murder.[2]

The fourth chapter of Genesis opens by reporting the birth of Cain and Abel, along with their respective vocations—the former going into arable farming and the latter into keeping sheep. Skipping the less salient details of their adolescence and quotidian lives, Scripture turns to a defining moment in their development: they both bring a sacrifice to God. Cain offers produce of some sort as a tribute, and Abel offers from the choicest of his flock. God, it seems, prefers meat to seeds, as He is said to have responded to Abel and neglected Cain. Cain is enraged and his face falls—and then God reaches out to him in the midst of his fury.

> [6] And the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you distressed? And why is your face fallen? [7] Surely, if you do right, there is elevation. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, but you can be its master."[3]

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[1] See, Quinones, Ricardo J. *The Changes of Cain: Violence and the Lost Brother in Cain and Abel Literature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991; Byron, John. *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry*. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2011; Luttikhuizen, Gerard P. *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*. Leiden ; Boston, MA: Brill, 2003.

[2] This episode is the subject of one of Frisch's (2013) analyses, where he infers a more detailed exegetical methodology, for Malbim, than simply the eradication of redundancies. What I have sought to do is to move past the exegetical methodology, for now, and speak to the broader hermeneutic concern.

[3] Genesis 4:6-7.

God appears to both censure and reassure Cain that he need not grieve over his celestial neglect—but God's guidance is ambiguous. Was this a warning or a critique? Why speak in such oblique terms? Either way, in the wake of this revelation, Cain kills Abel—as the next verse makes clear.

> [8] Cain said to his brother Abel … and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.

Half of the second generation of humankind were killed by the other, that much is clear. But what exactly did Cain say to his brother in the moments leading up to that murder? The ellipses in the citation are drawn from the 1985 JPS translation[4], provided in many ways to accentuate the apparent gap in the text. We are told that Cain spoke to his brother Abel, using a formulation universally followed by a quotation—and yet there are no words. Since exegetes first penned their thoughts, they have sought to address this lacuna.

The rabbinic sages of the midrash utilize the apparent vacuum to generate a range of imaginative narratives that entertain the sort of conversation that could have led to a clash and a murder, and a number of the early biblical translations go as far as to insert words into the ostensible void.[5] Some of the medieval Jewish commentaries[6] contend that the verse should be rendered "Cain spoke to Abel" rather than "Cain said to Abel," but, quite reasonably, some see this as straining linguistic credulity.

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[4] Jewish Publication Society. *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985, 8.

[5] See Genesis Rabbah, Targum Jonathan, and the Vulgate on this verse.

[6] Rashi (see note 5 to chapter 1) among them.

Abravanel[7]—a figure who Malbim deeply admired and has often been seen as heavily reliant upon—following the view of David Kimchi,[8] suggested that Cain repeated to Abel what he had just been told by God. For them, the biblical text is justified in its elliptical semantics due to the obvious nature of Cain's message, implied by the proximity of the communication from God in the previous verse. For these medieval commentators, Cain ensnares Abel by suggesting that he had been appeased by God and there was no longer a need to fear him, and once at a remove from their shared father Adam, Cain slew Abel in the field.

Whether this is read as a cold-blooded manipulative homicide, or a lethal act of passion and appetite, the clash between brothers makes for a drama of acute power. And exploiting this latent reserve of emotive substance, an English poet—living at the time that Malbim wrote—penned a play called "Cain: A Mystery."[9] Lord Byron depicts a tormented soul, a young man at odds with his more pious—and perhaps more naïve—family. Cain resists ritual behaviors and builds a relationship with a figure we know to be Lucifer who leads him further into a spiral of nihilistic resignation, leaving him incensed at the fact of death and the nonetheless inexorable instinct to keep on living. In this play, Cain is the embodied opposition to violence—the cause of his anger in the wake of his sacrificial rejection is not simply the fact of his rejection but his brother's decision to kill a living being. In many ways, the mystery of this play is how Cain's abhorrence of violence leads him to kill his sibling, showing, in Paul Cantor's words: "the tragedy that can result from the longing for transcendence, and yet [the play] leaves us with the feeling that only an ignoble soul would be dead to that longing."[10] Cain, for Byron, is the iconic romantic, trapped in a yearning for mystery that simultaneously torments him.

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[7] See note 4, chapter 1.
[8] See note 28, chapter 1.
[9] For the most recent critical edition, see Steffan, T. G., and George Gordon Byron. *Lord Byron's Cain: Twelve Essays and a Text With Variants and Annotations*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

Malbim, however, diverges from both the romantic and the traditional Jewish readings of this scene—finding a way to both save the text of Scripture from the assault of critics and save the soul of his readers from the allures of instinct. Malbim's reading turns Cain into a simpler two-dimensional figure, characterized by innocence and ignorance more than malice or longing—his villainy is the result of being unschooled more than being a tool of impulse.

Malbim begins his reading of Genesis 4:8 by simply saying that "Cain failed to understand the words of God."[11] The aphoristic and, to Cain, impervious previous verse, in which God addressed his aggravation, struck him as rather strange. Malbim continues:

> [Cain] did not comprehend that the external person—a blend of flesh, sinews, and bone—was not the true person, but simply an animal in the form of a person. The true person is the intellectual, internal person concealed within that leads him. [Cain] thought the body and its powers was the totality of man—so when he heard from the mouth of God that there was a sin of some sort, crouching at the door, seeking to steer him astray, but that he could master it, he had no idea to whom or what God was referring or what this sin was. And since the only residents of Earth were he and his brother, Abel, he presumed that the reference was to his brother Abel—that it was he who sought to destroy him, and he that was in his power to master. This is what is meant by "And Cain said to Abel his brother"—that he said, to himself, that God referred "to Abel his brother," which is why he accosted him and killed him.[12]

In this ingenious reading, Malbim solves both the grammatical vacuum and addresses what his pillars of biblical hermeneutics would deem to be hollow drama. A translation of the text as read by Malbim would omit any ellipses for there is no gap—Cain does *not* speak to his brother and there is no absent quotation, he speaks to himself and the essence of the thought is given to us in Scripture. Confused about the referent of God’s remark he thinks to himself that God must be referring “to Abel his brother.”

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[10] See Cantor, P. The Kenyon Review, Summer, 1980, New Series, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer, 1980), 71.

[11] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 1. *Bereishit*, Jerusalem: Horev, 2012, 89. Translation mine, as are all translations of Malbim.

[12] *Ibid*.

It must be said that Meklenburg, the contemporary mentioned in our second chapter, makes a very similar interpretive maneuver, suggesting that “to Abel his brother” is not a description of Cain’s behavior but a paraphrase of a claim that Cain made. But in Meklenburg’s reading, Cain ignores the latter half of God’s remark and responds to the former—“Why are you angry?”—saying that it was “Because of Abel his brother.” For Meklenburg too, there is no textual vacuum—in his words, “אין המקרא חסר כלום,” “Scripture isn’t missing anything.” But in his reading Cain is still an angry villain—bent upon the wrathful obliteration of his divinely favored brother. For Meklenburg, Abel’s murder is an act of passion performed in the wake of a divine intervention—and Scripture presents a scene of brutal and horrific inhumanity.

So, while Meklenburg saves the text, Malbim, intent on saving the soul as well, injects his signature sublimity. Cain does not murder out of personal resentment, nor in a whirlwind of passion, and he certainly does not ignore the celestial intervention—he kills Abel, for Malbim, on the advice of God Himself. Cain failed to grasp God’s reference to the dangers of bodily impulse, for he didn’t realize that bodily impulse was distinct from his essence. Cain, in Malbim’s reading, was a receptive target of revelation—trying to follow God’s counsel. His error was a lack of understanding of the human condition, thinking that there is no contest within us between the soul and the flesh, but only the presence of the latter.

And on being questioned by God on the whereabouts of his brother—recognizing the implicit accusation, Cain’s apparently sardonic reaction is—for Malbim—sincere. The next verse, Genesis 4:9 reads: “The Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel, your brother?” The final word of which

Malbim submits to special exegetical pressure—following his hermeneutic of biblical concision—and claims that “God was informing Cain that Abel was his ‘brother’ and his comrade, and not the referent of his earlier remarks.” To which Cain responds—in Malbim’s reading—by saying *not* “I don’t know [where he is]”, but “I didn’t know [that he was my brother].”

For Malbim, the biblical presentation of the first murder is not a confession that violence or rage plague humankind from its very inception—it is a tale that teaches the import of seeing the soul as more central than the flesh, and depicts the tragedy that can result not simply from following instinct but from failing to see instinct as distinct from the truest self. In this way, Malbim both saves the text from critics who paint it as ‘gapped’ or problematic, and he saves the soul of the reader by offering a scene that teaches the need to see the soul beneath the skin.

In terms of gravitational mapping, we see here Malbim’s third pillar at work, exerting a force over his interpretive activity—where his textual concerns are made to align with his pedagogic interests and his ethical ‘dark matter’ impacts his exegetical hand. Through the contrast with both Meklenburg and Byron, we can see that the biblical text can be saved in a whole host of ways, and that Malbim’s choice reflects a profound will to save the soul as well.

## Jacob’s Pain

Moving to the last of the three patriarchs there are two moments, in particular, that we shall use to illustrate Malbim’s exegetical pedagogy at work. These are moments of ostensible sentiment, where the biblical text also appears to indulge an excess of description, and Malbim’s reading—in opposition to a number of his Jewish forebears and romantic contemporaries—aims to save both the text of Scripture and the soul of his reader.

The first moment occurs when Jacob anticipates the arrival of his estranged and, presumably, enraged brother, Esau—the last time they spoke was in advance of Jacob deceiving their father into bequeathing him Esau's blessing. Though two decades had passed, Jacob had reason to believe that Esau's resentment had not—his ire at the time and his desire to kill Jacob are not the sort of passions that usually subside. As he hears of his brother's impending arrival—alongside four hundred other men—Scriptures says:

> Jacob was greatly afraid, and he was distressed…[13]

Instinctively, the spectrum of traditional rabbinic commentators are triggered by the proximity of the adjectival repetition, as they wonder why the text represents Jacob's mental state in two, almost synonymous ways. David Kimchi sees in this excess an attempt to depict an inexpressible emotional state—in his words: "The doubling of the sense in different words is to exhibit the extent of his fear."[14] For Kimchi, the extent of Jacob's terror is nigh ineffable—he is shaken to the core as he considers the forthcoming confrontation, and Scripture employs two terms because a single one would fail to portray the degree of Jacob's dread; for him, though the doubling requires an explanation, it is not a major departure from Scriptural practice and in this instance does not add a new dimension to Jacob's condition, only a new depth.

Rashi, echoing an early midrash, however, sees the doubling as adding, not new depth, but, indeed, another dimension; the two emotional terms refer to two distinct fears: "He was 'afraid'—lest he die, and 'distressed'—lest he kill others."[15] Though Rashi's exegetical solution veers from Kimchi's in semantic terms, it does, like Kimchi's, amplify Jacob's emotional state. However, there is a further debate over why on earth Jacob would feel distress over the legally justifiable, indeed mandated, execution of self-defense. One super-commentary on Rashi, the *Siftei Chachamim* of Shabbetai Bass (1641-1718)[16], roots Jacob's distress in either a concern for disappointing his father, who had an emotional attachment to Esau, or a worry over killing some of Esau's men without justification. A contemporary reading of Rashi's depiction, identifies Jacob's concern as a reflection of the moral complexity of even *justified* violence—once more deepening the emotive tenor of the moment[17]. What does seem to unify each one of these readings, however, is a valorization of Jacob's terror and anxiety, which thematically leads us to Abravanel.

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[13] Genesis 32:8.
[14] See his comments to Genesis 32:8.
[15] See Rashi's comments toe Genesis 32:8.

Abravanel resolves the hermeneutic tension with a similar technique to Rashi—dividing the semantic weight of the two terms between two referents: "Jacob was very afraid—of Esau's approach, and was distressed—by the four hundred men that came with him." But he does not stop there; he then spends a paragraph emphasizing the virtue of Jacob's state, preempting a suggestion that his fear indicated a lack of faith:

> Jacob's fear and anxiety over Esau was not due to a weakened faith…his fear was rather in the spirit of a true warrior who, when entering battle fears for risks and feels danger, but due to his character chooses a good death over life. Just like the philosopher mentions, in his books of ethics[18], that one who enters battle not thinking that they will die is not called a warrior, just as one who gives charity out of disdain for money is not considered generous—he does not act out of his own convictions but rather out of a distaste for money. It is therefore fitting for the warrior to dread death but nonetheless choose it out of principle, and for the patron to love money and nonetheless act from virtue. So too is the case of Jacob.[19]

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[16] Published in 1680.

[17] Sacks, Jonathan. *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible: Genesis*. New Milford, CT: Toby, 2009. pp. 215-217.

[18] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapters 6-9.

[19] See Abravanel's comments to Genesis 32:8.

Abravanel not only acknowledges the emotional depth of this moment in Jacob's life, but sees it as evidence of his heroism; Jacob loves life, he is a man of this world with much to lose, but principle summons him to choose a dutiful death rather than flee. He fears, and this fear discloses the virtue of his decision.

Malbim's reading of this string of five words goes against the grain, in significant ways, of all these views. He concedes to Rashi, Kimchi, and Abravanel, as he must, that Jacob was afraid—however, he sees this fear not as the mark of a hero or the result of familial sensitivity or moral complexity, but as the sign of an appalling failure of faith. And Malbim reads the words this way not in spite of the text in order to castigate base sentiment, but as the judgement of Jacob himself.

> The fear shows that his trust was not as it should have been…God only performs supernatural miracles for those who trust in Him wholeheartedly, and since Jacob realized that he was afraid, *then* he was distressed. [emphasis added][20]

While, with the exception of Kimchi, the commentators saw the two verbs as semantically independent, Malbim goes further and reads them as chronologically subsequent and causally connected; Jacob's moral distress arises in response to his visceral fear. Malbim resists the exegetical options that deepen or add a dimension to Jacob's emotional state—and even succeeds to wrest from this text a lesson in repressing impulsive feeling. Jacob did experience instinctual fear, he did permit the emergence of emotion, but it is exactly this which he regrets and recognizes as a flaw. Once more, we have a moment of deep human drama, and without the option of superseding the evident meaning of the first verb, Malbim utilizes the second to condemn it.

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[20] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 1., 449.

What is particularly striking is that both Abravanel and Malbim structure their commentaries as answers to questions that they pose in advance[21], and, in this instance, though they pose almost the exact same question, their divergent formulations are telling. Abravanel asks, "At the vision of the ladder, God promised, 'Behold, I will be with you and protect you wherever you go'…How can Jacob have doubted his prophecy?"[22] Malbim asks, "Why was Jacob afraid—God promised that He would be with him?"[23] Their hermeneutic dilemma responds to the same concern—Jacob is scared—but their questions are different. For Abravanel it is about doubt, for Malbim it is about fear; for one it is intellectual, for the other it's visceral—and the ways in which they read the scene speak precisely to this difference.

Returning to our efforts of gravitational mapping, we see here, again, Malbim's third pillar at work, exerting a force over his interpretive choices—leading him to diverge from a range of previous readings to align the textual concerns with his pedagogic interests. Once more, beyond the two pillars of concision and precision, it is the third pillar of biblical sublimity—the 'dark matter' of his exegetical universe, taught explicitly in his sermons—which steers the semantics.

## Jacob's Exchange

The second moment in Jacob's life that we shall use to illustrate Malbim's exegetical pedagogy, occurs toward the very end of his life. Despite having survived the meeting with Esau intact, Jacob's children attacked each other and nine ended up selling their brother, Joseph. After twenty two years of interminable grief, Jacob learned that not only was Joseph still alive, but that he had thrived in Egypt, rising to the rank of Viceroy. So, he packed up and departed for Egypt and was granted an audience with Pharaoh at the behest of his long-lost son—and in that diplomatic encounter, Jacob was posed a simple question and gave a most unexpected answer.

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[21] There are differences between there approaches—for example Abravanel numbers his questions at the beginning of each chapter and references them in his answers, while Malbim inserts them at various intervals and does not reference them in his answers (nor do they appear in every passage). For more on this method in medieval exegesis, including Abravanel's work, see: Saperstein, Marc. 2010. "The Method of Doubts: Problematizing the Bible in Late Medieval Jewish Exegesis." In *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish and Joseph W. Goering, 512. USA: Oxford University Press.

[22] See Abravanel's questions on Genesis 32.

[23] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 1., 447.

> Pharaoh asked Jacob, "How many days are the years of your life?"[24]

Seemingly interested in a simple exchange of pleasantries, Pharaoh seeks a straightforward answer to a strikingly technical question: 'How old are you?' And initially, Jacob appears to answer the question, saying:

> "The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty."[25]

And had Jacob ended his answer at that moment the text would have likely left the commentators without pause. However, he continued:

> "Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they don't compare to the lives of my fathers…"

And it is this loquacious response that triggers the interpretive machinery of the commentators. Why, they wonder, does Jacob complain? In fact, Nachmanides—in his commentary to that verse—puts it quite simply: "I do not know the reason that the elder, our father, saw fit to complain to the King."[26] And his suggestion is that Jacob must have appeared far older than he was and aroused a measure of surprise in Pharaoh whose question was the result not of etiquette but true curiosity.

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[24] Genesis 47:8.

[25] *Ibid*. 47:9

[26] See Nachmanides comments to Genesis 47:9.

> Pharaoh was astonished at his elderliness, for most people of that time didn't live that long…therefore he asked "How old are you—for I haven't seen an elder like you in all my kingdom"?

For Nachmanides then, Jacob's wordy response was quite appropriate—addressing the spirit of Pharaoh's question rather than providing the mere technical answer. Jacob's response included the sense that:

> "Do not be surprised that my years are so few, in comparison to my fathers who lived longer, for they have been defined by toil and agony, aging me and making me appear very old."[27]

For Nachmanides we must imagine a startled emperor, impressed by the ostensibly extended senescence of Jacob, only to be reassured that Jacob was no exception to nature's laws but merely the victim of a life of struggle. So, while in this reading Jacob doesn't quite complain, he does give voice to a life of pain and acknowledges the physical cost it exacted upon him. The entire scene seems to be an excuse to inform us of Jacob's bodily condition—a man who had weathered a series of storms and been battered by them. Here we have a meeting of majesty and strife, an unruffled Pharaoh and a beleaguered Israelite.

David Kimchi appears to acquiesce to the plain sense of the text that Jacob is simply complaining, saying "I have been enmeshed in trauma all the days of my life up until this point"[28]. And addressing a secondary question, of how Jacob can know that his life has been shorter than his ancestors when he still had life to live, Kimchi continues to suggest that “due to the difficulties that he faced he felt the frailty within him and knew that he couldn’t live for that much longer.” Jacob, in this reading is the consummate pessimist, admitting defeat in the face of pain and knowingly acknowledging that his end was nigh.

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[27] *Ibid*.

[28] See Kimchi's comments to Genesis 47:9.

In many ways, the romantic reaction to this scene, aligns with the exegetical instincts of Kimchi—not particularly for the same grammatical reasons, but out of an interest in humanizing and dramatizing the narrative. Stephen Prickett, in his *Origins of Narrative* paints Laurence Sterne as one of the signature novelists whose work functions as either one of the symptoms or causes of the romantic appropriation of the biblical text—and he highlights his seventh sermon, entitled “The History of Jacob, considered,” as a central example.[29]

Sterne, after citing the words of our verse in which Jacob offers his reply, states: “There is not a man in history, whom I pity more.”[30] Jacob, for Sterne, is an object of pity, as the “most unhappy”[31] of the patriarchs—reasonably perhaps, as Sterne lists all of his trials and tribulations, and defines his life as worthy of our sympathy due to it being built on “a contexture of misery”[32].

And given this background, for Sterne, there is a simple reason that the final biblical forefather gave Pharaoh a complaint in place of a straightforward numerical answer.

> All that was more in the answer than in the demand, was the overflowings of a heart ready to bleed afresh at the recollection of what had befallen.[33]

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[29] See Prickett, S. *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* (1999), 105-151.
[30] Sterne, Laurence. *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick, Vol. IV*. Ireland: T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1766, 7.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid. 8.
[33] Ibid. 12.

To put it simply, Jacob gave a longer answer than the question called for because he *could not help it*. At being asked his age, Jacob couldn't suppress his pain, he couldn't enumerate his days without unleashing a chain of memories that flooded his mind with melancholy and filled his mouth with lamentation. The most unhappy patriarch—pitiable, miserable, despondent—Jacob's tale, Sterne writes, should bring tears to our eyes.

After this tragic and humanizing depiction Sterne then concludes the sermon with a striking lesson for his readers and listeners: do not imitate Jacob. In his words, "if there is an evil in this world, 'tis sorrow and heaviness of heart"[34]. Where Jacob fails—a failure for which we should all have sympathy—he suggests, we must try to succeed: "Whatever is the proportion of misery in this world, it is certain that it can be no duty of religion to increase the complaint"[35]. The bottom line of Sterne's sermon is, unlike Jacob, foster joy and don't complain.

For Sterne, the biblical text does not teach, it simply screens the human condition; it offers no ethic, merely—in this case—a pathetic figure, for us to judge and assess and critique. For Sterne, and the romantics who follow his lead, Scripture should inspire our emotions, stir our sentiments; it is a profound work that invites us to ponder how we should live, but it does not teach, it stages.

Malbim's reading could barely more at odds with Sterne's. Instead of seeing Jacob's elongated response as the unwarranted result of an irrepressible torrent of sorrow, Malbim sees Jacob's reply as entirely rational, entirely lucid, and divided into two precise parts.

When Pharaoh asks, "How many days are the years of your life?", Jacob's replies, in Malbim's eyes, by suggesting that the question needs to be more specific—and he goes on to distinguish between mere existence and meaningful living, with Malbim pointing us towards his early sermons.

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[34] Ibid. 26.
[35] Ibid. 25.

> In my sermons, *Artzot HaShalom*, I've explained that 'years of life' only bespeak years in which one serves God, for they are the life of the person, not the years in which one lives a life of the emotions alone, which is the life of an animal. The latter are not called 'years of life' for the animal portion of the person lives in them, whereas the intellectual and spiritual portions of the person are essentially dead—so we can refer to them as 'years of sojourn,' as during them the person resides upon the material Earth…and since Pharaoh, according to his understanding, called all the years that a person roams upon the Earth by the term 'years of life,' Jacob told him that he wasn't being precise with his words. "If you were to ask me about the 'years of my sojourn' I could answer you that they were one hundred and thirty, but if you ask about the 'years of my life,' know that the 'years of my life' have been few and bad," meaning, "the years which I lived a spiritual existence, which is the true life of a person…"[36]

For Jacob 'being' and 'living' are two entirely different things—he had been breathing for 130 years, but only managed to truly live in moments that matter; and those moments, for him, were filled with trauma. For Malbim, Jacob's answer does not betray an overwhelming flow of emotion, but a will to preach an ethos—to educate Pharaoh in the moral purposes of life and elevate an informal, colloquial question into an opportunity to discuss spiritual meaning.

In this reading, Malbim transforms what Sterne saw as a moment of emotional weakness into a moment of seamless teaching. Jacob admits his struggles but shows that he has not been defined by them; Jacob confesses his troubles but describes how purpose can be made to arise from them—he preaches that we ought to live more than breathe, to heal more than grieve, to wrestle blessing from misery by living a life of meaning.

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[36] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 1., 603-604.

So, while for Sterne, Jacob is a dramatic foil, for Malbim he is an ethical exemplar; while for Sterne he is a protagonist in a narrative, for Malbim he is a pedagogue par excellence. Sterne sees Jacob as a sentimentally tormented, albeit sympathetic, soul; Malbim sees him as an enlightened agent of faith—persuading an emperor that for those facing pain, finding purpose should remain the aspiration.

Once more, performing some gravitational mapping, we see Malbim's third pillar steering his interpretation. He leans away from Nachmanides and Kimchi—and differs profoundly from Sterne—in both saving the text from apparent excess and suffusing the apparently sentimental scene with his pedagogical interests. In this instance, the source of the 'dark matter' charted in his sermons gets an explicit reference in his commentary, offering us a brief glimpse behind the curtain—showing us how his ethical and theological ideas impacts the shape of his exegetical universe.

## Moses' Birth

For our next two case-studies we turn to two scenes involving the supreme Jewish prophet: Moses. We'll examine the verses that describe first his birth and then the murder that he commits as he first emerges out of the Ancient Egyptian palace.

Moses' birth is described toward the start of the second chapter of Exodus, which is followed immediately by his mother's decision to hide him from the authorities charged by Pharaoh to kill all baby boys born to Israelite women. The text condenses the matters of conception and labor and the baby's first three months into one verse and then—once it was no longer possible to hide him in the home—turns to the activity surrounding his placement in the Nile.

> When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.[37]

It is hard to understate the potential in this scene for heightened sentiment—a mother handing her child over to fate or providence in the hopes of evading state-authorized assassins. And what we might call the material-density of the scene—the background details which Eric Auerbach famously suggests that the biblical text is fraught with[38]—is exceptionally high. We're told that the baby was placed in a basket, we're told the material from which the basket was made, and we're told how the mother treated the basket chemically—and then we're told precisely where she placed her child in the basket in the Nile: in the reeds on the bank. For a figure insistent on Scriptural concision and precision, never mind sublimity, these two verses require much explanation for Malbim—why do we need the material facts of this scene? And if we do need them, why not give them all—we're not told which kind of wrap Moses sat in, we're not told the complexion of his skin or the color of his hair or his eyes; why do we need to know which wood Moses' mother used to make the basket or how she prepared it? And how can this highly material information be made ethically or theologically sublime?

First, the reactions of Rashi and Abravanel to these verses will provide a backdrop to Malbim's reaction drawn from the Jewish exegetical tradition.

Dealing with the material terms, Rashi offers his lexical services—rendering 'wicker' and 'reeds' into old French with the aid of some biblical and rabbinic references. Regarding the choice of wicker, citing a rabbinic text, Rashi notes its physical elasticity, and implies its practical utility for Moses' ride on the River Nile; and in relation to the different tarring materials, Rashi indicates that pitch was used to seal the raft and the bitumen was used to insulate the 'righteous' Moses from the pitch's smell.[39]

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[37] Exodus 2:2-3.

[38] See, Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Fiftieth anniversary ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003, Chapter 1.

What emerges from Rashi's reading is a sense of Moses' mother's sensitivity to her child's welfare and a commitment to the plain sense of verse, informed by rabbinic tradition, ordered around what we might see as common sense—where materials best suited to the context are specified.

Abravanel on this passage echoes much of Rashi's tack, but he does diverge in the details. Like Rashi, he alludes to wicker's physically beneficial properties, but not just in the spirit of nautical utility. For Abravanel the choice of wicker was driven by Moses' mother's need for subterfuge—its supple character meant that it could be concealed beneath one's robes.[40] Concerning the application of bitumen and pitch, Abravanel adds to Rashi's pragmatism—insulating Moses from the smell of pitch—by noting that bitumen is a soft and moist material that would make Moses' trip far more comfortable than lying on wicker, while also sparing him the force of hot winds and the blistering sun (similar to a neonatal practice of southerners, of which Abravanel says he has read). Interpreting a part of the verse left untouched by Rashi, Abravanel argues that the phrase, "She put the child into it," infers that Moses was unclothed, again due to the heat. Based not on exegesis but necessity, he adds that Moses' mother added air-holes to the basket to forestall suffocation.

For Abravanel, the opening of this verse serves to paint a picture of searing heat and a mother's attempt to secure her son's survival both from unforgiving nature and human cruelty, a theme that continues as he explicates the next verse.

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[39] See Rashi's comments on Exodus 2:2-3.
[40] See Abravanel's comments to Exodus 2:2-3.

Abravanel offers a number reasons for Moses' mother's decision to place him in the river. First, most broadly speaking, she takes her child out of the house to spare her family the threat of death for the treasonous breach of Pharaoh's edict. More specifically, she chooses the river's edge so that either a compassionate passer-by should be able to easily reach and save her child, or, at the very least—should her child indeed die—him being among the reeds would spare her the painful sight. The final possibility that Abravanel offers, as to why Moses's mother placed him in the river, speaks to a possible hunch on her part that Moses' was destined to be cast into the river, and the hope that this act would somehow quell the heavenly decree.

We see here, once more, a drive for the so-called plain sense, where pragmatism and psychological logic reign supreme. Both Rashi and Abravanel depict a scene in which a mother seeks to best care for her child, whether through practical preparation or theurgic insinuation, and neither exegete reacts in ways to assuage the material density of the text. The wicker and pitch and reeds deepen the sense of urgency and alarm on the part of the reader, seeing a mother in desperate need, trying to save her son.

Malbim paints a very different picture. He begins his exegesis of these verses by saying: "The entirety of Moses' essence and his nature are hinted to with this ark."[41] Here is the rest of the text of his elucidation:

> The human being is a fusion of body and soul, where the soul is incarcerated in the prison of the physical body. Following Adam's sin, the body's powers were tempered with the presence of the soul, from which it cannot disaffiliate until the day of death. However, Moses was of a standing similar to Adam preceding his sin, where the soul is distinct from the body and can strip off the mantle of materiality at any time—like a princess dwelling in a palace, who has permission to leave at her discretion.

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[41] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 2., 11.

> Parables fill the mouths of poets comparing the body to a ship on which the godly soul traverses the tempestuous ocean of life over the course of living.[42] Just as it is impossible for a person to cross the sea without a ship…so it is impossible for a celestial soul to roam the material world without clothes of flesh—a ship built from this material realm with which one can navigate the paths of the sea. However, Moses' ship—that is, his body—was dominated by airiness, like a wicker basket that effortlessly floats on the face of water.[43]

For Malbim, this scene of desperate parenting—this deeply material strategy for a baby's deliverance—echoes far beyond the Nile's banks. The material density of this passage, which calls its sublimity into question, pushes Malbim into symbolic exegesis, insisting that the plain sense of this verse—while, of course, indeed presenting historical truths—simultaneously speaks to Moses' fundamental spiritual condition. And Malbim does not stop here.

To properly identify the identity of the materials translated here as 'bitumen' and 'pitch,' Malbim cites Jedaiah ben Abraham Bedersi's[44] lexical work, '*Behinat Olam*,'[45] and then resumes his reading. Both the tar-like layers resemble the material 'robes' that Moses wore—i.e., is body—but the raft itself was as light as a feather which captures Moses spiritual character—i.e., his soul. And where Rashi said nothing, and Abravanel offered four reasons, Malbim states simply why Moses was laid down specifically in the reeds on the bank of the river:

> He was not placed in the midst of the river and its deeper current but by its bank in the reeds, to indicate that the soul of this godly man did not crossover into the flurry of the sea of life and its waves of craving; for he was drawn from the water and

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[42] See the section of our first chapter which discusses the 'oceanic consciousness' of the romantic age—and the pertinence of this metaphor in Malbim's writing.

[43] Ibid.

[44] For more on Bedersi, see Altmann, Alexander, and Brandeis University. Philip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies. *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967, 165-184; Pines, S. *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume: On the Occasion of His Seventy-fifth Birthday: Hebrew Section*. Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965, 187-201; Glasner, R. *A Fourteenth-Century Scientific Philosophical Controversy: Jedaiah Ha-Penini's "Treatise on Opposite Motions" and "Book of Confutation."* Sources for the Study of Jewish Culture 5. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1998.

[45] For a modern English translation see, Jedaiah Bedersi and Tobias Goodman. *An Investigation of Causes Arising from the Organization of the World, in Which Man Is Particularly Interested*. Brooklyn: 1951.

> stood constantly on the shore and in the reeds, detached from the wicked and bitter waters.[46]

Though Moses's mother may have lain him down in the reeds for a whole host of reasons, it is the spiritual resonance of this decision that warranted its inclusion in the biblical text. For Malbim, everything from the pitch to the wicker to the reeds necessitates an exegetical intervention to save the biblical text from the stains of semantic gratuity and corporal excess—blemishes that go against the grain of the divine dialect and Scripture's pedagogical mission. And while a range of interpretive options remained for Malbim—it was, once again, the 'dark matter' of his exegetical universe that pushed him into making drastic hermeneutic maneuvers to save the text and see the text as saving the soul rather than merely staging a scene.

## Moses' Murder

Our second Mosaic moment comes only eight verse later when he is, so to speak, re-born—when, after an adolescence spent in the palace, he steps outside to see the slaves under his patron's rule.

> When Moses had grown up, he went out to his brothers and witnessed their labors; he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brothers. He turned this way and that, and he saw there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.[47]

This moment, for at least one of the romantics, crystalizes an aspect of Moses greatness. Goethe, in his essay entitled "Israel in the Desert,"[48] discusses both text-critical matters surrounding the narrative of the Exodus and conjectures as to the nature of Moses' character. For him, Moses' greatness comes not from any sort of cerebral superiority or strategic genius, but—as for many romantic heroes—from his raw passion and power. He writes:

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[46] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 2., 11.

[47] Exodus 2:11-12.

[48] See Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, and Eric Ormsby. *West-eastern Divan*. London: Gingko, 2019, 444-462.

> Amongst this race of the mighty tribe of Levi a powerful man stepped forth; a lively sense of justice and injustice characterized him. He appeared worthy of his fierce ancestors, of whom the patriarch [Jacob] proclaimed, "The brothers Simeon and Levi! Their swords are murderous weapons…" This is wholly the spirit in which Moses manifests himself.[49]

For Goethe, Moses is the heir to his tribal founder's moral-indignation and belligerence; just as Levi massacred the city of Shechem for abusing his sister[50], Moses slays an Egyptian for harming his brother—and with the same lack of strategy or forethought. Moses is muscular, powerful, fierce, with a sense of injustice that demands action. And, for Goethe, it is precisely this first act of the grown Moses—which he calls a 'patriotic assassination'—that defines his personality.

> He secretly slays the Egyptian who has mistreated an Israelite. His patriotic assassination is discovered and he has to flee. One doesn't need to look for causes in the upbringing of someone who commits such a deed and presents himself as a mere child of nature. He received the favor of a princess as a young boy, he was reared at court; nothing acted upon him; he grew into a fine, strong man but one who remained rough and unpolished under all circumstances. And we too find him to be just such a powerful, volatile, withdrawn man, incapable of expressing himself, in his exile as well. His bold fist earns him the affection of a royal priest of Midian who at once brings him into his family…[51]

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[49] Ibid. 446.

[50] See Genesis 34.

[51] Ibid. 447.

Despite his pampering in the palace and his imperial education, he remained ‘rough and unpolished’—Moses, for Goethe, embodied physical strength and determination but not intelligence; he was a man of muscles not the mind, powerful but incapable of expressing himself. In the following paragraph Goethe goes even further, describing the pain and the pining Moses must have felt in his Midianite exile, being at a remove from the people he sought to protect:

> We see him in the most grievous circumstances in which an exceptional man can find himself – a man born not for contemplation and reflection but for action – now isolated in the wilderness but constantly preoccupied by the destiny of his people…Too weak to have any effect through his own physical force in this great matter, quite incapable of drawing up a plan, and even if he were capable of doing so, quite maladroit at undertaking a coherent oral discourse in which personality shows to advantage. It’s hardly surprising that so forceful a character would eat himself alive in such circumstances.[52]

Moses—incapable of internal reflection—feels isolation and powerlessness as an offense against his spirit. His personality leads him to seek war and fight for his ends—and his apparent stutter reflects a far deeper disinterest in rational expression. As he waited for the green-light to return to Egypt and redeem his people, his life was characterized, for Goethe, by profound frustration—and he turned morose and sullen. Only once he returns to the stage of world history—waging wars and saving slaves—does he regain his energy. And everything about Moses’ nature can, for Goethe, be traced back to that encounter as he stepped out of the palace:

> Moses’s personality, from that first murder onward, through all the cruelties to follow to his death, offers the supremely imposing and worthy image of a man who is driven by his own nature toward what is greatest.

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[52] Ibid. 447-8.

Moses's greatness—in Goethe's romantic imagination—lies purely in his personality, as a man driven by passion and defined by action, willing to follow his convictions by all means necessary. In fact, so committed is Goethe to this version of Moses' character, that he feels the need to emend a detail in the biblical text to align with it. He is perturbed at how, in his words, "a powerful, volatile, rash man of action [can be] wandering without rhyme or reason for forty years with a monstrous swarm of his people in so small a place and in the very sight of his goal."[53] So, to solve this problem, Goethe simply adapts the biblical narrative—seeing the weight of Moses' nature as far more potent, authentic, and exegetically determinative than any of the technical claims of the text itself. He suggests that by "Merely by shortening both the route and the time which he spent there we have…set him back up in his rightful place."[54]

For Goethe, Moses is a man whose nature determines the narrative—he is a figure of fierce power, driven to act to bring his vision into being; his most formative act being the murder of an Egyptian in a flash of passion to avenge the injustice executed on a brother.

Malbim's rendering of the Mosaic character—as seen in his reading of the scene of his birth—could not be more distinct from this romanticized version. But first, we turn to Rashi and Abravanel for some comparative context rooted in the Jewish exegetical tradition. The verse at the center of the question around Moses' motivation to murder reads: "He turned this way and that, and he saw there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." And Rashi responds to two parts of the verse. First, he addresses why Moses looks "this way and that," citing a view found among the midrashic sages that sees Moses witnessing two moral atrocities, one inside the Hebrew's home, where the Egyptian assaulted a married woman, and the other outside

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[53] Ibid., 461.
[54] Ibid., 461-462.

that same home, when the Egyptian beat the woman's husband.[55] In this reading, Moses became incensed at the Egyptian's impunity—seeing a brazen pattern of dehumanization and exploitation. Rashi then turns to the next segment of the verse—the section that seems to lead to the Egyptian's murder—"and he saw there was no man." Here Rashi, citing a different rabbinic tradition, makes a startling assumption—that in that moment Moses had a prophetic vision: "he saw there was no man that would emerge from him in the future who would convert."[56] Almost searching for justification to commit an act of vigilantism, an extra-judicial execution, Moses looks into the future and sees that this Egyptian has no redeeming value; where laws enforced in courts underscore the limits of human prediction, leaving room for certain criminals to repent, Moses saw the full picture and felt it fitting to rid the world of the Egyptian brute. In many ways, Rashi's response is less concerned with Moses the person than the act itself, seeking ways to vindicate the explicit murder against the backdrop of Jewish law.

Abravanel takes a different route, painting Moses as fearful, at least initially.

> Moses was concerned that it would be known that he struck the Egyptian—thus he looked this way and that to know if someone was watching him, and once he saw no one was looking at him, beyond the victim, he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand so that no one would know that he had been killed. For if a body was found in the field the family would ask and pursue the murderer. And this all shows his upright character…for despite his youth spent with the Egyptians, he didn't forget the pain and toil of his brothers, and endangered his life in killing the Egyptian to avenge the pain of the children of Israel.[57]

In this reading, Moses looks around less for a moral justification than an opportunity to kill the Egyptian—he is livid but also timid in the presence of danger. Moses braves his own life for the sake of avenging a deep wrong, doing all he can to suppress his behavior and cover up the murder. As the exegetical attention begins to turn toward the Mosaic character, it starts to forge a very human picture—that of a man attached to and willing to kill for his kin yet terrified of the consequences. Abravanel then supplements his reading with an alternative, seeing Moses' decision to kill the Egyptian as informed less by opportunity than by moral necessity.

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[55] See Rashi's comments on Exodus 2:12.
[56] Ibid.
[57] See Abravanel's comments on Exodus 2:11-12.

> Some explain—"He looked this way and that and saw there was no man"—as suggesting that Moses thought to himself that, on the one hand, why should he get involved with this difficulty and maybe the Egyptian will kill him; but, on the other hand, a great man seeing injustice cannot stand by and where there is no one else to step in, must take a stand. This is what is meant "this way and that," for there were the two perspectives that I mentioned; "and he saw there was no man"—meaning, that Moses wouldn't be referred to as a 'Man' or 'hero' if he failed to avenge the blood of his brothers, so he struck the Egyptian.[58]

Here Abravanel moves the drama directly into Moses' mind—where the back and forth is no longer the scurrying of an outward glance to see if the coast is clear, but an internal dance between self-interest and altruism.

Malbim, in his exegetical reaction to this moment, moves in a radically different direction—and, somewhat unusually, in the context of biblical narrative, he deploys rabbinic tradition in his defense. This is his explanation in full:

> We are informed that a divine spirit arose within him to shatter the arm of the wicked[59] and release one about to die[60]; however, lest one say that he did this without the consent of his intellect but out of a sudden rage, which would be improper, it says that he looked this wat and that to see if there was another person—showing that he acted out of patience and strategically, knowing that there would be danger if anyone would find out—then he struck the Egyptian to save the soul of his brother.

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[58] Ibid.

[59] A reference to Psalms 10:15.

[60] Reference to Psalms 102:21.

> And the sages declare, in tractate *Sanhedrin*, that the Egyptian was liable for the death penalty; yet Maimonides, in the laws of kings, rules that it is only to be implemented by the hands of heaven; hence the midrash suggests that Moses consulted with the heavenly retinue (*Pamalia shel Ma'alah*), reading "he saw there was no man" as implying that he saw no man, but he did see angels and consulted with them. And on the level of philosophical exegesis (*Remez*), the phrase means that he saw—looking at himself—that he wasn't [simply] a man but connected to the angels, so he struck the Egyptian with the spiritual powers within him; hence the sages say that he struck him with the holy name of God.[61]

Malbim goes to great lengths to insist that this murder was a strategic act of divine justice rather than the result of an impulsive human indignation. And in drawing on the sages and alternate exegetical levels—as noted, a rather unusual tactic for Malbim—he deepens the sense of Mosaic equanimity and leaves him at as far a remove from rage and volatility as one can be. Though the semantic content of the various levels differs, their sense and spirit align in that Moses is depicted as a deeply spiritual—almost angelic—figure.

On the surface level, he is a calm agent of divine justice, checking for witnesses not out of fear or apprehension, but a sense of strategy—more a spy-like serenity, than a guilty panic. The view of the sages that Malbim invokes suggests that even read as an internal vacillation—in the footsteps of the Abravanel—Moses' hesitation is not the result of a conflict between self-preservation and heroism, but a contest between two views of the appropriate retribution for the Egyptian's crime. Moses is in no way aflame with irrepressible rage or torn between indifference and saving the day—he is in a state of divine receptivity, contemplating the true route to executing justice and in conversation with a band of angels. And on the final level of reading employed here—*Remez*—Malbim depicts Moses as not only in conversation with angels but, in many ways, among them. Moses is so far from Goethe's man of action, that he slays the Egyptian without even making use of his limbs, merely uttering the name of God to execute the aggressor.

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[61] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 2., 15.

As Malbim confronts the moment of Moses' first mature act he faces an exegetical decision as to whether to cast him as a man driven to act by impulse and passion, or a figure far more cerebral and considered—and Malbim, against the grain of the spirit of his age, and a range of views from his exegetical antecedents, builds a continuity between the scene of Moses' birth and his first act on the biblical stage. Moses is a man of angelic temper, steered by law rather than raw emotion—he, in exhibiting the supreme human condition, serves as a model for Malbim's moral vision, and the text which depicts him serves as the platform for Malbim's moral pedagogy. The sublimity factor in Malbim's exegetical operation once more steers his interpretive hand, taking him in unexpected directions, even leading him, in this instance, to invoke the sages; as always, the 'dark matter' leads the way.

## Naomi's Lesson

Moving away from Moses and the Pentateuch, we now turn to a prime example of Malbim's exegetical pedagogy, from the book of Ruth. The book begins with the fact that Naomi was married to a wealthy baron in Bethlehem, together with whom she abandoned the city as famine struck. The next few verses detail years of diaspora and tragedy, as Naomi's husband and sons die, and then the tide turns and she seeks to return to the land of Israel. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, insists on escorting her, and they both arrive at the gates of Bethlehem before the eyes of a watchful crowd. The text continues:

> And as they arrived in Bethlehem, the entire city stirred over them, saying, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for God has embittered me greatly. I left full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi? The Lord has testified against me; God has afflicted me."[62]

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[62] Ruth 1:19-21.

In this encounter, where Naomi returns home after years in a Moabite diaspora, a number of modern scholars see flashes of passion. For Avivah Zornberg, the stirring of the city is more than a mere quiver or murmur, it is a rippling unrest fueled by "existential wonder"[63]; Jonathan Grossman conceives of this scene as "charged with emotion"[64]; and Yael Ziegler, admitting an inscrutability of the precise emotional tenor, labels it at the very least "tumultuous."[65]

But the true potency of this moment resides—for many readers—in Naomi's stunningly passionate oration. Her words are structured and dramatic, poetic and emphatic; they bespeak a deeply defeated but defiant soul. Robert Hubbard Jr. sees Naomi's speech as a bitter, blunt, and explosive outburst, in part triggered by her seeing the streets of her past—the streets where her sons had once played, and she and her husband had once strolled.[66] Ziegler also sees this speech as bitter and heartbreaking, depicting it as a defensive deflection of the women's antagonistic question—titling her chapter on this scene "Naomi Meets the Women of Bethlehem: Namelessness, Bitterness, and Despair"[67]—and both Hubbard and Ziegler explicitly reference the deep humanity of Naomi's portrayal.[68] Zornberg depicts Naomi's speech as an exhibition of "existential guilt and despair," baring a profound sense of shame and humiliation. And in perhaps the most emotive reading of this speech, Lois C. Dubin sees Naomi as shaken, empty, shattered, bitter, stricken, and alone.[69] For Dubin, she is "a female Job,"[70] where her words of hopelessness function less as a theodicean protestation than a fraught and therapeutic gesticulation—Naomi weeps in words to provoke a reaction of care and attention from her peers. Dubin, Zornberg, Hubbard, Grossman, Ziegler and a whole host of modern readers harness the biblical text to unleash what they see as the dramatic power latent in its verses—they offer emotional complexity, psychic profundity, and a prism into the figures that populate Scripture's pages. In these readings, Naomi comes to life and fires our imaginations—she embodies a broken but resilient humanity, in which her speech reveals a reverence for the profundity that resides in solemnity and pain.

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[63] Zornberg, Avivah. "The Concealed Alternative" in Kates, J.A., and G.T. Reimer. *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*. Ballantine Books, 1994, 66.

[64] Grossmann, Jonathan. *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*. Bern: Peter Lang Ltd, 2015, 113.

[65] Ziegler, Yael. *Ruth: Alienation and Monarchy*, Maggid Books, 2015, 167.

[66] Hubbard, Robert L. *The Book of Ruth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988, 124.

[67] Ziegler, Yael. *Ruth: Alienation and Monarchy*, 167-180.

[68] Hubbard, Robert L. *The Book of Ruth*, 127; Ziegler, Yael. *Ruth: Alienation and Monarchy*, 177.

[69] Dubin, Lois C.. "Fullness and Emptiness, Fertility and Loss: Meditations on Naomi's Tale in the Book of Ruth" in Kates, J.A., and G.T. Reimer. *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*. Ballantine Books, 1994, 131-144.

[70] Ibid, 132.

As we have come to expect, Malbim bends this text in a very different direction, evincing an utter disregard for human drama, depicting in its place, a cool, collected, and instructive conversation. Here are his comments:

> Naomi always used to have servants and maidservants and an entourage, and when she left her home she would be surrounded by a large crowd. But now they saw coming, merely a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the two of them alone like deserted paupers, thus, "the entire city was astir".[71]

Malbim's comments do not address the emotional state of the city's inhabitants, but simply explain the object of their interest—Naomi's less lavish appearance. Malbim then turns to Naomi's speech, opening his exegesis with a parable and then explaining its application:

> If a person is in possession of incomparable levels of wealth…and then loses all his wealth, left with only a thousand *Zuz*, and it is said of him that he has been bankrupted and made poor—it can only be said if his previous wealth is mentioned, as relative to that affluence he can be seen as needy and low. For if the value of his previous wealth is not mentioned, surely a person in possession of a thousand *Zuz* can be considered wealthy. However, if the wealthy person had lost everything—left without a penny or piece of bread to appease his hunger—then one can label him a pauper even without noting his previous worth.

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[71] Malbim, *Humash VeHaftarot Im Peirush HaMalbim*, vol 4., 639.

> Thus, when the city populace sees [Naomi] and her daughter-in-law approaching, without any attendants, they knew that she had lost her previous wealth; nevertheless, they presumed that she still had the gold and jewelry that an average person would be more than happy with. Thus, [the verse] indicates the cause of their confusion in "Is this Naomi?", in this they note her previous worth—meaning that relative to her previous wealth she had undergone an extraordinary plummet. "So she said to them." she informed them that it was not as they thought, that only if stating her previous reputation could they call her *Mara* (Embittered)…She said that it was unnecessary to mention her prior standing at all, for she was so poor that she had nothing…and thus they could call me *Mara* without even noting my previous name, *Naomi*. Hence it is written, "Do not call me *Naomi*; call me *Mara*," meaning, it is possible to call me *Mara* without calling me *Naomi*—i.e. without mentioning my previous name or worth—"for God has embittered me greatly," for although "I left full," still, "The Lord has brought me back empty," with nothing in hand. Therefore, you can call me by the name of *Marah*, *Aniyah*, and *Evyonah*, even without mentioning my name Naomi, which I had at the time of my prosperity.[72]

In Malbim's rendering, Naomi's response to the women's question is more pertinent than her affect; she does not cry or wail or grieve or assail God—she simply "informs them." Her first words serve as a simple correction of what she considers an innocent misperception of her state. The crowd of women, noticing a former aristocrat without even a hint of an entourage, wonder whether it could really be Naomi. And the reason, Malbim claims, that they *needed to say her name*, is that only in the context of her prior opulence is her current status remotely striking. She is not, in their estimation, destitute or penniless, but merely middling; and only because of her previous fortune does her average standing warrant the slightest attention.

Already, Malbim has mitigated the dramatic tension of this meeting—what for Zornberg was a city-wide swelling of existential wonder, and for Ziegler was an antagonistic and tumultuous welcome, has, through the work of Malbim's intricate exegesis, mellowed; the tone of the people's probe has tempered from mockery or panic to a somewhat measured curiosity.

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[72] Ibid., 639-640.

In response, Naomi answers their question with an adjustment of their presumption; she is not as comfortable as she may seem. Her fiscal situation is notable *not* only in contrast to her prior state; even without knowing her past, *even without mentioning her name*, her situation is dire—there is no need to say 'Naomi,' as by every measure she is empty. And, in Malbim's reading, Naomi is not specifically attached to the name *Marah*—she appears not to be particularly bitter—but uses it as a random stand-in for destitute anonymity; suggesting that the women could call her *Aniyah* or *Evyonah* as well. Her retort is not a poetic gesture or a sign of festering pain, it is a simple straightening of facts—and with the facts set straight, Naomi then turns to a more pressing matter, as she transitions from a depiction of her material reality to her understanding of providential theology.

> "Why do you call me Naomi?". Up to this point she only responds that it is unnecessary to mention her earlier name, *Naomi*, but now she adds something new—she says that it has now been revealed to her that the name *Naomi* was always unsuitable. Hence she says, "Why do you call me Naomi?", as if to say, the reference to my prior state with the name *Naomi* is also untrue—in accordance with that which we've explained many times, that at times when God seeks to inflict a considerable punishment, He lifts the person to great heights of success, such that if they drop from there to poverty and need, their pain and suffering will be more deeply felt, and the fall will be far greater…
> Thus, she suggests that her earlier success, in wealth and station, was designed by God in order that He could drop her from such great heights to poverty and lowliness, for in this way her descent will be more severe and her fall far greater. Therefore, considering that her earlier successes were merely a sort of caution to return to God—for He had raised her to be able to cast her from there to the depths of the abyss—the name *Naomi*, by which she was known at the time, was in error, for it was a deeply bitter success, a rise for the purpose of falling. Hence it says: "since I left full," only in order that "the Lord has brought me back empty"; therefore, that I was full then, was only to augment the suffering of now, so "Why do you call me Naomi?"…for "the Lord has testified against me," meaning—the earlier success was merely a warning in which to caution me to improve my ways, lest He cast me from the heights of this success to the deep, and so it was that with this success, "God has afflicted me", for by its means the magnitude of my suffering and fall doubled…[73]

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[73] Ibid., 640.

Naomi’s apparently repetitive rhetoric is, for Malbim, not repetitious or rhetorical at all—it is the introduction of a new argument; it is the next phase of her lecture. Not only was the present estimation of Bethlehem’s female natives mistaken, but the theological premise beneath their curiosity was baseless. Seeing her evident destitution, the women presumed Naomi’s moral demise over time, where her decline from affluence to indigence mirrored a fall from grace—where both her piety and her prosperity had been captured in her once apt but now incongruous name, with its connotations of pleasantness. And it is precisely this causal linkage of material wealth and spiritual worth that Naomi comes to reject. Her second sentence asks not why they are now, in the face of her fall, calling her ‘Naomi’—simply repeating her first point—but why, even at her material heights, they would consider ‘Naomi’ a fitting name.

To think that one can read celestial favor into material success is to misunderstand the workings of providence, Naomi teaches. *Sometimes* wealth is a signal of esteem, but *sometimes* it is a prelude to a spectacular plummet in fortune designed precisely for the purpose of exacting a more severe punishment. Naomi then points to her current position as evidence that her prior wealth was not a pleasant sign but fundamentally punitive, intended merely to deepen the damage of her fall from grace. Every material achievement is better seen, Naomi teaches, as more an admonition than an endorsement—they should all drive one to penitence rather than pride, even if out of an abundance of caution.

What we see in this speech then, for Malbim, is an exhibition of pedagogy rather than dramatic poetry, protest, or pain. Naomi is not airing grievances or expressing agony, she is coolly schooling her audience—there is no dramatic tension, no theatrical apprehension, no poetic or aesthetic textual intention. Naomi presents her personal decline with the hope of correcting an ethically treacherous misperception—that material fortune always indicates virtue. Where others have seen Naomi grieving or seething or screaming in response to a panicked or hostile query, Malbim depicts her skillfully settling a calm confusion.

Once more, Malbim both saves the text from deceptive excess and uses the text to save the soul of his reader—moralizing a moment of ostensible passion. Where others sought the exhibition of Scripture's affective power, Malbim unveils a dispassionate theological ethic—one in which Naomi does not lament or quail but lectures, and one in which his third pillar tracks onto his interpretive method as the text is made to teach more than simply screen the human condition.

## Psalm 1: Human Roots

We turn now to the book of Psalms and shift away from prose narrative toward the biblical text most known for its poetic character—as, in Robert Alter's description, it is "almost universally assumed that the psalms exhibited the rhythmic regularity, the symmetries, and the cadenced repetitions, of artful poems"[74]. And precisely as a result of its poetic tenor, romantics were drawn to the Psalms as a text that expresses deep human sentiment—embodying what they saw as the theatrics and dramatics of biblical narrative in the voice, most often, of a single speaker. As Alter puts it, romantics felt that the Psalms "is quintessentially a "poetry of the heart," a spontaneous outpouring of feeling expressed with directness and simplicity, almost without the intervention of artifice, its poignancy and universal appeal deriving from this very lack of conscious artifice".[75]

And this perspective was embraced by one of Malbim's traditional rabbinic contemporaries, Samson Raphael Hirsch—noted in our first and second chapters—who, along with the romantics, tended to see infrastructure and architecture as artifice, and nature—trees, beasts, and seas—as an emblem of authenticity and the repository of divinity. Perhaps most pronounced in his writing, is a reflection on how Judaism can be revived in the modern age as it leaves the cage of the ghetto, where Hirsch describes the pull of nature and its ties to King David's music:

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[74] Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, 2011, 139.
[75] *Ibid*, 140.

> How utterly different is the spirit of Judaism where it can unfold itself freely! It transports us into the open country where the brooks trickle and the meadows bloom, where the seeds ripen and the trees blossom and the herds pasture, where man exercises his powers in close contact with nature and places his exertions immediately under the protection and blessing of God. Nature meant us to be men of the fields and flocks. The Galuth [diaspora] has made us into wandering traders. Oh, that we could turn our backs on this occupation which has been artificially imposed on us, that with our children we might flee away to the simplicity of a country life infused with the Divine Jewish spirit! Then would simplicity and peace, temperance and love, humanity and joy, enthusiasm and happiness dwell with us; David's harp would sound again and Ruth would again find the ears of corn on the field of Boaz.[76]

David's music and poetry, in Hirsch's romantic conception, resonate with nature and invite biblical readers to embrace their free, inner state—locating meaning in the expression of the raw, untrammeled and authentic self. So, for the sake of contrast, we look to the first Psalm—with its evocative simplicity and natural imagery, to see how romantics and Malbim might wrestle with the same text to arrive at very different ends.

Here is the text of the first Psalm:

> Happy is the man who has walked not in the wicked's counsel, nor in the way of offenders stood, nor in the session of scoffers sat. But in the Lord's teaching is his desire, and His teachings he murmurs day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, that bears its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither, and in all that he does he prospers. Not so the wicked, but like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand up in judgment, nor offenders in

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[76] Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *The Collected Writings*. Vol. II, New York: P. Feldheim, 1984, 318.

> the band of the righteous. For the Lord embraces the way of the righteous, and the way of the wicked is lost.[77]

On its face, this is a simple wisdom psalm—contrasting those who embrace virtue and those who embrace vice. It involves, in Alter's depiction, "morally symbolic use of agricultural imagery," which operates effectively through "the archetypal simplicity of the contrasted images of tree and chaff."[78] And while Alter goes beyond the romantic sensibility, harnessing the analytics of structural criticism to unfurl the Psalm's poetic genius and its evocative power, we can see how a pre-critical romantic would find the poetry evocative on its face—drawing the reader and listener into nature, seeing virtue and vice in the field of the heart more than the palace of the mind. Even Alter himself suggests that the Psalm's poetry resembles the moral psychology embodied in one of the great romantic novels, Jane Austen's Mansfield Park.[79]

Malbim, as we might expect, takes an entirely different attitude toward this text, seeing the natural imagery as less an appeal to the human heart than a semantically condensed argument for the supremacy of the intellectual spirit. And it is this repurposing of the Psalter's natural imagery that recurs time and again in Malbim's commentary on the Psalms—as we shall see in another example shortly. His exegesis of the first verse, in addition to the verses surrounding the images of the tree and the chaff, are particularly illustrative.

On the first verse, Malbim attends to the first two words—seeing them as setting the tone for the Psalm:

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[77] Psalm 1:1-6. Translation based on Alters, with some minor alterations of my own for the sake of flow.
[78] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 146.
[79] *Ibid*, 146.

> "Happy is the man" – this come to explain the conditions through which the person becomes happy, and there is a distinction between 'happiness' and 'success.'[80] 'Success' relates to worldly matters achieved in this world, and 'happiness' refers to matters of the spirit in the realm of the world to come. And in truth, perfection can be achieved in three spheres: perfection of acquisition, perfection of body, and perfection of the soul, therefore it is explained that the text here is dealing with the happiness of 'man'—meaning, the happiness unique to man and human beings in that they are human, as opposed to the happiness that human beings have in common with other living creatures, i.e., perfection of acquisition and body, which is found in other animals. For, in truth, we find that many living creatures achieve sustenance and nutrition more easily than human beings…and are naturally physically stronger than people—such as elephants and lions—and have more sensitive senses—such as eagles and owls with their sense of sight. And the happiness that is exclusive to human beings is the perfection of the character and spiritual attributes…[81]

Malbim reads the opening two words as defining this biblical poem as dedicated to a very delimited species of wisdom—counsel on how to be happy in a uniquely human sense. The recipe for success, in human terms, is not in the material sphere but in a realm beyond the reach of other creatures—in the realm of ethics and the spirit. This psalm does not endorse a sense of sentimental yearning or raw expression or bodily satisfaction, it is a text devoted to the perfected condition of the soul—a condition Malbim will see expressed in the imagery of the tree. In many ways, Nachum Sarna's description of the Psalmist's happiness aligns with Malbim's exegetical opening so far:

> It is happiness, be it noted, not pleasure, that concerns the psalmist. Pleasure may be self-centered, a transient, agreeable sensation or emotion, an instinctive response to a particular stimulus that gratifies the senses; and it may be frivolous and illusory.

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[80] It is hard not to see the influence of Aristotle's *Ethics* on this formulation—at least as it was read through medieval eyes. Malbim, even late in life—when his commentary to Psalms was published—as in his early sermons, continues to draw on Aristotelian ideas about the human person and the aim of finding happiness in a philosophically meaningful sense. This influence is also clear in the continuation of his comments here, where he distinguishes between the 'wicked' and the 'offender'—with the former corrupting the intellect, and the latter merely a victim of impulse, echoing the classical Aristotelian distinction between vice and incontinence. While this influence on Malbim's thought is not pertinent for our direct purposes, it is certainly worthy of further study.

[81] Malbim. *Nevi'im U-Khetuvim Miḳra'ot Gedolot: Ha-Nakh Ṿe-khol Ha-mefarshim Kolel Perush Ha-Malbim.* vol. 8. Jerusalem: Meḳor Ha-Sefarim, 1997, 3.

> By contrast, happiness is deep-rooted; it penetrates the very depths of one's being, and it is serious and enduring.[82]

Malbim's exegesis continues on the theme of a uniquely human happiness—as distinct from any success enjoyed by the rest of nature—and in fact literally uproots the connection made by the simile of the tree:

> If we turn to the human being from the perspective of his organic nature, which he has in common—though in a higher form—with trees and plants, we can understand him as a tree whose roots are planted and embedded above and whose branches spread downward. For the brain of the human being, stands in for the roots of the tree, from which flows all senses to the branches which are its limbs… From here we see that the human being is not like a tree of the field, which has its foundation and lifeforce in the ground, but has his roots and foundation in the heavens from where he receives his lifeforce…for not by bread alone does man live and he turns toward the earth, then he inverts himself—with his head down and his feet up…[83]

Malbim finds a way to read the simile almost against itself, suggesting that that the connection made between the tree and the human being is purely technical and wholly superficial—in that, as organisms, they share a system of energy dissemination but have the opposite vector; trees are rooted in the ground and human beings are rooted in the heavens. Malbim uses the natural imagery to lay a partition between man and nature, suggesting that while animals and plants succeed by feeding off the ground, human beings thrive by nourishing their souls—or in his terms, their 'brains'—from above. For Malbim, it is the intellect that separates humanity from other animals and elevates it above the creatures of impulse who define their joy by physical perfection and success. Though, of course, the natural imagery must be seen in emblematic terms—it is an explicit simile on the part of the poet—Malbim goes beyond simple symbolism; he goes against the grain of the image itself, cutting man off from the rest of nature.

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[82] Sarna, Nahum M. *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel*. 1st paperback ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1993, 30.

[83] Malbim. *Nevi'im U-Khetuvim Miḳra'ot Gedolot*, 5.

Malbim's commentary then puts the rest of the third verse under exegetical pressure—delineating seven traits that identify the psalmist's idealized saint based on a reading of the tree and the stream and the leaves. In this way, Malbim saves the text's apparent excesses from being mere imagistic filler, and instead gives specific meaning to each turn of phrase.

## Psalm 42: The Soul's Cry

The very same exegetical impulse—to save the text and turn natural imagery against itself—is at play in Malbim comments on the famous second verse of the forty second psalm:

> Like a hind pining for water, my soul cries for You, O God.[84]

So compelling did the romantics find this image of a soul craving for God, that, on its basis, Felix Mendelssohn, "the greatest child prodigy the history of Western music has ever known"[85]—himself born only a month before Malbim—wrote what he called his "best sacred piece." His "*Wie der Hirsch schreit*," based on this psalm, was composed in 1837, and evokes the power of what Ryan Turner calls the "vivid visual and sensual imagery of the hart and fresh water."[86] And for

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[84] Psalm 42:2. Translation based on Alter, with slight alternations.

[85] Rosen, Charles. *The Romantic Generation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, 569.

[86] See http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes_translations/notes_other/n_mendelssohn_psalm_42.htm. For more on the history of Mendelssohn's composition see: Jeffrey S. Sposato, "A New History of Mendelssohn's Psalm 42," The Choral Journal, March 2009, Vol. 49, No. 9, pp. 8-27. In addition to Mendelssohn's version, the earlier German-born composer George Frideric Handel wrote his "*As pants the hart*," a version of which was first composed in the church that sits on, and gave its name to, the street on which I spent my childhood.

Alter as well, “the poignancy of this famous line reflects the distinctive tone of this supplication, which…expresses above all his passionate longing for God.”[87]

This is a deeply sentimental verse, seeming to give voice to a raw compound impulse on the part of the poet—at once enmeshed in a sense of despair and at the same time evoking the hope that God can be spoken too. And this image of a wild animal—pining and probing for water—gives, once more, the reader the sense that the natural world is the natural habitat of the spiritual imagination.

Malbim, whose three hermeneutic pillars require the biblical text to be both as concise and precise as possible, as well as sublime—as he defines it—can be expected to use exegetical methods to address what can only be seen, through his eyes, as troublesome poetic excess and a simultaneous allusion to raw and instinctual sentiment.

Here is Malbim’s commentary:

> “As a deer” – a deer thirsts for water due to its nature, and beyond that it eats venomous roots and seeks to dowse the toxins with water; and due to these two reasons it pants for streams of water and goes in thirst toward water. “So does my soul yearn for you, God” – for the revelation of God’s presence and for prophecy and the divine spirit…it is understood that this yearning is also due to two separate things. First, the soul’s nature—just as the deer thirsts for water due to its nature, so too does the soul thirst for God due to its nature, for it depends upon God for it lifeforce and spirit… and, second, a situational thirst—just as the deer has increased thirst due to its diet of venomous roots.[88]

In this brief but pivotal piece of exegesis, Malbim takes a romantic image and recasts it as a condensed theological comment. To address the problem of excess, Malbim suggests that the text could not have been more concise—in order to communicate the double agony of the soul, a plain non-metaphoric prose would have to detail both the soul's natural need for contact with divinity and its contingent agony resulting from its fleshy context; and yet, in the space of a single simile the point was made and left for exegetes to extract. And to address the question of sublimity, and the propriety of a romantic image, Malbim uses his reading of the simile to once more separate human souls from the natural world. The pain conjured by the image of a pining hind is exegetically deciphered as the soul's discomfort on Earth—trapped in a body as abrasive as a necessary but toxic diet.

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[87] Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009, 148.
[88] Malbim. *Nevi’im U-Khetuvim Miḳra’ot Gedolot*, 243.

Where, in our second chapter we read Malbim's introduction to Psalms, in which he wrestled with questions surrounding the text's composition and each chapter's seeming thematic incoherence, here we see his exegetical engagement with specific verses—exhibiting the continuation of a pattern in which his three hermeneutic pillars serve as the means to save the text and, concomitantly, use the text to save the soul. His 'dark matter'—the ethical and theological ideas found in his sermons—continues to lead his exegetical hand to invert apparently romantic imagery and uproot seemingly sentimental semantics.

Malbim's exegesis offers solutions to hermeneutic problems, but he does so in a way that promotes a coherent set of ethical and theological teachings committed to highlighting the need for seeking divinity and emphasizing the import of duty as a means to do so. Facing an array of crises on the cusp of modernity, Malbim offers an exegetical pedagogy that seeks at one and the same time to save the text and save the soul.

# Chapter Five: Conclusion

## Overview

Having now explored a selection of both narrative and poetic biblical texts, we can see our thesis come to the fore: Malbim is more than a mechanical or reactive exegete, seeking to solve local textual concerns or push back on reformist hermeneutic attitudes—he is an exegetical pedagogue, at once seeking to shore up Scripture's sacred semantic density and present it as disseminating a consistent set of ethical and theological teachings.

In this way, Moshe Segal's accusation of Malbim as emotionally numb or detached from modern exegetical sensibilities also falls flat. Malbim is not simply an exegete *in* the modern age, he is an exegete *of* the modern age—acutely aware of the cultural pressures forming on the newly emancipated traditional Jews, and expertly harnessing hermeneutic tools to brace his readers to resist those pressures.

In our first chapter, we overviewed those cultural crises faced by Jews as they faced emancipation—from the political upheaval, educational reforms, and allures of material life, with specific emphasis on the hermeneutic crises surrounding the biblical text. The text's integrity itself was threatened, rabbinic tradition was mocked, and the biblical narrative was recast in romantic terms. We outlined Malbim's life—from the loss of his father and children and first marriage, to the expulsion from Bucharest and his travels from East to West. We saw a man under immense pressures—all the while trying to publish a comprehensive commentary to the Hebrew Bible.

In our second chapter, we saw how Malbim classified the biblical text as a document of unwavering sanctity, for which even rabbinic tradition takes a back seat. Where Mendelssohn, Meklenburg, and Hirsch all saw the threat against tradition as more pernicious and urgent—and were thus willing to empty Scripture of its own semantic power, Malbim refused to concede the ground of the biblical text to critics or to the romantics, who tried to rehabilitate it under the guise of a novel. For him, Scripture cannot be the subject of doubt, nor can it be recast or appropriated—to use Prickett's term—as a novelistic, dramatic, theatrical document seeking to propagate sentiment. For Malbim, Scripture's semantic density is non-negotiable, as a result of it being written in a divine dialect, which saves the text from accusations of philological incoherence and marks the text as inimitable.

Once we secured Malbim's view on Scripture's density through his series of biblical introductions, we surveyed his earlier sermons in our third chapter. The sermons served as a window into his young ethical and theological imagination—also offering traces of his nascent hermeneutic at work in service not of saving the text but saving the soul. Using both biblical narratives (from David's clash with Goliath and Solomon's dream at Gibeon to divergent priests on Ezra's dais and Jacob's dream on Moriah) and biblical dictums (from Ecclesiastes to Psalms and Proverbs), Malbim exhibits a flair for the interpretive and a deep care for the spiritual condition of the modern Jew. His ethical and theological commitments include mental clarity, cerebral priority, emotional equanimity, and a total devotion to God.

And in the fourth chapter, we saw how Malbim's ethical and theological teachings suffuse his exegesis—being the unseen but decisive 'dark matter' that makes up his third pillar of biblical hermeneutics: sublimity. Malbim insists that to save the text of Scripture, and evade the challenges of modern critics, we are to see its semantics as incredibly dense, and to transcend the appropriation of romantics, we are to see it as highly sublime (in his sense). So, when Cain kills Abel, Malbim quells the ostensible drama while simultaneously mending the elliptical text; when Jacob dreads, Malbim sees the verse offer a terse and severe self-critique; when Jacob appears to complain to

Pharaoh, Malbim sees him preaching. When Moses is laid, by his mother, among the reeds of the river Nile, Malbim sees the material density as an insinuation of something deeper; and when Moses murders the Egyptian, it is only after deep contemplation and consultation with angels, and comes as an expression of his near-celestial nature. When Naomi seems to lament, Malbim sees her as teaching; and when the Psalter teaches using trees and leaves and streams and pining hinds, Malbim inverts the emblems and conceptually severs the human intellect from nature. Time and time and time again, Malbim applies his hermeneutic pillars—seeing the biblical text as inextricable dense and inflexibly pedagogical. There are no scenes of pure sentiment, no screenings of the raw human condition; for Malbim, every Scriptural episode teaches a lesson, one that is informed by the ethics and theology that comprise his spiritual vision.

Methodologically, we have taken a vast body of biblical exegesis, and instead of attending merely to the local interpretive maneuvers, we have taken a step back and sought a unifying pedagogical mission behind the substance of the exegesis. In Malbim's case, we have found a spiritual vision which, having first emerged in his sermons, is made to speak through Scripture to his readers as they confront the very real crises of modernity.

So, when Segal sees Malbim suggest that Jephthah and his daughter engage in a legal debate rather than a grief-ridden, agony-filled conversation, he is wrong to assume that Malbim was blind to the profundity of human sentiment—Malbim saw its power all too well and deemed it a spiritual danger. Much as the image of a pining hind or an elegiac mother or an impulsive prophet or a petrified brother led Malbim to reconfigure the reading of the text to represent an image of spiritual attunement—all while defending the divine dialect's concision and precision—the notion of Scripture screening the mere pain of a father and daughter struck him as indulging a romantic impulse that undercut its true moral teaching and spiritual power. While the legalistic reading may be less compelling, it is far less dangerous, for Malbim, than Segal's alternative.

Put simply, Malbim is an anti-romantic. He sees an embrace of unmoored emotion and unimpeded feeling, that permits impulse and instinct to reign supreme, as a recipe for spiritual ruin—and he sees the reading of Scripture through the lens of sentiment as a desecration of its sacred purpose as a solemn guide for the moral life.

For Malbim, surviving the modern age entails understanding that matter is dark and the spirit is light—and Scripture, in every tale, in every teaching, in every letter and inflection, imparts that truth.

## Epilogue

In mid-November of 1990, the now late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks gave his first series of publicly broadcast lectures—the BBC's annual Reith Lectures—which he titled "The Persistence of Faith."[1] In the six instalments he took a fundamentally historiographical perspective on many of the social and intellectual changes in Europe in general, and Britain in particular, since the inception of modernity—and made some suggestions about how to overcome the challenges that have emerged as a result.

The strategic trigger for his discussion was a now rather famous essay penned by Francis Fukuyama—"The End of History"—which, in Rabbi Sacks' view, claimed that communism had been defeated in "the victory of consumer culture" and ideological history had essentially come to a close.[2] The claim was made that all the wars that had plagued humanity in search of a perfect politics had reached their apogee and liberal democracy was the answer that meant peace for the rest of time. Rabbi Sacks disagreed—and spent the next thirty years writing about why; in his words, there is "a certain emptiness at the heart of our common life."

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[1] For recordings of all six lectures see: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gq0dl/episodes/player, for recordings and transcripts see: https://rabbisacks.org/reith-lectures-the-persistence-of-faith/.
[2] See, *Lecture One: The Environment of Faith*.

What Rabbi Sacks, employing a contemporary ecological metaphor, calls "a God-shaped hole in our ozone layer," had led us to lose a "sense of meaning beyond ourselves." He traces the changes over the past two centuries in the realm of family life and civic life and political and religious life—and suggests that despite the fact that faith has been marginalized in almost every measurable way, it persists as a reflection of a fundamental human need for apolitical community and moral meaning.

Rabbi Sacks notes that at the dawn of the modern age, a number of those who embraced the truths of enlightenment recognized the power of religious faith on the part of the masses, even if simply as a pragmatic force, for society's sake—including Voltaire, Dostoyevsky, and even Nietzsche. And the key shift that Rabbi Sacks pins on modernity is what he calls the "The long journey…from society to self."[3] Hegel, Kant, Sartre, Mill all helped shape the philosophies that embodied this shift away from "any moral authority beyond the self," with vast implications for the political and social realms.

Sacks shows the impact that this shift has had on families and languages, where, again in his words, "The central character of our moral drama is no longer the saint or the hero, but the free self." And in words that most stand out for me, in this context, Sacks suggests that "What is missing…is the idea once thought to be definitive of morality: that there can be obligations which constrain our choices, and duties that place a limit on desire." As a result of the rise of the self and the eclipse of the common good, Sacks claims, societies have fragmented, religions have become more extreme, and average people have become more lonely—“The sovereign self, by dissolving its attachments, has become a kingdom without a country.”

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[3] See *Lecture 3: The Family*.

What we can clearly understand as the cultural impact of romanticism—the movement that took the enlightenment’s political individuality and transformed it into an essential individualism; the movement that objected to the cerebral abstractions of philosophes and replaced it with the sentimental instinct of poets; the movement whose appropriation of the bible we have detailed in our first chapter and evidenced in our fourth—is the force that Sacks sees as the instigator of social chaos. And the free self being the popular hero, the inability for any outward duties to put limits on internal desires, are precisely what Malbim found so troubling two centuries ago. The celebration of raw sentiment, the valorization of inner instinct, the coronation of ego—begun in Rousseau’s first discourse objecting to the sway of philosophy, and spreading across Europe in art and music and politics and preaching, is precisely what Malbim seeks to push back on with his exegetical pedagogy.

There are not too many who see Sacks as a retrograde or relic of a prior age—he was a cultural critic and a social analyst whose very immersion in modernity allowed him to see its dangers. Malbim, though speaking in a very different religious dialect in a very different historical context, was made of the same cloth. He was fluent in Kant and knew romantic verse; he traversed the breadth of Europe—from the palaces of Constantinople to the streets of Paris; he knew Lowth’s parallelism and rebuffed it in his own introduction to Isaiah; he knew the new material allures and called for an intellectual focus; he understood the oceanic consciousness of the age and sought to craft a spiritual raft for his peers built from the words of Scripture.

And when Malbim saw that his sermons went largely unread, as they remain to this day, he turned his attention to pure biblical exegesis—giving his pedagogy a vehicle that would stand the test of time. All over the globe, traditional Jews know the name Malbim—they have heard him cited from pulpits and mentioned at lecterns; they have seen his words printed next to Rashi's, beneath the text of Scripture itself; I have been asked more than once, by those who have heard Malbim's name or read his words, whether he was a contemporary of the great medieval exegetes. It is this work that has enshrined him in the traditional educated Jewish mind.

Malbim sought to critique the romantic turn in modern culture while embracing some of the truths of the enlightenment spirit, in a bid to protect his coreligionists from losing their faith—and he saw that the best way to do that was to offer a defense of their most sacred text, pushing back at critics with linguistic tools and romantics with an exegetical pedagogy. Just as the rabbinic sages of the second and third centuries responded to crises with creative exegesis—reinvigorating sacred text with fresh meaning—Malbim eschews the tendency of his peers to take refuge in tradition at the expense of the biblical text, and embedded his pedagogy in Scripture, giving it new life and his readers more faith. Malbim faces the crises of modernity with an exegetical impulse—both to save the biblical text and pave the way for traditional Jews at the dawn of a new age.

My mentor and teacher, Michael Fishbane, has defined, in a striking passage, the task of the teacher and scholar:

> Teachers and scholars thus have a maieutic role as midwives to levels of experience and fact embedded in texts. The moral task of the teacher is to explore modes of textual expression for the sake of a fuller human creativity; while the moral task of the scholar is to recover repressed or forgotten layers of culture for the sake of our fullest human memory. Differently, each unchains the forces of ignorance and repression—in the belief that our *humanitas* is expanded through an encounter with humanity in its historical manifold.[4]

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[4] Fishbane, Michael A. *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*. Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1992.

For the sake of creativity and memory, it has been my aim to recover some of what has been lost about Malbim’s toil and perhaps what has never been detected—and it is my hope that, as a result, his legacy lives on and our *humanitas* continues to grow.

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