Rabbi Yaacov Huli: Author of the Me'am Lo'ez

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Rabbi Yaacov Huli (1689-1732) was born and raised in Jerusalem, where he received an excellent rabbinic education. When he went to Istanbul in 1714, his profound and expansive rabbinic knowledge won him the respect of the great scholars of that city. Rabbi Yehudah Rosanes, chief rabbi of the community and a world-renowned scholar, appointed the young Rabbi Huli to his rabbinical court. When Rabbi Rosanes died some years later, it was Yaacov Huli who compiled and edited his master's classic commentary on Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, known as Mishneh leMelekh.

Rabbi Huli was disturbed by the low level of Jewish instruction available to the working class and the poor. If they had no access to the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic texts, how were they to be fully observant Jews? How were they to know what the Torah required of them? The proliferation of scholarly rabbinic texts in Hebrw did nothing to improve the spiritual condition of those whose academic training was deficient.

Rabbi Huli conceived the idea of producing a comprehensive work in Judeo-Spanish for the benefit of the Sephardic public. Entitled Me'am Lo'ez, it was framed as a commentary on the Torah. The first volume, published in 1730, dealt with the Book of Genesis. In this work, Rabbi Huli provided classic rabbinic interpretations and commentaries on the biblical verses. Laws and customs,

rabbinic homilies, and ethical lessons were interspersed throughout the work. The book was written in a popular, engaging style. Indeed, Rabbi Huli worried that it would be used merely for entertainment rather than for serious Torah study. As a work in the vernacular, it was available to a wide audience. It was written in a language and style which they could understand, appreciate, and enjoy. The Me'am Lo'ez was something of an encyclopedia of biblical and rabbinic learning, so that those who studied it derived a wide array of information and inspiration.

Rabbi Huli intended to publish similar volumes for all the books of the Torah. He did complete Genesis and much of Exodus. After his untimely death at the age of forty-three, other rabbis continued the work in the spirit of Rabbi Huli, comleting the Five Books of Moses and other biblical books as well.

The Me'am Lo'ez was an immediate success. It went into numerous editions and was read enthusiastically by a large audience. Rabbi Huli had constructed the work so that people would be able to study the weekly Torah portion from it. The book was used in this manner by families and study groups, and in synagogues.....

Rabbi Huli did not think of the Me'am Lo'ez as an original work. Rather, he viewed himself as a compiler of many and diverse classic Jewish sources. He was pleased to be a popularizer, bringing comprehensive knowledge to the public in a lucid and pleasant style. But his approach was indeed original. It was he who decided what material to include and what to exclude; how to present it in a lively manner; how to capture the interest of his readers and speak to their everyday needs. In many wasy, the Me'am Lo'ez mirrored the spiritual life of the Judeo-Spanish speaking world of the time....

The Me'am Lo'ez appealed to the masses because it was sympathetic to the poor and downtrodden. Rabbi Huli drew on traditional sources which extolled humility and honest labor. Rabbi Huli explained that there was no shame in working for an honest living. One should not think it beneath his dignity to work at a craft or any other honest occupation, and should not attempt to live in a style beyond his means (Genesis 12:4). When our forefather Jacob prayed, he asked only for bread and clothing, not for any luxuries. Truly pious people did not seek superfluous things, but were happy with the basic necessities which God provided them (Genesis 28:22).

God created Adam from dust, not from gold (Genesis 1:1). He created a vast universe. One who looks at the sky at night and contemplates the countless stars cannot help but be overwhelmed by the grandeur and power of God. He is

humbled by his own smallness in the universe. This feeling of humility leads one to serve God with devotion and purity (Genesis 2:7).

A facet of humility is that one should not try to show off his piety and righteousness. On the contrary, one should walk humbly with God, keeping his piety as private as possible. Rabbi Huli reminded his readers that one is allowed to bow only in designated places during the silent devotion, the Amidah. To bow more frequently would be a sign of presumptuousness and false piety. One should not do things which will make him appear to be more pious than other worshippers (Genesis 12:4).

The work of Rabbi Huli reflected the midrashic/kabbalist view of life which then predominated among the Sephardim in Moslem lands. Philosophic inquiry was no longer a vital part of the intellectual life of the community. The emphasis was on an absolute commitment to observing the halakhah in all its details. Kabbalah was recognized to have inestimable value and was a necessary ingredient in religious life. The willing acceptance of God's decrees with equanimity was encouraged, engendering a relative passivity. The predominant worldview emphasized loyalty to rabbis and the rabbinic tradition. The messianic hope was expressed longingly, wishfully.

(NOTE: Rabbi Huli's last name is sometimes presented as Culi, rather than Huli. But the name Huli is the correct way the name was pronounced by Sephardim. Indeed, Rabbi Huli himself alluded to his name when he entitled his work Me'am Lo'ez, drawn from Psalm 114. The word "lo'ez" refers to a foreign language, in this case Ladino. Toward the end of the Psalm, the verse reads: milifnei adon HULI arets, milifnei Elo-kei YAACOV, a clear allusion to his own name, Yaacov Huli.)