YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Commentaries on the Mishna**

**By Rav Yosef Marcus**

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families

in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,

whose yahrzeit is 21 Tamuz. Yehi zikhro barukh.

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**Shiur#20: Commentaries on the Mishna from the 20th Century,Part 1**

Translated by Rav Eli Ozarowski

1. **Introduction**

The purpose of any commentary is to bridge some sort of gap which exists between a text and the reader. This is true regarding difficult concepts that require explanation, language that is hard to understand, internal contradictions within the text, or the logic behind the ideas expressed in the text.

In [*shiur* 11](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-11-commentary-rav-ovadya-bartenura) we mentioned that Rabbi Ovadya of Bartenura was the commentary who can most aptly be described as “Rashi on the Mishna.” His goal was to explain the Mishna line by line in a clear and simple manner based on the conclusions of the Gemara and the great commentaries on the Mishna who preceded him. However, what may be perceived by one generation as a commentary that is easy to understand is not always a sufficient explanation for other generations.[[1]](#footnote-1) For example, we saw in *shiur* 17 that one of the motivating factors for the *Tiferet Yisrael* in writing his commentary was the necessity for a commentary that was easily comprehensible for the people of his time.

This same phenomenon occurred again in the beginning of the twentieth century. By this time, the Mishna and the commentary of the Bartenura had become inaccessible to the general populace, with the exception of those who studied Torah on a regular basis and were proficient in rabbinic texts. Others, though, now needed commentaries written in a modern style in order to understand the original texts. As a result, over the course of the twentieth century, a number of new commentaries on the Mishna were written to bridge the widening gap between the text and the reader.

1. **Bialik’s Commentary on the Mishna**

One of the first attempts to do so was Hayim Nahman Bialik’s commentary on *Sefer Zera’im*, which was written in the early 1930s. Most of the information about Bialik here is taken from an article by Mordechai Meir.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **Bialik’s Motivation for Writing the Commentary**

In the introduction to his commentary, Bialik explains why he felt there was a need for a new commentary. He begins by explaining why the Mishna should be considered one of the fundamental texts that every Jew should study.

The first work following the Bible that has been preserved in its original Hebrew and has been maintained from the time of its compilation until today is the Mishna. The Oral Torah, the breath of the nostrils and the soul of the life of the Written Torah, has been preserved in the Mishna. The Mishna is the faithful reflection of the multi-faceted nature of all the paths of life and forms of culture that were present among the Jewish people for a number of centuries after the sealing of the biblical canon, while the people were still rooted in their land. Alongside the Bible, the pure gold mine of the ancient Hebrew language, the Mishna serves as an unending quarry of great depth of that same Hebrew language in its newer form… all of these qualities enable the Mishna to join the cornerstones [of study for a Jew], and perhaps the foundations of the education of the people at all times…. (Chayim Nachman Bialik, from the introduction to his commentary on the Mishna)

He concludes his introduction with the following words which continue the theme of the previous quote:

One whose heart is aroused, whose eye is open and whose ear is listening, will reveal underneath this fossilized mask the beautiful ancient lifestyle… and also from the inside of this rock, the sound of transformative running water will reach his ears. Does not the wind of the fields rise up from the patches [of land] of the Mishna in *Seder Zera’im*? Do not the marketplaces of Jerusalem, the alleyways of Tzippori, and the alleys of Teveria… and the daily routines of ancient life peek forth in front of your eyes from between the lines of *Mo’ed, Nashim,* and *Nezikin*? Do you not hear from between the lines of *Kodashim* and *Taharot* the sound of the... energetic priests and young Levites, who arise with alacrity at dawn to [go to] the Sanctuary to [perform] their service and [stand on] their platform? It is not the Mishna that is dry; our souls are dry. And if the Mishna is considered “dry” externally, it is “moist” inside. (Chayim Nachman Bialik, introduction to his commentary on the Mishna)

One can sense from these words that Bialik, who studied in the Yeshiva of Volozhin during his youth (but then abandoned the world of religion), attributes cultural value to the Mishna, and for this reason he sees the Mishna as one of the Jewish people’s greatest assets. Bialik invites the learner to discover the foundations of Modern Hebrew, descriptions of the ancient agricultural methods used in Israel, and the culture of the people that lived in Israel two thousand years ago within the Mishna. Indeed, Bialik preached multiple times not to neglect the library of classical Jewish works and to transform it into a cultural asset that was not only relevant for religious Jews. These ideas are consistent with the opinions expressed in his article, “*Ha-sefer Ha-ivri*” (“The Hebrew Book”),[[3]](#footnote-3) where he calls to amass together the most significant Hebrew compositions from all of the generations.

It is time to assemble. This is the echo of the hour, and this is all that we can do at this time. And if the Hebrew nation does not bring holiness to this new gathering, no harm is done, and perhaps the time of holiness has indeed already passed. But respect and love should definitely be practiced, and they are what we request at this time. (Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Ha-sefer Ha-ivri*)

After he discusses the significance of the Mishna, Bialik then explains in his introduction why there is a need for a new commentary:

And regarding the commentaries on the Mishna, there are certainly some good and beneficial ones, and a number of them open one’s eyes and we live from their words in explaining the words of the Mishna and its intention until this day. In the merit of these [commentaries], the study of Mishna has indeed spread throughout Israel over a number of generations and has become the acquisition of the masses. However, those commentaries and their design, form and style were primarily directed to the community of Torah learners who were educated in the *beit midrash,* those for whom the sound of the Oral Torah and the language of the Talmud and the method of its give and take were absorbed in their blood from their youth… it is not so for an ordinary Jew who knows how to read, one who lives in today’s generation, as he will not be content with those commentaries, not with the long ones or the short ones… the desire and intent to place the Mishna in the hands of the people as a book that is usable by every Jew who knows Hebrew requires republishing it in a new form that is more suitable to the tastes of the people of our generation and its demands. (Chayim Nachman Bialik, introduction to his commentary on the Mishna)

Bialik’s primary claim is that the classic commentaries on the Mishna are not suitable for the reader of modern Hebrew that has not studied in the *beit midrash.* This type of individual requires a commentary written in Modern Hebrew that does not assume that the reader is familiar with basic principles already known by those who have a proficient background in Torah sources.

1. **Features of the Commentary**
2. **Introductions**

One of the novelties of Bialik’s commentary is the introduction that appears at the beginning of every tractate. The introductions include the relevant verses from the Torah for the topic of the tractate, a general overview of the primary subjects discussed in the tractate, an explanation of relevant concepts, and an explanation of the order and placement of each tractate in each Seder*.* In these introductions, he also discusses a number of fundamental subjects that emerge from that particular tractate. For example, the introduction to tractate *Berakhot* includes a brief discussion of the structure of the daily prayers, and a general overview of the weekday and Shabbat prayers.

1. **Traditional Commentaries and New Commentaries**

In his introduction to the Mishna, Bialik notes that sometimes, one must distinguish between the simple meaning of the Mishna and the Talmudic explanation given for it. He also notes the achievements of critical Talmudic scholarship in interpreting the Mishna, which is based upon parallel tannaitic sources and analysis of the formulation and language of the text. Nevertheless, he writes that most of his commentary is based upon earlier commentaries, and its main novelty is simply its modern formulation, which enables even one who has no training in formal Torah study to understand the Mishna.

1. **Concise Language**

In his introduction, Bialik also addresses the need to both explain the Mishna satisfactorily as well as maintain a concise style that does not digress from the primary subject. He acknowledges that this is in fact difficult to achieve, but argues that despite its brevity, his commentary is not superficial, and even the learner who seeks an in-depth understanding will find value in it. Nevertheless, his insistence on brevity causes him to usually offer no more than one explanation for any given Mishna, or to suffice with a general statement that this Mishna has many explanations, without specifying further – or at times, even to avoid providing an explanation at all.[[4]](#footnote-4) His desire to abridge also causes him to forego addressing the question of which opinions are accepted as halakha.

1. **Acceptance of the Commentary and its Circulation**

When Bialik’s commentary was published, it provoked many different reactions: Some were public, and others private; some praised him for it, while others criticized him. One of those who wrote a personal letter to Bialik was Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook,[[5]](#footnote-5) who wrote the following:

To the honor of our exalted poet, R. Chaim Nachman Bialik, with much gratitude, I received the *mishnayot.* I have not had time to glance through it properly, [but from what I did see,] the mark of talent, wisdom and precise work are spread throughout it, and many will benefit from its light. I now see [fit] to comment on what his honor wrote about [the Mishna’s statement] “and all that are eaten for one day,” [upon which he commented] “the offerings that are eaten by the priests.” But why specifically the priests, as there are offerings that are eaten by the owners, such as the thanks-offering [*korban toda*], and the nazirite’s ram, which are also eaten within one day. And R. Ovadya of Bartenura mentions the thanks-offering at the beginning of his words. And we find then that the words “by the priests” is… a deficiency in the [explanation of] the meaning. It is possible I will find other comments when I go over the rest of the work, and with great friendship, I hope to inform his great honor over time when I have a chance, God willing. God should strengthen his portion, and should desire the work of his hands. Very faithfully yours, Avraham Yitzchak Kook.

After offering him words of blessing and appreciation about his work, Rav Kook comments on Bialik’s explanation of the Mishna (*Berakhot* 1:1) that states that offerings that are eaten for one day must be consumed before dawn. Bialik writes that this refers to offerings that are eaten by the priests, and Rav Kook notes that there are some offerings which are eaten within one day by non-priests as well.

Bialik never completed his commentary, and only the commentary on *Seder Zera’im* was actually published. It is possible that this is one of the reasons that his commentary never became well-known or widely used. However, Bialik’s initiative opened the door for additional commentaries to attempt to make his dream a reality. One of them was Professor Chanoch Albeck, who appears to have continued in Bialik’s direction.

1. **The Commentary of Albeck on the Mishna**
2. **The Background of his Writing of the Commentary**

Professor Chanoch Albeck (1890-1972) was one of the most important academic scholars of Talmud in the twentieth century. He taught in the Talmud Department at the Hebrew University for many years and was also the head of the department, and he published many books of critical scholarship on rabbinic literature, including some fundamental ones, such as his *Mevo La-Mishna* (Introduction to the Mishna) and *Mevo La-talmidim* (Introduction for Students). His work on the Mishna was published by Mossad Bialikbetween 1952 and 1958. As is stated in the introduction to *Seder Mo’ed*, which was the first volume to be published, the publishers viewed his work as a continuation of Bialik’s work:

The new edition of the Mishna that begins with this volume, is one of the important segments of the idea of gathering together the literature of the generations that C.N. Bialik initiated, and he himself planted his vision in the world of action… one of these projects was the Mishna [published] with vowels and commentary, that Bialik began to establish, but he was not privileged to publish more than the first *seder* of Mishna, *Seder Zera’im.* (Introduction, Albeck’s Commentary on the Mishna)

As we will see, there are some similarities between their commentaries, but there are more differences between them, since Albeck was a *Talmid chakham* (Torah scholar) as well as a first-rate Talmud scholar.

1. **Features of the Commentary**

Albeck himself never wrote an introduction outlining his goals and methodology,[[6]](#footnote-6) and a number of questions have arisen because of this, as Professor Ephraim Urbach writes:[[7]](#footnote-7)

In what way does he fill his role as an intermediary between today’s reader and the Mishna? In what way is he different from the commentaries that preceded him? Does he take into account the understanding of today’s reader and his taste [i.e., background]? Can this be seen as an achievement for philological-historical scholarship in this area?

The publishers of Albeck’s commentary only briefly describe his methodology, but they can still serve as the basis for our ensuing discussion.

1. **Sources for and Methodology of the Commentary**

The first subject matter discussed in the introduction is the topic of the sources used by Albeck in his commentary and his methodology:

The methodology of the commentator is to arrive at an explanation of the Mishna not only based on the Talmud (both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem), but primarily based on the Mishna itself and based on other works of the *Tanna’im* (*baraitot,* Tosefta, *Mekhilta*, *Sifrei*, *Sifra*), and other writings from the era of the Mishna, to the point that the study of Mishna can be defined independently, and even one who does not regularly study Talmud can learn it. The commentator made a point of addressing any matter that requires explanation for the contemporary learner, which the [earlier] commentaries did not bother to explain. The language of the commentary is brief, and does not delay the reader, or distract him from the inside [i.e., the main theme of the text]. (Introduction, Commentary of Albeck on the Mishna)

Indeed, in many instances, Albeck interprets the Mishna differently than the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud, instead offering a new interpretation of his own or in the name of others who preceded him. However, most of the time it is difficult to ascertain from the commentary itself whether his interpretations are novel or traditional, as Albeck endeavored to make it so concise that “the words of the commentary can be read in continuity with the words of the Mishna.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Since an in-depth analysis of the meaning of the Mishna, which often necessitates a longer discussion, does not always go hand in hand with the desire to abbreviate and provide only the simple meaning of the words, Albeck divided his commentary into two parts: The first is a flowing commentary, and the second consists of additional material placed at the end of each volume. In the latter part, he expands on specific points that arise in the Mishna, as well as other issues that are connected to the Mishna in some way.

1. **Preface**

An additional feature of the commentary noted by the publishers is the preface to every tractate:

The commentary on each tractate opens with the [relevant] scriptural verses, which form the basis for the halakha of the Mishna. In the prefaces at the beginning of each tractate, the explanation of the halakha in the Bible that is the primary [theme of] the tractate is presented, as well as its development up to the [time of] the Mishna. And the prefaces also discuss the redaction of each tractate and the order of the chapters. At the end of each preface, the issues dealt with in each chapter are listed, and in this manner, the reasons for the juxtapositions of the *halakhot* in the Mishna are evident. (Introduction, Commentary of Albeck on the Mishna)

In these prefaces, Albeck frequently offers elaborate explanations of various *halakhot* based on historical scholarship. He often cites various sources from Tannaitic literature and the Talmud and then compares them to other non-rabbinic sources, such as Josephus and Philo. He also elaborates on other scholarly issues, such as archeology and history.

1. ***Nikkud* of the Mishna**

As we have seen, Bialik already established the *nikkud* or vocalization of the Mishna as being one of the goals of his commentary. In tandem with the request of *Mossad Bialik* and Devir Publishers to Albeck to write a commentary on the Mishna that continues in the spirit of Bialik, they also turned to Mr. Chanoch Yellin to vocalize the Mishna. Yellin’s introduction appears at the beginning of *Seder Mo’ed*, where he specifies his method of how he did so.

1. **Circulation of the Commentary**

Albeck’s commentary has been published in eight different editions (the most recent one from 2008), which indicates a relatively widespread dissemination. However, it seems to be less popular among the religious population and the yeshiva world, presumably because of its critical and novel style, and the fact that it is not always based on the interpretation of the Talmud and classic commentaries.

When it was published, Albeck was even attacked directly by the ultra-orthodox community in Israel. In their mouthpiece called *Ha-neeman*: *Bita’on Hitachdut Chanikhei Ha-yeshivot* (*Gilyon* 20, Tishrei 5721), an article criticizing Albeck was penned by Rabbi Yonah Mertzbach. Most of the article criticizes a novel interpretation of Albeck in tractate *Yoma* (p.215) that addresses a well-known dispute between the Sadducees and the Pharisees (the Sages) concerning the offering of the incense on Yom Kippur: According to the Sadducees, the High Priest would place the incense on the pan outside of the Holy of Holies and then enter with the pan into the Holy of Holies. According to the Sages, he would first enter the Holy of Holies, and then place the incense on the coals. This dispute is mentioned explicitly in the Tosefta (*Yoma* chapter 1), but in the Mishna it is only alluded to briefly when describing the High Priest’s oath to the Sages that he would not alter the order of the service.

Albeck claims that according to the Pharisees, although the High Priest would place the incense on the pan only inside the Holy of Holies, the *ma’aleh ashan,* an herb that the Sages required be added to the incense in order to create a cloud of smoke, was placed on it outside. His motivation for saying so is his analysis of the formulation of the dispute between the Sages and the Sadducees that appears in the Tosefta and in other sources.

Rabbi Mertzbach strongly criticizes Albeck’s claim, both because it has no source in the Talmud or other commentaries, and also because his (Rabbi Mertzbach’s) own analysis of the sources do not yield the conclusion that Albeck reached. Rabbi Mertzbach concludes his critique with the following words:

This novelty of Albeck, with its smell and taste, ruins our desire to search for other explanations in his work. We will continue to drink from the “wine” of Torah using our own holy vessels.

It should be noted that Professor Urbach also mentioned this example in his critique of Albeck referenced above, and, like Rabbi Mertzbach, entirely rejected this suggestion as well.

1. Rashi’s commentary enabled most Jews to study and understand the basic concepts of the Gemara for hundreds of years. However, in our generation, despite the centrality of his commentary, many feel that Rashi is difficult to understand, and look for newer commentaries to use in obtaining a basic understanding of the Gemara. This is how the commentary of Rav Steinsaltz was developed, as well as that of the Artscroll (Schottenstein) Gemara. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mordechai Yair, “Shisha Sidrei Ha-Mishna Menukadim U-mefurashim al Yedei Chaim Nachman Bialik*:* Kavim Le-mifalo Ha-nishkach shel Bialik*,*” *Netuim* 16 (5770), pp.191-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was one of Bialik’s well-known works, which can be seen at <http://benyehuda.org/bialik/article03.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mordechai Meir, in his aforementioned article, lists twelve of these instances (note 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This letter was publicized in an article by Rabbi Yochanan Fried, “Igrot U-teudot,” *Sinai* 97, p. 243, cited also in *Malakhim Kivnei Adam,* p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Professor Ephraim Urbach addresses this in his article, “Perush Ha-Mishna Le’Chanoch Albeck,” printed in his work *Mechkarim Be-mada’ei Ha-yahadut* volume 2, Jerusalem 5758, p. 716-738: “It is unfortunate that the new commentator on the Mishna, Professor Albeck, did not reveal in his preface or short introduction… the principles of his methodology that guided him in his commentary, and his attitude toward his predecessor, Bialik.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is found later on in the comments of the publishers there. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)