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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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman**

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**לע"נ**

**יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

**ת.נ.צ.ב.ה**

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**Shiur#21: Commentaries on the Mishna from the 20th Century,Part 2**

Translated by Rav Eli Ozarowski

1. **The *Mishna Mefureshet* of Rabbi Eliezer Levi**[[1]](#footnote-1)
2. **A Brief Biography of Rabbi Eliezer Levi**[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rabbi Eliezer Levi was born in Berlin in 1883. Since there was no Jewish high school at that time in Berlin, he attended a public school, where he took courses in the classical languages and literature. According to his own account, his search for spirituality first led him to sample other religions. When he did not find spirituality there, he decided to return to Judaism after reading the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.[[3]](#footnote-3) He joined the Adath Israel Congregation in Berlin, which was led by Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer, and also studied with various other rabbis in Germany.

His first experience in studying Mishna was with Rabbi Ezra Munk, Rabbi Hildesheimer’s successor, with whom he learned Mishna together with the commentary of the *Tosefot Yom Tov.*[[4]](#footnote-4) He subsequently studied Mishna daily on his own with the commentaries of the Bartenura and the *Tiferet Yisrael,* as well as with the aid of a dictionary for translating difficult words. He later wrote about this: “At that time, I had already thought, ‘how much easier would it be if there was a commentary in simple language [on the Mishna] that explained all of the sources.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Rabbi Levi never held an official rabbinic title, though he was known as a Torah scholar in the communities where he lived, and he delivered *shiurim* on the topics of Talmud and the weekly *parasha.*[[6]](#footnote-6)He supported himself in Germany by running a metal factory. He later joined the Mizrachi movement, and was an active Zionist and a partner in the formation of Bank Mizrachi in Tel Aviv.[[7]](#footnote-7) He made *aliya* to Israel in the year 1942, where he also initially worked in a metal factory, but later became a teacher in the Moriah School in Tel Aviv. Rabbi Levi died in 1964.

Besides for his work on the Mishna, Rabbi Levi authored many works, the most well-known of which is called “*Yesodot Ha-Tefilla,*” which was published in 1947. He later published his commentary on the Mishna between 1952 and 1958.

1. **Motives for Writing the Commentary**

As mentioned previously, Rabbi Levi writes in his memoirs that the idea of writing a commentary on the Mishna arose when he assiduously studied Mishna by himself and had difficulty understanding it. In his introduction to the commentary on *Seder Zera’im,* he writes that his goal was to attract the youth to the study of Mishna, since it is the gateway to the Torah. At the end of his introduction, he explains the advantages of his commentary, among them that it is easily understood by the common person, “with clear explanations of every concept in the Mishna, in modern Hebrew, so that even one without Talmudic knowledge can study Mishna and understand it properly.” He also writes that over the course of the commentary he will explain the political and social background of various *halakhot* mentioned in the Mishna.

1. **Characteristics of the Commentary**
2. **Prefaces**

Like other contemporary commentaries, Levi’s commentary opens with a general overview about the formation of the Mishna, as well as a number of general subjects. These include the order of the *sedarim* of the Mishna and the tractates, the essence of the Mishna and whether it is considered a book of halakha, earlier and later *mishnayot,* later additions to the Mishna, characteristics of Jewish life that emerge from the Mishna, and philosophical ideas that appear in the Mishna. He also refers readers to some of the works of critical scholarship on the Mishna, such as R. Zekharya Frankel and R. Hanoch Albeck. In addition to this overview, he also has an introduction to each of the six *sedarim* of the Mishna, as well as an overview of each tractate where he explains the subject of each chapter.

1. **The Structure of the Commentary**

Rabbi Levi included the commentary of the Bartenura in his edition of the Mishna, placing his own commentary, the *Mishna Mefureshet,* underneath the Bartenura*.* He apparently did so because of a sense that one cannot study Mishna properly without also using the commentary of the Bartenura, which was already been so widely accepted.[[8]](#footnote-8) The text of the Mishna itself appears both as a separate unit at the top of each page, as well as appearing within Rabbi Levi’s commentary. He did not suffice by citing only the first few words of each sentence or paragraph, but instead cited each complete sentence from the Mishna, explained it, then cited the next sentence together with its explanation, and so forth. He also added vocalization and punctuation to the Mishna.

1. **Combination of Traditional Interpretation and Critical Scholarship**

In his memoirs,[[9]](#footnote-9)Rabbi Levi recounts the methodology of the rabbis in Berlin, who combined traditional study with modern scholarship. This combination finds expression both in his prefaces mentioned above, as well as in his actual commentary, where he often makes comments about the linguistic formulation of the Mishna, realia, early and late *mishnayot,* and occasionally offers novel interpretations of the Mishna.

Mordechai Meir[[10]](#footnote-10) cites a number of examples of this style as manifested in his commentary, one of which is the following: The Mishna (*Berakhot* 4:1) rules that “there is no set time for the evening prayer.” The Gemara (*Berakhot* 27b) concludes that this refers to the opinion of the *tanna’im* that *Ma’ariv* is optional, and not, as the simple meaning seems to be, that *ma’ariv* has no set time and can be recited all night. The Gemara then cites a dispute about the matter between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua. The Gemara (*Berakhot* 4b) also cites a *baraita* that rules that *ma’ariv* is obligatory, while on *Berkahot* 27b Rava and Abaye dispute the accepted halakha.

Rabbi Levi attempts to demonstrate in his commentary that the *baraita* on 4b proves that in the land of Israel, *ma’ariv* was accepted as obligatory, while in Babylonia, most of the *amora’im* ruled that it was optional, and this is how he explains the Mishna. He adds that there was also a historical reason for the difference in the rulings in the two sources. In Israel, they were able to recite the prayer easily, but in Babylonia, synagogues were only permitted to be constructed outside of the cities, meaning that it was dangerous to walk to and from them at night in the dark. Therefore, they ruled more leniently there about the level of obligation of reciting *ma’ariv.*

1. **The Kehati Commentary on the Mishna**
2. **A Brief Biography of Rabbi Pinchas Kehati**[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rabbi Pinchas Kehati (née Guchtman) was born in Poland in 1910 to parents of Hasidic lineage. In his youth, he studied in a hederand in *yeshivot*, and then studied in the religious Zionist school *Tachkemoni* in Warsaw. During those years, he became active in the youth movement *Ha-Poel Ha-dati* and worked in the *aliya* department of *Ha-chalutz Ha-mizrachi*.

He made *aliya* to Israel in the year 1935, and studied mathematics and physics, as well as religious philosophy and Kabbala, for a year in Hebrew University. He was then forced to abandon his studies due to financial difficulties and he began to teach part-time in the *Mizrachi* vocational schoolin Tel Aviv, simultaneously working part-time for *Ha-poel Ha-mizrachi.* He then worked in the *Ha-poel Ha-mizrachi* bank*.*

In 1953, Kehati was chosen to be a member of the executive committee of *Ha-poel Ha-mizrachi* and was placed in charge of its Youth Department. At that time, he conceived of the idea to publish a daily brochure with commentary on the Mishna being studied that day, based on the schedule of the *Mishna Yomit,* the daily study of Mishna consisting of two *mishnayot* a day. Kehati originally asked a number of individuals studying in a *kollel* to create a comprehensible commentary, but when he was not satisfied with the results, he was ultimately convinced (by his wife) to undertake the project himself.

One of the youth for whom Kehati had served as a counselor in the *Bnei Akiva* youth movement was the manager of a printing press and supported the idea. Thus, during the first week, seven thousand booklets containing a verse from the weekly *parasha,* a paragraph from the daily chapter of *Nakh*, and two *mishnayot* together with his commentary were printed. After receiving very positive responses, he began printing the booklets regularly in the beginning of 1955, beginning with tractate *Ketubot.* The emblem of the executive committee of *Ha-poel Ha-mizrachi* appeared on the brochures, which were sent to a thousand subscribers. However, Kehati was not released from his other responsibilities, and did not even receive a budget for printing, paper, and delivery.

After eight months of these difficult conditions, during which for two months he did not sleep more than two or three hours a night, Kehati was forced to stop sending out the brochures. However, various influential individuals came to his aid, and the executive committee of *Ha-poel Ha-mizrachi* eventually took on the project and even paid him a salary for it. Following additional difficulties and hiccups, other individuals and organizations intervened, such as *Heikhal Shlomo*, which financed the expenses, and in this manner, Kehati authored his commentary on the Mishna over six years. Each week, five thousand copies containing fourteen *mishnayot* with his commentary were delivered. In 1963, when he completed the project, he returned to his previous position at the bank. Between 1966 and 1967, the brochures were published in twelve volumes as a commentary of the Mishna by *Heikhal Shlomo.* In 1966, Kehati received the Rav Kook Prize. He died in 1976.

1. **Motives for Writing His Commentary**

While addressing this project of writing the commentary, Rav Kehati wrote the following:[[12]](#footnote-12)

Gentlemen, I will reveal a secret to you that perhaps many of you already know: I didn’t originally plan on writing another commentary of the Mishna. Rather, my goal was to create a movement of daily Mishna study. Now I have realized that this movement will not succeed unless we present the Mishna to the people with the appropriate tools for facilitating interest and creating a desire to dedicate their free time during the day to Torah, when returning home and when traveling.

This leads me to conclude that we must present the daily Mishna in the form of a booklet that the subscriber[[13]](#footnote-13) can take with him, and anywhere he goes he will be in the category of “happy is the one who comes here and his Torah study is with him.”[[14]](#footnote-14) But this leads us to another thought, that the form itself [of the Mishna] is still not strong enough to draw in the wider population. We must therefore also be innovative regarding the presentation of the Mishna and its commentary so that the Mishna has a “shining face” and can be explained in a manner that can be understood by everyone.

It seems that Kehati, like Bialik, Albeck and Levi, saw his primary objective as presenting the Mishna with a lucid commentary appropriate for a contemporary reader. As mentioned above, this commentary was part of his general desire to instill the study of Mishna within a wider audience. Later on in his words,[[15]](#footnote-15) Kehati suggests a plan for expanding the project: Each person who studies Mishna from the booklets should include at least two more friends in his learning, establish regular *shiurim* on Mishna, and arrange celebrations upon the completion of each tractate. In addition, he wished to publish additional booklets with addendums that would include alternate explanations given to that Mishna, as well as a focus on practical aspects of the Mishna, including measurements, diagrams, history of the *tanna’im,* and the scope of their sayings in the Mishna. In addition, Rav Kehati suggestedarranging written tests as well as conferences for discussing questions on the Mishna. Finally, he suggested preparing tools for a broad project of Gemara study.

1. **Characteristics of the Commentary**
2. **Prefaces**

Like the other modern commentaries that preceded him, Kehati also began the commentary on each tractate with an introduction discussing the verses in the Torah related to it, as well as a brief explanation of the various *halakhot* discussed therein, and their placement in the chapters of the tractate. He often also writes a separate introduction to a specific chapter, to a group of *mishnayot,* or even to one Mishna, in order to make it easier to understand. Similarly, Kehati usually offers an introduction to each individual Mishna that explains the subject of that particular Mishna and how it relates to the other *mishnayot* in the chapter.

1. **Methodology of the Commentary and its Style**

On the one hand, one of the great successes of the Kehati commentary is its clear and relatively succinct style of explaining deep and complex concepts. On the other hand, unlike the other modern commentaries that preceded him, he does not suffice with few words, and expands on the explanation of the Mishna in order to understand it properly. In many cases, he cites a number of interpretations of the Mishna, primarily when there is a dispute in the Gemara as to how to explain the Mishna. He often explains the entire Mishna according to one interpretation, and at the end adds a long footnote, in a different font, where he expands the discussion based on the Gemara and other sources, or cites a different interpretation to the Mishna, which he begins with the words: “We have explained the Mishna according to commentary X, but others explain…”

It should also be noted that the entire text of the Mishna is presented within the commentary, and not just a partial citation, so that one can learn the Mishna just from the commentary without having to go back to the Mishna while in the middle of reading the commentary.

1. **Sources of the Commentary**

Kehati’s explanations are mostly based on the classic interpretations: The two Talmuds, the commentary of the Rambam, the Bartenura, *Tosefot Yom Tov, Melekhet Shlomo, Tiferet Yisrael, Shenot Eliyahu,* and others. In addition, he also utilized many other commentaries that are not as well-known. Kehati occasionally also compiled interpretations from other works where an interpretation of one specific Mishna is occasionally cited. For example,[[16]](#footnote-16) in his commentary to tractate *Berakhot* (1:1), he cites Rabbi Avraham Eliyahu Kaplan’s explanation of the concept of *amud hashachar* (dawn). “The first rays of light that rise in the east at the end of the night and are called *ayelet ha-shachar,* increase after an hour, until they can be seen as a pillar of light that is called *amud ha-shachar.*”Among the sages of his generation, he occasionally cites Rabbi Unterman, the chief rabbi of Israel (who also wrote an endorsement of Kehati’s commentary). Kehati also occasionally suggests more novel interpretations based on the commentaries of Hanoch Albeck and others.

It seems that the combination of all of these factors: his clear formulation, his comprehensive explanations, and the fact that he offers multiple interpretations of the same Mishna, has transformed his commentary into one of the most popular Torah works of our generation.

1. **Additional Commentaries**

In addition to the commentaries mentioned above, there are three other commentaries written in our generation that are worth mentioning. The first, which is not exactly a commentary, is the beginning of the establishment of the critical version of the Mishna based on manuscripts and other evidence from the words of Chazal, the *ge’onim*, and the *rishonim.* This project began in 1972 in the *Makhon Ha-Talmud Ha-yisraeli*, a division of *Yad Ha-Rav Herzog,* with the blessing of Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin. Only tractates in *Seder Zera’im* have been published so far. The second commentary is *Mishnat Eretz Yisrael,* with the Safrai commentary. This is a commentary written by three scholars from the Safrai family: Ze’ev, Chana, and Shmuel Safrai. Their declared objective is to author a commentary using methods of modern scholarship to interpret the Mishna based on various types of research, including manuscripts, realia, history, archeology, and the comparison of sources. The project has not yet been completed, and at this time, all of the tractates of *Seder Mo’ed* have been published, as well as other individual tractates, such as *Shevi’it, Berakhot, Orla, Bikkurim, Pe’ah,* and *Ketubot.*

The third commentary is the commentary on the Mishna published by Artscroll,[[17]](#footnote-17) the publisher of the Schottenstein Gemara. The commentary, which has already been published on a number of tractates in *Seder Zera’im,* all of *Seder Mo’ed*, all of *Seder Nashim,* and some of *Seder Nezikin,* is divided into four sections: 1. A short commentary which flows together with the words of the Mishna. 2. A more detailed explanation of each paragraph of the Mishna, including additional interpretations from other commentaries. 3. A section of in-depth analysis of certain topics mentioned in the Mishna. 4. A section summarizing the *halakhot* that are derived from the Mishna and its interpretation.

1. Much of the information regarding this commentary is based on Mordechai Meir’s article, “Perush ‘Mishna Mefureshet’ Le-Rabbi Eliezer Levi,” *Ha-Maayan* 46:1 (5766), p.73-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The biographical details are taken from Rabbi Levi’s book, *Avot U-middot: Pirkei Zikhronot U-me’ora’ot Mi-yamim Lo Rechokim*, Tel Aviv, 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p.16-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p.38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mordechai Meir, “Perush ‘Mishna Mefureshet’ Le-Rabbi Eliezer Levi,” p.58. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p.141. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p.156. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is equivalent to what Rav Steinsaltz did in his edition of the Gemara by leaving the commentary of Rashi on the page. The Bartenura’s commentary was not published in the initial edition of the Kehati commentary, but the newer versions have included it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rabbi Eliezer Levi, *Avot U-middot: Pirkei Zikhronot U-me’ora’ot Mi-yamim Lo Rechokim*, p.81. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See note 1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Most of the biographical details are taken from *Ha-Rav Pinchas Kehati, Masekhet Chayyav U-pa’alo: Sefer Zikaron,* Jerusalem 5749. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. From “Le-siyum Mifal Ha-kuntresim,” in *Ha-Rav Pinchas Kehati, Masekhet Chayyav U-pa’alo: Sefer Zikaron,* Jerusalem 5749, p. 289. These words were delivered at a conference in the early 1960s. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This refers to those who sign up to receive a regular delivery of the booklet. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is a play on the Gemara (*Pesachim* 50a) that employs this statement to refer to one who remembers his Torah learning when he dies and can repeat it upon arriving in Heaven. It is used here, however, to refer to one who travels (“who comes to here”) and brings the booklet with him, such that he can study Torah wherever he finds himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p.290. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This example is brought by Professor Yitzchak Gilat in his article, “Al Mishnato shel R’ Pinchas,” in *“Ha-Rav Pinchas Kehati, Masekhet Chayyav U-pa’alo: Sefer Zikaron,*” Jerusalem 5749, p.79. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The commentary referred to here is the Artscroll Hebrew commentary on the Mishna. An Artscroll commentary on the Mishna in English, the *Yad Avraham,* was actually published some time ago. However, it did not contain the more updated style of four distinct sections described here. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)