H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shlomo Zalman Havlin, ed. *Seder ha-kabalah le-rabenu Menahem ha-Meiri.* Jerusalem and Cleveland: Ofeq Institute, 1995. lvii + 286 pp. $16.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-881255-07-9.

Reviewed by Henry Abramson (Florida Atlantic University)
Published on H-Judaic (May, 1997)

A Rishon from the Russian Archives

Makhon Ofeq, based in Cleveland and Jerusalem, have been responsible in recent years for producing important critical editions of many classics of Judaica, in some cases publishing completely new versions of texts based on manuscripts never before available to the scholarly community. The work under consideration here, a section of the massive *Bet ha-Behirah* commentary on the Talmud, is another impressive accomplishment for Ofeq and a valuable contribution to the literature.

Rabbi Menahem ben Solomon ha-Meiri was a thirteenth-century French scholar who devoted some eleven years of his life to compile the *Bet ha-Behirah*, which is a staple for serious students of the Talmud and the era of the Rishonim. His commentary to the Mishnaic tractate *Avot*, included in this encyclopedic work, was divided into two parts, and has been similarly published in two volumes by Ofeq. In the first volume entitled the *Seder ha-Kabalah*, which might be rendered as "the Order of the Transmission" (Rabbi Havlin has more felicitously rendered this as "History of the Oral Law"), the Meiri describes the chain of tradition passing down the Oral Law from Moses to his own medieval era. In some sense, this volume is an amplification and continuation of the first Mishnah in Pirke Avot, which describes the transmission of the Oral Law from Moses to the Men of the Great Assembly. The second volume (not under review here) is a critical edition of his commentary on the remainder of tractate Avot.

The Meiri's version of history relies heavily on talmudic and other rabbinic sources, and as a consequence has little to say about general historical events, and reflects a philosophy of history based on medieval Jewish thought. Some diversions–the life and career of Jesus, for example (pp. 69-70)–are interesting, but by and large the Meiri concentrates on intellectual history, describing the compilation of the Mishnah, the structure of the academies, the heirarchy under the Geonim, etc. An exceptionally valuable aspect of this work is his discussion of the works of his contemporaries and recent predecessors such as Rashi and Maimonides.

This edition is based on a MS held in the Saltykov Shchedrin Pubilc Library of St. Petersburg, and the editors have richly supplemented this with the texts of the classical commentaries by Rabbis Hayyim Palache and Isaac Lattes, also taken from MSS in Russia and Oxford. A concise running commentary by the editor and an exhaustive list of variant readings makes this version very user- friendly, and lays the groundwork for more extensive research. Critical essays by the editor and Professor Dov Septimus explore the *Weltanschauung* of the Meiri, and serve as useful companions to the text.

I would be remiss if I did not mention one further strong point of this publication, although it may run counter to the dictum in Avot of *al tistakel be-kankan ele be-mah she-yesh bo* ("do not look at the container, rather [look at] what it contains): this is a particularly beautiful book, with a tooled black cover highlighted by red and gold lettering and trim. Makhon Ofek should be congratulated for making sure that the *kankan* was befitting for *ma she-yesh bo.*

This review is the exclusive property of H-Judaic and

H-Net, copyright (c) 1997. H-Judaic acknowledges the support of Florida Atlantic University. Book Review Editor: Henry Abramson <habramso@acc.fau.edu>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

Citation: Henry Abramson. Review of Havlin, Shlomo Zalman, ed., *Seder ha-kabalah le-rabenu Menahem ha-Meiri.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 1997.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=990

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.