

# MALBIM ON JOB CHAPTER 42: THE HAPPY ENDING

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## INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Meir Leibush (1809–1879), known as Malbim, was a Romanian and Polish rabbi, preacher, and Hebraist who wrote a commentary on the Pentateuch and Sifra (Warsaw, 1874–80), and a commentary on the Prophets and Writings (Warsaw, 1874). Malbim is popular and highly respected among Orthodox Jewish scholars and may well be the leading relatively modern Jewish commentator on Job, as well on all the books of the Tanakh. In this paper I present Malbim's analysis of Job chapter 42. I discuss other chapters of Job and midrashic sources to explain Malbim's analysis of this chapter.

What may surprise and please lovers of the Bible is that Malbim gives a truly happy ending in Job chapter 42, claiming that Job's seven sons and three daughters didn't die, but were only captured and held by Satan and then released unharmed! This makes the Book of Job far more pleasant to read – it becomes a consoling and heartening book since no one dies before their time. According to Malbim, Job is not a tragic story of a man who lost his ten children and then had another ten. Such a story is frightening and sad. Based on Malbim's understanding of the end of Job, there is only joy. This supports the view that Moses wrote the Book of Job and taught it to the Israelites in Egypt. Malbim mentions in the forward to his commentary on Job, "Our sages say that Moses, may he rest in peace, wrote the Book of Job. The Midrash says that Moses would console with it the Israelites while they were suffering in Egypt." The midrashic source referred to here has never been pinpointed.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, according to Malbim, Job never doubted God or shifted from a position of absolute faith in the moral righteousness of God's actions in the world.<sup>2</sup> Job is consoling and heartening because there is a lesson that if one trusts in the Lord and follows His ways, all will be well in the end. As we find: *But they who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength, as eagles grow new plumes. They shall run and not grow weary. They shall march and not grow faint* (Is. 40:31).

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## THE HAPPY ENDING

In his commentary to Job 42:10-12, Malbim maintains that God returned to Job all his children and increased his property to twice what it was before. Here Malbim refers to unnamed midrashim that state that Satan merely captured and held his children and his property and then released them unharmed – restoring all to Job.

As is apparent to the sages, Job's properties were not despoiled and his children did not die. Only that Satan hid them from his face and sent him a messenger to bring him evil tidings. All his property and his children were the whole time in the hands of Satan.

Malbim explains that the three daughters of Job (42:13) are the same as in Job 1:2. God increased their beauty, as we read: *Nowhere in the land were women as beautiful as Job's daughters to be found* (Job 42:15). Job gave them new names because of their increase in beauty.

As is said in the name of the sages, these are the earlier children, only that the daughters increased in beauty. Because their beauty increased wonderfully, he gave them new names in keeping with their great beauty.

## UNWAVERING FAITH

Malbim writes in the introduction to his commentary to Job that the purpose of the book is to clarify matters regarding the theological problem that perplexed so many, why there are righteous that suffer and wicked that prosper.

This holy book elucidates matters that comprise an extended debate on the apparent bad state of order, that there are righteous people who are treated as if they committed the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people whose paths are successful and are fruitful, God even tests them and they escape. This is the question: why are there righteous who suffer while there are wicked ones who prosper? Our sages say the greatest of our prophets [Moses] was troubled by this question when he asked, *Oh, let me behold Your Presence* (Ex. 33:18). Because of this question apostates attacked and denied prov-

idence and said the world is abandoned; that there is no reward and no punishment; no law and no judge; and the honor of God is desecrated (as said in *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:16).

Malbim explains that when Job says *I know that You can do everything* (Job 42:2), he means that all along he knew and believed in his heart in divine justice, divine providence, and human free choice. He never had any doubts about God's morality or control of the world. Job aimed to strengthen his faith by presenting hypothetical arguments that he never actually believed in his heart and then to refute them using philosophy, reason, and knowledge.

After finishing debating, Job reveals what is in his heart, that in truth his heart was whole with God and he truly passed the test. For in his heart he believed in all the pillars of faith and didn't deviate from his righteousness. All the debating which took place was only theoretical philosophy, to expose matters clearly by research and investigation. He made a stand for the view that denies faith. Then, to refute this view, he presented claims and arguments for the view that strengthens faith. In this way truth is clarified and judgment comes to light. He represented the view that denies providence and free choice and the existence of the soul and its reward in the future world. Not that he turned to these ideas in his heart, for his heart had full faith in all these matters. It was only to clarify and refine matters. He wanted faith be clarified by reason and research. When he called to God to debate him, his calling was to enlighten his intelligence so that he would understand matters that he already believed in his heart, in order that they would not be concepts incomprehensible to the intellect.

Malbim thus gives a novel explanation of Job's complaints before God. Many commentators are deeply troubled by Job's harsh complaining before God. Malbim explains that all the debating which took place was only philosophical research. My view is:<sup>3</sup>

The philosophy and thought of Job are Jewish traditional despite the fact that Job complains before God with harsh words. There are other incidents in the Bible where a prophet complains before God. For example, Moses our teacher said, '*why did You bring harm upon this people*' (Ex. 5:22) and Elijah the prophet said, '*O Lord my God, will*

*You bring calamity upon this widow whose guest I am, and let her son die' (I Kg. 17:20).* God responded to the prayers and complaints of Moses our teacher and of Elijah the prophet as well as those of Job.

Malbim on verses 42:3-4 comments that Job, while struggling with the problem of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked, wants more than belief that all is fair and good. Job wants knowledge, but he never turned from belief and he never sullied God in his heart.

Therefore he argued and claimed that he wanted God answer these questions, so that by the polemics it will be clarified by way of investigation and knowledge how to answer the non-believer. Surely, achievement from knowledge is greater than achievement only from belief without understanding and knowledge. This is his intention throughout the polemic. However, in all truth, he never turned his heart from belief, he believed in divine providence.

According to Malbim, verses 5 and 6 show that ultimately Job is satisfied because God answers his plea for understanding. Job saw the truth through prophecy and revelation, which is vastly more powerful than only belief. *Hear now, and I will speak; I will ask, and You will inform me. I had heard You with my ears, But now I see You with my eyes; Therefore, I recant and relent, Being but dust and ashes.* The body is *ashes*, meaning that the life of the body and its success are nothing in comparison to the precious joy that is the life of the soul with God, the true enjoyment of which will be privileged to souls of the righteous in the afterlife. Job has no questions now regarding the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked.

Until now I only heard with my ears. I did not see You with prophecy, but simply accepted what was handed down to me by tradition. I only had belief without knowledge. There was room for doubt on these matters, *But now I see You with my eyes.* Thus everything becomes clarified with clear knowledge. By Your revelation to me in a vision, I see that You closely supervise the private actions of humanity... By Your mouth you made known to me the answer to these questions. This vision clarified to me the existence of the soul separate from the body, the possibility of the soul cleaving to God.

Without a vision, it is impossible for a person to see the separation of the soul from the body and the soul's cleaving to its superior source as will be in the future, when the soul separates from the body and returns to its Godly spiritual abode. *Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes.* For the life of the body and its success is nothing in comparison to the precious joy that is the life of the soul with God. Now there are no questions or difficulties concerning the suffering of the righteous, for bodily suffering is nothing in comparison to one moment of the pleasantness of the soul in spiritual enjoyment. Now clouds are dispersed, bright light is visible and revealed to me – light of knowledge.

Malbim on 42:7 writes that God was angry at the three friends of Job because they were hypocrites, not truly believing what they said. Job, in his heart, maintained the same truth all along.

In their mouths they argued in God's favor while their hearts were not in agreement with their mouths: *Will you fool Him as one fools men (Job 13:9)? His threat will terrify you (Job 13:11).* Job admonished them that they spoke matters they themselves did not believe in their hearts. The main thing with God is the matter of the heart and not the external speech of the mouth. In this matter *you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job.*

Malbim on 42:8 writes that the three friends needed Job to bring sacrifices and to pray for them because they sinned in their thoughts. Job also had to forgive them for their cruel accusations of his wickedness. Job himself was completely righteous in his actions, beliefs and thoughts.

Also they reviled Job for no cause and made him out as a wicked person and rebel against God, for this Job needed to pray for them.

Malbim on 42:14 (referring to himself as Rabbi Meir) recalls the verse *Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes (Job 42:6)*, explaining that Job recants and relents his earlier polemics, now recognizing that the main place of reward and punishment is in the next world. One must prepare for the future world by working in the spirit of Torah to perfect the soul. The Malbim ends

quoting the famous verse, *A good name is better than fragrant oil, and the day of death than the day of birth* (Eccl. 7:1), saying that of all of one's work while alive in this world, the finest that can remain is a good name.

The daughters were successful whether in beauty and whether in riches since he *gave them estates together with their brothers*. At the end of the polemics through what God revealed to him Job understood the life of the soul in this world and recognized that the main life and reward and punishment are in the world to come. Job said *Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes*, I don't worry about loss of the body and its torments after seeing that at the time the soul removes its filthy physical garments and returns to God it will experience eternal joy. Thus Rabbi Meir ends his commentary on the book of Job saying that the end of a person is death. Fortunate is one who grew in Torah. From this one sees that while the end of life is death, from there will start the main life, the life of the soul. The purpose is the end. All the while one is alive, one gets closer to this end. One must prepare provisions for that day, by working in the spirit of Torah to perfect the soul. On this Solomon in his wisdom says: *A good name is better than fragrant oil, and the day of death than the day of birth*. For the day of death starts from day of birth, for this is the end toward which one goes and gets closer to from time of birth.

#### CONCLUSION

According to Malbim, the Book of Job has a complete happy ending. No one died. His daughters increased in beauty. His property increased. Furthermore, Job himself never doubted God's morality. The answer to all the polemics lies in Job realizing, through revelation and prophecy, that the main life of man, including reward and punishment, are in the next world. With a truly happy ending, Job becomes a consoling and heartening book to read and study.

#### NOTES

1. The Talmud (Baba Batra 14-16) presents alternate views of Job. Rabbi Matityahu Strashun (Russian Talmudist, 1817 – 1885), in his commentary to Baba Batra 14b writes: "Moses wrote his book and the section of Balaam and Job . . . In the name of an ancient sage from the days of the Holy Rabbi [Rabbi Judah the Prince] we find written in an ancient scroll that Moses our teacher, may he rest in peace, would go and bring with his hands the Book of Job to the Israelite sages one by one during the Egyptian slavery so that they would listen and learn that there is hope to all who trust in God. That after the bad they will get good and kindness from Him . . . Exodus Rabbah (5:18) teaches that they had in their hands scrolls with which they would uplift themselves week by week saying God will redeem them... Truly according to the above it is probable to say that the scrolls referred to are the Book of Job."
2. This is similar to the approach of the Hellenistic Jew Aristeas in his retelling of the Book of Job. See Gruen, Erich, *Heritage and Hellenism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 118, 119.
3. Gerald Aranoff, "Job: A Giant in Torah and Wisdom, Evidence to the Divinity of Torah" *Sinai*, Volume 141, *Tishrei-Adar* 5768, Mossad Harav Kook, 2009.



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