



Extracting Fruit from the Peel: *Rabbi Meir's Integration of Contradictory Interpretive Methods*

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ABSTRACT

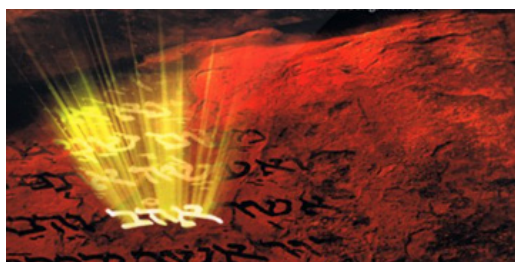
This paper examines Rabbi Meir's distinctive hermeneutical approach as a synthesis of the interpretive methodologies of his two primary teachers: Rabbi Akiva's expansive midrashic method and Elisha ben Avuya's literal-philosophical approach. Through analysis of talmudic sources and mystical traditions, this study demonstrates how Rabbi Meir's commitment to seeing the *or haganuz* (hidden light) in Torah enabled him to remain loyal to both teachers, even accompanying Acher beyond the *techum Shabbat*. The paper argues that Rabbi Meir's hermeneutic represents a unique third way—one that validates both the expansive creativity of midrash and the precision of literal interpretation by locating divine truth (kotnot or with an aleph) beneath all textual garments.

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Introduction

Rabbi Meir occupies a paradoxical position in rabbinic literature. Known as "he who lights the eyes of the rabbis" (*me'ir einai hakhamim*), his interpretive brilliance illuminated the tradition, yet his methodology often confounded his contemporaries [1]. His most enigmatic characteristic was his unwavering loyalty to two teachers whose hermeneutical approaches seemed fundamentally incompatible: Rabbi Akiva, the master of midrashic expansion, and Elisha ben Avuya (Acher), the advocate of literal-philosophical interpretation.

This paper argues that Rabbi Meir's hermeneutical approach represents neither a compromise between these methodologies nor an abandonment of systematic interpretation, but rather a sophisticated synthesis grounded in his unique perception of the *or haganuz* (hidden light) within Torah. His famous dictum about extracting fruit while discarding the peel reflects not mere pragmatism but a coherent theological-hermeneutical principle that anticipated later mystical developments [2].

Rabbi Akiva's Midrashic Methodology

Rabbi Akiva revolutionized Jewish hermeneutics through his doctrine that "every crown and flourish of the letters teaches multitudes of halakhot" [3]. His method presumed that divine revelation was inexhaustible—that each textual element contained infinite interpretive possibilities. The Torah's

ostensibly redundant elements (*ribbuyim*) and exclusions (*mi'utim*) became hermeneutical keys unlocking layers of meaning [4].

Akiva's approach was fundamentally maximalist. Where others saw simple narrative, he discerned legal principles. Where they found straightforward commands, he extracted elaborate systematic structures. His interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory of divine-human love exemplifies this methodology: surface meaning became a gateway to deeper theological truths [5].

Rabbi Akiva's hermeneutic contained mystical elements that would later influence kabbalistic thought. His successful entry into *Pardes* [6] suggests that his interpretive method was not merely intellectual but experiential—a way of encountering divine presence through textual engagement. His martyrdom while reciting the *Shema* [7] represents the ultimate unity of interpretation and lived commitment.



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Elisha ben Avuya's Literal-Philosophical Approach

Elisha ben Avuya, before his apostasy, represented a different hermeneutical tradition—one emphasizing textual precision and philosophical coherence. His approach aligned with Greco-Roman intellectual methods that prioritized logical consistency and empirical verification [8]. Rather than expanding textual meaning, Elisha sought to establish its most accurate, contextually grounded interpretation.

This methodology valued clarity over creativity, philosophical rigor over homiletical inspiration. Elisha's eventual turn toward Greek wisdom (*hokhmah yevanit*) was not a complete departure from his earlier methodology but rather its logical extension—prioritizing rational investigation over traditional interpretation [9].

The Tragedy of Abandonment

Elisha's transformation into Acher represents the hermeneutical dangers of divorcing interpretive method from communal commitment. His precision, unmoored from halakhic framework, led to nihilistic conclusions. Yet even in his heretical state, Elisha retained profound Torah knowledge—suggesting that his interpretive skills remained intact even as his theological commitment collapsed [2].

Rabbi Meir's Hermeneutical Innovation

Rabbi Meir's famous metaphor of eating fruit while discarding the peel [2] has typically been understood as mere pragmatism—extracting useful content while avoiding dangerous influence. However, these readings underestimate the sophistication of Meir's hermeneutical theory.

The fruit-peel distinction reflects Meir's conviction that divine truth (*or haganuz*) remains constant across different interpretive garments (*levushim*). Whether approached through Akiva's midrashic expansion or Elisha's literal precision, Torah's essential light endures. The "peel" is not false interpretation but rather the specific methodological approach; the "fruit" is the divine truth that transcends any particular hermeneutical system [10].

Seeing the Hidden Light

Rabbi Meir's epithet "he who lights the eyes of the rabbis" connects to his unique capacity to perceive the *or haganuz*—the primordial light hidden within Torah. This concept, developed in later mystical literature, suggests that divine illumination preceded and transcends textual manifestation [11]. Rabbi Meir's interpretive approach was grounded in this mystical insight: divine truth exists independently of interpretive methodology.

The reference to Rabbi Meir's teaching about Moses' mother hiding him "to see what would become" (*Meor Einayim*, Parashat Shemot) exemplifies this approach. Like Moses' mother, Rabbi Meir "hid" within diverse interpretive approaches to perceive their ultimate spiritual potential. His loyalty to both teachers reflected this commitment to seeing divine possibility within apparent contradiction.

The mystical distinction between *kotnot or* with an ayin (garments of skin) and with an aleph (garments of light) provides crucial insight into Rabbi Meir's methodology [12]. While others perceived interpretive differences as fundamental contradictions (garments of skin), Rabbi Meir recognized them as variations of divine illumination (garments of light).



כא וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ. קַמְצוֹת עוֹר—וַיַּלְבִּשֵׁם. 21 And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them. [2]

Gen 3:21

This perspective enabled him to accompany Acher beyond the *techum Shabbat*—not as violation of halakhic boundaries but as commitment to retrieving divine sparks from places of apparent spiritual darkness. His willingness to transgress conventional limits reflected his confidence that Torah's light could not be extinguished by methodological error or even theological rebellion.

Continuing Study with Both Teachers

Rabbi Meir's continued relationship with both Rabbi Akiva and Elisha ben Avuya after the latter's apostasy demonstrates his hermeneutical principles in action. Rather than choosing between interpretive methodologies, he recognized each as potentially revelatory. His study with Akiva deepened his appreciation for Torah's inexhaustible creativity; his engagement with Acher refined his commitment to interpretive precision [13].

This dual loyalty scandalized his contemporaries, who perceived it as theological inconsistency. However, Rabbi Meir's approach reflected a sophisticated understanding of hermeneutical pluralism—the recognition that divine truth exceeds any single interpretive framework [14].

Beyond the Techum Shabbat

The detail that Rabbi Meir accompanied Acher beyond the Sabbath boundary carries profound hermeneutical significance. The *techum Shabbat* represents the limits of acceptable interpretive territory—the boundaries within which legitimate Torah study occurs. Rabbi Meir's willingness to transgress these boundaries with his heretical teacher suggests that his commitment to retrieving divine truth exceeded conventional interpretive constraints [2].

This action was not antinomian rebellion but rather hermeneutical courage—the recognition that divine sparks might exist even in prohibited territories. Rabbi Meir's confidence in his ability to extract fruit while discarding peel enabled him to venture into interpretive spaces that others deemed too dangerous.

The Indestructibility of Divine Truth

Rabbi Meir's hermeneutical approach rests on the theological conviction that divine truth cannot be destroyed by human error—only concealed. This principle enabled him to engage with Elisha's heretical teachings without fear of contamination. Since Torah's essential light (*or haganuz*) transcends interpretive methodology, even flawed approaches might yield authentic insights [15].

This conviction anticipates later kabbalistic teachings about divine sparks (*nitzotzot*) trapped within broken vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*) [16]. Rabbi Meir's willingness to study with Acher reflects an early version of this mystical principle—the recognition that divine light persists even within spiritual brokenness.

Paradoxically, Rabbi Meir's confidence in his interpretive abilities was grounded in hermeneutical humility—the recognition that no single methodology exhausts Torah's meaning. His synthesis of Akiva's expansion and Elisha's precision reflected not methodological confusion but interpretive sophistication—the understanding that divine truth requires multiple approaches for adequate illumination [17].



The Mechanics of Mystical Vision

The figure of Rabbi Meir becomes paradigmatic for the Me'or Einayim's vision of transformed textual relationship, particularly through his unique ability to perceive *kotnot or* with an *aleph* (garments of light) rather than *kotnot or* with an *ayin* (garments of skin). This distinction, drawn from Genesis Rabbah's mystical reading of humanity's post-Eden condition, provides the theological foundation for understanding how divine vision operates in both textual interpretation and clinical practice.

The Me'or Einayim's exposition reveals that Rabbi Meir's capacity to see "garments of light" emerged from his success in transcending what he calls *bchinat shvirat ha-kelim* (the consciousness of brokenness). Where ordinary readers encounter Torah through the fragmented perspective of good-and-evil—experiencing it as *etz ha-da'at tov v'ra* (Tree of Knowledge)—Rabbi Meir achieved the integrated consciousness that perceives Torah as *etz chayyim* (Tree of Life), pure divine luminosity without mixture or contradiction.

This transformation occurs not through the text itself but through what the Me'or Einayim calls the *aspaklaria* principle: "Torah is a mirror (*aspaklaria*), and as one is, so does one see Torah." Those whose inner consciousness remains trapped in fallen dualistic awareness will inevitably encounter sacred text as mixed good-and-evil, potentially becoming *sam mavet* (poison of death). However, those who achieve *dvikut* (cleaving) of thought to its divine source transcend these garments and perceive Torah as pure light [18].

The Hermeneutics of Divine Consciousness

Rabbi Meir's hermeneutical achievement involved what

the Me'or Einayim describes as *birur ha-machshavot*—the clarification and elevation of fallen thoughts back to their divine source in *chochmah*. Each thought, regardless of how distorted or inappropriate it may appear, retains its connection to divine consciousness. Thoughts of love, even when misdirected toward worldly objects, originate in divine love; thoughts of fear, even when focused on temporal concerns, derive from divine awe (*yirah*).

The practical methodology involves recognizing the divine spark (*nitzotz*) within each fallen thought and redirecting it toward its source in the *olam ha-machshavah* (world of divine thought). This process transforms reading from passive reception of information to active spiritual practice in which the reader's consciousness must be aligned with divine consciousness for authentic interpretation to occur.

Applied to Rabbi Meir's Torah reading, this means that his ability to perceive "garments of light" resulted from his cultivation of what might be called "redemptive hermeneutical consciousness"—the capacity to trace every textual element back to its luminous source in primordial divine wisdom, thereby transforming even the most problematic passages into vehicles for divine illumination [19].



Clinical Applications of Mystical Reading

In clinical terms, the Rabbi Meir paradigm provides a sophisticated framework for what might be called "redemptive medical practice." Healthcare providers who learn to "read" patients as Rabbi Meir read Torah develop the capacity to perceive the *or haganuz* (hidden light) concealed within even the most challenging clinical presentations. The apparent pathology becomes transparent to the deeper healing narrative that seeks expression through the patient's suffering.

This transformation requires healthcare providers to undertake their own version of *birur ha-machshavot*. When encountering difficult patients, diagnostic uncertainties, or therapeutic failures, the clinician learns to recognize these challenges as opportunities for *tikkun* (repair) rather than obstacles to overcome. The impatience that arises with non-compliant patients can be traced back to its divine source in urgency about healing; the despair that emerges with terminal diagnoses can be elevated to its root in divine compassion for suffering.

The Me'or Einayim's insight that "foresight (*da'at*) is not clairvoyance but discernment—the ability to perceive in each thought its root and to elevate it" provides practical methodology for transforming clinical consciousness. Just as Rabbi Meir learned to perceive divine light within textual complexity, healthcare providers can develop the capacity to perceive healing potential within medical complexity [20].

The Paradox of Distance and Intimacy

Rabbi Meir's achievement illuminates the Me'or Einayim's interpretation of Miriam's stance "from afar" (*merachok*). The

distance that enables divine vision is not separation but the proper perspective that allows genuine encounter with sacred reality. Similarly, the clinical distance that enables diagnostic accuracy paradoxically facilitates the therapeutic intimacy necessary for healing transformation.

The practitioner who learns to read patients with "Rabbi Meir consciousness" maintains what the Me'or Einayim calls the "sisterly relationship" with divine wisdom—intimate enough to perceive the hidden connections and patterns, distant enough to avoid being overwhelmed by the apparent chaos of suffering. This balanced perspective enables healthcare providers to serve as mediators between divine healing wisdom and practical therapeutic intervention.

The Restoration of Primordial Medical Vision

Most significantly, Rabbi Meir's paradigm points toward what might be called the "un-fall" of medicine—the gradual restoration of healthcare to its original unity of technical skill and sacred presence. Just as Rabbi Meir's Torah appeared to him in its prelapsarian luminosity, healthcare providers who achieve this consciousness transformation begin to perceive patients in their essential spiritual reality rather than merely their pathological manifestations.

This consciousness transformation enables clinicians to participate in what the Me'or Einayim calls the broader work of cosmic repair, in which fallen sparks of divine wisdom trapped within broken systems are gradually elevated back to their luminous source. Contemporary medicine, with its technological sophistication yet spiritual fragmentation, provides the ideal context for this redemptive work—offering both the tools for effective intervention and the opportunity for consciousness transformation [21].

The promise of the Rabbi Meir paradigm is that this mystical vision remains accessible to contemporary healthcare providers willing to undertake the necessary work of consciousness purification and divine alignment. Through cultivating *dvikut* with divine healing wisdom, medical practitioners can learn to see through divine eyes, transforming their clinical encounters from merely technical interventions into opportunities for mutual spiritual elevation and cosmic repair.



"The Four Who Entered the Pardes:"
Ink and color on parchment, circa 1600, Italy

Anticipating Kabbalistic Hermeneutics

Rabbi Meir's approach anticipates several key kabbalistic principles. His recognition of divine light within diverse interpretive garments parallels the Zohar's teaching that Torah is clothed in multiple levels of meaning [22]. His willingness to extract truth from problematic sources anticipates the doctrine

of extracting holy sparks from impure realms [16].

The Hasidic concept of *nitzotz* (divine spark) within apparently secular or even sinful phenomena reflects Rabbi Meir's fundamental insight—that divine presence transcends conventional boundaries of sacred and profane, orthodox and heretical [23].

Rabbi Meir's unique status among the four who entered *Pardes* becomes hermeneutically significant in light of his synthesis. While Ben Azzai died, Ben Zoma went mad, and Acher became heretical, Rabbi Meir alone emerged intact [6]—not because he avoided danger but because his hermeneutical approach enabled him to navigate spiritual complexity without losing his essential orientation.

Navigating Interpretive Pluralism

Rabbi Meir's hermeneutical synthesis offers valuable insights for contemporary engagement with interpretive diversity. His model suggests that commitment to divine truth need not require rejection of alternative methodologies—that authentic interpretation might emerge through creative synthesis rather than methodological purity [24].

In academic contexts where historical-critical and traditional approaches often seem incompatible, Rabbi Meir's example suggests possibilities for productive dialogue. His confidence in Torah's essential truth enabled him to engage diverse interpretive methods without compromising his fundamental commitments [25].

Rabbi Meir's loyalty to both teachers also raises ethical questions about interpretive responsibility. His willingness to maintain relationship with Acher despite social pressure demonstrates commitment to truth that transcends communal approval. This model suggests that authentic interpretation might sometimes require resistance to conventional boundaries—not for the sake of rebellion but for the sake of truth [26].

Conclusion

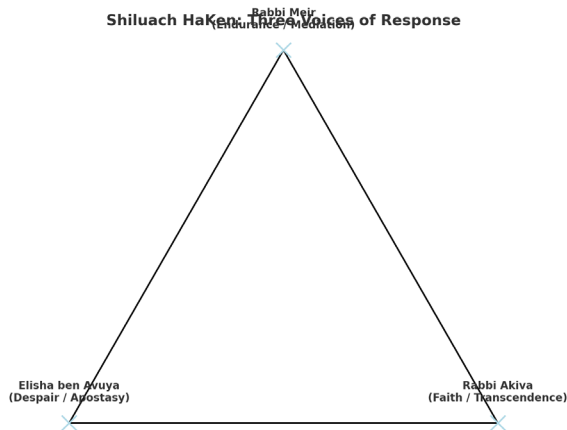
Rabbi Meir's hermeneutical approach represents a sophisticated synthesis that transcends the apparent opposition between midrashic expansion and literal precision. His commitment to seeing the *or haganuz* within Torah enabled him to extract divine truth from diverse interpretive sources while maintaining his essential theological orientation [27].

His famous metaphor of fruit and peel reflects not mere pragmatism but a coherent theological-hermeneutical principle: that divine truth transcends interpretive methodology while remaining accessible through multiple approaches. His willingness to accompany Acher beyond the *techum Shabbat* demonstrates hermeneutical courage grounded in confidence that Torah's light cannot be extinguished by human error [2].

Rabbi Meir's legacy suggests that authentic interpretation requires both methodological sophistication and theological humility—the recognition that divine truth exceeds human comprehension while remaining genuinely accessible through committed engagement. His synthesis of apparently incompatible approaches offers a model for navigating interpretive complexity without abandoning fundamental commitments [28].

In our contemporary context of interpretive pluralism, Rabbi Meir's example provides valuable guidance. His demonstration

that commitment to truth enables rather than constrains interpretive creativity offers hope for productive dialogue across methodological boundaries. Like the garments of light (*kotnot or* with an aleph), authentic interpretation illuminates rather than conceals the divine presence that transcends all human categories [12].



Addendum: Rabbi Meir's Position in the Shiluach HaKen Debate

Rabbi Meir's unique hermeneutical position becomes clearer when situated within the specific chain of tradition that shaped his interpretive approach. As primarily known as a disciple of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Meir inherited his master's sophisticated hermeneutical methods after Akiva's arrest and execution by the Romans, becoming one of the leading transmitters of Akiva's Torah. The Gemara (Eruvin 13b) praises his intellectual acuity, noting that "his colleagues could not fully fathom the depth of his reasoning."

However, Rabbi Meir's theological development was profoundly shaped by his paradoxical relationship with Elisha ben Avuya (Acher). Despite Elisha's apostasy, Rabbi Meir continued to learn from him (Chagigah 15a), employing his famous methodology: "Rabbi Meir ate the fruit and discarded the shell." This dual discipleship positioned Rabbi Meir uniquely between two irreconcilable theological poles, making him the living embodiment of hermeneutical synthesis.



Art by *Sefira Lightstone*

The Shiluach HaKen Paradigm

The significance of Rabbi Meir's dual discipleship emerges most clearly in the context of the shiluach haken (sending away the mother bird) debate, which crystallizes the fundamental theological crisis that shaped rabbinic hermeneutics. The mitzvah promises "that it may go well with you and that you may live long" (Deuteronomy 22:7), yet tradition records the traumatic incident of a boy dying while fulfilling this very

commandment.

This incident produced three distinct theological responses that define the spectrum of rabbinic hermeneutics: *Elisha ben Avuya* witnessed the boy's death and concluded that Torah's promise was false, leading to his apostasy. His response represents the collapse of faith under the weight of literal interpretation when reality contradicts textual promises.

Rabbi Akiva reinterpreted the promise as eschatological rather than worldly, shifting the fulfillment to the World to Come (*Olam HaBa*). His response preserves faith through paradox, transcending immediate contradictions through non-literal hermeneutics.

Rabbi Meir, as student of both, refused to choose between these positions. He inherited from Akiva the non-literalist hermeneutic that understands Torah's promises as pointing beyond immediate historical fulfillment, while simultaneously inheriting from Elisha the existential wound of Torah's apparent contradictions.

Rabbi Meir's theological position represents neither compromise nor synthesis but rather what might be termed "existential mediation"—the capacity to sustain Torah engagement while carrying the full weight of its contradictions. Unlike Elisha, he refuses to abandon Torah when it fails to deliver on its apparent promises. Unlike Akiva, he refuses to transcend the raw scandal of suffering through purely eschatological interpretation.

This mediating position manifests in several key characteristics: *Hermeneutics of Compassion: Rabbi Meir demonstrates that one can remain within Torah's framework while carrying the doubts and challenges of the heretic. His continued study with Acher after his apostasy represents a theological courage that refuses binary choices between faith and doubt.*

Intellectual Endurance: Rather than resolving contradictions through martyrdom (like Akiva) or apostasy (like Elisha), Rabbi Meir embodies the capacity to live productively within unresolved theological tension. His approach suggests that sustaining Torah while living with contradictions is itself a form of Torah study.

Dialectical Thinking: Rabbi Meir's hermeneutical approach anticipates later mystical developments by recognizing that divine truth can emerge through the tension between opposing interpretive approaches rather than through their resolution.

Rabbi Meir's position as mediator between Elisha and Akiva provides crucial insight into the theological dynamics that would later influence kabbalistic thought. In the framework of Lurianic mystical theology, Rabbi Meir's role parallels that of the tzaddik who serves as bridge between divine concealment and divine revelation.

Like the Shekhinah in exile (reflecting Elisha's despair) whose cries simultaneously arouse divine compassion (reflecting Akiva's transcendent hope), Rabbi Meir represents the human capacity to remain present to both divine absence and divine redemption without resolving the tension between them. His theology embodies what might be called "compassion in the tension"—the recognition that authentic spiritual life requires holding space for both doubt and faith, both divine presence and divine concealment.

This theological position proves particularly relevant for contemporary interpretive challenges, where traditional and critical approaches to sacred text often seem irreconcilably opposed. Rabbi Meir's model suggests that commitment to sacred tradition need not require rejection of critical questioning, while critical engagement need not necessitate abandonment of sacred commitment. His example provides resources for what might be termed "post-critical naivety"—the capacity to engage sacred text with full awareness of its problems while maintaining openness to its transformative potential.

Conclusion

Rabbi Meir's unique position in the shiluach haken debate illuminates his broader hermeneutical significance. As the living bridge between Elisha's collapse and Akiva's transcendence, he embodies a third way that neither abandons Torah nor ignores its contradictions. His approach suggests that the highest form of Torah engagement may involve not the resolution of theological problems but the development of consciousness capable of sustaining productive relationship with irreducible mystery and paradox.

This positioning provides the theological foundation for his famous fruit-and-peel methodology and his willingness to accompany Acher beyond the techum Shabbat. Rabbi Meir's hermeneutical courage emerges from his recognition that divine truth can survive and even flourish within human uncertainty, that Torah's essential light cannot be extinguished by interpretive difficulties, and that the work of sacred interpretation requires not the elimination of doubt but its integration into an expanded understanding of faith.

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