

## The Curlicues of Translating a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Text in Terms of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*By Morton J. Merowitz*

**Description:** This presentation will consist of reading portions of Merowitz's translation of Nahman Krochmal's *Moreh Nevuchei HaZeman*, (A Guide for the Perplexed of Our Time), a book which seeks to analyze both the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its history. Krochmal (1785-1840), a Galician businessman and autodidact, was a rather reclusive individual, who evidently saw himself as an 18<sup>th</sup> century Maimonides. His *Moreh Nevuchei HaZeman* is an attempt to explain the unique nature of Jewish history and how something Krochmal called 'the Absolute Spirit' (רוחני המוחלט) gave impetus to the Jewish people's survival throughout its history. The book, edited by Krochmal's literary executor, Leopold Zunz, was published posthumously in 1851. It has been published a number of times since then (one edition as recently as 2010) and consists of some seventeen chapters trying to ferret out the key of 'The Eternal People's' survival. The introductory part of this rather arcane work sets the tone for a journey through Jewish history and the Hebrew language as both evolved, and as the people and their unique history, transformed one another.

**Morton J. Merowitz** was born in Philadelphia, Pa. and attended schools there and in New York City. He graduated from Yeshiva University, the Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, and the State University of New York at Buffalo. He earned an M.L.S. from the State University of New York at Geneseo. He served as teacher and principal of Hebrew and day schools in Philadelphia, New Jersey, Connecticut and Buffalo, New York. He has some seventy articles, essays and book reviews in journals, including *Bitzaron*, *Judaism*, *Midstream*, *The Polish Review*, *Religious Education*, *YIVO Annual*, and *YIVO Bleter*. In addition, he has reviewed various books for the Jewish Book Council and *AJL Reviews*.

A word about the nature of historiography: historiography may be defined as the science of studying and writing about the past. S(he) who describes the past cannot possibly know what happened years, or even centuries ago without scrupulously that past. Otherwise, studying the past would simply be a sort of living in a type of dream world.

Over the years, I've been rather intrigued by the writings and career of a observant Galician businessman who taught neither in a yeshiva or in a seminary. We don't know what he looked like--this was, of course, long before photography was developed. (We do, however, have a photograph of his matzava/tombstone as well as a document containing his signature). A short biographical sketch of him was written by one of disciples, Naftali Herz Wessely (1725-1805) for the first edition of what Krochmal would have entitled ספר מורה אמונה מורה ספר (/ A book which teaches the pure faith and wisdom of Israel). The book was first published in 1851 by Krochmal's literary executor, Leopold Zunz (1794-1886), even though Zunz himself didn't write in Hebrew.

It should be noted that the book Krochmal wrote has, over the years, been published posthumously some five times! So someone must have been reading this rather rambling account of 17 chapters describing the ups and downs of the nature and dynamic of an perennial people-- Chapter 8 is entitled "An eternal Nation and its Eras." The term עולם עם was used to describe a pioneering effort to establish agricultural colonies in Argentina and is also the title of a book written by Peretz Smolenskin.

I'd like to suggest what motivated my tackling such an ambitious project--translation of the *Moreh Nevuchei Hazamam* into English. Years ago, I published some materials in Judaism, a

journal published the American Jewish Congress. At the time, Dr. Steven S. Schwarzschild was editor of Judaism and had earned his D.H.L from the Hebrew Union College in 1950, I believe, for his dissertation on Hermann Cohen and Nahman Krochmal. Also, I'd somehow been quite impressed by a statement made by one of my teachers at Yeshiva University's Teacher's Institute for Men. Dr. Irving Agus (1911-1986), who suggested that one of the best ways for understanding a text is to translate it! And so began a lengthy--and continuing-- translation endeavor!

If, by chance, someone were to ask me whom I'd like meet in some future world, I'd have to say that it would probably be Nahman Krochmal and perhaps Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). Both writers/thinkers turned their respective worlds upside down in their search for establishing the truth as they saw it and tried to make sense of the world in which they happened to be living. The term holocaust hadn't yet entered the lexicon of civilized behavior at a time of arms races, daring prison breaks and racial as well as ethnic/religious tensions facing today's very troubled world.

I'll now read my translation of the almost in-your-face opening words of Krochmal's rather rambling book.

Dear reader, Almighty G-d, blessed be His Name, refers to each and every generation by linking it to its interpreters and its sages. In His beneficence, He alters the needs and methods of Jewish reading and expounding the text. So that if there was, at one time, a well-established way by which a text might be interpreted, it's quite possible that such a method wouldn't match the way a subsequent generation which is marching to a different drummer might interpret this very same text! This, indeed, is what we're looking at here! If to the ancients, it made sense to superimpose biblical verses to an earlier era in order to teach the fundamentals of prophecy, this had already been established by the Sephardic masters from the time of Samuel HaNagid and later. Nowadays, the situation is rather topsy-turvey! We've got to inquire into and correctly establish the historical provenance of each text.

For example, in the midrashic texts of the sages which were addressed to their contemporaries, it was considered fit and proper to ascribe the entire book of Psalms to David and his contemporaries! Even the chapter *בבל נהרות על* (Psalms 137:1), they maintained, had been foreseen by David through divine inspiration to refer to the Babylonian exile, which he bemoaned. However, the Sephardic exegetes and especially nowadays, the young hotshots can't seem to be on this same level and degree of hope, naïveté and trust.

We, our teachers and guides had better strive heartedly to interpret this psalm, chanted by the levitical singer/poet as he was being forced into exile from his beloved homeland in order to occupy the desolate environs at the River *כבר*. So they trudge with their beloved lyres on their stooped shoulders. Upon arriving at their desolate destination, they hang them not upon the cedars and delightful trees (of Israel) but rather on the stumpy willows which flourish in Babylonia. The leaders of the exile want to hear sacred poems and one poet chants from the bottom of a heart filled with remorse for what has vanished. He vows never to forget his distant homeland and wishes and hopes to wreak revenge on their evil neighbors who still haven't deserted their homeland. In this manner, every single word is a divine flame illuminating everything they've seen. This ignites their boundless love for his land, his people and his G-d. And this all is a sacred undertaking which seems quite reasonable to the thinking of this most recent generation. It will bear within him every skill and acuity according to which the psalm in

question simply can't be understood by pre-dating it to the onset of the flourishing nation and land. They really didn't know a thing about Babylonia which wasn't based on hearsay. And this applies especially to the young chaps who were already steeped in those abridged historical accounts readily available to them. Not only would the good work which might be achieved through interpreting and reading this psalm, but they'll get even more confused through our interpretation of it.

Rabbi Huna said, in the name of R. Aha, that the Torah's teaching shouldn't seem to you like someone who has a mature daughter whom he wants to marry off to someone else. Rather, my son "if you take My teachings seriously, My commandments will await you (*Leviticus Rabbah* 25). The meaning of this statement that the advice-giver shouldn't be in a rush to extrapolate something which is already known. Nor should he now teach something which he's just learned, as is done by those who've learned things which shouldn't be learned. This is rather like the fellow who wants to betroth his daughter who has really matured to the first taker. This really is encapsulated by the Biblical verse "It's a tree of life to those to adhere to it" and to the verse "if you take to heart My word, My commandments will await you" (*Proverbs* 3:18). Moreover, the Torah compares the verse "you shall plant every fruit tree" to the study of Torah and it links this advice to the verse "for three years your produce shall not be harvested and on the fourth year, it shall be regarded as holy (*Leviticus* 19:23-24.) "

Nowadays, proper faith is altogether deficient. Both extremities should consider the way to go would be to consider the Torah-true approach what they've gotten used to since they were young. The difference between them is only this: Some are glad to find room to shed doubt on that faith; the others--and they're many--struggle and labor to strengthen and engage in fantasy and various pipe-dreams. This will never do in a knowledgeable generation. They toil in vain and for no purpose!

There are three suggested readings which might be useful in gaining a better understanding of Krochmal's work:

Jay M. Harris, Nachman Krochmal, Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age (New York University Press, 1991)

Shalom Spiegel's Hebrew Reborn (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), "A Galician Socrates," pp.93-118

Arthur A. Cohen, The Natural and Supernatural Jew.