

BOOK REVIEW

Kabbalist in the Heart of the Storm: R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto

by JONATHAN GARB

(Tel Aviv: The Haim Rubin Tel Aviv University Press, 2014)

Reviewed by
Zvi Leshem

While traveling from Italy to Amsterdam in early 1735 to escape the rabbinic persecution that had severely limited his ability to teach or write about Kabbalah, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Ramhal) became the subject of a second attack, which culminated not only in an intensification of the ban on his teaching and literary activities, but also in the destruction of some of his Kabbalistic manuscripts: The man, whose works are today studied in yeshivot of every stripe, was accused of being no less than a false prophet, a false messiah, and a crypto-Sabbatean. One of the great historical mysteries of modern rabbinic history is how a figure so persecuted less than 300 years ago has since transformed into one of the most influential figures in the Torah world. It has been claimed that he exercised profound influence on such diverse figures and movements as Hasidism, the Gaon of Vilna, the Mussar movement, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the *Haskala*, and the course of Modern Hebrew literature. This remarkable story is one of many topics covered in Jonathan Garb's new book, *Kabbalist in the Heart of the Storm: R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto*.

The last few years have seen an explosion of publications by and about the Ramhal and his circle. From my desk in the Gershom Scholem Reading Room, at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, I gaze upon several shelves of books by the Ramhal, including many new editions with commentaries, as well as the recently published corpus of his *talmid-haver* R. Moshe David Valle (Ramdu). Since Gershom Scholem arranged his library with the primary sources separated from the research materials, I need to get up and walk to another room to see the academic research on Ramhal. Its location is telling. Scholem collected all of the works by and about Ramhal, but didn't write anything significant about him (there are, however, notes in the margins of some of his books, and according to Joseph Dan, Ramhal was one of several Kabbalistic topics about which Scholem collected extensively but simply didn't find the time to write). He placed the books about Ramhal with tomes relating to later messianic movements, alongside dubious neighbors: Sabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank,

as well as R. Jonathan Eybeschütz. In fact, when one begins to peruse the research on him, the placement seems less perverse, as scholars such as Isaiah Tishby and Meir Benayahu dealt extensively with the mystical and messianic aspects of Ramhal's writings, as well as with the backlash that they engendered. And yet, as Garb points out in his introduction, for all of the intensive study and publication relating to Ramhal in the *Haredi* world, since the publication of Tishby's *Hikrei Kabbalah u-Shelukhotcha* vol. 3 in 1993 (published in English as *Messianic Mysticism* in 2008), no leading academic scholar has devoted an entire monograph to the subject. Enter Garb, Gershom Scholem Professor in the Department of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University, who took up the challenge.

Unlike the earlier researchers, who tended to focus only on Ramhal's mysticism and/or messianism, Garb's work is an all-encompassing analysis of Ramhal's life and literary corpus against the backdrop both of earlier Kabbalah and of the European culture of his time. The structure is chronological, focusing on several distinct periods in his all too brief and arguably tragic life, and the literary output of each. One additional thread runs throughout the book: *ha-pulmus*, the controversy, i.e. the two-waved rabbinic attack on Ramhal, its effect upon him and his reactions to it.

Before discussing this crucial point, a few words about Garb's methodology are in order. First, it is impressively clear that he has full mastery of and makes extensive use of all of Ramhal's published writings, including his letters, as well as archival and other manuscript materials. The same goes for the writings of Ramhal's teachers, such as R. Isaiah Basan and his colleagues and students, including the abovementioned Ramdu and R. Yekutiel Gordon, whose revealing letter to Vilna set off the first round of controversy in 1729. Garb also makes extensive use of writings about Ramhal, both by academics and those coming out of the *Haredi* world, where Garb, who has a yeshiva background, is well-connected. These connections serve him well in this book, giving him an edge over other scholars who would be less able to provide the reader with "inside information" on the Ramhal's acceptance and the various interpretations of his doctrines outside of the academy, as we shall discuss later. Garb also makes judicious use of non-Jewish historical information regarding the intellectual climate in Italy and Amsterdam in Ramhal's time. Needless to say, he is also adept at analyzing Ramhal's mystical doctrine in the context of earlier Kabbalistic literature, primarily Lurianic Kabbalah, which is of course crucial to defining the *hiddush* in Ramhal's own Kabbalistic views, a topic beyond the scope of this article.

TRADITION

Another important thread running through the book is a sorely needed coherent attempt to understand the various components of the Ramhal corpus in relation to one another. This topic, which earlier scholars have touched upon, looks for parallels between seemingly unconnected works, asking questions such as how much Kabbalah is found in Ramhal's *mussar* classic *Mesillat Yesharim*? Furthermore, is there significance to the methodic approach that runs through most of the genres of his work, from his treatise on Talmud study, *Derekh Tevunot*, through his classic description of the Divine workings of the world in *Derech Ha-Shem*? Also, what is the relationship between Ramhal's original presentation of Kabbalah in *Zohar Ramhal*, an avowedly revelatory work, his switch to the genre of Kabbalistic commentary (partly in response to the ban) in *Adir ba-Marom*, and the systematic presentation of Kabbalistic principles in *Da'at Tevunot*? And of course, how do Ramhal's theatrical works fit into all of the above? It is worth noting that, while engaging in said analysis, Garb also challenges the authenticity of some of the works attributed to Ramhal (notably *Kla"h Pithei Hokhma*), a topic which is beyond the scope of this review.

Returning to our opening question, which many a thinking *babur yeshiva* must have asked himself at some point: How could it be that the revered author of *Mesillat Yesharim* and *Derech Ha-Shem* was in his own lifetime suspected of the worst heresies and persecuted accordingly? And how is it that today he is accepted in all quarters of Orthodox Judaism? (And beyond. A little known fact is that in 1948, long after he founded Reconstructionism, Mordechai M. Kaplan translated *Mesillat Yesharim* into English. He did, however, include a caveat that "*Mesillat Yesharim*... should at least be read... for the purpose of acquiring a knowledge of the ethical ideals that actuated the inner life of the Jewish people in the past."¹) While a complete treatment of this topic is impossible in the context of this review, a few points do deserve mention. Garb does a great service by carefully tracing both rounds of the controversy, quoting extensively from correspondence between Ramhal and R. Basan, his teacher. Those letters are crucial, for they provide us with a window into Ramhal's inner world, his messianic self-consciousness, and his reactions to persecution on several levels, including the emotional, the spiritual, and the tactical. Here Garb makes effective use of Leo Strauss's classic *Persecution and the Art of Writing* to illustrate how Ramhal was able to continue to disseminate some of his esoteric teachings by imbedding

¹ Mordechai M. Kaplan, *Mesillat Yesharim: The Path of the Upright: A Critical Edition Provided with a Translation and Notes* (Philadelphia: JPS, 5708-1948), xi.

them in seemingly innocuous contexts. R. Basan's letters are also quite instructive, as they clearly reveal the deep concerns and frustration of a *rebbe* called upon again and again to defend a brilliant and beloved *talmid* who just can't seem to stay out of trouble.

The first round of controversy began when the rabbis in Vilna read in R. Gordon's letter that Ramhal, at the time the single, 23-year-old leader of a mystical *havura* composed primarily of Jewish medical students at the University of Padua, was receiving mystical revelations from a *maggid*, the prophet Elijah, the angelic Metatron, *Adam Kadmon*, and the Messiah himself! Additionally, like R. Shimon bar Yohai, Ramhal was engaged in composing a new *Zohar* based upon these revelations. Needless to say, the rabbis were not pleased. The fact that his fraternity was also engaged in intensive messianic activity focusing upon *tikkun ha-Shekhina*, and hinging upon Ramhal's identification with *Mashiah ben Yosef* and Ramdu with *Mashiah ben David*, hardly helped matters. Ramhal was also concerned with the possibility of rectifying "fallen" messianic figures from the past, including Sabbatai Zvi, in a sense foreshadowing the famous story in *Shivhei Ha-Besht* regarding the Baal Shem Tov's attempt in that direction. We should keep in mind that this occurred in 1729, less than sixty years after Sabbatai Zvi's apostasy, and in Italy, which had been a major Sabbatean stronghold. This was still a time when crypto-Sabbateans were being persecuted throughout Europe, including in Italy, and the young and unmarried Ramhal was an easy target. Little wonder, then, that just five years later, as he journeyed – finally married – to the relatively free atmosphere of Amsterdam, he was detained in Frankfort and subjected to a severe rabbinic interrogation and ban on his mystical activity, and that some of his manuscripts were destroyed. This time one of the leaders of the attack was none other than R. Yaacov Emden, who was of course later to target a much more senior Kabbalist, R. Yonatan Eybeschutz (to whom, regrettably, Garb refers as a "Sabbatean Kabbalist" without qualification), in a renewed bout of anti-Sabbatean polemic. Ramhal's ability to accept his persecutions while remaining convinced of his innocence, and see within them divine providence, speaks worlds about his faith and devotion.

The second half of the puzzle is that of Ramhal's complete rehabilitation and elevation to virtual superstar status in the pantheon of modern religious figures. I recall that some twenty years ago, when I was planning the curriculum for a certain institute of Torah study for women, a slot opened up for a *shiur mahashava* and somehow the choice came down to *Tanya* or *Derekh Ha-Shem*. The *rosh ha-midrasha* settled matters by stating that "*Tanya* is a work which represents only Hasidic Judaism,

TRADITION

whereas the Ramhal is for all of *Kelal Yisrael*.” Garb devotes his final chapter to this topic, and traces, one by one, how the Ramhal came to be accepted by the Hasidim, the Vilna Gaon and his circle, the *Musar* movement, and Rav Kook’s circle. Each story has its own dynamic, and they are of course intertwined. For example, as soon as the Gaon expressed his approval of *Mesillat Yeshtarim*, Ramhal become more acceptable for the Lithuanian yeshiva world in general and for the *Musar* movement in particular, with such pivotal figures as R. Yisrael Salanter basing much of his approach upon the work and R. Yehezkel Sarna of the *Hevron* yeshiva publishing a commentary on it. The fact that R. Shlomo Elyashiv (the *Leshem*) pushed for the publication of Ramhal’s Kabbalistic manuscripts, despite his personal reservations about some of Ramhal’s mystical doctrines, certainly gave them legitimacy in the eyes of his disciple R. Kook. R. Kook’s circle was further influenced by his own disciple R. David Cohen (*Ha-Rav ha-Nazir*), and Garb even records a tradition to the effect that R. Kook told R. Yitzchok Hutner that he (R. Kook) was himself a *gilgul* of the Ramhal, a statement certainly open to interpretation. This process has only accelerated in recent years, and Garb is sufficiently up-to-date to contrast the approaches to *Mesillat Yeshtarim* in the different *musar shmuzin* in a variety of *yeshivot* with that of Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz in his *sibot*. I would add that even among the few Hasidic holdouts, the process has come full circle. If the first Komarner rebbe, R. Yitzchak Isaac Yehuda Yechial Safrin, warned his readers in numerous places to completely avoid Ramhal’s writings, today’s Komarner rebbes and their mystically inclined Hasidim have no trouble fraternizing with Ramhalian Kabbalists, and the two groups seem to enjoy mutual admiration. That, of course, speaks to the highly eclectic atmosphere in Israeli Kabbalism today, but that is a different topic. When one adds to the above the open admiration of Ramhal by Bialik and others in the early circles of modern Hebrew culture, some of whom viewed him as “the father of modern Hebrew literature,” and the picture is fairly complete. Ramhal was sufficiently multifaceted and multi-generic that, once he was exonerated of the charges against him, the path was cleared for a wide variety of Torah approaches to find valuable antecedents within his wide and varied corpus. To quote the *Nazir* in his *Kol Ha-Nevuah* (in the chapter on “the Light of the Messiah”), “the spirit of Ramhal hovers over the latest period of Israel, in all of its movements, and so too over our generation and future generations.”

Professor Garb has done a tremendous service, not only to the world of academic Judaic studies, but to the traditional scholarship as well, by presenting us with both a comprehensive and penetrating treatment of

Book Review

the Ramhal's world and writings. While the idea of translating this work into English is indeed daunting, I hope that someone can be found to do so competently. In the meantime, I suggest that all who wish to deepen their understanding of this most intriguing figure begin to work their way through the original.

Rabbi Dr. Zvi Leshem directs the Gershom Scholem Collection for Kabbalah Research at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem.

