

BOOK REVIEW

Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb, *Giving: The Essential Teaching of the Kabbalah, with Commentary and Insights for Living the Kabbalah*, translated by Aryeh Siegel (Urim Publications, 2020), 279 pp.

Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb, *The Master of the Ladder: The Life and Teachings of Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag*, translated and edited by Yedidah Cohen (Nehorah Press, 2020), 356 pp.

Reviewed by
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Prof. Joseph Weiss, writing years ago about the Ba'al Shem Tov, pointed out that unlike the straight upward trajectory of the hagiographic stories of Torah scholars, those of early Hasidic masters, such as the Besht, are different, for they contain an element of surprise. The surprising component is that of seclusion and revelation: The young tzaddik hides his holiness from the world until the right moment comes for him to be revealed. This, claims Weiss, is only partially true regarding the Besht's great-grandson, Rebbe Nahman of Breslov, who as a youth desired to hide his righteous qualities from the world despite possessing the ultimate Hasidic *yihus*. However, once while at a *tisch*, R. Nahman was unable to restrain himself and began to "speak wondrous Torah," and the rest, as they say, is history.

The Hasidic Kabbalist R. Yehudah Leib Ashlag (Warsaw, 1885—Tel Aviv, 1954), who made Aliya to Jerusalem in 1921, would seem to fit Weiss' description of R. Nahman. As a young man raised in a Hasidic family in Warsaw, R. Ashlag came in contact with numerous Hasidic masters, most notably R. Yissachar Dov Rokeach of Belz, whom he met when he was eighteen. Steeped in talmudic and kabbalistic knowledge from his youth, R. Ashlag was ordained at age nineteen and served as a *dayan* on the Warsaw *Beit Din*. A dramatic turn in his life came in 1918 when he met a businessman who was also a profound but secret Kabbalist. R. Ashlag studied with him on and off for a few months until, after a night of study pertaining to the mystical interpretations of the *mikve*, the teacher passed away, having forbidden R. Ashlag to reveal his identity. Arriving in Israel a few years later, R. Ashlag gathered around him a few close disciples with whom he would study Kabbalah every night from 1:00 until 9:00 the following morning. R. Ashlag also moved around a lot. Beginning in Jerusalem's Old City, where he clashed with the veteran Sephardi Kabbalists of the Bet El Yeshiva, he later moved to the Givat Shaul neighborhood where he served as official Rabbi, only to then spend time again in

Warsaw, London, Tel Aviv, and Bnei Brak before moving back to Jerusalem. Eventually, R. Ashlag settled down in Tel Aviv for the last years of his life.

R. Ashlag also engaged in massive writing projects, with his most notable publications being *Talmud Eser Sefirot* on the Lurianic writings and, his magnum opus, *Ha-Sulam* ("The Ladder"), a Hebrew translation of and commentary to the Zohar, from which he received his "Master of the Ladder," or "*Ba'al ha-Sulam*," appellation. After his death, he was succeeded by his son R. Baruch Shalom as *Admor* of what essentially became a small Hasidic sect which continues to this day. Of course, the Ashlagian project must be seen against a much wider picture of the last century's move from esotericism to exotericism and the popularization of Kabbalah, in which both R. Ashlag and his friend R. Kook played major roles. To fully address these complex topics, which have received considerable academic attention in recent years, would take us well beyond the scope of this review. I would, however, recommend in this context Jonathan Garb's *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah* (Yale, 2009).

The Ashlagian story really begins after his death when his students, and especially their students, split into various factions, ranging from Haredi on the right, to the completely universalistic New Age "Kabbalah Center" on the left. This is important to note as we come to address two recent English volumes containing writings by and about R. Ashlag. Both are translations of works by R. Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb, a leading student of R. Baruch Shalom, Ba'al ha-Sulam's son and successor.

Before doing so it is important to point out that R. Ashlag viewed himself as a Lurianic purist in his Kabbalistic approach. This is seen clearly in a letter that he penned to a disciple in 1927: "There is nothing new here [in my teachings] at all because everything that I wrote is already written in the writings of the Ari—this, actually is the truth... I did not add anything at all to the writings of the Ari. My intention is simply to remove stumbling blocks from those who are limping and blind" (*Master*, 45). This is highly significant since the works before us present little or nothing of Lurianic Kabbalah. Instead, as we shall see, they focus almost entirely on what would seem to be novel in the Ashlagian system; the emphasis on the need of the individual to radically transform himself from egoism ("the desire to receive") to altruism ("the desire to give"). The reason for this is related to his above mentioned dispute with the Kabbalists of Yeshivat Bet El in Jerusalem. His protestation notwithstanding, R. Ashlag was an innovator. If not, he could have eased into the Bet El community when he reached Jerusalem. Since I have unfortunately studied neither at Bet El nor directly with an Ashlagian master, I rely on

R. Ashlag's own description of the confrontation with the masters he found in Jerusalem to make sense of the distinctions. Quoting from a previously unpublished manuscript, R. Ashlag passionately addresses his perception of the differences:

When I met with the people, I clearly saw their spiritual poverty, their ignorance and their foolish ways... Here there is no clear voice in the wisdom of the Kabbalah... They just see Kabbalah as a collection of words and names with no parable and its solution, only literal words (*Master*, 39–42).

Thus, the main difference, as R. Ashlag perceived it, was between the Jerusalem school's focus upon textual mastery of the Lurianic corpus versus his own attempt to uncover the inner meaning of the texts and how to apply them to one's spiritual life. He continues:

Then I met the more famous of them. These are men who spent years learning the Zohar and the writings of the Ari to the extent that they are able to recite the books of the Ari to a wondrous degree, and they are known as holy men. I asked them if they had learned with a teacher, one who had attained the inner meaning of these matters. But they replied "God forbid! There are no inner meanings! Only the words as they are written were handed down to us...." At this point I poured out my anger on them because I had no more patience to be in their company (*Master*, 40).

R. Ashlag viewed the Lurianic Kabbalists of Bet El as ones who had no interest in understanding the texts that they mastered and declaimed by heart. He, on the other hand, felt that he arrived at the inner practical application of these texts. One can of course question his evaluation of his opponents' approach. Bet El, at least from the time of R. Shalom Sharabi (Rashash, 1720-1777), also had a very rich ritualistic approach to prayer, focusing upon the Lurianic *Kavanot* that Rashash explained and elaborated. The Ba'al Shem Tov's brother-in-law, R. Gershon Kitover, arriving in Jerusalem in the 1740s, became part of Bet El, despite his Hasidic approach to Kabbalah and ecstatic spiritual life. Lastly, I would mention that Bet El also functioned as a mystical fraternity, in which the members were bound to mutual assistance by a written pact. This point has been addressed in numerous studies and I hope to demonstrate its influence on Hasidic fraternities in twentieth-century Poland in a forthcoming article. Nonetheless, this is apparently not what R. Ashlag perceived in his meeting with the Kabbalists of Bet El. He continued on his own, and revealed

his own approach, in which the inner meaning of Kabbalah is to train oneself in selfless altruism. One might also argue that there is no need for such a radical dichotomy in relating to the Lurianic corpus. That is, a literal reading could still lead to practical applications, and, in fact, it would seem that this was the case in Bet El, although apparently not in the direction that R. Ashlag believed in. And it is this point, rather than any theoretical aspects of his Kabbalah, which is so poignantly portrayed in the two volumes before us.

The Master of the Ladder, translated by Yedidah Cohen (who has published two previous books on R. Ashlag), is essentially a biography to which she has appended an introduction, an afterward, notes and glossary, as well as a bibliography of R. Ashlag's works, a timeline of his life, and a short biography of the author, R. Gottlieb. The work is also sprinkled with poems by and pictures of R. Ashlag and his circle. The book, which weaves together both biography and teachings (sometimes of considerable length) is well-edited and readable. It includes numerous letters, as well as quotes from R. Ashlag's children and students, giving the book a special, intimate quality. It is important to emphasize that this is a hagiographical work, which is both its strength and its potential weakness. For the reader who enjoys "Tales of the Tzadikim" in a modern vein, the book is a goldmine of R. Ashlag's piety, his relationship with other *gedolim*, including Rav Kook, and his unique take on the practical message of Kabbalah, which is to transform us from egoism to altruism. If we are successful, we achieve "affinity of form" with God and achieve a state of *devekut*. For all of the above, this serves as a fine introduction to the man, his works, and his approach to Kabbalah. What, in my mind, may not resonate with some readers is the polemical nature of the work. For R. Ashlag's disciples, he is not only a master Kabbalist and spiritual teacher, but, in fact, the only one for our generation. His teachings are not only an important path within Jewish mysticism, but the only legitimate one. This of course should not be surprising when we read in the introduction:

Rabbi Ashlag writes that he merited the soul of the Holy Ari... he tells of a prophetic revelation he received in which God revealed Himself to him, saying, "I have chosen you to be the tzaddik and sage for this generation in order that the crises of humanity may be healed with a lasting salvation (xvii).

This self-awareness and even messianic consciousness of R. Ashlag is apparent throughout the work and is taken for granted as Divine truth by

the author and translator. For some readers this makes for very inspiring reading. However, for others, and not only skeptics, this is problematic in that it seems to leave no room for any other approach to Kabbalah. Thus, as mentioned above, R. Ashlag clashed with the Sephardi Kabbalists at Yeshivat Bet El, bitterly attacking their Kabbalistic tradition for being too theoretical. I would venture to add that even Hasidim of other stripes might bristle with the feeling that their own paths are being delegitimized. In fact, there were Hasidic masters who completely rejected R. Ashlag's teachings. For example, regarding R. Shlomo Twersky of Denver we find, "he was very strict not to study the *Sulam* on the Zohar, as was R. Yoel of Satmar." On one occasion R. Twersky even grabbed a copy of the *Sulam* from the hands of his son-in-law and threw it on the floor!*

The reasons for the objections are not revealed. We could conjecture that for the Satmar Rebbe it could have been related to R. Ashlag's Zionist leanings, but that would seem less relevant for R. Twersky. Perhaps it was due to the anonymity of his Kabbalistic tradition, but this too is speculative. It is also worth noting that R. Ashlag's philosophical positions may have had political overtones as well, and rumor has it that the British authorities, citing his Communist sympathies, once closed down his printing press. Perhaps not surprising, his brother-in-law and close disciple R. Yehuda Zvi Brandwein served as the Rabbi for the *Histadrut* national labor union.

To my mind, purporting to have all the answers ready for any question is also a problem with contemporary religious "orthodoxies" (Chabad, certain disciples of Rav Kook, etc.). Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that seemingly the majority of Ashlag devotees world-wide are *ba'alei teshuva* of one sort or another. It would seem to be easier to come to this Torah as a *tabula rasa* than with a pre-existing set of Kabbalistic understandings or practices.

Giving: The Essential Teaching of the Kabbalah, Aryeh Siegel's translation of some of R. Ashlag's early essays with R. Gottlieb's commentary, as well as some of R. Gottlieb's own essays, is a very different kind of book. In fact, the two works under review here, both translated clearly and lucidly, are complementary. In Siegel's introduction he succinctly lays out his program:

Fruitful study of Kabbalah is not dependent on one's knowledge, intelligence, or talent. It requires only a desire to work on one's character, sincerity of intention, and faith... This is not the typical book on Kabbalah

* R. Shlomo Twersky, *Malkhut Shelomo* (Lakewood, 2006), 200.

[what is?]. It does not provide details of the systems of Kabbalah or its practical uses. Nor does it give us a guide to meditative techniques, or outline the history of Kabbalah. Instead Rabbi Ashlag inspires us.... [T]he Torah has one single purpose... to enable us to acquire the desire to give to others without any intention of receiving a reward. To embrace and adopt this character is to attain the state of cleaving to God (17).

Hence Siegel's title, *Giving*, is in fact a fine summary of the goal of this work, which also includes the Hebrew texts of R. Ashlag's essays, a significant contribution. These essays, penned originally by R. Ashlag as a series of Hebrew pamphlets in 1933, were collected and issued in 1974 under the title of *Matan Torah* ("The Giving of the Law"). They are translated here together with the running commentary of R. Gottlieb. Siegel also added helpful "Questions for Review" at the end of each essay. Following R. Ashlag's essays are a series of brief "Insights for Living the Kabbalah." Thus, in one volume we have a brief introduction to both the founder of the Ashlagian School, and one of the contemporary leading protagonists from the Orthodox branch of its third generation. Additionally, Siegel provides the original Hebrew of R. Ashlag's (but not R. Gottlieb's) essays at the end of his work, and this is certainly an important addition. I would suggest that the Hebrew reader consider reading them first before embarking on the translation, which integrates both R. Ashlag and R. Gottlieb together in one flowing text.

I do however feel the need to ask the following question: Does this volume, in fact, instruct the reader in Kabbalah? A quick perusal of the very brief glossary (as opposed to the lengthy and detailed one in *Master of the Ladder*) reveals a mostly generic list of basic Jewish terms with only "returning light" and "*sefirot*" being specifically Kabbalistic. Comparing this work to, for example, R. Aryeh Kaplan's *Inner Space*, we discover a radically different presentation. Kaplan's work involves detailed presentations of the *Sefirot*, *Partzufim*, Worlds, and Divine Names, which are the major building blocks of the Lurianic system. This is all essentially absent from *Giving*. Furthermore, both volumes would have benefitted from more exposition regarding exactly *how* the study of Kabbalah helps one move from egoism to altruism. In a sense we seem to have been given the practical application of the Ashlagian system without quite enough of the theoretical background. In other words, what precisely is it about Kabbalah, or this particular approach to Kabbalah, that facilitates this noble move? Perhaps the inclusion of some of R. Ashlag's more theoretical Kabbalistic writings could have helped to round out the picture. In fact, Cohen does address this in *A Tapestry for the Soul*, (Nehora Press 2010)

which is based largely upon R. Ashlag's *Introduction to the Zohar*. That work seems to me to fill in the missing gap of the newer volumes, and I would suggest reading it as well. Of course, in all fairness, the translator anticipated this in his introduction quoted above. Nonetheless, I cannot agree with the words of a previous reviewer, "If I were to recommend one book to commence the study of Kabbalah, it would be... *Giving*". I would qualify the recommendation by saying that if one wishes to commence the study of Ashlagian Kabbalah, I would readily recommend these two books together as a perfect combination. And this in itself is a very significant accomplishment.

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