

Fascinating INSIGHTS

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COMING SOON Bez"H

Fascinating Insights—The Sefer (in English)

Ramchal

In honor of the Ramchal's¹ Yartzheit—26th of Iyar—let us talk about this great man. When R' Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746), also known as the Ramchal, was fifteen years old, he already knew the entire Talmud by heart, the teachings of the Arizal and the Zohar.

When he was twenty, he claimed to have received direct instruction from an angel (known as a Maggid). While stories of such encounters with celestial entities were not unknown in Kabbalistic circles, it was unheard of for someone of such a young age. His peers were enthralled by his written accounts of these “Divine lessons,” but the leading Italian rabbinical authorities were highly suspicious and threatened to excommunicate him. Just one hundred years earlier another young mystic, Shabbtai Tzvi (1626–1676), had rocked the Jewish world by claiming to be Moshiach. Although, at one point, Shabbtai Tzvi convinced many European and Middle Eastern rabbis of his claim, the episode ended with him recanting and converting to Islam. The global Jewish community was still reeling from that, and the similarities between the Ramchal's writings and Shabbtai Tzvi's were perceived as being particularly dangerous and heretical. The Ramchal decided not to write the Maggid's lessons or teach mysticism.

In 1735, the Ramchal left Italy for Amsterdam, believing that in the more liberal environment there, he would be able to pursue his mystical interests. Passing through Germany, he appealed to the local rabbinical authorities to protect him from the threats of the Italian rabbis. They refused and forced him to sign a document stating that all the teachings of the Maggid were false. Most of his writings were burned, though some did survive.

He authored about ninety Sefarim on a range of different topics. From the Zoharic writings, the 70 *Tikkunim Chadashim* re-appeared in 1958 against all

odds, in the main library of Oxford. “Arrangements” of thoughts, these Tikkunim expose 70 different essential uses of the last pasuk of Chumash. Supposedly taught word-by-word in Aramaic by the Ramchal's Maggid, they parallel the Tikunei Zohar, which expose the 70 fundamental understandings of the first Pasuk in Chumash.

It was only as recently as the 1970s that some of Ramchal's books were discovered and printed. One interesting work is his *Mishkney Elyon*, which was written when he was 22 years old. He mentioned this Sefer in a letter he wrote in 1729 to his Rebbi, R' Yeshaya Basan, during his dark days of oppression while everyone was closing down on him. The Sefer hadn't been printed, nor seen, for 227 years until in 1956 when its manuscript was accidentally discovered in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It was then printed for the first time ever in 1980, under the title *Ginzei Ramchal*. In 1993 a new broader edition of *Mishkney Elyon* was requested by the Lubavitcher Rebbe and published by the Ramchal Institute in Yerushalayim.

When the Ramchal finally reached Amsterdam, he was able to pursue his studies of Kabbalah relatively unhindered. Earning a living as a diamond cutter, he continued writing but refused to teach. It was in this period that he wrote the *Mesillas Yesarim* (1740). The Gra (1720-1797), who was a contemporary of the Ramchal, was reputed to have said after reading *Mesillas Yesarim*, that if the Ramchal was still alive, he would walk from Vilna to learn at the feet of the Ramchal.

Frustrated by his inability to teach Kabbalah, the Ramchal left Amsterdam for Eretz Yisrael in 1743, settling in Akko. Three years later, he and his family died in a plague.

A century after his death, the Ramchal was rediscovered by the Mussar movement. R' Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883) placed *Mesillas Yesarim* at the heart of the Mussar curriculum of the major Yeshivas of Eastern Europe.

The great Kabbalist, R' Binyamin Hakohen, known as the Rabach (1650-1730), once asked the Ramchal (in a letter) where his *Shoresh Haneshama* is from. R' Yekusiel Gordon² said of the Ramchal, “At his command, Eliyahu Hanavi appears and reveals his secrets. Also, the Neshamos of many—including Avraham's, Moshe's, Rav Hamnuna's and Moshiach's—revealed themselves to him... He was commanded by the *Malach* to compose 70 Tikkunim on a Pasuk... He knows the Gilgulim, where the *Shoresh Neshama* is of everyone and the Tikkunim of every Neshama, and nothing is hidden from him. No one knows this about the Ramchal except our group that learns with him.

² He was a Kabbalist and physician, and one of the main students of the Ramchal. R' Gordon was one of the main conduits of the Ramchal's teachings from Padua to Eastern Europe. He came to Italy to study medicine where he met the Ramchal. He considered leaving his medical studies in order to dedicate himself to the study of Kabbalah. However, the Ramchal urged him not to as he insisted that his Maggid wished for R' Gordon to be successful in both areas.

¹ ר' משה חיים לוצאטו is an acronym for רמח"ל.

Moshe and the *Malach Matat* have shown that many Pesukim that have been applied to R' Shimon Bar Yochai can also be applied to the Ramchal. The Ramchal and R' Shimon Bar Yochai are comparable in every respect and it has become apparent to all. No one has merited this distinction since the time of R' Shimon Bar Yochai."

Bullfighting and Butterflies

There are events and certain actions where we may feel there is no prohibition involved but yet it doesn't seem right. R' Ovadia Yosef³ was asked if it permitted from a Halachic standpoint to go to a stadium to watch bullfighting? He answers that there is no doubt that this is completely against the spirit of the Torah because this is the culture of sinners and cruel people, which is not in the portion of those who are from Yaakov. As the Gemara⁴ says there are three identifying marks of a Jew—merciful, bashful and they do acts of kindness... With bullfighting, they starve and pain the bull before he enters and after they incite him... and we are taught it is forbidden for a person to eat before he gives food to his animal.⁵ Also, the Gemara⁶ relates that Rabbi once told his maidservant who was sweeping up baby weasels that were on the floor to leave them be and quoted the Pasuk *ורחמיו על כל מעשיו*, His mercy is upon all His creations.⁷ They then said in heaven since he shows mercy, let us show mercy to him... One who enters a stadium to watch bullfighting and pays the entrance fee is a friend to a destructive person and is *מסייע ידי עוברי עבירה*⁸, assisting those who commit transgressions... To go where people enjoy themselves on the cruelty of pain of animals implants that trait in the people who enjoy it and they destroy their soul. It is a Mitzva to publicize not to go to such places.

The Noda B'Yehuda⁹ deals with the question if hunting is permitted. He says that there is no problem of *Baal Tashchis* and *Tzaar Baalei Chaim*.¹⁰ However, in Torah, the only hunters we find are Nimrod and Esav,¹¹ and it is not the ways of the Avos. Why would a Jew unnecessarily kill an animal and waste his time? Going into a forest is dangerous since there are many animals there and thus if one goes there, he transgresses *הנה אנכי הולך* and *ונשמרתם מאד לנפשותיכם*¹². The expert hunter Esav said *למות... למות*¹³, meaning he was afraid of being with those animals. However, the Noda B'Yehuda does say that an *עני* who hunts for his sustenance is permitted to do so.

The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch¹⁴ writes that the Torah forbids us to inflict suffering on any living creature. Furthermore, one is obligated to remove the suffering of any creature even if it is ownerless or belongs to a *גוי*. However, if they are troublesome to people or if they are needed for

³ Yechaveh Daas 3:66.

⁴ Yevamos 79a.

⁵ Brachos 40a.

⁶ Baba Metzia 85a.

⁷ Tehillim 145:9.

⁸ See Gittin 61a and Avoda Zara 55a.

⁹ Mahadura Tinyana, Yoreh Deah, 10.

¹⁰ R' Yisrael Pesach Feinhandler in Shu"t Avnei Yashfei (He was originally from Cleveland and learned in Telz. A renowned Posek, he was a Rav in Romema in Yerushalayim. He published eleven Sefarim.) was asked concerning a butterfly that got caught in a spider web if it was a Mitzva to take the butterfly out because of *Tzaar Baalei Chaim*? He answered for various reasons that there is no Mitzva to save the butterfly. Among the reasons is that the nature of animals is that there are predators and prey. So just as if a lion attacks a deer, *Tzaar Baalei Chaim* doesn't mandate a person to save the deer, so too one doesn't need to save the butterfly, since it is the nature of the world.

¹¹ Breishis 9:10 and 25:27.

¹² Devarim 4:15. See Rambam, Hilchos Rotzeach U'Shmiras Hanefesh, 12:6.

¹³ Breishis 25:32.

¹⁴ 191:1.

medical purposes or any other purpose, it is permitted even to kill them... Therefore it is permitted to pluck feathers from living geese to use as a quill if you have no other feather with which to write. However, people abstain from doing so because of cruelty.

When horses pull a wagon and come to a rough road or a steep hill and can't draw it further without help, it is a Mitzva to help, even if they belong to a *גוי*, because of the suffering of the animals, for fear that the *גוי* will hit them harshly to force them to pull more than they are able.¹⁵

Three Sons, Three Periods

1) Analyzing the command to take a census of the three sons of Levi—*קהת* and *גרשון*, *מררי*—we notice there are discrepancies. Hashem tells Moshe to take a census of Gershon as well—*גם הם*—The Chassam Sofer¹⁶ is bothered why these words were necessary?

2) With *גרשון* and *קהת*, the term *נשא את ראש* is used, in contrast to *מררי*.¹⁷ Why is *מררי* different?

The three sons of Levi hint to three periods of our nation. The *קהת* alludes to when we are in unity on our homeland, as in *ולו יקהת עמים*, an assemblage of nations.¹⁸ The offspring of Kehas are *חברון*, *יצהר*, *עמרם*, and *עזיאל*.¹⁹ At this time period, we were at our peak (hinted to in *עמרם* as it is a contraction of *עם* and *רם*) and lit up the world (*יצהר* related to *צהר*, light). *עזיאל*—*חברון*, we were connected to Hashem (from the term *חבור*, to attach) and strong (*עז* sourced in *עז*, strength) in our Kedusha. For such a period the phrase *נשיאות ראש* is proper as this infers we were exalted.

גרשון hints to the time when we are exiled from our land as *גרשון* means to divorce. Still, it says *נשיאות ראש* since we also—*גם הם*—were exalted because we subdued ourselves before the sages and learned from them. This is considered like offering *Korbonos* as Chazal say.²⁰ This is the meaning in *בני לבן* (לבן is rooted in *לבני* and atoned for since we listened (*שמעני*) to the sages.

Finally, *מררי* hints to the bitter times as in *וימררו את* *חיייהם*,²² as in the generations of *שמד*, religious persecution and forced conversion. In this period, we are treaded upon and despised. This is a deeper meaning in that the *בני מררי* are *מהלי* (that we tolerate all types of illness and afflictions related to *מהלה*, sickness) and we were removed from our dwellings (*מוש* is rooted in *מש*, to move). Still, we are *Moser Nefesh* ourselves for Hashem. It therefore doesn't say *נשא את ראש* there since they are greater than their ancestors as Chazal²³ say *הרוגי מלכות אין אדם יכול לעמוד במחיצתן*, those executed by the government enjoy such an exalted level in the next world that no other person can stand in their enclosure.

Rabbi Alt merited to learn under the tutelage of R' Mordechai Friedlander Tzt"l for close to five years. He received Semicha from R' Zalman Nechemia Goldberg. Rabbi Alt has written on numerous topics for various websites and publications. He lives with his wife and family in a suburb of Yerushalayim where he studies, writes and teaches. The author is passionate about teaching Jews of all levels of observance.

¹⁵ Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 191:2.

¹⁶ Toras Moshe, s.v. *נשא*.

¹⁷ Bamidbar 4:29.

¹⁸ Breishis 49:10.

¹⁹ Bamidbar 3:19.

²⁰ On the Pasuk *... מקטר*, in every place where offerings are presented to My Name... (Malachi 1:11), we are taught it refers to the Talmidei Chochamim who are engaged in Torah, it is as if they offered all the *Korbonos* (see Menachos 110a).

²¹ See Devarim 3:25.

²² Shemos 1:14.

²³ Pesachim 50a.