

Mesilat Yesharim (Path of the Just) by Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1738) Translated by Rabbi Yosef Sebag

Quotes

The writer says: I have composed this work not to teach people what they do not know but to remind them of what they already know and which is very familiar to them... But according to their familiarity and to the extent that their truth is evident to all, so too is their neglect very prevalent and forgetfulness of them very great. Therefore, the benefit to be gleaned from this book is not from a single reading, for it is possible that the reader will learn little that he did not already know. Rather the benefit derived [from this book] comes from review and diligent study. For [then] he will be reminded of these things which, by nature, people tend to forget and he will put to heart his duties which he hides from.¹

What will we answer on the day of rebuke if we have been lax in this study, and forsaken that which is so incumbent on us as to be the main thing which the L-rd our G-d requires of us? Is it conceivable for us to exert our minds and labor in logical inquiries which we are not obligated in, in sharp discourses bearing no fruit, and laws which are not relevant to us - and that which is so great a debt to our Creator, we abandon it to habit and surrender it to rote practice?!²

If we truly examined the matter, we would discover the truth of this thereby benefiting ourselves and teaching it to others to benefit them also. This is what Shlomo said: "If you will seek it as silver and search for it as buried treasure, then you will understand the fear of G-d" (Mishlei 2:4-5). He didn't say "then you will understand philosophy; then you will understand astronomy; then you will understand medicine; then you will understand legal decisions; then you will understand laws" - but rather "then you will understand fear of G-d"! Behold from here, that to understand the fear of G-d one must seek it like silver and search for it like buried treasure. Is it sufficient then what we have been taught by our forefathers and what is familiar to every observant person in a general sense?³

The foundation of piety and the root of perfect service [of G-d] is for a man to clarify and come to realize as truth what is his obligation in his world and to what he needs to direct his gaze and his aspiration in all that he toils all the days of his life.⁴

¹1-2, Introduction

²18-19 Introduction

³24-25, Introduction

⁴Chapter 1:1

Indeed, you can see that no rational person can possibly believe that the purpose of man's creation is for his existence in this world. For what is man's life in this world? Who is truly happy and content in this world? "The days of our life are 70 years, and if by strength, 80 years, yet their span is but toil and trouble" (Ps. 90:10). How many sorts of distress and sicknesses, pain and burdens, and after all that death! Not one in a thousand can be found to whom this world has granted plenty of pleasures and true contentment. And even such a person, if he reaches the age of a hundred years, already [is as one who already] passed and disappeared from the world. Furthermore, if the purpose of man's creation were for the sake of this world, it would not have been necessary to imbue him with such a lofty and exalted soul, greater even than the angels themselves.⁵

To summarize what we have learned, the primary [purpose] of man's existence in this world is solely to fulfill the commandments, serve [G-d] and stand up to trials. The pleasures of this world should only be used for aiding and assisting him, so that he will have tranquility and peace of mind in order to free his heart for this service incumbent upon him.⁶

The idea of watchfulness is for one to be cautious of his deeds and matters, namely, contemplating and watching over his deeds and ways whether they are good or evil; not abandoning his soul to the danger of destruction, G-d forbid, and not walking through the course of habit like a blind man in darkness... One who walks along in his world without contemplating whether his ways are good or evil is similar to a blind man walking on the bank of a river. His danger is certainly very great and his calamity is more likely than his escape.⁷

Thus the simpletons walk confidently, fall and are lost without having felt any prior fear. This is what scripture refers to: "the way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble" (Prov. 4:19), and "the clever one foresees the evil and hides himself, but the foolish commits transgression and is punished" (Prov. 22:3), and "[a wise one fears and departs from evil], but the fool transgresses and feels confident" (Prov 14:16). For they feel as secure as an edifice, and they fall before having any knowledge whatsoever of the stumbling block. The second error, and this is even worse than the first, is that [the darkness] distorts their sight until they literally see evil as if it were good and good as if it were evil. Thus they strengthen in clenching to their evil ways. For not only do they lack the [proper] vision to see the truth, to perceive the evil right in front of their eyes, but they also see fit to conjure up great proofs and convincing evidences to support their evil logic and false ideas. This is the great evil which

⁵ Chapter 1:18-20

⁶ Chapter 1:26

⁷ Chapter 2:1,3

envelopes them and clings to them, carrying them to the abyss of destruction. This is what scripture states: "the heart of this people has become fattened, and its ears heavy, their eyes covered shut; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn back, and be healed" (Isaiah 6:10).⁸

The summary of all the matter is that a man must contemplate with his intellect always, at all times, and also during the fixed appointed time of solitude, what is the true path according to the Torah that man must walk upon. And afterwards, to come to reflect on his own deeds to ascertain if they are traveling in this path or not. For through this certainly it will be easy for him to purify himself of all evil, and to correct all of his ways as scripture says: "Weigh the path of your feet, and all your ways will be established" (Prov. 4:26) and "Let us search and examine our ways, and we will return to G-d" (Eicha 3:40).⁹

Generally, that which brings a person to watchfulness is the study of Torah as Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair stated in the Beraitha: "Torah brings to Watchfulness." But that which, in particular, brings one to watchfulness is contemplation on the severity of the service which a man is obligated in and the depth of judgment incurred for it. This realization comes from studying the events reported in the holy books, and from studying the statements of our Sages of blessed memory which rouse one on this.¹⁰

There are three factors which cause loss of and distancing from "watchfulness". The first is involvement and preoccupation in worldly affairs. The second is laughter and levity. The third is bad company... Considering this, our sages, peace be unto them, said: "minimize your worldly occupations and toil in the Torah" (Avot 4:10). Occupying oneself to obtain a livelihood is indeed necessary but it is not necessary to occupy oneself to such an extent that he has no room left for service [of G-d]. For this we were commanded to fix times for Torah study... This is what our sages said "an ignorant man cannot be pious" (Avot 2:5).¹¹

This is the intent of Shlomo's warning: "do not mingle with those who make changes" (Prov.24:21). If a man claims to you: "a person's mind should always be associated with his fellow men" (Ketuvot 17a), reply to him, "this refers to human beings who act like human beings. Not human beings who act like animals." Shlomo warns further: "Go from before a foolish man" (Prov. 14:7).

⁸ Chapter 3:20-22

⁹ Chapter 3:31

¹⁰ Chapter 4:1-2

¹¹ Chapter 5:1-2, 4-6

For the Creator, blessed be He, who created the evil inclination also created the Torah as its antidote as our sages of blessed memory have stated: "I have created the evil inclination, and I have created the Torah as its antidote" (Kidushin 30b). Behold, it is obvious that if the Creator created for this affliction only this remedy, then it is impossible under any circumstances for a man to heal himself from this affliction without employing this treatment. One who thinks to save himself without Torah study is only mistaken, and will see his error only in the end, when he dies in sin. For in truth, the evil inclination is exceedingly powerful on a man. Without a man's knowledge, it advances and strengthens over him and comes to rule over him. Even if he employs all possible strategies in the world, but does not take the medication created for it, namely, the Torah as I wrote, he will not know nor feel the intensification of his illness until he dies in sin and his soul will be lost. To what can this be likened? To the case of a sick person who consulted the doctors. They recognized his illness, and prescribed for him the healing medication. But he, without any prior knowledge of medicine, disregards their medication and instead takes whatever medicine that occurs to him. Will not this sick person certainly die?¹²

But if he toils in the Torah, when he sees its ways, commandments, and warnings, behold, on its own, eventually a renewal will awaken within him which will bring him to the good path. This is what our sages of blessed memory stated: "would that it were that they abandoned Me but kept My Torah, for the light within it would bring them back to the good" (Eicha Raba 2).¹³

If he happens to find himself in the company of those who mock him, he should not give heart to this mockery. On the contrary, let him mock them and shame them. Let him consider in his heart - if he had an opportunity to profit a great amount of money, would he leave what he needed to do for this due to other people's mocking him? How much more so, to not want to lose his soul for the sake of sparing himself some mockery. In this manner the sages of blessed memory warned us: "be brazen as a leopard... to do the will of your Father in Heaven" (Avot 5:20). And David said: "I will speak of Your testimonies before kings, and will not be ashamed" (Ps. 119:46).¹⁴

Know that this is a fundamental principle, well tested by experience, in the art of Separation: every leniency must be carefully investigated. For even though, it is possible that it is justified and correct, nevertheless it is more likely to be the advice of the evil inclination and its deceit.

¹² 5:7

¹³ 5:12

¹⁴ 5:28

Therefore, one must investigate it with much analysis and examination. If after all this it still stands meritorious, then certainly it is good.¹⁵

Know that there is fear and there is fear. There is justified fear and there is foolish fear. There is trust [in G-d] and there is recklessness. The L-rd, blessed be He, has made man with sound intellect and clear reasoning in order that he may guide himself in the right way and guard from harmful things which were created to punish the wicked. But someone who does not want to guide himself in an intelligent manner and exposes himself to dangers - this is not trust in G-d but rather foolishness. Such a person sins in that he is acting against the will of G-d who desires that a man guard himself. Hence, besides the inherent danger which he is exposing himself to due to failing to guard himself properly, he also actively brings punishment down upon himself for the sin which he commits. Thus the sin itself is what brings upon him the punishment... For in a place where harm is likely and foreseeable it is proper to guard oneself. But in a place where there is no known danger one should not fear.¹⁶

This is precisely like the verse brought earlier "the lazy man says there is a lion in the way.." (Mishlei 26:13). Our sages, of blessed memory, illustrated, in successive degrees, to what extent unfounded fear can go to cause a person to refrain from good deeds. They said (Midrash Devarim Raba 8:6): Shlomo said seven things regarding the lazy man. To illustrate: They said to the lazy man: "Your teacher is in the city, go and learn Torah from him". He replies: "I am afraid of the lion on the road" [Mishlei 26:13]. "Your teacher is in the neighborhood". He replies: "I am afraid he may be between the paths" [ibid]. "He is in your building". He replies: "if I go to him, I may find the door locked...", see there. We learn from here that it is not the fear that causes him to be lazy, but rather the opposite, the laziness causes the fear.¹⁷

This is what David himself said later in his words: "Reward me, O G-d, according to my righteousness, according to the purity of my hands repay me" (ibid 18:21) and "the L-rd has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the purity of my hands before His eyes" (ibid 18:25). This refers to this purity and cleanliness which we have mentioned. He then further said: "For by You I run upon a troop... I have pursued my enemies and overtaken them" (Tehilim 18:30). And he himself further stated: "Who will ascend upon the mountain of G-d, who will stand in His Holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart." (Tehilim 24:3).

¹⁵ 6:23

¹⁶ 9:11-14, 18

¹⁷ 9:20-28

Certainly this trait is difficult to attain for man's nature is weak. His heart is easily seduced and he permits for himself things that allow for self-deception.¹⁸

CLEANLINESS FROM THEFT: We can observe that even though most people are not blatant thieves, literally taking with their hands the possession of their fellow and putting it in their own possessions, nevertheless, most people experience a taste of theft in their business dealings by rationalizing permission to profit through their fellow's loss. They may tell themselves: "Business is different". Many negative commandments refer to theft such as "you shall not steal" (Shemot 20:13, "you shall not rob" Vayikra (19:13), "you shall not oppress" (ibid); "nor deny nor lie one to another" (Vayikra 19:11), "you shall not oppress one another" (Vayikra 25:14), "You shall not push back your neighbor's boundary" (Devarim 19:14). All these are divisions of the laws of theft which apply to many common business transactions and each one includes many prohibitions under it.¹⁹

Rabbi Yehuda forbade a shopkeeper to distribute roasted grain and nuts to children in order to accustom them to frequent his shop. The other Sages only permitted it because his competitors could do likewise (Bava Metzia 60a).²⁰

Aba Chilkiya did not even return the greetings of Torah scholars in order to not be idle from the work he was doing for another (Taanit 23b)... What will they answer then, those who occupied themselves in their own pleasures and idled from work during the time they were hired out? Or if they occupied themselves with their own affairs, each person to his own gain?²¹

The summary of the matter: one who is hired out to his fellow for any kind of work, behold, all of his hours are sold to his employer for the workday as the Sages stated: "to hire oneself out is to sell oneself for the day" (Bava Metzia 56b). Whatever time he takes for his own pleasure, whatever it may be, is completely guilty of stealing. And if his employer does not forgive him, he is not forgiven. For the Sages already stated: "sins between man and his fellow are not atoned for on Yom Kippur until he has pacified his fellow"(Yoma 85b). Not only that but even if one does a Mitzva (good deed) during the time of his work, it will not be considered a merit but rather a sin in his hand. For a sin cannot be considered a Mitzva. And scripture states: "[I am G-d who loves justice and] hates theft in an offering" (Isaiah 61:8). In relation to this, our Sages of blessed memory said: "one who steals a measure of wheat, mills it, bakes and recites a

¹⁸ 10:11-12

¹⁹ 11:3-4

²⁰ 11:6

²¹ 11:9-10

blessing over it, is not blessing but rather blaspheming as written 'and the robber who blesses blasphemes G-d' (Tehilim 10:3)".²²

But if he does not meticulously examine his deeds very carefully, thorns will sprout instead of wheat. For he will transgress and stumble in the sin of Onaah (fraud) which we were warned against: "And you shall not oppress one another" (Vayikra 25:17) and our sages of blessed memory said: "even to deceive a non-Jew is forbidden" (Chulin 94a). And scripture states: "the remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity nor speak lies, neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth" (Tzefania 3:13). Similarly the sages said: "one may not embellish old merchandise so that it appears new" (Bava Metzia 60b).²³

The Sages also stated: "if one steals from his fellow even the worth of a peruta (small coin), it is as if he takes his life from him" (Bava Kama 119a). This teaching reveals to us, the graveness of this sin even for a small amount. They further said: "the rains are withheld only because of the sin of theft" (Taanit 7b). And "for a basketful of sins, which sin prosecutes at the head of all of them? - theft" (Vayikra Raba 33:3). And "the generation of the flood had their fate sealed only because of the sin of theft" (Sanhedrin 108a).²⁴

How much more so for the sin of taking interest, which is considered as great as denying the G-d of Israel, G-d forbid. Our sages of blessed memory commented on the verse: "he has loaned on interest; and has taken increase; shall he then live? He shall not live! [He has done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be on him]" (Yechezkel 18:13) - "he shall not live" refers to living in the time of the resurrection of the dead for he and his dust are abominable and detestable in the eyes of G-d' (Shemot Raba 31:6). I do not see a need to elaborate on this for its dread is already imprinted on every man of Israel.²⁵

And our Sages said: "Says the Holy One, blessed be He, 'do not say since it is forbidden for me to have intercourse with a woman, I will embrace her and be free of sin, I will caress her and be free of sin, I will kiss her and be free of sin'. Says the Holy One, blessed be He, - 'just like when a Nazir makes a vow not to drink wine, he is also forbidden to eat grapes or raisins, diluted grape juice, or anything derived from the grape vine, so too, for a woman who is not your wife, you are forbidden to touch her in any way. Anyone who touches a woman other than his wife brings death to himself...' " (Shemot Raba 16:2).²⁶

²² 11:11-12

²³ 11:19

²⁴ 11:22

²⁵ 11:26

²⁶ 11:32

And "whoever utters obscene language, Gehinom is made deep for him [as it is said, A deep pit is for the mouth that speaks perversity] (Mishlei 22:14).²⁷

And regarding listening to obscenities it is likewise taught: "even one who listens and remains silent, as written '[The mouth of strange women is like a deep pit;] the one abhorred by G-d will fall therein'" (Shabbat 33a).²⁸

There are some people whose profession is lying. Namely, those people who go around and make up complete lies in order to increase social conversation or to be considered among the intelligent and knowledgeable. On this type it is written "lying lips are an abomination to G-d" (Mishlei 12:22). And also "your lips speak lies, your tongue mutters perverseness" (Isaiah 59:3). Our sages, of blessed memory, have already pronounced their judgment: "four classes of people do not receive the divine presence" (Sanhedrin 103a, Sota 42a), and one of these is the class of liars... This is as what our sages, of blessed memory, said: "it is the penalty of a liar, that even when he tells the truth, he is not listened to" (Sanhedrin 89b). For this evil has ingrained itself in their nature such that their words are unable to leave their mouths free of falsehood. It is about this that the prophet grieved and said: "they have taught their tongue to speak lies, they weary themselves to commit iniquity" (Yirmiya 9:4).²⁹

But the wisest of men (Shlomo) has taught us that all of this is contrary to the will of the Creator, blessed be He, and the attributes of His pious ones as written: "the righteous man hates a false word" (Mishlei 13:5). This is also what the Torah commands us: "keep far from a false matter" (Shemot 23:7). Notice that the verse did not say "guard against falsehood" but rather "keep far from a false matter", to rouse us on the great extent one must distance and flee far away from falsehood, as scripture says: "The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity nor speak lies, and a deceitful tongue shall not be found in their mouths" (Tzefania 3:13).³⁰

Our sages, of blessed memory, taught: "What constitutes profanation of the Name? Rav said: If, for example, I were to take meat from the butcher and not pay him at once... Rabbi Yochanan said: In my case [it is a profanation if] I walk four cubits without Torah and Tefillin." (Yoma 86a). The explanation of the matter is that every person according to his level and according to what he is considered in the eyes of his generation, must be mindful to not do

²⁷ 11:43

²⁸ 11:46

²⁹ 11:90-91

³⁰ 11:93

something which is not befitting of someone like him. The greater his importance and wisdom, the greater he needs to increase watchfulness and meticulousness in the divine service. If he fails to do so, behold, the Name of Heaven will be profaned through him, G-d forbid. For it is an honor to the Torah, that one who increases study in it, should also increase uprightness and refinement of character traits. Any lacking in this among those who increase study in the Torah brings disgrace to the study itself. This is, G-d forbid, a profanation of G-d's Name, blessed be He, who gave us His holy Torah and commanded us to toil in it order to achieve our perfection through it.³¹

Our sages of blessed memory said (Chullin 89a):"who hangs the earth on nothing (belima)' (Iyov 26:7) - [the earth endures on the merit of] one who restrains (bolem) his mouth during a dispute". Namely, his nature has roused him to anger and through strengthening himself over it, he restrains his tongue.³²

The general principle: the desire for honor is one of the biggest stumbling blocks before a man and it is impossible to be a faithful servant to his Master all the time that he is concerned for his own honor. For then he will need to detract from the honor of heaven due to this foolishness. This is what King David, peace be unto him, said: "I shall be even less than this still and be low in my own sight" (Shmuel II 6:22).³³

Marital relations are completely permitted but the sages decreed immersion in a Mikveh for those who had seminal emissions in order that Torah scholars not be frequently with their wives like roosters. For even though the conjugal act itself is permitted nevertheless he imprints this lust within his nature, and from there he can be drawn to the forbidden as our sages said: "there is a small organ in man. If one satiates it, it becomes hungry. But if he starves it, it becomes satiated" (Sanhedrin 107a).³⁴

If you ask: if this is so necessary and essential, why did the sages not decree this like they decreed on the various fences and enactments? The answer is clear and simple for "our sages do not impose an enactment upon the people unless the majority of the public will be able to abide by it" (Bava Kama 79b). The majority of the public are not capable of being Pious so it is sufficient for them that they be Tzadikim (righteous).³⁵

³¹ 11:103-104

³² 11:141

³³ 11:167

³⁴ 13:25

³⁵ 13:34

Body: that one strives to help all men however he can, and lighten the burden that is upon them. As we learned: "bearing the yoke with one's fellow" (Avot 6:6). If his fellow is about to be struck by some bodily harm and he can prevent it or remove it, he should exert himself to do so. Possessions: to assist him with whatever means he can and to prevent damages from befalling him however he can. It goes without saying that the pious person will distance all possibilities of damages to individuals or the public that may arise from his own part.³⁶

Included in this matter is to not cause pain to any creature, even animals, and to show mercy and concern towards them. Likewise scripture states: "the righteous man knows the soul of his beast" (Mishlei 12:10) (Rashi-what his beast needs), and according to some of our sages (Shabbat 128b), to cause pain to an animal is a biblical prohibition, while to others it is at least a Rabbinical prohibition.³⁷

Nevertheless, he who diminishes this honor to G-d when he was able to increase it is considered a sinner. This is what the prophet Malachi rebuked the Jews with the word of G-d saying: "If you offer a blind [animal] for a sacrifice, is it not evil? Were you to offer it to your governor, will he accept it from you or will he show you favor?" (Malachi 1:8).³⁸

JOY: The second [branch of love of G-d] is joy, it is a great, essential principal in serving G-d. This is what David exhorted us saying: "Serve G-d with joy, come before Him with song" (Tehilim 100:2), and "the righteous will rejoice, they will exult before God and delight with joy" (Tehilim 68:4). And our sages said: "the Divine presence rests on a person only through his rejoicing in a mitzva" (Shabbat 30b). On the aforementioned verse: "Serve G-d with joy", our sages said in a Midrash (Shocher Tov, Tehilim 100): "Rabbi Abahu says: 'when you stand to pray, your heart should rejoice, for you are praying to the Almighty of whom there is none like Him'".³⁹

JEALOUSY: The third branch of love [of G-d] is jealousy, namely, that a person be jealous for the sake of His holy Name, hate those who hate Him, and strive to subdue them as much as he can, in order that G-d's service be done and His honor increased. This is what king David, peace be unto him, said: "O G-d, do I not hate those who hate You? Do I not contend with those who rise up against You? I hate them with an utter hatred; I count them my enemies"

³⁶ 19:5-6

³⁷ 19:33

³⁸ 19:50

³⁹ 19:99

(Tehilim 139:21-22). And Eliyahu said: "I have been very jealous for G-d, the L-rd of hosts..." (I Kings 19:10). We already learned what he merited by virtue of his jealousy for G-d, as the Torah states: "because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the children of Israel" (Bamidbar 25:13).⁴⁰

This is what Shlomo said: "those who forsake the Torah praise the wicked, but those who keep the Torah contend with them" (Mishlei 28:4). For those who praise the wicked on his wickedness and do not rebuke his deeds to his face, behold, they are the "forsakers of Torah" who abandon it to be desecrated, G-d forbid. But the guardians of the Torah who strengthen themselves to strengthen it, will certainly contend with the wicked and be unable to restrain themselves and be silent. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Iyov: "Scatter forth the wrath of your anger; see every arrogant man and submit him; tread down the wicked in their place; press them in the earth together, push their faces in the ground" (Iyov 40:11-13). For this is the intense love that he who truly loves His Creator can demonstrate, and it is written: "those who love G-d hate evil" (Tehilim 97:10).⁴¹

The second temple was likewise destroyed due to such incorrectly weighed Chasidut. In the story of Bar Kamtza (Gitin 56a): "the Rabbis thought to offer the blemished animal [of the emperor in order not to offend him]. Said Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas to them: 'people will say that blemished animals may be offered on the altar'. They then proposed to kill Bar Kamtza so that he should not go and inform against them, but Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas said to them: 'people will say one who makes a blemish on a consecrated animal is to be put to death'". In the meantime, that wicked man went and informed against Israel to the Roman emperor, who came and destroyed Jerusalem. This is what Rabbi Yochanan meant when he said on this: "through the humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land" (Gitin 56a).⁴²

For instance, the Torah commanded us: "you shall surely rebuke your fellow" (Vayikra 19:17). Very often a person attempts to rebuke sinners at a place or time when his words will not be heeded and he causes them to breach even further in their wickedness, to desecrate the Name of G-d, and to add transgression to their sin. In such cases, the only Chasidut is to keep silent. Thus, our sages, of blessed memory, said: "just like it is a mitzva to say what will be heeded, so too it is a mitzva to not say what will not be heeded" (Yevamot 65b).⁴³

⁴⁰ 19:105-106

⁴¹ 19:109

⁴² 20:11-12

⁴³ 20:14

Due to what he lacks: this is evident, for it is impossible for a man, whatever level of perfection he may have reached, to not have many deficiencies, whether due to his nature, or due to his family and relatives, due to certain events that happened to him, or due to his own deeds. For "there is no righteous man on earth who does good and sins not" (Kohelet 7:20). All these are blemishes on a person which allow him no room whatsoever to become haughty. Even if he has attained many virtues, nevertheless these deficiencies are enough to obscure them.⁴⁴

In one's speaking: our sages, of blessed memory, said: "one should always speak with other people in a gentle manner" (Yomah 86a). This is stated explicitly in scripture: "the words of the wise are heeded [when spoken] gently" (Kohelet 9:17). One's words should be of honoring [others] not of belittling them. Likewise scripture says: "he who belittles his fellow lacks sense" (Mishlei 11:12), and "when the wicked comes, there also comes contempt" (Mishlei 18:3).⁴⁵

Above all, one should always contemplate to recognize the weakness of human intellect and its great many errors and falsehoods, how it is always nearer to error than true knowledge. Therefore, he should always fear this danger, and seek to learn from every person, always listening to advice, lest he stumble. This is what our sages, of blessed memory, said: "Who is wise? He who learns from all men" (Avot 4:1), and scripture says "he who hearkens to counsel is wise" (Mishlei 12:15).⁴⁶

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Mesillat Yesharim or Mesillas Yeshorim (Hebrew: מסילת ישׂרים, lit. "Path of the Upright") is an ethical (musar) text composed by the influential Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746). It

⁴⁴ 22:6

⁴⁵ 22:29

⁴⁶ 23:12

is different from Luzzato's other writings, which are more philosophical. *Mesillat Yesharim* was written and published in Amsterdam. The earliest known manuscript version, written in 1738, was arranged as a dialogue between a hakham (wise man) and a hasid (pious person). Before publication, it was rearranged to have only one speaker. The dialogue version often sheds light on the more well-known version. *Mesillat Yesharim* is probably Luzzato's most influential work, widely learned in virtually every yeshiva since formal study of musar texts was introduced to the yeshiva curriculum by the Mussar Movement of Rabbi Yisroel Salanter.

Aim of the work

The aim of this work extends beyond the achievement of the perfection of human character in Divine service. Its stated aim is to remind the reader of one's deepest obligations in this regard, as well as to encourage the centrality of the deep study of this subject matter in one's daily life. Unlike many other musar books, which are ordered according to the authors' own lists of character traits, Luzzato builds his work on a Beraita in the name of the sage Pinchas ben Yair, whose list goes in order of accomplishment: "Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair said: Torah leads to watchfulness; watchfulness leads to alacrity; alacrity leads to cleanliness; cleanliness leads to abstention; abstention leads to purity; purity leads to piety; piety leads to humility; humility leads to fear of sin; fear of sin leads to holiness; holiness leads to prophecy; prophecy leads to the resurrection of the dead". Within each step, Luzzatto explains the step itself, its elements, how it can be acquired, and what might detract from its acquisition. For example: Watchfulness can be acquired by setting aside time for introspection, and acquiring watchfulness can be impaired by excessive mundane responsibilities, wrong company or a cynical stance in life. The same pattern is used for every single one of the traits mentioned. Luzzatto's expressed goal is to condition the reader to accept a disciplined approach to "restrain animal instincts" and encourage "the divine spark in every human into a bright, warming flame", according to Trude Weiss-Rosmarin.

Influence

Mesillat Yesharim is perhaps the most important Jewish ethical text of the early modern period. The Vilna Gaon is reported to have commented that he could not find a superfluous word in the first eleven chapters of the work, and stated that he would have traveled to meet the author and learn from his ways if he had still been alive. These and similar pronouncements largely cleared Luzzato from misgivings by others as to his suspected Sabbatean leanings. *Mesillat Yesharim* became Luzzatto's most famous ethical tract and one of the most popular Jewish ethical treatises. It was published in ten different editions between 1740 and 1835. Along with *Shirei Tiferet* ("Poems of Glory") by Naphtali Hirz Wessely, *Mesillat Yesharim* became part of the canon of musar literature of the course of the 1780s to the

middle of the 19th century. American rabbi Mordecai Kaplan published the first English translation of Mesillat Yesharim through the Jewish Publication Society of America in 1936.

Moshe Chaim Luzzatto by Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshe_Chaim_Luzzatto

Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Hebrew: משה חיים לוצאטו, also Moses Chaim, Moses Hayyim, also Luzzato) (1707 – 16 May 1746 (26 Iyar 5506)), also known by the Hebrew acronym RaMCHaL (or RaMHaL, רמח"ל), was a prominent Italian Jewish rabbi, kabbalist, and philosopher.

Early life

Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was born in 1707 in the Jewish ghetto of Padua, Republic of Venice. The son of Jacob Vita and Diamente Luzzatto, he received classical Jewish and Italian education, showing a predilection for literature at a very early age. He may have attended the University of Padua and certainly associated with a group of students there, known to dabble in mysticism and alchemy. With his vast knowledge in religious lore, the arts, and science, he quickly became the dominant figure in that group. His writings demonstrate mastery of the Tanakh, the Talmud, the rabbinical commentaries and codes of Jewish law and Kabbalah.

Poetry and literature

At an early age, he began a thorough study of the Hebrew language and of poetic composition. He wrote [epithalamia](#) and [elegies](#), a noteworthy example of the latter being the dirge on the death of his teacher Cantarini, a lofty poem of twenty-four verses written in classical Hebrew. Before age 20, he had begun his composition of 150 hymns modeled on the biblical Psalter. In these psalms, composed in conformity with the laws of parallelism, he freed himself from all foreign influences, imitating the style of the Bible so faithfully that his poems seem entirely a renaissance of biblical words and thoughts. They provoked the criticism of the rabbis, however, and were one of the causes of the persecutions to which Luzzatto was later subjected. R. Jacob Poppers of Frankfort-on-the-Main thought it unpardonable presumption to attempt to equal the "anointed of the God of Jacob". Only two psalms are known of which it can with certainty be said that they belonged to Luzzatto's psalter; in addition seven hymns by him which were sung at the inauguration of the enlarged Spanish synagogue at Padua appeared in the work "Hānukkat ha-Maron" (Venice, 1729); but it is not certain whether they were taken from the psalter.

As a youth Luzzatto essayed also dramatic poetry, writing at the age of 17 his first biblical drama, "Shimshon u-Felistim", (of which only fragments have been preserved, in another work of his). This youthful production foreshadows the coming master; it is perfect in versification,

simple in language, original and thoughtful in substance. This first large work was followed by the "Leshon Limmudim," a discussion of Hebrew style with a new theory of Hebrew versification, in which the author showed his thorough knowledge of classical rhetoric. It is in a certain sense a scientific demonstration of the neoclassic Italian style, in contrast with the medieval. There is a vast difference between Luzzatto's style, which recalls the simplicity, smoothness, and vigor of the Bible, and the insipid, exaggerated, and affected work of his contemporaries. The book, dedicated to his teacher Bassani, was printed at Mantua 1727, with a text which deviates from the manuscript formerly in the possession of M. S. Ghironi.

In the same year or somewhat later, Luzzatto wrote his allegorical festival drama "Migdal 'Oz" (or "Tummat Yesharim"), on the occasion of the marriage of his friend Israel Benjamin Bassani. This four-act play, which shows Latin and Italian as well as biblical influence, illustrates the victory of justice over iniquity. It is masterly in versification and melodious in language, the lyrical passages being especially lofty; and it has a wealth of pleasing imagery reminiscent of Guarini's "Pastor Fido." The drama was edited by M. Letteris, and published with notes by S. D. Luzzatto and prolegomena by Franz Delitzsch, Leipsic, 1837.

Controversy

The turning point in Luzzatto's life came at the age of twenty, when 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 decades earlier another young mystic, Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676), had rocked the Jewish world by claiming to be the Messiah. Although, at one point, Zevi had 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 Luzzatto's writings and Zevi's were perceived as being particularly dangerous and heretical. In some of his revelations Luzzatto even described Moses, Abraham and Elijah introducing themselves to him and calling him "my mentor", this infuriated many rabbis, especially Moshe Hagiz, who considered his writings heretical and ordered the burning of all his writings.[3] Other rumors were spread that Luzzatto has authored a new book of Psalms that was meant to supplant the Davidic Psalms in the messianic age, a claim which Luzzatto and his mentor Yeshayahu Basan have vigorously denied.

These writings, only some of which have survived, are often misunderstood to describe a belief that Luzzatto and his followers were key figures in a messianic drama that was about to

take place. In this contentious interpretation, he identified one of his followers as the Messiah, son of [David](#), and assumed for himself the role of Moses, claiming that he was that biblical figure's reincarnation.

Departure from Italy

After threats of excommunication and many arguments, Luzzatto finally came to an understanding with the leading Italian rabbis, including his decision not to write the maggid's lessons or teach mysticism and hand over all his writings to his mentor Yeshayahu Basan. In 1735, Luzzatto 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. But the controversy wasn't entirely over yet. Rumors were spread that Luzzatto's mentor Yeshayahu Basan sympathized with his pupil and even sent him back some of his writings to publish. This caused a major uproar and many heated letters passed between Moshe Hagiz and Yaakov Poppers and Basan threatening to undermine the latter's authority if he did not hand over the box with Luzzatto's writings to the rabbis of Venice. In one letter, Moshe Hagiz, Luzzatto's staunchest opponent, calls Luzzatto a wretched renegade who betrayed his religion, and lost his portion in the world to come, calling and urging for the burning of all his writings. Basan was forced to hand over Luzzatto's writings to Poppers which he subsequently buried deep in the ground and burnt some of the writings he deemed heretical.

Amsterdam When Luzzatto finally reached Amsterdam, he was able to pursue his Kabbalah studies relatively unhindered. Earning a living as a diamond cutter, he continued writing but refused to teach. It was in this period that he wrote his magnum opus the *Mesillat Yesharim* (1740), essentially an ethical treatise but with certain mystical underpinnings. The book presents a step-by-step process by which every person can overcome the inclination to sin and might eventually experience a divine inspiration similar to prophecy. Another prominent work, *Derekh Hashem* (The Way of God) is a concise work on the core theology of Judaism. The same concepts are discussed in brief in a smaller book called *Maamar Halkarim* (the English translation of this book is now available on the Web with the title "Essay on Fundamentals"). *Da'at Tevunot* ("The Knowing Heart") also found its existence in Amsterdam as the missing link between rationality and Kabbalah, a dialogue between the intellect and the soul. On the other hand, *Derech Tevunot* ("The Way of Understanding") introduces the logic which structures Talmudic debates as a means to understanding the world. One major rabbinic contemporary who praised Luzzatto's writing was Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797), who was considered to be the most authoritative Torah sage of the

modern era as well as a great kabbalist himself. He was reputed to have said after reading the Mesillat Yesharim, that were Luzzatto still alive, he would have walked from Vilna to learn at Luzzatto's feet. He stated that having read the work, the first ten chapters contained not a superfluous word. Luzzatto also wrote poetry and drama. Although most of it is seemingly secular, some scholars claim to have identified mystical undertones in this body of work as well. His writing is strongly influenced by the Jewish poets of Spain and by contemporary Italian authors. The cantor of the Sephardic synagogue in Amsterdam, [Abraham Caceres](#), worked with Luzzatto to set several of his poems to music.

Acre, Israel

Frustrated by his inability to teach Kabbalah, Luzzatto left Amsterdam for the Holy Land in 1743, settling in Acre. Three years later, he and his family died in a plague.

Burial site

Though it is accepted by scholars that his tomb is in Kafr Yasif, where some assume to have identified it, his burial place is traditionally said to be near the Talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva in Tiberias, northern Israel. It is noteworthy that there are many scholars who make some comparison between the Ramchal and Rabbi Akiva. Some believe that the Ramchal is actually a Gilgul (reincarnation) of Rabbi Akiva. Probably also because Kafr Yasif is now an Arab town while Tiberias is Jewish, the Tiberias tomb is the destination of almost all of the pilgrims seeking his final resting place.

Synagogue in Acre

Luzzatto's original synagogue in Akko was razed by the city's Bedouin ruler, Zahir al-Umar, in 1758, who built a mosque on top of it. In its place, the Jews of Akko received a small building north of the mosque which still functions as a synagogue and bears Luzzatto's name.

Religious writings

A century after his death, Luzzatto was rediscovered by the Musar movement, which adopted his ethical works. It was the great Torah ethicist, Israel Salanter (1810–1883), who placed the Messilat Yesharim at the heart of the Musar (ethics) curriculum of the major yeshivas of Eastern Europe. Derech Hashem, Luzzatto's treatise on Jewish theology, eventually came to be considered as an authoritative guide of Jewish theology. The work is a compilation of authoritative opinions found in Talmudic sources. Most of his writings were burned, though some did survive. From the Zoharic writings, the 70 Tikkunim Hadashim 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 verse of the Humash (the five books of Moses).

Supposedly taught word-by-word in Aramaic by Luzzatto's "Maggid," they parallel the Tikunei haZohar ("Rectifications of the Zohar"), ascribed by some to Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai, the Rashbi, which expose the 70 fundamental understandings of the first verse of the Humash (Books of Moses).

Secular literary legacy

The Hebrew writers of the Haskalah, the Jewish expression of the Enlightenment, greatly admired Luzzatto's secular writings and deemed him the founder of modern Hebrew literature. His cousin, the poet Ephraim Luzzatto (1729–1792), also exerted genuine influence on the first stirrings of modern Hebrew poetry.