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Jonathan Garb

Mussar, Curriculum and Exegesis in the Circle of Ramḥal

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MUSSAR, CURRICULUM AND EXEGESIS IN THE CIRCLE OF RAMḤAL

By Jonathan Garb*

Abstract

The paper is part of a larger project on the circle of the eighteenth-century kabbalist R. Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto (Ramḥal, 1707—1746?). It describes Ramḥal's canonic contribution to Mussar literature as well as his writing on Talmudics. Further, it addresses the relationship of the circle and the university, as well as the place of the Law in the history of the circle and in the writing of R. Moshe David Valle (Ramdav, 1697—1777), its other main leader. It concludes with a reflection on the study of Kabbalah in the 21st century university and the possible contribution of Mussar to the present crisis in the Humanities.

* Associate Professor, Department of Jewish Thought, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, e-mail: jgarb@mscc.huji.ac.il

Table of Contents

A. Background to the General Project3

B. Contribution of the General Project6

C. The 2011-2012 Tikvah Project 8

D. Ramhal and the University9

E. Ramhal and the Law..... 17

F. Towards a Study of the Exegetical Corpus of R. Moshe David Valle.....20

G. Concluding Thoughts on Kabbalah Study in the 21st Century University26

A. Background to the General Project

My Tikvah project concerns the circle of Ramḥal (R. Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto, 1707–1746?), the leader of a mystical-messianic circle in Padua that was placed under severe and escalating strictures by the Jewish authorities, in Venice and later throughout Jewish communities in Europe, all due to open propagation of Kabbalah to the young and several associated factors. As a result, Ramḥal moved from Italy, first to Amsterdam, where he refrained from Kabbalistic writing while producing several classics in other fields, and then to Palestine/*Eretz Yisra'el*, where he died of plague with his family, the precise date and circumstances being unclear. This is part of a wider project, contained in two books: One monograph, now in review at an Israeli press, is an intellectual biography of Ramḥal. The other takes up the massive Biblical exegesis of his close associate, Ramdav (R. Moshe David Valle, 1697-1777), the only kabbalist and one of the few authors to have written on practically every verse of the Hebrew Bible. Ramdav, a mystical leader and messianic aspirant in his own right, remained in Padua, not being subjected to overt strictures, and apparently all of his very numerous texts have reached us.¹

As I have only begun the second project, that involves studying dozens of volumes, perhaps half in difficult Judeo-Italian manuscripts and some in Italian, the greater part of my paper shall be devoted to the first book. It is often overlooked that when modern Jewish studies began to emigrate from their German center, they reached the shores of America before those of Israel. Specifically, work on Ramḥal was commenced by figures such as Simon Ginzburg, who began exploring the rich collection of the manuscripts of the circle in the collections of the Jewish Theological Seminary that I had the pleasure to visit this year (one finding will be discussed in section E).

However, Ginzburg's book, the only academic biography of Ramḥal (*The Life and Works of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto*) dates from 1931 and regards his Kabbalah as 'worthless stuff'.² There is no book-length study in Hebrew, nor indeed any

¹ This project is assisted by the generous support of the Jules and Gwen Knapp Charitable Foundation.

² See e.g. Simon Ginzburg, *The Life and Works of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, Founder of Modern Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1931), 77.

comprehensive overview of his extensive corpus in any language. The French language study by Joelle Hansel, does not discuss several key texts, most glaringly Ramḥal's most famous work, the Mussar treatise *Mesilat Yesharim* (from the Amsterdam period).

Indeed, even after academic Kabbalah studies commenced in Israel in the early 1920's, the study of Ramḥal's texts was not part of the agenda of its 'founding father', Gershom Scholem. It was only in the 1960's that Scholem's first student, Isaiah Tishby, as well as Meir Benayahu, began a comprehensive study of the circle. Tishby and Benayahu's work, which developed mostly in the 1970's and 1980's, both assisted and was assisted by the massive project of publication of the writings of the circle — instigated in the 1970's by the 'Lithuanian' Mussar teacher R. Ḥayyim Friedlander, and later (and currently) by R. Joseph Spinner, formerly of New York and now of Jerusalem (The degree of assistance that the Haredi scholars gave to the academics is hinted at in the latter's articles).³ While the Tishby-Benayahu project was not continued in academia, even without any attempt to decide their sharp disputes, the Haredi scholars involved in the project of publication and the necessary manuscript work subtly hinted at doubts as to the ready attribution of numerous rediscovered Kabbalistic writings (previously censored due to the persecution of the circle), to Ramḥal, rather than other members of the prolific circle. I have greatly expanded on these hints in a lengthy article on the Kabbalistic writings of Ramḥal, recently cited approvingly in R. Spinner's latest edition of his rich commentary on Ramḥal's *Da'at Tevunot*).

These findings call for a re-evaluation of the entire — far from extensive (relative to the scope and complexity of the texts and, e.g., to writing on the near-contemporaneous early Hasidic texts) — body of research on the Kabbalistic writings of Ramḥal.⁴ This being said, over the last two decades, Elliot Wolfson has made a profound contribution

³ The history of Ramḥal scholarship has not been encompassed in any publication preceding my bibliographical article and the subsequent monograph. Generally speaking, the history of Kabbalah scholarship is largely unwritten, despite the vast advance represented in Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem and Los Angeles: Magnes and Cherub Press, 2010). See also http://huji.academia.edu/JonathanGarb/Talks/36776/In_honor_of_Abrams_Kabbalistic_Manuscripts_and_Textual_Theory, and below, section G.

⁴ Jonathan Garb, "The Authentic Kabbalistic Writings of Ramḥal," *Kabbalah* 25 (2011): 165–222 [Hebrew].

towards the study of various theoretical issues rising from Ramḥal's writings, such as gender, messianism, and most recently dream theory.⁵ Nonetheless, numerous fascinating texts, by Ramḥal, Ramday, and others, have barely been studied, and again, many are still in manuscript.

All this, despite of the fact that the influence of Ramḥal on virtually all modern Jewish movements — Haskala, Hasidism, Mussar, Zionism etc. — is widely recognized, as is the vast scope of his multi-genre creativity (to be alluded to here several times). Figures that have not yet had such an impact and that are far less multi-faceted have recently been treated to very extensive works (in one recent case close to one thousand pages long). The need for a biography in Hebrew is thus obvious. Hebrew is indeed the language of choice for such a biography, as Ramḥal is justly seen as one of the originators of Modern Hebrew. The elegance and well-crafted structure of his writing are rarely matched in rabbinic writing in any period. In this sense, Ramḥal has exemplified the principles that he himself set out in his two books on rhetoric, *Lashon Limudim* (from his Italian period) and *Sefer ha-Melitza* (from his period in Amsterdam). As he himself wrote in the latter work: 'Every language, according to its grammar and laws, has turns of phrase and special manners of speech that are unique to it and in which conversing in that tongue is more pleasant and savory than the manner of speech customary amongst the vulgate. And these laws cannot be transposed from one language to another'.⁶ Though I have some experience with translating difficult texts, I did not find even this brief example easy, as his language is indeed deeply embedded in the style and flow of Hebrew.

This having been said, Ramḥal has enjoyed the attention of several disciplines: Studies of Hebrew literature have provided a relatively thorough analysis of his plays, poetry, and to some extent also of his works on rhetorical method. There has been quite a bit of historical work, especially on the well-documented controversy he aroused (especially Elisheva Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moses Hagiz and the*

⁵ See, most recently, Elliot Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), as well as idem., "Tiqqun Ha-Shekhinah: Redemption and the Overcoming of Gender Dimorphism in the Messianic Kabbalah of Moses Hayyim Luzatto," *History of Religions* 36 (1997): 289–332.

⁶ Moshe Hayyim Luzatto, *Sefer Ha-Melitza* (Jerusalem, 2005), 316.

Sabbatian Controversies and most recently the doctoral work of her student David Sclar). However, again, what is most missing is a panoramic view, that has to include the circle that was of great importance both for Ramḥal's inner life as well as for his external tragic biography, as I shall now elaborate. Such a view, encompassing a large number of works in print and in manuscript, can only be obtained in circumstances of relative leisure (see below, section G.)

B. Contribution of the General Project

The decision to write an intellectual biography should be seen against the background of an increasing interest within contemporary Jewish culture in the 'great of the spirit' (Israel) or 'Jewish Lives' (U.S). However, I wish to position Ramḥal not only within the gallery or pantheon of illustrious Jewish writers but also within the broader context of religion in European modernity. In order to do so the pivotal role of Ramḥal's circle and especially that of Ramdav must be better appreciated. Throughout the book, I use the 'control case' of Ramḥal's prolific Italian contemporary R. Emmanuel Hai Ricci, in order to demonstrate the marked difference between a kabbalist operating inside a circle and without it. Here, I am indebted to Randal Collins' extensive work, as well as that of others, within the field of sociology of knowledge (a natural ally of intellectual history) on the role of intellectual networks and lineages in the construction of knowledge and the facilitation of creativity, with the eighteenth century being a landmark in this history.⁷

The discovery that numerous writings attributed to Ramḥal were composed by members of his circle greatly facilitates this process, and hopefully will eventually lead to a more multi-focal view, in which the unique contributions of the various members of the circle, as well as the role of the interaction (ritualized, inter alia, in the *taqanot*, or founding charter of the circle) will be more explicitly recognized. Building on an earlier article, I hope to show that comparing Eastern European legends, containing a surprising degree of verifiable historical information and the correctly identified

⁷ See Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000) as well as the comments on networks in this period of Jewish history in David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

writings of the circle show that Ramḥal envisioned a ‘division of labor’ in which the various students contribute in unique forms of practice as well as writing to the messianic project.⁸ The term ‘labor’ is used advisedly, as, building on other earlier studies, I show that the early industrial revolution should be seen as one of the intellectual contexts for understanding Ramḥal’s circle, for the first time, within its time and place. The importance of the concept of labor is evident in numerous texts by Ramḥal and Ramdav, the latter responding almost explicitly to contemporary Italian economic theory.⁹

Finally, one should reexamine the role of the circle in the campaign against Ramḥal. There was especial ire, even amongst Ramḥal’s supporters, such as R. Isaiah Bassan (mistakenly described as his teacher), against Ramḥal’s Lithuanian second-in-command (again, the military imagery is deliberate¹⁰), R. Yekutiel Gordon, who was later instrumental in creating a new Ramḥalian circle in Eastern Europe, thanks to which numerous texts and traditions have been preserved (leading in to the rehabilitation of Ramḥal in this area). It was in fact Gordon who instigated the controversy by disclosing Ramḥal’s mystical-messianic experiences and aspirations. The international dimensions of the circle and the dispute will be addressed below (section D), and here I should but note the fact, already alluded to by Carlebach, that various inter—regional and inter-communal tensions came into play here, as evidenced in Bassan’s strong statement on the Ashkenazim as ‘enemies of wisdom’. Yet more widely, one should view such sociological facets of the topic within the framework of the emergence of a more trans-communal Jewish identity in the early modern period, as discussed in an above-noted study by David B. Ruderman, yet with somewhat more emphasis, as is my wont, on conflictual dimensions and regional variations, down to the level of the province and city, refining Idel’s method of studying countries (as in his

⁸ Jonathan Garb, “A Renewed Study of the Self-image of R. Moshe David Valle, as Reflected in his Biblical Exegesis,” *Tarbiz* 79 (2011), 265–306 [Hebrew].

⁹ Jonathan Garb, “The Modernization of Kabbalah: A Case Study,” *Modern Judaism: A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 30/1 (2010): 1–22.; idem., “The Circle of Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto in Its Eighteenth-Century Context,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 44/2 (2011): 189–202.

¹⁰ See Jonathan Garb, “The Political Model in Modern Kabbalah: A Study of Ramḥal and his Intellectual Surroundings”, in *‘Al Da’at Ha-Kahal – Religion and Politics in Jewish Thought: Festschrift in Honor of Aviezer Ravitzky*, ed. Benjamin Brown et. al., 13–45 (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center and Israel Democracy Institute, 2012), 13–45 [Hebrew].

recent volume on pre-modern Italian Kabbalah or his work here at Tikvah on Byzantine Kabbalah). My first emphasis follows closely in the path associated with the term ‘general crisis of the seventeenth century’, as the deep conflicts emerging in this period, such as the relatively over-studied (yet in some ways under-analyzed Sabbatean outburst), had a strong impact on the controversy surrounding Ramḥal and other figures also discussed by Carlebach.¹¹

If one may pause for a more general methodological statement, this project is firmly within the tradition of intellectual history, seeking to avoid the a-historical approach of the ‘history of ideas’ approach, that of its ‘intellectual cousin’, the ‘great books’ school, and certainly the approach prevalent in the current generation of the phenomenological school of Kabbalah studies (that leads to studies ‘from the Bible to Hasidism’).¹² Thus, my comments on Catholic influences on the circle (that is loudly called for by the unstudied two-volume inter-religious polemic by Valle, whose translation I am currently supervising), are part of an accompanying attempt at ‘contextualized comparison’ or ‘controlled comparison’, to borrow a term from anthropological theory (Fred Eiggen).¹³

C. The 2011-2012 Tikvah Project

In my work at Tikvah, I have ‘zoomed in’ on two areas in Ramḥal’s writing, having established that he employs the same organization of knowledge in each of the numerous genres in which he composed (more on this in section E). Indeed, as I shall discuss below, Ramḥal’s innovation is not to be located in any specific point, but rather in his superbly well-structured re-organization of several genres of Jewish knowledge, in response to the immense proliferation of material in the centuries following the revolution of print. The most central area is Ramḥal’s ‘great book’ *Mesilat Yesharim*,

¹¹ See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). For his pre-modern predilection hear the beginning of this talk: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_RZvLu29RI

¹² See e.g. Ron Margolin, *Inner Religion: The Phenomenology of Inner Religious Life and its Manifestations in Jewish Sources from the Bible to Hasidic Texts* (Ramat Gan and Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University Press and Shalom Hartman Institute, 2012) [Hebrew].

¹³ For the “contextual-comparative approach” to the study of mysticism, see April Deconick, “Mysticism before Mysticism: Teaching Christian Mysticism as a Historian of Religion,” in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William B. Parsons, 27-29 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

which has enjoyed several line-by-line commentaries in the Yeshiva world and virtually no academic study. This genre of Mussar (which is not ethics, as well-argued by Wolfson and my student Patrick Koch) can be seen as a form of spiritual education (the one short treatise on child education composed in the circle, *Derekh 'Etz Hayyim*, is almost certainly not Ramḥal's, which is probably fortunate, as it encourages spanking...).¹⁴ My analysis pointed, again, at Ramḥal's response to modern economic life and its psychological effects, but also to the complex interplay of Talmudic normative discourse and a universal 'religion of love'. Ramḥal's treatise on Talmudic learning, *Derekh Tevunot*, has likewise not received academic attention. As we shall see, the project of streamlining Talmudic learning and separating "the bare bones" of the *sugiyya* (passage) from its rhetorical/argumentative overlay — all in order to clear time for spiritual pursuits, can be seen as part of a long history (in which the Code of Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*) is of course an important chapter). At the same time, Ramḥal's insistence that Talmudic reasoning corresponds to the universal nature of the mind prefigures later efforts (R. Shimeon of Shkop, R. Moshe 'Ami'el) which emerged in the very Lithuanian Yeshiva world that was, as mentioned above, markedly influenced by Ramḥal's thought.

D. Ramḥal and the University

During the first semester, I had the good fortune of presenting a central chapter in the Tikvah project in the joint workshop of the Center and the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies.¹⁵ There I explored the relationship of the circle and the university within the broader framework of its interaction — as an institution of sorts — with various institutions in the Jewish and general worlds. Following the terminology developed by the late lamented Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, the leading researcher of Jewish institutional history, I seek to describe the circle as a 'counter—system'. This was certainly the manner in which it was perceived by its numerous opponents, who

¹⁴ Elliot Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Patrick Koch, *Human Self-Perfection: A Re-Assessment of Kabbalistic Musar-Literature of Sixteenth-Century Safed* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, forthcoming), as well as [http://huji.academia.edu/JonathanGarb/Talks/32897/Kabbalah Mussar and Jewish Modernity](http://huji.academia.edu/JonathanGarb/Talks/32897/Kabbalah_Mussar_and_Jewish_Modernity).

¹⁵ Although Professor Wolfson was unable to attend this session, I am deeply grateful for his supportive and illuminating written comments on the written version of my talk.

eventually came to include the leadership of every major European Jewish community in the early eighteenth century.

One of these institutions, particularly pertinent to this year's theme of education, was the university. It is a striking fact that many of Ramḥal's associates and students were graduates of the prestigious faculty of medicine in Padua, which counted William Harvey and Galileo Galilei amongst its alumni. This was one of the first major academic institutions to open to Jewish students, and David B. Ruderman has already pointed at its important role in the development of Jewish early modernity. The relationship between the faculty and Kabbalah can be traced to the 17th century, when R. Joseph Hamiz, an erstwhile student of the famous critic of Kabbalah, R. Yehuda Aryeh (Leon) Modena, studied medicine before becoming an Abulafian kabbalist and Sabbatean.¹⁶ As Ruderman has put it, Leon was as happy with his student's graduation as he was unhappy with his later career. Not an uncommon experience for us teachers...

Again, a control group is helpful: One of the first European universities with a marked contribution to both law and medicine, Bologna came early under the ever increasing influence of the Church and could not be an option, neither for Jewish students, nor for independent thinkers such as Galileo. As Francesca Bregoli demonstrated in a forthcoming chapter that she kindly shared with me, Padua remained a central player in the intellectual life of North Italian Jewry until 1738 (three years after Ramḥal departed Italy), when the University of Pisa opened up to Jewish students. The unique role of Padua is better appreciated against the background of the history of the interrelationship of the university with another institution, the state, a history that is still very much being written, especially in my own country. We should be grateful to David Sorotzkin, whose recent work shall be discussed further below, for alerting us of the centrality of the state for the entirety of modern Jewish history.¹⁷ It is known that following the era of Cardinal de Richelieu in the early seventeenth century, there was increasing intervention of the emerging modern state in academic life of the universities

¹⁶ For this episode in its context, see now the fine study of Yaacob Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ See the important collection by Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (eds.), *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

(Richelieu being sadly not the last state figure to propose preferring technical training to the letters...). Not only is the specificity of Padua important, but also that of medicine: As Jonathan Israel has shown, medical studies were often vehicles of the more radical branches of the Enlightenment, an early form of which was already present in Padua, as evidenced by a possible reference by Ramdavi (Although like Israel Bartal, I do not see the early eighteenth-century activity of Ramḥal as belonging to the period of the Enlightenment).¹⁸

Ramḥal himself — unlike figures such as his erstwhile mentor Ramdavi, who received his rabbinical ordination together with him — never went to university. Unlike Steve Jobs, he didn't even begin a degree. Rather, from a very early age, he consecrated himself to *ḥasidut*, or pietistic practice. The first texts we looked at appeared to describe Luzzatto as reversing the modernizing and academizing (or rather as academizing) process by moving some of his students away from academia and towards his own chosen path of *ḥasidut*.

'I have withdrawn from external literature, and study it only a few times a week' (R. Yekutiel Gordon of Vilna, Ramḥal's close student).¹⁹

'The students of the wisdom [Kabbalah] are the fellows [of the 'inner circle'] ... who render their profession secondary and their Torah primary ... and also the doctor Firassi comes to study wisdom every night' (Ramḥal on his circle).²⁰

'And many... have received *tiqqunim* to emend the ills of their heart ... and Abraham Firassi excels above all, and this is a miracle: That from being a heretic and libertine, he has almost attained the level of *ḥasidut*. And he said that just as God showed with the dead [dry bones] of Ezekiel, that he can revive

¹⁸ See e.g. Victor Lucien Tapié, *France in the Age of Louis XIII and Richelieu* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 172. On medicine, see Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment, Radical Enlightenment and the Medical Revolution of the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Medicine and Religion in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham, 5-28 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007). On Ramḥal and Haskala, see Israel Bartal, "On Periodization, Mysticism, and Enlightenment: The Case of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto," *Jahrbuch des Simon Dubnow Instituts* 6 (2007), 201-214. On Pisa, see Barbara Marangoni, "Minoranze religiose nello studio di Pisa: Le lauree degli acattolici 1737-1799," *Bollettino storico pisano* 64 (1995): 147-192 (my thanks to Francesca Bregoli for calling my attention to this study).

¹⁹ Mordechai Chriqui (ed.), *Epistles of Ramḥal and His Contemporaries* (Jerusalem: The Ramchal Institute, 2011), 135 [Hebrew] [my translation].

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42 [my translation].

whoever he wants in one moment ... thus he uncovered his holy arm [Isaiah 52, 1] to the sons of Padua to show how in one moment he can restore his sons to his love easily' (Ramḥal on Firassi).²¹

A reading which retrojects the contemporary secular/orthodox divide would identify here 'roots of secularity' opposed by a revival or *teshuvah*-movement which makes 'born again' Jews out of erstwhile academics.²² In this reading Ramḥal would be joined to 'conservative' forces within the Jewish community, and his *beit midrash* (usually translated as study-hall but with far richer connotations, described in Ramḥal's letters and analyzed in my book) would be casted as a traditional institution.

But such a positivistic interpretation would naively ignore the fact that Ramḥal was responding here to attacks on himself, his circle and specifically his 'foreign student', Gordon. Ramḥal was attacked not only for his own interest in theatre and philosophy, but also for encouraging the secular studies of students such as Gordon. Again, these are not like attacks on the later *maskilim*, or followers of the Jewish Enlightenment. Rather one should again take a sociological view: Luzzatto did not pursue a medical career, and he was openly contemptuous of the career path of Italian Rabbis. He opted for a third path of mobility, that of a pietist. However, in his age, marital status, appearance, cultural horizons, and spiritual practice, he did not fit the classical image of the post-Lurianic Kabbalistic pietist. As I showed in a recent lecture at Stanford, this claim lay close to the heart of the controversy.²³

A brief textual illustration: A prominent Italian Kabbalist who cannot be said to be one of the worst of Ramḥal's critics, R. Joseph Ergas of Livorno, wrote the following of him: 'I asked whether he is married, whether he performed the ritual ablutions ... and whether he was careful never to trim his beard, even with scissors. And to all these questions the reply was negative. Yet these are the pillars of spiritual attainment'.²⁴ By

²¹ Ibid., 85 [my translation].

²² See, generally, Shmuel Feiner, *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

²³

[http://huji.academia.edu/JonathanGarb/Talks/64706/Gender and Sexuality in the Luzzatto Controversy in Early 18th-century Italy](http://huji.academia.edu/JonathanGarb/Talks/64706/Gender_and_Sexuality_in_the_Luzzatto_Controversy_in_Early_18th-century_Italy)

²⁴ Chriqui (ed.), *Epistles of Ramhal and his Contemporaries*, 206 [my translation].

way of explanation, I will just add here that the necessity for a beard is part of the Kabbalistic notion of the ideal male figure corresponding to the divine male form. Besides this mystical-gender angle, there is also an entire social history in the background, already explored by Elliot Horowitz (who noted the stress on the holiness of the beard in a social critique penned by Ramḥal's persecutor, R. Moshe Hagiz).²⁵

So, even if one avoids a Straussian reading of writing under persecution, one cannot avoid suspecting that the controversy significantly colored Ramḥal's description of his circle. I believe that a balanced presentation of Ramḥal's position on secular learning can be found in his mature and classical, thematic version of *Mesilat Yesharim*:

It [Proverbs 2, 4: 'If thou seek her as silver, and search for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God'] does not say then you shall understand philosophy, then you shall understand geometry, then you shall understand medicine, then you shall understand laws (*dinim*), then you shall understand *halakhot*, but then you shall understand the fear of God (Ramḥal).²⁶

Elsewhere in this work, Ramḥal critiques those who study the *pilpul* (casuistry) of Halakha and the verdicts of the Law (*pisqei dinim*), asking if we should exert our minds with 'fruitless *pilpul*' and theoretical laws, while neglecting the primary duty of inner worship of God, all the while referring to the rise of *pilpul* in Europe at the time. Likewise, in the dialogue version of *Mesilat Yesharim*, he castigates reading of 'thousands of response' (alluding to the effects of the print revolution on the genre of Halakha), as well as stating bluntly that the studies of most 'Yeshiva rabbis' do not lead them to perfection. Already in Italy, Ramḥal had defined the role of his circle as the theurgical project of the emendation of the *shekhina* (or divine indwelling), rather than the path of most of the sages of Israel, who spend their time on vain *pilpul*, in pursuit of

²⁵ Elliot Horowitz, "The Early Eighteenth Century Confronts the Beard," (<http://www.springerlink.com/content/p070484n21573050/fulltext.pdf>)

²⁶ Ramḥal's introduction to the thematic version (in Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *Mesilat Yesharim: Complete Edition*, ed. Yosef Avivi and Avraham Shoshana (Jerusalem: Ofek Institute, 1994), 201-202 [Hebrew]).

earthly status and income. In the next letter, Ramḥal clearly states that one should spend at most an hour or two a day on Halakha.²⁷

These texts are more radical than it appears at first blush: They may well accord equal legitimate but secondary status to Talmudic-Halakhic and secular-medical learning, all inferior to the pursuit of *ḥasidut*. In other words, Ramḥal did wish his students to minimize their secular studies in favor of Kabbalistic pietism, but no more (or no less) than he wished them to minimize their Talmudic studies. There is clear evidence that Ramḥal's Kabbalistic writing benefited from his students' medical knowledge, as in a letter of his which questions a Lurianic description of the brain based on empirical observation of its anatomy (Giovanni Battista Morgagni, an expert on brain autopsy, taught at Padua at that time).

It is true, as Elliot Wolfson pointed out in his written response to my talk that Ramḥal also differentiated, in the dialogue version, between the holiness of the deep study (*'iyyun*) of the Torah and external, secular studies that are devoid of such sanctity (*ḥulin*).²⁸ Indeed, as I shall expand in my biography, we can find statements on the theurgical value of *piḥpul* in the writings of both Ramḥal and Ramdavi. It is also true that *Mesilat Yesharim* itself contains brief halakhic discussions (the generalizing denial of their existence by Joseph Dan being simply incorrect, as I shall show in the relevant chapter in my book). Nonetheless, the main thrust of the combined social and curricular critique is evident. One might be tempted to regard this move as a repetition of a similar fourteenth century Kabbalistic critique (in *Tiqqunei Zohar* and the *Qanah–Peli'a* Byzantine literature), later adopted by the Safedian kabbalists and even more so by the Sabbateans.²⁹ Indeed, Ramḥal, as one of the few major kabbalists not to comment on the rationales for the commandments or the *kavvanot* (mystical intentions) of the prayers (the attribution of such texts to him is almost certainly mistaken), did join these earlier kabbalists in moving Halakha away from its central place in Jewish life. I cannot go into

²⁷ Ibid., 9, as well as Ramḥal's introduction to the dialogue version (in *ibid.*, 60-65); Chriqui (ed.), *Epistles of Ramḥal and His Contemporaries* 264-266 and 269.

²⁸ Avivi and Shoshana (ed.), *Mesilat Yesharim* (1994), 53.

²⁹ In this context one should note the somewhat overlooked statement by the great Safedian figure R. Yitzhaq Luria on the superiority of *yihudim* – Ramḥal's own meditation of choice – over Torah study.

this here, however a close reading of *Mesilat Yesharim* discloses a subtle move from the religion of Law, of caution and asceticism, to a far more spontaneous and individualistic ‘religion of love’ (the term being inspired by a poem by the famous Sufi writer Ibn ‘Al-‘Arabi).

This tendency was clearly sensed by Ramḥal’s opponents, who utilized the bans on Ramḥal’s works in order to reinforce earlier, yet little-applied restrictions on accessibility and printing of Kabbalistic literature. However, one should make two important points here: One is that Ramḥal’s opinion is also indebted to modern influences, such as a similar critique by the controversial (if less so), R. Yehuda Loewe of Prague (Maharal), as well as being a possible source for the development of this approach in the Hasidic revolution that began already in his last years. Secondly, Ramḥal’s vision of *ḥasidut* is far broader than mere study of Kabbalistic texts: one the one hand, as clarified by Moshe Halbertal in his own response to this paper, it posits a model of self-perfection focused on rigorous self-inquiry. Here I wish to point at a fresh reading of *Mesilat Yesharim* offered by the anonymous subversive Haredi blogger, known as ‘Nireh Lichora’.

A former Head of a Yeshiva, this writer is one of the inspirations for the new and extremely courageous internal protest against Haredi leadership (as in the website ‘Va-Yehi ‘Or’). As Yakir Englander has shown in his recently submitted PhD dissertation, his Halakhic thought shakes up the common wisdom of *dati* (Orthodox) Judaism, and not just the Haredi world. As a result, some of the most fierce and unfair attacks on him have been penned by so-called liberal rabbis in Israel. Here, however, I wish to focus on his reading of *Mesilat Yesharim*, chapters 2-3. Turning around a textual unit that has often been used as a source for unquestioning obedience to the ‘great of Torah’, ‘Nireh Lichora’ points out that Ramḥal is in fact saying that one is looked after by God only once one looks after oneself. Thus, when Ramḥal (using a contemporary image also found in the Mussar books of Ramdavi), speaks of the wise, who have exited the labyrinth of life’s confusion and can offer guidance, he is not describing an earlier form of the twentieth century *da’at torah/’emunat ḥakhamim* (opinion of Torah/faith in sages) doctrine (see also below, section F.). Rather the sole advice of the sages is that

each individual models their own self-observation. I would add that this is also why Ramḥal devotes some space, especially in his introduction to *Mesilat Yesharim*, to castigating the false *ḥasidut* (probably describing the nascent Eastern European movement) based on imitation of external practices rather than inward self-study).³⁰

In other words, Ramḥal, in a freshly modern sense, is not attempting to decide between two forms of textual authority, but rather brings forth one's own depth as a major source of authority. This stress on self-observance is greatly developed in the overlooked Mussar manuscript by Gordon, *Mareh ha-Mussar*, and was thus a joint concern of the circle. We can now better appreciate the internal resources for Ramḥal's own stand against the authorities, as in the following declaration: 'If he [one of Ramḥal's main opponents, R. Katzenelnbogen], has the power of all of the Rabbis and *ge'onim* of Ashkenaz and Poland, I also have power, that of the Holy One, Blessed be He and his *shekhinah* and all of the Supernal Yeshiva [who revealed themselves to Ramḥal in his experience]'.³¹

To the extent that Ramḥal's curricular change is textual, it focuses on the study of the revelatory writings that were at the forefront of the assault on the circle. In my book, I shall show in detail that Ramḥal envisioned each member of the inner circle advancing its theurgical goals through such writings, and indeed we have several such products, usually erroneously attributed to Ramḥal, as in the case of the hundreds of new prayers composed by Gordon. Looking forward towards my concluding comments, one can see Ramḥal's curtailed innovative movement as a source of inspiration for a form of intense Jewish spirituality that diverges from the path not only of Haredi Judaism, but also of so-called orthodoxy as such. While (despite some obvious Sabbatean influences) the claims as to any transgression of Halakha in the normative sense cannot be founded, in the formative sense (using Halbertal's well-known distinction), the opinions of the circle were indeed unsettling in terms of the dominion of Halakha. Here I also follow William Pinar in attributing a central cultural role to curriculum, as the interface of past, present

³⁰ See <http://tshuvot.wordpress.com/>; <http://www.y-or.co.il>. The nature of the derogators has already been well described in bT Sotah, fol. 22b.

³¹ Chriqui (ed.), *Epistles of Ramhal and His Contemporaries*, 106.

and future of a culture.³² The rehabilitation of Ramḥal, especially in Lithuania with its Mussar Yeshivas, has, as stated, contributed greatly to the survival of manuscripts as well as textual scholarship, yet also, through the known procedures of *haskamot* (rabbinic letters of approval) etc. created a certain ‘institutionalization’ of Ramḥal’s ‘counter-system’. Therefore, despite some residual critiques (as in the case of R. Shlomo Elyashiv, the great twentieth century Lithuanian Kabbalist), we arrived at the paradox of the recasting of Ramḥal as a major inspiration for a world whose ideal is near-total immersion in Talmudic analytics.³³

E. Ramḥal and the Law

My study of the entirety of the authentic works of Ramḥal has not revealed any concern with contemporary legal theory, understandably as his students opted for the other proverbial recommendation of modern Jewish parents ... however, section F. will take up Ramdavi’s legal theory. More widely, an institutionally oriented examination of the controversy casts light on the history of the interrelationship of the Law and religion, as explored in great depth by Harold Berman. When I saw the manuscript of the main collection of the letters concerning Ramḥal at the JTS collection, it became clearer than ever to me that we are speaking of a *tiq beit din*, or file recording a legal-religious investigative procedure of the rabbinical court. It was this legal nature that ensured the very preservation of the correspondence. Berman has written that the first of the ten characteristic elements of Western law is the relatively sharp distinction between legal institutions and other types of institutions, thus disembedding law from religion and politics, despite the influence of these. This is certainly not the case for the eighteenth century Jewish world, and as Gila Stopler would surely remind us, is still not entirely the case in Israel. Legal procedures — such as the examination, restriction, and ultimately prosecution of Luzzatto’s school and writings — were conducted by institutions, such as

³² See Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); William Pinar, *Curriculum Theory*. If, as Sorotzkin has shown, the foes of the circle — such as R. Jacob Emden and R. Moshe Hagiz — were paragons of orthodoxy, what does this say of the circle itself?

³³ It is interesting that David Shalem, head of the largely virtual “Ramhal community” in Jerusalem, castigates the leaders of Haredi institutions (*mosadot*) for abandoning Ramhal’s true message (in the introduction to his Kabbalistic commentary on *Mesilat Yesharim*).

batei dinim, which possessed full legal authority and employed recognizable legal procedures. However, these institutions were deeply embedded in both political (in the sense of communal leadership), and religious forms of authority.³⁴

The true nature of this process can be yet further appreciated if one considers the active inquisitory activity that took place in Venice throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, all this in the counter-reformatory spirit of the council of Trent, whose key place in the history of Kabbalah has recently been recognized by Roni Weinstein, responding inter alia to earlier work of mine.³⁵ It is especially striking that the Venetian inquisition aspired to independence from the central authority of the Church. This activity, directed also at all aspirants to revelation or mystical illumination in unconventional manners, was almost certainly part of the background of the persecution of Ramḥal, led by the Venice rabbinate and in opposition to his supporters in the Padua rabbinate. Elsewhere, I have pointed at the reflection of this inter-communal tension in the Venetto in Ramdavi's writings.³⁶

More widely, any general conclusions on modern Judaism, and especially Italy, should be regarded as provisional until the scholarly world integrates the twenty rooms of inquisition files opened to scholars in 1998 (until the telling date of 1939). Carlo Ginzburg, who was instrumental in bringing this about, has shown what wonders can be found in a fraction of this material. It is a great pity that this event, equivalent to the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, Qumran, and the Cairo Geniza, took place in an era in

³⁴ Harold Berman, *Faith and Order: The Reconciliation of Law and Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 25. The place of the law in political and cultural life in Venice, albeit in earlier periods, has been admirably discussed by Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7, 65, 128-35, and especially 232 on silencing religious sects and "fabulous traditions" by law.

³⁵ See Roni Weinstein, *Kabbalah and Jewish Modernity* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2011) [Hebrew], especially 254–55 (focusing on Italy).

³⁶ Garb, "The Modernization of Kabbalah," 12–15. See also Anne J. Schutte, *Aspiring Saints: Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618-1750* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Brian S. Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1983).

which archival and manuscript training have been so weakened, although one should be consoled by the possibilities opened by contemporary computerization of data.³⁷

Another important intersection of the law and Ramḥal relates to the organization of knowledge that I see as Ramḥal's primary contribution to modern Jewish civilization. Ramḥal's main concern was with transforming the organization of Jewish knowledge, bringing order into the chaotic literature of Kabbalah, Mussar, and Talmudic study. Though his labor was within the Jewish domain, it can be easily shown that his project must be seen against the background of profound transformations in organization of knowledge and intellectual life. Thus, it is no coincidence that the orientation of the circle reflects the process of the Jews joining the modern university.

As shown by Harold Berman as well as Barbara Pitkin, already in the sixteenth century, radical changes in religious thought went along with a new sense of modernity that effected a reorganization of the Law. Pitkin's prime example is John Calvin, whose re-organization of the biblical text, accompanied by systemization of history reflects his legal training first and foremost. This alone reflects a tradition of a close connection between the disciplines of law and history that both historians and legal experts should aspire to galvanize today. However, she more briefly mentions the northern Italian humanists, Andrea Alciato (Milan, Lombardy) and Lorenzo Valla (Pavia) (the latter of whom also influenced Martin Luther). This school remained influential in the eighteenth century, and it is intriguing to wonder if anyone in Ramḥal's circle knew of it despite having not studied Law formally.³⁸

These brief comments obviously do not, if one may be permitted a pun, do justice to the need for a more thorough examination of what has hitherto, to the best of my knowledge, not been examined: the role of the law in the social history of early modern Jewry.

³⁷ See Cullen Murphy, *God's Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012). For an example of a good Foucauldian analysis of such materials, see John Arnold, *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

³⁸ Harold Berman, *Law and Revolution, Volume II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Barbara Pitkin, "Calvin's Mosaic Harmony: Biblical Exegesis and Early Modern Legal History," *Sixteenth Century Journal* XLI/2 (2010): 451.

F. Towards a Study of the Exegetical Corpus of R. Moshe David Valle.

The peni-ultimate part of this paper represents ‘work in progress’, towards my second book that will deal with Valle. However, I already feel that my thinking on Kabbalistic biblical exegesis has been enriched by my dialogue with Benjamin Sommer. Generally speaking, scholarship has focused on the theory of Kabbalistic hermeneutics, yet we do not have verse-by-verse or even chapter-by-chapter analysis of its actual practice.³⁹ My proposed step forward here is to describe the commentaries of Valle on about a dozen biblical topics, thus illustrating his general method not only in interpreting virtually every verse in the Bible and the unique way in which he reads a chapter or a set of chapters as a whole, but also his approach to certain key facets of Jewish religiosity. For this paper, I focus on his reading of a legal issue, as the current explosion of writing in English for non-specialized audiences on the Bible, on Midrash, and on traditional commentary, ranging from Alan Dershovitz to Avivah Gottlieb-Zornberg, almost always discusses narrative or ethical areas rather than legal passages. One major exception is Moshe Halbertal’s recent book on sacrifice, which fleshes out the wider political, psychological, and ethical implications of seemingly technical verses. Another very recent exception is Michael Walzer’s *In God’s Shadow* that includes legal codes in an illuminating discussion of Biblical political thought.⁴⁰

One of Ramdavi’s more extensive and interesting treatments of the Law appears in *Mishne La-Melekh*, his first commentary on Deuteronomy 17:8: ‘If there arise a matter too hard (*ki yipal’e*) for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, even matters of controversy within thy gates; then shalt thou arise, and get thee up unto the place which the LORD thy God shall choose’.⁴¹ Valle writes:

³⁹ See e.g. Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbalah* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008); Elliot Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008).

⁴⁰ Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012); Michael Walzer, *In God’s Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). For my existing study of Valle’s exegesis, see Garb, “A Renewed Study.”

⁴¹ The biblical quote follows the English translation of the Jewish Publication Society.

ki yipal'e – This denotes concealment, that what is hidden from the other courts is not hidden from the great court where there was the holy unification of the Holy One Blessed Be He and his *shekhina* and its residing (*hashra'a*) on the elders clarifies everything that is hidden and blocked and calibrates (*kola'at*) to the hairsbreadth of all that is subtle and deep.⁴² What is impossible for the other courts that judge by the human intellect whose grasp is limited and can only check 'until where it's hand reaches' [See bT *Pesahim*, fol. 8a], and this is what is written... that there is a dispute between the sages of the other courts... and it is already known that every dispute is from the side of darkness, and thus one needs to ascend and go up in place to clarify the truth and this is what is said, "then shalt thou arise, and get thee up unto the place," for there is the clear light of the residence of the *shekhina*, and there is no place for the darkness to adhere there as in other places... and this is an image of the supernal, for all the doubts in the heavenly academy, that is the Yeshiva of Metatron, are settled and clarified in the supreme academy, that is the Yeshiva of God himself, where there is no darkness at all, like in that of Metatron... and the intermixed darkness, causes doubts and disputes and controversies, for out of the debate truth is clarified... yet there are very many deep and subtle doubts for which no argumentation may avail to light up their darkness and one needs to ascend to the place of light or to await for it to be revealed... like *tyq"u* in the words of the sages, i.e. that one needs to wait for the *tiqqun* (rectification)...⁴³ For the litigants both adduce strong arguments that confuse the mind of the judge and one needs a great light to clarify the truth.⁴⁴

This extremely rich text requires extensive decoding, in light of the other writings of the circle, some of which I have relegated to the footnotes: The term *yihud* and the concept of the unification of the main body of divinity and the *shekhina* is central for Ramḥal, for Ramdav and for the project of the circle itself, as defined in its charters (that I cannot discuss at length here). As already shown by Tishby, the term 'clarification' is likewise pivotal for Ramdav's messianic self-consciousness as the *mevarer*, or clarifier. Likewise, as I shall show at length in the book, for 'blocking' or *situm*, that can only be opened by

⁴² The term *hashra'a* is often found in Ramdav's writings and may have influenced the later Hasidic usage of the term as immanent divine presence which also grants a form of mystical inspiration, similar to the Modern Hebrew usage. As I shall show in my manuscript, the stress on subtlety and depth characterizes Ramḥal's and Ramdav's writing on Torah study, including Talmudics.

⁴³ Besides the pun *tyq"u* (*tishby yetaretz qushiyyot u-ba'ayot*) – *tiqqun* (תיקון – תיקון), and the literal reading of waiting for Tishb"y (Elijah, not the researcher...) to resolve open questions as awaiting "*giluy 'eliyahu*" – the revelation of Elijah – that was believed to accompany Kabbalistic tradition almost from its outset, there is another point embedded here: an allusion to two models: (a) ascending, as in ascent of the soul, and (b) passively awaiting mystical inspiration ("hoping" – *kivvuy* – as Gordon often put it). As I shall show in the monograph, both are present in the writings of the circle.

⁴⁴ R. Moshe David Valle, *Sefer Mishnah Le-Melekh: Bi'ur Sefer Devarim*, ed. Joseph Spinner (Jerusalem, 1995) [MS London, British Museum 390, fols. 378a-645b], 238-239 [my translation].

the circle. As I demonstrated in the article dedicated to Ramdavi, what is phrased in explicit, personal and messianic terms in the writings that pre-dated the controversy clampdown on the circle is presented in coded, national and exegetical fashions in the later writings. Indeed, the reference here to controversy and dispute, while of course answering the local exegetical imperative, reflects the impact of the controversy.

One key point in this specific text is the sharp distinction between the human intellect of the lower courts and the illuminatory experience of the higher court, isomorphically paralleling, in a fashion characteristic of many Kabbalistic texts,⁴⁵ a supernal structure — in this case the distinction (inspired by the above-mentioned *Tiqqunei Zohar*) between the lower worlds of Metatron and the divine world.⁴⁶ One should note a sharp and fresh exegetical move here: The heavenly academy described in the Talmud, that disputes itself and in one famous case (bT, *Bab'a Metzi'a*, fol. 86b) even argues with God, is only 'heavenly' in the angelic sense, but not the true divine Yeshiva.

Unlike liberal presentations of the virtue of debate and human autonomy in Rabbinic legal theory and exegetical theory (based inter alia on the heavenly academy disputing God), Ramdavi is downgrading the human intellect in favor of a view that — though there is no linear line of influence — could be compared to the above-mentioned *'emumat hakhamim* doctrine of the infallibility of Torah scholars in large parts of the Yeshiva-affiliated world as well as the Hasidic world in the twentieth century — whose roots actually can be found in a work by Ramhal's arch-foe Hagiz, as shown by Carlebach (and more recently by Sorotzkin). This parallels his critique of the false human *politica* (probably affected by the politics surrounding the controversy) elsewhere, as I have shown in the past. Before one hurries to see this as another instance of so-called 'fundamentalism', one should recall similar ideologies of infallibility of the Communist Party that captivated numerous intellectuals last century, or even the exalted and uncritical view of the Supreme Court of Justice in certain circles in Israel.

⁴⁵ See Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism: From Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005) [Hebrew].

⁴⁶ On *illuminismo* and its possible echoing of *illuminatio* (enlightenment) in Ramdavi's Italian texts, see Garb, "The Circle," 190. One example of the approach of the *Tiqqunei Zohar* is the distinction between the *pardes* (classical site of mystical experience as well as the four-fold exegesis of the Torah in later texts) of Metatron and that of the divine.

All such instances reflect a shared response to the modern phenomenon of doubt and dispute (one key landmark being the great schism in the church in the sixteenth century), that is also present in numerous Hasidic texts, especially those of Braslav (that in my view were influenced by Ramḥal's circle).⁴⁷

On a deeper level, there are two contextual decoding options, based on the parallel in Ramdavi's slightly later second commentary on Deuteronomy (*Bi'ur Mishneh Torah*): One is that Ramdavi is associating the lower, controversy-ridden and error-prone courts with the rabbinical authorities that processed the investigation of the circle, and the divine Yeshiva is that of Ramḥal's circle.⁴⁸ A more radical reading is enabled by Ramdavi stressing that the Supreme Court has no adherence (*ḥizva*) of the forces of darkness. As I have shown and will show further in my book, Ramdavi usually reserves this level for himself, almost explicitly denying Ramḥal this status. Thus, the latter, famously enjoying angelic mentors, including Metatron (as mentioned by Gordon) reflects the lower courts, whose revelations still come from non-divine worlds, that according to classical Lurianic statements (naturally quoted by Ramḥal's opponents) contain strong admixtures of falsehood.⁴⁹

I believe that following Ramdavi's exegesis on Deut. 17 and its Biblical parallels will both support this reading and tease out further implications for political theory. On a slightly later verse, Ramdavi writes of the Supreme Court: 'even if they hate one of the litigants, the holy union that resides on them conquers their hatred and their justice merges by itself, for they [the judges] change completely when they sit on the chair of justice and are aligned with the supernal will even against their will'.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁷ For *politica*, see Garb, "The Modernization of Kabbalah," 9. The search for certainty in Europe in earlier periods has been discussed by Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?: The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a discussion of this theme in the works of Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, a figure much closer to Ramḥal's time and place, see John S. Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 99.

⁴⁸ R. Moshe David Valle, *Bi'ur Mishneh Torah (Perush 'al Sefer Devarim)*, ed. Joseph Spinner (Jerusalem, 1989) [MS London, British Museum 323, fols. 1a-190b], 189. The evidence for this is the term used there of the Supreme Court: The *hashra'a* "magadet 'elyhem" — speaks to them — echoing the term "maggid" associated with Ramḥal's angelic mentor.

⁴⁹ See also Jonathan Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 69–71.

⁵⁰ Valle *Bi'ur Mishneh Torah*, 240. For this passive mode of being overpowered by the mystical state, see above, n 43. The passive-active distinction it taken up in several of my writings cited here.

transformation of the court parallels Ramdav's discussion that I treated elsewhere, of the transformation of the king, while the model of the deterministic victory of divine will in Ramhal's theory of history, that he describes — echoed in a text that we shall soon see — as *hanhagah* or divine leadership.⁵¹ This then leads in to his discussion of the injunction, following (v. 11) in the Biblical chapter (and a major source for the *'emunat hakhamim* doctrine) to follow the Supreme Court without deviating 'right or left', and then into his theory of regal authority:

In order to place the people under the yoke of awe and Mussar one needs a king of flesh and blood to rule them... for the awe of the divine kingdom is only on the wise and righteous who know the truth properly.. and do not diverge right nor left, but the ignoramuses who walk in the darkness of the vanity of the world and the revelation of the kingdom of God is not apparent to them, will certainly easily divest themselves of the yoke of awe and Mussar without the constant awe of a king.⁵²

Despite the mystical valorization of the king, and especially the Davidic monarchy, in other texts by Ramdav (to be discussed in an Israel Science Foundation project of mine),⁵³ here we have a rather *di'avad*, or concessional theory of political rule, explicitly drawing on rabbinic commentary ad loc (v. 15): The king is superfluous for the illuminati, as in those who would follow people like the members of the Supreme Court, and necessary in order to preserve awe and Mussar (the very goal of *Mesilat Yesharim*). More profoundly, Ramdav is alluding to the circle's theory of the rule of the righteous, or *tzaddiq*, that (as briefly noted by Tishby) is a source for the more famous Hasidic doctrine. Ramdav refers here to the refrain of the book of Judges: 'In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes'. On one of these instances (21:25), Ramdav commented:

This is the great rule that explains all of the evils that befell Israel and that were mentioned in this book, all because this was the leadership (*hanhaga*) of the judges, that are the secret of the stars and they lacked the leadership of the holy

⁵¹ In this case, the similarities to Marxist theory reflect the parallels between Hegel and Ramhal, noted recently by David Sorotzkin, *Orthodoxy and Modern Disciplinary: The Production of the Jewish Tradition in Europe in Modern Times* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad, 2011) [Hebrew], 332.

⁵² Valle, *Bi'ur Mishneh Torah*, 241-2. For the sake of David Flatto's project, I note Valle's interesting discussion of Second Temple kings, based on Josephus, in the second commentary on Deuteronomy — *Sefer Mishnah Le-Melekh*, 190–191.

⁵³ http://www.isf.org.il/downloads/AnnualReport_2009.pdf

king, the supernal sun, and just as the leadership of the unique one... unifies the minds and hearts to one opinion and matter, thus the leadership of the many divides the hearts and minds.⁵⁴

Here one can reinforce the reading that the site of dispute and diversity is that of the astral realm, opposed here to the king, who is necessary for those who do not enjoy mystical illumination, and himself may have a similar level, and can thus occupy a role equivalent to the Supreme Court (this is Ramdavi's close reading of their juxtaposition in Deuteronomy, as well as the parallelism in the employment of the expression: 'he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left' in 17:20, in describing the king's heart — which is the subject of most of Ramdavi's discussion of the regal elsewhere). The astral realm is similar to the angelic realm that Ramḥal may have described as a source for his mystical inspiration, as raised by Idel.⁵⁵

However, the level of kingdom is reserved for the truly Davidic figure, in Ramdavi's mind (as I have shown elsewhere, debating and hopefully refuting Tishby) — Ramdavi. Again, the political is ultimately the personal, as in the messianic. This is not surprising, as the aspiration for restoring the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court, accompanied visions of redemption of the Jews, as in the cases of sixteenth century Safed, Napoleon, the students of the Vilna Gaon, the early R. Kook, and R. Maimon after the establishment of Israel (foiled inter alia by the prince of caution, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik).

In concluding this discussion, one should note that the political or legal-political theory of the Kabbalists and Mussar writers has barely been addressed in the valuable offerings on the Jewish political tradition, most famously the Yale series. This is striking, as again, one of the early (not only for the Jewish context) usages of the modern concept 'the political', written in the country of Machiavelli and in the rough period of Vico, can be found in this self — same corpus of Ramdavi.

⁵⁴ R. Moshe David Valle, *Sefer Or Zaru'a: Bi'ur Sefer Shoftim*, ed. Joseph Spinner (Jerusalem, 1998) [MS London, British Museum 388, fols. 218b-275b], 303. Ramdavi's rather standard opinion, in his commentaries here and on Deuteronomy, as well as Samuel, is that the desire for the king only problematic insofar as it was in imitation of the practice of the surrounding nations.

⁵⁵ Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 208–209.

G. Concluding Thoughts on Kabbalah Study in the 21st Century University

Scholem's famous statement (at the end of his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*), on the story of Jewish mysticism having not ended, being always prone to break out in 'you or me', has been borne out by the amazing development of Kabbalistic thought in the last generation, including the proliferation and analysis of the corpus of the Ramhal circle by Haredi scholars (see above, section A).⁵⁶ However, this is not less true of the academic study of Kabbalah. Despite substantive advances since, my bibliographical article on the writings of Ramhal certainly points at the need for massive further study, not to mention the massive critique of the flimsy textual foundations of large parts of the field in the above-mentioned study by Daniel Abrams. This is not to say that there have not been major advances in Kabbalah studies in the last generation, paralleling, influenced by and influencing the above-mentioned Haredi mystical renaissance,⁵⁷ and I have mentioned some of these above. At the same time, as Ramhal states in *Mesilat Yesharim*, the basis of all true inner work is constant *heshbon nefesh*, or self-scrutiny, an art much developed in the tradition of the Lithuanian Yeshivas, where I received my early training. This is especially true of the area of teaching (including graduate training), which is customarily neglected in academic discourse, even as its planning and execution have become an increasingly large portion of the work of professors.⁵⁸

As one can readily observe when reading a collection of memoirs from the world of Lithuanian Yeshivas, in which Ramhal's thought (especially his Mussar teaching) was rehabilitated and embellished, many of the luminaries of the first generations of Hebrew University, including several prominent legal scholars, came from this world. Not so in the field of Kabbalah. It is not of anecdotal significance that neither Scholem nor his students (with the exception of Tishby) had exposure to Yeshiva education. Rather, this

⁵⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 350.

⁵⁷ See Jonathan Garb, "Mystical and Spiritual Discourse in the Contemporary Ashkenazi Haredi Worlds," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9/1 (2010): 29–48; idem., "Towards the Study of the Spiritual-Mystical Renaissance in the Contemporary Ashkenazi Haredi World in Israel," in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2011).

⁵⁸ See also David L. Miller, "Good Teaching Doesn't Count," in *Reimagining Education: Essays on Reviving the Soul of Learning*, ed. Dennis P. Slattery and Jennifer L. Selig (New Orleans, Louis., Spring Journal Books, 2009), 29-38. For an important correction in my field, see William B. Parsons (ed.), *Teaching Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), as well as my forthcoming review of this excellent volume in *Religious Studies Review*.

should be viewed within the context of the sociology of knowledge of Israeli Jewish Studies: Kabbalah research was one central domain (another being Bible) in which the very identity of academic Jewish studies was oppositional to the world of traditional Jewish learning. As Elliot Wolfson expanded in depth (to coin a phrase) in his written response to my presentation at the joint workshop, Scholem's project should be seen within the context of his aspiration to restructure Jewish culture in secular, or in his own terms "anarchistic" directions in Israel. In a recent doctoral dissertation on the history of Kabbalah scholarship, Moran Gam-Hacohen has persuasively shown that even the more revisionist of Scholem's students essentially upheld the curriculum and major concerns established in the first part of the century.⁵⁹

Thus, focusing now on teaching (the history of research having been discussed in section A), the university had an entirely different curriculum from the Yeshiva, centered on the pre—modern period. In this program, Ramhal's masterpiece *Mesilat Yesharim*, like many wonderful modern works, received virtually no academic attention (unless one counts a characteristically idiosyncratic series of talks by Yeshayahu Leibovitz). Furthermore, the fragmented structure of Jewish studies in Israel ensures that it is very hard for students (especially as since 2002, at least at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, all but the best of students must pay for any course beyond the ever-proliferating program requirements), to receive any overview of the Jewish tradition. While one cannot receive a graduate degree in Kabbalah without a basic exposure to (the philological study of) Talmud, one can certainly do so without any exposure at all to Biblical exegesis, *piyyut* (liturgical poetry), sermons, the history of the Jewish languages, or Halakha.⁶⁰ Simply put, there is no sense of Jewish civilization. The Law, very close to the very living heart of this civilization, is associated with a separate faculty, rather than taking its due place in intellectual history. For example, all of the insights above of the relationship of the Ramhal circle to the Law could not emerge from

⁵⁹ Moran Gam-Hacohen, "Trends in Kabbalah-Research in Israel, 1929-2010," Ph.D. thesis (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2010) [Hebrew]. See also Boaz Huss, "Ask No Questions: Gershom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism," *Modern Judaism* 25/2 (2005): 141-58.

⁶⁰ The recent near-disappearance of the study of Yiddish at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, at a time when it is enjoying a renaissance in the Haredi world and some recovery in the United States, is one more indication of the neglect of the modern and the short road from fragmentation to disappearance of knowledge and to moving grossly out of synch with cultural developments.

a fragmented specialization in the Kabbalah of Ramḥal that has characterized much of scholarship on the topic.⁶¹ There is certainly no sense of the overall phenomenon of Judaism as a religion, using the tools crafted in religious studies as well as the social sciences. Guy Stroumsa's proposal of an introductory course on the Jewish religion was rejected as being 'orthodox'. The slowly changing focus on the pre-modern, together with the division of labor relegating sociological and anthropological and psychological dimensions to another faculty, enable the ideologically motivated presentation of Judaism as archaic, residual, or at best reactive ('orthodox', 'ultra-orthodox', or 'fundamentalist') rather than being an evolving, dynamic and relevant world of thought and feeling.⁶²

In my view, reading the texts in the civilizational context in which they were written (their authors being blissfully or sadly ignorant of current departmental divisions) is the main justification for enclosing Jewish studies in discrete departments, institutes and centers (thus inevitably forgoing the advantages of close cooperation with the social sciences, legal studies, or religious studies). At the very least then, when studying "inter-corporal" (to borrow Moshe Idel's phrase) figures such as Ramḥal, a full panorama of the multiple forms of Jewish creativity, and especially its most central one, the Halakha, is a sine qua non. This is all the more true of more obviously Halakhic figures such as Nahmanides (who has indeed been studied in this manner by Moshe Halbertal), R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, and the Vilner Gaon (now being researched in this proper manner by Eliyahu Stern at Yale), to which one can readily add lesser known, yet important figures, such as R. David Ibn Zimra or R. Yehiel Safrin of Komarno. I believe that this approach expresses the forgotten virtue (see anon) of reverence towards such texts.

It is well known that in the 1980s there was a worldwide sea change in Kabbalah research. One of several factors contributing to this shift was the contribution of

⁶¹ One example: The heated Benayahu-Tishby exchange on the question of the attribution of the treatise *Ma'ase Ha-Mitzvot* to Ramḥal would have benefited from acquaintance with Halakhic didactic writing in Italy, the latter being well evidenced by historians such as David Malkiel.

⁶² It is true that at Tel Aviv University there is now a relatively strong unified department of "Hebrew culture," yet this very secular-Zionist designation only proves my thesis as to the universal avoidance of an overall view of Jewish civilization in its manifold linguistic, geographical and cultural contexts.

scholars with more intimacy with traditional forms of Jewish learning, such as Haviva Pedaya (the granddaughter and student of a prominent Iraqi kabbalist), Elliot Wolfson (the first major Kabbalah scholar who had Yeshiva training), and more recently figures with a strong traditional (including Kabbalistic) background such as Avraham Elqayam, Jonathan Garb, and Oded Israeli. This is a laudable change, as is the recent civilization-wide and genre-bridging work of younger scholars such as Maoz Kahana and David Sorotzkin, however any savvy sociologist of knowledge will observe that institutional structure is often more powerful than individual achievement.

My own vision of bridging the gap between traditional and academic learning indeed goes beyond foregrounding the texts which have been central for Jewish learning in the modern period or honoring the close commentaries and bold textual suggestions of Yeshiva scholars. I am also not content with awakening the memory of a circle of Kabbalistic doctors in the eighteenth century as an inspiration. Rather, my long-term aspiration, as a cultural agent and not just as a researcher, is to imagine an academia in which, to quote Alasdair MacIntyre (and his own sources),⁶³ theology and philosophy, as more than another professionalized discipline, can revitalize the ‘multiversity’ of narrow specialization and fragmentation. The figure of Ramḥal, master of grammar, rhetoric, Mussar, Talmudics, theatre, logic, Kabbalah, and poetry etc., is not part of a national pantheon, to be monumentalized and then forgotten, but an ongoing challenge.

Towards conclusion, I wish to focus on the contribution of Mussar to the university, beyond the practice of *heshbon nefesh*: Mussar, as in classics such as *Mesilat Yesharim*, can be viewed as part of a wider Western tradition of thought on the virtues. Following various writers, I feel it is time to reflect on the virtues that are important for really studying at the university.⁶⁴ Numerous traditional texts, including legal

⁶³ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, Md.: Sheed and Ward Book and Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009). See also Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2007); Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996). As a point of intellectual history, one should note the importance of John H. Newman’s *The Idea of a University* (available at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/>)

⁶⁴ For a sampling of a large literature on these topics, see Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford New York: Clarendon Press Oxford University Press, 2006);

statements insist on immersion in Halakha and Mussar as a precondition for studying mystical texts. As we have seen, this was the position of Ramḥal's opponents, and the controversy was leveraged in order to reinstate these regulations (in a cultural process that has also been discussed in Maoz Kahana's forthcoming book). Rather than seeing these opponents only as the 'villains of the piece', one can take a more dialectical view and inquire as to the merit of this position. Thus, in the 21st century, we could consider the updated virtues we regard to be essential for studying mysticism in the academia.

Cooperation with colleagues is now listed prominently in the list of expectations of new faculty posted with Hebrew University searches. Likewise, the *taqqanon*, or code, on promotions adds to this *hishtalvut* (blending or integration) with one's designated academic unit. At least the first is a laudable virtue, yet should not such essentially adaptational criteria be balanced with truthfulness, honesty, honor and moral courage? The desired motto thus being 'fortitudo prodo laurus'. My sense is that in academia today, the words of the Winograd Report on the 2006 Lebanon War, according to which one's duty to one's professional judgment overrides any duty to superiors, is eminently relevant. Courage and honesty can only flourish if academic freedom is constantly cultivated. Here I refer to freedom not as a negative or as a means, but as a virtue in and of itself, known in Kabbalistic writing as the world of freedom (*'alma de hiru*) necessary for *binah*, or deep understanding. In prevailing and in my view unhelpful politicized dichotomies, some of these virtues are associated with 'liberal' thought and others with 'conservative'. However, I see them as parts of a whole. To mention but one example: The honor and self-dignity of one's field cannot be reconciled with an atmosphere of chasing desperately after students, who should be desperate seekers of wisdom (as

Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); James Bowman, *Honor: A History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007); William I. Miller, *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004). There is a large theological literature on honor and especially on glory that can also well translate the Hebrew *kavod*. However, I wish to focus on *Mesilat Yesharim*, chapter 19, where the concern for the *kavod* of God is described as the heart of *hasidut*.

Maimonides put it, following the Arabic term *talibān*), and not customers. In my view such exhibiting of low self-esteem will only exacerbate the crisis of the humanities.⁶⁵

Generally speaking, I follow here the approach of Philip Wexler (that I believe is also shared in a different way by Elliot Wolfson), according to which Jewish spiritual texts should not only be interpreted through social science theory, but can also contribute to such theory (especially educational theory) no less than say (my own example) turn of the twentieth-century Central European psychology (aka psychoanalysis).⁶⁶ After Heschel, Levinas, and others, the world is more open to the intellectual contributions of Jewish civilization, yet now is the time for the wisdom of the heart, the marvelous biblical exegesis of Gottlieb-Zorenberg marking the beginnings of this process. It is my hope to develop this in my above-mentioned Israel Science Foundation project, as well as two more projected projects, both of which have their genesis in enriching conversations with Joseph Weiler.

Such soul-searching seems to be appropriate for a time of profound and troubling transformation in the very nature of the university. This questioning can only be conducted in an atmosphere in which the virtues of freedom and courage are cultivated. We have examined here the impingement upon spiritual and intellectual life by a variety of institutions, in a sad trajectory leading from a short-lived outburst of independence, facilitated by the setting of Padua, through inquisitorial procedures to the burning or burying of books, some of which were lost, and some of which misidentified (as discussed in my bibliographical article). As an institution, the Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization is a true haven in which incisive investigations can be pursued, free from academic or religious *doxa* and their accompanying institutional apparatuses. **There can be no meaningful academic freedom without time to read, think and converse, as well as the necessary conditions for these, all of which are uniquely found at the center.** While Foucault and Agamben have focused on modern forms of control in space (prisons, barracks, clinics, hospitals, madhouses,

⁶⁵ Maimonides ruling can be found in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Rotzeakh ve-Shmirat Ha-Nefesh, 7:1*.

⁶⁶ See Philip Wexler, *Holy Sparks: Social Theory, Education, and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*; Garb, *Shamanic Trance*.

schools, detention camps, etc.), in a globalized world, disciplinary institutions and forces regulate time.⁶⁷

The contributions of members of the research group and of members of other centers at Washington Square North 22, only some of which were mentioned here, exemplify the role of intellectual networks in the formation of knowledge and the facilitation of creativity.

⁶⁷ See Ellisa Marder, *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).