

# RAMCHAL BIOGRAPHY: PART 1 - HIS LIFE

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

1.

There are certain lives that are inherently captivating, and Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's was certainly that. Born in Paduah, Italy in 1707 to wealthy parents, he took to literature and Torah studies early on. In fact, that early interest in literature served his writing style well throughout his life, and his Torah studies formed the basis of his literary output.

He obviously mastered all of Tanach, Talmud, and all sorts of rabbinical commentaries and halachic codes, as one can see by his profuse and authoritative quotations from traditional sources throughout his writings. And he also acquired a profound command of Kabbalah since he was known to have memorized all the writings of the Ari when he was 14.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (known as Ramchal) was a student of one of the greatest rabbis and kabbalists in Italy at the time, Rabbi Yeshaya Bassan, from early on to age 15, when Rabbi Bassan left Paduah to fill his father-in-law's rabbinical position. Rabbi Bassan's father-in-law was the great Kabbalist Rabbi Binyamin HaKohen, who was himself a student of the famous Kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Zacuto. So Ramchal's teachings clearly followed the path of a well known kabbalistic tradition. Ramchal himself had a couple of profound meetings with Rabbi HaKohen at the end of the latter's life in which he discussed his own Kabbalistic insights. We'll cite one of Ramchal's revealing letters to the elder kabbalist shortly.

At age 17 Ramchal joined a small, clandestine group of pietists known as "Mevakshei Hashem" (Seekers of G-d). Among the things they demanded of their members, aside from devout and altruistic allegiance to Torah study and mitzvah observance, was that each member commit himself to a set and inviolable study-schedule that was solely dedicated to the well-being of the Jewish Nation and to "Tikkun HaShechina" (the rectification of the Divine Presence in the world). The entire group most especially concentrated on an around-the-clock study of the Zohar, with each member taking his turn, and the next in line starting his course of study some 15 minutes before the previous ended his (as the one following him started \*his\* study session 15 minutes beforehand) to ensure a sure flow of study. Ramchal received semicha (i.e., he was formally ordained) at age 19, while yet a member of Mevakshei Hashem.

2.

The phenomenon that most especially defined his life was the series of times that a Maggid (a

Heavenly Agent) appeared to him and provided him with direct instruction, starting at age 20. While the experience itself was personally uplifting and enlightening, and allowed Ramchal the sort of profound insights that affected his works (and even provided the very wording in several instances), it also led to the great and terrible polemic that plagued him for years and nearly closed off his works from us.

We'll quote now from remarks a student of Ramchal's (Rabbi Yekutiel Gordon) made in a letter about some of these appearances to a leading Italian rabbi, when Ramchal was 22.

"There is a young man here, tender in years, (who) is a holy man: my master and teacher ... Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. For these past two and a half years a Maggid has appeared to him ... who reveals wondrous mysteries to him .... With the approval of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shechina, the Maggid ordered him to compose a Book of the Zohar, called in Heaven 'The Second Zohar' ....

"This is what happens (when the Maggid, referred to here as "the angel", appears). The angel speaks out of Ramchal's mouth but we, his disciples, hear nothing. The angel begins to uncover great mysteries to him. Then my master orders Elijah to come to him, and he comes to uncover mysteries of his own. Sometimes, Metatron, the great prince, also comes to him, as well as the Faithful Shepherd (i.e., Moses), our forefather Abraham, Rabbi Hamnuna the Elder, ... the Messiah, and Adam ....

"To sum up, nothing is hidden from him. At first permission was only granted (from Heaven) to reveal to him the mysteries of the Torah, but now all sorts of things are revealed to him. But no one outside our circle knows of it .... As he has demonstrated to all, no one before him has had this kind of merit since the time of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (the author of the Zohar)."

Ramchal himself spoke of the revelations, among other things about himself, in one of his letters to Rabbi Binyamin HaKohen, whom we'd cited above.

"The L-rd who is righteous and who searches all hearts is my witness in Heaven and my testimony on high as to why I have kept (my revelations) secret from your honor .... But now that the matter is public knowledge ... I am very pleased to hear that you know of it ... (and) I am especially glad to know that your honor, in his goodness and integrity, accepts it as true and reliable .... "G-d-fearing people come to me every day to hear the new things that G-d tells me. Many young men who had once walked in the vain ways of young people have now, thank G-d, ... returned to G-d, and come to me to receive Tikkunim (rectifications) for their (past) deeds.

"At this time G-d ... wished to reveal a new light (to the world) in the category of the Zohar .... He chose me for this in His mercy. If you were to ask me about the kind of preparations (I engage in to deserve this), what could I say? The truth is that it has come about through G-d's love alone and has little to do with my preparations for it. Nonetheless, it is also true that I have been zealous for years about reciting Yichudim (mystical recitations of particular Divine Names). I perform a different Yichud

practically every fifteen minutes, and I do this even now, thank G- d .... And the Creator now uses me as the instrument for the fulfillment of His purpose."

He then went into further detail as follows:

"On the first of Sivan in the year 5487 (1727), as I was reciting a certain Yichud, I fell into a trance. When I awoke, I heard a voice saying: 'I have descended in order to reveal the hidden secrets of the Holy King'. For a while I stood there trembling, but I soon took hold of myself. The voice kept on speaking and revealed a particular secret to me.

"At the same time on the second day I made sure to be alone in the room, and the voice reappeared to reveal another secret to me. One day he revealed to me that he was a Maggid sent from Heaven and he gave me certain Yichuddim that I was to recite in order for him to appear again.

"I never saw him but I did hear his voice as it spoke through my own mouth. He then allowed me to ask him questions. After about 3 months he revealed to me the Yichuddim I would have to recite to be worthy of having Elijah reveal himself to me. He then charged me to compose a work on Ecclesiastes on the basis of the mystical meaning of its verses that he had revealed to me, and Elijah came and imparted his own secrets to me. (The Maggid) said that Metatron, the great prince, would be coming to me and that I would know that it is he because of what Elijah had said. From then on I came to recognize each of my visitors. Souls whose identity I know are also revealed to me. Each day I write down the new ideas each of them imparts to me. All these things happen while I lie prostrate, with my face to the ground, and I see the holy souls in human form as in a dream."

3.

Word of these revelations came to the Rabbinic leaders of the time, and while many of them were effulgent in their praise of the young Kabbalist, some others (of great prominence) were flabbergasted by the idea of so young a person being privy to such revelations, and they did all they could to stifle him.

As dumbfounding as the thought of denying Ramchal's brilliance and the level of his revelations appear to us now, it was rooted in something quite rational. For only some 100 years before the false messiah Shabbatai Tzvi (d.1676) had wreaked havoc throughout the Jewish world, and nearly undid the foundations of the Faith, G-d forbid. The entire Jewish community was still reeling from that in Ramchal's time, and beyond. The whole matter is a subject unto itself, but suffice it to say that the leaders of Ramchal's generation were rightly leery about a new false messiah and any more subsequent threats to our people.

Some rather unkind things were said about Ramchal, though his defenders did laud his trustworthiness as well as his piety. A great deal of Ramchal's correspondences from the time and afterwards have survived and it's thus evident that despite and throughout it all, he defended his experiences stoutly while maintaining his lofty perch. In any event, threatened with

excommunication, Ramchal swore not to transmit the Maggid's revelations or teach Kabbalah.

He left Italy for Amsterdam In 1735, and while passing through Germany he appealed to the rabbinical authorities there to advocate for him to the Italian rabbis. They refused and instead forced him to sign a statement denouncing his own experiences. Most of his writings were burned, though some did survive.

He was able to pursue his studies of kabbalah relatively unhindered while in Amsterdam, and was accepted as a great man there. 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 Messilat Yesharim (The Path of the Just), as well as Derech Hashem (The Way of G-d), Da'at Tevunot (Knowing the Reasons), and more.

A major rabbinic near-contemporary who praised Ramchal's writing was Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), the most authoritative Torah sage of the time as well as a great kabbalist. He was reported to have said after reading The Path of the Just, that were Ramchal still alive, he (the Gaon) would have walked from Vilna to learn at his feet. The Holy Maggid of Mezritch (Dov Bair, the successor to the Baal Shem Tov) also praised the "Chassid of Paduah" and his works to the Chassidim. And to this day Ramchal is praised from all corners of the Jewish world as a great mystic, moralist, teacher, tzaddik, and writer.

He left Amsterdam for Israel in 1743 and settled in Acco. Three years later, he and his family died tragically in a plague, and he was buried near Rabbi Akiva in Tiberias.

May the memory of the righteous be a blessing for us all!

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