

THE RAMCHAL

RABBI MOSHE HAIM LUZZATO.

Born in 1707 and died in 26th of Iyyar, 1747.

A] Messilat Yesharim.

It is well known (and recorded by Rabbi Yechezkel Sarne' in his edition of the "Messilat Yesharim") that the Gaon of Wilna made the statement that the already deceased Ramchal is his Rebbe. He added that would he still be alive in his period, he would not rest a moment or waste time till he would travel to Italy (the land of domicile of the Ramchal) so to hear from his lips words of wisdom. He also said that in this aforementioned book there is not an unnecessary word until chapter 11. From there on there are some unnecessary repetitions. It is well known that in the famous Mussar Yeshivos of Lithuania, the major Mussar work pondered and to be fully absorbed, was only the above work.

What was the "chiddush" that this volume initiated in Jewry?

The answer is that it is the first attempt to purify and improve a person's moral character by applying only that advice given by our ancient sages. True, we have already several Mussar works proceeding the day of Ramchal. For instance: "Hovot Halvavot" or "Reshit Chochma" or "Or-chot Zaddikim" or even "Tomer Devorah". Yet not one of them utilized the ladder offered by Chazzal, who knew what they knew by Ru-ach Hakodesh and by exegesis of the Holy Scripts.

The ladder is the following: "Study of the Torah brings about Cautiousness, which brings about alacrity, from which devolves spiritual purity, which in turn brings about continence and abstinence, which eventually leads to immaculate innocence, which of course will be transformed into Hassidic piety. This will be followed by true humility which will lead to true awe of G-d. The end result will be Kedusha, the epitome of holiness. These ten stepping stones (taught by the great master Rabbi

Pinchas be Ya-ir, Tractate Avoda Zara 20b) are deduced from the Holy Bible by the Talmud Yerushalmi (Tractate Shkolim Chap. 3 end of Hakacha 3).

It is truly odd that over 1,600 years passed after the Talmud taught us of this “ladder of spiritual ascent”, yet not one author based his plan of moral progress according to this master-plan. As the sages attest in a similar matter: “his forefathers skipped a few matters, so to allow their descendents to initiate novel thoughts” (Tractate Hullin Page 7a). Here we have before a master-plan how to succeed in improving our natures.

B] Daily Cheshbon Nefesh

Another novel point to ponder is the particular advice rendered by our sages, to dedicate a few minutes daily to examine and analyze our constant actions, our errors and mistakes. We should dedicate some thoughts how to safeguard that we not repeat our faults.

We were told of the necessity of this daily procedure by our Sages (Tractate Baba Basra 78b) and the Kabbalists (Zohar Book 3 page 178) advise us to do this daily. Yet this is not pressed upon us by any other medieval author as a major piece of advice for daily improvement (Mesillas Yeshorim, chap. 3).

Truly the book “Messilas Yesharim” is a master-piece of Mussar. Yet even in many of his other works (over 30 books and articles, see my list in my book titled “**Otzrot Ramchal**”) we find deep insights.



C] Humility

Concerning the topic of “humility”, many people ask: “If G-d prohibits us from conceit, why is it that apparently He Himself requests us to praise Him?” Even more so, the verse in Tehillim (93, 1) “G-d is clothed by pride” seems to run counter to what we are taught to refrain from haughtiness.

Another question asked is: why should we lie to ourselves? If we have a true particular value, why should we “cover-up” and “make-believe” that we have no such positive attribute? To be humble means to lie?

The Ramchal replies (in his book “**Leshon Limudim**”) that truly we must understand why a person should not be proud at all of any true value that he finds in his personality, since simultaneously he finds also other shortcomings in his character. For example,

- If a person is orderly and methodical, nevertheless he is so too an angry sort, irritable and sometimes nasty.
- If a person is clever yet it is also true that he is harsh with other people who are not as alert or intelligent as he is.

Therefore by what right could he be proud of himself, since he is constantly with great faults (even though they are unknown to his contemporaries).

However, if we would find one individual who is lily-white perfect, with no deficiency, certainly he would be justified in being proud of himself.

Therefore G-d Almighty who is certainly the exemplification of excellence and perfect worth, He is the One and Only who is entitled to be Proud. This profound and erudite explanation we owe to Ramchal, who was not preceded by any other Sage or commentator with this explanation.



Yir'at Shoma'im

Another major lesson taught by this great master is that even though a Rabbi may be well versed in Talmudic lore, if he is lacking in “Yir'at Shoma'im” then he is faulty in his legal decisions also.

This tremendous point is taken up by Ramchal in his introduction to “Messilas Yesharim”. He explains that the only true wisdom is that of awe of the Lord.

The source for this extreme dictum is the Chazzal adage that the biblical term "hen" is based on the Greek "uno", the only true wisdom is awe of the Lord.

Other disciplines are termed "wisdom" by incidence and in a general and occasional way. This is what our sages taught – "woe unto him that erects a gate to his domicile, yet has no domicile there to dwell" (Tractate Shabbos, page 31b). For the true dwelling is "awe of the Lord".

All of our ancient literature teaching us what is permissible and what is prohibited, yet they are only the peripheries of the Torah.

This self-same point is taught in Pirkei Avos (Chap. 3) – "Rabbi Hanina ben-Dosa said, He who's awe of the Lord precedes his knowledge, his knowledge will prevail. But if not, his knowledge will dwindle into nothingness".

This point is taken up by King David in his tirade (Psalms) against Do'eg the Edomite. As well known, he was the head of the Sanhedrin (Rashi to Shmuel I 21, 8). Nevertheless he lost his part in the Everlasting World (Tractate Sanhedrin; page 90a). – How so?

King David teaches:

"Unto the wicked villain G-d calls 'For what reason do you mouth my laws, why should you pronounce my Torah tenets on your lips? Is it not so that you hate Mussar, therefore you cast My word behind your back!... Therefore you slander your brother Jew, therefore you cast upon him vile aspersions". (Psalms 50, 16-20).

Therefore in the continuation of King David's prayer on this topic, he beseeches "Oh Do'eg... why do you preen yourself on your actions?... therefore G-d will destroy you forever and pluck you out of your tent and root you out of the eternal land of life". (Psalms 52, 2-7).

Our Sages explain this as to say that Do'eg prided himself on his proficiency in Torah lore (Midrash Tehillim 52, 6-7) and in order for him to forfeit his eternity it would be necessary to void that knowledge, since eternal life and Torah erudition are intertwined (Tractate Kessubos page 111b).

Therefore David requested that G-d cause Do'eg to forget his vast knowledge (Tractate Sanhedrin, page 106b) and therefore automatically he lost his eligibility to a portion of the World to Come.

Why should David be so unforgiving? Why is it that he should not let by-gones be by-gones? **The answer is** that this was to be a moral lesson to be given unto all of those who wish to attain Jewish knowledge. As the Psalms verse continues there: "And the righteous shall see all this and will fear, but also laugh and rejoice concerning Do'eg. Lo, is this the man that made G-d his fortress? Not so! For he trusted in the abundance of his riches and there arrogantly continued his mischievous wickedness" (Psalms 52, 8-9).

Ramchal teaches that the paramount lesson taught by the Do'eg the Edomite episode is, that abundant Torah knowledge but sans true awe of the Lord, must eventually lead to amorality, and must lead to treachery and deceit. Therefore the other students of the Torah law, witnessing his downfall, will fear for their own spiritual status, they will be hurtfully concerned and worried how they can warranty their own spiritual level? But so too they will rejoice at the downfall of the wicked. Since those who are only "apparently" Torah scholars, yet are scoffing the Mussar values, their overturn and disaster is only a matter of time. Therefore the wisest man on earth, King Solomon, opens his book with the pithy statement: "Awe of the "Lord is the very commencement of knowledge (i.e. one cannot make even the first step, if lacking this value) wisdom and Mussar only fools despise" (Mishlei 1, 7).



D] Nimshal of our secret lore

The above cardinal lesson we learnt from Ramchal.

But we have gained from him even another extra-ordinary lesson. It is well known that the Ari-zal opened up for us the abstruse literature of the Zohar documents. A common adage has it that the Zohar is similar to Torah She'biktav and without Torah She-Bal-Peh we are yet left in the dark. However, the 8 volumes that we gained from the Arizal are similar to Mishnayos without any Talmud or Gemarra, if taken without Ramchal.

How so? This is since all of the teachings of the Arizal were only riddles and parables. One must be a great expert to unravel these mysteries ("nefesh Ha-chaim", book 3 chapter 7). This field called "Nimshal" was opened up for us by Ramchal. As the Gaon of Wilna attests (reprinted by Rabbi Friedlander in his new edition of "Da'as Tevunos" page 236) **only three people in the world** really knew the Nimshal of our secret lore, and one of them was Ramchal. He gave us some good clues and guiding lines in the literature that he left behind him.



Another great value that we owe this master is a scientific and orderly guide how to learn Gemara. In his book "**Derech Tvunot**" we have a masterful teacher for this difficult field. To our consternation, many of contemporary Yeshiva students are ignorant of the fact that there is at all such a book, let alone knowledge of its contents and directives.

Another great work that the master bequeathed us is a "reader" just what are the tenets of our faith? True the Rambam said that there are 13 principles. But how are they explainable? For this we have his book "**Derech Hashem**". Here we find all major issues of Jewish faith unfolded in a masterly fashion. This work was recently republished with hundreds of wonderful footnotes and added explanations by the renowned **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan z"l** "the Handbook of Jewish thought". (Maznaim Publishing Corporation" 1979).



Ramchal was born in 1707 and died in 1747. One wonders, why such a short life? However one is reminded of the Arizal's words that when a Zaddik has completely his earthly tasks, he immediately returns to his celestial abode. For a real Zaddik this mundane world is a let-down, it is trial and tribulation (as written by Ramchal in "Messilass Yeshorim", chapter one concerning the unwillingness of the soul to descend unto earth upon birth of the individual). Upon completion of its tasks the true Zaddik rejoices at his departure, as written in Mishlei (chapter 31, 25) "Rejoice at your final day". So too we must comprehend that within this short span of forty years, Ramchal achieved all that was committed unto him.

What must also be known is why he died within a short period of entering Israel? (he is now buried in Tiberias, close by to the grave of Rabbi Akiva).

The answer given by his great mentor **Rabbi Yeshaya Bassan**, is that Ramchal's soul is a spark from that of Moshe Rabbenu. Just as that great Master cannot enter the Holy Land before the time of the final redemption, so too Ramchal, who spent so much energy in discussing and teaching this great topic (See his book "**Taktu** (=515) **Prayers**").



It is proper that we study his character and his written legacy, the literature that he bestowed us.

We should attempt to garner every grain of spiritual profit that we are able to get from this Torah giant and holy saint.

As aforementioned, his yahrzeit is 26th of Iyyar.