

Foreword

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When one knows a number of things and understands how they are categorized and systematically interrelated, then he has a great advantage over one who has the same knowledge without such a distinction. It is very much like the difference between looking at a well-arranged garden planted in rows and patterns, and seeing a wild thicket or forest growing in confusion. (*Derech HaShem*, paragraph 1)¹

The human mind is not capable of grasping the universe. We are like a little child entering a huge library. The walls are covered to the ceilings with books in many different tongues. The child knows that someone must have written these books. He does not know who or how. He does not understand the languages in which they are written. But the child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books—a mysterious order which he does not comprehend, but only dimly suspects. (Albert Einstein)

1 Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *The Way of God*, translated by Aryeh Kaplan (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1999), p. 21.

We live in turbulent times. Confusion abounds. The generation that lives before *Mashiach* is said to be living in “*Chevlei Mashiach*.” *Chevel* means rope, and we are all hanging onto a rope that is shaking violently. We are struggling not to fall off. Even great minds can lack clarity without proper guidance. Our Sages tell us that *emunah*, faith in G-d, is the most important tool for being successful in these difficult times.

Indeed, the foundation of Judaism is the realization that existence is purposeful, and that man has a purpose in life. Both man and nature have meaning because they were created by a purposeful Being. It is this Being that we call G-d. If there were no Creator, then the universe would be purposeless, human existence pointless, and life devoid of meaning and hope.

Our incredible universe did not arise by chance, similar to a beautiful poem that could not possibly have been written with a random splash of ink.

But the existence of a world that has a Creator raises the quintessential question: What is the purpose of life? What were we created for?

The Ramchal’s works answer questions that still plague us today. Do our acts matter for salvation? How can we gain knowledge of G-d’s plan? What is the relationship between the physical realm and the spiritual? What is the meaning and purpose of life? If G-d is in charge of the universe, how can we have free will?

The Ramchal’s writings were—and are—powerful because they addressed the great questions and concerns of his day; moreover, his answers revealed that the major “threats” to Jewish practice were not as threatening as people might have thought, as we shall see.

Brief biography of the Ramchal and overview of the times in which he lived

Any classic work of literature can be properly understood from the context of the culture of its time. Ramchal’s works are no exception.

Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known by the acronym “Ramchal,” was a leader whose greatness was largely recognized only years after his passing. Ramchal lived a very short life, passing away before the age of forty. In his brief life span, he managed to author approximately a

hundred *sefarim*, and with them he left an indelible mark on all future Jewish generations.

Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was born in Padua, Italy, in the year 1707. His father, Reb Yaakov Chai, was a Torah scholar and supported his family by dealing in silk and grain. Since Rav Moshe Chaim's father was an affluent man and a great practitioner of hospitality, his home hosted many visitors from Eretz Yisrael. This made a tremendous impression on young Moshe Chaim, leaving him with a powerful sense of love and longing for the Holy Land.

From a young age, Rav Moshe Chaim was educated by Rav Yitzchak Chaim Cantarini, who taught him much Torah, as well as grammar, poetry, and the art of writing with logical power and stylistic beauty. The latter skill is clearly evident in the many *sefarim* he would write later in life.

After Rav Yitzchak Chaim passed away, the Ramchal was taught by Rav Yeshayah Bassan, the author of *She'eilos U'Teshuvos Lachmei Todah*. Rav Yeshayah was considered one of the *gedolei ha-dor*, and was an expert in both the revealed and esoteric facets of the Torah. Rav Yeshayah—known as the Mahari Bassan—was a *dayan* in Padua, and more broadly, a prominent leader of Italy's Jews. He was a student of the renowned *mekubal*, Rav Moshe Zacuto of Mantoba and of his father-in-law, Rav Binyamin HaKohein Vitale.

The Mahari Bassan viewed the Ramchal as much more than a student. In addition to teaching him both the hidden and revealed portions of the Torah, he also developed a profound understanding of the Ramchal's very soul, which he used to guide him and to transmit to him a way of thinking about the deepest aspects of the Torah. During these formative years, the Ramchal also acquired a secular education—which included the study of Latin, Italian, French, and Greek—as was customary in that time and place, and he developed an aptitude for playwriting and poetry.

When Rav Moshe Chaim was fifteen years old, the Mahari Bassan left Padua to assume the rabbinate in Reggio Emilia, where his father-in-law had been serving as *rav* and from which he was now retiring due to old age.

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After his *rebbe's* departure, Rav Moshe Chaim continued to immerse himself in Torah study and *avodas HaShem*, and he joined a society of men focused on spiritual growth, called “*Mevakshei HaShem*.” The members detached themselves from all worldly pursuits and primarily studied Kabbalah. Within this select group, the Ramchal became recognized as a prodigy, possessing extraordinary powers of comprehension and retention.

His peers also came to realize that in addition to his vast knowledge of *Shas* and *poskim*, Rav Moshe Chaim was also well-versed in all of the writings of the Arizal and the entire *Zohar*. It is said that “he did not know what it meant to forget something.” At a time when the publication of a book was a major accomplishment even for a recognized scholar, he already had written his first book of Kabbalah—at the age of fifteen.

His *rav* and teacher; Rav Yeshayah Bassan, wrote:

I have communicated to him all the steps of the knowledge, and all my spiritual possessions were at his disposition; nothing was hidden to this genius thirsty for knowledge. He was searching my entire library to find some of the writings of Kabbalah that G-d had granted me, then he would cross the stream, tasting the “Etz Chayim.” His mind would then enter the valleys of secrets, and began to love and delight in them...

When he was seventeen, the Ramchal composed his book *Lashon Limudim*, in which he stated the modern rules of gender, stylistics, rhetoric, and versification, as a guide to the Hebrew writer. The Ramchal demonstrated particular abilities in using metaphors and assonances, and he used this ability with great efficiency in his different dramatic writings. For this, the Ramchal would be proclaimed “the father of modern Hebrew literature.”

The main goal of the small group that the Ramchal had joined, and later led with Rabbi Moshe David Valli, (*Mevakshai HaShem*) was to draw themselves as close as possible to G-d. Among their rules was that some member of the group should be engaged in Torah study at all times, day

and night, and that they should make devotion to G-d their one and only goal in life.

Once the goals of this study group (and the revelation that the Ramchal was being taught by a heavenly *Maggid*) became known, some *rabbanim*, and particularly Rav Moshe Haggiz, became very concerned. They started to rally elder scholars against the Ramchal. To them, mysticism and Kabbalah were synonymous with endangerment of the community, because of the rift created within the Jewish community by the pseudo-messianic movement of Shabtai Tzvi.

The Ramchal's reluctance to fight back is largely described in the correspondence between the Ramchal and his *rav*, Rav Bassan. One letter written by the Ramchal to Rav Bassan clearly demonstrates his peaceful spirit, being above such quarrels: "Try by your wisdom, master, to refute their arguments...For what purpose (is) this quarrel...I do not want to create conflicts with anybody...It is peace that we need..."

To his antagonist Rav Moshe Haggiz, the Ramchal wrote:

To the illustrious wise...his name is among the greats...son of righteous...how come you, a sage—like an angel of G-d, have gone to war without trying to delve into the problem; to declare war against someone you have never met or seen...No, it is not a good thing. In any case, let us stop this quarrel...let us not give to the Sa'tan room to dance between us...

The period of persecution extended over five years, and the Ramchal was forced to respond to accusations, particularly those of the Rabbinical Court of Hamburg and its head, Rav Yechezkel Katzenellenbogen. In actuality, what was he really blamed for? Nothing specifically, except perhaps for having written on the subject of Kabbalah at a young age, having mentioned the *Mashiach*, and having revealed his communications with the *Maggid*.

Nevertheless, at the insistence of Rav Haggiz, in 1730, the Ramchal agreed to sign a document stating that he officially retracted his writings, and agreed that:

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The duty of every Jew is to obey the orders of the Rabbis, even if they say that the right hand is the left, and the left hand is the right, and to stop writing in the language of the Zohar on Kabbalah, in the name of the Maggid or other holy souls; so as not to provoke quarrels in the midst of the wise of Israel.

As mentioned, the main concern of the opposition was due to the painful period European Jewry had recently experienced. Approximately one hundred years earlier, a popular Jewish figure had emerged and wreaked havoc across the Jewish world. His name: Shabtai Tzvi. Recognized as a young, brilliant mystic, he led a mass of followers to believe that he was the *Mashiach*. By preying on the fact that most Jews were living in difficult conditions and experiencing anti-Semitism, he convinced large numbers of Jews that the final redemption was imminent. As he made his way toward Israel, he was stopped by the authorities in Turkey and imprisoned. Under threats of death from the Sultan, Shabtai Tzvi converted to Islam. His most ardent followers converted as well, claiming—incredibly—that it was all part of the process of redemption. For the majority of European Jewry, who sincerely believed and hoped for salvation, it was a devastating blow.

Understandably, when another young and charismatic scholar and mystic arose one century later (who we now know to be the great and righteous Ramchal), it raised suspicions among the local Rabbis, who feared another false *Mashiach*.

It was the emphasis on Kabbalah, combined with the Ramchal's growing popularity, which led the Rabbinical authorities of his time to pronounce a decree allowing the Ramchal to teach Kabbalah only under two conditions: that it had to be in the Land of Israel, and that he must be forty years old. Some rather unkind things were said about the Ramchal, though his defenders did laud his trustworthiness as well as his piety. Many thought it objectionable for one so young to teach and write books on Kabbalah and other esoteric subjects.

Amidst this controversy, the Ramchal moved with his family to Amsterdam, where he avoided public attention, devoting himself

instead to writing. On his trip from Italy to Amsterdam, he passed through Frankfurt. There, he encountered Dayan Rav Ya'acov Papiroch, who commanded him to leave and forced him to sign another agreement preventing him from writing on Kabbalah or studying its works with anyone until he reached the age of forty.

Ramchal was able to pursue his studies of Kabbalah relatively unhindered while in Amsterdam, and was accepted as a great man there. Earning a living at an occupation variously described as lens grinder or diamond cutter, he continued writing—but refused to teach. It was during this period that he wrote his magnum opus, *Mesilas Yesharim* (*The Path of the Just*), as well as *Derech HaShem* (*The Way of G-d*), *Da'as Tevunos* (*Knowing the Reasons*), and others.

The contribution of the Ramchal to Kabbalah has been compared to that of the Rambam to halachah. Out of the vast “sea” of Talmudic literature that only outstanding scholars could master, the Rambam had distilled his comprehensive *Code of Torah Law*. Also known as the *Mishneh Torah*, it was an all-time model of clarity and order that could be easily understood by all. Similarly, the Ramchal brought order and clarity to the labyrinth of Kabbalistic concepts and teachings in the writings of the Arizal, and produced a ladder of ascent and entry into its mysteries that could be used profitably by any serious student.

The source of the author's great talent for organization is not known for certain. Perhaps it is due to the fact that the Ramchal was a student of Rav Yitzchak Lampronti, author of the *Pachad Yitzchak*, the first major Talmudic encyclopedia ever assembled. It is reasonable to presume that the Ramchal learned the art of organization and systematization from him and then carried it to its logical conclusion when setting forth the most fundamental and profound concepts of Judaism.

In 1743, the Ramchal fulfilled his dream of settling in Eretz Yisrael. Very few details are known about his life there, except that he lived in the city of Akko. His stay in Israel lasted only a short period. In 1746, at the age of thirty-nine, he died in a plague, along with the rest of his family. According to most traditions, he was buried near Rabbi Akiva in Tiberias.

As is the case with some other great geniuses, the Ramchal's greatness was recognized as such only after his death. The Gaon of Vilna was of those who clarified the Ramchal's true greatness, declaring that if the Ramchal was still alive, he would have traveled to Italy on foot to learn from his wisdom.

About *Mesilas Yesharim*, the Vilna Gaon said: "This book is witness to the greatness of its author, and his extraordinary vision of the human potential for elevation."

The Vilna Gaon also commented that the Ramchal was the only Sage since the time of the Arizal who truly understood the Kabbalah.

The *Maggid* of Mezritch said about the Ramchal: "His generation did not have the merit of this great man. Such is the case that many of our people, through a lack of knowledge or understanding, have pronounced unjustified calumny upon him."

In the past generation, a series of fine, accurate Hebrew editions of many of the Ramchal's most important works have been published through the efforts of the late Rav Chaim Friedlander and other scholars, bringing them within easy reach of growing numbers of students. In addition, the Ramchal is now accessible even to those who do not know Hebrew through the translations of *The Path of the Just*, *The Way of God*, and *The Knowing Heart*, in addition to some of his works on logic and reasoning.

About *Derech HaShem*

Derech HaShem (The Way of G-d) is probably the most systematic exposition of Jewish fundamentals ever written. It explores Divine regulation of the world and it includes: the existence of G-d, the nature of G-d, Divine Providence, prophecy, the purpose of mitzvos, this world and the afterlife, and the Jewish people among the nations.

The book also illustrates how most of the other important teachings of Judaism are a logical consequence of these concepts.

We have to keep in mind that the Ramchal was writing to observant, generally well-educated Jews. He did not feel a need to explain basic Jewish concepts, but rather to organize them. His view, which may be just as valid today, was that people were learning Torah piecemeal, without

any clear overview of the fundamentals, and that this disorganization made it difficult to understand the “big picture” of the Torah’s view of life.

The Ramchal expounds, “Without this [big picture], one’s longing for truth will be frustrated and he will be pained by his unsatisfied desire.” It is similar to taking a class in human anatomy where every day the teacher chooses at random which limb or organ of the body to discuss, without ever explaining the reality of a skeletal system, a cardiovascular system, and so on. This approach would make it impossible to see the big picture of the human body.

It is therefore no wonder that *Derech HaShem* has been studied intensely by the greatest scholars, and at the same time has served as the ultimate introduction to Judaism for the novice.

The Ramchal ends with one exhortation:

I have worked to arrange these concepts in the order that seemed most suitable and in language considered most appropriate to provide a complete picture of what I deemed necessary. You should therefore go through this work carefully, diligently remembering each fact until you find use for it.²

This book, *G-d and Man: The Ultimate Plan*

My dear friend and former congregant Refael Moshe Becker has taken upon himself to disseminate the Ramchal’s works in a clear and lucid fashion—and in modern English. He thus enables many more individuals to benefit from this classic work. *G-d and Man: The Ultimate Plan* is, perhaps—so far!—Refael Moshe’s greatest achievement. This book, seemingly simple yet incredibly deep, gives the reader a clear understanding of the Ramchal’s *Derech HaShem* and a window to the purpose of life and how to attain it.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai declared, “I have seen people of high attainments (*b’nei aliyah*), but they are few.” It is indeed rare to meet such lofty souls, but undoubtedly the *mechaber* of this *sefer*,

2 Ibid., p. 26.

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Refael Moshe Becker, is one of them. He is constantly pushing himself to further heights in Torah, *tefillah*, and *gemilus chassadim*. Hence it is not surprising that he has taken upon himself to author multiple works with the specific purpose of spreading the works of the Ramchal.

I give my blessing to Refael Moshe that his work be enthusiastically welcomed by the many thirsting for the guidance that this book provides. May HaShem bless the author with continued success in his spiritual ascent and *nachas* from all his children.