Philosophy and Kabbalah in the Eighteenth Century

Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, Commentator of Maimonides

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Introduction

In the first half of the eighteenth century, a brilliant school of Kabbalah blossomed in Italy.\(^1\) Its representatives devoted themselves to the interpretation and dissemination of the teachings of Isaac Luria, the Master of Safed, often by comparing and contrasting them with those of Moses Cordovero. Some went beyond exegesis and developed original doctrines. This was the case for Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (ר"מ"ה, 1707–1746). In the ‘Adolescent of Padua’ Hayyim Nahman Bialik describes Luzzatto as ‘the man of opposites’.\(^3\) He highlights the plethora of domains in which Luzzatto excelled: a playwright and poet, Luzzatto was also ‘a logician, a mystic and a visionary’ endowed with a ‘clear mind’. He was capable of ‘swimming valiantly in the sea of the Talmud’ and ‘plunging into the depths of Kabbalah’. In Bialik’s opinion, the association of such a wide range of talents in one single individual was far from contradictory: ‘all these opposites became united in Luzzatto’s heart, the Adolescent of Padua.’

1. See also the chapter on ‘Luzzatto and Maimonides’ in my book, Moise Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–1746). Kabbale et philosophie (Paris 2004) 205–210. This chapter also examines other facets of the relationship between the two thinkers, in particular the question of divine attributes. In other parts of the books, I deal with Maimonides’ theory of prophecy and compare it to Luzzatto’s. The first monography on Luzzatto was published by S. Ginzburg: The Life and Works of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, Founder of Modern Hebrew Literature (Philadelphia, PA 1931).

2. This position aims at qualifying Moshe Idel’s assessment. He considers this period of transition between the flowering of Sabbateanism and the rise of Hasidism to be less creative than other times in the history of Kabbalah. See his preface to Hansel, Moise Hayyim Luzzatto.

3. Ch.N. Bialik, כ"ה ח"י ביאליק (Opera Omnia) (Tel Aviv 1936) 135–136. In his portrait of Luzzatto, Bialik does not mention his role as an ethical writer, the author of the famous Mesillat Yesharim (translated alternatively as The Path of the Upright or The Way of the Righteous).
The originality of Luzzatto and his works lies in the alliance he forged between disciplines that are typically considered to be competing, or even incompatible: logic, the instrument of rational thought, the royal road of philosophy, and Kabbalah, considered to be ‘prophetic wisdom’ by its proponents, ‘irrational’ by its detractors, and a ‘mystical experience’ by modern scholarship.\(^4\)

Luzzatto also stands out for the stances he took in the controversies which marked this period in modern Jewish history. One of the best known of these involved the repercussions of the messianic doctrine of Sabbatai Zevi in Jewish intellectual circles in Italy. Luzzatto’s special connection to the Sabbatean movement has attracted the attention of specialists, who have debated to what extent he adhered to this movement, rekindling the debate which led to his persecution during his lifetime.\(^5\) By contrast, the controversy in Italy over the works of Maimonides in the first decades of the eighteenth century has often been neglected. An exploration of this debate, however, can shed light on a key page in the history of the strained relationships between Kabbalah, and philosophy or ‘rational inquiry’ (חקירה).\(^6\)

1. **The Maimonidean Controversy in Italy**

As far back as the nineteenth century, these relationships were seen as a conflict where Maimonides played a major role.\(^6\) Such eminent historians and philosophers as Heinrich Graetz, David Neumark and Franz Rosenzweig saw the rise of Kabbalah as a direct reaction to the tenets set out by the author of the *Guide of the Perplexed*.\(^7\) Despite criticism of this stance by Scholem and his followers, this view is


\(^7\) All references to the *Guide of the Perplexed* are taken from S. Pines’ English translation (Chicago 1963).