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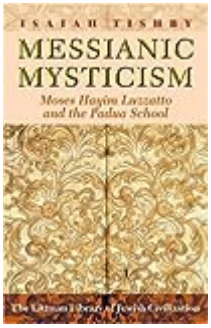

Isaiah Tishby. *Messianic Mysticism: Moses Hayim Luzzatto and the Padua School.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008. xxv + 578 pp. $69.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874774-09-9.

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Kabbalists and Messiahs in Eighteenth-Century Italy

Moses Hayim Luzzatto (1707-46) was undoubtedly one of the most important thinkers and fascinating personalities of eighteenth-century Italian Jewry. The scion of an influential Jewish family in Padua, Luzzattoâs life and literary legacy project a distinctly contradictory set of images. At once a poet, playwright, moralist, kabbalist, self-fashioned leader of a messianic group, radical prophet, and exiled accused heretic, Luzzatto nonetheless came to be celebrated by Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, as well as secular Jews of later generations. His works, especially *Mesilat Yesharim* and *Derekh ha-Shem*, have been copiously reprinted in many editions and remain popular to this day. Isaiah Tishbyâs contribution to the study of Luzzatto, both in terms of manuscript work as well as critical analysis, is of seminal importance, and the translations of his Hebrew studies of Luzzatto that appear in this volume are an invaluable asset to English readership.

The ten chapters of this book, along with an introduction by Joseph Dan and a detailed index, cover a wide range of interesting aspects of Luzzattoâs life and work. Many of the compositions by Luzzatto that Tishby addresses in this volume would be quite surprising to one familiar with Luzzattoâs more popular writing. Included here are a number of previously unknown works that Tishby discovered in MS Oxford 2593, as well as poetry (reproduced in both Hebrew and English), and several prayers that Luzzatto composed for a variety of occasions, including a confessional prayer that he wrote for his group of kabbalists in Padua. Tishby also gives attention to the works of Moses David Valle (a significant member of Luzzatoâs kabbalistic group), reproducing his mystical diary, rife with messianic overtones, and he explores the question of the spread of Luzzattoâs works in Eastern Europe, and their influence on Hasidic schools of thought.

One of the most striking compositions discussed in this collection of studies is the kabbalistic commentary that Luzzatto wrote to his own marriage contract when he married Zipporah, the daughter of Rabbi David Finzi of Mantua, in 1731. This remarkable text, as noted in Danâs introduction, sheds important light on Luzzattoâs messianic posture. Luzzatto came to be regarded with

suspicion when he began claiming as early as 1727 that he was receiving revelations of a maggid or heavenly voice, enabling him to compose prophetic pronouncements, and even a ânew Zohar,â which it seems he shared with the group of kabbalists that he led in Padua. Added to this was the accusation leveled by Moses Hagiz before the rabbis of Venice that he intercepted a letter by a member of Luzzattoâs group containing evidence that Luzzatto was a follower of Shabbtai Zvi. Luzzattoâs teacher and champion, Isaiah Bassan, convinced him that he could quell at least some of the controversy if he would agree to marry, since remaining single into oneâs mid-twenties was itself understood to be unseemly. The discovery of Luzzattoâs kabbalistic commentary to his own marriage contract reveals that while his decision to marry was in part a concession intended to placate his critics, the marriage was also understood by Luzzatto as a union of divine dimensions, literally heralding the messianic era. Situating this document within the broader context of Luzzattoâs messianic doctrine, Tishby concludes that Luzzatto regarded himself as serving the role of Moses, whose task is to guide the actions of the Messiah son of Joseph and the Messiah son of David. Evidence indicates, according to Tishby, that Luzzatto understood Valle to be the Messiah son of David, while none other than Zvi was regarded as the Messiah son of Joseph. Luzzattoâs orientation to Sabbatianism is complex, and Tishby devotes an entire study (chapter 5 of this volume) to exploring this question. Another of Luzzattoâs group, Jekutiel of Vilna, was believed to serve as Seraiah of the tribe of Dan, the general of the forces of the messianic army. Luzzattoâs commentary to his marriage contract is reproduced in full English translation in the volume, along with Tishbyâs illuminating notes. Taken together with Valleâs diary, these texts provide important source material for an underappreciated moment of messianic ferment.

A tantalizing question that Tishbyâs work on Luzzatto raises is the relationship between the esoteric and messianic discourse that these works contain, and the broader intellectual and cultural context in which they took shape. We know that Luzzatto received an education in non-Jewish areas of knowledge, and he even defended his colleague Jekutiel from detractors who took issue with his study of âGentile wisdom,â since he came to Padua originally to study medicine. How are we to understand these otherwise âworldlyâ men in their turn toward Jewish esoteric discourse as the source for all true knowledge? As Luzzatto remarks in a text addressing Jeremiah 9:22, âLet not the wise man glory in his wisdom,â found in MS Oxford 2593, âthe whole science of truth [kabbalah] rests solely on this question, the question of the holiness of Israel: how the Holy One, blessed be He, adheres to them in His holiness and how Israel must adhere, through their desire and their worship, to His holiness, blessed be He; and how all the affairs of the world and of the all creation have rested upon this basis ever since they came into existence and [will do so] to all eternityâ (p. 47). There remains work to be done in better situating Luzzatto and his colleagues within the eighteenth-century Italian intellectual context. The English rendering of Tishbyâs discoveries will hopefully prove fruitful in this respect.

Taken together, the texts and studies contained in this volume provide a rich resource for considering the at times ironic and often secret role that mystical and messianic discourse plays in Jewish religious, intellectual, and cultural history. While Littmanâs handsome edition could benefit from the inclusion of a brief biographical introduction for readers otherwise unfamiliar with Luzzattoâs biography, and an updated bibliography listing more recent scholarship, *Messianic Mysticism* is at present the largest single resource for the study of Luzzatto in English.

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