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Saraf Pri Etz Haim:
Rabbi Moshe of Dolina's Kabbalistic Activities as a
Mirror for the Study of Lurianic Kabbalah in Early
Hasidim

Rabbi Moshe Shoham of Dolina (1730-1820) lived in Eastern Galicia during the period which saw the rise and growth of Hasidism. Rabbi Moshe was brought up in the Ba'al Shem Tov's (the *Besht*'s) home. The service he performed for the *Besht* was close to that of a personal servant, but at the same time he was one of the *Besht*'s outstanding students. The close relationship between Rabbi Moshe, the *Besht*, and some of the latter's peers, during the period of the expansion of the Hasidic movement, makes Rabbi Moshe's writings an important source for the study of the Hasidic movement and for understanding the nature of the spiritual bond between the *Besht* and his inner circle of students and peers.

The present study wishes to examine various issues which arise from an analysis of Rabbi Moshe's work, Saraf Pri Etz Haim (SPEC). This book is a unique, revised edition of Rabbi Meir Poper's (RMP) renowned book, Pri Etz Haim (PEC). It provides insight into some of the characteristics of the study of Lurianic Kabbalah in early Hasidism.

SPEC was originally written by Rabbi Moshe as an independent book, rather than as a commentary or a revised edition of the PEC. Rabbi Moshe began writing it when he was a mature scholar, and finished it when he was 63 years old. The book was apparently aimed at scholars versed in Kabbalah, who would be able to follow his comparisons and the sources he integrated from the vast corpus of Lurianic literature. It is likely that the book served as a guide for outstanding students of Kabbalah and not as a popular book of "*kavanot*" (intentions for prayer) and "*hanhagot*" (directions on conduct) for the general public.

This research concentrates on this one work, in an attempt to characterize it from a literary and conceptual perspective. This examination is carried out through a comparison to works from the SPEC's immediate intellectual environment and, in particular, the teachings of Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov, Rabbi Shabbtai of Rashkov and various later Hasidic writers.

This study focuses on the following topics:

A. Rabbi Moshe's method of editing and its significance: The fact that Rabbi Moshe Shoham, a close student of the *Besht* and part of the first generation of Hasidism, prepared a revised

edition of the PEC shortly after it was first printed in 1785 forces us to examine the purpose of his new edition of the book, and to ask what it can teach us concerning Rabbi Moshe's method of Kabbalah study.

B. The order of the SPEC: An analysis of SPEC shows that Rabbi Moshe placed the sections of the book in logical order, beginning with conceptual parts and followed by a discussion of essential questions, all of which introduce the later discussions of the practice and technique of certain Kabbalistic customs. However, the book is also arranged so as to follow closely the daily schedule of the Kabbalist, but without the characteristics of either Kabbalistic prayer books or of practical "kavanah" books. This arrangement is an attempt to introduce general ideas to the student of Lurianic Kabbalah prior to more practical study. This order convinces us that the book was certainly not

intended for the dissemination of Kabbalistic ideas among the masses. Moreover, Rabbi Moshe's book offers a textual criticism of the PEC, through an exposition of various Lurianic traditions and rulings and the use of manuscripts and reliable printed sources Rabbi Moshe aims thereby to create a unified structure of "*kavanot*" leading to a harmonious view of Lurianic customs and a deepening of the religious experience of the Kabbalist.

C. Rabbi Moshe's library, as reflected in his book: A person's library can serve as a mirror reflecting his socio-cultural status. Rabbi Moshe's differentiated use of the Kabbalistic works at his disposal testifies to a hierarchical classification of different books, based on his perception of their presentation of accurate Kabbalist traditions. In this respect the books *Etz Haim* and *Mevo She'arim*, edited by Rabbi Haim Vital and his son Shmuel, stand at the head of the literary pyramid, forming the foundation of Lurianic teaching. From these two works grow the branches - the literature on the reasons for the *Mitzvot* (commandments) and the compilations of the Torah; as well as the fruits, or the *Pri Etz Haim*. The book *Pardess Rimonim* by Rabbi Moshe Kordovero (the *RaMaK*), is thus considered a non-authoritative book by Rabbi Moshe, as it is by other Lurianic Kabbalists. Similarly, Rabbi Moshe viewed Rabbi Joseph Irgas's "*Shomer Emunim*" and the "*Mishnat Hasidism*" by Rabbi Emmanuel Hai Riqi, both of which attempted to explicate the teachings of Lurianic Kabbalah in ways contrary to the teachings found in the Vital family's books (mentioned above), as problematic. In later Hasidism we find the study of Lurianic Kabbalah established by Rabbi Moshe's followers: Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Zidichov, Rabbi Yitzhak Izak Yechiel Yehuda Saphrin of Komarno, and Rabbi Tzaddok Hacohen of Lublin. On the other hand, there were still various circles of Hasidim who were influenced by the Kabbalistic teachings of the RaMaK, the

books of Rabbi Joseph Irigas and Hai Riqi's "*Mishnat Hassidim*" and used the interpretation of these sources as the basis for expressing their mystical philosophy.

D. Dissonance and renewal in Kabbalah: The debate on the status of Lurianic Kabbalah is considered by some scholars to be the basis of the polemic between Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Ladi (RS"Z) and the Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna. This study of the writings of Rabbi Moshe – SPEC and '*Divrei Moshe*' – shows that the assumption that Hasidim, contrary to the Mitnagdim, sanctified each and every Lurianic tradition, is incorrect. Rabbi Moshe does not hesitate to disagree directly with the words of the *Ari* or with those of his student, Rabbi Haim Vital; to change the techniques of "*kavanah*" or to offer alternative explanations regarding various issues. It seems that Rabbi Moshe saw himself as partaking in the Lurianic enterprise, which he viewed as dynamic and ongoing, albeit within certain limits.

These approaches to the study of Kabbalah were also expressed in other Hassidic circles in the first generation of Hasidism, by others within the circle of the *Besht*, as well as in later generations. It appears that one can deduce from this that there were additional undercurrents in Hasidism, in which the status of the Kabbalah of the *Ari*, in its conceptual and practical aspects, occupied a different place from the one generally accepted in the common research of the relationship between Lurianic Kabbalah and Hasidism.