

# Some Brief Thoughts on R. Shalom Sharabi on the Anniversary of his Death

*Some brief thoughts on R. Shalom Sharabi, the Yemenite kabbalist known as the Rashash (1720-1777) on the anniversary of his passing.*

It is only recently that the kabbalistic project of the Rashash has begun to move beyond the preconceived boundaries that enclose it.

Typically seen as a highly arcane model of Lurianic interpretation, the Rashash has often been described as an excessively complex, nearly mathematical interpreter of Lurianic Kabbalah. Associated with the meditative school of *sefardi kabbalah* the Rashash has typically been known for his re-codification of Lurianic intentions (*kavaanot*) and as such the lot of only the most erudite mystic. This is understandable in that the few authentic writings that we have (*Nahar Shalom* and its condensed introduction *Rechovot ha-Nahar*; *Siddur ha-Rashash* in all of its various manifestations; and his short glosses on R. Hayyim Vital's *Eitz Chayyim* printed as *Haggot ha-Shemesh*) seem to complicate the texts that they are coming to clarify. What appears relatively simple within the general depiction of Lurianic Kabbalah undergoes a process of complication in his brief comments. What seemed unified is separated, and what seemed whole is shown to be deficient. Universals are broken down into particulars and imaginative concepts are codified into technical symbols where, at first glance, they seem to lose their evocative power.

Part of this is due to his writing style, short hints that beckon the expert as they discourage the novice. One gets the sense that for the Rashash, writing was a painful necessity whose sting is mitigated in the decision to write as minimally as possible. While this stylistic decision seems to be rooted in his unique hermeneutics of secrecy- a model influenced by both internal beliefs about the dissemination of secrets as well as external threats of misinterpretation- the way in which the Rashash's ideas have been conveyed frustrate the hope for easy understanding.

This has all changed in recent years with the proliferation of teachings from the Jerusalem Kabbalist R. Yitzhak Meir Morgenstern, whose voluminous works that are astonishing in both their clarity as well as their depth. What R. Morgenstern has done to the teachings of the Rashash is simply unprecedented. Generally speaking, his elucidation on the Rashash's system has two parts: A. Clarifying the simple intention explicit within the highly

specific *language* of the Rashash and B. Bringing the profound *conceptual ideas* implicit within his teachings into communication with alternative models of Lurianic Kabbalah, namely the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and his students. What is most profound about R. Morgenstern's project, however, is that the distillation of Kabbalat ha-Rashash into a more evocative idiom does not minimize the complex particularity inherent within but rather highlights the *necessity* of this "mathematical language", or what R. Morgenstern refers to as "*omek ha-pratiyut*", the depths-of-particularity.

R. Morgenstern- and as of late his student R. Shmuel Ehrenfeld- are by no means the only explicators of Kabbalat ha-Rashash. R. Yaakov Moshe Hillel; R. Moshe Schatz; R. Itamar Schwartz; R. Benyahu Shmueli to name a few have been working on "translating" the ideas inherent within the Rashash into a more explicit and expressive system.

To end this brief, and mostly directionless thought, what the Rashash has done is deepen the simply unity of the Infinite (*ein sof*) to the point where even the most particularized aspect of being is shown to contain within it the light of the universal. Not only does the light of unity illuminate and subsume the universals-of-being, but it descends and transcends the very particularity that comes to darken it. If *Eitz Hayyim* describes the universal and historical process of being- from the *tzimtzum* of the Infinite light down to the evil that exists within the recesses of *Asiyah*- the Rashash shows us how this process is inherent within each and every action, each and every moment.

When unity is forced to confront the particularity of separation, the particulars are revealed to be part of the very unity they come to deny. As R. Hayyim de la Rossa- main student of the Rashash and author *Torat Chocham*- writes "I have seen from behind the creases of my master's eyes...that the general (*klal*) and the particular (*prat*) are always equal".