Introduction

During the early modern period, Jews lived with an assumed religious tenet to love their God. Biblical texts, including verses used in the liturgical Shema, explicitly commanded believers to wholly and actively do so. In the twelfth century, Maimonides had described a love of God driven by rational adoration of the Torah (and God’s works), which, appropriately realized, would result in a sense of intellectual and emotional fulfillment. Early modern kabbalists took the notion further by desiring to commune with the living God (devekut), channeling all of their faculties, including emotions, towards the spiritual. Both conceptions idealized love of God as true service without thought of reward.

The life and thought of Moses Hayim Luzzatto (1707-1746), who defined love and fear of God and about whom caches of primary sources survive, offers insight into practical implications of the mystical ideal. Luzzatto was a kabbalist intent on uniting with the divine and to instilling greater piety within society at large. When he and a group of like-minded young men banded together in an effort to spur redemption, rabbis throughout Europe, fearing Sabbatianism, condemned him as a heretic. After forcefully but unsuccessfully defending himself, Luzzatto conceded to the demands of opponents and refashioned himself as a quietist in Amsterdam.

The texts presented here shed light on Luzzatto’s challenge to love God despite his overt failure as redeemer. They reveal that his spiritual worldview trumped his personal aspirations: devekut corresponded to the level of one’s love and fear; the purpose of creation was only to manifest God’s Oneness; and the system of reward and punishment, and the existence of evil, were tied to divine providence and contributed to the unfolding divine plan. As such, Luzzatto accepted both his failures and achievements as inherently providential, and generally sought to nullify human desire. His theory left only a thin line between submission to God
and complacency, and between pietistic idealism and self-righteousness — and much room for historical exploration and interpretation.

Luzzatto’s method included a deep awareness of and engagement with his emotions. It was spurred by sheer awe and wonder of creation, and involved active love – not mere passive adoration – joyfully expressed in ritual observance and Torah study. Moreover, it hinged on a willingness to master emotions: to seek to spiritually uplift society while simultaneously accepting challenges as divinely ordained. There is little direct evidence that Luzzatto personally lived up to his ideal of joy, but it is clear that he grappled with personal sentiments in his journey from gifted adolescent to mystical redeemer to heretical pariah to refashioned quietist.

Issues surrounding emotions, whether overtly expressed or controlled, offer insight into Luzzatto’s biography and writings. He serves as a case study of one forced to demonstrate his love through trial, perhaps akin in his mind to Akiva ben Joseph with whom he believed he shared a soul.¹ In addition, his literary work frequently placed the reader in a position of total submission, including in a feminine role.² As rabbinic texts did not frequently or acutely explicate the love (and accompanying fear) of God, Luzzatto may well aid inquiries into the emotions of Jewish mystics, aspiring redeemers, and pietists in the early modern period.

Bibliography


¹ Talmudic texts recount Akiva’s death by conflagration, during which he calmly recited prayers as an expression of his love of God (bBerakhot 61b). On his soul-connection to Akiva, see Jekutiel Gordon letter in Mordecai Chriqui, Igerot Ramhal u-bene doro (Jerusalem, 2001), no. 6; and, for English translation, Louis Jacobs (ed.), The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies (Schocken, 1997), ch. 12.

² See Da’at Tevunot, including excerpt here, where the male reader is forced to identify with the feminine Soul.

Love and Fear of God:

*Derekh Hashem* I:4:8
One must strengthen his love and fear of the Creator. He should consider the great loftiness of His Blessed Name, and the extreme depravity of man. And he should humble himself before the Blessed Name, and be self-effacing before His majesty. In so doing, he delights and yearns to be among those who serve Him, to exult in His Praise and be exalted in His Greatness. These traits (love and fear of God) are powerful means that draw man to the Creator, illuminating material darkness, igniting the radiance of the soul, and raising man, step by step, until he attains a state of closeness to the Blessed Name.

*Derekh Hashem* IV: 3
We have already explained (I:4:8) the concepts of love and fear [of God], that they draw man close and join him to his Creator. This refers to true love and fear. That is, love of God’s Name, not love of reward, and sheer awe of His Majesty, not fear of punishment. This fear purifies man of the dark materiality of his body, and permeates him with divine inspiration. The level of purification and inspiration depends on the level of fear: he who can fear [God] at all times is constantly surrounded by the Divine Presence. This is what is found in the perfection attained by Moses our teacher, as [our Sages] teach us, “With regard to Moses, fear [of God] was a small thing” (*bBerakhot* 33b) – [his constant fear of God meant] he was continuously surrounded by the Divine Presence. This is a very difficult thing for men to attain. However, the degree that one does reach has the power to purify and sanctify accordingly, as mentioned, particularly in the midst of [performing] mitzvoth or studying.¹ In fact, it is a necessary condition to whole learning or observance.

¹ This primarily refers to studying Torah, but could also include any study provided the studier regards it as consistent with the overall task of pursuing divine inspiration. Luzzatto occasionally referred to natural phenomena observed in medicine, astronomy, or physics as physical representations or manifestations of spiritual realities.
Love binds and attaches man to his Creator, enhancing his [spiritual] strength and crowning him with a great aura. The primary element [of love] is the joy in one’s heart, the blazing of the soul before its Creator, and the devotion of all of one’s abilities to sanctify God’s Name and fulfill His Will. … Included in this realm is belief in God, and especially trust [in God]. And so, these matters bind man to the Creator and strengthen his connection to holiness and the illumination.

Revelation of God’s Oneness:

Da’at Tevunot, no. 34

[The Intellect says to the Soul:] … What is clear from all of this is the utter Oneness of the Blessed One. Notice that all other attributes of His perfection are not at all clear to us, for we lack the ability to grasp them. For example, we know that He is wise, but we cannot perceive the depth of His wisdom; we know that He knows, yet we cannot achieve [a level akin to] His knowledge. … However, His Oneness, on the contrary, can be revealed and evident to us with total clarity. It follows from this that it is not enough for it to be merely clear to us; rather we are obliged to restore this knowledge to our hearts, to resound it in our being without an iota of hesitation. This is what Moses our teacher commands us, as per the Almighty: “And you shall know today and restore it in your heart, that the Lord is God in the heavens above and on the earth below; there is nothing else” (Deuteronomy 4:39).

Da’at Tevunot, no. 44

[The Intellect says to the Soul:] … But the fact of the matter is that [God’s] Oneness is the primary element to be revealed. We see the assurances of the prophets that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will redeem Israel in any event, even if unmerited, and that He will remove the evil inclination from mankind and compel [men] to serve Him. All of these things refute [the idea that the world is based on]

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2 Belief in God here is not the opposite of doubting the existence of God. Rather, Luzzatto refers to total commitment to God’s dominance of every facet of life. Trust in God is in a providential sense, that all (including evil) exists as part of a divine plan.

3 Luzzatto’s text, a rambling dialogue between the שכל and נשמת, appears without chapters or sections. The numbering followed here corresponds to modern editions that enumerate a break each time a character speaks anew; see Da’at tevunot, ed. Yosef Spiner (Jerusalem: Ha-mesorah, 2012).

4 In Luzzatto’s thought,verity simultaneously refers to the Creator’s singularity and unity. More than that, God is the source of all, so the Oneness is all encompassing and absolute.

5 Though פקפק means doubt, it is best rendered here as hesitation, because the intended reader is not lacking in faith or belief in God. Rather, the concern is that the aspiring servant of God is hesitant to act in the presence of scoffers.

6 Luzzatto emphasized that redemption will come as part of God’s plan (within a 6,000-year human history), despite his conclusion that it is widely undeserved.
reward and punishment and free will. If the intention was to actually base the world on free will and reward and punishment – whereby the world would continually contain men freely acting as righteous or wicked according to their wills, with good being meted out to the righteous and evil to the wicked – it would be necessary to maintain this as a perpetual state without interruption. This would be [the case], if the Holy One, Blessed be He, desired to rule with the attribute of judgment — to forever quantify His creatures accordingly. However, we know that this is not so; for we demonstrated from the [Biblical] verses, and the words of our Sages make clear, that in the end freedom of choice will be removed from mankind and evil will cease to exist in the world. As they said, “It is written: ‘Sins will be removed from the earth’” (Berakhot 10a; Psalms 104:35). Therefore, the ultimate purpose of creation does not rest on reward and punishment, but on total perfection. The Holy One, Blessed be He, united these two components as one, in the depths of His plan to guide all towards the universal perfection.

Social Critique:

Mesilat Yesharim, ch. 1 (end) (Moscow, MS Guenzburg 1206)

[The Hasid says to the Hakham:]7 … I see that Moses our teacher, when imparting what is truly obligatory and appropriate for us, said, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, to keep the commandments of the Lord, and His statutes, which I command you this day for your good” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13). Thus, the observance of all the commandments as a whole – the sum of the laws and halakhic rulings you have studied – is only one of the matters mentioned in this verse. But four more elements are mentioned there, namely: fear [of God], walking in His ways, love [of God], and service of the heart. … Besides [deep] knowledge of mitzvoth performance, four additional things must accompany the deed for [its proper] completion, in order to fulfill His Will, blessed be He. Yet, you, by your own pronouncement, have dealt with [only] one and ignored the other four.

Mesilat Yesharim, ch. 26 (printed edition)

7 The Hakham is Luzzatto’s conception of a prototypical rabbi, engaged in constant halakhic study but without spiritual purpose or peace of mind. The Hasid is a simplified version of Luzzatto, expressing the author’s ideals of love and fear of God and an ability to adapt to one’s circumstances. The Hakham starts out as arrogant and dismissive, but becomes the Hasid’s willing disciple.
It is clear that everyone needs direction and instruction in accordance with his craft or trade. The pietism of one occupied in the Torah is not the same pietism of one needing to hire himself out to work for others. And neither of these is akin to the pietism appropriate for one who engages in business. And so it is with all other worldly affairs in which man toils. Each individual has his own [particular] paths of piety. This is not because piety [itself] changes, [for] it is certainly the same for all men — to do that which is pleasing to his Creator. However, as specifics [of individuals and circumstances] vary, it is impossible that the means through which [a person] reaches the ultimate goal do not also vary according to the individual’s situation. [Just as] it is possible for one who ceaselessly studies [Torah] to be perfectly pious, so too [is piety attainable] to someone who toils in menial labor out of necessity. As it is written, “The Lord has made everything for His own purpose” (Proverbs 16:4); and “In all of your ways, know Him, and He will direct your paths” (Proverbs 3:6).

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8 Luzzatto uses these verses from Proverbs as expressions of God’s Oneness and providential plan: the reader may understand that their own circumstances are part of a larger plan that God directs and in which they can participate.
For the Love of God: Spiritual Purpose and Mastering Emotions in the Pietistic Writings of Moses Hayim Luzzatto

David Sclar, Princeton University

Love and Fear of God:

Revelation of God’s Oneness:

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השכר וונגד וענש אחרים לנו, כי בנוי הבטחות שחרר לprecated, וה:SetText._

Social Critique:

(Moscow Guenzburg 1206)
החסידות לפי לא. החסידות דרכי לו רואים, הוא לפי ואחד אחד לכל, בעולמו האדם בעסקי אבל. בו לייצרו רוח שנחט מה לעשות אלא ולאינו הואיל, ודאי נפש לכל ישוה הוא הנה כי, המשנה. כי הנגה הוא שוד לכל נפש ודי. הראלי ויאפשר לא עשתה מיהם שחתת רוח לפי בו. אבל הראלי והנשואים המשנה, או בעיר שלא ישתנו והמציעים המגנות מאתם של החכמים, כל זה לפי עניין. ובבר יוכל ליהנות חסיד גמור איש אחר לא יפסק מפי דבריה, כמוכו משמיע צרכי זה בעל מלאתם פחותה. רותאני: "כל ע筆י הוא" (משלי ט: ג). רותאני: "בכל דרכך דעהו והוא יישר, ארותיך" (משלי ז: ג).