

Let Him Bray: The Stormy Correspondence Between Samuel David Luzzatto and Elia Benamozegh

By: DANIEL A. KLEIN

True reciprocal tolerance is that which knows how to love and esteem others, while preserving intact the belief in one's own doctrines. Indeed, true fraternal love is not given when one does not loudly proclaim that which one believes to be true. The first right of our fellow beings is to hear the truth from us.¹

Why can't we be friends? Why can't we be friends?²

Nineteenth-century Italy produced two outstanding Jewish religious figures: Samuel David Luzzatto (“Shadal,” 1800-1865) and Rabbi Elia Benamozegh (1823-1900). Both were staunch defenders of Jewish tradition, but just as one was from the east (Trieste) and the other from the west (Livorno), it can be said that never the twain did meet. In particular, they took polar opposite positions with regard to the value of the mystical teachings of the Kabbalah. And when they proclaimed their truths to each other in a remarkable exchange of letters, sparks flew.

For some reason, the story of the Shadal-Benamozegh rivalry has not received the attention it deserves, at least outside Italy. Not a word about it appears in Morris B. Margolies’s otherwise comprehensive biography

¹ Elia Benamozegh, *Storia degli Esseni* (Florence: 1865), p. IV.

² Papa Dee Allen et al., “Why Can’t We Be Friends?” From the album of the same name by War (1975).

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of Shadal,³ for example, and their correspondence has not been thoroughly discussed or presented in English until now.⁴ A closer look at their exchanges is rewarding, not only for their elegant and acerbic literary style, but also for the windows that they open to the writers' principles and personalities, and for their treatment of key issues that remain relevant to Jewish thought today.

Background

Shadal's great-granduncle, Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal, 1707-1747), was an eminent Kabbalist, and Shadal's father Hezekiah (1761-1824), though a carpenter by trade, was also a Kabbalah devotee. At the age of 13, however, Samuel David Luzzatto broke from this family tradition. While reading the collection of Talmudic legends in *Ein Ya'akov*, Shadal noticed indications that although a system of chanting the Bible existed in Talmudic times, the text was not yet marked then with written vowels (*nekudot*) or accents (*te'amim*). This discovery, Shadal later related, became an *idea madre* for him, an idea that gave birth to many others, first and foremost the idea that the Zohar, which frequently mentioned the written *nekudot* and *te'amim*, could not have been written by the authors of the Mishnah and Talmud, as it claimed to be. And if this Kabbalistic masterwork was a forgery, he reasoned, then the Kabbalah as a whole could not stand.⁵

In 1826, Shadal wrote *Vikkuah al Hokhmat ha-Kabbalah*, presented in the form of a series of dialogues between two scholars who first meet at a late-night Hoshana Rabbah study session. One scholar defends the antiquity and validity of the Zohar's doctrines, but the other scholar (clearly Shadal's alter ego) offers challenging arguments to the contrary, including the following:

- Although there was indeed a form of secret mysticism during the Talmudic period, it came to be forgotten and had no connection to the Zohar.

³ Morris B. Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto: Traditionalist Scholar* (New York: Ktav, 1979).

⁴ A few translated excerpts from some of their letters do appear in Alessandro Guetta, "The Last Debate on Kabbalah in Italian Judaism," in Barbara Garvin, Bernard Cooperman, eds., *The Jews in Italy: Memory and Identity* (University Press of Maryland, 2000), pp. 256-275.

⁵ Samuel David Luzzatto, *Autobiografia di S. D. Luzzatto* (Padua: 1878), pp. 56, 57.

- The concept of *Sefirot* (Divine emanations) did exist in that earlier period, but it was then understood as having no more than a mathematical significance, as opposed to the much more crucial metaphysical role later given to the *Sefirot* by the Kabbalah.
- The written system of *nekudot* and *te'amim*, introduced by post-Talmudic authorities as a practical means of preserving the proper reading of the received biblical texts, had no mystical significance and could not have been a proper basis for the interpretations that the Zohar purported to derive from it.
- The very fact that the Zohar referred to this post-Talmudic system was proof that the Zohar itself had to be an even later work.
- Kabbalistic mysticism posed a threat to the survival of the true Jewish faith.

Concerned that publicizing these views might undermine the simple faith of the pious, Shadal withheld the *Vikkuah* from publication until 1852. This is one reason why Elia Benamozegh offered no response to it in 1826. The other reason is that in 1826, Benamozegh was only three years old.

Born in Livorno (sometimes known as Leghorn in English) to a family that had emigrated from Fez, Morocco, Benamozegh was precocious and largely self-taught, like Shadal, but unlike his fellow autodidact, he remained attached to the Kabbalism of his youth after a period of doubt (as he noted in a letter to Shadal in August 1863). Benamozegh's first book (*Emek Mafji'a*, Livorno, 1845) was a refutation of Leone Modena's anti-Kabbalistic work, *Ari Nobem* (written in 1639 but first printed only in 1840). Benamozegh went on to serve as a rabbi and professor of theology at the Collegio Rabbinico of Livorno—a rival institution of the Collegio Rabbinico of Padua, where Shadal taught—and to author several important works, including a Torah commentary, a history of the Essenes, and the posthumously edited *Israël et l'Humanité* (Paris, 1914), discussing universal religion and the roles of and relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Calm Before the Storm

The first preserved communication that we have from Benamozegh to Shadal, written in November 1857, expresses effusive praise for a letter by Shadal that had appeared in the Hebrew-language periodical *Ha-Maggid*. Shadal's letter had argued that although Moses Mendelssohn, who remained faithful to the Torah and Jewish observance, had gained the respect of the non-Jewish public, those who came after him and had cast

aside their faith could not now complain that German intellectuals were attacking the Jews. “They do not understand that they [the intellectuals] are writing ill not about the Jews, but about the hypocrites who call themselves Jews, but who are neither Jews nor Christians but disciples of Spinoza” (*Ha-Maggid*, Oct. 9, 1857, pp. 165-166). Benamozegh could not have agreed more. “You were magnificent in that letter,” he wrote. “Nestor was no less mighty in weaponry for being mature in judgment and wise in counsel.”⁶

In an 1859 letter to a Livornese rabbi, Shadal floated the idea of starting a new Italian Jewish periodical that would be “sincerely *Yehudi*” and would break with the *oltremontani*, those nontraditional Jews who lived “over the mountains,” i.e., in Germany. At the same time, Shadal reserved the right to dispute amicably in this periodical with the “mysticists.” He suggested Livorno as the place of publication and said that it would be up to the “young people” to take up the idea or let it drop.⁷ Naturally, Benamozegh learned of this proposal and reacted enthusiastically to the prospect of collaborating with Shadal. Noting that the proposed journal would have many adversaries, he said, “Therefore, cannons of large caliber will be needed, and your name is already a promise of a brave battalion” (Benamozegh, *Lettere*, p. 19). However, Benamozegh wanted to make it clear that in his own participation in the project, he would express support for the “revealed theology” of the Kabbalah (*Lettere*, p. 16).

Perhaps it was at least in part because of this consideration that Shadal apparently lost interest in the plan by the end of the year, and it never did come to fruition. A letter from Shadal to Benamozegh dated November 3, 1859, closed as follows: “To believe that the Zohar predates Dante is to willfully close one’s eyes. Believe me that the Zohar was born with Dante, and that I am your *affezionatissimo* S. D. L.” (*Epistolario*, p. 950). In other words, Shadal was insisting that the Zohar, like Italy’s greatest poet, was a product of the thirteenth century C.E. These words foreshadow the storm that was brewing between the “most affectionate” Shadal and his younger colleague.

⁶ Elia Benamozegh, *Lettere dirette a S. D. Luzzatto da Elia Benamozegh* (Livorno: 1890), p. 3. Nestor was a proverbially wise elder statesman in Greek mythology.

⁷ Letter to Israel Costa, included in the collection of Shadal’s letters in Italian, French, and Latin, *Epistolario italiano francese latino* (Padua: 1890), p. 938.

The Clouds Gather

In 1852, Shadal had at last published his *Vikkuah*,⁸ having been persuaded that “the evils of the Kabbala’s mystic cult outweighed its benefits as a bulwark of piety” (Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto*, p. 49). Notwithstanding his profound respect for Shadal, Benamozegh felt compelled to respond. The result finally appeared ten years later: *Ta’am le-Shad* (Livorno, 1862). This book’s title was derived from a phrase in Num. 11:8 describing the taste of manna, *ke-ta’am leshad ha-shemen* (“the flavor of soft oiled dough,” as per Shadal’s translation), but in a play on words, it could be understood as “reasoning in response to S. D.” Weighing in at 223 pages, considerably longer than its target, *Ta’am le-Shad* was formatted, like the *Vikkuah*, as a dialogue between two scholars. The gist of Benamozegh’s argument is that (1) the Zohar can be shown to be in perfect agreement with the Talmud; (2) the Kabbalah is of ancient origin, notwithstanding the silence of pre-medieval authorities on the subject; and (3) the Kabbalah is a necessary and fundamental doctrine of Judaism. Although Benamozegh promptly sent a copy of his book to Shadal, the latter decided not to respond.

Meanwhile, a debate broke out within the Italian Jewish community as to whether or how to pay the expenses of fundraising emissaries (*Missioni* in Italian) who came to Italy from the land of Israel. Benamozegh wrote a pamphlet, “Le Missioni di Terra Santa” (Livorno, 1863), contending that their activities deserved the continued support of Italian Jewry. Among other things, Benamozegh maintained that such emissaries served as an important line of communication between the Semitic people and the “Japhetic” people of Europe, in keeping with the biblical ideal of Japheth dwelling in the tents of Shem (Gen. 9:27). Then Benamozegh waded into more dangerous waters. He noted that some, including “Professor Luzzatto,” had unwisely sought to dig an abyss between the Japhetic Greece and the Semitic Palestine. Such people, he remarked, were “more Orthodox than the Masters of Orthodoxy,” i.e., the ancient Rabbis, who spoke of Greek civilization with “sympathy and respect” (“Le Missioni,” p. 20).⁹

⁸ Samuel David Luzzatto, *Vikkuah al Hokhmat ha-Kabbalah*. Gorizia: 1852. A new edition, edited by Yonatan Bassi, was published in Jerusalem by Carmel in 2013.

⁹ It is true that Shadal often expressed the view that there was a fundamental difference between Judaism, with its emphasis on compassion and justice, and “Atticism,” with its emphasis on the intellect and the self (see, for example, his 1863 article “Atticismo et Judaïsme,” *Otzar Nehmad* 4, pp. 131-132). As for Benamozegh’s treatment of the Japheth-Shem relationship, Shadal would have

Again, Shadal made no public response to this provocation, but he gave vent to his feelings in a letter to an unidentified third party.¹⁰ Expressing his preference to refrain from attacking Benamozegh in the open, Shadal said, *Penso lasciarlo ragliare*—“I intend to let him bray.”

Unfortunately, word of this pungent remark made its way to Benamozegh’s attention. And this is when the storm broke.

Some Words of Explanation

Before proceeding to the correspondence itself, a few preliminary observations are in order. First, even though both Shadal and Benamozegh were fluent Hebrew writers, all of the letters they wrote to each other in the crucial years 1863 and 1864 are in their native Italian,¹¹ which is undoubtedly the reason why these exchanges have remained relatively unknown to most of the Jewish world. Hence, I thought it would be interesting and instructive to translate these letters into English.

Shadal’s letters to Benamozegh are collected in the 1890 *Epistolario italiano francese latino*, while Benamozegh’s letters to Shadal appear in the separate volume *Lettere dirette a S. D. Luzzatto da Elia Benamozegh*, also published in 1890. Yoseph Colombo (1897-1975), a Livorno-born rabbi, was the first to splice excerpts of these letters together to form a continuous narrative, which originally appeared in “Il dibattito tra Luzzatto e Benamozegh intorno alla Kabbalà,” *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, vol. 8, no. 10/12, February-April 1934, pp. 471-497. Colombo published a slightly revised version of this article 32 years later in the same Italian Jewish journal, as part of a symposium marking the hundredth anniversary of Shadal’s passing: “La Polemica col Benamozegh,” *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, vol. 32, no. 9/10, September-October 1966, pp. 179-204. More recently and more briefly, the subject was revisited by one of the leading Italian Jewish scholars of the twenty-first century, Rabbi Gianfranco Di Segni, in an article called “Le polemiche fra rabbini non sono certo una novità” (“Polemics

viewed it as based on a mistranslation. His own rendering of Gen. 9:27 was, “May God extend the borders of Japheth, and may He [i.e., God, not Japheth] reside in the tents of Shem....”

¹⁰ It has been suggested that this third party may have been Rabbi Israel Costa of Livorno, who was acquainted with both Shadal and Benamozegh, and to whom Shadal had written in 1859 with his proposal for a new Jewish periodical (Yoseph Colombo, “La Polemica col Benamozegh,” *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, vol. 32, no. 9/10 (Rome: 1966), p. 189).

¹¹ *Iggerot Shadal*, the collection of Luzzatto’s Hebrew letters (Przemysl and Cracow, 1882-1894) does include one earlier letter from Shadal to Benamozegh in Hebrew (Nov. 6, 1859, p. 1363), but it deals with an unrelated subject.

between rabbis are certainly nothing new”), which appeared on the website *Kolot* <<http://www.kolot.it/2010/09/16/le-polemiche-fra-rabbini-non-sono-certo-una-novita/>>.

In preparing the present article, I made use of all of the above resources. Neither Colombo nor Di Segni nor I present all the letters in their entirety; some editing was called for to omit some extraneous matter and to focus on the most essential arguments (note that Benamozegh’s full letter of Sept. 21, 1863, alone runs to 30 printed pages). Where I wanted to insert more of Shadal’s writing than Colombo or Di Segni had included, I went back to the *Epistolario* to retrieve the desired material, and in order to expand my coverage of Benamozegh’s writing, I collected it from the *Lettere* volume.^{12,13}

As the reader will note, the exchanges of these two giants of Italian Jewry are couched in the high, florid literary style of their century, laced with flashes of wit and sarcasm, and oscillating between blunt invective and protestations of respect and friendship. The effect, it might be said, is almost operatic—a Verdi or a Meyerbeer could have set these words to stirring music.

One repeatedly used term in these letters calls for comment: *Mosaismo materiale*. This term, which I have translated literally as “material Mosaism,” is hard to define because each writer seems to give it his own spin. Shadal uses it to refer to the simple, “non-mystical” type of Judaism that he reveres, and he alleges that Benamozegh finds it “absurd.” Benamozegh, in turn, expresses his full support for *Mosaismo materiale* in the sense of Judaism as traditionally practiced, but he argues that it needs to be complemented and supported by the teachings of the Kabbalah.

And now, let the debate begin.

¹² The entirety of Benamozegh’s letter of Sept. 12, 1863 (*Lettere*, pp. 57-74) can also be accessed via another resource: Benamozegh, Elia “Scritti sparsi,” *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, vol. 21, no. 7. Rome: 1955, pp. 262-272.

¹³ While hunting (with ultimate success) for an online version of this rare book, I devised a temporary workaround with the help of one of my friends in high library places. So, I express my thanks to Nachum Zitter, Director of the Reference Department of the National Library of Israel, for providing me with scanned copies of some of the key Benamozegh pages.

Benamozegh to Shadal, Aug. 16, 1863 (*Lettere*, pp. 49-51)

Most esteemed Sir and friend,

...I want to give you now a proof of the great account in which I hold your opinion, and at the same time the honesty of my conduct. It would displease me greatly—disposed as each of us are, I have no doubt, to love and respect the adversary as a man of honor and a friend—if misunderstandings arose that could poison the relations between us that I always wish to keep cordial. Through information that I have reason to believe beyond any suspicion, I know for certain... that you, having had occasion to express yourself in writing concerning my polemic, availed yourself of this precise phrase: *lasciatelo ragliare* (“let him bray”).

Samuel D. Luzzatto holds himself in such noble regard, he is so free of mean-spirited passions, he has such fame that none can obscure, that he could not possibly have used such indecencies, for which reason I could surely vouch that you are not their author. It is no less true, however, that they circulate in your name and perhaps have been put into the service of passions or schemes that are quite other than noble. This cannot and will not be. Your name cannot serve as an instrument of denigration, nor do I deserve to be repaid, against your will, with such coin for the respect that I have invariably shown and will show for you. I therefore believe that I have looked after your dignity by giving notice of this matter and submitting a demand upon your honesty for an explicit declaration that would paralyze the effects of a denigration that cloaks itself in your most reputable name...

I will leave off for today, requesting you to answer me and to keep in mind, when you wish to pay me some disagreeable compliment, to at least treat me as a *behemah tehorah* [a kosher animal].

Whether as a shade or as a real man, I will never cease to address myself to you as

Most devoted and affectionate always,
Elia Benamozegh

Shadal to Benamozegh, Aug. ___ [no precise date given], 1863
(*Epistolario*, pp. 1027-1028)

Most esteemed friend,

I received some time ago the *Ta'am le-Shad*, and I did not write you so as not to enter into useless disputes. I was asked if I intended to respond, and I said no. And so it is. The little life and strength that are

left to me¹⁴ I wish to employ in endeavoring to leave to posterity a little more truth and a little less error, and not in fruitless controversies. Let anyone combat me who so desires; let anyone mistreat me at his pleasure; I will not waste my time in defending myself; I would be deflected from my mission, which is to discover new things. As long as there exists one verse in the Holy Scriptures that is not understood exactly, I must not think of defending my writings. Truth and time will defend them.

Besides, I cannot believe that you think you have refuted me. I do not believe that you are blinded. And if you believe it useful to defend mysticism, I will not oppose that.

Recently I saw your pamphlet about the Missionaries, and there I observed a page with libelous insinuations hurled needlessly against me, as if I were a hypocrite.¹⁵ In this case I should have responded. But God made me strong, and I said and wrote in a confidential letter, *Penso lasciarlo ragliare*, never thinking that these words of mine could come to be used as weapons against you.¹⁶ Nor did I intend to attribute to you the nature of the braying quadruped, an animal that has always been held in higher esteem by me than is commonly the case.

“S. D. L.,” as you say in your letter, “holds himself in a noble regard, is free of mean-spirited passions, and has such fame that none can obscure”; therefore, upon seeing himself publicly treated as intolerant for lack of orthodoxy, he lets others bray.

The choice of word might have been less indecent if I had said *latrare* (“bark”). *Crusca*¹⁷ would have offered me examples of barkers that are not dogs, but it gives me no example of brayers that are not donkeys. Still, braying seems to me less odious, less offensive than

¹⁴ Shadal was 63 and in failing health when he wrote this letter, and in fact he had only two more years to live. A few months previously, he had written to one of his students, “I am exhausted by old age and by melancholy.... Nevertheless, I persevere in my work. I do not wish to lose a solitary day, for who knows how few are the days left me? I must consolidate my work and get it published” (*Epistolario*, p. 1017, quoted in Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto*, p. 54).

¹⁵ Evidently this is a reference to Benamozegh’s comment, in “Le Missioni di Terra Santa,” that those including Luzzatto who sought to dig an abyss between Greece and Palestine were “more Orthodox than the Masters of Orthodoxy.”

¹⁶ In fairness to Shadal, the phrase *Penso lasciarlo ragliare* (“I intend to let him bray”), worded as a private remark, is not the same as the phrase that Benamozegh accused him of using: *lasciatelo ragliare* (“let him bray,” in the second person plural imperative, that is, as if Shadal were directly addressing the public at large).

¹⁷ This is a reference to the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, the first dictionary of the Italian language (first edition 1612). Shadal may have consulted the fourth edition (1729-1738). The publisher was the Accademia della Crusca, the world’s oldest language academy, founded in Florence in 1583 and dedicated to separating the linguistic “wheat” from the corrupt *crusca*, or “bran.”

barking. In any case, you do not need me to declare to you that you have never been a donkey in my eyes; rather, I have used the verb *ragli-are* by way of simile, just as Crusca has *latrare* as a simile.

And in so doing, it was not you who was the offended party, but the poor donkey. For the donkey's brayings are always sincere, that is, they are the expression of genuine feelings or sensations, such as hunger, love, or the like. To the contrary, the words that were published by you against me in the aforementioned pamphlet express falsities and calumnies, not only against me, but equally against all the ancient masters who expressed an affinity for Greek culture, converting them all into so many apostates, similar to that Elisha [ben Abuyah] of whom it was said that "Greek tunes never ceased from his mouth" [*Hagigah* 15b]....

Live in happiness and believe me to be always a friend of the truth, and a friend of all men, but without hope or fear of them.

Your most devoted S. D. L.

Benamozegh to Shadal, Aug. 24, 1863 (*Lettere*, pp. 52-56)

Most esteemed friend,

If I were to act only out of self-love, I should not respond to your letter. Not only is the offense affirmed, but it is reaffirmed and pursued... But underneath your anger, which I believe to be undeserved, I still see the virtues and the selflessness that do you honor, and that is what makes me answer you. The fact that you prefer not to respond to the *Ta'am le-Shad*, not even privately... spares me the displeasure of finding myself once again in opposition to you. It is another thing, however, when you say, "Let anyone mistreat me who so desires." In my refutation, have I perhaps forgotten any of the requisite forms of respect? This I think you cannot say. With regard to believing or not believing that I have refuted you, allow me to say to you that it is not up to me or you to judge, but with this difference: you may sincerely believe that I have not refuted you, while I could not, as you say, believe that I have not refuted you without being a charlatan or a writer in bad faith. I appeal to your good sense. Is it something to be envied nowadays, the defense of certain abandoned principles? Is mystical theology so in vogue that one may be tempted to take up its defense, if a conviction that surpasses all other considerations did not obligate one to do so?... I make allowances for you because you do not know my life, my studies, my past; nor do you know how, after having loved the Kabbalistic books as a young man, I too began to speak ill of them seeing that everyone was doing so, and how it was only further reflections that brought me to believe that Mosaism without that theology was absolutely without basis... In sum, it would be inconceivable that I—having had such a wide

scope for lashing out in the Kabbalistic polemic in *Ta'am le-Shad*— would have shown myself respectful in one whole volume but irreverent in four incidental words. That cannot be and is not the case.

Let us not speak of the minute disquisition concerning *latrare, ragli-are*, etc. ... this is a type of comparative philology that I have never enjoyed and that I wish you would not enter into. Such weapons do not suit you.... Keep in mind as well that Elisha was not an apostate merely because he was familiar with Greek literature. Three quarters of the ancient and modern sages would be deemed so as well; it was for the reason that you know and that I need not tell you, the author of the *Vikkuah*. As for “Greek tunes,” if I am not mistaken, it was you yourself who interpreted this in the sense of erotic poetry or something of that sort. Am I wrong?...

I would like you to see in this letter a proof of my desire to be your friend, no more or less. If you justly speak of not fearing or hoping for anything from anyone, tell me now, why would I, your adversary, show you affection if I did not love you, especially for your studious self-sacrifice? What do I hope for or fear from you? But I would be a liar my whole life if I kept silent whenever I thought you spoke incorrectly....

Say to me something better than “most devoted,”
and believe me to be your most affectionate

Elia Benamozegh

Shadal to Benamozegh, Sept. 8, 1863 (*Epistolario*, pp. 1029-1030)

Most esteemed Sir,

...Your reflections have brought you to believe that Mosaism without that theology is absolutely lacking in basis. Now see whether we can be friends. I have dedicated my life and my entire being to the defense of simple Mosaism, which is and always was understood by all of antiquity, while you aim for nothing less than making it appear absurd and vain. Christianity sought to do the same. But Christianity has produced good outside the Synagogue. To the contrary, the new Kabbalists, new but worse Christians, tend to attack the Synagogue without benefiting any other people. You, in order to be consistent, will take the field with all those accusations that Christianity typically makes against material Mosaism. What does Christianity typically produce, when preached to the Jews? Vacillation in faith in some, faith in Christianity in none. Today Kabbalistic mysticism, preached in your sense, would have the same result.

Is this not a frightful abyss that you are digging between you and me? Are we not two opposite poles? Nevertheless, I do not wish to go to battle against you, for the age is too materialistic to allow the forces

of mysticism to gain power against Mosaism, while you yourself, I hope, would never wish to imitate the Christians and make yourself an open adversary of the pure and straightforward material, civil, and political Mosaism. And if you would ever do such a thing, the institutions of Moses would still, even in our times, have valiant apologists, and the very consonance of your objections with those so often repeated by the followers of the Nazarene would be sufficient to render them innocuous to our coreligionists.

Besides, can you believe that you have refuted me?

You yourself say that your work is not finished. Have you said a word against the most evident proofs of the non-antiquity of the Zohar?...

Without wishing to call you a charlatan or a writer in bad faith, I can believe you to be convinced that you have created a pious work defending to the best of your ability a doctrine that you can believe to be salutary and necessary for the correction of the current materialism.

...I am not disgusted with you, nor am I ever disgusted with a person for personal motives. But the principle professed by you, the absurdity of material Mosaism (which I adore and for which I sacrifice myself), does not permit me to declare you (without hypocrisy) a friend...

Polemics with Christianity have never stirred my blood. If someone came to attack me, I would respond, "The swords still exist; they have not yet been turned into plowshares." So no one has come. "But be a good Christian," [I say,] "and let everyone be faithful to their native beliefs." It was in this sense that I often spoke with Monsignor Nardi, when he was a professor here, and we lived for many years in good harmony.¹⁸

¹⁸ Monsignor Francesco Nardi (1808-1877) was a Professor of Canon Law at the University of Padua. An obituary described him as "one of the most indefatigable, earnest, and even violent defenders of the cause of the Pope," but it went on to observe that "no difference in political opinions, even the most diametrically opposite, ever interfered with the affection and esteem for those whom he had once reckoned among his old friends" (*Proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society*, London, 1877, pp. 426-427). In an 1839 monograph on the history of embroidery, Nardi acknowledges Shadal's assistance in furnishing biblical references and calls him "an ornament of our city" (*Sull' origine dell' arte del ricamo*, Padua, 1839, p. 19). In 1847, he and Shadal served together on a commission to decipher a supposedly ancient bronze tablet that had been discovered in Sicily (*Epistolario*, pp. 514-515). In an 1850 letter to Nardi (*Epistolario*, p. 585), Shadal takes issue with a point that Nardi made in a book about the "truth of the Catholic religion" (see note 26 below). But seven years later, another letter from Shadal to Nardi opens with the salutation *Chiarissimo professore, amico carissimo* ("Most distinguished professor, dearest friend"), followed by a discussion of Genesis ch. 14 and certain Hebrew and Arabic Dead Sea-related place names (*Epistolario*,

Live in happiness for many, many years, and always believe me to be

Your most devoted
S. D. L.
faithful to the plain truths
unmixed with fables;
friend of peace
even with the mysticists,
even with the Christians.¹⁹

Benamozegh to Shadal, Sept. 12, 1863 (*Lettere*, pp. 57-74)

Most esteemed Sir and Friend,

...If I am to judge from certain phrases in your letter... it would seem that I am nothing less than a Christianizer, who wishes to deviate from that which all of antiquity understood as the Mosaic faith. But what is this antiquity for which you reserve a privilege? Is it the Mosaic antiquity? And would you call the Mosaic antiquity simple?... But you know very well that simplicity is not a legitimate mark of a true religion, for the truth by its nature is complex, organic, harmonic, nor is Mosaism a simple thing in this sense of simplicity. Material Mosaism, as you call it—does it seem simple to you?... The religious laws, ceremonies, rituals that regulate the relationship between humankind and God and which provide the primary criteria for correctly judging the nature of a religion—do they seem simple to you?... That immense, multiform body of practices and rites, however it may be explained, can it exist together with that meager Deism that wants to attach itself to the majestic Jewish organism, like the head of a dwarf to the body of a giant? Can you deny that even in the Talmudic tradition there is an esoteric knowledge? S. D. L. is too much a person of good faith to try to deny it... You will say that those mysteries did exist, to be sure, but that they disappeared and were taken over by false ones. But is there anything more unlikely than this? In such a short time? With hardly any interruption or vacancy of position, given that the last of the Amoraim were not far distant from the Geonim?... Then you cannot allege that traditional antiquity consisted of simple Mosaism. Where is this antiquity, then? In R. Hai Gaon, who was a Kabbalist, in Raavad [R. Abraham ben David], in R. Eliezer the teacher of Ramban, in Ramban [Nahmanides], in Rashba [R.

pp. 916-917). Shadal closes this letter with *di Lei devotissimo amico* (“your most devoted friend”).

¹⁹ In Italian, the last two lines share a rhythm and rhyme: *anche coi misticisti/ anche coi gesucristi*.

Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret], in [R. Moses] Cordovero, in [R. Joseph] Caro, in Abrabanel, in Rashbatz [R. Simeon ben Zemaḥ Duran], not to speak of a thousand other pureblooded Kabbalists? Will you say that these, too, are Mystics and Christians? You may say it and think it. As for me, I consider those named—let it not displease you—more authoritative masters of that which is Mosaism than any others, no matter how much learning and fame they may have in the world...

Who are the new Christians who aim to destroy the Synagogue? Who is it who is proclaiming the abolition of the Law as Jesus or his followers did? Certainly not the new Kabbalists, who, to the contrary, are closing off the way to any innovation... and elevating [religious] practice from a mere externality, from an insipid ceremonial... to a necessity of the highest order, to a cosmic, eternal, universal need... If by "Mosaism" you mean only the written law, this type of Mosaism will never suffice to satisfy the religious sentiment, if there is not united with it the dual tradition, that is, the practical (Mishnah-Talmud) and the speculative (Kabbalah). Indeed, the Kabbalah renders Christian propaganda useless and powerless, because it fills the immense void left by material Mosaism.

...Who ever thought or maintained that the Zohar did not contain interpolations, even large and copious ones? Did I not clearly say so in the *Ta'am le-Shad*? Are there not, according to the Talmud, interpolations even in the Pentateuch (*Shemonah Pesukim*),²⁰ and in the Talmud, the Mishnah, and the Midrashim are there not continuous and well-known interpolations? But why do you want to have two systems of weights and measures concerning the one and the other? And then—and then—if the truth were not impeding me, do you know that I would be capable of conceding to you that the Zohar is false from top to bottom, while nevertheless requiring you to agree that the Kabbalah is ancient? What does the Zohar have to do with the Kabbalah, the bibliographical question with the critical and theological question?... Yes, sir: there are interpolations in the Zohar; what of it? And if you insist—*ve-im takniteni*—I would add, yes sir, the Zohar is false; so what? The Kabbalah existed before it among the Amoraim, Geonim, Rabbanim, and it will exist after it.

At all costs, you do not want to declare yourself a friend to me. And why? Because [you say] I assert the absurdity of material Mosaism. Do you mean to say "practical"? Then guard yourself from believing that I call it absurd, because you would be libeling me. It is precisely because I do not call it absurd that I attribute to it a spirit, its own contemporaneous twin theory, which is the Kabbalah. There once was a

²⁰ That is, the final eight verses of the Torah, relating the death of Moses. According to a Tannaitic opinion cited in *Bava Batra* 15a, Joshua wrote these verses.

mysticism that despised practice, and that was the mysticism of the Kabbalist Jesus, who abolished the law—and that of Shabbetai Zevi, another Kabbalist Jesus, who declared himself superior to it, as you know—but this is not mine. Mine is that of Naḥmanides, of those who entered the *Pardes* (except for Elisha),²¹ of R. Hai Gaon, the Rashba, the Rashbatz, R. Caro, R. Cordovero, the Ari [R. Isaac Luria], and all that beautiful school of thought that raised up the value of practice. And on the day that I come to imitate the Kabbalist Jesus or Shabbetai Zevi and violate the material Mosaism that I adore as you do and in which I take delight in fulfilling the practical *mitzvot*, I will say as I said fifteen years ago in my first sermon, *tivash yadi ve-ein yemini kaḥob tikh'heb*²².... Perhaps you are dubious about me, seeing that I have neglected the defense of the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, strictly speaking, and have taken a fancy to the Kabbalah, but the reason is clear:

- 1 Because in my opinion, the Kabbalah contains the principles, the theory of the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, and once the principles are defended, the consequences are validated.
- 2 Because it is the more mistreated one, and I have a secret inclination toward causes that are unfortunate but true. You may even call me, if you will, an advocate of lost causes. That is my character, enough said. I consider the Kabbalah to be a *met mitzvah she-ein lo koverim* [i.e., an unattended dead body with no one to bury it], whose care takes precedence over all other obligations.

I tell you this because I have been looked upon with similar doubts by others, and to all of them I have replied the same.

Why, then, do you not want to call me a friend? We both believe in God, in the Mosaic revelation; may I say, also in the tradition? For the love of Heaven, do not tell me no. Then what difference remains between us? That you do not believe that the Kabbalah is part of Mosaism, and that I believe it. We are both of good faith, but let us guard ourselves against being intolerant; excuse the term and do not take any offense. Would you not feel capable of being a friend to a Christian, to a Deist, to a Karaite, as long as they were of good faith? I myself feel capable of doing so, and I have had and still have several such friends, whom I have instinctively considered adversaries before getting to

²¹ “The Rabbis taught: Four entered the *Pardes* [‘the orchard,’ i.e., Heaven]. They were Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aḥer [Elisha ben Abuyah], and Rabbi Akiva... Ben Azzai gazed [at the Divine Presence] and died... Ben Zoma gazed and was harmed [he lost his sanity]... Aḥer cut down the plantings [he became a heretic]. Rabbi Akiva came out safely” (*Hagigah* 14b).

²² “May my arm be withered and my right eye utterly darkened”—a paraphrase of Zechariah 11:17.

know them, and afterwards I have valued and loved. If Naḥmanides were alive, would you not throw yourself into his arms, and would you not kiss his hand? Would you tell him, too, that he is not your friend? Let us imagine, then, what you would say to the Rambam [Maimonides], who Aristotelizes Mosaism—and it is he who in fact partly disfigures its fair face. I stop my ears so as not to hear it. Ah, but the holy Naḥmanides did not act this way; great Kabbalist (and Christian?) that he was, he took up against everyone the defense of—who? Of one who, like you, stood at the opposite pole of Kabbalism—of the Rambam. Although old and dying, he went wandering from city to city to save the Rambam from infamy and his books from the flames. And the Christian Benamozegh, he swears to God that he would know how to do as much for S. D. L. if another Philippson tried to stain his reputation,²³ and if the Orthodox defamed him for faults that he does not have. And he would do so more worthily and meritoriously than the crowd of admirers who swear upon his every word and who know how to say nothing but amen. I would add yehei shemeih rabba mevorakh to all (and it is a great deal) that you have well said....

It would be wrong, then, for you to refuse to declare yourself my friend.... I would not care so much if it were a millionaire [who was so refusing], but you, whose abnegation and sincerity I admire, I must care about; and that same ingenuous declaration of not wanting to be my friend—in an age in which *affezionatissimi* and *sviceratissimi* [i.e., insincere declarations of “most affectionate” and “passionately yours”] rain down like roof tiles on one’s head—makes me love you all the more. I am like those women who fall ever more deeply in love with one who makes a show of not loving or caring for them. What can one do? Everyone has his own tastes....

Polemics with Christianity do not please you. It is certainly more convenient not to conduct them. But they are necessary for the fate of future humanity. How unfortunate for us if our predecessors in the world had fled from polemics! We would still be at the level of fetishism. You say, “If someone came to attack me, I would respond,” etc. But when the arena is open and there is publishing and printing, the attack and the defense must be permanent. When there was no printing,

²³ Ludwig Philippson (1811-1889) was a Reform Jewish journalist and scholar in Germany, founder and editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*. Benamozegh may be referring to an article in this journal (vol. 21, no. 48, Nov. 23, 1857, pp. 657-659) in which Philippson subjected Shadal to a lengthy and savage attack, saying among other things, “The ridiculous vanity and self-worship of this great Italian *Havdolos-Fabrikant* is known to everyone.” Philippson’s colorful Hebrew-German epithet, literally “manufacturer of distinctions,” has been understood as “philological hairsplitter” (Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto*, p. 53).

or when it existed but with the counterweight of the Inquisition, I understand that the Jews would have had to wait for the knock on the doors of the synagogue and be pulled by their pigtailed before responding. But today! Certainly tact, moderation, and prudence are necessary, but one must do battle. Otherwise Judaism will be taken away; it is not enough to say that it is divine and therefore immortal, because we are not speaking of Judaism per se; rather, we are speaking of Judaism in the hearts and minds of the people, and that can go away. Truth and virtue, too, are divine and immortal; is that a reason why one should not exert all one's efforts to make people better and more fully educated? Without a doubt this is not the way to live peacefully in the world; rather, it is an obligation that must be fulfilled.

One thing, I cannot deny, has surprised me. Can you really say, "Be a good Christian and let everyone be faithful to their native beliefs"? It must be one of two things: either you said this in order to flee from bother and disturbance—and I can sympathize, but this is not a system to build oneself as a rule—or you said it in good faith, and in that case it is religious indifferentism,²⁴ for it is as if to say that if all the religions cannot be equally good and true, it follows that they are all equally false. Moreover, would it not be a grave sin to speak this way to a tritheist, a Christian, if it is not for the sake of fleeing from danger? *Ve-lifnei ivver lo titten mikhsbol* ["Do not place a stumbling block before the blind"—Lev. 19:14]. What I ask of you is not to live with me in good harmony as you lived with Monsignor Nardi. Let my "nard" send forth to you a different scent: *nirdi natan reih*²⁵—not to live with me in that sort of peace in which you are disposed to live with Christians; good politics, no doubt, but not what I would want you to employ with me.²⁶

²⁴ The term "indifferentism" is used in Catholic teaching to refer to the mistaken belief that no one religion or philosophy is superior to another.

²⁵ "My nard sent forth its fragrance"—Song of Songs 1:12. Nard (*nerd* in Hebrew) is a flowering plant of the honeysuckle family that yields spikenard, a perfume oil.

²⁶ As noted above, however (see footnote 18), Shadal did not shy away from asserting religious disagreement with Nardi on at least one occasion. In a note on p. 239 of Nardi's book *Verità della religione naturale e cristiana cattolica* ("The Truth of the Natural and Christian Catholic Religion," Padua, 1840), Nardi had said that "the idea that God could suffer and die would be opposed to reason, but not that a Person uniting in himself, to be sure in an incomprehensible manner, the divine nature with the human could, like a man, be born, suffer, die, and rise again." In a letter to Nardi dated June 25, 1850 (*Epistolario*, p. 585), Shadal expressed the view that one's "eternal health" cannot depend on "the acceptance of incomprehensible dogmas. God can indeed demand of us the sacrifice of our passions, but never that of our sound reason.... This, reduced to the most basic terms, is the Jewish-Christian question. In a word, a Jew does not find the Note

...I believe that we can still come to an understanding, that we can each make reciprocal concessions, and on the day in which we present ourselves to the world united together, and by dint of good will and love of the truth we combine together the *Vikkuaḥ* and the *Ta'am le-Shad*, then I believe I will hear in the distance a different braying from the one that you heard in my pamphlet—the braying of the donkey of the King Messiah.

...Tomorrow you will hear the shofar and I will hear it. What will that sound say to you? Your material Mosaism, what will it say to you? Surely nothing other than one of the charming but puerile reasons that have been given outside of the Kabbalah, and to hear it with devotion, to give importance to the *teki'ah*, *shevarim*, *teru'ah*, will require of you an extraordinary effort of faith. For me, as you know, the matter is quite different. Every note has its importance, just as every atom of material is a mystery, just as every physical object has its place and value in Creation. For me, the Torah is the prototype of the world, it is the world in the mind of God, it is the true incarnate word of the *mitzvoṭ ha-ma'asiyyoṭ*. What does it seem to you? Am I or am I not a devoted friend of material Mosaism? But with a slight difference from you.

And when I hear the shofar tomorrow, I too will say, “Let S. D. L. live many, many happy years; God spare him further suffering so that his mind may be kept serene and strong in the cultivation of sacred literature, and so that if one day he, too, decides to be a Christian like Rabbi Akiva and Naḥmanides, he will be able to direct his potent scholarship to the triumph of the Truth.” I too say, “Live many years,” but I do not add the restricted complimentary close of “most devoted”; rather, I say, with a love that I pray to God is the same for me as I feel for you, O good and brave Luzzatto, at this moment,

Most lovingly yours,

Elia Benamozegh

Shadal to Benamozegh, Sept. 18, 1863 (*Epistolario*, pp. 1032-1036)

Most esteemed friend,

...I will tell you that the trills of the shofar were (as I believe) commanded by God to put into public notice (at a time when no calendars were printed) the beginning of the year, just as on the tenth day of the year, with the same shofar, the arrival of the Jubilee year was brought into universal awareness. If today such sounds have lost their [original] purpose, they still preserve (as do so many ceremonies) the immense

on p. 239 convincing.” It is significant that Shadal refused to accept “incomprehensible” ideas from Christianity and Kabbalism alike.

value of reminding us of our ancient political existence, and they revive in us the feeling of nationality, which—without so many small but repeated reminders—perhaps might have become extinct among us, as it did among all the other ancient nations. Those trills excite in me clear ideas, profound sensations, the most edifying reflections. The miracle of our existence animates me, it encourages me to endure in the struggle against Spinoza,²⁷ against all the supposedly enlightened ones, and to risk everything, whatever may occur, in defense of a cause that has been victorious until now and that will certainly remain victorious.

To me, that horn is the drum of nationality, of the existence of a people that was once a nation and that today lives only in God, and that will cease to exist only when it ceases to believe in God.

I now take in hand the *Mishnat Ḥasidim* of the unfortunate Ricchi,²⁸ and I search therein for the mysterious value of those trills, and I understand nothing of it. But I suppose that others do understand it, and I equally suppose (for the moment) that there is a real and true interaction between the two worlds, and that true and quite real are all the celestial and more than celestial effects of those trills. Then I ask myself, those who groundlessly call Mosaism “literal,” with its precepts that have no motivation other than being *gezerat ha-melekh* (“the King’s decree”), do they have anything better? Granted all their mysterious motives for the Mosaic precepts, have they taken one step forward, do they have some more advanced theory than the one which we all know—that is, that “God has commanded that which He desired”?

Fools! They do not know that the ultimate reason for all things is the Divine good pleasure,²⁹ and that on earth and in Heaven, everything that has happened could have happened in a completely different manner, if the Creator had been otherwise pleased. If our trills electrify and put in motion the most exalted worlds, that happens only through

²⁷ Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza was Shadal’s particular *bête noire*. See, for example, his commentary to Exod. 15:3: “According to Spinoza, everything that exists in the world is of necessity, and not at all a matter of will; but according to the Jews (from Abraham until today), nothing exists of necessity, and everything is a product of God’s will. The faith of Spinoza and the faith of the Hebrews are as distant from each other as east and west, and the opposition of one to the other is total.”

²⁸ Immanuel Hai Ricchi (1688-1743) was an Italian rabbi and Kabbalist who was killed by robbers (hence Shadal’s description of him as “unfortunate”). *Mishnat Ḥasidim* (Amsterdam, 1727), considered his most important book, is an intricate Kabbalistic work that contains a subdivision devoted to *kavvanot*, or mystical meditations.

²⁹ Italian *benelacito*. Its French equivalent, *bon plaisir*, appears in a phrase once used by monarchs when signing a law: *Car tel est notre bon plaisir* (“For such is our good pleasure”).

the Divine good pleasure; any reason beyond this one does not exist, and cannot exist. And so no matter how many mysteries may be invented, nothing will ever go beyond the *gezerat ha-melekh*.

Besides, the notion that one's execution of the Divine precepts must be accompanied by sublime meditations [*kavvanot*] is never stated in the Law, and the ancient Rabbis disputed as to whether the precepts can be fulfilled only if they are carried out with *kavvanah*. Such *kavvanah* is not that of the mysticists, but is the simple consciousness of executing a Divine precept. And if not even such consciousness was believed to be necessary by some of the great Sages, who would dare to deny the epithet of "Orthodox" to one who cannot agree that the material execution of the Divine precepts is nothing if it is unaccompanied by mysterious *kavvanot*?

Metaphysical delusions are certainly ancient. But our Masters knew of their futility and evil consequences, and they lamented, "Anyone who speculates about four things [it would have been better if he had not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what was before, and what will be after]."³⁰ Thus they did not profess any doctrine that purported to scrutinize the incomprehensible. They were not so foolish as to ask why the world was created when it was, and not before or after that time, only to respond (see *Etz Hayyim, Heikhal 1, Gate 1, Branch 2*)³¹ that the present lower world could have existed only after the creation of all the other worlds above it, which came into existence one after the other—without realizing that the Creator, Who was in existence an eternity ago, could have begun His work some millions of centuries previously or subsequently, as He wished, and that the moment in which our world's existence became possible could have been brought forward or backward by some millions of centuries without any why or wherefore, for the eternal and unique Being has no one on whom to depend, and there can be no other why or wherefore than His own good pleasure.

³⁰ The citation is from Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1. The *Tiferet Yisrael* commentary explains this statement as a warning against speculation as to what is beyond space and time, since such matters are beyond human understanding, and seeking such knowledge will lead to error and heresy.

³¹ *Etz Hayyim* (1573) is a Kabbalistic work based on a compilation of the teachings of R. Isaac Luria by R. Hayyim Vital (1542-1620). "Anyone who enters the complex world of the *Etz Hayyim*... will quickly realize that these are texts which have little regard for Scripture and are not founded on what we may call normative rabbinic and/or the early theosophic Kabbalistic tradition." (Magid, Shaul. "From Theosophy to Midrash: Lurianic Exegesis and the Garden of Eden," *AJS Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1. New York: 1997, p. 38).

Most wisely, our Masters gave the label of “one who has no consideration for the honor of his Maker” to such metaphysicians [Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1], who pose absurd questions and resolve them with answers that are even more absurd. Such questions and such answers were not handed down by them to us, because they declared themselves openly opposed to such impertinences. These cannot be traced back to the Mosaic revelation, because they are absurd, and if they could be traced back to that source, they would have been respected by the ancient Masters.

These ancient Sages of ours, who did not permit the Oral Law to be written down—would they ever have dreamed of entrusting to paper, or allowing others to write down, the arcane doctrines that they confided only to their most experienced disciples? Is it possible that Simeon bar Yoḥai could actually have given the order, “Rabbi Abba will write [the secrets of the Torah]”?³²

If fanaticism allows itself to see here and there in the Zohar a few egregious outliers³³ and to admit to the presence of a few interpolations, the dispassionate observer finds that the book contains not even half a page that could possibly belong to those personages to whom it is attributed.

And if, then, a Kabbalist wanted to renounce the Zohar and keep the Kabbalah, he could absolutely not do so, for his inspired men—Isaac Luria, Joseph Caro, and whoever else there may be—all accepted the Zohar as a work of the Masters whose names it bears, and so they would all be false prophets.

Would that Kabbalist want to renounce even Luria and go back to Naḥmanides? We will talk then.

I cannot examine your lengthy book, which I read with great effort only once. It will suffice for me to let you know that my aversion to Kabbalah does not stem from incredulity or heterodoxy, but is a profound religious sentiment. It will suffice for me to let you know that it would be quite easy for me to rebut the *Ta'am le-Shad*, and that I do not do so in order to avoid wasting time, since mysticism itself is too contrary to the spirit of the age, with its partisans becoming scarcer every day.

If you defend mysticism, I will let you do it; if you speak ill of me, I will let you do it. Can you call for more friendship than this?

You want to be my friend, but at the same time you would like to see me converted. And I evade missionaries. Friend or not, you know

³² This is a reference to the *Idra Zuta*, a portion of the Zohar (*Ha'azinu*) describing a gathering of Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai's students on the day of his death, at which time it is said that he told Rabbi Abba to write down the secret Torah teachings that he had not previously revealed to them.

³³ Italian *farfalloni*, literally “butterflies” and idiomatically “philanderers.”

me as an honest man, ready to be of service to you sincerely, more than many professed friends.

I will add, to avoid any misunderstanding, that by “simple and material Mosaism” I mean, for example, sounding the shofar, or hearing it sounded, without engaging in mystical *kavvanot* [meditations], but with the sole *kavvanah* [intention] of fulfilling a Divine precept, which is holy for us for the simple reason that it was imposed upon us by God, and which had its social purposes in the Israelite republic, but which for us, in our dispersion, is a religious ceremony that sanctifies us and brings us closer to God (see *Lezioni di Teologia morale*, §§ 21, 29).³⁴

One who defends the *kavvanot* defends doctrines of which not a trace is found in the Mishnah or Talmud; and one who, in so doing, considers himself Orthodox is a fanatic, which can be tolerated. But one who dares to declare heterodox someone who does not think of such things as he does—he is impertinent and insults without any shade of reason our entire antiquity, which never knew anything of *kavvanot*, and in which great and venerable Masters denied even that precepts can be fulfilled only with *kavvanah*.

Having now re-read your letter, I find that I must respond to the objections that you make to my remark, “Be a good Christian.”

This is not politics, and it is not indifferentism. I am convinced that Christianity is not a polytheism. Christianity professes one single God, and its first followers suffered martyrdom for not worshipping “the gods.”

The mysteries with which it defaces pure monotheism are errors, but it does not thereby cease to be a monotheism. It is a calumny, an iniquity, to declare a person to be a polytheist or a tritheist if that person sincerely wants to be and believes himself to be a monotheist.

Convinced that the world does not have to become Jewish and will not, at some time, have to become circumcised, I want the Christian to live as a good Christian and be faithful to the evangelical morality, and not—in renouncing Christ—to renounce Moses, renounce God, and worship Spinoza.³⁵

³⁴ This book (“Lessons in Moral Theology”), published by Shadal in Padua, 1862, states in § 21 that the laws relating to the service of God serve the purpose of keeping the idea of God and Providence in our minds, as a means of keeping us honest and virtuous. In § 29, Shadal emphasizes that the ceremonial laws never lose this beneficial effect and thus continue to merit observance, even though many of them were originally intended to distance the Israelites from idolatry.

³⁵ It would seem that later in life, Benamozegh’s attitude toward Christianity underwent a change. Consider the following passage from an English translation of *Israël et l’Humanité*, a work edited by Aimé Pallière from Benamozegh’s notes after his death: “And now we turn to the followers of the two great messianisms, Christian and Moslem. It is to Christians in particular that we wish to address a

Of God there is very little that we can comprehend, and I am quite tolerant, and you might say indifferent—or, if you like, an indifferentist—regarding theoretical errors when it comes to metaphysics. I would never have condemned or scorned our ancient anthropomorphists, nor would I have condemned Maimonides for his spiritualism; nor do I despise the Kabbalists for their beliefs, but they are my enemies when they insult non-mystical Mosaism, when they vilify the *pesbat de-oraita*, the plain meaning of the Torah.

You see that our opinions are more than slightly in discord, and that we will never be able to come to agreement. But if in any case you want me as a friend, I will be one, as I am with so many others, always telling you the truth without a veil and without reticence.

...The Zohar says that Hoshana Rabbah is the *siyuma de-dina* (“the conclusion of judgment”), and yet you would make Shemini Atzeret analogous to Yom Kippur, that is, the Day of Judgment. Is this not making a mockery of the Zohar and your readers?³⁶ And by putting this argument at the front of your book, is this not as if it said:

*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate,
Di trovar qui sode ragioni e belle;
Ma sofismi e menzogne imbelletate,
E falso giorno e notte senza stelle—?*³⁷

frank and respectful word, and God knows that it is with fear in our heart lest our advances be taken for hypocrisy. No! No impartial and reasonable man can fail to recognize and appreciate, as is appropriate, the exalted worth of these two great religions, more especially of Christianity. There is no Jew worthy of the name who does not rejoice in the great transformation wrought by them in a world formerly defiled...As for ourself, we have never had the experience of hearing the Psalms of David on the lips of a priest without feeling such sensations. The reading of certain passages of the Gospels has never left us unresponsive. The simplicity, grandeur, infinite tenderness, which these pages breathe out overwhelms us to the depths of our soul...” (Luria, Maxwell, trans. and ed. *Israel and Humanity*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995, pp. 50–51.)

³⁶ Here Shadal is criticizing the opening section of *Ta'am le-Shad*, in which Benamozegh notes that the two protagonists of Shadal's *Vikkuaḥ* conducted their debate on the night of Hoshana Rabbah. This serves as a point of departure for an extended discussion between Benamozegh's own two protagonists (pp. 2-21) as to the Kabbalistic significance of Hoshana Rabbah and the holiday that immediately follows it, Shemini Atzeret.

³⁷ Here Shadal has borrowed a famous line from Canto III of Dante's *Inferno* and added three more of his own devising. These lines may be translated as follows: “All hope abandon, ye who enter here/ Of finding here firm and fair reasonings/ But only sophisms and painted fallacies/ And false day, and night without stars.”

...Live happily and believe me to be
Your sincere friend,
S. D. L.

P.S. You make mention of those who “entered the *Pardes*,” as if they were Kabbalists. R. Hai [Gaon] had it by tradition that by means of certain preparations, they came to see the heavenly hosts. Thus, neither they nor he were Kabbalists in the modern sense, but they were all anthropomorphists, professing a material mysticism which is that of the *Shiur Komah*³⁸ and the *Pirkei Heikhalot*,³⁹ a doctrine that has fallen into discredit and practically into oblivion after the war waged by Maimonides against every form of *bagshamah* [i.e., belief in the corporeality of God].

The author of the *Kuzari* [Judah ha-Levi] contributed some words and ideas to the *Zohar* (see Munk, *Gebirol*, p. 277),⁴⁰ but he did not know the Kabbalah strictly speaking, for in the *Sefirot* he saw only abstract numerical ideas, never real substances, worlds, emanations, or what have you, like those of the Kabbalists, to which prayers are addressed. Steinschneider (*Mazkeir*, p. 59)⁴¹ gives you credit for attempting to show elements of the Kabbalah in the *Kuzari*, and then he adds, “It remains to be asked, however, how much of the *Kuzari* entered into the Kabbalah of the thirteenth century.”

Benamozegh to Shadal, Sept. 21, 1863 (*Lettere*, pp. 75-105)

Most esteemed friend,

...You believe that the trills of the shofar were commanded by God to put into public notice, when no calendars were printed, the beginning of the year. Permit a few questions that my meager intellect suggests:

³⁸ A Midrashic work purporting to describe the measurements of God’s bodily parts. Maimonides claimed that it was a heretical Byzantine-era forgery.

³⁹ Otherwise known as *Heikhalot Rabbati*, a work of uncertain date and authorship, in which Rabbi Ishmael relates how he, with a company of colleagues, learned the secrets of ascending to see “the King in His beauty.”

⁴⁰ That is, Munk, Salomon. *Mélanges de philosophie Juive et Arabe*. Paris: 1857-1859, pp. 277-278. There, Munk asserts that the concept of Israel as the heart of all the nations was adopted by the *Zohar* from the *Kuzari*. Shadal refers to the book as “*Gebirol*” because its first part contains excerpts from Solomon ibn Gabirol’s *Mekor Hayyim* (*Fons Vitae*).

⁴¹ Steinschneider, Moritz, ed. *Ha-Mazkeir* (*Hebräische Bibliographie*), vol. 5. Berlin: 1862. Founded in 1858, *Ha-Mazkeir* was a bibliographical journal of Judaica that enumerated each year’s literary publications. Shadal (who is listed as a contributor to the volume in question) is referring to a notice describing Benamozegh’s *Ta’am le-Shad*.

1. Was it really necessary for God to reveal Himself in order to unveil this fine idea? Does it not seem to you that it would have been better for the Divine mind to have revealed some kind of signal that was unknown then and only put into practice afterward, since such a thing would have better verified the intervention of the Supreme Intellect?
2. How would the shofar have been more effective than a simple public announcement?
3. Why would practices such as this one have to be observed today, since, as you say, their purpose has ceased? Is it reasonable for people to be chained to inane practices, and—notwithstanding the bright light of civilization and a plethora of more befitting means—be petrified in antiquated and obsolete ways that can have nothing more than a simply archeological value?
4. If they are practiced today for no other reason than to remind us of our political existence, I ask: (1) What is the purpose, then, of all those rules, prescriptions, minute details that regulate the form, time, mode, and instrumentation of those sounds? (2) Are you not afraid that a rabbi who has been indoctrinated in these principles of yours, and who does not believe it precisely necessary to perpetuate the remembrance of bygone times, this empty ceremonial, might put a stop to these practices, among the most incomprehensible and alien of our customs, or at least suppress with a coup d'état all the *dinim* of the shofar and substitute some instrument, some sound, some form in its place?⁴² (3) Furthermore, are you not afraid that some Italian or German reformer or deformer, starting out from your own premises, might say, “Better than this horn-blarney, a fine and unctuous sermon speaks to the heart and mind,” thus lending authorization to the German Reform, which, it is well to remember, has been motivated by none other than this precise principle, that is—as you say—that this and so many other ceremonies have only a commemorative purpose? (4) And if this is true, what idea do you have of a wise God Who knows no better than to order this amorphous means of proclamation and then—with the progress of the times and human erudition in civil life—not only

⁴² In fact, at one time, many Reform congregations dispensed with the shofar, perceiving it as “primitive sounding, raucous, informal, antiquated, and therefore inherently inappropriate to their religious aesthetics;... many American Reform congregations simply substituted a modern trumpet... while still others relied altogether on the organ’s trumpet stop.” (Levin, Neil W., liner notes to Herman Berlinski’s *Shofar Service* (1999 recording), Milken Archive of Jewish Music, <<https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/masterworks-of-prayer/work/shofar-service/>>.)

fails to sanction new and more fitting ideas by means of another revelation, but wishes His people to continue living in the temple of a semi-barbaric life of forty centuries ago, and Who permits and indeed wants them to say, “Blessed be You, O Eternal, Who commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar”?...

5. I cannot discern that connection that you see between the sound of the shofar and our nationality. Does national life consist of perpetuating antiquated customs? A nation that has no current life and is reduced to feeding upon memories shows itself to be a nation no longer.
6. Furthermore, our nationality is a noble and sacred thing, no doubt, but nobler and holier is our religion; indeed, the former is no more significant than other nationalities if it does not serve as a means of perpetuating and augmenting the latter. To reduce the revealed precepts to mere national preservatives is to make them lose three quarters of their value; it is to reduce God to the rank of a Lycurgus or a Romulus⁴³; it is to fuse religion, which can never die, with our nationality, which can; it is to expose religious truth to all those changes and vicissitudes and perils to which nationality is exposed; it is to say to the Jew, “If you no longer care to live a separate national existence, you no longer have any reason to be observant”; it is to make eternity into a satellite of the present time.
7. Given the above, it cannot be understood why you so strongly condemn Spinoza, the enlightened ones, etc. For Spinoza thought precisely as you do with regard to the ceremonies and their origin and significance—only more logically and coherently than you, he made them human works, for truly there is no need for God to inconvenience Himself to do what you and I would have known to do. Spinoza and the enlightened ones have nothing against our nationality, but they are against our religion; and it is not an effective means of combating rationalism, pantheism, and illuminism to say to their advocates, “God’s precepts are nothing but national commemorative institutions and are simply ceremonial.”...

As for your declaration, “Fools! They do not know that the ultimate reason for all things is the Divine good pleasure”: “Of course,” say these fools, but they add, “Such good pleasure is not without great wherefores”; in other words, God’s intelligence cannot be separated from His will, and one would truly be a fool if one were to make the

⁴³ In other words, a flesh-and-blood legislator. Lycurgus (fl. 820 BCE?) was the quasi-legendary lawgiver of Sparta, and Romulus was the legendary founder and first king of Rome.

Divine will into an idea similar to the bon plaisir of the French despots....

What you mean by “metaphysical delusions” I truly cannot say. Metaphysics is one of the primary needs of the human mind, and every time the mind reflects on things that are not physical bodies, that is metaphysics, like it or not. Woe to humanity if it could not occupy itself with metaphysical matters, but only with physical bodies and the relationships among them! Is this the material Judaism that you adore, that is, religious skepticism and obscurantism? You are frank with me; allow me to be so with you....

If, when reading the *Ta'am le-Shad*, all hope is abandoned at the entrance, as you say, then when reading the *Vikkuah*, it is abandoned at the exit....

I have been reading these days, in the *Maggid*, your long and sensible reflections on Mendelssohn and his disciples.⁴⁴ You investigate with great sorrow how it was that from such a religious man was derived a school of skeptics, rationalists, and worse; and there passes in review an infinite number of causes that seem not to fully satisfy you, nor, truth be told, can they be satisfying. The true reason was too close to you for you to see it. Remember what I said to you in the pages above, that when it is established as a premise that in Mosaism there is nothing but *pesbat*, when one denies absolute reasons for the precepts, independent of times or places, the consequences sooner or later are inevitable. This is what Mendelssohn did, and even if he did so with not quite as much solemnity as you do, certainly his inclinations with respect to sod [that is, esotericism] were not dissimilar to yours. See, now, the consequences. Those political, geographical, social, and moral motives that the *pashtanim* assign to the precepts do not stand up to analysis, to criticism, to human needs, interests, or passions. If one wants to preserve the *mitzvot*, they must be put on a higher plane in which these influences cannot make themselves heard, and this is the plane of the absolute. Otherwise, Mendelssohn and Luzzatto, by sentiment, habit, personal persuasion, and pious and generous heart, will be pious, observant models of moral and religious virtue, but not being able to transmit these felicitous inclinations to those who succeed them, they will sooner or later have disciples who will draw out the consequences of their premises, who will say, “If the purpose of the Sabbath is only rest and a reminder of the creation, would it not be all the same to celebrate it a day later? Must we encounter thousands of sacrifices of interests, separate ourselves from the majority, cut ourselves off from the universal for a difference that amounts to nothing? If one eats matzah for no other reason than the memory of the blessed unleavened dough,

⁴⁴ See *Ha-Maggid*, Sept. 17, 1863, p. 293; Sept. 24, p. 301.

can we not remember it equally well with a good sermon, without submitting our teeth and stomach to torture for seven days? And above all, are they not ridiculous, those many minute precautions with which that bread is prepared?" I challenge a reasoning mind to stop the mouth of these terrible logicians and nevertheless to stay with the *pesbat* exclusively.

The example of Mendelssohn seems to be made especially for you. If you do not pay heed in time, my prediction will be in vain, and you will be the Mendelssohn of our age in Italy and the rest of Europe. This is what you will be in delayed effect, just as you already are now in scholarship, fame, and inclinations. You who love Judaism, who I believe would give his life's blood for it—why would you want to leave within your mind this fatal germ that will bring forth its bitter fruits, perhaps when neither you nor I are in this world any longer to weep for it and remedy it? Do you want to see the advance signs now? Observe on whose side are the reformist aspirations, on your side or mine—that is to say, on the side of those who deny the Kabbalah like you, or of those who continue to accept it, relatively few to be sure (as you rejoice to say, with a joy that makes me shudder), but those who still remain. I would like to serve you in the manner of the squire of Xerxes, who said to him every morning when he awoke, "Sire, remember the Greeks." And I would like to whisper in your ear, "Remember Mendelssohn!"

I know how sterile this polemic of letters would be with anyone else, and I would not waste my time with one who was not capable of everything for the love of the true and the good. But I am writing to Luzzatto, to the man who... [could] make himself a hundred times greater than he is, becoming—as I said many years ago in *L'Univers Israélite*—after Moses, Ezra, and Hillel, the fourth restorer of our religion....

See that I speak to you with my heart on my lips and without reticence. I believe that in so doing, I will merit your friendship all the more....

This letter, which was begun before Yom Kippur, I finish today as Shemini Atzeret has gone. Show yourself more solicitous than I am, and honor me more promptly with your response.

Always most devotedly and affectionately yours,

Benamozegh

Benamozegh to Shadal, Feb. 24, 1864 (*Lettere*, pp. 108-110)

Most esteemed friend,

At this time I do not doubt that you have received the *Vayikra*,⁴⁵ the sending of which was delayed by a day. You will find your interpretations cited in many places, sometimes disputed, other times approved and endorsed, always, I believe, with respect, and I regret it wherever I have not shown enough.⁴⁶ Here, too, you will find much that can be restated about the Kabbalah, which is our Helen—and as for which one of us is Menelaus and which one is Paris, I will leave the choice to you.⁴⁷ Only please, let there not break out between us a ten-year war, of which new Homers would have to sing after us: “*Cantami, o Diva, del pelide Achille le ire funeste/ che infiniti addusse lutti agli Achei*.”⁴⁸ I hope at least that you do me the justice of agreeing that my opinions are reasoned and serious. Why do you not write me more often? Writing itself can be a form of study, and if you do not care to continue our Kabbalistic polemic, is there any lack of subjects on which we can exchange our ideas? I do not know how much delight you might derive from it, but I do know that I would enjoy it infinitely, since here one lives, or at least I live, in a nearly perfect solitude, and except for the company of my books, my children, and my new students, I will tell you that now I see few people and visit no one. What is more, I live in a villa and I am

⁴⁵ That is, the Leviticus volume of *Torat Hashem*, Benamozegh’s edition of the Pentateuch, including his commentary *Em la-Mikra* (Livorno, 1863).

⁴⁶ Benamozegh’s first comment, on Lev. 1:2, would certainly have aroused Shadal’s ire. He cites Shadal’s opinion, in *Ha-Mishtadel*, that the idea of offering sacrifices to God originated not from a divine command, but from human impulses, and that the Torah—whose purpose was not to teach the people wisdom and knowledge, but to guide them on the paths of righteousness—did not abolish this custom. However, Benamozegh asserts not only that this opinion was mistaken, but that Shadal failed to perceive that he was following in the path of one whom he rightly despised, namely Spinoza, and that the same approach had been taken by the Christians and the leaders of the Reform movement.

⁴⁷ As recounted in Homer’s *Iliad*, the beautiful Helen of Troy was the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and was abducted by Paris, son of the king of Troy. This act was one of the immediate causes of the ten-year Trojan War. Benamozegh gives her name in the Italian form, “Elena.” There is probably no way to know for certain whether Benamozegh was aware of it, but Elena (Leah in Hebrew) was in fact the name of Shadal’s wife! In any case, Benamozegh’s attempt at humor here may have fallen flat.

⁴⁸ “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles/ and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians.” These are the opening lines of the *Iliad* (trans. Richmond Lattimore, 1951). Benamozegh quotes the Italian version by Vincenzo Monti (1810).

a *villano* [“peasant”] all year. It can be said of me that I am a field mouse, and that if you accept me as a table-mate at the banquet of learning and friendship, the “feast of the Leviathan,” I can also be one who is *oleh al shulhan melakhim*.⁴⁹

...[Teaching my new students] is a labor that is taking ever greater proportions. God give me strength, and may He give it to you, our Italian Nestor, as He would to anyone who strives for goodness and truth.

I repeat then: write me and let us reason together by letter as we would do verbally if we saw each other in person.... But what need is there to keep in mind what divides us? Let us concentrate on what unites us and, in our discussions, let us seek to eliminate any remaining division. And I am, without any reservation, as always, your most affectionate and devoted friend,

Benamozegh

Benamozegh to Shadal, March 18, 1864 (*Lettere*, pp. 111-112)

Most esteemed friend,

You so tight-fisted with letters and I so extravagant! This shows how much you are worth, and how little I am. Are you perhaps less than content with the somewhat free way that I treat your opinions in *Em la-Mikra*? I do not believe that I have ever fallen short of the respect due to you, but when one is as honest and of good faith as you are, one must understand that others who are equally convinced to the contrary may sometimes put slightly too much energy into defending their opinions. I have no need to praise you, but the esteem that I have for your learning and above all for your scholarly honesty makes me wish for you to care for me as much as I love you. Reading yesterday your response to Pineles in *Ha-Maggid*,⁵⁰ I said, “Poor me! Must I, too, have aroused your anger?” For if I am not mistaken, on one occasion I

⁴⁹ This is a jocular reference to a statement in *Avodah Zarah* 68b that a field mouse (as opposed to a city mouse) is considered a delicacy and is *oleh al shulhan shel melakhim* (“is served at the table of kings”).

⁵⁰ Hirsch Mendel Pineles (1805-1870) was a Galician scholar. In the March 9, 1864 edition of *Ha-Maggid* [p. 77], Shadal defends his view, which Pineles had criticized, that an unintentional manslayer who leaves a city of refuge may be killed only by a particular blood-avenger (*go’el ha-dam*) and not by any member of the public at large. Shadal says, “If the words of the scholar Pineles had merely wounded my honor, I would have kept silent (as I have kept silent a number of times and have not responded to those who asserted empty claims against me, so as not to waste my time), but those words inflict a not inconsiderable injury upon the honor of our Torah, so how can I keep silent?” Note that Shadal’s statement echoes the wording of his letter to Benamozegh of August 1863.

wrote in *Em la-Mikra*, “In *Ha-Mishtadel*, the Scriptures have been distorted”; I said “In *Ha-Mishtadel*” [the title of your work, instead of referring to you by name], to be sure, to avoid defaming your name, but otherwise the signs of my esteem and the affection that I bear for you are not lacking. I would like to tell you here about my opinion of your response to Pineles, but I am avoiding a discussion for fear of writing 20-page letters and, what is worse, not receiving a reply....

One word about your response to Pineles. You oppose this writer, and rightly so, when he says that the Torah could suppress the instinct for revenge only up to a certain point. But oh, most honest Luzzatto! Do you not do the same? For what is that power left to—or that obligation imposed upon—the *go’el ha-dam*, whether one person or a hundred, to shed the blood of the unintentional manslayer if not (under the system of pure *pesbat*) a concession to the concepts and customs of the times? Can you maintain that a well-ordered society could tolerate similar abuses? Therefore it seems to me that between you and Pineles there is only a difference of degree. He makes the greater concession, you the lesser, but the system is entirely...

[Editor’s note: Unfortunately, this is all we have of Benamozegh’s last letter. In his introduction to the *Lettere* volume, p. 4, Benamozegh apologizes for the truncation, and he explains that the original letter, which Shadal’s sons had returned to him, had been misplaced, and that the only available copy was incomplete.]

Conclusion

To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, this is the way the correspondence ends, not with a bang but a whimper. Not only is the last part of Benamozegh’s final letter missing, but Shadal has already left off writing well beforehand. It is not that Shadal stopped reaching out to colleagues toward the end of his life; to the contrary, both the *Epistolario* and *Iggerot Shadal* contain letters written as late as the month of his death, September 1865. It is also not the case that he was avoiding all controversy; one of his later letters (written in French on Oct. 27, 1864) was to a Christian acquaintance, the Swiss pastor and proto-Zionist Abram-François Pétavel, urging him to concentrate his efforts on promoting peace, reconciliation, and charity without attempting to change anyone’s religious convictions (*Epistolario*, pp. 1052-1053). However, one might hazard a guess that Shadal simply concluded that he had nothing more to say to Benamozegh, or that he had had enough of his younger rival’s blend of harsh criticisms and fawning praise.

To put things in historic perspective, it was just at the height of the Shadal-Benamozegh polemic in September 1863 that the Battle of Chick-

amauga was being fought in Georgia. Unlike that horrific battle, the polemic involved no bloodshed, and yet the two conflicts can be seen as comparable in some respects. The polemic involved a “civil war” of sorts between two contrasting strains of Italian Judaism. Benamozegh saw himself as fighting for a “lost cause,” the same term that came to be embraced (*lebardil*) by the defeated American South. But most significantly, both conflicts centered on issues that can be said to remain incompletely resolved to this day.

True, Benamozegh’s gloomy characterization of his cause seems to have been premature. He would have been pleasantly surprised (and Shadal would have been baffled) to learn that mysticism in general and Kabbalah in particular are currently enjoying both academic respect and broad popularity. Nevertheless, the debate continues with regard to the following questions that the Shadal-Benamozegh letters raise:

- What is the true origin and nature of the Zohar?
- If the Zohar is not all that it is claimed to be, is it still an important mystical work? If not, can the Kabbalah stand without it?
- Can Orthodox Judaism survive without Kabbalah, or without some form of mysticism? Or, to the contrary, is it harmed more than helped by it?
- Do we perform mitzvot (1) because of the unseen cosmic effects that such performance engenders on a higher plane, (2) to commemorate events in Jewish history, (3) to reinforce our feelings of peoplehood, (4) for social and moral benefits, (5) simply because God told us to, or (6) more than one of the above?
- What is our proper relationship with followers of other religions, and in particular with Christians?
- Is Jewish national sentiment a key component of Judaism? Is the fusion of religion and nationality a dangerous thing?
- If one no longer cares to live a separate Jewish national existence, does one still have any reason to be observant?
- Can Jews who passionately espouse different *hashkafot*, even within the Orthodox community, learn to agree to disagree? Co-exist? Love each other?

Some of these questions may have to remain without definitive answers until Elijah comes. But when he does, and on the day that we hear at last the *Mashiah*’s humble mount approaching, we will all be able to smile and say, “Let him bray.” ❧