

Rabbi Moshe Binyamin: One of the First Kabbalists in Baghdad

Shaul Regev

Very few manuscripts authored by our Babylonian sages from the 17th through the beginning of the 19th century are in our hands today. This is due to the elements of nature, wars, and occupations which all contributed to the loss of the originals. It is also possible that there are few extant copies since perhaps those Babylonian sages did in fact not write much.

We find a similar situation in the Great Yeshiva of Mosul, headed by the sages of the Barazani family who also did not leave us many manuscripts, either because they did not write much or if they did, those manuscripts were lost to us over time.

Rabbi Moshe Binyamin was one of the renowned Kabbalists who lived in Baghdad at the close of the 17th century through the middle of the 18th century. Much of his background is shrouded in uncertainty. We have very little information about him from external sources, with the majority of it coming from his own preface to his books.

Three of his Kabbalistic books survived, the first being, "*Tfila L'Moshe*" - "A Prayer to Moses," which contains his interpretation of ten chapters from the "Book of Psalms" which are included in our prayers commencing from chapter 90, "A Prayer to Moses." This book continues with his elucidation on "The Prayer of Hannah," "The Prayer of Hezekiah," "The Prayer of Jonah," and other texts of a similar nature.

The second book, "*Sha'arei Yerushalayim*" - "The Gates of Jerusalem," contains his commentary on the chapters of comfort and condolence found in the "Book of Isaiah." In his third book, "*Ma'asei Rav*" - "The Deeds of Rav" he elucidates on the deeds of Rabba Bar Bar Chana, as found in the Talmudic tractate of "Bava Batra." In all of his writings, his commentaries are a blend of literal interpretation, homiletic exegesis, and Kabbalistic meanings.

In his generation we do find other sages, such as Rabbi Ezra The Babylonian, who also wrote about Kabbalah albeit not at the level of Rabbi Moshe Binyamin. In the generation following him, we find the writings of other Kabbalists such as Rabbi Sasson Shenduch. These early writers were but a prelude to the deluge of Kabbalistic writing in the 19th century which had tremendous influence on Babylonian Jewry at the time.