

## ARIZAL

### **ARIZAL – His life**

The city of Jerusalem had been conquered by the Sultan Suleiman of Turkey since 5277 – 1517. The population of about 600 Jews lived in poverty and was mostly dependent on Tsedakah<sup>4</sup> sent from abroad. In Jerusalem, lived Rabbi Shlomo Luria an honest and God fearing man, with his wife and had no children yet. One day in the year 5294 – 1534, he stayed alone in the synagogue to study longer than usual. Eliyahu the prophet appeared to him and said: God has sent me to you as a messenger to let you know that your wife will give birth to a son that you will call Itshak. He will be a savior for Israel from the Klipot<sup>5</sup>, he will do the Tikun<sup>6</sup> of many reincarnated souls, from him, will be revealed the wisdom of Kabbalah. No knowledge will be kept from him and his name will be known everywhere. However, I ask you; when it will be time to circumcise him, do not start until you see me. Rabbi Shlomo astonished by this revelation, stayed all day in the synagogue crying and praying to God to fulfill this promise.

Shortly after, his wife became pregnant, Rabbi Shlomo was beginning to see the realization of the promise and his joy had no limit. Soon, a boy was born and the preparation for the Brit Milah to be on the eighth day started. All the community was invited to join the Simha at the synagogue. When Rabbi Shlomo arrived he started to look for Eliyahu the prophet but

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<sup>4</sup> Charity

<sup>5</sup> Husks – Negative forces

<sup>6</sup> Rectification

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could not find him. The guests were arriving and everybody was impatiently waiting for the ceremony to start. Rabbi Shlomo started to have doubts about the prophecy, 'maybe I did something wrong' he thought. When asked why it was not starting, he replied that he was waiting for other family members to arrive. Finally, lifting his eyes he saw the prophet Eliyahu, you can start now he said, I made you wait to test you and see if you were going to wait for me as I had asked. Nobody could see the prophet besides Rabbi Shlomo, the baby boy was circumcised and given back to his mother. On the way home, his wounds were already healed to the stupefaction of all, a miracle they said.

The child grew and started learning, his intelligence was much superior to anyone around, by the age of three, he could already pray from his Sidur, by eight, he was an expert in Halakha. His memory was phenomenal and no one could stand up to him or challenge his understanding of the different texts. During this time, his father Rabbi Shlomo passed away, his mother said to him: I am now a widow and cannot afford to buy you the books you need, let's go down to Egypt to your uncle's house, he is very rich, and there you will have all you need. What you would like me to do I will do, answered the young Itshak. The family went down to Egypt and was welcomed by the uncle Rabbi Mordekhai Francis who was respected by the community for his generosity and erudition. He had come to Egypt after the expulsion from Spain together with other sages to build a new community. He welcomed his sister and her children and took them under his wing making sure they had all the security and comfort they needed, he

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treated them as his own children. The young Itshak was provided with all the material and books he needed for his studies. Rabbi Betzalel Ashkenazi was asked to be his tutor; they had heard he was a child prodigy. The Arizal learned with him until the age of fifteen, by then his understanding and knowledge was far above any scholar in Egypt, he was now an adult and his uncle gave him his daughter to marry.

### **The Zohar**

About two years later, the Arizal was seating in the synagogue, his seat was not up front with the prominent members of the community, he preferred seating in the back with the less fortunate and the passing strangers, in front of him sat a traveling merchant. The Arizal noticed that the merchant was holding a manuscript, he came closer and glazing into it he realized that it contained very deep secrets. He asked the merchant if he knew what was in it, the latter admitted shamefully that he did not know how to read and was holding a book as not to look like an ignorant in front of the others. The Arizal asked him to sell it to him, but he refused saying that he had no need for money, but if the Arizal agreed to talk to his father in law to cancel the import taxes on his merchandise, he would give it to him. That was done and the Arizal took possession of the manuscript that was no other than a genuine copy of the Zohar.

For the next six years the Arizal was going to consecrate his life in understanding the writings of the Zohar. He secluded himself in a cabin by the banks of the Nile, coming out just for Shabbat to be with his family, and returning right when

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Shabbat ended. He would put tremendous efforts to understand the Zohar, sometimes spending days and nights without sleep on one subject to grasp it properly. In his dreams he was told if he did understand as Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai did, or if he needed to dwell deeper into it. As he once said; to attain the wisdom needed to understand this profound knowledge, one should be as much as possible silent, and avoid all unnecessary conversations.

### **Ascending to Tsfat**

The Arizal attained high levels of sanctity and purity. Eliyahu the prophet came to let him know that he had been sent by God to teach him the profound secrets of the Kabbalah, that nothing should be kept from him and that all the secrets will be now revealed to him. He also deserved that every night after falling asleep when his soul ascended with all the other souls, angels will escort it to the Yeshiva<sup>7</sup> of his choosing. Some nights he would go to the one of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Eliezer, a prophet or the one of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai.

At the age of thirty six, when he ascended one night to the Yeshiva of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, they told him; what are you doing in this impure land, go to the Galilee where you will attain even higher levels of sanctity and understanding. Know that your days are few, and there will be your final rest. You will meet your main student Rabbi Haim Vital, a very high soul, in a previous reincarnation he taught you a lot of Torah, now you will give back to him, by teaching him all the secrets that you will learn.

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<sup>7</sup> Place of learning

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The next morning, he and all his family left Egypt to go up to Tsfat in the land of Israel. There he found amazing Torah and Kabbalah scholars as Rabbi Moshe Kordovero, Rabbi Yosef Karo and others.

### **Rabbi Moshe Kordovero**

The Ramak – Rabbi Moshe Kordovero was the main Kabbalist in Tsfat, he had written important works on the Kabbalah and was a man of great sanctity and wisdom. The Arizal preferred to stay discreet about his knowledge of the Kabbalah, he did not want in any way to disturb or impose himself as a challenging authority.

Shortly after, Rabbi Moshe Kordovero was on his deathbed; his students and other Rabbis came to pay their last respects. He told them: Know that after me will come a man who will open your eyes on the Kabbalah, even if at first his teachings will seem to contradict mine, this will not be true. In my time the conduits of this knowledge were constricted from up high, in his time they will be more open. When his students heard this, they insisted on knowing the name of this master, he refused saying; if he chose not to manifest himself until now, I will not reveal who he is. On the day of my burial, the man who will see a pillar of cloud preceding me, is the man chosen by God to reveal this knowledge to his people. When at the cemetery they wanted to bury him beside important Rabbis, the Arizal said: this is not his resting place; the cloudy pillar that preceded him is there – showing another place. They

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then realized that the Arizal was the master Rabbi Kordovero had told them.

### **Woman of valor**

In Tsfat, ten men were appointed to oversee the safeguard of the moral values of the community. Early one morning, one of these men opened his window to see if dawn had broken to go to the synagogue. In the faint light of daybreak, he saw a woman dressed with her Shabbat clothes coming out of her house, he knew this woman's husband was overseas, where could she be going, he wondered. Discretely, he followed her and saw she was going to a house where a man of doubtful values was staying. For sure this woman is about to commit a sin, he thought, I will wait after the Tefilah and tell the other appointees what I saw. When the Tefilah was over, he asked the attendant to gather all the appointees, he had to testify on what he saw with his own eyes. Before he started to speak, the Arizal said to him: Keep silent, do not speak negatively about innocent daughters of Israel, the woman that you saw this morning at dawn, is a clean and pure woman. A man came from overseas; he had a letter and money from her husband to give her. She at first wanted to send somebody to get them, but he refused, saying he had promised her husband that he would remit them himself to his wife and transmit a personal message to her. The man fell to the feet of the Arizal, pleading forgiveness. The Arizal said; why are you asking for my forgiveness? Go and apologize to that woman on whom you were going to testify falsely. He did, and the word started to get around about the saintliness of the Arizal.

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### **I am not a prophet**

Not everybody was convinced about the talents of this young Rabbi. Two of the most important Rabbis of the town decided to find out for themselves. They came to him and said: we heard you are a prophet, is this true? No, he replied, I am neither a prophet nor a son of a prophet and I don't know much. While talking to them, a man passing by brushed his clothes on the Arizal. The latter said: may God forgive you, now I will have to dip myself a few times in the Mikve<sup>8</sup>. Curious the two Rabbis followed the man and asked him what he had done to provoke such a reaction from the Arizal. Ashamed, he told them that the Yetser Hara<sup>9</sup> had taken possession of him and that he had a not natural intimate relation with his wife. Hearing this, the two Rabbis came with other Rabbis to bow to the Arizal. Please, they implored, do not hold any goodness from us, we are ready to be your students and learn from your Torah. He then started to reveal deep secrets to them, they were amazed and from that day they stayed close, to learn from him.

### **Rabbi Haim Vital**

Rabbi Haim Vital was in Damascus, every night the Arizal was bringing over his soul and asking: Rabbi Haim, why aren't you coming to learn? Don't you know that I came to this world to repair your soul and teach you very deep secrets that were not revealed to no one until now? In the morning, Rabbi Vital was mockingly saying what happened to his students

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<sup>8</sup> Ritual bath

<sup>9</sup> Bad impulse

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and colleagues. He thought of himself as a higher scholar and Kabbalist than the Arizal.

One day, he decided to go and see for himself if what was said about the Arizal was true. Coming to Tsfat, he went to the Arizal and asked him to explain a subject in the Zohar that he couldn't understand. The Arizal answered and revealed very deep secrets on this subject. Rabbi Vital was so astonished that he almost lost consciousness. Rabbi Vital asked him about another difficult subject in the Zohar, the answers left him even more astonished than before. He tried asking once more, the Arizal stopped him, you have asked enough, you are not meriting to hear more.

Ashamed, Rabbi Vital left, covered himself with a sack and ash and started praying and crying that he may find favor in the eyes of the Arizal, and that he will accept to teach him these Torah secrets. The day after, he came back to see the Arizal crying and kissing his hand, he implored him to accept him as his student. Because it took three month before you decided to come, you did not deserve, but the ashes that you covered yourself with last night, have done the necessary Tikun<sup>10</sup>. Therefore do not fear, I will not retain from you any secrets of the Torah. From that day on, he sat with the other students to learn.

### **All the pens in the world**

His students asked him one day; why doesn't our master write a book on his knowledge to guide the future generations. He

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<sup>10</sup> Repair

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responded, even will all the pens in the world, it will not suffice to write down what I know. When I open my mouth to explain to you a secret of our Torah, there is an abundance of thoughts which overflow my mind and I try to open a small conduit to direct it to you so you that you will not be drowned and not understand anything, like a baby who receives an overflow of milk at once. I would prefer that only Rabbi Haim Vital records and write, he alone can understand the meanings of these inner thoughts because he is a spark of the soul of Rabbi Akiva.

One day at the synagogue, Rabbi Moshe was called to the Torah. The reading was Parasha<sup>11</sup> Vayelexh. When he came down, he went as usual to salute the Arizal, who told him; how come you are still recording my lessons when I expressly said that no one should write them except Rabbi Haim Vital. Rabbi Moshe stepped back by surprise and said; no master, since the day you said not to write, I did not write anything. The Torah does not lie, said the Arizal, in the portion you read it said; And Moshe wrote, I know that on the papers inside your pocket you have recorded my teachings. Astonished Rabbi Moshe could not answer.

### **Some powers of the Arizal**

He knew about Maase Bereshit<sup>12</sup> and Maase HaMerkavah<sup>13</sup>. About all the different levels of prophecy, their details and from which level the prophets had their revelations. He

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<sup>11</sup> Weekly reading – section of the Torah.

<sup>12</sup> How and what was created at the creation of the world

<sup>13</sup> The heavenly Chariot: Sephirot and Partzufim

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understood the whistling of the trees, the grass and stones, the language of the birds and other animals, the conversations of angels, the flicking of a candle. He could read on a face or the lines on the hand. He could interpret the exact meaning of any dream. He could talk to the soul of a person in front of him; know of his previous incarnations, what he did from the day he was born until now and what his present Tikun is. He could travel great distance by concentrating and projecting his physical body instantly.

### **The flickering flame**

The Arizal once went to visit on Erev Shabbat<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Yosef Ashkenazi. He was as usual studying Mishnayot when suddenly; the candle's flame started flickering for a long while. Afterwards, when the Arizal left, he met Rabbi Abigdor the son of Rabbi Yosef Ashkenazi on the street. How is your younger brother? The Arizal asked, frightened, he asked why the Rav was asking about him, he is lying on his bed, he answered. The candle flame told me that he will pass away this week. And so, he did.

### **Reading of the hand**

The Arizal was teaching Rabbi Haim Vital whatever he wanted to learn. Rabbi Vital had asked repeatedly that he teach him the reading of the lines on the hand, The Rav was postponing all the time, asking; why do you want to learn this science? The knowledge of the Kabbalah is sufficient for you, from it, you will understand all that you want.

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<sup>14</sup> Friday night