

THE ARIZAL & RABBI CHAIM VITAL

Every once and awhile, a unique and awesome soul is born in order to renew the world with a light that had not previously been revealed. The wisdom of the Kabbalah was received by Moshe Rabbeinu as part of the Torah at Mount Sinai, and was given over orally from teacher to student under the strictest of guidelines. During the time of the Second Temple, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, one of these unique souls, took the wisdom of the Kabbalah and clothed it in written form in a book called the Zohar. In doing so, he pulled the light of the Kabbalah further down into the world. In the sixteenth century, the Arizal, another unique soul, introduced an entirely new system of understanding the Zohar, which constricted the wisdom of the Kabbalah even further, making it more widely accessible. The Arizal was renowned as the greatest Kabbalist since the days of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria was commonly known as the "Ari," an acronym standing for *Eloki Rabbi Yitzchak* – the Godly Rabbi Yitzchak. Later generations were concerned that this name might be taken out of context, so it was said that the aleph, at the beginning of the acronym, stood for Ashkenazi, a reference to his family roots in Germany.

The Arizal was born in Jerusalem in 1534, and moved to Egypt in his early childhood. By the time he was eight years old, he was recognized as a prodigy; an expert in all areas of the revealed Torah including the *Tanach*, *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, *Pilpul*, *Midrash* and *Aggadah*. When he was seventeen years old, he obtained a copy of the Zohar and would spend days, and sometimes even weeks, engrossed in a single passage until he had grasped its deepest meaning.

He understood the conversations of both trees and birds, as well as the speech of angels. By reading someone's face, and even by a person's odor, he could discern all that the individual had done and what he would do in the future. He knew people's thoughts, often before the thought even entered their minds. He knew the future, and was aware of everything happening here on earth, as well as what was decreed in heaven. He knew the mysteries of reincarnation, who had been born previously, and who was here for the first time.

Concealing his gifts completely, the Arizal arrived in Tsfat from Egypt during the summer of 1570, with

the express purpose of teaching Rabbi Chaim Vital who, the Arizal knew, was to become his main student and disciple. Not until six months after the Arizal arrived in Tsfat did Rabbi Chaim Vital finally meet him. Rabbi Chaim, an acknowledged expert in the Kabbalah himself, wrote that one reason it took so long to meet his master was because he initially thought that his own knowledge of the Kabbalah surpassed that of the Arizal.

According to his own accounts, Rabbi Chaim was a disciple of the Arizal for less than eighteen months, but during this brief period, he amazingly gained a complete mastery of the Arizal's system. Given their short-lived relationship, it defies imagination how much information must have passed between the two of them. Like many of the great masters, the Arizal rarely, if ever, recorded his own teachings, and entrusted the task to his main disciple. Rabbi Chaim Vital's writings comprise over a dozen large volumes, each intricately compiled and written in an extremely terse style. Known collectively as the *Kitvey HaAri*, the volumes include the *Etz Chaim* (Tree of Life) and *Pri Etz Chaim* (Fruit of the Tree of Life), as well as the *Shemoneh Shaarim* (Eight Gates), and deal with everything from Torah commentary to Divine Inspiration and reincarnation. The sheer quantity of Rabbi Chaim's writings is immense, and if not for him little, if any, of the Arizal's teachings would be known.

Even so, their relationship had a deeper side. The Arizal repeatedly cautioned his student not to reveal his greatness to anyone. He stated clearly that he had come into the world only to teach and perfect the soul of Rabbi Chaim Vital. Through this, others would be perfected and the entire world would return to God in repentance, heralding the Messianic era. If his true greatness was revealed prematurely, the Arizal would not be able to accomplish his mission and untold damage would be caused, not only to him and his student, but to the entire world. Rabbi Chaim, however, feeling that there were others much worthier and greater than he to receive from such a light as the Arizal, had a difficult time believing that he could be such a vehicle. As a result, he felt compelled to reveal his master to the great Torah giants living in Tsfat at the time, including Rabbi Moshe Alshich, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (the Ramak) and Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the *Shulchan Aruch*.

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As his fame spread, scores of people from distant places sought out the Arizal to receive rectification for their souls. Because of his humility, the Arizal refused no one, but his time spent with Rabbi Chaim was greatly compromised. The Arizal continued to plead with him to be more discreet, revealing awesome secrets about Rabbi Chaim's soul in an attempt to convince him that their relationship served a vital purpose in the world, but to no avail. Rabbi Chaim was unable to overcome his feelings and continued to expose the Arizal's greatness.

Rabbi Chaim later wrote, "In my transgression, I wanted to be a 'foolish Chassid,' so I said to my master, 'If they aren't able to learn from you, then neither will I. I don't want to be accused in heaven that I was only concerned for myself and not for these Tzaddikim who also want to learn from you.'" Consequently, a mere two years after he had arrived in Tsfat, the Arizal passed away during the summer of 1572 (5 Av 5332) at the age of thirty-eight.

After the death of his master, Rabbi Chaim often saw him in dreams, but as the years passed, these visits became less frequent. He settled in Damascus in 1594, teaching and inspiring his fellow Jews to return to a life based on Torah. However, he was plagued until the end of his life with regret and sorrow that the final redemption had not yet come. With the exception of occasional visits to Tsfat, Rabbi Chaim remained in Damascus until his death in 1620.

Rabbi Chaim Vital once wrote, "On one occasion, I asked my master why he was worthy of all this wisdom. He replied that he had worked very hard for it. I countered, 'The Ramak and I, Chaim, also worked very hard.' He answered, 'Yes, you worked very hard, more than anyone else in this generation, but you did not work as hard as I.'"

Tsfat in the sixteenth century was a special era and unique opportunity for redemption, as well as being home to some of the greatest Tzaddikim in Jewish history. Although the Arizal's time in Tsfat was brief, the spiritual achievements that were attained during this period sustain us, even today, as we await the final redemption. ■

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