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The Teacher Only when the Student is Ready

The “Holy Ari,” Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, was born in Israel but at a very young age he moved to Egypt where he was raised by his uncle, who was a wealthy merchant, and eventually married his uncle’s daughter.

After his marriage, the *Arizal* spent some time trying his hand in business. But a short while later he gave it up completely to pursue a life of scholarship and holiness. The reason, it is said, is that one day he came across the holy *Zohar* (primary Kabbalah text) and was instantly enchanted. He became so engrossed in its study that he let go of all else.

He spent seven years of intense Talmudic study with his teacher R. Betzalel Ashkenazi (author of *Shita Hamekubetzet*). Afterwards, he secluded himself for six years. He would retreat to a cottage that was built on the banks of the Nile, where he would be alone, in total isolation, returning home only for Shabbat.

During this time, he would not converse or speak to anyone. Even with his wife he would only speak when absolutely necessary, and when he did it would be in concise words, and only in the Holy Language, Biblical Hebrew. From this he merited *ruach hakodesh*—i.e. purified and prophetic intuition. *Eliyahu Hanavi* (Elijah the prophet) started to appear to him and teach him the secrets of the Torah.

After twenty years of such study, meditation and seclusion in Egypt, the prophet Eliyahu appeared to him and said, “G-d has told me to tell you: Your time is nearing, you are going to pass away from this world soon...go up to Israel, to the city of Tsfat, and find the wise man whose name is Rabbi Chayim (Vital). You shall rest your hands upon him (metaphorically speaking, as this is a form of initiatory transmission and transition) and give him over all your wisdom because he will take your place (after you pass on), and your entire being did not come down to this world except to rectify his soul, because he has a very precious soul. And through you (i.e., the wisdom you will impart and the spiritual work you will do with him), he will merit wisdom and a great light will shine through him to the entire people of Israel.

“And I (Eliyahu) guarantee you that I will reveal myself to you whenever you need me, and I will reveal to you secrets of the Above and Below. And also, G-d will bestow upon you *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration), a thousand

times more than what you have already received. What you cannot merit here in an impure land (i.e. Egypt) you will attain in the Land of Israel.”

Immediately the Ari, along with this wife and children, moved to settle in Tsfat and waited for **Rabbi Chayim Vital** to come to him.

And there he sat, waiting and wondering, “When will this R. Chayim come and learn from me and receive the wondrous hidden wisdom?”

Six months passed and R. Chayim did not come to the Ari. Moreover, he thought that really the Ari should come to learn from him, being that he himself was such an accomplished scholar.¹ To compound the situation, the Ari, despite the fact that he was the humblest of men, did not wish to approach R. Chayim or to send a messenger in order to encourage him to come learn with him.

Finally, after six months, R. Chayim did come to the Ari; he had decided to present him with a difficult piece of *Zohar* in order to see how the Ari would decipher the text. This was meant to be a test of sorts, as R. Chayim was already thoroughly confident in his understanding of the text, based on (his studies with and) the teachings of R. Moshe Cordevero. The Ari proceeded to explain the selection from the *Zohar* very beautifully, whereupon R. Chayim began to ask him a flurry of questions. The Ari answered each question thoughtfully and impressively.

Afterwards R. Chayim Vital went home and began fasting. Before he went to sleep he placed a sackcloth upon himself and sat covered in ashes. He cried bitterly in a great outpouring of his soul, praying to the Al-mighty that he find favor in the eyes of the Ari, so that the Ari would take him on as a student and become his teacher.

The next morning, he came to the Ari and said, “For the sake of Heaven, do not let me go without revealing to me the great secret wisdom that you possess.”

The Ari replied, “The ashes you placed upon yourself last nights helped (i.e., your prayers have been answered). This was my original intention (to become your teacher); do not worry any longer. Last night I was told by the Heavenly Academy to not withhold any (information) from you, and so I will reveal to you all that I know.”

¹ He already had received *semicha* (classic rabbinical ordination) from Rabbi Moshe Alsheich, who had received *semicha* from Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of *Shulchan Aruch*.

R. Chayim then said (wonderingly), “Does this find favor in the eyes of the Creator – that there should be such a great light in the world, and other students (besides me) of this generation will not know of such greatness?”

The Ari responded, “What you suggest (that you teach others) has not been decreed, for these inner secrets will be (revealed) only to you, and no others.”

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from “**Mystic Tales from the ‘Emek HaMelech’ by R. Naftali Hertz, with commentary by R. DovBer Pinson**” pages 19 & 23. (See this precious book for deep analysis of each story, significant lessons drawn from them, and important Kabbalah concepts explained, all by R. Pinson of //iyyun.com.)

*Biographic notes:*

**Rabbi Yitzchak Luria** [of blessed memory: 5294 - 5 Av 5332 (1534 – July 1572)], Known as "the holy Ari," revolutionized the study of Kabbalah and its integration into mainstream Judaism during the two years he spent in Zefat before his death at 38. ([For a more full biography](#)) ([For teachings of the Ari translated into English](#))

**Rabbi Chaim Vital** [of blessed memory: 5303 - 30 Nisan 5380 (1543 – April 1620)] Student of Rabbis Moshe Alsheich and Moshe Cordevero, but best known as the main disciple of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria and the authoritative redactor of his doctrines, as recorded in *Etz Chaim* ("Tree of Life", *Pri Etz Chaim* ("Fruit of the Tree of Life"), and *Shmoneh Sha'arim* ("Eight Gates"). Author of several books of his own as well.

([For a more full biography](#)) ([For teachings of Rabbi Chayim Vital](#))

*Connection:* *Hei* (5th) *Av* (Monday night - Tuesday) is the 447th *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the "Holy Ari," leader of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Safed Kabbalists.