

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ADDITIONS

SURVEYS

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ADDITIONAL SOURCE MATERIALS

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- Joseph ha-Kohen, *The Chronicles of Rabbi Joseph ben Joshua ben Meir the Spardi* (London: R. Bentley, 1900) [1836]. The author's other major work of historical writing.

Isaac Luria, the Cabalist

1534-1572

SPAIN was the chief center in the Middle Ages for the study of the *Zohar* and other cabalistic works, but after the expulsion in 1492 new centers for mystical studies arose. Most famous among them was the town of Safed in the hills of Galilee. The greatest of the cabalists here was Isaac Luria [1534-1572], a native Palestinian of Italian-German origin. His followers, who looked upon him as almost superhuman, called him the *Ari*, the "Lion." The initials ARI stand for *Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac*, the "German Rabbi Isaac."

Luria, in his system of cabala, laid emphasis upon transmigration of souls, repentance, asceticism, the power of prayer, Messianism, intense religious concentration, and sincere, high-minded living. He himself wrote very little, but his oral teachings, his personality, his religious practice, and the legends that have clustered about him have all influenced Jewry to this day. His chief disciple, Hayyim Vital Calabrese (1543-1620), a Palestinian of Italian origin, is most responsible for the spread of the Lurianic cabala.

The first selection following, a short biography of Luria, is taken from the Hebrew letters which Shlimel ben Hayyim Meinstel Dresdenitz began to send from Safed in 1606. Shlimel was a devout follower of Luria and gleaned his information from the disciples of the "Lion" himself. Despite their legendary cast—strongly reminiscent of the New Testament gospels—these letters contain some authentic data of the life of this important historic figure.

The second selection, which so clearly portrays the social conscience of Luria, is taken from an ethical and liturgical work, *Hemdat Yamim* ("Desire of days"), first published in 1731-1732. Though this book is usually ascribed to the notorious mystic Nathan Benjamin Ghazzati (1644-1680), it is probably the work of the seventeenth century Italian Jewish cabalist, Israel Solomon Longhi.

1. *A Short Biography of the "Lion," 1607*

¶First, I would like to say something about the loftiness of the "Lion," Rabbi Isaac—of blessed memory—although what I say

amounts to only a drop in the bucket. During his youth he lived in Egypt although he was born in Jerusalem. At his birth Elijah, of blessed memory, appeared to his father—for he was very pious, as was his mother too—and said to him: "Take heed, now, on the day of the circumcision, not to circumcise this child until you see me standing beside you in the synagogue."

Now when the eighth day came and they took the child to the synagogue for the circumcision the father looked around on all sides for Elijah but did not see him there. By some sort of a pretext, the father delayed for about a half an hour or more and kept the congregation standing. They wondered why he held off so long and finally they all rebuked him. He, however, paid no attention to their complaint but waited till finally Elijah did come. He said to the father: "Sit down on the chair," and the father sat down with the infant in his arms. [Elijah was the patron saint at circumcisions and sat on a special "Elijah chair."] Then Elijah came, sat down on the father's lap, took the child from the parent, put him on his own lap and held him with his own two arms. The man who performed the circumcision went ahead with his work and saw nothing, of course, but the father. After the child had been circumcised Elijah returned him to the father, saying: "Here is your child. Take good care of him for a great light shall shine forth from him upon all the world."

Later when he was still a lad his father died. Because of poverty he went down to Egypt to the home of his uncle who was a very rich man. [His uncle Mordecai Francis was a wealthy tax-collector.] Luria developed into a brilliant student noted for his keenness, powers of argumentation, and sound reasoning, so that by the time he was fifteen years of age he was superior to all the sages of Egypt in his understanding of and his ability to debate in Talmudic law. His uncle then gave him his daughter to wife. After the marriage he studied alone with our honored teacher, Rabbi Bezalel Ashkenazi [d. about 1591], for seven years, and after this he studied by himself for six years. In addition to this, for two years in succession, he kept himself in seclusion in a certain house built along the Nile river and sanctified himself by an unusual piety. He was altogether alone and spoke with no one. On the eve of the Sabbath, just before it grew dark, he would return to his home, but even here, too, he would talk to no one, not even his wife, except when it was absolutely necessary, and then only in Hebrew and very briefly.

It was there on the banks of the Nile that he merited for himself the descent of the Holy Spirit. At times Elijah the prophet revealed himself to him and taught him the [cabalistic] secrets of the Torah,

and he was found so worthy that throughout the night his soul would mount on high, and troops of ministering angels would come to guard him on the way till they had led him into the heavenly assembly, and there they would ask of him in which college he wished to study. . . . [There were schools in heaven, also.]

After these two years of extreme asceticism in Egypt, Elijah appeared to him. Luria was at that time only thirty-six years of age; and he was thirty-eight years old when, from here in Safed—may it be rebuilt and reestablished speedily in our days—he was summoned to the Academy on High, because of our many sins. Elijah had said to him: "The time of your death is approaching. And now go up to Safed. There you will find a certain scholar whose name is Rabbi Hayyim Calabrese—may God guard and deliver him. Anoint him in your stead. Lay your hands upon him and teach him all your lore for he will take your place. The sole purpose of your coming into the world has been to "improve" the soul of Rabbi Hayyim, for it is a precious one. [Blemished souls can be "improved" through good deeds and the help of the saints.] Through you he will merit wisdom, and a great light shall shine forth from him upon all Israel. I assure you that I will reveal myself to you whenever you need me; I will lay bare before you the secrets of the upper and the nether worlds, and God, too, will pour out upon you his Holy Spirit a thousand times more than you are able to acquire here in Egypt."

All these things did our Master Luria—of blessed memory—reveal to our teacher Rabbi Hayyim Calabrese, and he in turn revealed them intimately to a chosen few of his associates in Palestine. But our teacher Hayyim, however, wrote in the book which he composed that it appeared to him that Luria was the Messiah ben Joseph but the Master would not admit it to him because of his exceeding humility. However his disciples could surmise it from what Luria had told them. . . . [Messiah ben Joseph is the forerunner of the Davidic Messiah.]

Luria knew all the deeds of men and even their thoughts. He could read faces, look into the souls of men, and recognize souls that migrated from body to body. He could tell you about the souls of the wicked which had entered into trees and stones or animals and birds; he could tell you what commandments a man had fulfilled and what sins he had committed since youth; he knew wherein a sinful man had been punished by God and would prescribe "improvements" to remove a moral blemish, and knew just when such a moral defect had been corrected. He understood the chirping of birds, and through their flight he divined strange things, as is re-

ferred to in the verse [Ecclesiastes 10:20]: "For a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter." All of this he acquired because of the piety, asceticism, purity, and holiness that he had exercised since his youth.

ii. Abraham Galante's Theft, Safed, 1569-1572

¶He who fears the word of the Lord will take care to see that his business is carried on honestly in order that he shall not sin through false representation or through theft. He should at all times renounce his own in favor of his neighbor and in this way he can be sure that that which belongs to his neighbor will not come into his possession. It is impossible to do business so as to be exactly correct and to stick to the middle of the road and not to take something from your neighbor or he from you. Therefore, he who fears the word of God and who dreads divine punishment for theft will renounce a little of what he really has coming to him, for if he does not it is inevitable that he will take something, if only a trifle, of what he comes across.

In the days of Luria—of blessed memory—the late Rabbi Abraham Galante had asked the Master to give an "improvement" to his soul. [Galante, who died at Safed in 1588, was a wealthy Italian cabalist.] The Master was very timid about doing so because of Galante's outstanding position, until finally the latter said to him: "If you do not declare unto me everything that you see on my forehead then I will adjure you by God to inform me!" Luria then turned to look at his forehead and said: "There is a possibility, my lord and teacher, that you are guilty of theft." [The mystics believed that sin leaves its mark on the forehead.]

Galante was immediately terribly frightened and cried out: "Whither shall I carry my shame since I am guilty of the crime of theft," and went home out of sorts and displeased and put on sackcloth and ashes. He then sent and summoned all the garment workers in his employ [he was a manufacturing weaver], and when they came to him they found their employer clad in sackcloth sitting on the earth, and they were very much distressed.

"Can you not realize and understand that I am only a human being and have no desire to go to Gehenna because of you," he said to them. "Now if you will examine most carefully the accounts of your wages for the work you have done for me, I will appreciate it. If there is nothing due you, then leave me."

"What demands can we make of you for payment?" they responded. "Ever since we have been in your employ we have lacked

nothing and do not expect to lack anything. God's blessing has rested upon us; we have had more than enough to eat, and there is no one of us who keeps accounts."

"Nevertheless," he then replied, "it is obvious that I am guilty of the crime of theft since you refuse to make your just demands for moneys due from me. Now I am therefore going to put some money before you and I want every one of you to take whatever you want and to forgive me for all that I have taken that belongs to you, and I, in turn, will forgive you."

He put the money before them, but they were not willing to stretch out their hands to take even a single penny. One woman, however, did put out her hand and take two pennies, and then altogether they called out and said: "We completely forgive you, down to the last penny, etc."

Galante then arose and went to the synagogue of the Master—may his memory endure in the world to come—who hurried out to meet him and said to him: "Why, my lord, were you so exceedingly fearful?" To which Galante answered: "Is it a small matter to feel that I may possibly be guilty of theft? Now if I have found favor in your sight take a look at my forehead and see whether it carries the sign of anything."

"There is no sign of sin," responded the Master and then revealed to Galante the mystery of how it came about that there was a suspicion of theft, by informing him that it was because of that woman who stretched out her hand and took the two pennies. The error arose out of the fact that that woman did the finest work and was superior to the other weavers and should have received more, but was only paid the same wages as the other craftsmen. "But in the heavens above," said Luria, "where they are very particular about such things, they held it against you and stamped the account in writing on your forehead!"

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