

Sages of the Ages

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (Ari)



1. Introduction: The "Ari"
 - i) Derivation of the acronym
 - ii) "The Holy Lion" (Luria the great Kabbalist is the Lion, Rambam the great Rationalist is the Eagle; both metaphors from Ezekiel's vision of the "Chariot")
 - iii) Fact and legend inextricably intertwined
2. Rabbi Yitzchak (ben Shlomo) Luria Ashkenazi
 - i) Father is Ashkenazi (Luria from Alsace-Lorraine?), mother is Sephardi
 - ii) Born in Jerusalem (today the Old Yishuv Museum), under Ottoman rule, 1534 (legend of birth)
 - iii) Father died soon after, mother moved to Egypt
3. Egypt
 - i) Raised by wealthy uncle, Mordechai Frances (later his father in law)
 - ii) Studied Talmud and *halakhah* (as well as esoterica) under Rabbi David ibn Abu Zimra (Radvaz) and then under older colleague, Rabbi Betzalel Ashkenazi (author of *Shittah Mekubetzet*)
 - iii) Married at age 15
 - iv) Commerce: Pepper, grain (this apparently continued even in his last years, in Tzefat)
 - v) Gradually turned to asceticism, esotericism, mysticism:
 - (a) *Zohar* had just been published for the first time

- (b) From age 22, 7 years of *hitbodedut* [seclusion] (on a Nile River island owned by his uncle), intense study and meditation, rapturous prayer, mystical contemplation
- (c) Returned home only on Shabbat, even then spoke only as absolutely necessary, and only in the Holy Tongue
- (d) Revelation of the Prophet Elijah?

4. Tzefat

- i) Returned to the Land of Israel, possibly settling briefly in Jerusalem
- ii) Meron on Lag B'Omer in 1569 (source for Lag B'Omer as *yahrtzeit* of Rashbi?)
- iii) By 1570: Tzefat, where he studied briefly under R. Moshe Cordovero (known as a master of the *Zohar*); however Ramak died in June of that year
- iv) Ari succeeds (and surpasses) Ramak as leading Kabbalist of Tzefat (and of the generation, perhaps of all generations)
- v) Ari's contemporaries in Tzefat: R. Joseph Caro, R. Moshe de Tani (Mabit), R. Moshe Alshekh (for some reason excluded from Ari's inner circle) R. Yaakov Beirav, R. Eliezer Azikri (*Sefer Haredim*), R. Elijah de Vidas (*Sefer Reshit Hokhmah*), R. Shlomo Alkabetz (brother in law of Ramak and author of "Lekha Dodi")
- vi) Activities:
 - (a) Story of R. Hayyim Vital and waters of the Kinneret (Wellspring of Miriam): To appreciate/grasp ideas which transcend human understanding
 - (b) Identifying gravesites of Prophets, Tannaim, and Amoraim (through Revelation of Elijah)
 - (c) Ari wrote almost nothing (a few poems), but his teachings were recorded by Rav Hayyim Vital (and others), especially in *Eitz Hayyim* (8 volumes); other sources: *Shivhei ha-Ari*, *Shulkhan 'Arukh ha-Ari*
 - (d) Died in an epidemic at the age of 38 on 5 Av, 25 July 1572

5. Teachings: Profound, novel, known as Lurianic Kabbalah: Tzimtzum, shevirat ha-kelim, Tikkun

6. Influence

- i) "*Nusah S'fard*" (similar to the so-called *Nusah Ari*)
- ii) *Ketav Ari*
- iii) *Magen Avraham* (R. Abraham Gombiner, Poland, c. 1634-1682)
- iv) Popularity of Kabbalah, Messianic yearning (Shabbetai Tzevi), Rise of Hassidism

MORALITY

1. Before entering the synagogue a person is to take on himself the positive commandment of loving his neighbor. Then he is to enter. He is to direct his heart to love everyone among the people of Israel as himself. Thereby will his prayer ascend comprehending within itself all the people of Israel and it will be able to rise and it will be endowed with potency. Especially important is the love in our circle of colleagues. Each one must see himself as an integral part of the group. Our teacher, his memory be for a blessing, admonished us much concerning this. And if any one colleague should suffer affliction, or illness should befall any in his family, or among his children, he should associate himself with him in his grief and offer prayer on his behalf. He should similarly identify with him in all he does; and he should endeavor to include all his associates with him in this identification.
2. It was the practice of my teacher to recite in his prayer all the particularizations of sin as found in the confessional even though they did not apply to him. He maintained that each person, even when he was not guilty of them, must confess them, especially since these prayers were couched in plural form. This is indeed how they should be recited—in the plural rather than the singular form: "We sinned," not, "I sinned." The reason for this is that the entire people of Israel is one individual organism. This is the secret of the mutual responsibility of all souls. (*Shulhan Arukh, Hilkhot Bet haKeneset*)
3. I noted that my teacher was not particular about the clothes he wore. He used to eat little. Expenditures to meet his wife's needs he extended to her according to her wishes. He used to give charity with a glad heart and an open hand. At times he did not consider whether he was left with any funds for himself or not. My teacher also used to say that each *mitzvah* has its own letter among the twenty-two letters of the alphabet and when a person performs a *mitzvah* that letter shines on his forehead. . . and then it is absorbed within. But if he performed the *mitzvah* of charity, the letter pertaining to it does not recede quickly like the letters of other precepts, but remains on his forehead all week long, illustrating the secret meaning of the verse (Ps. 111:3): "And his righteousness [*zidkato*] endures always" [he takes *zidkato* in its meaning of charity and applies the verse to man rather than to God].

WAYS OF PRAYER

1. It is wrong for a person to pray in a state of depression, but one is rather to pray in the manner of a servant who serves his master in joy. Otherwise the soul will be unable to receive the higher illumination through his prayer. Only when reciting the confessional of sin or when recalling his own sins is this permitted, but not when reciting the other prayers. Submissiveness is in order but it is to be expressed with great joy. (Jacob Zemah, *Shulhan Aruch shel R. Yizhak Luria, Hilkhot Bet haKeneset*)

2. My teacher used to say that it is desirable for a person to consider himself the dwelling place and seat of the divine emanations, for man is made in the divine image. This is especially important during prayer, and through this will his prayer rise and be accepted. The higher holiness will abide in him and thereby he will be able to unify worlds. (*ibid.*)

4. My teacher never raised his voice when reciting his prayers, not even the part of the service which is well established, like the psalm of praise, to show submissiveness before God, may His name be praised. Only on the Sabbath did he raise his voice slightly, in honor of the Sabbath. (*ibid.*)

5. My teacher used to recite the prayers from the prayer book and not orally. All parts quoted from the Bible he used to recite with the proper cantillation, and all parts quoted from the *Mishnah* he used to recite with a melody. (*ibid.*)