
KABBALAH

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DEATH AND REBIRTH

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Dedicated to the memory of Etta Hulbert, Collette Raccah, Boaz Rotenberg and Rachel Chaya bat Mordechai Dov.

VISITING GRAVES

As in other religions, Judaism does not view death as the moment of ultimate extinction. With its belief in reward and punishment, resurrection of the dead, and the messianic age, Judaism has developed a view of death which allows the dead to continue to play an important role in the cycle of existence. In general, the dead are believed to occupy one of several intermediate realms depending on the merit they have accrued during life. While occupying these after-life stations, the relationship of the dead to the living is one of mutual dependence. On the one hand, the dead are said to benefit from the prayers of the living. For only through the prayers of the living can they gain additional merit and thus ascend to even higher realms. On the other hand, particularly when the deceased are saints (*zaddikim*), they are considered to be especially effective intercessors. Because of their greater proximity to heaven and freedom from earthly travails, they can be much more effective advocates than even the greatest living saints. Indeed one of the characteristics of living saints is their ability to effectively enlist the aid of the deceased *zaddikim* through certain practices performed at their graves.¹

While the customs associated with visiting the graves of *zaddikim* have developed over time, particularly since the Middle Ages, and may well have absorbed influences from both Islam and Christianity, the basis for seeking intercession of the dead at their graves is well attested in early Jewish sources. For example, in tractate *Sotah* 34b of the Babylonian Talmud we find the following *midrash* concerning Caleb. "[The verse reads] 'they went up in the Negev and he came to Hebron' (Num. 13:22). It should read 'and they came.' Rava said, it

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ECSTASY AND SANCTIFICATION

The Babylonian Talmud, in a celebrated passage¹ describing Rabbi Akiva's torture and martyrdom, depicts his equanimity as he recited the *shema*. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakhot* 9:5) adds that Rabbi Akiva laughed through his torture, and that Tinneius Rufus asked him, "Are you a wizard, or intractably defiant of pain?"

Although Rabbi Akiva, in the talmudic account, rejects Tinneius Rufus's assertions, it may be that this story is the origin of a tradition (or cluster of related traditions) which has surfaced in various times and places, to the effect that one undergoing martyrdom does not feel the pain of death.

In the *Tashbez* of Rabbi Samson ben Zadok (415) we find the following:

Rabbi Meir [of Rothenberg] states that when a person determines to sanctify the Name, surrendering his soul in martyrdom, then whatever is done to him whether stoning, burning, burial alive or hanging does not cause him any pain.... This is evident from the fact that while no one could restrain himself from crying out in pain if his finger were placed in fire, yet many surrender themselves to death by fire... for the sanctity of His blessed Name, and they do not cry out at all. In addition, it is a widely held view that when one mentions the Tetragrammaton before martyrdom, he is assured that he will withstand the test, and that he will feel no pain.²

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teaches that Caleb separated from the party of the spies and went and prostrated on the graves of the patriarchs. He said to them, 'O my forefathers, pray that I be saved from the party of the spies.'" Also in tractate *Ta'anit* 16a the following is recounted: "Why does one go to graves? Rabbi Levi bar Hama and Rabbi Hanina differed. One said, surely because before Thee we are like the dead. The other said, so that the dead can pray for us."

In the Zohar, considerable emphasis is given to enlisting the aid of the deceased *zaddikim* by praying at their graves. Intercession is explained through application of the kabbalistic theory of the parts of the soul and their various fates after death. Various locations have been fashioned for the three main parts of the soul after its separation from the body. The lowest aspect, the *nefesh*, remains at the grave. There it is available except on Shabbat and New Moons when it ascends and reunites with its higher parts as part of the divine retinue.

The Holy One, blessed be He, fashioned three locations for the souls of *zaddikim*. One is for their *nefesh* which does not depart from this world, but rather remains in it. So when the world needs compassion and those who are alive are overcome with misfortune, they pray over their graves. The *zaddikim* then go and inform the "sleepers of Hebron" who awaken and enter the earthly Garden of Eden where the *ruah* of the deceased *zaddikim* wear their crowns of light. They consult with them, issue a decree, and the Holy One does their will and has mercy over the world. So this *nefesh* of deceased *zaddikim* remains in the world in order to defend the living...

Zohar III, *Aḥarei Mot*

Although visiting the graves of *zaddikim* seems to have its antecedents in rabbinic Judaism, the practice has occasionally been challenged. Two basic objections have been raised. First, it seems to violate the Torah's prohibition against resorting to the dead. Second, it seems to involve utilizing the deceased *zaddik* as an object of prayer. Nevertheless, leading halakhic authorities like R. Yosef Karo and R. Moses Isserles have generally accepted the practice of praying at the graves of *zaddikim*. A typical rationalization of the practice is found in a responsum of MaHaRaM shik, *Orah Hayyim* 293. "First of all, *zaddikim* [are considered] alive and existing as far as their souls are concerned. Second, one does not pray to them. The essence of the prayer is to God. It is only that God [more readily] accepts our prayer because of the *zaddikim* who are also asking for compassion. For through the *zaddik*, who shares the suffering of others, God has mercy on them."

The actual practice of visiting graves of *zaddikim* seems to have reached its fullest development in 16th century Safed. Here the practice was associated not only with enlisting the aid of the deceased *zaddik* as an intercessor, but more importantly as a source of revelation. This emphasis is found for example in the important kabbalistic book *Sefer Gerushin*. Here are recorded secrets of Torah which were revealed to R. Moses Cordovero and R. Shlomo Alkabetz during their wanderings in the Galilee. In imitation of the wandering *Shekhinah* they would visit the ancient graves of the region, prostrate, and spontaneously utter kabbalistic interpretations

of the Torah. However, with the arrival of R. Isaac Luria in Safed in 1569 or 1570, visiting graves received a new emphasis. For Luria's charismatic powers enabled him not only to contact the souls of *zaddikim* at their graves, but to locate additional graves of rabbinic saints which were previously unknown. Luria's leading disciple, R. Hayyim Vital, writes of Luria's unusual powers in *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim*, Gate of Transmigrations, (Section 37): "I have already informed you that Luria was constantly able to perceive the souls of *zaddikim* everywhere, but especially when he was at their graves where, as it is well known, their *nefesh* abides. Even from a distance his eyes would discern the *nefesh* of a *zaddik* standing over its grave. Thus he knew the grave of each and every *zaddik* and would speak with them and learn secrets of Torah from them..." One of the kinds of secrets that Luria had access to was knowledge of the spiritual relationships that existed between individuals and the souls of departed *zaddikim*. For Luria, the practice of visiting graves was connected to his general theory of reincarnation. He believed that most souls require many incarnations in order to perfect themselves. A currently incarnated soul could receive aid from the perfected soul of a *zaddik* with whom it shared a soul root. Since many of Luria's disciples were understood to have close connections with the souls of rabbinic sages buried in the area, the practice of visiting graves received a new emphasis. [See below the account of a prostration experience of Rabbi Hayyim Vital.]

The practice of visiting graves of *zaddikim* continued in Eastern Europe where it was especially practiced by Hasidim. Lacking access to the graves of ancient sages which allowed for the development of this practice in Safed, the Hasidim venerated the graves of their own rebbes. This was particularly true in the case of the *hasidim* of R. Naḥman of Bratslav, who promised to intercede for the soul of anyone who would say at his grave the ten Psalms which constitute his *Tikkun ha-Kelali*.

In addition to the more esoteric practices that characterize the Lurianic school, a number of more popular practices have been associated with visiting graves. Of these, the one best known is the practice of learning the Torah of a *zaddik* at his grave. The basis for this may be the Talmud *Yeb.* 97a: "R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Shimon ben Yoḥai whenever a sage's teachings are mentioned in this world, his lips move in the grave." In kabbalistic sources this was interpreted to mean that when a sage's teachings are mentioned at his grave, he, as it were, comes to life and can intercede on a person's behalf.

A second custom which continues to be practiced by contemporary kabbalists involves circumambulating the grave seven times. This custom however, which parallels and may be borrowed from Muslim practice, is so far not attested in sources predating the Middle Ages. An explanation for circumambulation is found in *Ma'avar Yabbok*.

"Esoterically the circumambulations allude to the dance that the Holy One blessed be He will hold for the *zaddikim* in the future in the Garden of Eden. For then the maiden will rejoice in the dance and the external forces of judgement will be driven out and the sound of their complaints will resound no longer in the house of the Lord. And this is the esoteric meaning of circumambulat-

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HASIDIC REBBES

How a spiritual master faces death is a matter of great interest in many religious traditions. The encounter with death can be considered the ultimate measure and proof of the depth of a master's conviction. Thus it is not surprising that a tradition like Hasidism, with its emphasis on charismatic leaders and the positive value it places on telling stories about them, would preserve a rich heritage of tales which focus on the last moments of their rebbes. The following six accounts deal with the deaths of but a few of the most famous Hasidic masters, from the movement's founder, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, (d. 1760) to R. Gershon Hanokh of Radzin, the Baal Tekhelet, (d. 1891). What is common to all of these tales is the fact that none of the masters was surprised by death. Each is shown to have been prepared for the end and to have behaved in some exceptional way. Whether he died in ecstasy like the Maggid of Zlotchov, with his mind on learning Torah like the Rebbe of Gur, or seeking a way to hasten the redemption like the Apter Rov, each is depicted as having faced death without fear.

The tales have been translated from typically hagiographic Hasidic texts. While their historicity may not be verifiable, they do offer us a reliable account of Hasidic tradition's view of these matters.

How They Died

During his final illness, the Baal Shem Tov was not bedridden. He did grow thin. His voice was affected, and he used to sit alone in his meditation room. On the last night of his life, the night of Shavuot, his disciples gathered around him. He spoke to them about receiving the Torah. In the morning he assembled them and told them how to deal with his body after his death. Then he asked for his prayerbook and said, "I want one more *shmooz* with God, blessed be He."

Later they heard him say, "I forgive you. These two hours don't trouble me" They wanted to know who he was speaking to. He said, "Don't you see the Angel of Death? He used to flee from me. But now that he has permission, he has thrown back his shoulders in great joy." Afterwards, the locals came to pay him a holiday visit. He taught some Torah. At mealtime, he ordered his servant to put honey in a big dish. But the servant served it in a small one. So he remarked, "There's no authority on the day of one's death; even the *gabbai* doesn't obey me." Later he said, "I've always dealt kindly with all of you, now deal kindly with me." He let them know that he would die at the moment when the two clocks in the house would stop.

While he was washing his hands, the big clock stopped. People stood in front of it so that he would not see. He told them, "I'm not worried about myself. I know for certain that I will exit by one gate and immediately enter by another." He sat on his bed and asked that everyone gather around him. He spoke to them about that pillar which is used for ascending from the lower Garden of Eden to the supernal Garden of Eden. He also explained the aspects of space, time and soul in each of the worlds and related them to the order of worship. He requested them to say, "And may the pleasantness of the Lord Our God be upon us..." (Ps. 90:17). He changed his position from lying to sitting several times

and continued his *kavannot* until they could no longer hear him. He asked that they cover him with a sheet and he began to tremble and shake like he did during the *shemonah esreh*. Then he rested a bit. They noticed that the small clock had stopped. They waited as long as they could before pronouncing him dead.

Shivhei ha-Besht

Already two years before he died, Rabbi Yehiel Michal, the Maggid of Zlotchov, was completely detached from the concerns of this world. Someone had to keep an eye on him lest his soul expire from the intensity of its adhesion to the Creator. He used to walk back and forth in his room until his face burned like a flame. Then he really had to be watched. It was his custom to eat the third Shabbat meal alone in his room with one of his sons. Afterwards, he would walk to the *bet midrash* to teach and worship. One fateful Shabbat, that bitter day when the ark of God was taken, no one was with him for the third meal. He ran to and fro shouting, "During this favorable moment, Moses expired!" His daughter heard him and brought her brother, Rabbi Isaac of Radvil. He ran to the room, grabbed his father, and shook him in order to distract him from his *devekut*. But, alas, the Maggid fell on his son's shoulder, recited the *shema* and died as he uttered the word "One."

Died the third of Nissan 5542 (1782)

Sefer Nativ Mizvotekhah

Before his death, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Rebbe of Apt, wept bitterly over our exile and the late arrival of the Messiah. "The Rebbe of Berditchev promised before he died that when he gets 'there,' he would neither rest nor be silent nor let holy ones rest until the Messiah comes. But, afterwards, they delighted with him so much in the supernal chambers and stairs, that he forgot his promise. But, I," the Apter Rebbe concluded, "won't forget!"

Later he said, "Master of the Universe, I know that I don't deserve to be among the *zaddikim* in the Garden of Eden. So, perhaps You would permit me to be among the wicked of *Gehinnom*. But, you know, Master of the Universe, how I always detested those who transgressed Your will. So how can I be among them? Please, then, let all the transgressors out of *Gehinnom* so that I can be there."

Died fifth of Nisan 5585 (1825)

Sefer Eser Orot

Several weeks before Rebbe Gershon Hanokh Henokh of Radzin contracted his fatal illness, he spoke a lot about death. Death, he taught, should not be feared.

When the illness overcame him and he was forced to take to his bed, he closed himself in his private room before lying down. They heard him saying verses from Psalms, "Didn't I hate those that hate You, O Lord" and "Lead me in the eternal way" (Ps. 139:21,24). Then he went to bed. No matter how intensely the illness attacked him, he never sighed. They asked him why. Perhaps by sighing he could lessen his suffering. He answered, "Whosoever has complaints against God, groans, but whoever has no complaints against God bears everything in silence and accepts the sufferings with love. For the best response to suffering is silence and praying for mercy."

Died the fourth of Tevet 5651 (1891) *Sefer Dor Yesharim*
Translation and introduction by Miles Krassen

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ing Jericho. To isolate it both below and above from the sources of impurity through the mystery of circumambulation along with the sounding of the *shofarot* which cause every ordinary person to tremble.”

Another custom involves placing a stone on the tombstone and removing it after concluding the prayer. R. Salman Muzafi explained that the stone symbolically serves as a throne and the act of placing it on the tombstone summons a spark of the soul of a *zaddik* to rest on it.² Similarly the left hand is placed on the tombstone during learning and prayer. The verse Isaiah 58:11 is recited after which the following is added: “May you lie in peace and sleep in peace until the coming of the comforter, the proclaimer of peace.” This practice is obviously intended for the benefit of the deceased. It is also the custom for *kohanim*, descendants of priests, to participate in the practice of visiting graves. Although they are forbidden from actually approaching the grave, their mere presence in proximity to the grave is sensed by the soul of the *zaddik* and is in itself effective. Finally, giving charity in the name of the deceased is especially recommended. *Sefer Shenei Luhot ha-Brit* mentions that at the grave of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai “one should learn the Zohar, make vows, and afterwards pray.”

As already mentioned, the souls of the deceased *zaddikim* may be contacted at their graves except on Shabbat and New Moons. In general, the souls of the deceased are considered to ascend during all holy days. Because of this the days immediately preceding the days of ascent are considered especially favorable occasions for visiting graves. If the soul is contacted at such times it can intercede for the supplicant when it is above. Thus, the best times for the visit are the day before Shabbat, the day before the New Moon, the day before Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. In addition, the days before the New Moons of Elul, Nisan and Kislev are considered particularly favorable. Visiting graves when the moon is full is also recommended, since the moon's light is considered to have a powerful effect on the souls of the *zaddikim*.

One other day must be mentioned: the anniversary of a *zaddik's* death, the *yahrzeit*. Already in rabbinic sources a certain positive coloration was given to the death of a *zaddik*. For example, in tractate *Moed Katan* 25b, one finds “the Rider of *Aravot* rejoices when the pure soul of a *zaddik* comes to Him.” The idea is further echoed in the Zohar, *Veyehi* 245b: “Come and see. If all the *zaddikim* only knew this, they would rejoice when the day comes for them to leave this world. For the Holy One, blessed be He, only enjoys himself with the souls of the *zaddikim*.” Finally, according to Lurianic kabbalah, during the anniversary of the death of a *zaddik*, his soul is raised to a higher level. So each year he is considered to have undergone a new death during which he vacates the level attained during the previous year. This belief aptly reflects the mutual dependence of the living and the dead. The prayers, learning, and pious acts of the living performed on the anniversary of a *zaddik's* death effectively raise the soul of the deceased to a spiritual degree it could not have attained without their efforts. At the same time, from the new higher degree, the soul of the *zaddik* has more power to defend the interests of the living.

R. Salman Muzafi, one of the last true masters of Lurianic kabbalah and the *kavvanot*, emphasized an additional element which parallels an aspect of the veneration of saints

which is found in religions as diverse as Buddhism and Christianity. When visiting the grave of a saint, one should pray for exactly that matter for which the saint was known during his life. “One should seek [from the grave of] each *zaddik* the matter which the saint had worked for during his life. For example, when one visits [the grave of] R. Meir Ba'al ha-Nes, one should pray that one's eyes be enlightened in Torah. [At the grave of] R. Mattiah ben Heresh, one should seek to correct sins associated with seeing and pray to have the merit to take care in what one permits oneself to see. At [the grave of] Hillel [one should pray] to be spared from anger and to learn Torah with all one's might. At the grave of R. Yehudah ben Bava [one should pray] that he restore our judges of old. [At the grave of] Honi the Circle Maker, [one should pray for] rains of blessing. [At the grave of] R. Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son [one should pray] that all the world be free of judgement, and so on.”³

Miles Krassen

1. For an interesting account of a contemporary kabbalistic saint of this type, see Ben Zion Muzafi, *The World of a Zaddik* (Hebrew). (Life and Work of the Kabbalistic Saint, Rabbi Salman Muzafi) (Jerusalem, 1976).

2. Ben Zion Muzafi, *Siftei Zaddikim* (Jerusalem 1987), pp. 22.

Much of the material included in our article is drawn from Muzafi's “Introduction.”

3. *Siftei Zaddikim*, pp. 27–28.

Vital at Abbaye's Grave

Erev Rosh Hodesh, Elul 5331 (1571)

My teacher sent me to the cave of Abbaye and Rava. There I prostrated at Abbaye's grave. First I performed the *yihud* of the Mouth and Nose of the *atika kadisha* [Holy Ancient One]. Sleep overcame me. When I awoke, nothing had changed (*ve lo ra'iti davar*). Later I prostrated a second time, this time on Abbaye's grave itself. I performed the *yihud* which is recorded in my teacher's own hand.¹ But while I was combining and interspersing, as is well known, the letters of YHVH and ADNY, my thoughts became confused so that I was unable to [continue] combining them. So I ceased concentrating on that combination. Then within my mind I seemed to hear a voice telling me over and over, “Retract! Retract!” And it occurred to me that these were the well know words which Akivya ben Mahalelel said to his son.² So I returned to combining the letters and [managed] to complete [the *yihud*]. Then it seemed as if my thoughts were telling me, “God will provide for Himself a lamb for the burnt-offering, my son” (Gen.22:8). And they were also explaining the verse's meaning; I had been worrying about the efficacy of the first *yihud* in vain. It had been effective before God! That's why I was hearing, “God will provide a lamb...” They also seemed to be explaining to me how the first *yihud* that I performed alluded to in this verse. For [in Hebrew] the first letters of the verse, *Elohim Yir'eh Lo Ha-seh*, have the numerical value of 46, the same as YHVH and 'EHYeh [if one is added for the totality of the four words]. Also, the first letters of the words, *Ha-seh Le'-olah Beni*, form the word *hevel* (breath). This is a reference to the breath of the Supernal Mouth which I had in mind when I

performed the *yihud*. It also seemed they were calling my attention to the first letters of *Lo Ha-seh Le-'olah* from Hillel the Elder. But I do not know how to connect this.

Behold, all of this passed through my mind at that time. Later, a great dread seized me and all of my limbs were trembling. My hands were shaking and my lips were also quivering in an extreme manner, moving constantly with great rapidity. A voice seemed to be perched on my tongue between my lips. At great speed it repeated more than a hundred times, "What can I say? What can I say?" I tried to calm myself and to control my lips, but I could not quiet them at all. Then I thought to ask for wisdom. The voice burst forth from my mouth and tongue saying, "Wisdom, Wisdom," more than twenty times. Then it went on: "Wisdom and Knowledge, Wisdom and Knowledge," a number of times. Then "Wisdom and Knowledge are given to you." After this, "Wisdom and Knowledge are given to you from Heaven like the knowing of Rabbi Akiva." And then, "greater than that of Rabbi Akiva!" Next "like [that] of Rav Yeiva Sava!" And then, "greater than [that of] R. Yeiva Sava!" Later [the voice said] "*Shalom 'Alekha*." And then, "Greetings are sent to you from Heaven!" All of this occurred very rapidly. A wondrous thing, [occurring] repeatedly while I was awake. I fell on my face and prostrated on the tomb of Abbaye.

Later I went to my teacher. He explained to me that I did very well in consecutively performing the two *yihudim*, for they should be done in this order. The reason I had not been answered after the first *yihud* was that they were waiting until I performed the second one. And my teacher told me that while I was returning from there to his house, he saw the soul of Benayahu ben Yehoyada accompanying me. He explained to me that [Yehoyada] and I do not share the same soul root. The meaning [of his presence] is that he reveals himself whenever someone performs [successfully] the supernal *yihud*. For such was his practice when he was alive, as we have explained elsewhere.

My teacher of blessed memory also informed me that he had learned [from Heaven] during the afternoon prayer, that if I am worthy, on the very next Shabbat, [the soul of] Rabbi Yeiva Sava will always remain with me. It will not depart from me, even in my subsequent transmigrations. Through his soul I will attain great illuminations, especially during the standing prayer (*amidah*), in the blessings of "the years," "the shoot of David, your servant," and "hears prayer." The reason is that, like Benayahu ben Yehoyada, R. Yeiva Sava also reveals himself to *zaddikim*, as we have explained. Moreover, R. Yeiva Sava and I are of the same soul root. Consequently, if I will be worthy of his revealing himself to me, with God's help he will reveal to me great wonders.

Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim, 140–141.

Translation and commentary by Miles Krassen³

1. Here Shmuel Vital notes that this *yihud* is recorded in *Sha'ar Ruah ha-Kodesh*, p.110, the first *yihud*.

2. Mishnah 'Eduyot 5:6–7.

3. A slightly different version from *Sefer ha-Hezyonot* is translated in Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York: Schocken, 1977), 131–33. For a lucid discussion of

the performance of *yihudim* in general and an interpretation of this text, see Lawrence Fine's article, "The Contemplative Practice of *Yihudim*" in *Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987) volume 2, pp.64–98.

Yahrzeits

Tishrei

10 R. Yehudah Leib Ashlag
21 Menahem Mendel of Premishlan
27 R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev

Heshvan

4 R. Kalonymos Kalmish of Piaseztzna
21 R. Abraham Azulai

Kislev

19 R. Dov Ber, Maggid of Mezeritch
28 R. Hayyim of Chernovitz

Tevet

18 R. Zvi Elimelekh of Dinov

Shevat

5 R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Gur (*Sefat Emet*)
10 R. Shalom Sharabi

Adar

1 R. Abraham ibn Ezra
R. Immanuel Hai Ricci
11 R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai
27 R. Shlomo Elyashiv

Nissan

13 R. Yosef Karo
R. Moshe Alsheik

Iyar

1 R. Hayyim Vital
2 R. Mendel of Vitebsk
10 R. Yitzhak Eizik Yehudah Yehiel of Komarno
14 R. Meir Ba'al Ha-Nes
18 R. Shimon Bar Yohai
26 R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto

Sivan

6 R. Shlomo Alkabetz
20 R. Yosef Irgas

Tammuz

2 R. Nahman Horodenker
11 R. Zvi Hirsh of Zidichov
15 R. Hayyim ibn Attar
23 R. Moshe Cordovero

Ab

3 R. Natan Shapiro (*Megillah 'Amukot*)
4 R. Menahem Azariah of Fano
5 The ARI
27 R. Yehudah Fetaya

Elul

3 R. Abraham Isaac Kook
13 R. Yosef Hayyim (*Ben Ish Hai*)

THE LURIANIC ADAM

In Lurianic kabbalah, Adam is not merely the first human being. His role as common ancestor of all humanity is interpreted mystically. He is not only the progenitor of all subsequent souls, but is conceived as the collective embodiment of virtually all souls. According to the Lurianic myth, Adam's soul lost its unified state as a result of his sin. As a consequence, the collective soul disintegrated into a number of discrete parts which suffered a variety of fates. Some of the finest parts returned to their supernal source. Others fell into the *kelippot*. There they must remain until the righteous efforts of holy people in this world release them and grant them an opportunity to be incarnated as humans. A third group of soul-parts remained in Adam. These sparks were passed on to his flesh-and-blood descendants.

It is important to note that in Lurianic kabbalah the fragmentation of Adam's soul is a parallel to the cosmic chaos that resulted from the "shattering of the vessels." Just as the upper worlds are in need of *tikkun*, the soul of Adam requires healing. Life, then, is an opportunity to heal some part or parts of the one whole soul of Adam. This process of *tikkun* lasts as long as human history. As long as progress is being made by incarnated sparks, they continue to transmigrate in forms of existence which are appropriate for them according to the complex laws of transmigration.

The implications of the Lurianic myth of Adam are, then, that the multiplicity of incarnated souls is the result of Adam's sin. In reality, there is only one soul. This one soul can regain its unity through the redemption of its various parts. These various parts, moreover, may be related to each other in varying degrees. Some "soul roots," for example, have been subdivided so that their "sparks" are shared by thousands of individuals. The *tikkun* of these soul roots depends on the collective efforts of these mystical families. Unfortunately, however, the parts are not aware of their true nature. In order to be healed, they require the guidance of an enlightened kabbalist who can determine the history of an individual's soul, the extent of the damage which it has suffered, and the proper spiritual remedies which must be applied.

The text that follows is taken from Hayyim Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim*. It presents some of the basic aspects of the Lurianic myth of Adam. In particular, this text reveals the Lurianic response to the problem of the multiplicity of souls. If all the souls were originally part of Adam's soul, and tradition tells us that the soul had 613 parts, how can one account for the 600,000 souls that received the Torah at Sinai and the even greater number of souls present in later stages of history?



The Multiplicity of Souls

It is known that each of the four worlds, Emanation, Creation, Formation and Making, contain five *parzufim*: *Arieh Anpin*, *Abba* and *Imma*, *Ze'ir Anpin* and *Nukba*... It is also known that from all of the aspects that make up each of the four worlds, human souls issue forth. This is the mystical meaning of the verse, "Children are you to the Lord, your God" (Deut. 14:1). Consequently, the various aspects of the souls correspond to the structure of the worlds both in general and in detail. For example, the souls from the world of Emanation are also divided into five categories, corresponding to the five *parzufim* of Emanation. For those which are drawn from *Arieh Anpin* are called *yehidah*. Those from *Abba* are called *hayyah*. Those from *Imma* are called *neshamah*. Those from *Ze'ir Anpin* are called *ruah*. And those from *Nukba* are called *nefesh*. All of them are parts of Emanation. Afterwards come the lower worlds. Those drawn from the world of Creation are called the *neshamah* of Creation. Those from the world of Formation are called the *ruah* of Formation. Those from the world of Making are called *nefesh* of Making. This is the general classification...¹

All these categories were included in Adam. As for Adam, he was composed of 248 limbs and 365 sinews and his soul had the same number of subdivisions. Thus each of these categories was subdivided as follows: the *yehidah* of Emanation is divided into 613 limbs and sinews. Each of these limbs and sinews is called a root. And, similarly, each aspect of the *hayyah*, *neshamah*, *ruah* and *nefesh* of Emanation is made up of 613 roots. (The same subdivision continues through the lower worlds.)

Here is an explanation of one aspect from which the rest can be deduced. Take, for example, *nukba* of the world of Making. *Nukba* comprises 613 limbs and sinews. These are called 613 great roots. That is, they are the minimum. Each of them contains no less than 613 sparks. Each spark is one complete soul. The sparks are called 613 great sparks. Now depending on the extent to which they have been flawed, they may be further subdivided. For 613 great roots may be broken down into as many as 600,000 small roots (although it is possible that there will be fewer). It is not necessary that every great root will have the same number of small roots. It depends on the extent of the flaw. One great root may be divided into 1000 small roots while another has only 100. But none may have more than 600,000. Similarly, the sparks may be divided into 1000 small sparks, another into 100 and so on. But the totality of the 613 great sparks can not be broken down into more than 600,000 small sparks...

Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim section 11

Translated and commentary by Miles Krassen

1. In each world each of the five categories is subdivided into an additional five categories. For example, in the world of Emanation those souls which originate in the *sefirah keter* of *Arieh* are called *yehidah* of the *yehidah*, those from *hokhmah* are called the *hayyah* of the *yehidah*, those from *binah* are called the *neshamah* of the *yehidah*, those from the next six *sefirot* are called the *ruah* of the *yehidah*, and those from *malkhut* are called *nefesh* of the *yehidah*.

The Ascent of Saints

And now, an explanation of the shattering of the kings: when all the lights went back up to their places, there were still sacred sparks within all these vessels, and they fell down into the broken pieces and from these were created the shells (*kelippot*).

Even though the food has been clarified from the shells, or residue, and it disappeared above, there are still sparks of the sacred left within the vessels, and this is what is left for us to complete, through our prayers and good deeds and through the souls of saints when they leave this world.

When the saints leave this world and pass through the worlds of Action (*olam ha-asiyyah*), they raise up with them the sparks of holiness from the shells to the world of formation (*olam ha-yezirah*); and in the same way when they rise from the world of formation to the world of creation (*olam ha-beriah*), and from the world of creation to the world of emanation (*olam ha-azilut*), they raise these sparks and return this light to the sublime and noble place where it originated.

This is the mystery of the feminine waters, and this is the meaning of the ten sages who were martyred by the Romans in the destruction of the Holy Temple. At this time the iniquities caused the shells to become overpowering, and there was no energy left to raise the feminine waters, which are these sacred sparks, and the world was desolate and filled with destruction. Therefore the sages gave their lives to the Kingdom, and by surrendering their lives they were able to raise feminine waters to the Father and Mother, and to raise up the sparks that were in the shells. This is the meaning of the saying, "So it has arisen in thought before me," mentioned by Rabbi Akiva; this is the mystery of the kings who ruled and died, and this is the mystery of the One who creates universes and destroys them.

And even though we have said that the kings who died are the seven broken vessels of Grace, Strength, and so on, until the Kingdom, all the vessels needed a fixing. We see that Wisdom and Understanding also needed a fixing, for is it not so that Understanding first received this light back-to-back? She did not have the capacity to receive it directly. Therefore her vessel became smaller, and because of this lessening of the vessel it fell. (Meaning to say, the backside energies of the Father and Mother descended, and from this descent was created Jacob and Leah.)

And because Understanding could not receive the light, Wisdom also could not receive the light that was appropriate for her, and would have gone to her if Understanding had been face-to-face. Therefore this level descended.

This is the meaning of "The righteous perish" (Is. 57:1). The righteous, the saint, is the category of Foundation. When the saint is generating a flow to the *Shekhinah*, then part is given to him and part to her. If he does not send a flow to the *Shekhinah*, then he only has one part. This is not to say, God forbid, that his is a flaw on his part. This is not because he has a defect, but only because of a failure within the Kingdom to receive.

This is what our sages of blessed memory have written in the scripture that says streams of Wisdom, which are above the Torah, and streams of Understanding, which are above the *Shekhinah*. For the light that descends and flows from the sublime Wisdom refers to the Father, and from him the Torah was created; which is also the Little Face. The light that falls

from Understanding refers to the Mother, and from here is created the *Shekhinah*, the Feminine, as it is written.

When the Little Face ascends, he raises up with him the light that fell to his place, the feminine waters, and he brings it back up to the Father/Mother. He is returning and raising these sparks of holiness that have fallen.

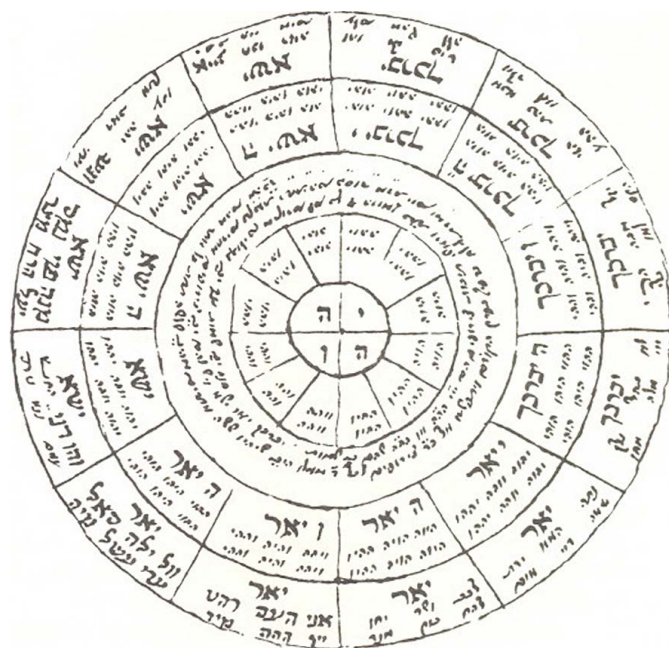
Just as the souls of the saints raise the feminine waters so there can be a union of the Little Face and the Feminine, in the same way the Little Face and Feminine raise the feminine waters from the union of the divine Father and Mother, from these flows that have descended.

We surrender our lives through the act of falling on our faces in the morning prayer and confessing our sins. This act generates the feminine waters of Rachel. In raising our life spirits (*nefesh*), we raise the sacred sparks that are trapped in the shells of Rachel.

The saints, in their death, raise these sparks of holiness with them, to awaken the feminine waters of Rachel, so the Little Face will unite with the Feminine. The sign for this is the Little Face and the Feminine ascending to the Father/Mother, and this is the mystery of the unification of the *shema* Israel.

During the recitation of the *shema*, the lower union rises to the higher union. ["The Lord is our God" is the lower union while "The Lord is One" is the higher union.] "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One..." In that moment we waken the sacred sparks that have descended in streams from the Father and Mother, and raise them to the level of Understanding, to activate the feminine waters at this higher station. This prayer makes possible the union of the Great Father and Mother.

Sefer Ez Hayyim (Jerusalem 1910), "Sha'ar ha-Klalim" p.10ff
Translated by Eliyahu Klein.



It is evident that this passage reflects the bitter experience of Ashkenazi Jewry in the aftermath of the Crusades. We turn now to a Sephardic tradition in the writings of Rabbi Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, a Spanish kabbalist who after the Expulsion in 1492, eventually made his way to Jerusalem. He writes in *Megillat Amrafel*:

When a person determines to surrender himself for the honor of His great Name, come what may, such a person will not feel the pain of the blows inflicted upon him....If such a person, when they take him to be subjected to torments and extreme torture...would visualize (*yekaven*) the great and awesome Name between his eyes, resolving firmly to sanctify it; while his eyes are directed toward the Holy One of Israel and his heart's focus is in communion with Him; [if he further visualize] the holy Name as a flaming fire, with shining letters filling the universe, or as large as he is capable of imagining, then such a one is assured of withstanding the test [of martyrdom]...and he will not feel the blows and tortures.

Rabbi Abraham goes on to cite another tradition as to how to respond to one's inquisitors:

'What do you want from me? I am a Jew, a Jew, a Jew, I will remain, and as a Jew I will die! A Jew! A Jew! A Jew!' he can then be assured that he will sanctify his Creator, will not desecrate the divine Name [through apostasy] and will not feel the tortures.³

Gershom Scholem, in his discussion of this passage,⁴ traces Rabbi Abraham's ideas back to the *Tashbez* and Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, suggesting that Rabbi Meir may have received them from the circles of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. According to Scholem, "these notions originated not during the time of the Spanish Inquisition, but in Germany, in the aftermath of the Crusader Massacres."⁵

While there is indeed a clear connection between the passage in *Megillat Amrafel* and the teachings of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg as found in the *Tashbez*, I suggest that Scholem overlooked another, more proximate and independent source. In the *Me'irat Eynayim* of Rabbi Isaac of Acco we find the following:

Whoever wishes to know the mystery of binding his soul on high, that his thought should commune with the Supernal God, with that continual, unceasing thought thereby acquiring the World-to-Come, with the Name being always with him in this world and the next: he should visualize the letters of the Tetragrammaton, as if they were before him, written in a book with Torah script. Each letter should be infinitely large in his mind's eye. That is, when you visualize the letters of the Tetragrammaton, your mind's eye should be directed towards the letters, while your heart concentrates on the *ein sof*. This must be done in unison: the visualization and the concentration must be done together.

This is the true communion of which Scripture speaks.... As long as a person's soul is in communion with the blessed Name in this manner, no evil will befall him, he will not err in any domain of life..., and will not be subject to the accidents, for as long as he remains in communion

with the blessed Name, he is above all accidents, and has control over them.⁶

The similarity between the *Megillat Amrafel* passage and that of *Me'irat Eynayim* is evident: in both the Name is visualized, not pronounced; the letters are visualized as being of colossal size; there is a coordination between the visualization of the letters and an inner intent, which is directed towards the Godhead.⁷ Finally, the visualization confers protection: in *Me'irat Eynayim* a general protection from harm, and in *Megillat Amrafel* a protection from the agony associated with martyrdom.

In the *Tashbez*, however, the name is pronounced, almost, it would seem as a charm or invocation; there is no mention of visualization. Rabbi Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi apparently linked the Ashkenazi tradition as exemplified in *Tashbez* with an independent Sephardic tradition, possibly stemming from Abraham Abulafia.⁸

Later versions of our theme can be found in the *Yosef Omez*⁹ of Rabbi Yosef Yospa Hahn Nordlingen (d. 1637), and in *Kehillat Ya'akov* of Rabbi Moshe Galante (16th century), who writes that "Those who are burning and put to death for the sanctity of His Name do not undergo suffering, but die by means of a [divine] kiss."¹⁰

When our theme appears among writers from within the Hasidic tradition, it is recast in an entirely different matrix. To my knowledge, the first Hasidic author to expound the theme of bliss in martyrdom is Rabbi David Solomon Eybeschütz (1755–1813). Rabbi in the Bessarabian city of Soroki, he studied Hasidism with Rabbi Meshullam Phoebus of Zbarazh among other masters of the school of the Maggid of Miedzyrzec. In his homiletic commentary on the Torah *Arvei Nahal* he writes:

A responsum of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg cites an oral tradition that one who is put to death for the glory of the blessed Name feels no pain at all. The reason for this is that since the individual who is about to be martyred is inflamed with a powerful yearning to surrender his life for the sake of the sanctity of His blessed Name, he raises up all his senses and his entire physical being by means of that fervor to the World of Thought. Eventually he reaches the point where he is entirely vested in Thought so that his sensory awareness disappears, while his feeling and physicality are stripped away....¹¹

Rabbi Eybeschütz goes on to explain the story of Rabbi Akiva's death in this light: the enigmatic words "Silence thus it arose in thought" (offered to Moses in response to his bewilderment over Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom) simply mean that Rabbi Akiba, in the ecstasy of surrender, raised his senses to the World of Thought, and, instead of pain, experienced great pleasure.

The recasting of our tradition in a Hasidic mold is quite evident. It is now not the invocation of the Tetragrammaton which confers protection, as in the *Tashbez*, nor the visualization of it, as in *Megillat Amrafel*, but a Hasidic ecstasy; the martyr, in his overwhelming enthusiasm for the privilege of being called upon to surrender his life for God, is so enraptured that he loses all bodily sensation and enters into the "World of Thought" (a characteristic concept of the Maggid of Miedzyrzec).

Finally, we note that the text of *Arvei Nahal* is cited by a Hasidic master who wrote during the Holocaust. Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, a Polish master known as the Piaseczner Rebbe, wrote a book in Warsaw during the years 1939–1943 which was published in Israel after the war under the title *Esh Kodesh*. In his homily for Shabbat *Shuvah*, 1939, he expresses a hope that “just as we bind ourselves to God with such intensity that our sensations disappear, so does He bind Himself to us, as it were, in His thought, to the extent that His own feelings of anger and rage against us are set aright, so that the afflictions vanish and we are truly saved in all respects.”¹² Here the tradition of ecstasy in martyrdom is employed by the Hasidic preacher to give a measure of comfort and hope to his *hasidim*, the oppressed residents of occupied Warsaw.

Thus, a tradition which first came into prominence during the Crusades found new expression during a catastrophic period eight hundred years later.¹³ One must conclude by expressing the hope that Rabbi Shapiro’s vision of the transformation of ecstasy-in-death into ecstasy-in-life shall finally come to realization.

Notes

1. *Berakhot* 61b.
2. Lemberg 1858, p. 40a.

Neḥemia Polen

3. Published in Gershom Scholem, *Perakim le-Toldot Sifrut ha-Kabbalah* (Jerusalem 1931), pp. 124–7. Also in *Kiryat Sefer* 7(1930–31), pp. 153–5; 441–2.
4. *Perakim*, p. 138.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Me’irat Eynayim* (Jerusalem 1975), pp. 278–9.
7. The importance of this coordination in *Me’irat Eynayim* was pointed out to me by Professor Mark Verman.
8. See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), pp. 33–4.
9. Frankfort, 1928 (reprint ed. Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 100–1.
10. Cited in David Tamar, “*Perakim le-Toldot Hakhmei Ereẓ Yisrael ve-Italyah u le-Toldot Sifrutam*,” *Kiryat Sefer* 33 (1958), pp. 376–7.
11. *Arvei Nahal* II (Piotrkow, 1888), p. 112 (*parashat Mas’ei*).
12. *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 8–9. Cf. p. 111.
13. For other sources relevant to our theme, see Yehuda Liebes, “Mysticism and Reality: Towards a Portrait of the Martyr and Kabbalist, R. Samson Ostropoler,” in Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (eds.), *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), p. 253, n. 131. Cf. also Bernard Septimus, “Narboni and Shem Tov on Martyrdom,” in Isadore Twersky (ed.) *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature II* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 453–4, n.25.

REINCARNATION AND THE RIGHTEOUS

The Questions of Rav Sheshet des Mercadell Concerning the Suffering of the Righteous

The Gerona kabbalists inherited the notion of reincarnation from *Sefer ha-Bahir*. They did not, however, view it as a universal mode of divine retribution, but instead seemed to have generally limited it to a set of specific circumstances. In particular, it was seen as justification for the halakhic institution of Levirate marriage and an explanation for the seemingly unwarranted sufferings of the righteous.

The Talmudic tradition describes a man who has not fulfilled the Biblical commandment of procreation as if he were ‘guilty’ of the twin sins of bloodshed and the diminution of the Divine Image (*Yeb.* 63b). In the eyes of the Gerona kabbalists, such an individual is barred from access to the Divine Presence after death. However, upon the basis of the Biblical narrative of Judah and Tamar (*Gen.* 38), where Tamar loses two husbands and fathers twin sons through her encounter with her father-in-law, the kabbalists deduced that Levirate marriage served as a means to redeem and return the soul of a childless man to earth, so that he might fulfill the *mizvah* of procreation.

Amongst the reincarnate were included the truly wicked. This conclusion enabled the early Spanish kabbalists to find a solution to one of the burning issues of Biblico-Rabbinic theodicy, that of the *zaddik ve-ra lo*, the suffering of the righteous individual. Once one posits the existence of the process of reincarnation, one can argue that the sufferings of the righteous (and as a corollary, the prosperity of the wicked) are the fruits of behavior in a former life.

In this early period, we also find a developing tendency to identify particular Biblical and rabbinic figures as reincarnations of their predecessors. Moses is seen as Abel *redivivus*,

both having been shepherds who merited divine favor. The Ten Martyrs of the Hadrianic persecutions were identified with Joseph’s ten brothers who had sold him into slavery.

This introduction of the concept of reincarnation into Jewish mystical theology raised a host of questions concerning its place in the divine providential economy and its integration with such fundamental notions of Talmudic eschatology as the resurrection of the dead and the nature of the World-to-Come. The literature of the period rarely deals systematically with the issue, but instead generally handles it within the context of exegesis to the Pentateuch and Job. A valuable exception to this state of affairs is a short work written by a student of the Ramban, Rav Sheshet des Mercadell of Catalonia, in the late 13th century. Rav Sheshet grapples with the question: Who exactly is it that undergoes reincarnation? His response is that reincarnation is generally restricted to the wicked and childless.

This attempt to limit the process of reincarnation is already controversial. The Biblical tradition lists a variety of offenses that entail the penalty of *karet*, translatable as “cutting off” or “extermination.” The Talmudic sages, as a whole, interpret the penalty as premature death. However, in Rav Sheshet’s generation, it is being transformed into reincarnation. An individual who transgresses and incurs the penalty of reincarnation, even if righteous, is condemned to rebirth and a second death. Rav Sheshet is thus forced to muster rabbinic sources and rational arguments to demonstrate that extermination is limited to this world and that neither the righteous nor even the morally mediocre undergo reincarnation. His “Questions” were edited by Gershom Scholem from three manuscripts, Munich 92, Montefiore Library Halberstam 174, and Fuldd A4 and published by him in *Tarbiz* 16, nos. 2–3, June–April 1945,