

*Gershom Scholem's Major Trends -
Jewish Mysticism - 50 years after*

Faithful Transmission versus Innovation: Luria and his Disciples

by

RONIT MEROZ

Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Prof. Gershom Scholem – and it is no coincidence that his name is the opening word of this lecture and on this occasion – defined two branches in the tradition which handed on the Kabbalah of Luria (known by the acronym Ha'ari) to the following generations¹. He defined them by their contents as well as by geographical characteristics.

One branch is the eastern, mainly the Safed, tradition whose principal representatives were R. Hayyim Vital and R. Yoseph Ibn Tabul, and Scholem has this to say about it: "There are differences and variations in the formulations and in the concepts ... but the unity [of the material] is manifest and salient and there can be no doubt that it reflects the teachings of 'the living Ari', the way he taught them to his disciples at various times"². The second branch is that of the Italian tradition whose prominent representatives were its founder – R. Yisrael Sarug – and his disciple, R. Menahem Azarya of Fano. This branch does indeed draw its inspiration from the first, but also adds to it an entirely new topic, dealing with the Malbush ("garment") – a topic not found at all in the tradition of Safed.

Scholem's argument raises two issues. One is: with what degree of faithfulness do the writings of the disciples reflect the teachings of their master, the Ari? The other touches on the influence their writings had on the following generations: were they indeed all known to later generations? Which were the predominantly influential ones (quantitatively or qualitatively) in forming the following generations' concept of Luria's Kabbalah? This presentation will take up the first question only.

The yardstick we shall apply here to the writings of the Ari's disciples is chronological: we shall distinguish between writings presenting the Ari's thought written while he lived in Safed, and those which were composed after his death. (We shall, however, omit the writings dealing with the Ari's thoughts such as they evolved before he moved from Egypt to Safed, because these were almost entirely written by himself and cannot, therefore, add to our knowledge of his relationship with his disciples.)

¹ Scholem, Sarug: Major Trends, chapter 7.

² Scholem, Sarug, p. 216.

The first group coincides almost entirely³ with what Scholem calls the eastern tradition. While Scholem (in his article on Sarug) discerned a measure of unity in it, others found it replete with contradictions, including contradictions between various parts of Vital's own writings. One of the attempts to explain the very existence of such contradictions, as well as their large number, accounts for them by asking how well the disciples understood their master's doctrine; or alternatively, to what extent they agreed with it. Altmann, for instance, argues that R. Mosheh Yonah did not accept the concept of the Tsimsum of Infinity, and therefore simply ignored it in his version of the Ari's teachings⁴; Tishby, on the other hand, maintains that Vital, for his part, did not dare to put down on paper the cathartic doctrine of the Infinity, and therefore, in contradistinction to Ibn Tabul, left it out of his own writings⁵. During the last few years, however, several theories have been put forward – by Prof. Y. Liebes, Y. Avivi and myself⁶ – which contend that the many contradictions stem from developments in the Ari's own thought processes possessing their own inner consistency, rather than from the unreliable reporting of his disciples.

The assumption that, on the whole, the disciples of the Ari reflect their master's thinking faithfully seems preferable – at least in following the method I have adopted – for three reasons. First, as a working hypothesis which makes it easier to unravel the tangle of the Ari's doctrine; second, because of the internal evidence – well known for a long time – for the writers' conscious effort at reliability. Thus, Vital used to state clearly where he was copying his master's words (whether from the latter's writings, or from notes he himself took during the Ari's lessons or immediately following them); and where he was writing while relying on his own memory; he was wont to point out passages for which he doubted the accuracy of his own memory, or would state where he cited his teacher's words by relying on the statements of another of his disciples⁷. Ibn Tabul, too, made a distinction between what he heard from his master and what

³ Unlike Scholem, I distinguish between the first edition of Vital (regardless of whether it was edited by himself or by Halevi and Vestali [or Guastaldi]), and all other editions of Vital's works in which Vital's own elaboration and personal presentation of Luria's material is much more evident. See Avivi, Binyan Ariel, last chapter.

⁴ Altmann, *Azaria of Fano*, p. 249.

⁵ Tishby, *Evil*; for instance pp. 27ff. and 57ff. Scholem accepts Tishby's opinion in this regard; see Scholem, *Shabbetai Sevi*, p. 35, note 38; so also, Kabbalah, p. 195.

⁶ Liebes, *New Directions*; Avivi, Binyan Ariel; Meroz, *Dissertation*.

⁷ More than in any other source, it is the structure of the first edition which attests to this faithfulness. There, he distinguishes between some passages he copied from Luria's manuscripts in the latter's own handwriting, others in which he reports what he heard him say, and others again in which he puts down what he had heard others say on behalf of Luria (see Scholem, *Luria's Writings*). For further examples, see Sha'ar Hahakadmot, 84b; Sha'ar Hakavanot; Drushei Hali'ala, Drush 4; and many more.

he added himself⁸. And third, because, as a result of new manuscripts that have come to light, it has become clear that we cannot ascribe one particular version of the Ari's doctrine exclusively to any one individual student of his, or explain the absence of it in the writings of another as dependent on the disciples only. For instance: versions characteristic of Kanfei Yonah by R. Mosheh Yonah also appear in the name of R. Moshe Najjarah, R. Yoseph Arzin, R. Yoseph Ibn Tabul⁹ – or again: the cathartic approach which, as Y. Tishbi has contended the Ari used to teach, was recorded by Ibn Tabul, while Vital knew of it, but did not so much as dare commit it to writing; yet in recent years it has been found included, after all, in the “Drush shemasar R. Hayyim Vital le-R. Shelomo Sagish”¹⁰. It has therefore recently become evident that the gaps between the versions of individual disciples are becoming smaller, though – it needs to be said – they have not disappeared altogether and the number of conflicting versions, each claiming to represent the genuine views of the Ari, is still considerable.

The above hypothesis, together with other methodological considerations, have led me to conclude that the Ari's thinking passed through several well-defined phases of development. The methodology and the conclusions it leads to have been fully set out by me elsewhere¹¹ and need not, therefore, be repeated here. What is important for the present argument is that the assumption of faithful rendition is indeed a fruitful one and does lead to conclusions regarding the development of the Ari's thinking, and this development's inner consistency. Moreover, it proves itself valuable in that, for every phase of the development of the Ari's thought processes, we find a corresponding group of texts reflecting it, and in each such group we find texts written by a number of disciples rather than by a single one.

And yet, another, closer look at the Lurianic writings reveals that the picture is even more complex. Even though the assumption of faithfulness proves a valuable research tool, and even though we may conclude that it reflects realities to a large extent, we still sense a measure of creativeness and freedom of thought on the part of the disciples. Let me illustrate this by means of some examples from the writings of Vital.

a) In his Sha'ar Hamitzvot, Parashat Hukat, Vital writes: “The commandment of the ashes of the heifer. I, the writer, am studying to understand the homily of my teacher, may he live on in the next world, and [through

⁸ Tabul, *Idra Raba*, particularly p. 158, but also pp. 156, 162, 163.

⁹ Tabul's version is to found in Columbia Manuscript X 893 6862, pp. 95 a–140 b. On the other versions see Avivi, *Italy*, pp. 96–100.

¹⁰ Touitou, *New Selections*.

¹¹ Meroz, *Dissertation*, introduction.

contemplation] I thought of [the innovative] interpretation we shall now write down, and I brought the words before my teacher, may he live on in the next world, and he acknowledged them." Vital then goes on to state his innovation, and concludes: "Up to here I Hayyim, the writer, have put down my innovative interpretation, ... and from here on my teacher, of blessed memory, added and said..."

The situation is clear: Vital makes some innovation, tells his master about it and gains his approval and his acceptance of the truth of the matter. The innovation, as well as the Ari's words about it, were included in a book of which Vital declared repeatedly that it does nothing but render his master's thinking.

b) In the fourth part of Sha'arei Kedushah, Vital describes a technique of bringing the soul into contact with the soul of a tana by repeating one particular mishnah over and over again. This particular passage alone, describing the technique in question, was first published by Lawrence Fine¹², and again as part of an edition of the fourth part published in Jerusalem.¹³ – From the Sefer Hahezionot, we learn that Vital frequently practiced this technique, since he says about it: 'as is my known practice'¹⁴.

How this technique evolved is described in Sha'ar Hagilgulim, Introduction, 38: "One Sabbath, I contemplated [and reinterpreted] two verses according to their true meaning. And my teacher, of blessed memory, said to me on the Sabbath morning that he had seen Ben Azay [in a vision] giving me two fine presents [i.e. the two innovations the writer had thought of], and he asked me to tell him what innovations I had thought of that Sabbath day. And I told him. And he said to me that, because that Sabbath night it had occurred to me to read one [particular] mishnah of Ben Azay three or four times, he [Ben Azay] had given me the said two gifts."

The format is the same: Vital thinks of an innovation [I refer to the technique Vital spontaneously develops] and it is the Ari who gives it significance and grants it the seal of approval. Details of the technique appear in Sha'arei Kedushah, the introduction to which says: "I wrote this tract, small in size and great in quality ... and in it I shall clarify secrets which the early generations who preceded us did not conceive of, for I received them from a holy person, an angel of the Lord of Hosts, my teacher the Ari, may he live on in the next world."

c) The following example is of doubtful value, since it requires a well-nigh impossible distinction between a "yod" and a "vav" in the manuscript.

¹² Fine, Recitation.

¹³ In the collection "Ketavim Hadashim". Incidentally, it should be noted, this edition badly lacks fidelity to the text of the manuscript it purports to render in print.

¹⁴ Vital, Sefer Hahezionot, pp. 54, 55.

Binyamin HaLevi and Elisha Vestali (or: Guastali) composed the Sefer Hadrushim, Sefer Hakavanot and Sefer Halikutim, apparently from books stolen from Vital in 1586, while the latter was ill. Their edition contains texts known to us also from the first edition put together by Vital himself, but here they appear in a fresher form, while in Vital's edition, they are more elaborate. In Sefer Halikutim in the National Library's manuscript Heb 8° 479, p. 175 a and b, we find¹⁵:

The maggid said to me that the reason why the righteous goes through transmigrations of the souls for a thousand generations, while the unjust does so for only three, is because of what is written about Aher [meaning: Elishah]: 'Let him not be judged nor let him enter the world to come ... because he engaged in the study of the Torah' and so on (Hagigah, 15 b). Because those who were learned [in the Torah], particularly from among the early generations, cannot possibly enter hell. Yet their sins need cleansing. Therefore they need the transmigration of the soul to make them whole. But the unjust enters hell and his sins are cleansed [only] there¹⁶.

The same theme appears in a more elaborate form in Introduction 4, of Sha'ar Hagilgulim without reference to the fact that this opinion originates in the words of a Maggid¹⁷.

¹⁵ Similarly also in Sefer Hadrushim, New York manuscript 1985, p. 261 b.

¹⁶ The controversy as to whether the number of metempsychoses is three or one thousand goes back to the beginnings of the Kabbalah (see Scholem, Metempsychosis, p. 320–321). The contribution of the Maggid is, in this instance, not in raising the question as such but in laying down which is the correct possibility. He decides against the opinion of Luria's first teacher, David Ben Zimrah (Magen David, 39 a), and is closer to the view of Luria's second teacher, Mosheh Cordovero (Or Yakar, vol. 21, p. 26; and similarly, Sefer Shi'ur Komah, chapter 50). His decision contradicts that of another Maggid – that of Yosef Karo – who holds that nobody undergoes more than three metempsychoses (Maggid Meisharim, relating to the portions of 'LeKh Lekha', 'Mikets', 'Tazri'a' and the book of Job). It would appear that, by and large, this was the majority opinion among Safed Kabbalists: see R. Yehuda Halliwa, Tsofnat Pa'ne'ah, R. Shelomo Alkabetz, Shoresh Yishai on Ruth, 4:10; R. Ovadia Hamon, Mas'ot Hanefesh, e.g. lines 1270–1279; R. Eleazar Azkari, Sefer Haredim, chapter 33, p. 160. It also conforms with the opinion of the author of Galya Raza (see Elior, Metempsychosis, pp. 227–228). The differences between the said Kabbalists and the views of Luria relate to the fate of the sinful soul after the original three metempsychoses – a subject we cannot go into here.

Another contribution by the Maggid to the topic under discussion is in the way of justifying the cited views: other Kabbalists (e.g. Karo, *ibid.*) are apprehensive of the accumulations of the sins of the evil souls in this world; by contrast, Vital's Maggid may have been guided by considerations relating to the next world.

It needs stressing that, while the mystical experience is innovative as such, the problem or issue that is being posed in its course belongs to a certain traditional framework, and therefore constitutes a conservative element. The very fact of putting forward a question limits the possible scope of innovation, and the issue under discussion is a case in point. On this issue see also in the last note.

¹⁷ The difference between the righteous and the sinful as regards the very possibility of their entering hell is also referred to in Introduction 22; the distinction regarding the number of metempsychoses is, however, absent there. This may express a change in Luria's views – Hakkdamah 22 may represent a later stage in his thinking. In this later development, he may have come to think that there is no limit to the possible number of metempsychoses, particularly for the sinful.

Possibly, the opening words of the above section should be read: 'The Maggid said to him' – i. e. – to Luria; in that case the point is not relevant to our discussion. However another possible reading is: 'The Maggid said to me' – i. e. Vital – as translated above. In that case we see once again that an innovative, scholarly thought of Vital himself gains a place in a book representing his master's doctrine. True, the attainment of the rabbi's seal of approval is not mentioned here in so many words, but we have no reason to believe that it was not given in this case, too. Incidentally, this is the only example known to me in Lurianic literature which speaks of obtaining a revelation from a Maggid as an actual personal experience rather than discussing the theoretical possibility of doing so.

d) It is usually held that Vital wrote *Sefer Ets Hada'at* Tov before he came to know the Ari's. And indeed at the beginning of Part Two of the book, published in Jerusalem in 1906 from a manuscript originally in the possession of R. Shalom Shar'abi, we read: "Said the writer, Hayyim, son of the honoured rabbi Yoseph Vital, may his soul rest in paradise. I wish to write down everything my creator has, by his grace, allowed me to study in the books I laboured over from the days of my youth and younger years until today, when I am twenty years of age; especially so, as most of them were taken from me and stolen and are not with me any longer; therefore I will write down the rest, that which has remained with me now, though it is but a little."

Scholem noted in the margin of one of the pages of his own copy of the book that in a manuscript in the possession of R. Alter of Gur, Vital had written that he was thirty-two years old at the time. And in a critical vein, he added: "This is not the way of writing of a twenty-year old!" The Jerusalem National Library does not possess a photocopy of the R. of Gur's manuscript, and unfortunately I have not been able to locate another manuscript of this book – a manuscript which would make it possible to resolve the mystery of whether Vital wrote it in 1563, when he was twenty (a few years before he first met the Ari), or in 1575, when he was thirty-two (about three years after the Ari's death). Maybe the solution is that the book was first written in 1563, but re-edited in 1575.

But then in this book – a mixture of Bible commentaries in the manner of the *peshat* (plain meaning), allegories, Kabbalah, and also kabbalistic allegories, we find some details which have always been counted among the Ari's innovations: all the souls were contained in the First Man; these souls originate in the various limbs of the First Man; the First Man contained 613 (*taryag*) sparks¹⁹. We have two ways of understanding this. We may

¹⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 447.

¹⁹ *Ets Hada'at* Tov, Part I, p. 8 b, pp. 12 b–13 a; Part II, p. 8 a. The argument that there

argue that the book as such is perhaps of the earlier date, but when Vital re-edited it later (supposing he did so at all), he integrated Lurianic ideas into it. The problem with this argument is that it is difficult to disengage these ideas from the context in which we find them. It would require us to exclude from the book a whole series of explanations and clarifications. Moreover, from the stylistic point of view, these explanatory passages, containing what we have (so far) considered Lurianic ideas, are not different from the rest of the book; while generally speaking the particular style of this book as a whole differs from that which we encounter in the eight books of Vital presenting Lurianic thinking. I am therefore inclined to prefer the second version, viz. that the sections containing Lurianic ideas already formed part of the original book. This necessarily leads to the conclusion that we were wrong in attributing these innovative ideas to the Ari, and that their real origin is in the thought of Vital. This again is in keeping with the fact that the ideas we are speaking of are not found in those Lurianic writings (whether his own or those written down by his disciples) which date back to the period before Vital's becoming a member of the Ari's circle. As a pivotal example, we may mention one of these writings composed by Luria himself, in which he uses language almost totally identical with that of Cordovero²⁰. If this is so, then Vital's contribution to the Lurianic Kabbalah is inestimable: the concept that all souls are contained in the First Man is pivotal to the Lurianic doctrine of the soul, and even more so to the Lurianic concept of prophecy. This is true of the entire texture of the special mystical techniques of "unification" and of attaining mystic awareness. In particular, the influence of this idea can be discerned in the Kavanah of prostration on the grave, written by Luria himself²¹.

is an element of innovation here is not put forward in order to deny the existence of earlier sources for this idea; these have been reviewed by Scholem, *Metempsychosis*, pp. 333, 338–340. But it is still noteworthy that sources preceding Luria speak in terms of grouping souls together through the symbol of the tree and its branches, while Luria does so in particular through the symbol of the 613 parts of the body. In that, he is singular. – For the views of Cordovero, the teacher of both Luria and Vital, see below.

²⁰ In his commentary on *Saba Demishpatim*, Luria wrote: 'All souls are included in the soul of Abraham, and all the generations following him are his sons, whether through the value of their souls or through the value of their bodies.' (Printed in *Zohar Haraki'a*, p. 70 b. For evidence of this commentary belonging to the writings of Luria himself, see Meroz, *Dissertation*, pp. 267–271.)

Similarly, Cordovero wrote (*Or Yakar*, vol. 21, pp. 2–3): 'The secret of the souls is one tree; and the root which is the principal part of the tree, was our Father Abraham in the secret of his soul ... Thus, all parts of the souls ('הנשמות הנבחרות') are the sons of Abraham, precisely as is the case with the branches of a tree.'

To illustrate once again: R. Mosheh Yona wrote his book *Kanfei Yona* in the name of Luria before Vital joined their circle (see Meroz, *Sarug*). In *Kanfei Yona*, pp. 506–512, there is a discussion of the soul in terms of "shoots" and "trunk", but we do not find there arguments on the same subject couched in terms of the 613 parts of the body.

²¹ Further details on this point will be found below, as well as in an article of mine now in preparation, dealing with the development of Lurianic mysticism.

Hence we may say: not only from old Kabbalistic texts in which he immersed himself and over which he laboured strenuously²², and not only from the words of his teachers, R. David Ben Zimrah and R. Mosheh Cordovero, did the Ari's doctrine evolve, but also from what he learned from his disciples, Vital among them. Most of all, of course, the divine spirit which revealed itself to the Ari was, for him, a source of truth, and he attributed the same degree of truth to revelations of the divine spirit which his disciples experienced. It was the Ari, after all, who taught his students techniques calculated to bring them into contact with the divine spirit or, in other words, to derive knowledge from the ultimate source of truth. The Ari's attitude towards the results of such experiences on the part of his disciples (including, in principle, experiences they underwent by means of techniques other than those he himself had taught them) is a liberal one. That is to say, he was open to accept their innovations as words of truth, and, often enough, did in fact do so.

The picture we derive from looking at the overall tissue of relationships between the Ari and his students is that of a "school", which puts forward new doctrines created by a joint effort. The participants contribute from their previous knowledge as well as from their recent revelations. The Ari has the faculty of receiving revelations of unusual power and on an unusual scale, and this makes him the spiritual leader of the group and perhaps its major contributor. At the same time, he encourages a dialogue between himself and the disciples and his mind is sufficiently open to acknowledge the innovative concepts they put forward. In this paper we have mentioned cases that attest to this process, and we are justified in assuming that they were not the only ones, and that others have simply not come down to us. More particularly, we may assume that Vital was not the only one to bring his innovative thinking to the attention of his teacher: rather, he was franker than others in writing about it. From studying Vital's writings, we know that the Ari's disciples formed a Havurah (study group) with a strictly hierarchical structure; at its head stood the Ari and, for all we know, Vital occupied the second place after him²³. We must assume that this structure reflected Luria's estimate of the spiritual level of his disciples, but that need not imply that other disciples did not have opportunities for independent expression.

e) The kavanah of prostration on a grave – Luria's well-known way of communing with the souls of the righteous in paradise – has been put into writing by Luria himself, unlike so many other elements of his doctrine

²² Hakdamat Sha'ar Hahakdamot, printed at the beginning of Ets Hayyim, 4 c; Sha'ar Ruah Hakodesh, 11 b.

²³ According to a number of sources, e.g. Sha'ar Hagi'gulim, Introduction 39, p. 165; the Hakdamat Sha'ar Hahakdamot printed in the beginning of Sefer Ets Hahayyim; also, Meroz, Dissertation, pp. 302–306.

which have come down to us only through his disciples. The kavanah is based on unification of the Tetragrammaton with the name איהוה and has no connection to the daily prayers. Vital, however, in his writings, gives other versions for this unification. At the beginning of one of them (the one found in Sha'ar Ruah Hakodesh, next to the kavanah as written down by Luria) he says:

[Luria] said to me that I could have performed that unification [according to Luria's kavanah] during any of the three prayers – shaharit, minhah, arvit – in the following manner: in Nefilat Appayim of shaharit and minhah, and while saying 'shema' for arvit.²⁴

In the Sefer Hahezionot Vital tells us what came to pass under this guidance from Luria:

At the end of that Sabbath (he says) I was performing a unification after midnight ... and R. Yeiva Saba (revealed himself to me and) told me that by performing the unification of my teacher, of blessed memory (as found in his own handwriting) I would attain as much wisdom as I wished for; and that I should perform the unification three times a day in the following manner: in Nefilat Appayim of shaharit, and in Nefilat Appayim of the 'amida' prayer during minhah, and while saying 'shema' for arvit, and thus I should attain all I wished.

And on the night of the Monday I repeated the unification after midnight. And R. Yeiva Saba said to me: And why did you not perform the unification as I commanded you to do, three times each day, as I said? For in that way you shall attain complete, unlimited [mystical] awareness. And go to your rabbi, R. Yitshak Ashkenazi and tell him to teach you how to do this three times, as I said, and tell him to speak to me, and I will teach him this and then he will teach you ...

So I went to my teacher, of blessed memory, and told him all that. Then he taught me how to perform the said unification during the three prayers and I have already explained this at the conclusion of the unification as found in the handwriting of my teacher, of blessed memory, so see there²⁵.

Thus, Sefer Hahezionot lets us understand how a unification described in Sha'ar Ruah Hakodesh (ostensibly entirely devoted to the words of Luria) came about. Behind the everyday words "[Luria] said to me ...", we find revealed the persistence of Vital searching for the right way to carry out Luria's innovations. Luria held that the unification should be performed separately from the daily prayers. But as a result of the revelation he experienced, Vital arrives at the opposite conclusion. At first, his awe of his teacher is so great that he does not dare to go against what he told him, but after the repeated revelation of R. Yeiva Saba he ends up mentioning the matter to his teacher after all. Luria's reaction is positive: Vital's nomistic method receives his approval in principle and it is he who provides the details of the new technique. The new form of communion is

²⁴ Vital, Sha'ar Ruah Hakodesh, 43 b.

²⁵ Vital, Sefer Hahezionot, pp. 172–173. Vital refers to the source given in the preceding note.

thus the result of cooperation between Luria and Vital, but it is Luria who is given exclusive credit.

f) The Ari's liberal approach and openness, at least towards Vital, found expression also in the procedures applying within the Havurah. The Ari is the fount of knowledge, but it is Vital who is in charge of repeating the material studied ('Hazarat Hadrushim') with its other members²⁶. This leads us to understand that the Ari felt certain of Vital's proper understanding; he must have been aware that in going over the lessons with the disciples, Vital was bound to add clarifications not expressly stated in his (the Ari's) lectures, yet he relied on them to be words of truth. Nevertheless, we know that this is a possible source of misrepresenting the teacher, of explaining things in ways he did not intend, as well as an opportunity for creative and innovative expression.

To revert to the question of the faithful rendition of the Ari's views by his disciples, we may now say that, since the expectation of revelations of the divine spirit was a cornerstone of the Ari's doctrine, and since, by its very nature, this requires a large measure of liberalism, and since the Ari did indeed practice such liberalism in leading his school, the question no longer poses itself. Faithful to the spirit characterizing their master's teaching, the disciples wrote down what they heard from him, what they understood him to mean, and also whatever additional, innovative thoughts came to them in the context of his teaching; and all these were, in their view, legitimate and authoritative. Since innovation was, as it were, built-in into the Ari's method, it was altogether impossible not to apply it. Their writings summed up the dialogue between them and the Ari, whether that dialogue had taken place by means of an actual exchange with him, or whether it had occurred in their own minds, in their inner voice²⁷. Let us then say: the writings of the disciples are a faithful mirror of the results of the thinking of the school rather than of a single, individual teacher. It is, as a matter of course, still important to try and discern, as best we can, precisely who was the author of this or that particular concept, but it is doubtful whether we shall be able to do so down to the last detail.

g) Looking at the issue from another aspect, we encounter evidence attesting to the fact that the Ari reacted not only to the intellectual innovations of his disciples, but also to their personalities.

According to the testimony of R. Shelomo Shlomo of Dreznitz, Vital joined the circle of the Ari's disciples only six months after the Ari himself

²⁶ Sha'ar Hagilgulim, Introduction 39, p. 165.

²⁷ This last possibility is attested to most of all by Vital's contact with the soul of his teacher after the latter's death, in order to receive knowledge and gain approval. See Sefer Hahezionot, p. 57.

settled in Safed²⁸. If we combine another set of data, however, we arrive at a rather later date: Vital himself tells us that he started studying under the Ari in Adar 1571²⁹. The Ari participated in Cordovero's funeral, held in Tammuz 1570, and had earlier studied under him in Safed for some time. This shows that Vital delayed joining the Ari as a disciple for at least nine months, counting from the latter's arrival in Safed.

The reason for this delay, according to R. Shlomo (and in stark contrast to Vital's words in praise of the Ari composed after the Ari's death) was that Vital "did not value him [the Ari] enough to learn from him; on the contrary, he thought himself more learned in the wisdom of the Kabbalah than him."³⁰

This should not surprise us: when the Ari came to Safed, Vital, though only twenty-seven years old, was already established as a Kabbalist of well-consolidated views; he had already written at least two books concerning knowledge of the secret, Sefer Ets Hadá'at Tov, and a book on alchemy. Moreover, he believed in the superior qualities of his own soul and was kindling messianic hopes in himself³¹. The Ari, a Kabbalist recently arrived on the Safed scene, who brought nothing with him but a collection of unedited commentaries on the Zohar, did not impress Vital at all. But, one way or another, he completely changed his mind within the year³².

A change corresponding to that in Vital's estimate of the Ari also occurred in the Ari's mind with regard to Vital, as his first lesson shows. In that lesson, the Ari made exorbitant statements about the superiority of Vital's soul: "He [the Ari] said to me that my soul was higher than that of several of the angels of the highest rank, and that, by virtue of my soul and of my deeds, I was capable of ascending higher than the firmament of Arabot." – The Ari went on to say, in the same lesson, that "when he was [still] in Egypt, he began attaining mystical awareness and it was said to him that he should come to Safed, because I, Hayyim, was living there, so that he could teach me ... [and that] he came to Safed for no other reason ... but because of me, and not only that, but also that the main reason for his soul entering its present migration was only on my account, to make me whole ... He also said to me that he had not been commanded to teach anyone except myself, and myself alone, and if it had not been to teach me, he need not have existed in this world."³³

²⁸ Dreznitz, Letters, p. 43 a. According to Toldot Ha'ari, Vital delayed only three months; see Benayahu's edition, p. 161.

²⁹ Vital, Sefer Hahezionot, pp. 4, 134.

³⁰ Letters, p. 43 a; see also Toldot Ha'ari, p. 162.

³¹ Vital, Sefer Hahezionot, pp. 1–4.

³² See Toldot Ha'ari, pp. 161–163 for the ways this thorough change came about.

³³ Sefer Hahezionot, p. 134.

What we find here, therefore, are not simple, ordinary hierarchical relations between teacher and pupil. Ostensibly, Vital acknowledges the Ari's authority as teacher, but simultaneously the teacher serves – in the view of them both – as an instrument, or an auxiliary means, of developing a superior soul, i. e. Vital's (though that soul was not necessarily superior to his teacher's). It became evident that Vital was not prepared to recognize the authority of his teacher until the latter, for his part, acknowledged Vital's superior qualities and until he accorded to Vital's soul a place within the set of principles of his doctrine – i. e. until he recognized its messianic potential. It would thus appear that the Ari's recognition of Vital's messianic potential within the framework of the Lurianic doctrine was a precondition for the actual establishment of a teacher-pupil relationship between them.

To go back to R. Shlomei's words, we may now say that the delay in establishing close contact between the Ari and Vital stemmed not only from Vital's reluctance to acknowledge the wisdom of the Ari, but equally from the fact that the Ari did not immediately acknowledge the wisdom of Vital. And if we revert to the subject matter of our presentation, it is permissible to state that considerable parts of the Ari's doctrine of the messiah³⁴ would not have developed in the way they did, had it not been for the personal, human encounter between the Ari and Vital. They are not the fruit of a single man's reflections, but of the meeting of people and their thought. And how can we doubt Vital's faithfulness in rendering his master's teachings precisely on those points which he himself helped to consolidate?

To wind up this section, let me say that it is itself the result of an encounter – the encounter between my method of analysing phases in the intellectual development of the Ari, and that of Professor Y. Liebes. The latter's method is based on an analysis of the personal experiences and the spiritual biography of the Ari as a means of identifying different phases in the development of his thought. Here, I have made use of the principles underlying his method and have added to them some elements of research into the spiritual biography of Vital.

So far, we have dealt with the first group of writings, those reflecting the Ari's doctrine as it evolved during his stay at Safed. In concluding this part, let us note that, in the past, the Ari was thought of as an innovator and as the initiator of audacious thoughts; this is the way Scholem saw him in his Major Trends. Later researchers³⁵ have pointed out how deeply the Ari was

³⁴ E. g. the structure of the Havurah (Meroz, Dissertation, Part III, 3, 5); kavanah of prostration on the tomb; and the argument that the messiah's origin is either in the male or female sefirah (ibid., 2, 3, 3, 8). These are elements referred to in my dissertation as belonging to later phases in the development of the Ari's thought – phases that developed only after he met Vital. (The discussion there is, however, independent of the argument pursued here.)

³⁵ E. g.: Zak, Tsimtsum; Zak, Mirror; Idel, Tsimtsum; Idel, Image.

rooted in the notions of his predecessors, and blunted, to some extent, the element of innovation as compared with the Kabbalistic thinkers preceding him. Our present discussion has pointed to the mutual relationship between the Ari as a teacher, and his Havurah, and has blunted – again, to some extent – the element of innovation in the thought of those who followed him.

Let us now turn to the writings composed after the Ari's death. Being devoted to the new doctrine which had evolved in Safed, many of his disciples went on treating his Kabbalah after his death. We shall discuss only three of them, who in turn created around themselves new circles of disciples – Vital, Ibn Tabul and Sarug. Indeed, Sarug too is, to my mind, a direct, personal disciple of the Ari (for reasons which I have recently set out in detail³⁶).

1. As for Vital, there is no need here to go to any length in describing how faithful he was in rendering the contents that emerged in Safed in the Ari's lifetime. His repeated copying or re-editing of his earlier tracts, at a time when the Ari was no longer alive, is also well known. At the same time, he shows himself faithful to the spirit of the Ari's teaching – whether we wish to call this innovation, the search for inner experience, or for the divine spirit – and he continues to preoccupy himself with the techniques intended to bring about such experiences and/or revelations. Sefer Haheznot (actually: his diary) attests to this. I would like to stress in particular the continued connection between his revelations and the figure of his teacher (not merely as the person who taught him these revelatory techniques). For instance: "Three days after my teacher, of blessed memory, died I saw him in a dream ... and since then he has shown himself to me on most nights in order to comfort me, so that I should not despair ... and in all the dreams I dream of him, he is always the one to teach me Torah and consoles me to prevent me from despairing."³⁷

If we study Vital's writings and ask ourselves what these nocturnal, or other, revelations added to them, other than personal encouragement, we are likely to find the answer in one of two possible ways:

The continuous preoccupation with the contents of Lurianic teaching brought Vital face to face with its many internal contradictions. In his later writings, we find many attempts to resolve these contradictions, whether by preferring one version at the expense of another, or whether by means of an innovative argument intended to explain, and thus reconcile, two conflicting versions. This method of Vital's is described in great detail by Y. Avivi in the final chapter of his book *Binyan Ariel*.

³⁶ See Meroz, Sarug.

³⁷ Sefer Haheznot, p. 57.

Another area in which we find how the Lurianic doctrine was developed further, and thus changed with the passage of time, is brought out by the book *Sha'arei Kedushah*, and we have to ask ourselves whether we are justified in classing this as innovative. The question arises because, alongside many characteristically Lurianic concepts contained in the book (such as the concept of Adam Kadmon), we find that the changes it introduces are actually a reversal to pre-Lurianic thinking. I shall only point out two, from among many similar, examples: Much like in his book *Ets Hada'at Tov*, Vital now stresses the importance of the four elements (fire, wind, water and earth) in the cosmic ontology – more so than the Ari does. On the other hand, the concept of the broken divine vessels is altogether absent from the book. True, everything created – living or inanimate – possesses an abstract power which is of the nature of a soul³⁸. But in contrast with the Ari's view³⁹, this soul does not originate in the sparks scattered at the time of the breaking of the vessels and of their captivity in the *klippot*. In this respect, Vital's view is similar to that of R. Yoseph Ben Shalom Ashkenazi⁴⁰, and even more so to that of Cordovero⁴¹, Vital's first teacher of Kabbalah⁴².

It is doubtful whether such thinking ought to be considered innovative. It is, moreover, doubtful whether Vital himself so regarded it, a fact that leads us to discern here, too, one of the tragic aspects of Vital's life. I have dealt with this elsewhere⁴³ and shall therefore only say once more that Vital harboured messianic hopes which, as best we can tell, went together with mystical experiences of an unusual kind. His hopes were gradually disappointed as time went on, and he slid deeper and deeper into despair. His life's tragedy stands out all the more, if we compare it with the third of the above-mentioned leaders of Havaurot, R. Sarug.

2. Ibn Tabul. From his writings, as well as from the testimony of others, it is arguable that he too, like Vital, was faithful to the contents he absorbed during his stay with the Ari at Safed, as well as to the spirit of the Ari's doctrine with its quest for contact with the divine spirit. But he, too, has his own particular way of attributing the source of such revelations to his teacher. For instance: "I do not intend, in this treatise, anything else than to understand one thing from another, in case [the Ari] said so as well as in case that he did not, and to interpret [them] according to what God

³⁸ *Sha'arei Kedushah*, part III, chapters 1 and 2.

³⁹ *Sha'ar Hamitsvot*, Parashat Ekev, 42 b.

⁴⁰ Ashkenazi, *passim*. E.g. *Bereshit Rabbah*, pp. 100–102.

⁴¹ See *Sefer Pardes Rimomim*, part 24, chapter 10; Ben Shelomo, *Cordovero*, pp. 288–

289.

⁴² Vital's latest phase needs much study. I hope to deal with this subject matter more thoroughly in the future.

⁴³ My M.A. Dissertation. *Hebetim Betorat Hanevuah Halurianit*, final chapter.

granted me in his mercy. And it is by virtue of him [Luria] of blessed memory that I say what I am saying."⁴⁴

The last sentence also defines the nature of Ibn Tabul's innovations, such as they appear in most of his writings. He is much less preoccupied with resolving the contradictions of his master, and much more with completing details which, in his view, are lacking in the latter's ontological descriptions⁴⁵. These innovations therefore continue Luria's train of thought and its contents. But it would appear that in some isolated instances, Tabul breaks out of this frame and creates a much more innovative Kabbalah. Because of the wealth of the relevant material, I cannot go into details in the present paper, but shall prepare a separate article on this subject.

3. Sarug and his disciples, too, manifested their faithfulness to the contents of Lurianic thought, by collecting Lurianic texts reflecting the Kabbalah of Safed⁴⁶ and by editing them⁴⁷. And indeed, if they had not felt themselves to be the continuers of the Ari's method, Scholem would not have been so critical of them! Let us note, by the way, that what we are speaking of here is the group of writings Scholem called the "Italian tradition".

In Sarug's writings, we encounter many passages attesting to his pre-occupation with mystical techniques, though these are different from the ones expounded by the Ari⁴⁸. In any case, it is obvious that in striving for revelations of the divine spirit he follows the Ari's path.

The innovative nature of Sarug's thinking is not being questioned. He not only added details to the ontological picture as it existed before him, but supplemented it by an entire new layer, unknown to other Lurianic Kabbalists. It was precisely this measure of innovation which led Scholem to doubt whether Sarug should at all be counted among the Ari's disciples. Let me add here that it is my impression that Vital, too, was aware of Sarug's innovative success. We cannot assume that Vital did not hear of Sarug's activities and teachings, since Sarug became well-known during the 1590s and Vital lived until 1620. Moreover, Vital's Damascene disciple, R. Efraim Penzner, copies from Sarug's writings at a time when Vital is still alive⁴⁹. Yet we know of no case where Vital referred to Sarug. It is of course possible that a hitherto unknown manuscript will come to light and change

⁴⁴ Idra Rabba, p. 163. See also Rubin, *Tabul*.

⁴⁵ See also Ginsburg manuscript, 1734 (microfilm 41295), *passim*, e.g. p. 31.

⁴⁶ Avivi has brought together a list of texts collected by the circle of Sarug; see Avivi, *Italy*.

⁴⁷ E.g. *Takan Likutum*, manuscript Jerusalem, 8° 941; or the collection which Avivi called *Limudei Atsilut*, manuscript Jerusalem, Schocken collection, Kabbalah 7. Both are discussed in Avivi's above-mentioned article.

⁴⁸ See the *Kuntres* printed under the title *Limudei Atsilut*, p. 22 b; as well as *Kuntres Hayetsira*, manuscript Bodley, 1675 (microfilm 17398), pp. 132 a–137 b.

⁴⁹ Scholem, *Sarug*, p. 228; Avivi, *Azaria of Fano*, pp. 363–364.

- ³ תשבי, תורת הרע והקליפה, ירושלים, תשל"א: א. Tishby, Evil: New Selections, New Selections, Louitou, Zak, Mirror: עמ' תשמ"ד, 12, דעת 12, תשמ"ד, עמ' תשמ"ה.
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