Rabbi Hayim Vital (1543-1620) and the Dilemma of the True Cabalists

HIS FAMILY

Rabbi Hayim Vital was born in the city of Tsefat (Safed, Israel) in 1543. His father was Ribbi Yosef Vital, an expert scribe (sofer). The Tefillin written by Ribbi Yosef were very appreciated by Ribbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulhan Arukh and chief rabbi of Safed in those times, not only for the sanctity and purity of that great Hakham who wrote them but also for having been written following some very ancient traditions, for example, the letter kaf sofit (peshuta = extended) written with the upper part rounded, not rectangular (□). Rabbi Moshe Galante wrote that more than a thousand pairs of Tefillin had arrived in the Jewish community of Egypt from Safed, written by the famous "Calabrian rabbi". The Vital family was originally from Calabria, so Rabbi Yosef and his son Rabbi Hayim were known as the "Calabrian" rabbis (calabreses).

SAFED (□□□)

The city of Safed became one of the most important destinations for many Jews who arrived from the Iberian Peninsula after the expulsion from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497). In the year 1540 there were 5,000 Jews in the city of Safed, 719 families. Rabbi Vital's teacher was the famous Rabbi Moshe Alshekh, also from Safed. When Rabbi Yosef Caro passed away, he was succeeded by Rabbi Alshekh, who inherited from Rabbi Caro the authority to order new rabbis. Rabbi Alshekh granted his ordination only to one Rabbi: that is Rabbi Hayim Vital. While Rabbi Hayim Vital is best known for his writings on Qabbala, his early studies were conventional rabbinical studies. His son, Rabbi Shemuel Vital, tells in his book "Source of waters of life" (be-er mayim hayim) that his father only allowed himself to start studying Qabbala when he had completed his advanced rabbinical studies , which includes a total mastering knowledge of all Talmudic and Halakhic works, which usually takes many decades of dedication.

THE GREAT TEACHERS

In Safed Rabbi Hayim also studied with the famous cabalist rabbi (mequbbal) Moshe Cordobero (Ramak) until the year 1570, when Rabbi Yitshak Luria, known as the Ari haQadosh, arrived to the city of Safed from Egypt. The Ari haQadosh is considered one of the most famous cabalists in history. According to rabbi Vital, while the works of the first cabbalists – from Nahmanides (1270) to the Ari himself – were formulated on the basis of the human intellect, the teachings of his master, the Ari, were revealed by divine inspiration. In the year 1572 the population of the city of Safed was decimated by a terrible plague that also claimed the life of the Ari HaQadosh at the young age of 38 years. After the death of the Ari, Rabbi Hayim Vital was recognized as his principal student and his successor.

FROM JERUSALEM TO DAMASCUS

In 1578 rabbi Vital left Safed and settled in Yerushalayim (Jerusalem). There he founded his own academy and helped the community along with other great Talmudic luminaries such as Rabbi Betsalel Ashkenazi, of Egypt, author of Shita Mequbetset and teacher of his teacher, the Ari haQadosh.

In 1597 Rab Hayim Vital moved to the city of Damascus, Syria, to serve as rabbi of the community of Sephardic Jews who had arrived from Sicily, Italy. His main mission in that community was to teach the bases of Tora to Jewish families, many of whom were returning to Judaism after having lived in panic of the Spanish Inquisition for one, two or more generations.

Rabbi Hayim Vital died in Damascus in 1620, at the age of seventy-seven.

HIS WORK

The Ari haQadosh did not write his teachings, but taught his Qabbala privately to a small select group of students. With the authorization of his teacher Rabbi Vital took notes that after the death of the Ari he organized, drafted and edited those notes, but by express will of the Ari, he did not publish them. For many years Rabbi Vital's main work "Ets HaHayim" remained "buried" (□□□□), and the rabbi did not authorized its publication. Rabbi Tsemah tells in his book that a very wealthy individual improperly obtained the book of Rabbi Vital and published 100 copies of it without his permission.

TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH?

One of the most controversial issues in this area (to this day) is the question of publication and promotion of Qabbala's books and ideas. The Hebrew word "qabbalá", which means "reception", indicates that cabalistic knowledge must be received by the student directly from his teacher, and not through the study of a written text (or a video on Youtube …). The popularization of esoteric knowledge carries the serious risk that the mystical knowledge be trivialized, or worse, used by unscrupulous individuals for material or personal gain. This happened unfortunately more than once. For example, in the times of the false messiah, the impostor Shabetay Tsevi (1666), who used cabalistic concepts to defend and promote his false messianic claims.

When Qabbala is popularized it can be exploited by charlatans and unscrupulous individuals, as it happens even in our days, because most people do not know what the Qabbala is about, and therefore, they have no way to distinguish between the master and the impostor. Although one of my teachers taught me the following idea which can help a little but in this area:"He who knows it does not say it; and he who says it does not know it"

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SHA'ARE QEDUSHA

Rabbi Vital wrote many books. One of his most accessible works, for those who master basic Hebrew, is Sha'are Qedusha, a book of Musar (Jewish ethics) that inspires the reader to practice love and dedication to HaShem, studying His Tora and deepening in the meaning of the prayers

To read online Sha'are Qedusha click HERE