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**Charisma and Anti-Charisma in Safed:  
Isaac Luria and Hayyim Vital**

The sixteenth century saw the rise of a new type of Jewish religious leadership based on personal spiritual charisma in place of the more traditional religious authority based on learning and religious knowledge, tradition or rabbinic authority.<sup>1</sup> The classic medieval example of rabbinic authority based on religious knowledge was Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), called by his admirers, “the Great Eagle” of Jewish religious life. His influence was based on his legal writings, primarily his *Mishne Torah*, the most influential halakhic compendium before Joseph Karo’s *Shulkhan Arukh*, which was significantly influenced by the *Mishne Torah*. However, despite his great halakhic influence, there is little evidence that Maimonides’ personal religious practices or preferences influenced others directly. His disciples did not record his practices and then attempt to emulate them. His own son, Abraham (1186-1237), followed an independent spiritual path quite different from his father’s.<sup>2</sup> Maimonides’ lasting influence was a result of his writings and not from the details his personal life.

In contrast to the Maimonidean example of religious leadership based on universally recognized intellectual brilliance and religiously authoritative writings, a charismatic leader’s authority is primarily based on his personal characteristics and the impact that his personality makes on those around him. He

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<sup>1</sup> Elior, R. “Messianic Expectations and Spiritualization of Religious Life in the Sixteenth Century.” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 145 (1986): 35-49.

<sup>2</sup> On Abraham’s new spiritual path see S. Rosenblatt, *The High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1927.

becomes an object of adulation and emulation. A charismatic leader can be a significant scholar and make a contribution to religious learning, but that is not for what he is remembered. Similarly, a religious leader can be charismatic, but that is not the primary source of his authority or the basis of his lasting legacy. This is the crucial difference between charismatic leadership and leadership based on religious learning and the authority derived from religious knowledge.

A few charismatic leaders can be found in Jewish communities prior to the sixteenth century, particularly among mystical circles. Judah the Pious and Abraham Abulafia are among the better-known examples. However, they and the other medieval figures that one might mention were only influential in their own small circles, but had relatively little influence on the larger Jewish community. In contrast, the influence of Isaac Luria, the central figure in the mystical revival of the sixteenth century, along with his colleagues and disciples transformed the fundamental structures of Judaism.

The center of this mystical revival was the Galilean city of Safed, which surpassed Jerusalem as the most important center of Jewish life in this period. The reasons for this are twofold, mundane and spiritual. On the mundane level, Safed's status as a regional capitol and its location on major trade routes created economic opportunities. The major industry was the wool trade, an industry in which the Sephardic community had particular expertise, thus attracting many exiles from Spain.<sup>3</sup>

Spiritually, it was near the graves of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai and his colleagues who were the heroes of the *Zohar*, the central text of medieval kabbalah. These graves would play a central role in the development of Safed Kabbalah. Direct communion with the spirits of the deceased mystical figures at their graves through various mystical practices would become an important means

of understanding and exploring the mystical tradition in Safed. Beginning in the 1530's Safed attracted a number of important kabbalists.<sup>4</sup> Among the first who came to Safed were Joseph Karo and Solomon Alkabetz. Both Karo and Alkabetz were important kabbalists who gathered around themselves many students and disciples who also became significant kabbalists, the greatest of whom was Moses Cordovero, Karo's student and Alkabetz's brother-in-law. Karo had been granted a *magid*, a mentor from Heaven, who in Karo's case was the personification of the Mishnah.<sup>5</sup> Alkabetz was the author of *Leha Dodi* and the creator of the ritual of *Kabbalat Shabbat*. Cordovero was one of the most prolific kabbalists who synthesized the whole medieval kabbalistic tradition in his writings.<sup>6</sup> Yet, when we think of Safed the name that comes to the fore is Isaac Luria, a figure who in two short years revolutionized both Kabbalah and the concept of Jewish religious leadership.

### Isaac Luria

Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (AR"Y)<sup>7</sup> was born in Egypt in 1534 and came to Safed in 1570 when he was thirty-six.<sup>8</sup> Orphaned at an early age he was raised by

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<sup>3</sup> See, S. Avitsur, "Safed – Center of the Manufacture of Woven Woolens in the Fifteenth Century." *Sefunot* 6 (1962): 41-69.

<sup>4</sup> The classic description of Safed as a spiritual center is that of Solomon Schechter, "Safed in the Sixteenth Century: A City of Legists and Mystics" in *Studies in Judaism: Second Series*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1908, pp. 202-306. See also the more recent description by L. Fine, in *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 41-77.

<sup>5</sup> On Karo and his *magid* see, R.J.Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo Lawyer and Mystic*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977.

<sup>6</sup> On Cordovero and his teachings see, J. Ben Shlomo, *Torat ha-Elohut shel R. Moshe Cordovero*. Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Luria is known by the acronym "AR"Y" which stands for "the divine Rabbi Isaac".

his uncle, a wealthy tax official. He received an excellent rabbinic education, studying with Rabbi Bezalel Ashkenazi (c. 1520-1591), a leading rabbinic authority of the period.<sup>9</sup> One day in the synagogue Luria saw a visiting merchant holding a manuscript. When he inquired about its contents, the merchant answered that he was of converso background and could not read it. Luria looked at it and realized that it contained mystical secrets. The merchant gave him the manuscript after he promised to intercede with his uncle concerning customs duties owed by the merchant. The manuscript contained parts of the *Zohar*. After obtaining the manuscript, Luria withdrew to a small hut near the Nile where he studied the manuscript for six years. He only came home for Sabbaths and holidays. Eventually he was worthy of having Elijah come and teach him the mysteries of the text. When he reached the age of thirty-six, Elijah told him that the time had come for him to travel to Safed and teach disciples. He traveled to Safed, but did not “reveal himself” until after the death of Moses Cordovero in the summer of 1570, several months after his arrival. After his public revelation, a group of disciples gathered around him and he taught them until his untimely death at the age of thirty-eight on the fifth of *Ab*, 1572 during a plague.

Though he only lived in Safed for a little over two years, Isaac Luria came to be identified as the central figure of the kabbalistic revolution in Safed during the second half of the sixteenth century. His centrality was twofold, as the initiator of a new school of kabbalistic thought known as Lurianic kabbalah and also as the primary figure who initiated many new religious practices and traditions that became widespread throughout the whole Jewish world.

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<sup>8</sup> The biographical information on Luria is derived from L. Fine, “Physician of the Soul”.

<sup>9</sup> He was the author of the important halakhic compendium, *Shita Mekubezet*.

After his death, stories began to circulate about Luria that spoke of his mystical and magical abilities. The most important collections of stories about Luria's charismatic abilities is a series of letters written by R. Shloimel Dresnitz. Dresnitz came to Safed about thirty years after Luria's death to study Kabbalah. He sent a series of letters to a friend in Poland telling him the many wondrous things that he heard about Isaac Luria from a variety of people in Safed. These letters were published as *Shivhei ha-Ari* and became the basis for the hagiographic tradition surrounding Luria.<sup>10</sup>

Among the things recounted by Dresnitz were that Luria knew the sources of a person's soul and could trace it all the way back to the soul of Adam, which incorporated all later souls. He could look at a person's forehead and tell what sins they committed.<sup>11</sup> Luria would "diagnose" the sins of his disciples and prescribe the appropriate penances to atone for these sins. The purpose of this penance was to mend the spiritual damage to the soul of the disciple caused by the sin and make it ready to receive divine inspiration. He was able to understand the language of birds and animals and had the ability to expel evil spirits that possessed people.<sup>12</sup> Exorcising evil spirits became one of the hallmarks of the new type of "holy man" developed in Safed. R. Joseph Karo performed the first exorcism, but the majority of exorcisms in Safed were attributed to R. Isaac Luria. Possession and exorcism became part of the hagiographic legacy of Safed spirituality in subsequent centuries.<sup>13</sup> Luria was also seen as a messianic figure.

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<sup>10</sup> For the history of Lurianic hagiography see, M. Benayahu, *Toldot ha-Ari*. Jerusalem: Machon Ben Zvi, 1967.

<sup>11</sup> Fine, L., "The Art of Metoposcopy: A Study in Isaac Luria's Charismatic Knowledge." *AJS Review* 9 (1986): 79-101.

<sup>12</sup> Stories about these abilities are found in the hagiographical biography of Luria, *Shivhei ha-Ari*.

<sup>13</sup> Nigal, G. *Dibbuk Stories in Jewish Literature* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Mass, 1994<sup>2</sup>; Goldish, M. ed. *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003.

There was an expectation that the Messiah would come in 1575 and that Luria would be the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> When he died, his status was reinterpreted as a Messiah of Joseph figure whose death would be an early part of the messianic drama.<sup>15</sup>

Lurianic Kabbalah, whose religious authority is based on Luria's charismatic authority and the belief that he received his interpretations of Kabbalah as revelations from Elijah, found its expression in two distinct areas, one esoteric and the other exoteric. The esoteric aspects are the theoretical teachings of Luria and his disciples, while the exoteric aspect are the rituals and traditions that first began as the practices of the mystical brotherhoods in Safed and by the end of the sixteenth century began to be disseminated throughout the Jewish world.

Isaac Luria saw his teachings as esoteric matters that were only appropriate for a small mystical elite, whose souls were worthy to receive these teachings. He left behind very few writings of his own. The best-known ones are the three songs he wrote to be sung at each of the Sabbath meals.<sup>16</sup> What are called the Lurianic writings are in fact the teachings of Luria as they were copied

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<sup>14</sup> Tamar, D. "The Messianic Expectations in Italy for the Year 1575." [Hebrew] *Sefunot* 2 (1958): 61-88.

<sup>15</sup> Idem. "Luria and Vital as the Messiah ben Joseph." [Hebrew] *Sefunot* 7 (1963): 169-177.

<sup>16</sup> Luria's extant writings consist of a commentary on *Sifra de-Zeni'uta*, a section of the *Zohar*, which was written in his youth and reflects the influence of R. Moses Cordovero and a collection of pious customs and several Sabbath hymns which attained wide popularity. The first attempt to catalog Luria's kabbalistic writings was, G. Scholem, "The Authentic Kabbalistic Writings of R. Isaac Luria" [Hebrew] *Kiryat Sefer* 19 (1942): 184-199. More recently, Joseph Avivi, *Binyan Ariel*. Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1987, and Ronit Meroz, "Early Lurianic Compositions" [Hebrew] in *Mashu'ot: Studies in Kabbalah and Jewish Thought in Memory of E. Gottlieb* ed. M. Oron and A. Goldreich. Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994, pp. 311-338, have sought to identify Lurianic writings found in the works of his disciples. See also the reservations of Y. Liebes, "Early Lurianic Compositions?" [Hebrew] pp. 339-342, in the same volume.

and interpreted by his disciples, primarily Hayyim Vital. Vital felt so strongly about the esoteric nature of Luria's teachings that he kept his kabbalistic writings in a locked cabinet. He even asked that these writings be buried with him after his death. The aura of esotericism and secrecy that surrounded Luria's kabbalistic teachings continued for centuries.

Luria's self-perception as an esoteric teacher for a select few and as a failure in his goals would seem to be radically different from the legacy he left behind and the perception of others. Though Luria's esoteric kabbalistic teachings have remained the preserve of a small elite, even after their publication, the figure of Luria as a "holy man" who possessed extraordinary powers and abilities became very widespread and influential. Luria became the role model for the "kabbalistic holy man," a figure whose charismatic authority was built on his perceived abilities as a mystic and visionary. Virtually all later charismatic figures took Luria as their role model and tried to emulate his abilities as a sign of their own charismatic authority.<sup>17</sup>

What we know about Isaac Luria is based on the observations and recollections of others. We have no way of knowing how he perceived himself and whether he saw himself as a charismatic figure. In the case of Hayyim Vital, his disciple, we have an autobiography that explores the issue of charisma and its lack, in great detail. The manuscript of this autobiography, known as *Sefer Hezyonot* [Book of Visions]<sup>18</sup> is in Vital's own handwriting, so there are no

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<sup>17</sup> See, M. Faierstein, "From Kabbalist to Zaddik: R. Isaac Luria as Precursor of the Baal Shem Tov" in *Studies in Jewish Civilization 13: Spiritual Dimensions of Judaism*, ed. L.J. Greenspoon and R.A. Simkins. Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2003, pp. 95-104.

<sup>18</sup> An English translation of the *Book of Visions* is in, M. Faierstein, *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies: Book of Visions and Book of Secrets*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999. All references are to chapter and paragraph in this edition. (Hereafter B.V.) I have also edited a new Hebrew edition of the *Book of Visions*

questions about its authenticity. Unlike his teacher, Vital actively sought a public leadership role and believed himself to be someone with great charismatic authority. Despite all of his accomplishments, real and imagined, his life was a constant struggle for recognition and acceptance.

### Hayyim Vital

Hayyim Vital Calabrese<sup>19</sup> was born in Safed on the first day of *Heshvan* 5303 (1542). His father, Joseph Vital Calabrese was a well-known scribe in Safed. Vital studied in the *yeshivot* of Safed, most notably under R. Moses Alshekh, whom he considered his teacher in exoteric subjects. He also studied Kabbalah with R. Moses Cordovero, the most important kabbalist in Safed before Luria. Vital informs us that the elevated nature of his soul had been predicted even before his birth. In his youth, a variety of diviners and heavenly messengers also predicted that Vital was destined for greatness. In 1570, an oil diviner told him that a teacher who will teach him great wisdom would come from Egypt.<sup>20</sup>

That year, R. Isaac Luria came to Safed from Egypt. After the death of R. Moses Cordovero in the summer of 1570, Luria began to gather a circle of disciples. Vital initially remained aloof and only became Luria's disciple in the spring of 1571, at least nine months after Luria's arrival in Safed.<sup>21</sup> One source suggests that initially Vital, "did not value him [Luria] enough to learn from him. On the contrary, he thought himself more learned in the wisdom of the

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with expanded Introduction, *Sefer Ha-Hezyonot: Yomano shel R. Hayyim Vital*. Jerusalem: Machon Ben Zvi, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Calabrese was the family name, indicating an origin in the Calabria region of Italy. However, he is referred to as Hayyim Vital in most sources.

<sup>20</sup> B.V. 1.1 - 1.6.

<sup>21</sup> It is not certain when Luria arrived in Safed. The first significant reference to him in Safed is his participation in the funeral of R. Moses Cordovero. Vital mentions in B.V. 4.1 that his first encounter with Luria was on *Rosh Hodesh Adar* of 1571.

Kabbalah."<sup>22</sup> Ronit Meroz suggests that this relationship never an ordinary hierarchical student-teacher relationship. Vital acknowledged Luria as his teacher, but at the same time, Luria recognized the messianic potential of Vital's soul.<sup>23</sup> After joining the circle of Luria's disciples, Vital quickly asserted himself as Luria's most important disciple. Vital even claimed that Luria had only come to Safed for the purpose of teaching him.<sup>24</sup>

After Luria's death in August, 1572, Vital hoped to become his spiritual heir and successor as leader of the group of mystics that had gathered around Luria. He also endeavored to have himself accepted as the only authorized interpreter of Luria's teachings. In 1575, the long awaited year of redemption, Vital gathered around him twelve of Luria's disciples. The formation of this group may have been connected to the messianic significance of this year. When the Messiah failed to appear, the significance of the year was reinterpreted to mean that it was the beginning of the period when the advent of Messiah could be expected at any time.<sup>25</sup> The members of this group signed a document in which they pledged to study Luria's teachings only with Vital and not to divulge these teachings to outsiders.<sup>26</sup> Even Vital's teacher in exoteric studies, R. Moses Alshekh, was not deemed worthy and Vital refused to initiate him into these mysteries despite his entreaties (B.V. 1.16).

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<sup>22</sup> Ronit Meroz, "Faithful Transmission versus Innovation: Luria and his Disciples", in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After* ed. P. Schaefer and J. Dan. Tuebingen: Mohr, 1993, p. 267. How this change came about is described in M. Beneyahu, "*Toldot ha-Ari*" pp. 161-163.

<sup>23</sup> Meroz, p. 268.

<sup>24</sup> B.V., 1.7, 4.1.

<sup>25</sup> Tamar, D. "The Messianic Expectations for the Year 1575 in Italy" [Hebrew]. *Sefunot* 2 (1958): 61-88.

<sup>26</sup> Scholem, G. "The Document of Association of Luria's Disciples" [Hebrew] *Zion* 5 (1940): 131-160.

This mystical circle of disciples around Vital lasted less than two years and dissolved in 1577 when Vital left for Jerusalem, where he served as a rabbi and head of a Yeshiva. Vital not only saw himself as the heir of R. Isaac Luria in mystical wisdom, but also as the successor of R. Joseph Karo, the greatest *halakhic* authority in Safed (B.V. 2.1). In Jerusalem and later in Damascus his public teaching was restricted to exoteric studies. He desisted from teaching mystical doctrines.<sup>27</sup> In 1586, Vital returned to Safed. The reasons for this move are unclear. He remained in Safed from 1586 until 1592. He is again found in Jerusalem in 1594, acting as a rabbi of the community. According to letters published by M. Benayahu, Vital came into conflict with the leaders of the community in Jerusalem over rescinding the exemption for scholars from paying taxes. Vital opposed rescinding this long standing exemption and it aroused great enmity from the communal leadership. In the end, Vital left Jerusalem for Damascus in 1597.<sup>28</sup> He most probably remained in Damascus for the rest of his life. He served as rabbi of the Sicilian community for a time. However, his sojourn in Damascus was a time of depression and despair. It was also apparently a period of poverty.<sup>29</sup> In 1604, he again suffered a serious illness that impaired his eyesight and led to periods of blindness (B.V. 1.19). Towards the end of his life Vital assembled another group of disciples around him in Damascus. Vital died in Damascus on the first of *Iyyar* 5380 (1620), aged 77.

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<sup>27</sup> Benayahu, M. "Rabbi Hayyim Vital in Jerusalem" [Hebrew]. *Sinai* 30 (1951): 68.

<sup>28</sup> Benayahu, M. "The renewal of the polemic over the exemption of scholars from taxes in Jerusalem and the reasons for Rabbi Hayyim Vital's leaving Jerusalem for Damascus" [Hebrew]. *Asufot* 8 (1994): 241-262.

<sup>29</sup> D. Tamar, "The Greatness and Wisdom of Rabbi Hayyim Vital" [Hebrew]. *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik Jubilee Volume*. Jerusalem / New York, 1984, Vol. 2, p. 1306.

### The Sefer Hezyonot

Vital also wrote the first true autobiography by a Jewish mystic, his *Book of Visions*.<sup>30</sup> It was written for an audience of one, namely Vital himself. There is no reason to believe that he intended it to be published or read by others. Vital was disturbed that others did not give him the recognition he felt he deserved, particularly in Damascus. His desire to understand the dissonance between his inner elevated status and his external reality was the motivation that led him to write this autobiography. He redacted or wrote the final version of the *Book of Visions* during the period of 1609-1612 and that it was a response to a specific spiritual crisis.<sup>31</sup>

Why then did he commit these intimate details to writing at such a relatively late date in his life? I believe the answer is related to the two basic questions that Vital wrestled with throughout his life and which form the central motifs in this work. They are: Who was he and what was his spiritual mission? The answer Vital provides to these questions may have served as a source of solace and strength at what must have been a difficult time in his life.<sup>32</sup> He was already advanced in years, though he had been assured that he would live to the age of 100 (B.V. 3.53), his mission had not yet been accomplished, and it seemed

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<sup>30</sup> M. Oron, in her article, "Dream, Vision and Reality in Hayyim Vital's *Sefer Hezyonot*" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 10 (1992): 299-309, has demonstrated that this work should be considered an autobiography. My conclusions are similar to those of Oron. However, I have not documented each specific point of convergence.

<sup>31</sup> D. Tamar, "The Messianic Dreams and Visions of R. Hayyim Vital" [Hebrew]. *Shalem* 4 (1984): 212, suggests that it was redacted about 1610. However, there are items dated as late as 1612.

<sup>32</sup> K.J. Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p, 75, comments on Peter Abelard's autobiography that "he [Abelard] may have been the prime beneficiary of the catharsis that can lie in writing." The same sentiment may also be applied to Vital.

further from completion than ever. At the same time he was surrounded by scoffers and enemies who sought to disparage him and his activities. In the summer of 1609, he was rebuked by the angel Zadkiel who said to him:

"Now you have completely withdrawn and isolated yourself in a corner. Some people dream wondrous dreams and tell them to you. All this is from God, in order to strengthen your heart, but your heart is still undecided and you do not believe strongly in those dreams. Know that your place in Paradise is next to your teacher, the Ashkenazi, and two other *zaddiqim* of the great *Tannaim*. You are completely righteous before God, but that which I spoke of was the reason that the *zaddiq* refrained from speaking to you by means of Unifications. Your teacher is also somewhat angry with you because of this and that is why you do not dream of him as you did previously. If you will return to your work, you will undoubtedly attain all your goals. (B.V. 1.23)"

Vital had hoped to bring the final redemption that had been predicted for more than a century. His teacher, R. Isaac Luria, had tried, but ultimately failed. The mantle had fallen on Vital, but he did not seem to be succeeding and had become depressed and withdrawn. The angel Zadkiel chided him for this despair and encouraged him to return to his task. By collecting the dreams, visions and revelations that he and others had received he hoped that he would find the strength and reassurance he needed to carry on with his messianic mission to its ultimate successful completion.

### **Vital's Self Perception**

Vital reports that he had intimations in his youth, long before he met Luria that he was destined for greatness. The *Book of Visions* begins with a series of

predictions of his greatness, which began even before his birth. When he was twelve, a palmist predicted great things in his future. Not long thereafter, a heavenly messenger told his teacher in exoteric studies, R. Moses Alshekh, that he would be the successor of R. Joseph Karo. A whole series of seers and diviners all predicted great things for him. Finally, he met his true teacher, R. Isaac Luria, who confirmed the veracity of all these predictions and told Vital that he had only come into the world for the sole purpose of teaching him (B.V. 1.16). In addition to these general predictions of greatness, there are dreams, visions and other omens by Vital and others which identify him with a whole series of royal and messianic figures from Jewish history.

Vital believed the redemption to be imminent and expected it within his lifetime. A key question for him was, what would be his role in the messianic drama? He had asked his teacher this question, but Luria responded that he did not have permission from Heaven to answer it (B.V. 4.45). Thus he had to fall back on his own devices to answer this central concern that permeated his whole being.

The most important figure that Vital associated himself with was the Messiah of Joseph. He was explicitly called the Messiah of Joseph in a letter from a scholar who claimed to be the Messiah of David. He assured Vital that he would pray for him at the appropriate time and that Vital would not die as the Messiah of Joseph was supposed to, according to the Talmudic tradition.<sup>33</sup> Vital's name, Hayyim, which means "life" was assurance of this (B.V. 1.9). A resident of Damascus had a dream in which a deceased friend sends regards from heaven and assures Vital that the Messiah loves him and prays for him before God (B.V. 3.11). Vital himself had a dream in which he spoke to the Messiah (B.V. 2.2) and another in which he received a letter from the Messiah in which the Messiah

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<sup>33</sup> B. *Sukkah*, 52a.

assured him that he will soon come, but Vital must endeavor to return the people in penance as this will help the Messiah come more quickly (B.V. 2.42). Decisive for Vital's identification with the Messiah of Joseph was the kabbalistic tradition that the Messiah of Joseph was reborn in every generation, waiting for the propitious moment to be revealed. Should the Messiah - in - waiting die, the mantle was passed to another person worthy of it. Though his teacher, R. Isaac Luria, never personally claimed to be the Messiah of Joseph, this claim was made on his behalf by his disciples after his death. It was only natural that Vital would also take over this aspect of his teacher's identity.<sup>34</sup>

Vital also asserts his importance in relation to some of the great scholars of Safed, most notably R. Joseph Karo.<sup>35</sup> He reports that in his youth, Karo was told by his *maggid* that Vital would be his successor (B.V. 1.3). This prediction is fulfilled for Vital in several dreams, both in his youth and old age. The first dream he reports is one in which a wealthy man had died and the whole community, including Karo, attended his funeral. When the cantor told someone to put the deceased's *zizit* on his head, the deceased objected. All the assembled, including Karo, were powerless to do anything, until Vital compelled him to obey (B.V. 2.1). In another early dream, Vital ascends to Heaven where he has a vision of God, who tells him to sit at His right hand. Vital demurs, saying that this place had been reserved for Karo. God agreed, saying that He too had thought so originally, but had decided that Karo should sit somewhere else and Vital should sit there instead (B.V. 2.5).

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<sup>34</sup> D. Tamar collected the relevant material and demonstrates the identification of Luria and Vital with the Messiah of Joseph in his article, "The Ari and R. Hayyim Vital as the Messiah of Joseph" [Hebrew] *Sefunot* 7 (1963), pp. 169-177.

<sup>35</sup> Vital had a deeply ambivalent attitude towards Karo. Cf., R.J.Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo Lawyer and Mystic*, p. 142ff; L. Fine, "Recitation of Mishnah as a Vehicle for Mystical Inspiration: A Contemplative Technique Taught by Hayyim Vital", *Revue des Etudes Juives* 141 (1982): 193.

Vital also mentions other "signs" which point to his elevated status. One of more unusual ones is the pillar of fire. According to a story in the Lurianic hagiography of R. Shlomo Dresnitz (*Shivhei ha-Ari*), shortly before R. Moses Cordovero died, he said that whoever would see a pillar of fire over his bier would be his successor. The only one who saw it was R. Isaac Luria.<sup>36</sup> Vital has modified this tradition and now the pillar of fire is seen by others hovering over Vital himself as a sign of his greatness. He reports four different sightings by others between 1568 and 1610.<sup>37</sup> It is noteworthy that the first sighting is placed two years before he met R. Isaac Luria, implying that his greatness was not dependent on his association with Luria, but was already pre-existent.

Vital's grandiose self-estimation is only one side of his complex personality. There is also the other side which questions his ultimate ability to fulfill the messianic role he had claimed for himself. This complicated tension between success and failure can be found in his relationship to his mentor, R. Isaac Luria. Y. Liebes suggests that Luria saw himself as the reincarnation of Moses, and Vital as the reincarnation of R. Akiva. In Lurianic *Kabbalah*, R. Akiva, the personification of the Oral Torah, stands higher than Moses, the personification of the Written Torah.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Vital's task was to finish what Luria had started. Luria intimated to Vital that the latter had a messianic mission in a number of ways. He repeatedly connected Vital's soul-root with R. Akiva, and alluded to the greatness of Vital's soul numerous times without being specific, but assured him that it was from the highest sources.<sup>39</sup> Luria, who was an expert in

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<sup>36</sup> D. Tamar, "Greatness and Wisdom", p. 1300.

<sup>37</sup> B.V. 1.12, 1.26, 1.27.

<sup>38</sup> Y. Liebes, *De Natura Dei: On the Development of the Jewish Myth* in *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, p. 26f.

<sup>39</sup> This is the leitmotif of the whole fourth part of the *Book of Visions*. Of course,

metoposcopy,<sup>40</sup> saw interesting things written on Vital's forehead. Once, he saw the verse, "For whom is all Israel yearning, if not for you" (I Samuel 9:20), when Vital asked him about his soul (B.V. 4.23). On another occasion he saw, "Prepare a seat for Hezekiah, king of Judah (B.V. 4.28)."<sup>41</sup>

On the negative side of the ledger, Luria rebuked Vital seven days before his death and told him that he had done great harm to himself and to Luria by revealing Luria's teachings to others. R. Moses Alshekh had heard about Luria's teachings and had ordered Vital to tell him about them. Vital complied and as a result the number of visitors to Luria's house increased greatly, leaving Luria insufficient time to study with Vital. In addition, further harm was caused to Luria because the others were not ready for the revelation of these secrets. Luria pleaded with Vital to keep the teachings secret, but Vital would not listen, fearing that he might hinder the repentance of his colleagues. Luria died seven days after this conversation and Vital considered himself at least partially responsible, since he had not listened to Luria's injunction (B.V. 4.44). This would also explain Vital's obsessive secrecy with regard to Luria's teachings in his later years.

Closely related is another story that Vital reports about his teacher's death. When Luria was dying, he told R. Isaac ha-Cohen that if he had found only one of his disciples who was completely righteous, he would not have been taken from the world. The same point is made in two dreams that Vital reports. Luria appeared to Vital in a dream three days after his death and Vital asked him why he had died so hastily. Luria responded that it was because he had not found even

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it must be remembered that we only know this because Vital tells us that it is the case.

<sup>40</sup> On this aspect of Luria's knowledge and its importance see, L. Fine, "The Art of Metoposcopy".

<sup>41</sup> B. *Berakhot*, 28b. Hezekiah was destined to be the Messiah, but he failed to offer praise to God at a crucial point and this honor was taken away from him. Cf., *Song of Songs Rabah*, 4.8.

one disciple who was complete, as he had desired (B.V. 2.16). Three months later, Vital saw R. Moses Cordovero in a dream. Cordovero assured him that Luria's method of kabbalistic analysis was the one taught in heaven and even Cordovero studied it. When Vital asked him why Luria left the world, he received the same answer. Luria left because there was not even one *zaddiq* who was complete, as Luria had desired. Had he found him, he would not have died. (B.V. 2.17) Based on Vital's testimony, it would seem that Luria saw himself as failure in that he could not even find one disciple who could meet his standards. Not even Vital could live up to Luria's exacting standards.

Thus, Luria's premature death was attributed at least in part by Vital to his own inadequacy and lack of spiritual completeness. Vital himself says, "if we had all been completely righteous and completely repented, we would have had the power to extract all the good souls from the *kelippot* in one instant and the Messiah would have immediately come."<sup>42</sup>

### **Vital's Mission**

The ambiguity and confusion we have seen in our account of Vital's self-perception is absent when we consider his primary task. Vital sets for himself one central objective, to cause the people to repent and in this way bring on the advent of the messianic age. It is noteworthy that almost all of the material relating to the theme of repentance is from his Damascus period, while the bulk of the dreams and visions which identify him with royal or messianic figures other than the Messiah of Joseph are from earlier periods in his life. The premature death of his mentor, R. Isaac Luria, must be considered a central factor in this transformation. As long as Luria was alive, Vital could see himself as the reincarnation of R. Akiva to Luria's Moses. However, after Luria's death, the focus necessarily

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<sup>42</sup> D. Tamar, "Messiah ben Joseph", p. 115.

shifted since it was clear that Luria had not succeeded in his mission, forcing Vital to shift his own emphasis.

There are three foci in his discussions of repentance. First, that this was his primary mission. Second, reminders and rebukes for not fulfilling his mission, and third, reasons that hindered him in the performance of his task. It is significant that the only successes Vital records in his desire to preach repentance occur in his dreams, never in his waking experience. Vital was reminded in a variety of modes and by a diversity of beings that it was his mission in life to cause the people to repent. He was assured by visionaries (B.V. 1.15) and by the kings of the demons, who had been summoned by magical means, that he came to this world for the purpose of causing the people to repent and that through this the redemption will come (B.V. 1.21). Angels, similarly called by magical incantations, conveyed the same message that his mission was to return the people in repentance (B.V. 1.23, 1.28). During one period when he was preaching repentance, he dreamed that the king of Ephraim<sup>43</sup> had come in anticipation of the imminent redemption which, it is implied, would come about as a result of Vital's preaching (B.V. 2.34). In another dream, he received a letter of encouragement from the Messiah assuring him that the Messiah had already been invited to come to the land of Israel and that Vital's preaching would hasten his coming (B.V. 2.42).

Much more common are incidents, dreams and visions by Vital and others which couple Vital's need to preach repentance with rebukes to Vital for not fulfilling his task. Perhaps the most dramatic incident is the long story of the spirit that inhabited the daughter of Raphael Anav (B.V. 1.22). It is significant that the spirit, who was the sage Piso from Jerusalem, had to return to this world to atone for the sin of not preaching repentance. Vital was also told that his daughter had

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<sup>43</sup> I.e., the king of the Ten Lost Tribes.

died in a plague because he had not preached repentance (B.V. 1.23). When he asked if he would be worthy to be visited by Elijah, he was told that Elijah stopped visiting him because he stopped preaching repentance. If he would return to this task, then Elijah would return to him (B.V. 1.28). He was further reminded that the redemption depended on him and that if he did not preach willingly, he would be forced to do so (B.V. 3.33).

The variety of people who reminded him, in dreams, of his mission and rebuked him for not pursuing it adequately ranged from biblical figures like Joshua (B.V. 3.7) to recently deceased scholars like R. Samuel de Medina (1506-1589) (B.V. 3.29). He also received letters from the sages of Jerusalem asking him why he delayed preaching repentance and thereby hindered the redemption (B.V. 3.23). He was even rebuked by the kings of the demons (B.V. 3.47). Even his mentor, R. Isaac Luria, returned in a dream to rebuke him for not preaching to the people and for being arrogant about his wisdom (B.V. 3.8).

Vital's responded to these rebukes by complaining that he was hindered in the performance of his mission because the people of Damascus would not listen to his preaching and would not heed his message. They were rebuked by the kings of the demons for their lack of attention to Vital's message. They were even threatened with losing their share in the world to come (B.V. 1.21). R. Joshua Altif dreamed that the king had decreed the destruction of the Jews of Damascus because they did listen to Vital (B.V. 3.58). In other dreams they were threatened with financial ruin (B.V. 3.53, 3.63) and black hail if they did not harken to Vital and his message (B.V. 3.50). Even a plague, which ravaged Damascus, was blamed on the people's indifference to Vital (B.V. 3.45).

Vital's difficulties were not only with the Jews of Damascus as a whole, but even extended to the congregants of the Sicilian synagogue, whose rabbi he had been for a time. The wife of the beadle of the synagogue had a dream which tells much about Vital's relationship with his own congregation. She dreamed that

people were preparing for Vital's return as rabbi of the synagogue, indicating that he had previously been fired. Vital entered the synagogue accompanied by a large retinue. Tellingly, the section where Vital and his guests were seated was richly appointed, but the rest of the synagogue was crumbling and in disrepair. When the community was summoned, only one or two people came. The sages who had accompanied Vital left when they saw that the community had not come, threatening the community with destruction as they departed. Vital also left, followed by the beadle's wife. In the courtyard, she saw a kettle of boiling pitch. She was informed that this was for scalding the Sicilian community because they would not take Rabbi Hayyim back as their rabbi (B.V. 3.49).

This dream was probably an accurate reflection of Vital's difficulty in even maintaining his position as the rabbi of a small synagogue. Vital's constant complaints about the people of Damascus and their lack of positive response to his message supports this view. It is only in his dreams that Vital was a successful preacher who persuaded his listeners to repent. It would also explain his depression and the need for constant prodding from the heavenly messengers that he should fulfill his mission of preaching repentance.

This study of R. Isaac Luria and his disciple R. Hayyim Vital shows that true charisma is a form of leadership that cannot be created or willed into being. At the same time, it is very difficult to hide it when one has been blessed with it. It is, as the commonplace has it, a gift from God that has no rational explanation.