

# THE KABBALIST.

Extract begins on page 35 of the Dutch text.

*Tsfat\** 1563. Winter (*Jewish calendar: 5323*)

וַיֵּלֶךְ Vav Hej Vav: **The God who travels in past, present and future**

It wasn't murder, he told himself, but an accident. A regrettable accident. It was his father who had brought the issue to a head, not he. He left his father in peace with his obsessive devotion to the Torah. Why couldn't his father let him study alchemy? It was as clear as day that alchemy described the secrets of life far more concretely than the Torah. Alchemy provided formulae, recipes, guidebooks. It was a practical science that could be tested experimentally.

But that Torah of his father's. The only certainty it offered was that nothing was certain. There was absolutely no consensus on the shortest verse in the five Books of Moses. For centuries, rabbis had been writing commentary after commentary in their endless discussions of what exactly was meant in the Bible. There was no way of establishing how far you had developed as a person. Perhaps that was why everyone attempted to outdo one another by writing the thickest books with the vaguest interpretations. His father, too, had thrown himself into the centuries' old tradition with abandonment. He prided himself on the recognition and esteem his books brought him.

But that was not enough for Chaim. Chaim wanted concrete answers. Chaim wanted to know how life worked. What the meaning of existence was. Whether there was life after death. Whether life was random. Whether it was possible to manipulate life. And more than anything, if God existed, then who He was. He wanted a real-life

relationship with Him. Man to man. After all, he was created in His image, wasn't he? Well, then, he wanted him to show himself instead of hiding in unfathomable lines of the Bible that left so much room for interpretation. He wanted God to see him as His equal.

Wasn't it his father who time after time sought confrontation? Who, like an annoying terrier, refused to let go and wanted to drag him by the scruff of the neck back to the Torah. How often had Chaim made it clear to him that this was a lost cause? Now, in the three years he had been studying alchemy, Chaim had already gained more insight into answers than in all the years he had obediently attended Torah classes.

What did he care that the whole town lamented the fact he had strayed from the path of the Torah? In that respect, Tsfat was a village. Everyone kept an eye on everyone else. Everyone tried, above all, not to walk out of step, so as not to lose his so fiercely defended place in society. Because you were also dependent on each other for business. You bought from each other, worked with each other, shared contacts with each other. That's why they shared the same belief, the same rituals, the same synagogues.

For his own part, however, Chaim chose to go against the flow. He did make friends with the Muslims while the other Jews endeavoured to keep the contact as businesslike as possible. An Arab friend had given him an alchemistic book to read. That book had changed his life. His mind reeled from the book's insight and promises. The day he was able to make gold, his human nature would also be transformed into the characteristics of gold. He would be immortal, possess all wisdom and wealth, he would have achieved the perfection of his soul.

The more emphatically his father condemned him as a heretic engaged in diabolic practices, the more determined he became to achieve results. It became a race with his father. One day, he would astonish him with his insight and results. He would prove the Torah was a dead-end and the true answers lay in alchemy. He kept a detailed report of his experiments. He dreamed of writing the ultimate alchemistic work that

would serve as a guidebook for humanity. Nobody would talk about his father's heavy tomes any more. Alchemy would render the Torah superfluous. An old-fashioned, primitive way of thinking was how people would brand the Torah. Well-intentioned, but naive, terribly naive.

His father became furious when Chaim spoke of the Torah and Judaism like that. He found it unbearable that his son denied his roots. That he disputed everything his father lived for and believed in.

Chaim's father hoped this stroll in the hills around Tsfat would bring him closer to his son. Perhaps he would remember the walks they had taken when he was still a child. When his word was still law. Perhaps he would remember how his father had instilled in him an awe of nature. Of the perfection of the Creation in which God had provided for everything mankind needed. How everything maintained a mutual balance and made sense. But it seemed as if all his words at that time had been poured into a bucket with no bottom. There was no memory with which he could breach the walls Chaim had raised. The only response was arrogant laughter.

When it started to snow heavily, they had sought shelter in the grotto where, legend had it, Shimon Bar Yochai, the famed Kabbalist, had hidden for thirteen years from the Romans, who had condemned him to death. The security of the grotto appeared to briefly thaw the chill between father and son. The father had even thought he had reached his son when he dwelt on his reverence for the Kabbalah. Chaim simply had a predilection for mysticism. If he no longer saw any magic in the literal Torah, perhaps the study of the hidden meanings in the five sacred books could lead him back to the fold? Although you were supposed to be forty before you were accepted by a Kabbalah teacher, his father had sufficient influence for an exception to be made for his son. But the father had climbed this ladder of hope too quickly. Chaim saw the manipulative promises he was trying to tempt him with. Didn't that man ever give up? Couldn't he ever simply tell him something without the underlying motive of converting him? The obstinate belief that he was right exasperated him.

It wasn't murder. It was an accident, a regrettable accident. That was how he explained it when, out of breath, he reached Tsfat. No-one had doubted his word. An expedition had immediately left to retrieve the body of the respected Torah writer. Chaim had only shared his secret with his mother. A fateful indiscretion he would regret forever. Never again would Chaim share his secret with anyone. It was an accident. Surely there was no reason why he should pay for an unfortunate accident for the rest of his life? He was a promising young man and this tragic accident should not be allowed to cast a shadow on his future.

*Tsfat 1570. Summer, seven years later (Jewish calendar: 5330)*

מתי Mem Chet Yud **The God who cast you in a favourable light**

His name was Chaim Vital, son of the famous Torah commentator Yosef Vital. He was a handsome young man of twenty-five with a good set of brains. He spent all his spare time studying the Kabbalah. Each morning at three o'clock, along with nine other men, he followed the lessons of the great Kabbalah master Cordovero. As Chaim was always the first, he looked after the keys. When he opened the lock of the synagogue, it was just as if his heart opened. He loved to pray for a while in the total darkness and silence. Only then did he light the candles and tidy up the bare study to the right of the hall. Chaim was the youngest student Cordovero had ever admitted to his lessons. The other nine students were at least forty. Forty was the age at which men were thought to be mature enough to begin studying the Kabbalah. By that time, they had been able to build up a career and find a good wife and the children were old enough to no longer demand their full attention. At the age of forty, you had time and room to devote yourself to spiritual matters.

Chaim was the target of envy and malicious gossip in Tsfat. Many Kabbalah students felt they had more right to a place on Cordovero's

benches. Grey-haired old men who could have been Chaim's grandfather and had already been studying the Kabbalah for decades had to sit back and watch this stripling evidently being treated as wiser than they.

It was quite plain how far people thought you had advanced in your Kabbalistic study. There was a clear hierarchy in teachers in Tsfat and nobody disputed the fact that Cordovero sat enthroned at the top of that ladder. Cordovero chose ten students who, in turn, gave lessons themselves. The closer your teacher was to Cordovero in the circle surrounding him or, in the very best case, if he was a direct student, the higher the regard in which you were held. Every student was exalted in the esteem his teacher enjoyed.

Chaim had worked his way up through patient study with inferior teachers. He carefully selected one teacher after another until he was receiving instruction from old Zimra, one of Cordovero's students. By excelling with him, he hoped that Zimra would mention his name to the teacher he admired most; one day he would be able to drink straight from the source that would quench his thirst. But the vain world-traveller Zimra never mentioned Chaim's name. Zimra only talked about himself.

In the meantime, therefore, Chaim did all he could to turn up in Cordovero's vicinity. He visited the same synagogues, bought from the same shops and walked bare-footed in the hills where he knew Cordovero also walked unshod. On one of those walks, Chaim had dared address the great teacher.

'Master Cordovero,' Chaim came straight to the point, 'I long so to make God's acquaintance. They say you know how I can meet him'.

Cordovero could not help but smile at the desperate young man who so longed for God's knowledge. He recognized himself in the restless temperament that had led him, too, at age twenty, to begin his study of the Kabbalah. It was as if I slept until the age of twenty, he had once said. Not a single thought I had then was of any use to me.

'Young man,' he replied, 'until the moment you sprang from behind that tree, I did not know you, though you knew me. From now on you will

be in my thoughts because you sought me. When I talk to my wife in a little while over supper about other affairs, that does not mean you cease to exist. In that same way we also always exist in God's thoughts'.

'In other words, it suffices to attract his attention,' cried Chaim, full of hope.

'Or vice versa,' said Cordovero, his eyes shining. 'Perhaps it was God who sprang from behind a tree to attract your attention. God exists in all things and all things exist in God. But he only comes alive when you seek him. Then you realise he has been within you always, waiting until you wanted to meet him'.

Cordovero had spontaneously offered to allow the young man to attend his lessons. To Zimra's fury.

'You are making a terrible mistake, Cordovero. That Chaim is no good. The day will come that you regret having let that sycophant into your class. The same day that people will worship me as the long-awaited Messiah,' Zimra had pathetically cried.

From that moment onwards, the self-satisfied world-traveller had severed all contact with Cordovero and become one of his most scathing opponents. Chaim took no notice. The position Zimra vacated was filled by Chaim. He was the happiest young man in Tsfat. He walked through town with his head held high and the derision slid from him like a gentle rain shower in March.

This morning, Chaim was even more eager to learn than usual. Cordovero was devoting attention to one of the basic principles of the Kabbalah: conquering egoism.

'It is good to develop your egoism as far as possible. After all, a man's nature is corrected by analysing his egoism. A Kabbalist has no desires. No, what I mean is, almost by definition, he has many desires. The aim is for us to transform the intention of those desires'.

Cordovero, who was known as the most lucid Kabbalah teacher, had not succeeded in making himself clear. Whichever theorem he attempted

to advance, it remained awkward fumbling. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead as he tried one more time.

'But Rabbi Cordovero,' Chaim interrupted, 'surely a desire remains a desire, regardless of the intention it is founded on? My desire, for instance, is to become the greatest Kabbalistic writer of all time. How can I transform that longing?'

Joshua, a jewel-laden silversmith and Chaim's half-brother, sighed loudly to express his irritation. He hated the fact that Chaim never missed a chance to draw attention to the commentary he was writing on the Zohar, the Kabbalistic bible, Shimon Bar Yochai's masterpiece.

'I assume your intention to become the greatest writer is egoistical,' replied Cordovero, 'as you wish to become famous and admired'.

'That, too,' admitted Chaim, 'but primarily because I want the Kabbalah to be known by as many people as possible'.

'So it doesn't matter whether your name is on the book or not?' asked Cordovero.

Caught out, Chaim laughed.

'Yes, of course I want people to know I wrote it'.

'And that serves only one interest: yours. The essence of your desire is to write the most wonderful Kabbalah book. A book that teaches mankind the laws of the universe. That is an altruistic longing. The desire to pass on the knowledge you yourself have received'.

'And the more knowledge I receive, the more I can pass on,' added Chaim. 'So that is what you mean by saying a Kabbalist has such great desires'.

'Very good, Chaim. There is nothing wrong with the urge to receive infinitely from life. But the source of joy in that receiving dries up when we stop giving. Nothing we receive thereafter will fill the emptiness of our hearts. The universal principle is to selflessly give without expecting anything in return'.

'So I shouldn't ask for any payment for that book?' asked Chaim.

'If you can find anyone willing to lay out money for a book by Chaim Vital,' Joshua interjected. There were no two greater opposites imaginable than Chaim and his brother. Joshua was twenty years older and couldn't stand his 'illegitimate' little brother. The excessive attention their father lavished on Chaim had been a thorn in Joshua's side.

The class tapped their spoons against their coffee cups in agreement. They were grateful to Joshua for finally putting that boaster in his place. Joshua gave a triumphant drum roll with his hands on the table. But Chaim himself awaited his master's reply, unmoved.

Cordovero wearily closed his eyes. He stroked his black beard and his laboured, heavy breathing echoed off the light-blue walls. Through the coloured windowpanes fell the first light of the pale yellow sun, rising behind the hill.

'It is written in the Torah of everything God created, 'And God saw that it was good'. Except when he made man. Why do you think that was?'

'This question is, of course, child's play for our famous author, Chaim Vital,' Joshua broke the expectant silence. 'Perhaps, in the next lesson, he can surprise us with a lecture on the subject?'

'What a coincidence. I was just about to suggest that myself, Joshua. Not without with the consent of our master, naturally,' said Chaim, unaffected by Joshua's attempt to ridicule him.

'I put my trust in you, Chaim. My mind is not clear today. I feel a little short of breath. Next time, if God wills it, I will take your place'.

The bombardment of jealous looks and thoughts fired at him was lost on Chaim. Surely Cordovero meant it ironically?

'Every teacher teaches what he himself has to learn. Our souls gather here each morning because it is predestined. Now, I am your master. But in a life to come I may be Chaim's student. The role we play with each other here on earth is of no consequence. There will come a day, perhaps not so far in the future, that my soul leaves the earth'.

'What do you mean?' asked Schlomo, one of Cordovero's most devoted students, who attempted to provide for his wife and himself by making paintings. 'You aren't sick are you? Can we do anything for you? Shall I open the windows for a minute and let some fresh air in?'

'You're only forty-eight. It's a little premature to start prophesying your death already,' Joshua flattered him.

'Immediately after my death, someone will take my place,' Cordovero said, ignoring their remarks. 'Much of what he pronounces will be the opposite of what you have learned from me. But you are not to contradict your new master. What he teaches you comes from the same source where I find my knowledge and that source is the absolute truth. His soul is a spark of Shimon Bar Yochai's soul. The divinely inspired author of the Zohar himself will be instructing you. Oh, I wish I could experience it myself. Take heed, he who opposes him opposes the spreading of the divine knowledge itself'.

All the students were thinking the same thing. He was talking about Chaim. Their worst nightmare was coming true. The student they would rather have cast from the steps of the synagogue was to become their new teacher. What an ordeal that would be!

'What is his name?' asked Joshua in an unctuous tone. Although he feared the answer, he wanted to know for certain whether his qualms were justified.

'I cannot tell you that. He does not want his identity to be known now'.

Chaim blushed. He, too, surmised that Cordovero meant him. He felt the resentful glances of his classmates. A mysterious silence seemed the only correct response, he felt. Let them guess whether it is I who wish to remain anonymous, he chuckled to himself.

Cordovero ignored the silent struggle that had broken out in his class. He looked at his students one by one. They watched suspiciously to see whether he let his gaze rest longer on one or another. They all

regarded him with utmost devoutness. All dreamed of taking their master's place.

'Humility is the most important characteristic of a man who has attained knowledge,' continued Cordovero, looking straight at Chaim. 'How we treat one another as people is a reflection of our spiritual development'.

Now he looked at Joshua. 'Look into your heart and see whether you curse anyone, speak evil of anyone, wish anyone ill. Wisdom is expressed in such simple things as a genuine smile, a warm greeting, a gesture of sympathy for our enemies. Look at the sun rising behind the hills. There is no reason why it should do so day after day. It is a gift. A kindly gift from the Creator. And to live in harmony with Him, he summons us, in our turn, to bring kindness into the world'.

Joshua bowed his head sullenly.

'The only other thing I can tell you about my successor is that he will reveal himself in a cloud at my funeral'.

No one understood what Cordovero meant. Not even Chaim.

Unless it was the cloud in which he left the synagogue, as his dream of one day becoming the most respected Kabbalist in the world today seemed slightly nearer.

### 3   היי   Hey Yud Yud: **The God who knows all your ways**

Chaim threw the Zohar into the corner of his room and scattered his notes. That day, he had reported himself sick to Abraham, his boss at the weavers where he tinted the wool in big dye baths.

Tsfat, which lay on a hill in Northern Galilee, was renowned far and wide for its luxurious fabrics. They had brought the town great wealth. The Spanish Jews had introduced the professional craft of tailoring into Tsfat. Many of them had secretly studied the Zohar in Spain. When given

the choice of converting to Christianity and leaving the country, they chose for the latter. They sought a new future in the little town near the grave of Shimon Bar Yochai, their hero, their help and stay. Of the ten thousand Jews populating Palestine at that moment, no fewer than six thousand lived in Tsfat.

And so a Jewish quarter was created that flourished not only materially but also spiritually. On the corner of every street were schools where instruction was given in the Torah or the Kabbalah.

The Jews lived and worked peacefully amongst the Muslims, who governed the entire Ottoman Empire and therefore Tsfat. The Turkish governor, Abu Siffin, ruled over the Jews and Muslims with a firm but fair hand. People respected each other's beliefs and traded with one another. Tsfat was a paradise for all those who had practised their belief in secret in Spain.

Dying fabric was a humble job, as befitted a Kabbalist. Chaim hired his body out to Abraham, who gave him money in return, enabling him to sustain himself. During his working hours, he was as devoted to his work as he was to the Kabbalah in his spare time. If someone he knew passed while he was drying the skeins of wool, then he did not greet him. Every minute he took from his employer was theft. Chaim was fanatical in his endeavours to live every moment of the day in harmony with the laws of the universe.

This was, therefore, the first time he had let his employer down. He had pretended to have a terrible headache. Abraham, a shrewd but honest businessman, had no reason at all to doubt Chaim's headache and told him to go home.

The universe then gave Chaim exactly what he had asked for: a headache. His intention to use this day to solve the riddle of why God, when he created man, did not say that "he saw that it was good," was prompted by a desire for fame and honour. He had wanted to astonish his master at the next morning lesson with a brilliant explanation. He wanted to prove he would be a worthy successor of Cordovero when he was no

longer there. But he found no answer in the Zohar. It seemed as if the letters hid within themselves and the text only became more obscure. Gibberish. Written by a madman.

Sullenly, he went and sat at the window and bit listlessly into an apple. From his room he had a view of a large part of the Jewish quarter. He saw the merchants in the narrow, twisting streets busy unloading their wares on women gesturing frantically that the price was far too high. His modest job meant Chaim never had much to spend and he was adept at haggling. But he didn't need much, either. This simple room on the second floor was his refuge. A bed, a sturdy table at which he both studied and ate, and his books and numerous sheets of paper containing his notes, kept in a cabin trunk. That was his fortune.

Chaim's thoughts drifted unconsciously to the famed palmist he had visited when he was just fourteen. Even then he was already aware that he wanted to become someone exceptional. Someone who made a difference in this world.

The Egyptian palmist, who was known throughout Tsfat for his skill, stroked his podgy fingers over the lines in his boyish hand. His warm breath blew over the clammy palms, whose trembling he endeavoured to conceal. It was dark in his room and he brought his face close to Chaim's when he spoke, "The lines in your left hand are the paths that are mapped out at your birth. The route of your life along lanes of wealth or poverty, success or failure. The lines in your right hand are the paths you yourself have chosen."

He carefully compared the two hands, even measuring the lengths of some lines with a ruler. Chaim tried to tear his eyes away from the festering sores on his thick lips that held such an endless fascination for him "This line," he said, dragging his dirty fingernail along the line that started between thumb and forefinger and ran towards the wrist, "is the life line. It maps out the course of your life. You can see there is a split early on in your life in this line. Over the next few years, thoughts will

enter your heart that will prevent you from studying the Torah. For three years you will put aside the books of Moses".

That prediction had come true. At the age of fifteen, a defiance had suddenly awakened within him of everything that was Jewish. The alchemistic book his Arab friend had given him had set him aflame. It described the mystic way of brewing the eternal elixir of life. It was exactly what his innermost soul cried out for. He knew this life concealed secrets that only unveiled themselves to those who devoted themselves entirely to them. He had an intense longing to become one of those initiates. He abandoned himself to his study of the secret language of alchemy. His father had been first furious, then desperate, then sad and finally deeply disappointed. His son, who from a tender age had shown an unusual aptitude for the study of the Torah, was now wandering in a heathen maze, in which his soul seemed lost without recall.

Three years later, however, precisely as the palmist had predicted, that tragic accident had occurred. Chaim had become convinced the forces he was studying were turning against him. All his experiments failed. The alchemistic symbols beset him in his nightmares. He sought solace with his brother Joshua, who was faithfully treading the path of the torah in the footsteps of their father. Flattered by his little brother's admiration, Joshua shared the Kabbalistic secrets he had just learned. He introduced him to the teacher he himself had started with. Even more fanatically than he had studied alchemy, Chaim proceeded to throw himself into this new love, as if he had to make up the three lost years. As if he could bring his father back to life with the Kabbalah.

But the palmist had made another terrifying prediction. He shook his head worriedly and loudly sniffed up the yellow mucus that was slowly dripping from his nose.

'Do you see this fork in your line?' he asked.

Chaim could clearly see how the lifeline separated, split into two ways.

'The point on your lifeline under your middle finger is the age of thirty-five. Your intersection is situated around the age of twenty-five. That's extremely unusual. With most people you only see that split when they are forty. It means that two paths reveal themselves to you; one path leads to hell, the other to paradise. The choice will be yours. If you choose the short path to hell there will be no more evil person on this earth than you. Then you will die young. If you choose the path to paradise, then you will rise to the highest level of wisdom imaginable for a man'.

So now he was twenty-five. And according to the prediction he would have to choose again between two paths. The only thing was, he saw no sign indicating that crossroads.

His sole passion was fathoming the Zohar. Writing his comments that would reveal the meaning of the Zohar to mankind. That had become his elixir of life. That was how he would achieve immortality. Because, to his surprise, he had discovered that both alchemy and the Kabbalah believed in the eternity of mankind.

The sun had already completed its descent behind the hills. Chaim picked up his book and sat back down at the table.

He wanted to prove himself by unriddling the accursed passage. The few verses that had given him such a splitting headache. But he was wandering, lost in a forest of impenetrable lines.

His heart remained as dark as the starry firmament that cast its meagre illumination on him, and he nodded off.

He was awakened by knocking at the door. It was Anna, his landlady. She lived on the ground floor. On the first floor she had her tarot reading practice. All day long there was a coming and going of mainly women, seeking support from Anna in their love problems. Anna was the perfect listener. She gave the women exactly the advice they wanted to hear. But Anna had one bad habit. She was never able to keep the secrets that were entrusted to her. If you had confided your heartache to her, you could be almost sure your love troubles would be the subject of

conversation at the early market the next day. Once, when she had read the cards for Chaim, she had laughed, 'What's this? I see you're going to marry a certain Anna. Well, you'll have to court me a bit harder, then'. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Chaim had thought, but I'd rather die a bachelor. Although Anna had a pretty, open face, her slovenly appearance did not exactly make her a woman with whom a man could compel admiration if she appeared on his arm. Anna looked pityingly at the battlefield in his room.

'So, been having a nice time writing again?'

Chaim shrugged.

'There was an old man at the door for you'.

'An old man?'

'Had you hoped it would be a girl? Most girls aren't so keen on bookworms, Chaim. It was a tramp, I think. He said you have to go over to your master Cordovera's house as quickly as possible'.

'Now? Tonight?'

'Yes, straight away'.

Chaim started. He had never been to his master's house.

'I'll go straight over'.

'I'd tidy myself up a bit first if I were you. You look a bit ruffled. And on Shabbat!' Giving him a brilliant smile, which sparkled all the more due to the gap between her front teeth, she shut the door.

She can talk, he chuckled to himself.

Chaim had not realised that the sun had gone down and the sabbath had begun. On their weekly day of rest all the inhabitants of Tsfat dressed in their finest. As the town consisted of a melting pot of immigrants from all over Europe and Arabia, to the passing traveller it resembled a Venetian carnival.

Chaim looked in the mirror and saw the red creases of his ruffled collar in his face. She was right, he couldn't go out like that. He was a proud young man. His work in the textile workshop meant he could have his clothes tailored from the finest fabrics at cost price. He quickly

undressed and washed his handsome, manly countenance with a jug of cool water. He tidied his luxuriant mop of brown curls, put a comb through his red-brown beard and slid the freshly starched shirt with its stiff ruff over his well-built torso. Chaim pulled on his silk stockings and then his royal blue knee britches over the top. He regarded himself contentedly while donning his hat with the narrow damask edging. He danced down the stairs, his shiny black shoes with bow-tie ribbons clattering.

Deborah, his master's hunchbacked wife, opened the door to Chaim with red-rimmed eyes.

'How did you get here so quickly, Chaim? How did you know?'

'Anna gave me the message'.

'Oh, yes, of course, Anna...' sighed the woman.

'You'll have to wait a while, Chaim. I'm sure you'll understand.'

'Yes, of course'.

Even if Chaim had had to wait all Shabbat, he would have done it without hesitating. He took a seat on a chair in the hallway. Now and again he heard terrible sobbing coming from one of the rooms and wondered what the matter was. Hopefully the sorrow had nothing to do with his visit.

It was not until several hours later that he was fetched by Cordovero's wife. She led him upstairs and took him into the simple bedroom where the master seemed sunk in a deep sleep. The room was sparsely lit by two candles. When she shut the door behind her, Cordovero awoke.

He seemed to come from another galaxy. Groggily, he looked around the room as if wondering where he was. But when he saw Chaim he was suddenly wide awake. His eyes began to shine and he hummed a cheerful tune.

'Come closer, dear friend,' he said, patting the bed. 'Sit down'.

It was the first time Cordovero had called him friend. Chaim felt intensely happy and knew something was going to happen today that would change his life. Perhaps Cordovero was going to ask him to be his assistant, in preparation for that far-off, glorious day when he would inherit his master's chair and reputation. His heart thumping in anticipation, Chaim sat down.

'When you sprang from behind that tree, you asked me how you could meet God. The same question Moses asked God himself when he spoke to him from the burning bush. Do you know what God replied?'

'That no one could look upon his face, only his back,' said Chaim, proud of knowing the Kabbalistic answer.

'Exactly,' smiled Cordovero, 'because you can only see God once he has passed. God always travels incognito. If you look back on what has happened to you in your life, only then do you see God's hand in it all. Then you see the blessing in your misfortune'.

'And yet, I really wish to see God's face,' Chaim answered resolutely.

'Chaim,' asked Cordovero earnestly, 'answer me honestly and sincerely: have you ever heard of Rabbi Isaac Luria?'

Chaim paled. Oh God, he thought, my master thinks that I'm untrue to him. Naturally he had heard of Rabbi Isaac Luria. There was no one more talked-about in Tsfat than he. Surely Cordovero hadn't caught a wild rumour that Chaim associated with that Isaac. He had arrived with his family from Egypt three months previously. Nothing unusual in itself; Tsfat was a gathering place for all Jews studying the Kabbalah. It was a coming and going of rabbis, who studied for a while and sometimes, in turn, set up small study groups themselves. Tsfat's permanent residents looked down rather on these pilgrims. Their knowledge of the Kabbalah was generally sparse and, just when they seemed to understand a spark of the true teachings, they thought they had received all wisdom and returned to their birthplace. The lowliest of students in Tsfat was probably a hero in his motherland. But the real Kabbalists stayed in Tsfat. They knew there was no place on earth where they could better complete the continual process of development and correction than there.

Unlike those mostly anonymous immigrants, Rabbi Isaac Luria had quickly become a much talked-about man. That was his own fault. He had had the arrogance to immediately approach Cordovero with the request to receive instruction from him. That was nonsense, of course. No beginner would think of wanting to study with the very greatest. Even if he had the

pure luck to attend a lesson, he wouldn't understand a word of it! It would be like finding yourself in an advanced course in Arabic. The level at which Cordovero taught was the very highest imaginable and only intended for a small, select group of students.

Chaim had therefore been amazed when he heard that Cordovero had agreed to his request. He couldn't understand it. He had been forced to throw himself ostentatiously into the limelight to win his place in Cordovero's group, but a perfect stranger, an Egyptian, was granted an audience with him within a day?

'Rabbi Isaac Luria, you say? Certainly I've heard of him,' Chaim replied with a sneer. He laughed heartily, to make it quite clear to his master what he thought of this Luria.

'Who hasn't heard of him? All of Tsfat is talking about him. They even claim he asked you for private lessons'.

'That's correct,' said Cordovero. 'And what do you think about that?'

'Brilliant, master. Like you, I get so irritated with all these immigrants walking around Tsfat with an air as if they wrote the Zohar themselves! By making Isaac look foolish you can set an example to all these pseudo Kabbalists'.

'What do you mean by that?' asked Cordovero.

His master wanted to test him. What he had to do now was formulate the right answer in a precise and well-considered manner. He ran his fingers pensively through his curls.

'It's so conceited, master,' began Chaim. 'We all know the study of the Kabbalah is a slow process where each pupil receives exactly that which is one rung above him. I, myself, have done nothing more for the past seven years than illuminate my dark soul with the Zohar. I was lucky. I grew up in this town and therefore, with each breakthrough in my study, I again found the next teacher who could take me one rung higher. And so I finally became your student. Everyone in Tsfat and the whole world knows there is no higher level possible. So it's absurd to imagine that someone who has grown up in far-off Egypt, far removed from all the

knowledge and teachers our town boasts, could possibly have climbed the same ladder'.

Chaim was warming to his theme and declaimed his words like profound verses. 'The Kabbalah is an experience. Like carob. You can describe what carob is to someone in the smallest detail, but unless you have actually tasted and experienced it you still know nothing. Isaac is probably caught up in some blind delusion. I would say that, like everyone else, he should start off with lessons from students of students of your students. Then he will come in at a level he can comprehend'.

Cordovero coughed. He had weak lungs and everyone who knew him was accustomed to his heavy breathing, rattling and sniffing. Chaim took his coughing as an encouragement and went even further, hoping to please his master.

'Anyone who really lives according to the Kabbalah treats his fellow man with the same respect and love with which one would treat the Creator himself. A real Kabbalist does not indulge in navel gazing. If he had really developed so far as to be worthy of your lessons, then he would have known that it is not the student who seeks the master, but the master who seeks his students'.

Cordovero simply raised one eyebrow. Reason for Chaim to correct his course.

'To be honest, master, I'm not interested in all that gossip going round about you and him. My study is the only thing I live for and it demands all my strength and attention. I haven't got time to concern myself with all those foreigners who visit our town, let alone all the gossip that many people find so entertaining.

Cordovero let a fatherly gaze rest on Chaim. For a while he said nothing. Then he asked, 'And how is your study progressing, Chaim?'

Chaim looked deep into his soul and decided to answer Cordovero frankly.

'I feel like an onion, master. Layer by layer the egoism of my soul is laid bare. Sometimes I seem blind to egoistical cravings that are so fused

with my character. As if I only recognise them years later; for instance I always put my right shoe on first and then my left. These are ingrained habits you no longer notice because they seem so natural. Luckily, though, the Zohar is a bitter but effective medicine. It is a book whose every page reveals your true nature like a magic mirror. Sometimes I want to dash that mirror to pieces. Then I hate to have to behold that mirror image of myself. But then I realise: it's not the mirror image I hate, but myself. It reflects my imperfect soul in its crippled state...'

Cordovero nodded. What he had just described was the *via dolorosa* of every soul walking the path of the Kabbalah. A path of desperation and euphoria.

Then it was quiet for some time. Only Cordovero's scratchy breathing was audible in the stuffy little windowless room. Chaim was burning with curiosity as to why he had been summoned. However honoured he might have felt, at the same time it was strange to be sitting on his master's bed as if he were visiting a sick friend. Cordovero was quite pale, but he didn't really look ill.

'Well, I've been finding it difficult to concentrate, master, since knowing what a heavy task rests on my shoulders,' said Chaim, setting the cat amongst the pigeons. 'Naturally I understood that you were referring to me when you spoke of your successor. It is tempting, but I'm not entirely sure I've progressed far enough'.

He looked at the peaceful face of his master, who appeared to be deep in thought, his eyes closed. Suddenly, the eyelids opened and two glowing coals threw him a fiery look.

'You are a fool, Chaim. You are the biggest fool I know'.

Chaim slid from the bed in shock. He regarded his master uncomprehendingly. He scabbled from the floor to his feet and Cordovero grabbed his hand and pulled him close up to his face. 'I want you to study under Rabbi Isaac Luria,' he whispered.

Chaim stared at him in amazement for a few seconds, then burst out laughing. His master had to be joking. The predestined successor take

lessons from an absolute beginner! But Cordovera continued to gaze at him impassively.

'What did you say? You can't mean it! What have I done wrong? May I no longer be your student?'

'I want you to do as I tell you, Chaim'.

'But master, am I so stupid that I have to go back to the level of a beginner again? Do you think I'm not making enough progress? That I don't study hard enough? Tell me what I have to do! Just as long as I can remain your student!'

'The only thing you have to do is follow my order'.

Chaim's world disintegrated. He fell to his knees by the bed and begged, 'But I've always been true to you, haven't I? In everything. If you ordered us to study the following chapter, then I prepared the following three. I've devoted my entire life to you. Why do you renounce me now? Why do you want me to follow the teachings of a charlatan?'

Cordovero sat up in bed and spoke more powerfully than Chaim had ever heard him.

'You cannot imagine how short-sighted you are, Chaim. I want you to go to Rabbi Isaac without delay. Stop everything you're doing. Leave everything in the world and go and meet him. This is not a request, Chaim, this is an order'.

Cordovero sank back into the pillows as a sign that the discussion was over. Chaim could tell by Cordovero's blank expression that it made no sense to argue any longer.

Without saying goodbye, he left the house. He was bewildered. He had hoped to receive a special favour from his master, but instead he had been thrown out. His nostrils quivered in disbelief. The brilliant future he had seen for himself lay in ruins. How they would gossip about him.

'Have you heard about Chaim? The conceited idiot who though he was mature enough to learn from the great Cordovero? He's been kicked out! Cordovero has sent him to that Egyptian, Isaac Luria! Can you humiliate anyone more than that? Poor Chaim...'

A beautiful, promising evening had suddenly become a hell.

Translated by Roz Vatter-Buck

**Extract begins on page 101 of the Dutch text**

Under the scorching sun, Chaim heaved the wool vigorously to and fro through the drum filled with red dye.

The deep Turkish red was made from the crushed roots of the madder plant or *rubia tinctorum*. The dyestuff was particularly expensive because the process of reducing the roots of the plant to a red powder required hard and intensive labour and since it was believed that the root would lose some of its magnificent colour in daylight everything had to be done during the hours of darkness.

Chaim wrung out each strand of wool once all the fibres had been soaked in the deep red pigment. The more wool he could dye with a single drum the higher the profits for Abraham. Chaim enjoyed his work. It was a craft that used up a great deal of his physical energy and that helped relax his mind.

Just as he was about to plunge a fresh bale of wool into the drum, Francesca suddenly appeared in front of him and threw herself into his dye-stained arms.

'Please hold me tight, Chaim,' she sobbed. 'For the first time and the last.'

She was shivering and although it was considered improper Chaim embraced her firmly and tried to calm her.

'What's wrong? What's upsetting you like this?'

Fatima, the Moorish seamstress who was sewing on buttons at a nearby table, stood up and went inside, taking her work with her. They were alone.

'My father insists I marry Yehuda.'

'Yehudah? Karo's son? But isn't he...'

'I won't do it, Chaim. You're the one I love. From the moment I set eyes on you.'

Fatima had returned for her scissors and scurried back inside when she heard Francesca's words.

'I think about you too, Francesca, a lot...,' was the only clumsy thing Chaim could think of saying.

'There's only one way out, Chaim. We have to get engaged, right this minute.'

Chaim pulled himself loose from their embrace. He held her hands and said: 'You and me, engaged? But how?'

'It is written in the laws of Moses and Israel that a man and a woman can get engaged in three different ways. With a ring – symbolising money – or with a document or by having intercourse,' Francesca explained proudly. She had concocted her plan underway.

'But Francesca, I have no ring, nor do I have the money to buy one worthy of your beauty.'

'We don't need a ring, Chaim,' she smiled, slightly disappointed.

'And we can't ask Judge Karo to prepare engagement documents. Yehuda's his son!'

She smiled again. Only then did it dawn on him what she had in mind. He stared at her in shock.

'Intercourse is all we have left.' His blushing thoughts were transformed into words on her lips.

### **Extract begins on page 327 of the Dutch text**

*(hh Heh Heh Ayin: The Goddess of unconditional love*

The gateway's golden sheen blinded him as if he were gazing into the sun. He sat down cross-legged in the gritty sand at a few meters distance. Chaim closed his eyes. He tried to achieve total silence, knowing that his intellect was little more than a blunt instrument that would be of little help

in the enormous task that stood before him. The shimmering golden radiance penetrated his closed eyelids. He concentrated on the dancing points of light until his thoughts dissolved in the golden brilliance, as sugar dissolves in hot water and the hot water becomes sweet and the sugar watery. He was completely at rest, and the awareness that the success of his endeavour was a question of life or death for Francesca seeped into the remotest layers of his consciousness. The rhythm of his heart was measured and stately, like a drumbeat at a royal investiture.

He was utterly motionless, like a statue sculpted from the sand. It seemed as if all life had ebbed out of him. The blood congealed in his veins, his breath froze in the chill of the silence. His soul tore itself noiselessly free from his flesh and blood.

Chaim's motionless lips muttered an imperceptible prayer. In tandem with the heavy molecules of light that danced on the back of his eye, the sound of apparently random Hebrew letters appeared and disappeared, letters that leapt from his dry lips to the sand in which they left their imprint. A procession of letters presented themselves like well-drilled recruits and having introduced themselves stood to attention in their place in the line. Three rows of seventy-two letters, engraved by the breath of God, formed the array. His heart recognised the first and third line as verses relating to the mighty Moses who stretched out his hand over the Red Sea. But the second line seemed to be a meaningless mishmash.

Thginllarehtoehtraenemoctondidenothginehtputiltidnassenkradehtthi werehtsawduolcehtosdnalearsifoymraehtdnatpygefoymraehtneewtebemact i.

The puzzling combination of letters revealed its secret, however, by illuminating each letter in reverse order so that Chaim's tranquil mind recognised the renowned verse from Exodus:

'It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.'

The meaning of the verse became clear to him without deliberation. The Egyptian army was his dark side. The army of the Israelites his soul, which trusted in the Creator. Cloaked in darkness, the Egyptian army had been separated from his soul, which bathed in the light.

Then the first three letters of the three-line verse lurched forward out of the array. They presented themselves as a word engraved in the golden doorway. Chaim's eyelids opened automatically and read 'Vav Heh Vav'. His eyes caressed the slender strokes and lines. whw Vav Heh Vav had no particular meaning as a word but it was like music to his soul. God had created the world with the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. Each combination of letters was a formula, just as chemical symbols convey the composition of a substance. A concrete object or some indescribable power, it didn't matter. Vav Heh Vav resonated around him until it filled him completely and he became one with the word.

Then the letters Vav Heh Vav removed themselves from the golden gateway, throwing threw themselves onto the sand like crippled finbacks washed up on the seashore.

Letter code after letter code thus appeared on the golden screen like a sequence of barely pronounceable names of God. Shards of words hooked together like a chain forming an ever-growing name that made the entire corridor shudder and shake. Syllables melted together like chunks of gold.

Chaim shivered and persevered adamantly with the production of syllables, completely ignorant of the correct order in which they belonged. The letters sought their own place, hitching together to form sentences that coalesced in an increasingly complex and virtually unpronounceable composition. When he had finally amassed so much energy that it seemed as if the whole of Mount Moriah was juddering and trembling, with all his

might he exclaimed a long, incomprehensible string of letters that knocked each other over like dominoes. The golden door swung open with great commotion and a mighty roar.

A clear white light emerged from the doorway and illuminated every corner of the underground corridor. Chaim was standing face to face with the Ark of the Covenant when the seventy-second name erased itself from the door and attached itself as the final link in the chain of letters. His lips noiselessly praised the Creator.

'Welcome Chaim,' said a gentle female voice.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the dazzling form of a woman shrouded in smoke atop the golden ark with its protective cherub wings.

'Shechinah? Is it you, Shechinah?' he stammered, filled with reverence.

The Goddess laughed affirmatively and sat on top of the chest.

'Yes, Chaim, it's me,' she said. 'I have never been in exile. I have waited here for thousands of years until someone's faith was strong enough to find me.'

'But surely that can't be me?' said Chaim. There is no one in the world who struggles more with his darkness as I do.'

The Shechinah's smile reassured Chaim. Who was he to call the judgement of the female manifestation of God into question? She glided from the chest to the ground and walked slowly towards him.

'You sought me because of her, because you love her so much. You ignored the danger to your own life. You grew wings. Wherever two people love one another selflessly and without condition, I appear. But where love is based on self-interest, Lilith is kissed into life.'

His heart skipped a beat.

'Francesca is a beautiful young woman,' said the Shechinah understandingly, 'with a beautiful soul. You had so much to give her but you held back. In her presence, you denied everything you believed in, everything you had learned and discovered. You allowed your body to come to rest in her but not your spirit. You didn't enrich her, you made no

effort to help her transcend herself. And so you transformed her into Lilith. Francesca's only sin was that she did not respect her father. You became her symbol. She knew that her father would never permit her to marry you.'

'Why not?' Chaim asked.

'Because he feared you would destroy her soul rather than nourish it. You awakened the power of Lilith in her. You challenged her. You persisted in giving her hope. The more she set her heart on you, the greater the hate and destruction she aroused in herself. She murdered the Shechinah in herself.'

'How...'

'How do I know?'

The Shechinah tossed her golden tresses back and forth and was transformed in the wink of an eye into Francesca. Chaim shivered and wanted to embrace his beloved.

'Don't,' Francesca said. 'Don't. I love you. With all my being, I love you. But what drove me was not my love for you but my hatred for my father. I wanted to destroy his life's work. If I succeeded in winning you, he would never be able to commit his ideas to writing. You were not the only one he confided in. That's why I wanted to see his books burn, all of them. I hated his teaching. I longed to see his dream of a better world go up in smoke. As a little girl, I called out his name so many times from my bed but he never came. When he was there, he paid no attention to me. How could a man who treated his daughter so badly succeed in creating a better world? You were my best opportunity to hurt him. I gradually changed into a daughter of Lilith. The forces of darkness in me defeated the good. My love for you was real but it became a blackened fire. I led you astray from your life's work. You are a writer. A writer must write. What value would my love for you have had if all I wanted was to change your deepest essence? I wanted to get at my father through you, but in you I found my father. You and my father are alike. I fell in love with the father who paid me the attention I needed.'

As Francesca closed her eyes she was transformed once again into the golden figure of the Shechinah.

'What was that?' Chaim asked.

The Shechinah smiled.

'Your mission is a splendid one, Chaim. The books that you write will lie dormant for centuries to come. But after four-hundred years humanity will discover them. They will serve as a guide to bring about real change in the world.'

The Shechinah rested her warm hand on his forehead.

He was surrounded by gold that illuminated his entire body. He felt like a dark container being filled with the purest imaginable light. He felt himself being eased away from his earthly self. He felt light-headed, light as a cloud that could dissolve at any minute into the sparkling mist that drifted from the Holy of Holies. He was aware that every desire had but one single goal: to be fulfilled. The human person was an unfulfilled desire. Desire was the fuel that nourished all life and growth. Sexual desire was the most powerful of all our desires, powerful enough to extinguish every other longing when bereft of spiritual foundations. A person without desire was doomed to be snuffed out like an imploding star, so dark and heavy that the place in which it once existed would suck every form of light into a bottomless funnel of emptiness in order to be reborn in another dimension as desire. But one single selfless thought had the capacity to change the world. Love was an immense energy that could change everything and everyone.

'Here I am. How can I be of service?' his heart inquired.

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**Translated by Brian Doyle**

