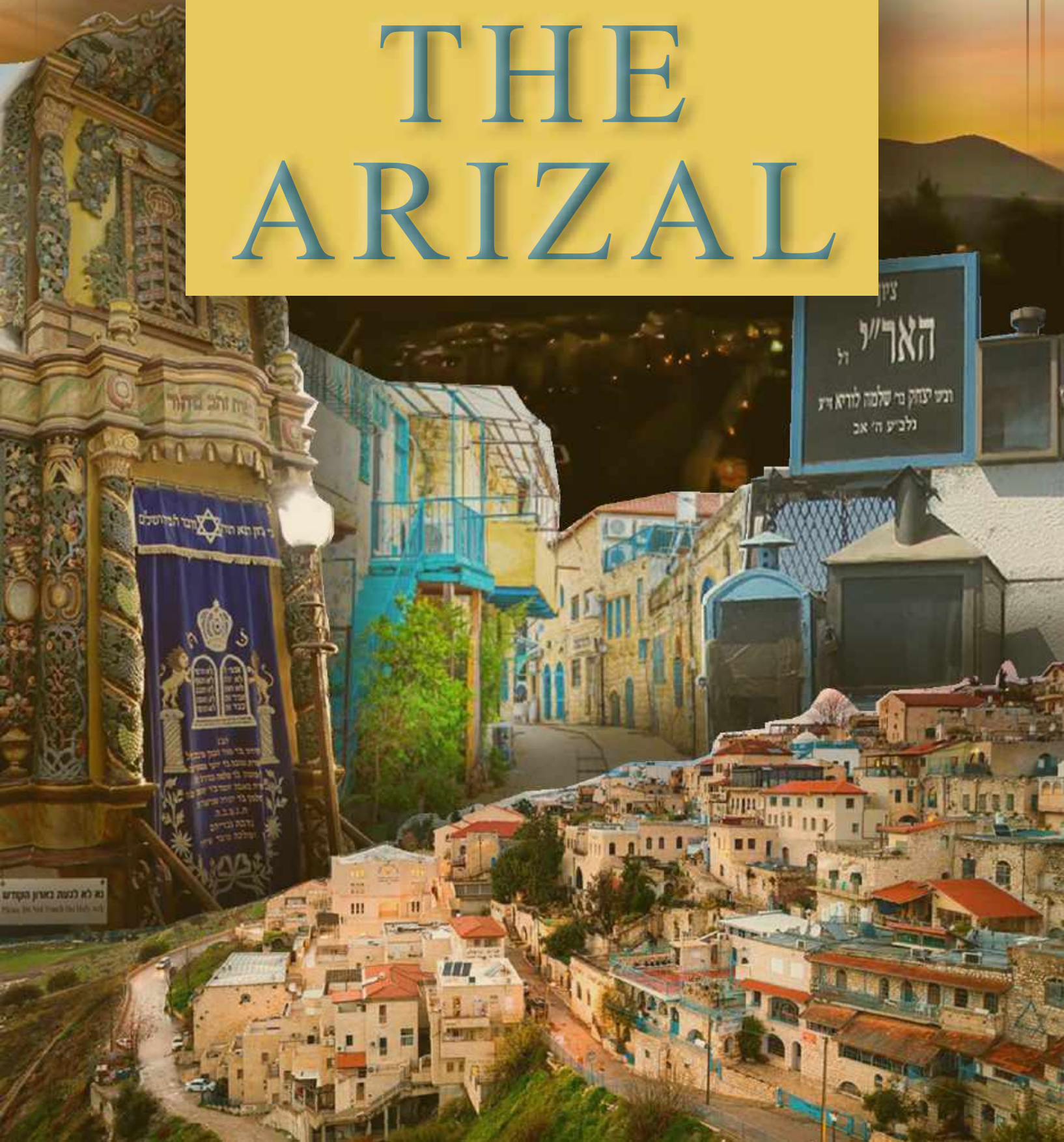


# THE ARIZAL



הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת הִיא הַתּוֹרָה הַיְחִידִית  
וְהַיְחִידִית הִיא הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

צִוְיָהּ  
הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת  
וְכִי יִשְׁמַח לִרְאוֹת יָדָיו  
וְלִבֵּיתוֹ הִיא אֵם

הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת הִיא הַתּוֹרָה הַיְחִידִית  
וְהַיְחִידִית הִיא הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

WE'VE ALREADY LEARNED THAT, WHEN it comes to history and the development of spiritual consciousness, we are involved in a progression — a process unfolding over time.

Even though Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai reached lofty levels of Godly perception, there was still a limit to how much he could share those perceptions with others. That's because a teaching relationship isn't only about the master's grasp of a concept; it also depends on the student's ability to receive that knowledge.

Teaching doesn't only mean sharing the information that you have. your student also needs to have the tools to process what you have to give.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai expended his last energies on earth ensuring that every drop of Divine awareness he'd gained during his lifetime would remain down here with us in some form. He was successful, but what he left behind was a kind of code. His own students could understand it, and their few students throughout the generations were able to glean something from those recorded teachings that form the Zohar. For most of us, though, that book is sealed. You and I can browse online for great books on relative ty, but unless we have strong backgrounds in higher mathematics they're not going to make much sense to us. We can stare at diagrams and formulae until our eyes give out, but unless we already have a lot of prior knowledge of the subject, we might as well be reading a foreign language.

About five hundred years ago, after another deep historical trauma — the expulsion of Spanish Jewry — a new light arose in the Holy Land. Rabbi Isaac Luria, also known as the "Arizal" — the "Divine Rabbi Isaac" — was determined to bring healing to the Jewish people and to the world. He did this, mainly, by taking the code of the Zohar and providing us with its Rosetta Stone, its key.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was the father of Kabbalah, but it took an other fifteen hundred years until Rabbi Isaac Luria became the father of modern Jewish mysticism. Every significant development in Torah since then had its foundations laid by him.

# BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATION



Kabbalah is the revelation of the Torah's inner dimension...its soul. Our tradition describes the process of birth as one that begins from pure spirit, and which later takes on the form of flesh.

The Torah's soul was given expression by Rabbi Shimon's teachings, but it wasn't fully born into the world until more layers and garments — a kind of body — could clothe it. The Arizal's teachings are that body.

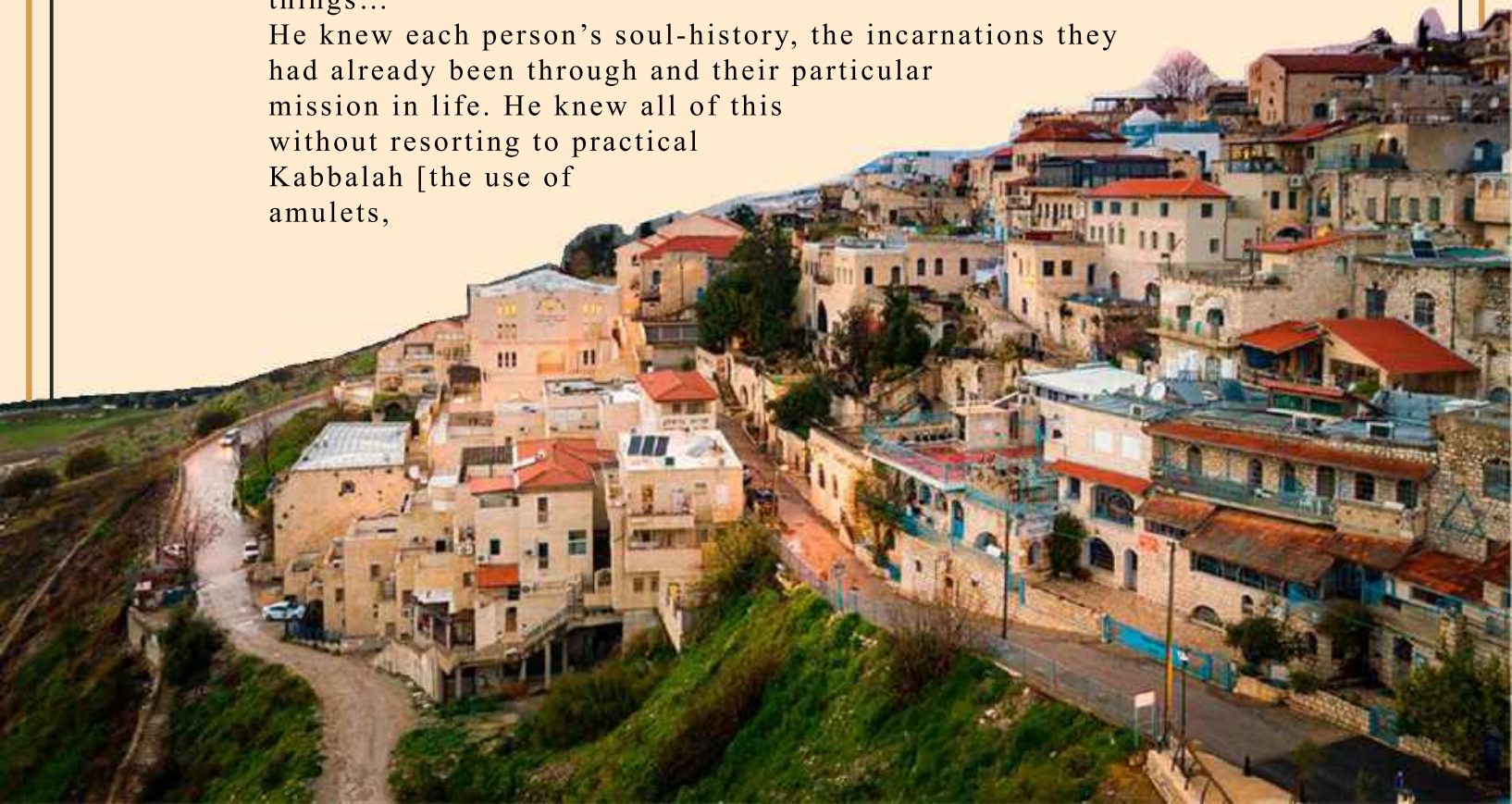


BUT WHAT WAS RABBI ISAAC Luria like? What kind of a person do you need to be to serve as a conduit of such powerful Torah? Rabbi Chaim Vital, Rabbi Luria's main disciple, once came out and asked the Arizal what he had done to reach such lofty levels of understanding. Contrary to what we might have thought, the Arizal did not reply that it was through fasting, self-mortification, or nonstop study.

# THE MAN OF GOD

Rabbi Chaim Vital describes the greatness of the Arizal in an introduction to one of his works:

Today, I'm going to share the Holy One's secrets with you... God always illuminates our path in every generation by way of unique teachers. In His compassion, he has sent us "an angel descended from heaven" — my master and teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi — who was a scholar of every dimension of Torah. He was a master of the full Kabbalistic tradition. He knew the language of the trees, birds, and angels. And, like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, he knew one's future and inner workings and thoughts just from looking at one's face. He knew the future, and also had knowledge of events taking place all over the world. By candlelight and firelight, he came to know of wondrous things... He knew each person's soul-history, the incarnations they had already been through and their particular mission in life. He knew all of this without resorting to practical Kabbalah [the use of amulets,



etc.] or immersive meditation. There has been no one of his caliber since the time of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

His knowledge, as well as communication with the souls of great sages throughout the ages, came to him naturally, after many years of personal purification and intensive study, without having to exert himself in mystical meditation. Elijah the Prophet himself came to teach him the inner mysteries of Torah...

Yet when Rabbi Isaac Luria answered Rabbi Chaim's direct question, "How did you come to the heights you've reached?" the Arizal answered, "Through performing the Divine Will with joy."

At first glance, that might seem overly simplistic. But when we remember that the mitzvot are individual channels of connection and alignment with the Creator, the Arizal's answer starts to make more sense.

To carry out God's Will with joy means taking hold of a mitzvah, of every connecting channel that presents itself to me based on my nature and situation, and using it mindfully. I don't have to think about what was, or what's going to be. I just have to be present in this magic moment of the mitzvah...and enjoy it.

Rabbi Isaac Luria is pointing us toward the gateway to prophetic connection with the Creator. Yes, you need to refine yourself; yes, you need to study. But the thing you need most is to take hold of that perfect instant of opportunity for connection with the Infinite One with a deep understanding of its cosmic importance.

In other words...with joy.

ONE OF THE MOST  
FUNDAMENTAL cosmic truths is  
that the Infinite One is in constant  
communication with His Creation.  
God waits for us to reach out and  
make conscious contact with Him.  
He sends us reminders of His  
presence in every situation we encounter.

# SOUL REPAIR

Everything we see, hear, think, and experience is a manifestation of Divine Providence. It's God's way of saying, "Here I am."

Those calls are what we call Divine Providence. Sometimes, the Divine calling cards are magical, connected moments. But sometimes the workings of Providence — Divine supervision and orchestration of events — are beyond our understanding. The world is full of suffering, and even genuinely good people can, and do, suffer.

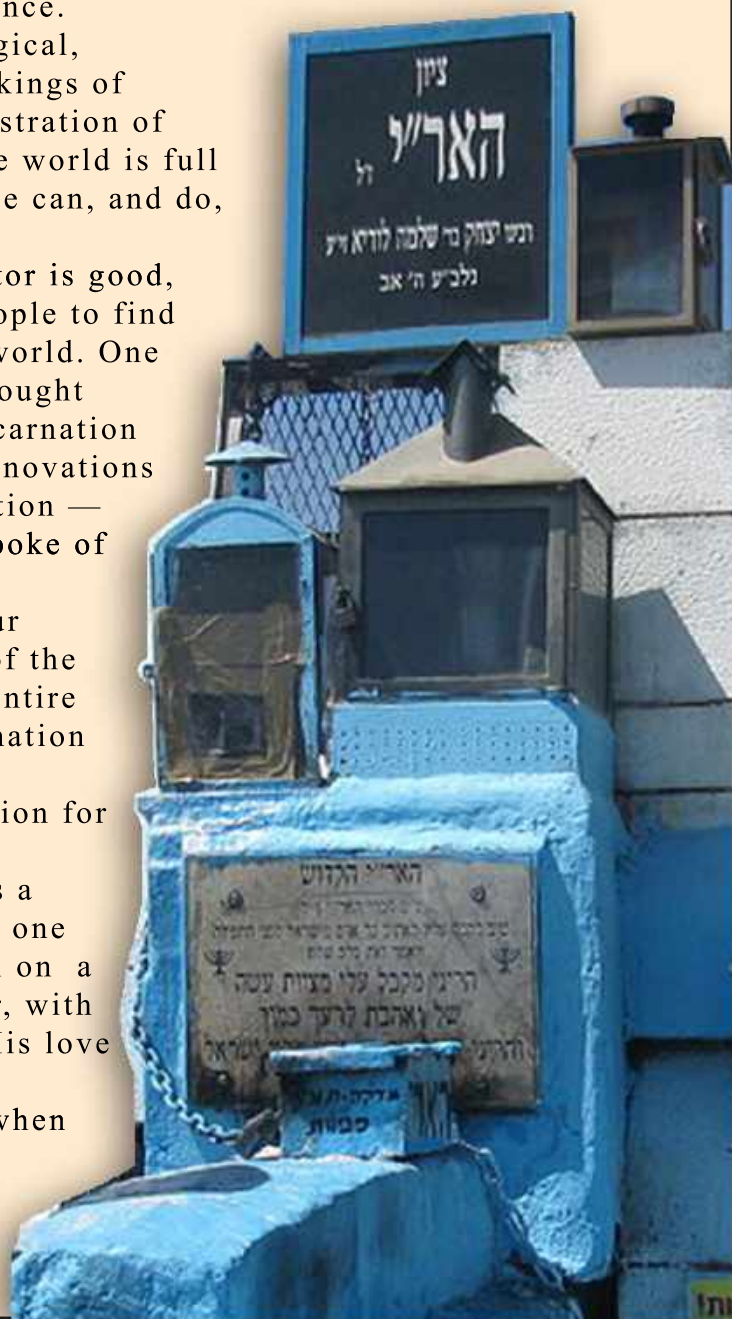
Everything rests on our belief that the Creator is good, and does only good — so it's natural for people to find their faith tested when they see evil in the world. One of the Divine concepts Rabbi Isaac Luria brought down to the world was his grasp of the reincarnation of souls. The teachings he shared weren't innovations of his — they were already part of the tradition — but they were generally unknown until he spoke of them openly.

Sharing a fresh perspective that broadens our understanding of Godly compassion is one of the greatest acts of mercy a person can do. An entire book detailing the workings of soul reincarnation entered our

world because of the Arizal's great compassion for us — it's called Sha'ar

Hagilgulim, "The Gate of Incarnations." It's a tapestry of teachings that open our minds to one essential truth: The Infinite One leads us all on a path of individual and collective soul-repair, with the greatest providential exactness, out of His love for us.

The concept of reincarnation — especially when it's interwoven with the ability to know the workings of Providence on the individual level as the Arizal did — was vital nourishment for the faith of the Jewish



people. It undoes the idea of meaningless suffering. When we're able to see the full story of an individual soul — where it's been in the past and where it needs to get to in the future — a picture of purpose takes form in our minds and hearts. This is the antidote to the erosion of faith that has become so widespread. In the story below, we can see how an awareness of the dynamics of soul-repair can make a genuine and immediate positive impact on the way we live our lives every day.

A man came to visit the Arizal of Safed with a personal problem. He and his wife just could not get along. Although he had spent years trying to appease her, his wife sniped at him constantly. He, in turn, would fire back; their home was a battleground. Maybe the great sage would be able to offer some advice so that his home could be peaceful?

When the man entered the Arizal's room, the sage immediately looked up and said: "The woman you're married to makes you suffer so because you have a debt to repay. In your previous incarnations, it was you who made her life a misery. She is merely

God's instrument to bring about your soul-repair. You must do your best to accept her harangues with love. Be grateful that your repair involves nothing worse!"

The man went home with a completely changed attitude. When his wife began to berate him, he nodded calmly and wouldn't respond. If she brusquely ordered him around, he would think, "I'm sure that this is repairing the damage to my soul that I caused before!" These thoughts made his life bearable, even happy.

After days of this changed behavior, the man's wife decided she wanted some answers. It was hard to fight without a sparring partner! She said, "You've been different since you went to see the rabbi. What did he tell you?"

When her husband was reluctant to divulge their conversation, she pestered him relentlessly. Eventually, he told her the truth. "I have no complaints, because when you fight against me you're actually helping me. I will love you exactly as you are, whatever you do, unconditionally."

The wife was so incensed, she cried out, "Help you?! If being hard on you is helping you, then from now on I'll be all sweet-

ANOTHER REVOLUTIONARY CONCEPT INTRODUCED BY the Arizal relates to the nature of the exile. The Jewish people were exiled from their land for the last time two thousand years ago.

During that long period, they were driven throughout the world by expulsions and forces beyond their control. For much of that time, they suffered oppression, forced conversions, and mass murders. Until recently, the exile — which we started to call the diaspora when it got easier — was the collective accumulation of our trials and tribulations.

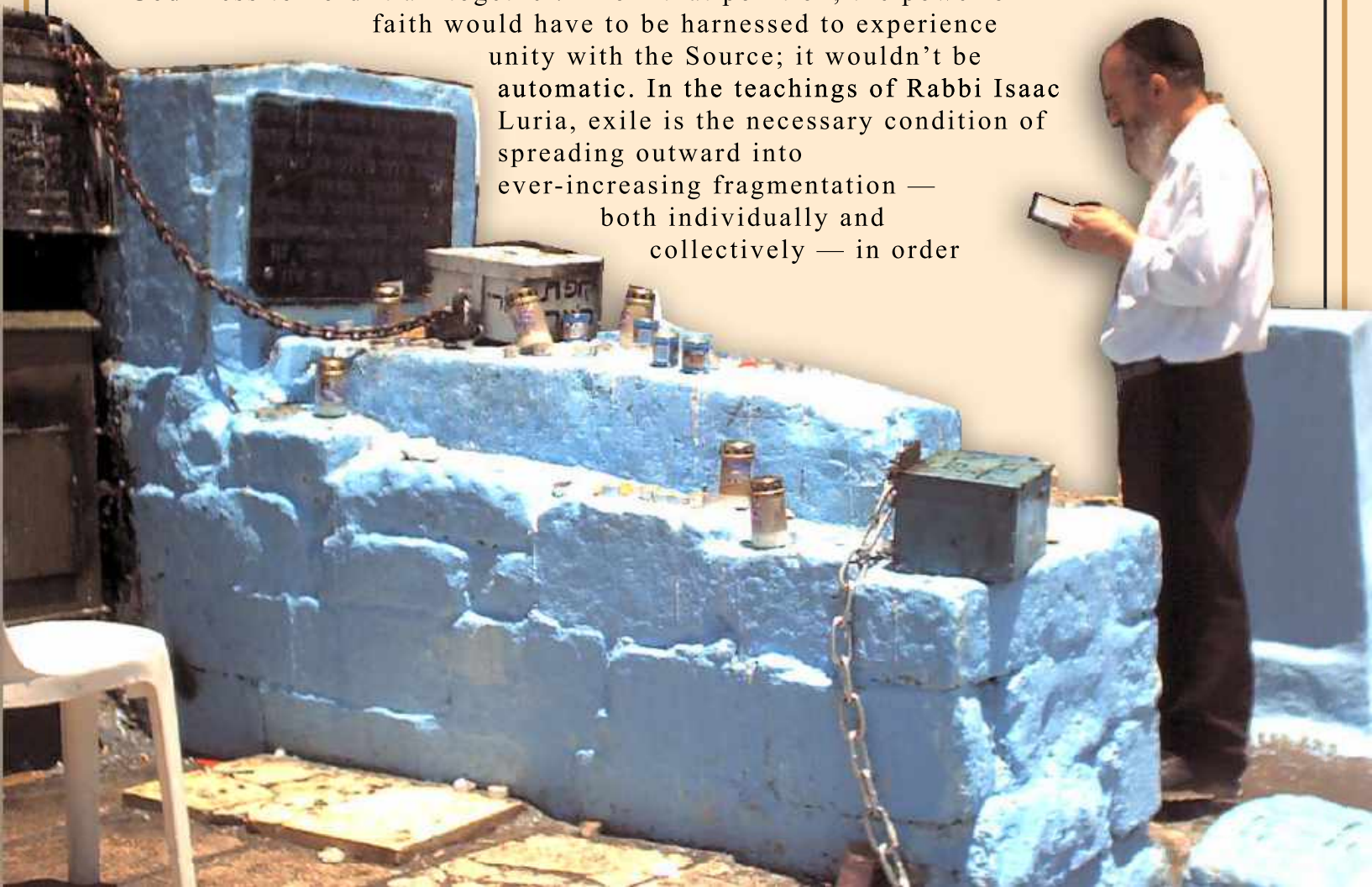
Then Rabbi Isaac Luria came and explained — patiently, compassionately — that exile isn't an arbitrary punishment for sins in the past. Because punishment is a lot like revenge, and the Creator doesn't exact revenge for our past misbehavior.

What He does is arrange for repair, for redemption of a bad situation.

The Arizal explained that Adam's choosing to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil fragmented reality into the state of multi-plicity, of perceived distance from the Infinite One. Every bit of reality would appear to be separated from its Source, in a state of independence and disunity, with no "cosmic glue" of Godliness to hold it all together. From that point on, the power of

faith would have to be harnessed to experience unity with the Source; it wouldn't be automatic. In the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, exile is the necessary condition of spreading outward into ever-increasing fragmentation — both individually and collectively — in order

# EXILE AND REDEMPTION



to bring God-consciousness to absolutely everywhere. Exile, then, becomes a story of a mission, a complex and ongoing process to gather in all of the sparks of Godliness that have been dispersed throughout Creation.

The Jewish people weren't exiled as much as they were sown throughout the far reaches of the globe. And all sowing is a necessary investment for a future harvest. With these teachings, and others like them, the Arizal infused a suffering Jewish people with hope and healing, and a new focus on redemption as it unfolds and evolves right now, through us and within us.



וא לא לגעת בארון הקודש  
Please Do Not Touch the Holy Ark

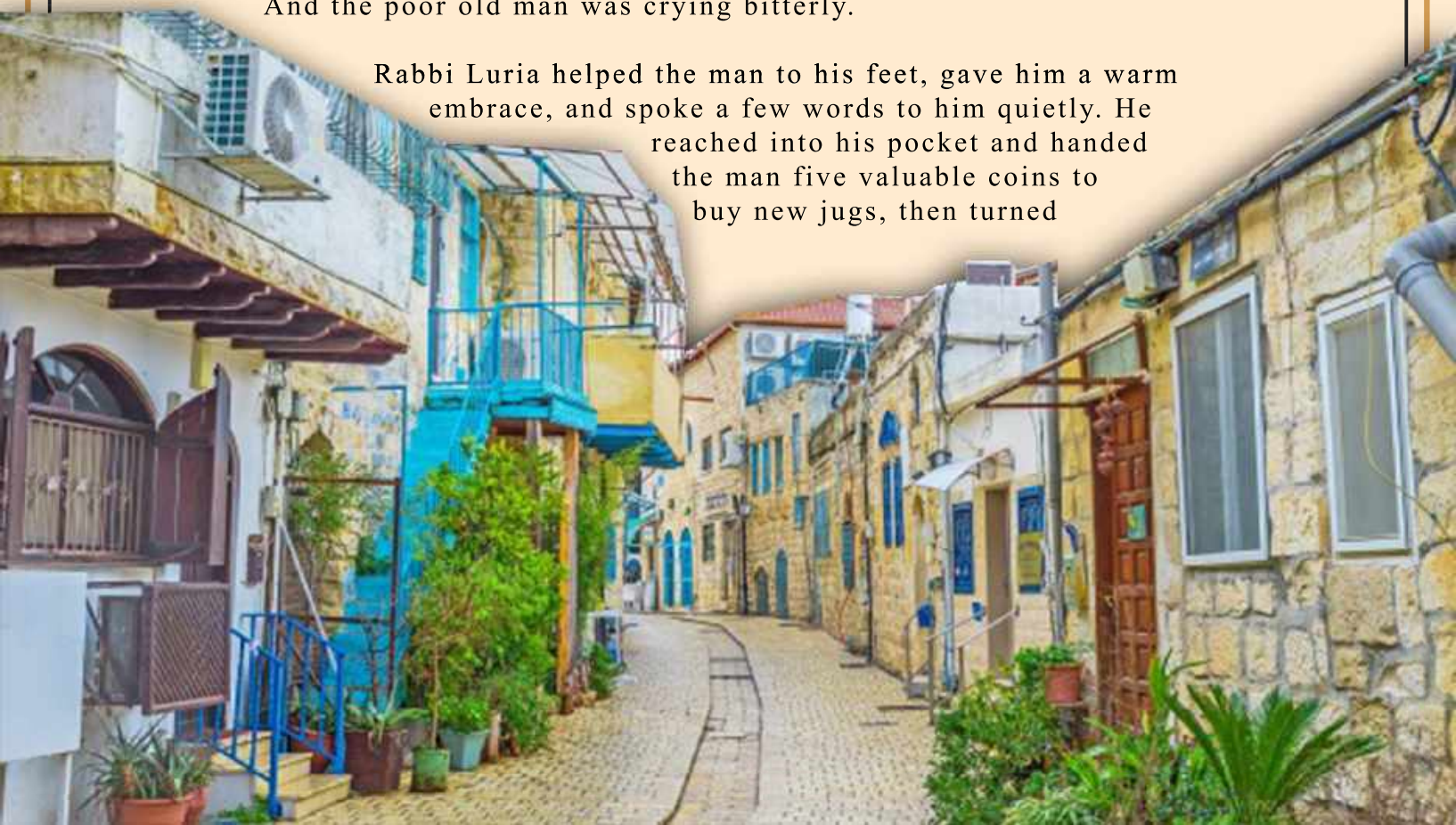
THE ARIZAL DIDN'T ONLY TEACH in theory, using the traditional tools of word and text. He took his students on the path of transformation through action — the most genuine learning experience there is. Rabbi Luria taught his disciples about loving-kindness by gathering them to live with their families in a single courtyard, with household goods shared in common. Through refining their small circle, he knew they could change the world.

# THE SHATTERED JUGS

Once, the great spiritual master Rabbi Isaac Luria was in the fields surrounding the mystical city of Safed, teaching Kabbalah to his inner circle of disciples. All of a sudden, he stood up mid-sentence and appeared to be completely engrossed in a matter far from the subject that had so mesmerized his students a moment before. In a kind of frenzy, the great master broke away from the circle and began to run back toward the town, with his students trailing behind in wonder.

As the Arizal ducked through the narrow stone alleyways of the ancient city, the disciples could barely keep pace with him. Suddenly brought up short, they found the saintly rabbi bent over an old water-carrier who was lying on the ground, surrounded by his smashed earthenware jugs. And the poor old man was crying bitterly.

Rabbi Luria helped the man to his feet, gave him a warm embrace, and spoke a few words to him quietly. He reached into his pocket and handed the man five valuable coins to buy new jugs, then turned



to retrace his path back out to the fields beyond the city. Still in a state of wonder, the small group of disciples followed their master back to their spot in the grasses. The questions began to flow from their lips. “How did you know?” “Why was it so important to interrupt our lesson in the middle to carry out this act of charity?” “Doesn’t Torah study take precedence over everything else?” “Could you not have sent one of us to take care of him? Why did it have to be you?”

The Arizal patiently explained, “These earthenware jugs were all that the old man had; there was no other way for him to make a living, and a meager one at that. When he slipped and they shattered, he was broken to pieces. At that moment, he began to weep and hate his Creator for having ruined him. Right in the middle of our lesson, I could feel that his tears, his claim against God, had triggered a heavenly decree that would have destroyed the entire world. One man’s pain can destroy the world! I had to run and find him...and let him know that God had not abandoned him!”

The Arizal shared a new awareness with his students — that small, human-scale acts of mercy have the power to overturn the harshness of a Divine decree. He implanted in their consciousness that acts of kindness down here are an accessible means of mitigating the heavenly judgments that can afflict our world.

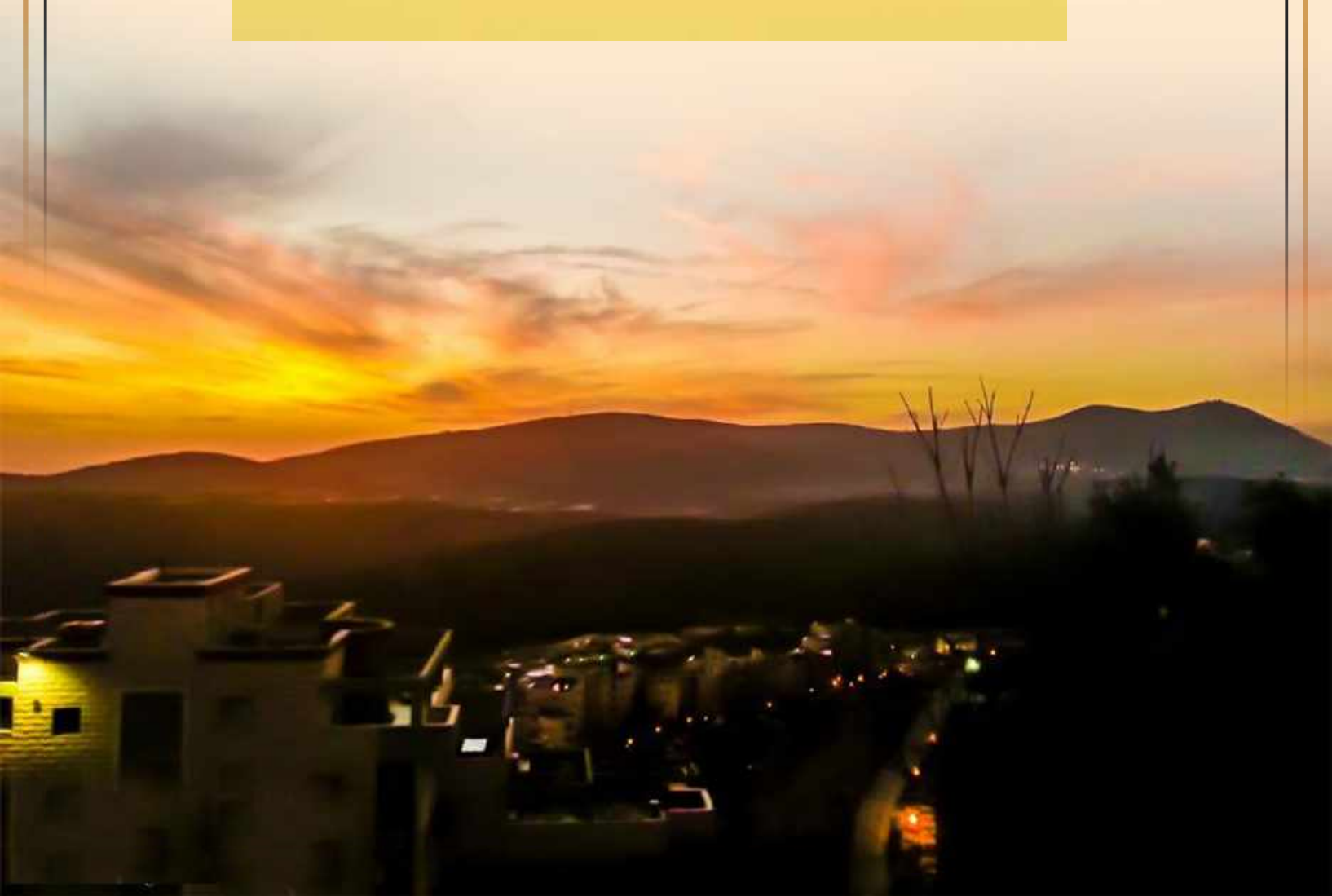
ONE OF RABBI LURIA'S GREATEST contributions to the evolution of spiritual consciousness was his marriage of the mystical and the mitzvah.

What I mean is that the Arizal succeeded in introducing customs rooted in Kabbalah into our daily practice as Jews. One beautiful example of this is the prayer service that inaugurates the

Shabbos. On the cusp between Friday afternoon and Shabbos evening, we have a custom — initiated by the Arizal, although it is hinted at in the Zohar — to sing a series of psalms and special prayers as a way of ushering in the Shabbos Queen. Rabbi Luria knew that the structure of mitzvah as legal code might be factually accurate, but it is actually lacking. Kabbalah always has been the soul of every mitzvah and Torah verse.

# THE MYSTICAL MITZVAH

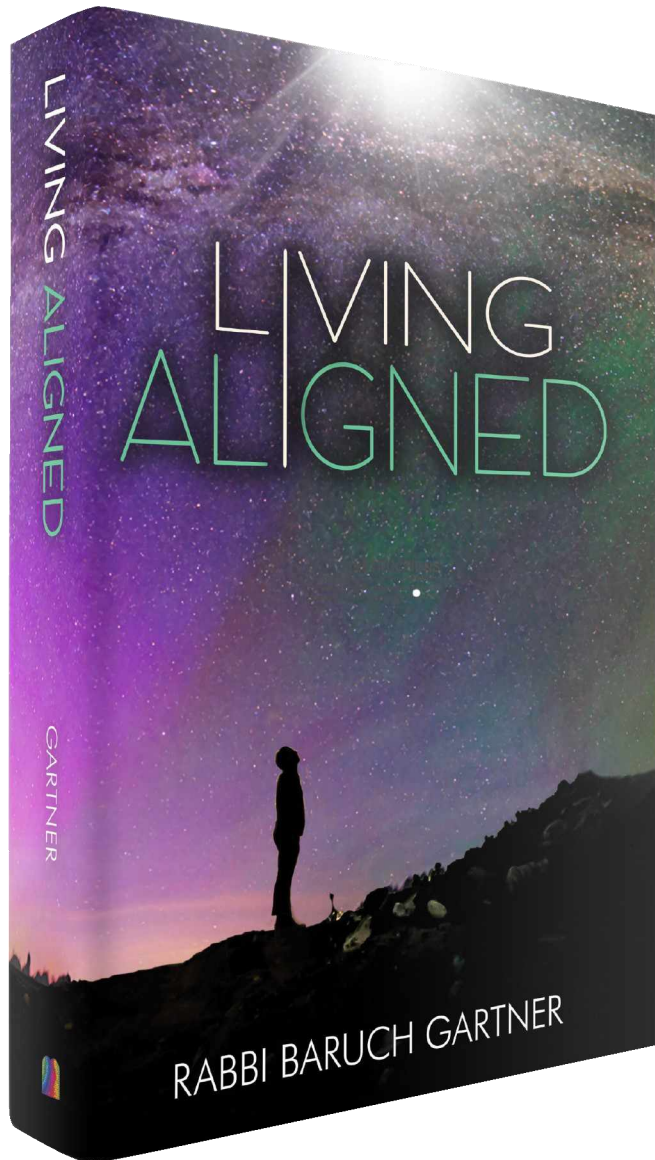
Mysticism isn't naturally separate from mitzvah practice. It is the hidden, inner soul of the practice that vitalizes it.



By breaking down the apparent barriers that existed in people's minds between mystical and mitzvah, he allowed the vital essence of mitzvot to stream into their outer forms so that we could access that life-giving spirit.

We'll see, though, that although the Arizal began this process, it would still take hundreds of years for it to really flourish and spread throughout the world.

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