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Sweet Talk

Rebbe Yitzchak Luria, zy'a, was undoubtedly the greatest expositor of the secrets of Torah since Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai, author of the Zohar. Known by the acronym *Arizal* or 'the *Ari HaKadosh*', the prefix *alef* stands for *Eloki*, "the Godly Rebbe Yitzchak". No other sage in Jewish history has been granted this honorific. Revolutionized the way we understand and live with *pnimiyus haTorah*, revealed an interpretive system of *Kavanos*, spiritual intentionality toward the direction and application of the Kabbalah in prayer and mitzvah observance.

Who could begin to imagine the awesome *Yamim Nora'im tefillos* of the holy Arizal? A familiar yet invaluable ancient tale perhaps holds a tiny glimpse:

One year, following the busy holiday period, the Arizal sensed that while the prayers he had led in the company of the scholars and kabbalists of Tzfas were impactful, there was something missing in them. In an effort to seek out a tikun and gain clarity on this intuition, the Arizal entered a deep meditative state and ascended to the upper worlds. There, in his state of expanded consciousness, a dream-like vision was shown to him of a Yid whose *tefillos* were remarkably favored on high.

Summoning his devoted disciple, Rav Chaim Vital, the Arizal insisted they embark on a journey to find out who this fellow was and how he had achieved so much in his prayers. After a days of mystical travels, they arrived at a small hut in a far flung Galilean town, and were taken aback by the luminous visage of the holy man when he came to the door. The sage greeted him and asked, "Please tell me dear brother, have you learned the depths of the Zohar's comments on *tefillah*?"

"Rebbe," the man swallowed shyly, "I am sorry to say, I'm unfamiliar with that.... And, well, honestly, I've never studied much Torah."

"But you do daven with *kavanos*, with lofty intentions, do you not?"

"Rebbe! ...I don't even know what that means!?"

The Ari and Rav Chaim looked at each other in wonder. "My friend, tell me please of your *avodah* during the High Holy Days, I must know!"

"Alright, if the Rebbe really wants. To be honest, I grew up in poverty, I never had the opportunity to learn even the basics of Torah and *tefillah*. In fact, I barely know half of the letters of the *alef-beis*. I'm not so comfortable in the shul, but of course I went anyway. Rebbe," he grinned with embarrassment, "I confess, I wanted desperately to fit in and daven with the congregation;

everyone was davenning so eloquently in Hebrew.... My heart was so broken, I didn't know what to do, so finally I just shouted out the handful of letters I know: 'Aleph, beis, gimmel, daled, hei, vav, zayin, ches...!' And then I said, 'Master of the World! All I can do is give You what I know. That's all I have, just a handful of 'A-B-C's'. Please help me — please string these letters together into words in a way that will bring You nachas...!'"

Deeply moved by the sincerity of this Jew, the Ari haKadosh bowed his head and praised him, "Ashrecha, fortunate are you! ...My friend, you'll never know what a great gift you have given me today. Thank you!" Smiles remained on the lips of the two great teachers of Am Israel until they had returned to their holy *beis medrash* in Tzfas.

...Needless to say, on the following year their prayers rose to an even greater level.

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֶרְתָּיו אֶת־
הָאֱלֹהִים הַתְּהַלֵּךְ־נָה,

"These are the generations of Noah: Noah was an *ish tzadik tamim b'dorosav*, righteous and wholehearted, perfect, in his generations. Noah walked with God" (*Bereishis*, 6:9).

Hashem praises Noah as an *ish tzadik tamim*. The Hebrew word *tam*, sometimes translated as 'perfect', is more accurately 'innocent' — while implying simplicity, purity, wholeheartedness, sincerity, and completeness.

A lack of *temimus* takes a devastating toll on our inner world. Consider the core of our daily religious practice, Torah and tefillah. While we may be able to intellectually

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explain numerous *p'shatim* and *peirushim* with fancy, highbrow language, engaging modern and ancient literary devices and analytical tools, it is the *midah* of *temimus* that *connects us* to what we are learning, saying and doing. Rather than merely articulating a mass of eloquent theoretical information, davening with *temimus* brings alive a simple truth: we are speaking with the Creator, Sustainer and Master of the World.

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This past week marked Rosh Chodesh Mar-Cheshvan. A number of explanations are suggested regarding the root of the name and essence of this month. The prefix *Mar* means 'bitter', a reference to this month being broken-hearted over its lack of any festivals. *Mar* also means 'drop', referring here to the first rains (the *Yoreh*), which fall in Cheshvan. *Sefer haAruch* suggests a word play: this month is *Merachesh-van*; *merachesh* (flowing) *vahn* (with water), as this is the month when we begin to pray for winter rains.

The Gemara (*Taanis*, 25b) recounts how, during a severe drought, the great Rebbe Eliezer rose before the community and prayed for rain, reciting the six extra blessings for rain ordained by the Sages to be added into the *Amidah*. Despite his twenty-four blessings, rain did not fall. Rabbi Akiva then went before the ark and cried out:

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ אֱלֹהֵי אֲמָתָה. אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ,
לְמַעַן רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ!

Our Father, our King, we have no king other than You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy on us!"

His prayers were answered immediately.

The Gemara then points to Rebbe Akiva's forgiving nature as the reason his prayers were more effective than those of his teacher Rebbe Eliezer. The Arizal (*Sefer haKavanos*), however, asserts that Rebbe Akiva opened his heart and cried out to Hashem with unscripted words and with complete humility and self-effacement, davening with *temimus*.

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The Gemara (*Megillah*, 27b) considers the length of time that one prayed as the time it is *סְדוּרָה בְּפִיו*, 'arranged in his mouth,' meaning the period it continues to linger *after* one has completed his formal davening. If we have prayed with *temimus*, our lips may still be subtly and even subconsciously articulating those prayers for quite some time.

Arugas haBosem relates that in the month of Marcheshvan, *marchushei merachshin*, "our lips are still moving," with the holy songs and prayers of the past month of Tishrei. Whispers of the elevated nigunim, songs and tefillos of Selichos, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukos still echo in our ears.

Before our memories of the High Holy Days and our *kabbalos*, our holy resolutions for the new year, begin to fade, let us take up the opportunity of Cheshvan. Let us take this time to process and reflect on our Tishrei prayers, and the lingering taste of their words and letters. In this way, may Mar-Cheshvan be sweetened with the afterglow of those festivals.

And may the *Ribbono Shel Olam* always hear our sincere prayers, accept our service of *temimus*, and 'make it rain' with floods of blessing! ■