



The Lessons of the Four Who Entered the PaRDeS

The Dangers Inherent Upon the Path of Ascent

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I do not wish to deceive anyone. **The Kabbalistic path, referred to as the “PaRDeS” can be a dangerous one for those not properly prepared to walk it.** I offer this essay as a clear warning to those who consider themselves ready, all the while that Heaven does not.

The Kabbalistic/Prophetic path is a necessary step of spiritual evolution. Yet, it must not be taken lightly. This is the final step in spiritual growth, not the first step or the middle one. Too many people have a juvenile attitude towards spiritual practices. For such spiritual children, it is best to leave them where they are, doing what they are doing. There are many that are not ready to “descend” into the palaces of the Heavenly King. Yet, there are those who have been long ready, and have been waiting for these teachings. It is to you, my ready students, that I write this essay.

In order to avoid the pitfalls along the path of Kabbalistic spiritual ascent, there are bits of knowledge that are essential to know. The reason why the Talmud records the following episode is to hint to us what these teachings are.

“Our Rabbis have taught, four entered into the Pardes. They were Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and Rabbi Akiba. Ben Azai gazed and died. Of him it is written, “precious in the eyes of HaShem is the death of his pious ones”.¹ Ben Zoma gazed, and went insane. Of him, it is written, “have you found honey, eat your share lest you become full, and vomit it up.”.² Aher became an apostate. Rabbi Akiba entered, and exited in peace.”³

Four men entered the Pardes. Yet, these are not just four ordinary men, but four very special men. Each one was very different from the other. Each one suffered a very different fate. **Their experience is recorded and past down to us because what happened to them is archetypal. What happened to these four righteous, holy and prepared men can happen to everyone of us.**



There are three major pitfalls along the way, one worse, and more difficult to detect than the other. Yet, the one who wishes to stand in the presence of HaShem must do so in the absolute truth of His Being. Descending to the absolute essence of truth can be a difficult thing, even for the properly prepared. By reviewing this story, I intend to reveal to you just how the three fell, and why, as well as what we must know, and do, so as not to share their fate.

All the four Sages of the PaRDeS were not unknowns. They were very famous Rabbis.

Shimon Ben Azai zt'l, it is written, was the first to enter the Pardes. He gazed, and died. Obviously, this is an extremely strong response. Was it warranted? Did he die of his own, or did HaShem "take" him? These issues must be addressed.

It is written,⁴ that with the passing of Ben Azai, diligent scholarship also ceased. Ben Azai was diligently studying Torah, day, and night. Ben Azai is quoted as saying, *"what can I do, my soul so greatly desires the Torah"*.⁵ Ben Azai made this statement in response to the question put to him, why had he never married, which is a violation of both normal human desire, as well as Halakha. His response continued by saying, *"the world can be perpetuated by others"*.⁶ Ben Azai's entire being revolved around the holiness of Torah. This is very meritorious, indeed. Yet, could this have possibly contributed to his death?

In another text,⁷ Ben Azai says, *"one should run to perform a minor mitzvah, as if it were a major mitzvah. One should run away from temptation, for the performance of a mitzvah leads to the performance of another mitzvah, and the performance of a sin, leads to the performance of another sin. So the reward of a mitzvah is the opportunity to perform another mitzvah, whereas the "reward" of a sin is the inevitability of another sin"*.

Ben Azai continues by saying,⁸ *"despise no one, don't challenge everything, for every man has his time, and everything has its place."*

Ben Azai was a unique type of individual who, we might say, did not belong here upon the earth. His piousness⁹ was legend, so much so that it says, that he who sees Ben Azai in a dream may look forward to achieving piousness.¹⁰ Now, remember from history, the title of *"Hasid"* was given to those who were also called *"Perushim,"* meaning those who separated from the physical pleasures of this world. Ben Azai was such a man, he is the case in point. Yet, what does all this have to do with his untimely end upon his gazing into the Pardes? It has everything to do with it.



Ben Azai's piousness and separateness from earthly pleasures were the causes of his death! Ben Azai did not die because he beheld the Face of G-d and was therefore punished. For though it is written, that no man can see G-d's Face and live, not even Moshe Rabbeynu (Moses) achieved that level, all the more so Ben Azai.

Ben Azai said *"there is no man without his time, and everything has his place."* Well, the PaRDeS was his place, and when he entered it was "his time."

Ben Azai did not have to die. He did not sin, or stumble in the PaRDeS. If anything, he stumbled here, upon the earth. Ben Azai had made no portion for himself here upon the earth. He had no wife, and no children. He had no great portion, or love for this world. It is then only natural that when he entered the PaRDeS, that he recognized his true home. He just simply decided to stay where he always felt he belonged. Thus, to this world, he died.

We must now ask the question, if there is anything wrong with what Ben Azai did? In the context of the story¹¹ of the PaRDeS, it appears that what he did was wrong. Remember, the story of the four is given us as a warning as to how to properly approach the PaRDeS. If we are not completely grounded upon the earth, we too, upon experiencing the sublimeness of the PaRDeS, might wish to stay and never return to earth. The problem with this is that this is the opposite of the purpose of the original entry into the PaRDeS, in the first place.

Our Divinely ordained purpose, as Children of Israel,¹² is to perform the rectification of this physical world, by acting as the vessels through which HaShem will channel his spiritual energy¹³ onto the earth. If upon our achievement of our goal as being the perfect vessel, or chariot¹⁴, we choose to stay above, we are thwarting the entire purpose of our ascent. We are upon this earth for a purpose, a purpose that must be achieved.

Ben Azai was a special case. Not all of us can be as committed as he. Not all of us should be. The lesson we learn from his experience is the importance of the grounding. We learn from Ben Azai that the beauty of Heaven is overwhelmingly intoxicating. Only by being grounded to the earth, and earth living can we escape the temptation to stay above, once we arrive. Today most do not have the devotion of a Ben Azai, therefore even to make the ascent, with or without proper psychological stability, is next to impossible. Yet, there are always those who will try. This is a warning, to them.



The next to enter the PaRDeS was Shimon Ben Zoma zt'l. We are taught that he gazed, and went insane. Yet, unlike Ben Azai, Ben Zoma's experience was not so intoxicating. Unlike Ben Azai, Ben Zoma did not want to resign his responsibilities here on earth. Ben Zoma was at a higher level than Ben Azai. Ben Zoma was able to overcome the temptation of wanting to stay above. Yet, it was this next step that tripped him up.

Shimon Ben Zoma was a mighty man. He had within him the strict spiritual discipline that comes with wisdom. He was famous for his expertise in the correct reading of the Torah. He reveals his secret how to achieve wisdom. He says, *"who is wise, the one who learns from all men"*.¹⁵ The secret of strength he also reveals, *"who is strong, the one who can conquer his desires."* Ben Zoma showed his strength by conquering the desire that Ben Azai succumbed to.

Ben Zoma then reveals the secret of wealth, *"who is wealthy, the one who is satisfied with his portion"*.¹⁶ So, we have knowledge of Ben Zoma's learning, his strength, and his wealth. Yet, the one characteristic that characterized Ben Azai is not mentioned, this is his piousness¹⁷.

"Ben Zoma gazed, and went insane because he wasn't complete in his piousness, and clarity as was Ben Azai. When he gazed at the brilliant light (in the PaRDeS), it was more than his mind could handle, and he became psychotic"¹⁸, for he could not clearly understand that which he saw".¹⁹

Ben Zoma could not assimilate that which he saw? Is this the reward of he who learns wisdom from all men, that He could not learn wisdom from HaShem, the Brilliant Light? It is written that the one who sees Ben Zoma in a dream can look forward to achieving wisdom.²⁰ How is it then that with all he had going for him, Ben Zoma could not handle what he saw, and it "psychically short-circuited" him?

The answers to these questions are in Ben Zoma's own words quoted. Ben Zoma was truly wise. His problem was not in being wise enough to learn from HaShem, for Ben Zoma was certainly wise. As shown above, Ben Zoma had the discipline not to fall for the spiritual intoxication, as did Ben Azai. No, Ben Zoma's weakness was not in regards to his wisdom or discipline. Ben Zoma's weakness was in regards to his "spiritual wealth."

*"The one whose wisdom is greater than his actions, that ones wisdom shall not last."*²¹ Ben Zoma was indeed wise, but Ben Zoma was incomplete in his piety, meaning that his actions were less that what was necessary to accomplish that which he sought. He did not heed his own advice, he was not satisfied with his portion. He wanted more. Unfortunately, he was unable to receive it.



Unlike Ben Azai, Ben Zoma was grounded upon the earth. He was wise, and he was strong. Yet, while these are all prerequisites for the successful entry into the PaRDeS, they are by no means the only ones.

Piety²², is by definition separation²³. While Ben Azai was too separated from the physical world, Ben Zoma was not separated enough. Therefore, when the Brilliant Light of HaShem's absolute truth shined within his consciousness, the apparent brilliance was too much for him to personally assimilate.

Though Ben Zoma could learn from all men, there is an aspect of learning that correlates to one's being the vessel and chariot for HaShem's Shekhina¹. This level of learning is beyond the intellect. It requires piety, and separation. Ben Zoma was not lacking. He was complete, but only up to the level where he was at. To ascend to the next higher level was possible. Yet, it was not HaShem who pushed Ben Zoma away. It was Ben Zoma who approached unprepared, by not being complete in piety, thus he was unable to completely offer himself as a chariot to HaShem of Atzilut.

Thus when the Light shone upon him, he could not receive it. Nor could he go back to where he was before. He got stuck, his mind split between that which he had seen, and that which he could not bare to see. Thus we say of him: *"have you found honey, eat your share lest you become full, and vomit it up"*.²⁴ He should have eaten only his share, but no more.

In order to successfully enter the PaRDeS, we must therefore have the devotion, ability, and piety of Ben Azai, coupled with the wisdom, and spiritual discipline of Ben Zoma. Yet, as we will soon see, even with all this there still lies a danger, and this danger is the worst, and most devastating of them all.

The next to enter the PaRDeS was Elisha (Ben Abuya) Aher. He gazed. What he saw caused him to abandon the Torah. Of all the three, Elisha reached the highest level, and yet, he fell to the lowest.

It is difficult to imagine, what he possibly saw, standing in the Brilliant Light of HaShem that would have caused him to turn his back so completely on everything that he knew, and everything that he saw. Elisha ben Abuya was considered one of the greatest of the Sages of his time, complete in piety, wisdom, discipline, and spiritual wealth. Yet, he fell to the lowest depths. Why? It just does not make sense that one of such stature could be toppled. What could it have possibly been that brought him down?

²⁵Elisha gazed upon what is called the supernal unity²⁶.

¹ Shekhina is the manifest Divine here. She is generally feminine, expressing it as the continuous "birthing" of the cosmos.



"Regarding Elisha Ben Abuya (Aher) who was considered one of the greatest Sages, yet he made a grievous error, this being the relationship between the supernal unity, and the lower unity²⁷.

He thought that they were two separate ways of Divine providence. He thought that the entire Torah, and all the commandments²⁸ are given (only) to those who have not yet perceived the "Yihud Elyon", but only the "Yihud HaTahtone." For he thought "there is no King without a people" who would serve Him (G-d) and do as He wishes.

However, the one who been able to perceive the "Yihud Elyon," realizes that there is nothing in existence other than G-d, and that all is nullified before Him. Therefore, there is no place for Torah, and mitzvot, for there really is not any free will (to merit reward or punishment).

Thus, Aher rebelled, meaning he thought that he now had the permission to violate the entire Torah, thinking that he was clinging to the "Yihud Elyon." Even those actions which are the opposite of the HaShem's will, Elisha did not consider to be evil, for he already "knew" that all, already is HaShem, and there is none beside Him.

This mistaken view of his, which he considered turning the evil into good, is called to "cut down the young saplings"²⁹. What he "cut" was the union of the supernal light and the emanated light. He thought them to be two separate ways of Divine providence, and the one who perceives the one cannot perceive (observe) the other.

Elisha made a separation between the aspect of the Divine providence which flows necessarily because His Kingdom is in all places, and which is the sustenance of the manifested planes, and between the supernal light that all is in Him, and nullified before Him, because He is the Source. Yet, this separation is not HaShem's will, for in reality they are both one. This subject is very deep, and profound, how sustenance and nullification are really one and the same."

Elisha Ben Abuya (Aher) had such great ability. Like Rabbi Akiba, he had the potential to enter, and exit the PaRDeS in peace. Elisha was able to experience the supernal union as did Ben Azai, and Ben Zoma before him.

Elisha was not persuaded to stay above, nor did he not integrate that which he experienced. Yet, his process of integrating the "supernal light" into



consciousness simply exchanged one spiritual reality for another. By exchanging the realities of the "emanated light" for the "supernal light", Elisha did not realize that not only was he not doing something good, but he was actually doing something bad.

The subtlest danger in the PaRDeS is related to what you do with what you receive there. We live in a world of darkness. Bringing light into this world must be done in a correct manner, or the vessels, designed to hold the light, could be damaged. This has happened before, and continues to happen now.

The teachings³⁰ regarding the shattering of the vessels, and the entrapment of the sparks of light in the broken pieces is not only a lesson in history, relating an experience of long ago. The teachings of the original lights³¹, their fall, and rectification are of a spiritual/psychological nature. These teachings are to explain to us the processes of the expansions of human consciousness. Most people studying Kabbalah today do not know this.

As is known, there is the "simple"³² and there is the "mysterious"³³. The mysterious relates to the "supernal light" and simple relates to the "emanated light". Elisha's mistake, and the mistake of many people today studying Kabbalah is to believe once you have the one – the mystery, you don't need the other – the simple practice. This error is deadly. It does not kill the physical body immediately, but it does murder the soul. As we have learned previously Kabbalah, and Practice are two aspects of the same thing. Do not deceive yourself! You cannot have one without the other!

There is the simple, and there is the mystery. There is practice, and there is Kabbalah. Yet, there is a mystery to the simple task of practice, as there is a simplicity in the depths of Kabbalah, as there is mystery too. All things, be it, practice, or Kabbalah must be learned, and applied at the level of the mystery, dedicating it to the upper light. For one without the other means the nullification of both. Nowhere do we see this more than in the case of Elisha Aher.³⁴

It is true all things come to be by the Hand of HaShem. HaShem is the Creator of both good, and evil.³⁵ Yet, in His wisdom, HaShem has revealed to us those things that we are to do to make a separation between the sacred, and the profane. These teachings are as true on the basic level, as they are on the highest level. Elisha Aher did not recognize this. **One does not come close to HaShem by going the opposite direction (i.e. into evil/seperation).** Just because HaShem created both good, and evil, does not mean that both have a place in the lives and actions of mankind.



When one experiences the depths of the mystery, and its profundity, the simple becomes almost transparent. Yet, this does not mean that it can or should be ignored. **This was Elisha's grievous error. When he was exposed to the Eternal, he forgot, or ignored the basic.** HaShem has created both. Both have their integral places, together, side by side. Without both, life as we know it cannot continue for it there is no literal, then the mystery is emasculated. Without the manifest, the unmanifest loses its meaning, and context (in terms of this, the reality in which we have manifest).

To disregard the real once true Light is perceived is very tempting. It almost appears that it is the right thing to do, but it is not. Elisha Aher fell into this subtle trap. This is one of the reasons why Torah study prior to entering the PaRDeS is a prerequisite. Even so, as with Elisha, there is no guarantee of success in integrating the higher and lower realities.

Only Rabbi Akiba succeeded in doing this. Of Rabbi Akiba we are taught, that he entered into the PaRDeS, and exited it, in peace. This is why Rabbi Akiva's example is our guide into the PaRDeS.³⁶

Beyond the individual lessons that we are to learn from the experience of each Sage, Rabbeynu HaAri reveals that there is still yet a deeper meaning.

It is written in Sefer Likutei Torah 14B, 15A, that this episode of entry into the PaRDeS was not your "usual" merkava ascension. On the contrary, this was something very different.

Rabbeynu HaAri'zal revealed to us that the four Sages were working in concerted effort to ascend together, and by their combined power, attempt to rectify the collective blemish of mankind.³⁷ In a way the four were acting as a spiritual guerilla squad attempting to strike at the heart of the "Other Side," and, as they say in the military, "take it out." For this reason then is this episode recorded, to let us know what happened, how and why they suffered their casualties, and how to proceed on such dangerous missions in the future.

We as a race are in a continual state of collective war with the powers of the "Other Side." They struck the first blow in Eden, and we have been fighting back, ever since.

It is for this reason, that the coming of Messiah is always put in apocalyptic, and military terminology. As HaShem's "troops" we attempt whatever we can to shine light upon the earth. For, from our point of view, the earth plane is conquered territory, and Israel is HaShem's "forward guard" in the battle to regain the earth.



Yet, our enemy is formidable. Until the fall, our enemy, the "Other Side" existed outside of us, in a clear and recognizable form. Yet, the fall allowed the enemy to become camouflaged within our own bodies, and souls. The Other Side clings to the light, and surrounds it completely so it cannot shine, other than through the filter of the shells that surround us all. These husks thus receive continued sustenance, and we, the barer of the light, are continually suppressed.

The four Sages attempted an act of spiritual sabotage against a very able evil enemy. Their worse opposition, like ours, did not come from some outside angelic, or demonic force. Their worst enemy was inside themselves, within their own psyches.

Even Rabbi Akiba, who entered and exited in peace did not escape completely unscathed. It was not much long after, that the Prince Shimon Bar Kokhba was defeated, and with him, Rabbi Akiba was executed in a most hideous manner.

It is possible that the four Sages were fighting the spiritual battle in coordination with the physical battles waged by the Prince, Bar Kokhba. The four Sages attempted the spiritual assault, as Bar Kokhba attempted the physical assault.

It is apparent from numerous teachings³⁸ that if the four would have succeeded in their spiritual "mission", Bar Kokhba would have succeeded in his physical mission. He would have, there, and then, been made to be King Messiah. Yet, when the war above was lost, the war below soon followed suit. This is in accordance to the great rule; as it is above, so it is below.

What was the error made by these four Holy Sages?³⁹ The four Sages each attempted to rectify 1/4 of the blemish in the collective soul of Adam, and thus jointly, together, rectify the whole thing.

This then was their mistake.⁴⁰ The assault cannot be a concerted effort of individuals jointly working together, each performing a different task. The assault must be comprehensive. Each individual must be completely integrated within oneself. Each individual must attempt the entire rectification by oneself. Every individual must be able to perform the rectification completely, by oneself. It must first be accomplished within oneself. Only then can it manifest externally, and multiply.



As human beings, there is only so much that we can do to rectify the world. Our meditations and spiritual disciplines have the ability to rectify only the internal aspects of the world. The external aspects can only be rectified when Messiah comes. Only he will have the power to make the rectification complete.

As I mentioned previously, what happens below will happen above. If we fight the good battle, at the psychological/spiritual level, and are victorious there, the World to Come will happen automatically.

This is why the correct learning and practice of Kabbalah is so important. It is only by these practices that we gain the spiritual strength to attain the necessary spiritual victory. Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and Rabbi Akiba all knew this. They knew what they were up against. They took their chances. Now, it is our turn.

We have the obligation to do all we can to win the victory in the battle for our souls. Our enemy must be clearly identified. This is the first step to defeat them.

If we can recognize just what these husks truly are, we will have succeeded in stripping them of their camouflage. Once they are exposed, their defeat is certain, and simple.

Yet, remember, these shells are within us. They must be removed, from our actions, our attitudes, our thoughts, and our being. Each individual must do this. No one can do just a part. We all must integrate the whole within us. Then, and only then, can we, as spiritual warriors, fight the spiritual battle, and thus bring the true deserved peace to our earth. As it is said: *"It is not up to you to complete the work, but you are not free to avoid your share"*.⁴¹

Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Elisha Aher, and Rabbi Akiva, each tried to accomplish the ultimate task of Judaism. Each met their fate, as was their due.

While today we might not have the same power as they did, we may still have the same commitment, desire, intent, and loyalty.

It was by the hand of HaShem that they did not succeed. It was not the time, for collective Israel was not strong enough. It has been almost 1900 years since their attempt. Much has happened since then. After so many years, our souls are finally ready.



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שׁוּיַתִּי ה' לִנְגִדֵי תַסִּיד

Keep your feet on the ground; keep your eyes on the goal; open your heart to Heaven...

We can bring the Messiah. But it is not enough just to "want" it. We have to make it happen. We can do this on the spiritual level, by the power within us, and within our Torah. The rest will be done by the Hand of HaShem. Messiah will come. He is coming now. He is already here, concealed, and waiting.

We are HaShem's front guard. For too long have we been lax in our duty. That now must change, lest our enemy make one last final attack and try to finish us, before we are ready to defend ourselves.

Our battle is an inner one, the husks must be assaulted, and overcome. This is the only way to HaShem. The one who wishes to stand in the presence of HaShem must remove the spiritual static that hinders this experience.

¹ **Tehilim 116, 15.**

² **Mishlei 25, 16.**

³ Hagigah 1B.

⁴ Sotah 49A.

⁵ In Yebamot 63B.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ In Abot 4, 2.

⁸ Ibid 4, 3.

⁹ Hasidut.

¹⁰ Berakhot 57B.

¹¹ Gemara.

¹² Bnei Yisrael.

¹³ Shefa.

¹⁴ Merkava

¹⁵ In Abot 4, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hasidut.

¹⁸ nit'rafah da'ato.

¹⁹ Otzar HaKabod 24A, Rabbi Todros Abulafia.

²⁰ Berakhot 57B.

²¹ Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa's words in Avot 3, 12.

²² Chassidut.

²³ Pereshut.

²⁴ Mishlei 25, 16.

²⁵ In the words of the teachings of Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen.

²⁶ "Yihud Elyon"

²⁷ "YIhud HaTahtone".

²⁸ Mitzvot.

²⁹ "katzitz b'niti'yot".

³⁰ From the holy Zohar, and the writings of the Ari'zal.

³¹ Nekudim.

³² Pshat.

³³ Sod

³⁴ In Sefer Even Sheleymah of the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna makes this very point.

³⁵ Yishaya 45:7.

³⁶ by the teachings we have brought down to us from his student, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, the author of the Zohar.

³⁷ which was caused by Adam in Gan Eden.

³⁸ throughout the Ari'zal's writings

³⁹ Rabbeynu HaAri'zal - Sha'ar Ma'amrei Razal (Hagigah).

⁴⁰ In kabbalistic language, the rectification must be in all four of the "Mohin of Abba," which are Hokhma, Binah, Hasadim, and Gevurot. All four must jointly descend together into Z.A. Only in such a way, can His Keter be expanded, and the light of A.K. (Adam Kadmon) shine through Z.A. onto the earth plane, neutralizing the klipot, and restoring all things to the way they should have been in the first place.

⁴¹ As Rabbi Tarfon in Abot 2, 21.