

Part 2: A Story of Tzefat Denouement

The summer after my meeting with Shalom bar Natan, I traveled to Tzefat once again. Third visit. On Shabbat, I went to the synagogue of the Holy Ari. I had deepened myself in the lore of the Ari, that particular Kabbalah that was both abstract, obscure, and as integrative as any mythology I had encountered in my studies. I was eager to pray in the same prayer space as the great Ari. On Friday night, I went to the synagogue of the Ari just above the square in the Old City of Tzefat.

A man was sitting next to me, Eastern European, small cap on his head, rugged face, the hands of a workingman. I mentioned to him how excited I was to be praying in the Ari's synagogue. He shrugged. I pointed to the reader's stand and said, the Holy Ari must have stood right there. He nodded. I've come a long way to pray here, I said. Where are you from? I asked. Czechoslovakia. Do you live here? Yes. It must be wonderful to pray here all the time, I said. It's just a synagogue, he replied, like other synagogues, I happen to come to this one.

Suddenly the luster had diminished for me. It became, for me too, just another synagogue. I wandered out into the courtyard a few steps below where the Ari's synagogue was built. The narrow passageways of the Old Jewish Quarter opened into a small courtyard just below the synagogue of the Ari. On one side of the courtyard was a private residence where a family was sitting at a dining table talking and singing. On the other side of the courtyard I saw a plain stucco building with several windows and a sign over one of the windows that read, hand lettered in Hebrew, Kossov.

I recognized Kossov as a place name in Russia. I heard the sound of praying and singing coming from the windows of the building marked Kossov so I went over. I couldn't see into the windows from ground level because the windows were too high off the ground. I managed to balance a garbage pail upside down and climbed up on my tiptoes to peer into the window.

Even with the pail and on my tiptoes, I was looking into the room at knee level, up through a density of legs, full of dark pants of the men's section of a synagogue, some of the legs in motion, some dancing, some swaying, all moving because the atmosphere in the prayer space was electrifying, even from my angle. As I stared into the room, my eyes attached themselves to the eyes of someone else, deep in the interior of the room, eyes light and blue like the sea, eyes like mine, staring at me from underneath a Chassidic flat hat called a shtreimel and from out of a wild unmanaged beard. His eyes were full of mischief, joy, and seemed to be staring through my face. It seemed so unlikely to me, from that angle, from near floor level of the room, from outside a small window, that I should be seen at all. I glanced behind myself and looked into the

room around my window station to see if perhaps those eyes were looking at someone else. They were looking at me.

He was beautiful in his Chassidic fur hat, his knickers and long dark coat, sitting on a bench toward the other side of the large room which I figured was the Kossov synagogue. He motioned me in, patted the bench next to him where there was just enough space for me to sit, and pointed out the window behind him into the darkness, mouthing something, smiling even broader. He did this several more times, pointing out the window behind him into the darkness at the other side of the room, saying something, smiling knowingly and shaking his head up and down, motioning for me to join him on the bench.

I climbed down off my pail and walked into the doorway to my right. I climbed five or six steps from the doorway up into the room. As I entered the room, dozens of laughing, praying faces turned to me as I walked through the synagogue. I felt as if I recognized ten faces as I made my way slowly to the bench on the other side, though I had never been there before. I nodded to faces that I was certain I knew, though I couldn't imagine from where. When I reached the bench on the other side of the room, the lovely Chassidic face with the laughing eyes patted the seat next to him and I sat down. He pointed out the window behind us and said, "Bar Yochai." I looked out the window and realized that he was pointing at the mountain five kilometers northwest of Tzefat, a mountain that you could see from that window, where the paradigmatic hero of Jewish mysticism is buried, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. He took me to the window, pointed out into the darkness, to Mt. Meron and said again "Bar Yochai."

Later, we sat talking. My friend spoke French and Hebrew, and I told him that Bar Yochai was my hero. "Bien sur," he said. I hadn't spoken French in years, but we were chattering away in French and Hebrew and I hardly noticed the languages we were speaking in.

I asked him why this place was called "Kossov." He told me that the first Chassidim from Ukraine had settled in Tzefat, some of them had come from Kossov, that they had owned this building, and that only recently did the community who is now praying there clean it up and turn it into a shul. They found the sign "Kossov" inside the room somewhere as they cleaned it. They decided to honor their mysterious antecedents and kept the name Kossov as was the custom in Jewish prayer circles, to honor those who preceded you.

He asked me if I had ever been to Tzefat before. I told him the story of Shalom bar Natan and asked him if he knew him. He said he knew him, but that he had moved away and didn't know to where. "Is there anyone else here who reads hands?" I asked.

"Sure," he said laughing, "this is Tzefat -- we all read hands!" And he threw his head back, parting his mighty beard with laughter, and howled out the window like a lion toward Mt. Meron, silhouetted in the dark distance.

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