

Part 1: A Story of Tzefat featuring The Oud

Oud: classical stringed instrument of the Middle East. ancestor to the guitar, ten or eleven strings, no frets

Dedicated to my brother

I don't recall seeing an oud until Tzefat, in 1977. I was in Israel studying at the yeshiva [house of study] in Jerusalem. It was my first trip to Israel. There were many things I was introduced to during that year. I was one of the few in my class who had never been to Israel before, and who I was to becoming was being formed in individual ways.

In the middle of the year, my classmates and I were led around Tzefat on a walking tour of the Old Jewish Quarter of Tzefat. Tzefat was the center of a form of Jewish mysticism called Lurianic Kabbalah, based on the teachings of the great sixteenth century mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria. It is now known also as an artists' colony.

We passed through narrow streets, walkways paved with stone and in the middle of the stone an indentation for water to run off, metal shutters on both sides of the walkway opening on homes, studios, shops that face each other from each side of the walkway. It is a labyrinth of the Middle Eastern market form adapted by the Spanish exiles who settled there in the Sixteenth century and built their homes on the other side of the metal shutters around courtyards, in the Spanish style, from their root memory of the land from which they were exiled in 1492.

I stayed close to my group thinking I couldn't possibly navigate those passageways by myself, it seemed like a great mystery to me, the labyrinth of passageways in the Old City of Tzefat. On one of those streets, we passed a storefront, its metal shutters drawn back and I glanced in and noticed some sort of woodwork on the tables. I realized I was looking at musical instruments, a sensual Oriental shape, unfinished wood, shapes like the swirl of Arabic calligraphy given form in wood. It was an oud, I surmised, something I had heard of as a guitar player in the ancestral sense. That was all I knew about the oud, it was an oriental antecedent to the guitar. I wondered what sort of sound came from such an instrument, how the physics and the senses coalesced to produce sound in such a body.

I walked into the shop, there was no one else present. I stared into the sublime Levantine femininity of the unfinished ouds languishing on the work tables of this workshop. There was no proprietor, perhaps he was off on an errand, perhaps having a cup of coffee at a nearby cafe, perhaps sleeping off a morning of excessive exposure to the sublimity of his wooden creations under a eucalyptus tree, this is the Middle East and there was no one there. I had walked

into an enchanted orchard of oud shapes, not yet music, but the sound that entered my heart that day has never departed, the pure form of an imagined sound.

I wandered out the door and read the hand-drawn sign hung above: Elias, 17 generations of oud makers, Tzefat, an address. Nice sign, I thought, small, elegant, unobtrusive, inconspicuous, untelling, drilled into the stone just above the metal shutters that were drawn across the storefront at closing.

I never did find Mr. Elias on that trip, but the shape and image of the oud had settled into my imagination and when I returned to the States, I found tapes of oud music, I listened and I wanted to try my hand at playing what I heard, but I had no idea where to play or purchase such an instrument.

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Back in the States, I found a good repair person to take care of my classical guitars. In his shop one day, I spoke to him of my interest in the oud. Do you know where I might find an oud in this country? I asked him. He turned around and fished a flier out of the waste basket. "I have something right here," he said. "I got it in the mail."

"Do you work on ouds?" I asked.

"Funny you should ask," he said. "I actually learned on the oud. I was trained in Turkey. The first instruments I worked with were ouds. No, I don't have any, but I do receive these fliers. I just threw this out. . . here it is." He gave me a photocopied flier, primitive, hand drawn lettering, a picture of an oud, a half a page, Waleed's Oud and Olive Shop, and an address, Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

I went to Brooklyn, found the shop, found a half a dozen other shops on the streets, all of which had ouds for sale. They were all highly decorated, inlaid with mother of pearl everywhere, and unplayable. Every one of them. In frustration, I went to a record store and asked for a tape of oud music. I was picking out a few tasty pieces when, as an afterthought, I asked, "you don't have any ouds for sale, do you?"

"I have one. I bought it in Cairo, but it's not very pretty and I don't know if it's playable.

"I don't care if it's pretty," I said, "can I see it?" He showed me the plainest oud I had seen that day, plain but playable, flat neck, good action, no gaping cracks in the body. I acquired my first oud, but I could not play it. I took it into my arms, and began to find the notes in a style reminiscent of the classical guitar,

which I was also studying. I played with my fingers, no pick, like I played the guitar.

I played this way, listening to tapes, mimicking the sounds with my fingers on the eleven strings of the oud, preferring the feel of flesh and nail on string than the flinty formality of plastic or plectrum on string as my earliest training in guitar had taught me.

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Life had intervened and I could not return to Israel for seventeen years. I had forgotten my entry to the world of the East, the sound of the Oud, and on my second trip to the Middle East, seventeen years later, I found myself again in Tzefat.

By this time my oud interest had inflated into an obsession. I found myself for the second time in my life in Tzefat, on a different mission entirely than the first visit, this time leading a group of American Jews around Israel and reacquainting myself with what had become in my imagination my spiritual home. I had come on a mission quite different from my first visit, my responsibilities on the second trip included only teaching the fellow travelers in our group the lore and history of Tzefat. I had even forgotten about the meeting in the oud workshop seventeen years earlier, although I had not forgotten the oud, I had misplaced my first encounter with it.

By the second time I visited Tzefat, in 1994, there lived in that small city a mystic, Shalom bar Natan, who was known to be a reader of hands. This is a technique that was practiced by the great mystic, the holy Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi himself, known by his acronym the Ari. Ari also means lion and he is one of the great heroes of Jewish mysticism. In the literature it says that the practice of reading hands had not been passed on. I had never visited before or since anyone like a psychic, but there are powers in the world, and especially in places like Tzefat, and when you need them, I suppose, they find you. There are powers in the world lying deep within reality, a light that permeates within, as the Chassidim say.

I found Shalom bar Natan's home and arranged a session with him late Saturday night. Eleven people from our tour chose to come with me. None of us discussed casually what happened that night, each experience was quite different it seemed, and I can only describe my own encounter.

I was next to last. At about 2:30 in the morning. Shalom invited me into his work room. His eyes were luminous and warm, shimmering coals out of thatch of thick, black beard. He looked first at my left hand, fingers under and on top, he examined the sides of my hands, fingers, between the fingers, then the other hand, the right hand. He concentrated on the right hand.

He began to talk to me, telling me what kind of work I have done in my life. He described my experience as a parent, it has been hard for you, he said. Your children -- I see problems in the head and in the heart. He was entirely accurate, but I didn't say anything. I listened. One of your children was in danger but is OK now. He used the expression OK. You are strong, very strong, he told me many times how strong I was. I wasn't feeling so strong in those days but I didn't say anything. He told me that my suffering had made me both strong and sensitive. He told me I had an unusual mix of logic and intuition, that I am creative and logical, both developed to a high degree, which is very good, he said. You should teach Kabbalah, he told me, Jewish mysticism, because of these qualities of head and heart.

He told me at what age I married, he was correct. He told me when my father died, he was correct. He told me when my mother died, he was correct. He described my brother to me. He told me a few things that no one knows, unless they have been reading my mail. I was ready to leave, he had told me enough, he had my attention, and I assumed that the session was over. Then he told me the purpose of my life.

I realized that all his prognostication was to attract my attention for the true message which was for him to articulate, at about 3 in the morning, in Tzefat, in 1994, the purpose of my life. I was overwhelmed, paralyzed. Our session had nothing to do with fortune telling, that was for lesser imaginations, all the hocus pocus that passes for mysticism these days, but the true message of what I am supposed to do when I get up in the morning and put on my pants. This was much more wonderful, much more ordinary, much more mysterious, much more daily, much more exotic, much more common, than fortune telling. What I am supposed to do. Today. Every day. The purpose of my life.

We moved from fortune telling to the realm of the Chassidic encounter called Yechidus, when you spend some time alone with the rebbe, he enters your world, he becomes your heart and you become his, and the rebbe gives you your charge, your purpose, he defines your life. He defines it from a place of knowing, of union, because for the time that you are together, he is your heart, and that is why this encounter is called yechidus, "becoming one." Only from that perspective can you speak the true purpose, the definitive encounter that derives its truth from being there.

The Swami once told me a story. There are three butterflies. The first one goes out to investigate the fire. "What was it like?"

"It was hot."

The second goes to investigate the fire. "What was it like?"

"It was hot."

The third goes and does not return. It was consumed by the fire. That butterfly understands fire, because to know it is to become it.

When the Baal Shem Tov, the originator of Chassidus, was dying, he gathered all his disciples around him and told them, each one, the purpose of his life. I often imagine them, gathered around the Baal Shem Tov, receiving their purpose. This is *yechidus*, union, becoming one with the rebbe.

I told the story of my encounter with Shalom bar Natan to Sarika, my oldest daughter. "So what did he tell you?" she asked. "What *is* the purpose of your life?" I told her that I couldn't tell her, I would have to write it down, or maybe tell her in secret, in some sort of shared ceremony that we had not yet created. Or maybe write it between the lines of a story, in the white fire. But it was too holy just to speak.

There is a famous story in the Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 29b. Moses ascends to heaven, and he comes upon God, who, of all things, is attaching crowns to every letter of Torah. "Why are you busying yourself with such a simple activity?" Moses asks. "There will come a man in a couple of generations, Akiva ben Yosef, who will weave a hundred tales on each crown," God says. "Show me," says Moses. "Turn around," God says, and Moses finds himself in the academy of the great Rabbi Akiva, in the eighth row, listening to his teaching. Moses doesn't understand a thing they are saying. He returns to the Holy One and says, "Master of the Universe, you have such a man as this and You give the Torah to me?"

Moses is asking the same question, the answer to which was revealed to me, "what is *my* purpose?" God says, "be silent, let it rise before Me."

Sometimes this is read as "shut up," but it isn't shut up, it's be silent. Find your silence, clear out the space, and your purpose, what you are seeking, will rise before you as it has risen before Me. But first, you must find your silence, God says, be silent and be found. You probably didn't even know you were lost.

Later that night, after having heard my purpose articulated to me by Shalom bar Natan of Tzefat, I was the last to leave Shalom's residence. It was about four AM by now. The lights in the Old Jewish Quarter of Tzefat had gone out entirely. The storefronts are so close to one another that they obstruct the sky, so at night, without lights, it was as dark as anywhere outside I have ever been. I couldn't see a single thing, I couldn't see my own hand in front of my face. So I placed my shoe in the indentation that runs down the middle of the stone pathway. Like a trolley car I made my way gingerly through the Old Jewish Quarter of Tzefat. I walked this way for what seemed to be fifty yards or so, I was wondering how much farther I had to walk until I would emerge from the density of the Old Jewish Quarter into the moonlight. I was moving slowly.

Then the street lights came on. I stood there under the lights of the Old Jewish Quarter of Tzefat adjusting my eyes as if I had crawled out of a cave into

the sun. I stood there, for a moment, acclimating myself to my surroundings, wondering how far I was from the long stairs that run down the middle of Tzefat and once separated the Jewish from the Arab Quarters of town. I hadn't yet moved from the spot where I stood, paralyzed since the lights had come on, stuck by my feet to the stone, and then I looked up.

I was standing in front of a store front, like so many others with metal shutters drawn across the front, my eyes drifted upwards, to a sign, hand lettered, drilled into the stone, which read, Elias, 18 generations of oud makers, Tzefat, an address.

It was the oud shop, the very same address where I first entered the world of the East, the deep world in the ground where I was now rooted and where seventeen years earlier I started to plant myself, tentatively inching into its soil and throwing a few tendrils and shoots. Except that this must have been his son, the eighteenth generation, one generation later than I had first encountered.

At once I was drawn back to that day in 1977 when I first entered that shop, where I met myself in this unexpected place, among the unfinished carcasses of the enchanted oud forest, behind these very shutters, before the oud had trained my hands and expressed the world.