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Hayim Joseph David Azulai's Ma'agal Tov (The Good Journey, 1770s)

Ma'agal Tov

Hayim Joseph David Azulai, 1770s

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Excerpt #1

11 Av 5514/ 30 July 1754

From there [Seligenstadt] we went to the Holy Congregation of Hanau. At the entrance to the city, the gatekeepers would not allow us through. I sent a note to the rabbi, and my eyes failed me while I waited. (Ps. 69:4) In the end, I gave some money to the gatekeeper and they let me pass. As I arrived, the beadle came out to greet us in a terrible fury. But he was compelled to bring us to his home. I said to him: 'let us go and see the rabbi, head of the court, for it disrespectful to the land of Israel for me to be here with you.' And I came this day (Gen. 24:42) to the rabbi and gave him my dossier as well as the account book. He looked through it all and responded that he did not recognize a single signature among them, for who could say whether what was inscribed there was true. As we were talking, I saw the book, *Bet Shmuel* on *Even ha-Ezer* on the table, and I began to engage in casuistry with him about the laws of isolation. When he saw (Gen. 44:3) that I had the scent of Torah, he greeted me with a bright countenance and pure utterances, by opening his blind eyes on the walls.

Excerpt #2

12 Av 5515/ 20 July 1755

Because I had brought *lettera di cambio* from London, I had to return them to their owner. For three hours I wandered through the streets of Paris, on its boulevards and broadways (BT Sab. 6a). 'It is a large land,' (Jud. 18:10), 'whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honorable of the earth,' (Isa. 23:8). As I was walking on one of the streets, I saw statues of Louis XIV and Henry IV and all the kings they had

conquered, 'made of burnished brass' (Ez. 1:7), 'the work of the hands of a cunning workman,' (S. of S. 7:2). Señor Yaakov took me to the office of the head academy who they call the *Directeur de l'Académie des Sciences*. I was there together with him for about five hours. He showed me the volumes they composed and printed annually that pertained to all the different sciences. He would read out to me some of the subjects, and I understood the basic outline. I saw anatomical works. 'Behold the iniquity,' (Ps. 51:7) they spend their days with these sciences, making innovations and inventions. I went to the library and I saw some twenty people reading and copying. I asked the attendant if there were any manuscripts of Maimonides. He answered: 'today the reading room for printed books is open; on Friday, the reading room for manuscripts will be open. Come on Friday and I will show you all of your manuscripts; in any case we have printed volumes of Maimonides. If you like, you are welcome to read them.' Out of respect, I took a copy of Maimonides with the commentary *Migdal Oz*. I sat there and read two chapters. Afterwards, I got up and saw all sorts of different Jewish books. But they were a small fraction of a much larger group. There are houses filled with books of all different religions and sciences in all different languages. Truly an object of wonder.

Excerpt #3

8 Sivan 5533/ 30 May 1773

Although I had wanted to go to Livorno, I was afraid I might be taken prisoner, for the Muscovites 'hath built and compassed with gall' (Lam. 3:5). The sea was filled with Muscovite corsairs and wicked Greeks. My heart melted and turned to water, one cannot imagine my constant anguish, day and night. Until I heard that on the coast of Tunis there were no Muscovites and there was a ship sailing for Tunis and from there to Livorno. I decided to travel on it and remain onboard for a day or two as they unloaded cargo at Tunis, and from there I would proceed to Livorno. I took precautions to receive authorization from the Imperial consul that I was a resident of Livorno. Two Jews had to testify that my married daughter was in Livorno. I received it. But it was all for naught: because my dress and my language bear witness that I am a Levantine. But perhaps it will help.

Excerpt #4

Kislev 5534/ November-December 1773

My coming to Tunis occurred against my will, due to the wicked ship captain who I feared would not let me sound the *shofar* on *rosh ha-shanah*. And also because of *kippur* and *sukkot*. And because the ship was in terrible condition. After *sukkot* I began preparing myself, for I wanted to sail to Livorno immediately but the wealthy man and his son pressed me daily and detained me for a very long time. On a number of occasions, I was actually at the point of departure when the man's son took an oath in

order to detain me. The port was twelve hour's journey, and one needed the king's permission. He [the son] would swear that he would seek to detain me. It was a great burden upon me, and 'Joseph could not refrain himself,' (Gen. 45:1). But their kindnesses overcame me, their gifts given with respect and without asking: nothing was lacking to me to such an extent that I did not even need to leave the house. They treated me with respect and sought to examine all of my writings and my books, inquiring especially whether or not I had kabbalistic ones. I had in my possession two manuscripts whose content I shall now describe. Behold, when I went to Egypt in 1764 with R. Abraham ibn Asher, of blessed memory, and R. Yom Tov Algazi, may the Lord protect him, we stayed with a wealthy man, R. Menasseh, of blessed memory, on our way to Istanbul. The aforementioned wealthy man took a liking to me and detained me. I remained there for seventy days, deliberating whether or not to send for my family, and by-the-by, I was not even going to the house of study but I remained in private study at home.

I went to S. Israel Sullam to examine the writings of our master and teacher, Rabbi Hayyim Vital, may his sacred memory be a blessing, which he had taken as security from R. Joseph Bilado on a loan of 50 *reales*. But R. Joseph Bilado was a broken and impoverished man and he had claimed them for his debt. They were manuscripts written in the very hand of our master and teacher R. Hayyim Vital, of blessed memory. Among them, I saw a wondrous manuscript of our master and teacher R. Hayyim Vital, may his sacred memory be for a blessing, containing practical Kabbalah and the science of letter combinations, among other things from the *tanaim*. I borrowed this book along with several others. I went and isolated myself with it. I had just begun to understand some of this method and was incredibly excited, but as I was examining it, I nodded off and saw our master and teacher R. Hayyim Vital, may his sacred memory be for a blessing. I posed a question to him, and he responded to me. He gave me a glass of wine to drink, and I woke up. I was extremely happy. I had hoped to free myself for the evening but I had to have dinner with the wealthy man R. Menasseh, of blessed memory. At his table people behaved inappropriately, joked around, and the like, to the point that it was almost midnight. I listened in silence but I was not in my home where through careful study of the aforementioned book 'I will pursue, I will overtake.' (Ex. 14:19). But I was unprepared lest some danger befall me. I fastened upon this line of reasoning to the point that in the morning after prayers I brought the aforementioned books back to the aforementioned S. Israel and gave up on them.

Several months later my family arrived from the Holy City. For several years I busied myself with communal duties, family, illnesses, and the like. I did not give a single thought to the aforementioned book. I went to the holy city of Hebron and resided there for three years and four months before departing on this mission as an emissary. When I arrived in Alexandria, they told me that S. Menahem Mir had two kabbalistic books in manuscript. I asked for them and they were brought to me. One of them was the

aforementioned book of Rabbi Hayyim Vital, may his sacred memory be for a blessing, and the other was an early astronomical treatise in manuscript among other things. I was stunned by what I saw. For S. Israel is alive and well, understands such books, is a scholar, and wealthy. How could this book have gotten here? I stared at it, studied it, examined it, and remembered it. This was the very same book. I said to the aforementioned R. Menahem: 'know that this is an extremely rare book, be very careful not to loan it to anybody, keep it with you, stowed away like a pearl.' He responded to me: 'I myself cannot read a single bit of it, what good is it to me? If you would like it, take it. It will bring me great pleasure, take the two that I brought in the market in Egypt. I tell you that S. Israel Sullam knew that I bought them and sent to tell me that they were his and he wanted to buy them back. But I responded that I bought them in public in the middle of the street from the estate of R. Naftali, a guest who had been here.' These are the words of S. Menahem. I was shocked to see how this book had travelled and ended up in my hands several years later and could not figure it out. I gave thanks to His name for bequeathing me this book.

I had a crate of books and when I had said I didn't know Kabbalah, I had taken this book out and hid it among my clothes. Miraculously when they came and searched my books they did not find it among them for it certainly would have been lost, just as Moses had taken the second book on astronomy against my will. Over there, no claim has any effect and all my pleas to have it returned were to no avail and it was never returned. They always wanted to open the small crate that contained my writings but I guarded the keys. One time they forced themselves upon me, took my keys and sought to take my notebook, but I began to shout imprecations until they returned them. One day, I forgot a section of *Birke Yosef* which I was in the process of writing. There were many sages there and as I was speaking with them they took my books. Later on, I sought them but I found them not, (S. o. S. 3:1) I asked for them but no one responded. I was greatly pained by this and I said something to the Qaid and screamed at them until they brought them.