

## 16th CENTURY EARLY ACHARONIM

### TURKEY, GREECE, EGYPT, & ISRAEL

R. Yosef Taitatzak (1465-1546)

R. Yosef was already an adult and an accomplished scholar when he was forced to flee Spain with his father and brother during the expulsion of 1492. The family settled in Salonica where his father, also a recognized Torah scholar, was one of the leaders of the growing Sephardic community. It was there that his father died.

R. Yosef headed a yeshiva in Salonica which attracted some of the finest minds of Turkish Jewry. He was soon recognized as one of the greatest Torah sages of that generation. R. Yosef Caro also acknowledged his authority, and even included some lengthy disputations he had with R. Yosef Taitatzak in his Beis Yosef.

For a short period R. Yosef lived in Serres, a town north of Salonica where he also established a yeshiva, but he soon returned to Salonica. At the end of his life he settled in Constantinople where he ultimately died.

R. Yosef was also an accomplished kabbalist, and he led an ascetic life. With the exception of the nights of the Sabbath and festivals, for forty years R. Yosef never slept in a bed, but on a box with his feet on the ground. He would rise precisely at midnight to mourn the destruction of the Temple, and would then immerse himself in Torah study.

18 hours of his day were taken up with learning and with teaching his disciples. He took care of his mundane needs during the remaining six hours. R. Yosef also received instruction in Torah from a heavenly voice - a maggid - who had also instructed his grandfather. He also maintained close ties with Shlomo Molcho who corresponded with him and was even a guest

of his at his home in Salonica in 1529. In addition R. Yosef was also adept in astronomy and astrology.

### Radvaz (R. David ibn Zimra, 1480-1575)

Radvaz arrived in Safed as a child after the Spanish expulsion. His parents had first stayed in Fez, Morocco before proceeding to Eretz Yisroel. While in Safed, R. David studied under a kabbalist who was accustomed to experiencing numerous miracles. R. David was a diligent student, and in a few years he was known far and wide as an accomplished rabbinic authority.

Radvaz emigrated to Egypt about 1514 and settled in Cairo. In a short time he was recognized as the Chief Rabbi of Cairo, a post which he held for 40 years. He did not, however, earn his livelihood from the rabbinate, but engaged in business, becoming a wealthy and benevolent merchant.

Radvaz was also very active in the communal affairs of the various Egyptian congregations, settling their disputes and grievances. He also introduced important enactments in the religious life of Egypt. Among these was abolishing the custom of using the Seleucid era as the basis for determining the year used as the date on bills of divorce or of sale. This practice, known as Minyan Shetaros, had been in use in the East since the times of Alexander the Great. It was discontinued in Eretz Yisroel upon the establishment of the Hasmonean kingdom, but still persisted in the rest of the East. Radvaz finally abolished this practice.

Radvaz headed a large academy in Cairo comprising many disciples, among them R. Betzalel Ashkenazi, author of Shittah Mekubetzes, R. Yitzchak Luri (the Ari Hakadosh), and R. Yaakov Castro (future leader of Egyptian Jewry).

In 1553 Radvaz returned to Eretz Yisroel and settled in Jerusalem. Observing the dire straits of the community he abolished the old practice under which Torah scholars were obligated to pay only half the amount of

taxes as non-scholars. He now made everyone pay equally. Continuously worsening economic conditions, and the fact that the pasha has cast his eye on the Radvaz's wealth, forced Radvaz to leave Jerusalem and to settle in Safed.

Radvaz finally found peace in Safed and was greatly honored and revered by the local Beis Din and by R. Yosef Caro. In all decisions signed by the entire Beis Din, R Yosef Caro would honor Radvaz and let him sign first. Radvaz left numerous responsa and also composed a lengthy poetic treatise, Kesser Malchus, an imitation of ibn Gabirol's work which utilized numerous concepts of the kabbalah.

### R. Moshe Trani (Mabit) (1500-1580)

R.Moshe received his initial instruction from his uncle R. Aharon Trani, an eminent scholar from Italy who emigrated from southern Italy to Salonica in 1497. At the age of 18, R. Moshe moved to Safed and became one of the most prominent disciples of R. Yaakov bei Rav. In 1538 he was ordained with semicha and appointed as a member of the Beis Din of Safed. And after the death of R. Yosef Caro in 1575, R. Moshe was recognized as the supreme head of this Beis Din.

Mabit (Moshe ben Yosef Trani) was a recognized halachist, and he carried on extensive correspondence with the authorities of his day. He replied to numerous halachic inquiries, and his collection of teshuvos, Teshuvos Mabit, contains 806 replies in three parts.

R.Moshe carried on an extensive correspondence with R. Yosef Caro on various halachic problems. Some of these debates became quite heated, resulting in some ill feeling between these two Torah greats. However, Mabit did visit R. Yosef Caro during the latter's sickness, and R. Yosef Caro blessed him while on his deathbed.

Mabit authored Kiryas Sefer (1553), a paraphrase of Rambam's Mishneh Torah, giving the source of each law, and determining whether it

was a rabbinical enactment or a Torah commandment. Two of R. Moshe's sons were well-known rabbanim. The elder R. Shlomo was a rav in Cairo, and the younger born to him in his old age, was the famous R. Yosef Trani.

### R. Shlomo Alkabetz (1505-1584)

R. Shlomo was a disciple of R. Yosef Taitatzak. Born in Salonica, in 1535 he emigrated to Eretz Yisroel where he settled in Safed. While there he concentrated on the study of kabbalah. He soon became known as one of the greatest kabbalists. His brother-in-law, R. Moshe Cordovero, was his disciple in kabbalah, and even R. Yosef Karo attended his lectures.

R. Shlomo is most famous for his beautiful and inspiring piyut, Lecha Dodi, incorporated into both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic siddurim.

R. Shlomo composed numerous homiletic and kabbalistic works, mostly commentaries to Biblical books. His works on Megillos Esther and Ruth were written for the average layman and are still popular to this day. His outlook relies primarily on the views expressed in the Talmud, midrashim, targumim, and the Zohar.

### R. Betzalel Ashkenazi (1520-1592)

R. Betzalel is generally regarded as a Sephardic scholar for he grew up and spent his life among Sephardim. However, by birth he was an Ashkenazi, and his father's brother was a great scholar in Ludmir, Poland.

While born in Eretz Yisroel he left with his family at an early age and emigrated to Egypt. There he studied under the Radvaz, and attained great heights in Torah knowledge. When Radvaz emigrated to Eretz Yisroel in 1553, R. Betzalel succeeded him as Chief Rabbi of all Egyptian Jewry. Besides being an acknowledged leading halachist, he was also involved in the communal affairs of Egyptian Jewry.

In 1588 R. Betzalel returned to his native Eret Yisroel and settled in Jerusalem. There he administered the communal affairs of both the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. In this capacity, he also traveled to surrounding countries - Egypt, Syria, and Turkey - in order to raise funds.

R. Betzalel's fame rests upon his monumental work - Shittah Mekubetzes - which is a compilation of the chidushim of many of the great Rishonim on many tractates of the Talmud. Some of these shittos were not authored by R. Betzalel, and his authorship of some others is doubtful. The shittos are a collection of independent works by authors whose identity has not been established with any degree of surety.

R. Betzalel was also known as a halachist, and he replied to many halachic inquiries. His responsa were published in his lifetime, in 1590 Venice. Among his disciples was the Ari HaKadosh.

#### R. Moshe Alsheich (1508-1593)

R. Moshe was born into a family of Spanish exiles living in Adrianople, and learned under R. Yosef Caro while the latter yet resided there. R. Moshe later moved to Salonica and studied under R. Yosef Taitatzak. He arrived in Eretz Yisroel as a young man and spent most of his life in Safed. There he was ordained by R. Yosef Caro with the semicha ordination instituted by R. Yaakov bei Rav, and he served as a dayan on the great Beis Din of Safed.

Although R. Moshe devoted the major part of his time to the study and teaching of Talmud, and to the adjudication of cases of law and halachic rulings - he nevertheless found the time to concentrate on Biblical studies, preparing sermons for the community. He was a gifted preacher, and his sermons were eagerly anticipated. From these sermons he developed his popular Torah commentary called Toras Moshe, or simply Alsheich HaKadosh, named after its author. The first part on Beraishis was published in Constantinople in 1595. In his introduction he wrote that since so many other preachers had adopted his sermons as their own, often

missing important points in his thinking, he felt compelled to have his works published to end this deplorable practice. After R. Moshe's death, his son R. Chaim had the entire commentary published in 1601 Venice,

R. Moshe also authored commentaries on other books of the Bible. His first published work was Chavateles HaSharon, a commentary on the Book of Daniel, published in 1563 in Constantinople. He also wrote a commentary to midrash, a work called Shearim, which contains dissertations on matters central to Judaism.

Although R. Moshe was a kabbalist, his commentaries do not reflect this fact. They center primarily on homiletic themes, stressing ethical and inspirational lessons, which may be gleaned from the various Biblical texts. His popularity as a darshan was not restricted to his own generation and locale. His works became the building blocks for generations of preachers for their own sermons. Abridgments were later made of some of his commentaries, including those to Maseches Avos and the Haggadah. His halachic responsa, numbering 140 replies, were also published after his death in 1605 Venice.

In 1590 at the age of 82, R. Moshe left Eretz Yisroel to raise funds for the Jewish community in Safed, which had been impoverished due to a widespread famine. He managed to return to his beloved Safed in 1593, but died shortly thereafter. His best known disciple was R. Chaim Vital, who had instructed his teacher in some of the intricacies of the Arizal's kabbalah.

### R. Chaim Vital (1543-1620)

R. Chaim's father, R. Yosef Vital, was an expert scribe, whose meticulousness and saintliness caused his tefillin and mezuzos to be greatly sought after. R. Yosef left his native Calabria in southern Italy and settled in Safed where, soon thereafter, his son R. Chaim was born.

From his earliest youth, a glorious future was predicted for R. Chaim by numerous sages, including R. Yosef Caro. A known kabbalist, Shabsai Lapidos, told R. Chaim that if he would occupy himself with the study of kabbalah, and would neglect worldly pursuits, he would rise to an unheard of degree in this field.

R. Chaim became a disciple of R. Moshe Alsheich and studied Talmud and halacha under him. He was highly regarded by R. Moshe who ordained him with the semicha ordination which he had previously received from R. Yosef Caro. R. Chaim was ordained in 1590, one of the last to receive such a semicha.

R. Chaim began his study of kabbalah under the tutelage of R. Moshe Cordovero. He obtained a thorough knowledge in this field, and in 1569, at the young age of 26, began composing a commentary on the Zohar. In 1570, the Ari established his home in Safed with the primary purpose of transmitting his extensive and sacred kabbalistic secrets to R. Chaim. As a result R. Chaim became the Ari's foremost disciple and expounder of his school of thought.

At first, R. Chaim had difficulty comprehending the intricate secrets which the Ari revealed to him. Once, while in Tiberias, the Ari gave him a drink from the Kinneret, told him that the water was from the Biblical well of Miriam, and that thenceforth be able to absorb the sublime wisdom of kabbalah. Indeed, thereafter he began to finally understand the intricacies of the Ari's discourses.

The Ari, who committed almost nothing of his vast teachings to writing, relied solely upon R. Chaim to accurately transcribe his kabbalistic system and works for future generations. When the Ari died in the summer of 1572, R. Chaim was recognized as his successor. Only he was trusted by the master to accurately transmit his thoughts to writing.

R. Chaim only remained in Safed for a few years after the Ari's demise. In 1578 he moved to Jerusalem, and in 1584 was appointed dayan there

through the recommendation of his teacher R. Moshe Alsheich. R. Chaim later settled in Damascus (c1593), where he resided until his death.

R.Chaim devoted his energies to arranging the many kabbalistic dissertations that he had heard from the Ari. He put them in their proper sequence in order to represent a complete doctrine and school of thought. This work, Eitz Chaim, is divided into eight parts. For years R. Chaim kept his manuscripts locked tightly away, not allowing anyone to see them. Once, though, when he fell seriously ill, his brother accepted a hefty bribe and turned over the key to R. Chaim's locked closet to a group of scribes. 100 of them laboriously copied most of the manuscripts by hand, returning the originals to the closet when they were finished. Thus the kabbalistic doctrine of the Ari began to circulate among the kabbalists of Eretz Yisroel.

R. Chaim still devoted considerable time and energy to elucidating his master's teachings. He wrote explanations of difficult points, and clarified concepts and contradictions in the Ari's writings. Many of R. Chaim's writings were also hidden away and later buried in the cemetery. A generation later, the manuscripts were exhumed, and today form the nucleus of the many books on the Ari's kabbalah.

R. Chaim also composed sermons on the Torah and on Nach which are almost devoid of kabbalistic overtones, resembling more the style of his other mentor, R. Moshe Alsheich. He also wrote works on Mussar, instructing readers on how to live a life of utmost holiness. Some of his responsa were later incorporated in the responsa of his son. R. Shmuel.

