

EARLY SEPHARDIC ACHARONIM

16TH CENTURY - GREECE AND ISRAEL

R. Yaakov ibn Chaviv (1445-1516)

R. Yaakov was born in Zamora, Spain and learned under R. Shmuel of Valencia. At the time of the expulsion from Spain in 1492, R. Yaakov fled to Portugal. In 1497 his young son Levi, already showing much promise as a great Talmudic scholar, was snatched from him and forcibly baptized. R. Yaakov succeeded in freeing his son, and together they fled to Salonica where he remained till the end of his days.

In Salonica R. Yaakov's greatness was recognized, and he was appointed to lecture at the local yeshiva of the native Jews. As more Spanish refugees arrived, a separate Spanish kehilla was formed, with R. Yaakov as its rav. R. Yaakov was also greatly respected by the rabbanim of the old Turkish communities in Salonica.

During this time period R. Yaakov composed his monumental work - Ein Yaakov - a compilation of all the aggadic material found in both Talmud Bavli and Talmud Yerushalmi. He also composed a commentary on this work, adapted from the most popular commentators, including his own original interpretations. Although the work follows the sequence of the Talmudic tractates, R. Yaakov also intended to add an index dividing the material into 12 principal subjects.

R. Yaakov did not live to complete his entire work, and the remainder was published after his death by his son, R. Levi ibn Chaviv. Ein Yaakov soon became a very popular work, used mainly by the working class who did not have the time nor the ability to delve into halachic and Talmudic intricacies.

R. Levi ibn Chaviv (1485-1545)

R. Levi was born in Zamora, Spain but fled to Portugal in 1492 when the edict of expulsion was implemented. After an attempt to forcibly baptize him, R. Levi and his father managed to escape Portugal and found refuge in Salonica, Greece. In Salonica R. Levi studied under his father and other local scholars. He was soon acknowledged as an outstanding halachic authority. When his father died in 1516, without finishing his monumental Ein Yaakov, R. Levi finished the work.

As his reputation grew, his influence in the community of Salonica also grew, and his opinion was sought on most communal matters. R. Levi officiated as the head of the local yeshiva, and he taught many distinguished disciples. In 1522 R. Levi decided to go to Eretz Yisroel. While on his way he stayed for a while in Aleppo, Syria where he lectured to the local Torah scholars. He initially visited Jerusalem for a short while, then left for Safed. While in Safed he met R. Yaakov bei Rav for the first time. These two scholars engaged in heated debates over a number of halachic issues. In 1524 he returned to Jerusalem where he was soon acknowledged as the chief rabbi and leader of the Holy City.

R. Levi now began to interest himself in halachic matters having special relevance to Jerusalem. He thus established the proper procedure for observing Purim on Shabbos. And in addition he determined the correct year in which shemitah was to be observed.

R. Levi then became embroiled in the great Semicha controversy. R. Levi refused to accept the ordination for himself and also refuted proofs sanctioning its re-establishment. The rest of the scholarly world followed his lead, and the semicha idea gradually withered away.

R. Yaakov bei Rav (1475-1546)

R. Yaakov was born in Maqueda, Spain and remained there until the expulsion in 1492. After the expulsion he fled to North Africa where he was enthusiastically received in recognition of his extensive erudition. He was appointed rabbi of Fez, Morocco at the age of 18, and later stayed for some time in Algeria. He eventually made his way to Israel and settled in Jerusalem. He established a yeshiva there, but was forced to disband it in 1520 due to a famine. He then went to Egypt where he re-established his yeshiva in Cairo. But he soon returned to Eretz Yisroel in 1524 and settled in Safed. His newly established yeshiva attracted the greatest scholars of his generation, R. Yosef Caro, R Moshe Trani, and many other luminaries.

In 1538 R. Yaakov decided to re-establish the semicha ordination. His stated intention was to enable penitents, especially Conversos, to achieve full atonement and thus to re-enter the Jewish community. R. Yaakov reasoned that penitents could achieve full atonement if there were a beis din (Sanhedrin) authorized to do so. The rabbis in Safed welcomed this innovation in Jewish law, but those of Jerusalem did not. The dispute soon escalated, and R. Yaakov was forced to flee Safed as a result of a trumped-up libel case levied against him. He then fled to Damascus. R. Yaakov realized that his idea of granting semicha had failed, and he wrote a letter expressing his disappointment that he had not been able to fulfill this mitzva.