

GREAT RABBANIM OF LATTER HALF 17th CENTURY POLAND

R. Yehoshua Heshel of Cracow (c1663)

R. Yehoshua studied under his father R. Yaakov who was rabbi of Brisk, and later of Lublin. At an early age he displayed an extremely sharp wit and a keen mind. His father took him as an assistant at his yeshiva in Brisk, and when he assumed the rabbinate in Lublin, R. Yehoshua became his father's right hand man. Upon R. Yaakov's death in 1644, R. Yehoshua became rosh yeshiva, and thereafter Chief Rabbi of Lublin.

R. Yehoshua Heshel remained in Lublin until 1654 when he was called to Cracow to succeed R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller. There he remained until his last day. Because of the great reverence in which he was held, he was called The Rebbe, Reb Heshel. Beside being acknowledged as an outstanding scholar, R. Yehoshua was regarded as a saint, and was known to be extremely charitable and kind.

Due to the Cossack massacres of 1648-49, and the later Swedish invasion in 1656, R. Yehoshua spent almost two years in Vienna in order to induce the rich and influential of the Viennese community to extend a helping hand to their unfortunate brethren in Eastern Europe. He also traveled to many communities which had not been affected by the attacks in order to raise funds for the victims. While he was in Nikolsburg, Moravia the rabbi of the community, R. Menachem Mendel Krochmal treated him with the utmost awe and respect. He even deferred to him when a halachic question had been brought to the attention of both of them.

R. Yehoshua Heshel's yeshiva was always filled to capacity, and many of the greatest scholars of the age were his disciples. Among his famous pupils were the Shach, R. Hillel ben Naftali Hertz, R. Shmuel Feivush, and R. Gershon Ashkenzi. R. Yehoshua composed many Talmudic commentaries, but due to his modesty he refused to have them published. Only fragments of his vast legacy have been preserved in the works of his

disciples. Many of his halachic decisions are also quoted in the works of his contemporary sages, and those of later generations. Many of R. Heshel's descendants were also famous scholars, such as R. Yechezkel Landau, the Noda BiYehudah.

R. David HaLevi (the Taz) (1586-1667)

R. David's maternal grandfather was R. Yitzchak ben Bezalel, rabbi of Ludmir in the province of Volhynia. He was a scholar much venerated by Rama and Maharshal. R. David's older brother, R. Yitzchak HaLevi was also a greatly respected scholar, and a few of his responsa are cited in his more famous brother's works. In his youth, R. David studied under his older brother R. Yitzchak, and later studied under the Bach who took him as his son-in-law.

R. David then moved to Cracow where, in great poverty, he pursued his studies. From there R. David was called to serve as rabbi of Potolitsch, a small town in Eastern Galicia. However, with the small salary he received, he was reduced to dire straits. In 1619 the Bach was appointed Chief Rabbi of Cracow, and on his way there he passed through R. David's city. He was aghast that his son-in-law was living in such a deplorable financial condition. Soon after this, R. David moved to the prestigious community of Posen, where he served as unofficial rabbi while the rabbinic post of that town was vacant. He ended up remaining there for more than twenty years.

In 1643 R. David returned to his native Volhynia and was appointed to the rabbinate of the old and prominent town of Ostroh. The Maharsha had served there as rabbi some years earlier. There R. David headed the town's famous yeshiva, and was soon recognized as one of the greatest rabbis of his time. His disciples and associates implored him to write his chiddushim on the Tur and the Shulchan Aruch, and his rulings on matters of halacha. R. David published his Turei Zahav on Yoreh Deah in Lublin in the year 1646. At the same time his younger contemporary, R. Shabsai HaKohen (the Shach) was composing his competing commentary, Sifsei Kohen, in Cracow.

R. David's peace was again disturbed by the Cossack uprising of 1648-49. He was forced to flee, first to Lublin, and then to Moravia. Finally he was called upon to serve in one of the rabbinates of Lemberg, where he remained until the end of his life. R. David's last days were saddened by the violent deaths of his two sons who were martyred in the great riots which occurred in Lemberg in Sivan of 1664.

R. David's last days also coincided with the era of messianic fervor which held Jewry in its grip with the advent of the false messiah Shabsai Zvi. When conflicting reports about the impending coming of the Moshiach reached Poland in 1666, R. David, already at the age of eighty, sent his son and his nephew to investigate these reports. The two arrived in Turkey in the summer and were warmly received by Shabsai Tzvi. Just two months later the false messiah apostatized, and rejected Judaism for Islam. The news of the "Messiah's" apostasy reached Poland before the two messengers even had a chance to return.

R. David is famous for his extensive Shulchan Aruch commentary, Turei Zahav, abbreviated Taz. It is published in almost all editions of the Shulchan Aruch, especially the sections of Yoreh Deah (printed directly next to the text) and Orach Chaim. Only the work on Yoreh Deah was published during his lifetime (Lublin, 1646), and gained him a reputation as a foremost halachist. The Shach, R. David's contemporary and rival, wrote critical glosses to Turei Zahav, but this work was only published after R. David's death.

Both commentaries, the Taz and the Shach, are indispensable to any student of Yoreh Deah, and rabbinical ordination is based on the applicant's knowledge of them. The work on Yoreh Deah and the one on Orach Chaim are the most important of R. David's works, and they, together with Shach and Magen Avraham, form the backbone of halacha in these sections of Shulchan Aruch. The commentaries on Even HaEzer and Choshen Mishpat were published when those parts of Shuchan Aruch had already been provided with adequate commentaries. The first part of the

commentary on Choshen Mishpat was published in Hamburg, 1692 by the famous gaon R. Tzvi Ashkenazi, with accompanying notes. The second part was published many years later (Berlin, 1761), and the work on Even HaEzer was printed even later by a descendant of the Taz.

A distinguishing feature of Turei Zahav is that it goes into a lengthy explanation of Tur's views, analyzing the most subtle nuances of the Code's language. As a result this work is regarded as a commentary to the Tur as well as to the Shulchan Aruch. R. David named his work Turei Zahav to highlight its aspect as a Tur commentary. In his preface to Yoreh Deah he stresses the obligation we have to defend and interpret the views of the earlier sages. However when the object is to arrive at a ruling on a particular halacha, this must be tempered with a genuine regard for the truth. Consequently, sometimes the views of our elders must be disregarded in the final halacha. With typical modesty, he laments the fact that by necessity, he has been forced into such a situation.

The Taz is regarded as one of the greatest sages of his age. His rulings were readily accepted with great reverence by most of his contemporary rabbis. By contrast his rival, the Shach, was yet a relatively unknown young man, and it took time for him to be recognized. A scant twenty years after the works of both men were published, it was found necessary to print both works side by side alongside the text of the Shulchan Aruch (1677). They remain in this hallowed place to this very day.

R. Moshe of Lublin d.1668)

R. Moshe was a scion of a very distinguished family - he was a great-great-grandson of Rema. His mother was the daughter of R. Bunom, whose father, R. Avraham Meisels, was Rema's son-in-law. R. Avraham Meisels was a wealthy scholar, author of a commentary on the Tur. R. Yitzchak (R. Moshe's father) was entrusted with the privilege of editing this work (never published) and was also a scholar of note. R. Moshe's younger brother, R. Shimon Wolf, was a lay leader of the Vilna community, and the Shach's father-in-law. R. Moshe himself became the son-in-law of the

illustrious Talmud commentator, Maharsha. In his youth R. Moshe was rabbi of Luboml (Poland), and later of the prestigious community of Lublin.

R. Moshe wrote Mahadurah Basra on the Talmud (Lublin 1670), containing additional chiddushim by his father-in-law, together with his own writings. The chiddushim on the aggados are all by R. Moshe, but those on the halachic parts of the Talmud are by him and his father-in-law. The distinction between the two scholars has been lost in the editions available today. Unfortunately some of R. Moshe's chiddushim were lost during his various wanderings as a result of the Cossack uprising. Some of the Maharsha's writings were also lost at that time.

R. Moshe ben Naftali Hirsh Rivkah (1595-1671)

R. Moshe's father, as well as his grandfather, had been scribes in Prague. R. Naftali's father was also a student of R. Yehoshua Falk HaKohen. As a proofreader for the Jewish printing establishment in Lublin, R. Naftali Hirsh added many rulings found in the margin of his mentor's copy of the Shulchan Aruch. He added these to the edition of the code which appeared in Lublin, 1596-97. No copies of this edition are in existence today. R. Moshe's sister was the mother of R. David Lida, rabbi of many communities in Poland and Lithuania, and later in Amsterdam, and the author of many published works.

One of the pillars of the learned Vilna community, R. Moshe devoted himself for many years to his studies. He had a most extensive private library. In 1655 when the Cossacks entered Vilna, he was forced to flee his beloved town along with the other Jewish inhabitants.

R. Moshe arrived in Amsterdam where he was favorably received by the community. The Sephardic rabbanim of Amsterdam, R. Shaul Mortera and R. Yitzchak de Fonseca, greatly respected him. It was in Amsterdam that R. Moshe wrote his important work, Be'er HaGolah (Amsterdam, 1662-66). This work is a very accurate work for the sources of the Shulchan Aruch, with some glosses. It has been published in almost every edition of the

Code ever since. R. Moshe also wrote a treatise on the rules to be followed in arriving at halachic decisions, a commentary to the entire Mishnah, and additions and revisions to his Be'er HaGolah. None of these works were ever published, though.

In spite of the great respect R. Moshe enjoyed in Amsterdam he longed to return to Vilna, and succeeded in doing so before his death. The Vilna Gaon was a descendant of R. Moshe as his paternal grandfather was the son-in-law of a son of R. Moshe. In the Vilna Gaon's own work on the Shulchan Aruch, he refers to his antecedent's sefer in almost every entry.