

## **RABBINIC LEADERS OF 16TH - 17TH CENTS. POLAND**

### **R. Mordechai Yafeh (Levush) (1535-1512)**

In his youth R. Mordechai studied under both Maharshal and Rema. Although he was not much younger than Rema, he held him in great reverence and was especially loyal to him throughout his life. He upheld all of Rema's decisions and stressed his role as the ultimate halachic authority. In 1553 R. Mordechai married and returned to his home town of Prague. He occupied himself with teaching and headed a yeshiva. He then began to write his monumental work, Levush, on the four parts of Shulchan Aruch.

Due to the persecution of Bohemian Jewry and their expulsion from Prague by King Ferdinand, R. Mordechai traveled to Italy in 1561. There he studied astronomy and related sciences. This enabled him to fully comprehend Rambam's explanations of the lunar and solar calculations regarding the determining of the Jewish calendar. In 1572 he accepted the position of rabbi of Grodno, Lithuania, and later that of Kremenitz. In 1598 when the Maharal of Prague left Posen to settle in Prague, R. Mordechai returned to Poland to officiate as rabbi in Posen. He remained in this city until his death. He was active until his last days, taking part in a halachic controversy surrounding a questionable get given in Vienna.

R. Mordechai was deeply involved in communal activities, and was regarded as the head of the Council of Three Lands, the supreme legislative board of Eastern Europe. R. Mordechai was also a kabbalist and composed a super-commentary to the kabbalistic Torah commentary of R. Menachem Recanati. Even his halachic works are interspersed with kabbalistic information.

R. Mordechai is popularly known as the Levush, after the ten works which he wrote, each beginning with the word Levush. The entire opus is called by the general name Levush Malchus, after the royal garments worn

by the author's namesake, Mordechai, as recorded in the Book of Esther. Each individual work has the word Levush as the first word in its title, followed by a word or words from the two verses in Esther (8:15-16). These verses describe Mordechai's royal garments and the joy which gripped the city of Shushan upon Haman's downfall.

In his introduction to his monumental halachic codex, R. Mordechai explains that he had perceived the need for a short halachic code at a very young age. Although R. Yosef Caro's encyclopedic Beis Yosef was accepted enthusiastically by scholars and satisfied their needs, it was nevertheless too lengthy to be convenient for practical use by the multitudes. During his sojourn in Italy, R. Mordechai heard that R. Yosef Caro was preparing an abridged version of his work. So he desisted from beginning such a monumental undertaking. He then decided to write commentaries to 3 very important works - Rambam's Moreh Nevuchim, R. Menachem Recanati's commentary to the Torah, and Hilchos Kiddush HaChodesh as found in Rambam's Mishneh Torah.

When the Shulchan Aruch was finally published, R. Mordechai found it to have two shortcomings - the reasons for the decisions were entirely omitted, and the views of the Ashkenazic scholars were completely disregarded. He thereupon began writing his work, but stopped short upon hearing that Rema was in the midst of writing his notes to the Shulchan Aruch. However, after seeing that Rema, too, wrote with the utmost brevity, not mentioning the reasons for his decisions, he resumed composing his work. R. Mordechai wished to present a comprehensive halachic code which would avoid the lengthy style of Beis Yosef, and the overly terse and legal style of the Shulchan Aruch.

Although Levush gained popularity during R. Mordechai's lifetime, after his death the Shulchan Aruch was accepted as the code of law practically universally. Levush, however, is an important work for the halachic student wishing to penetrate to the depth of a subject. It is cited extensively by the major commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch.

Of all Rema's disciples, it is perhaps the Levush who most closely resembled his venerable teacher. Aside from composing a comprehensive halachic code, R. Mordechai also emulated his mentor's outlook. He occupied himself with astronomy and related sciences, and shared the former's viewpoint that a synthesis between the kabbalah and philosophy was possible and desirable.

### R. Yehoshua Falk Katz (c1545-1614)

Born in Lemberg, Poland (now Lvov), R. Yehoshua learned during his youth under Rema (to whom he was related), and later under Maharshal. He married the learned daughter of a communal leader (parnas) of the Jewish community in Lemberg, and his wealthy father-in-law supported his gifted son-in-law for decades after his marriage. R. Yehoshua founded a yeshiva at the home of his father-in-law, and had numerous outstanding disciples. Since he had sufficient means of support, he declined to officiate in a rabbinic post - feeling that these offices would take away too much time from his learning - and chose instead to serve the community by teaching and writing his classic works.

Although acknowledging the great positive accomplishment of R. Yosef Caro in his Beis Yosef commentary on Tur, R. Yehoshua Falk nevertheless felt there was still place for further commentary. He felt that R. Caro had not concentrated sufficiently on explaining the Tur itself, using that work primarily as a means of organizing his own material. R. Yehoshua felt that R. Yosef Caro's conclusions were sometimes based on erroneous premises which were not compatible with the sources. Additionally, in his opinion the Shulchan Aruch had shortcomings and needed some further explanation. R. Yehoshua disagreed with the Levush's attempts in this area, and felt that some of the decisions needed correction.

R. Yehoshua Falk decided to write a work which would correct these shortcomings. He divided his intended work into four parts: a concise commentary concentrating on understanding the view of Tur; a more elaborate commentary investigating the sources themselves and

establishing the correct conclusions to be drawn from them; and notes on Rema's Darchei Moshe, bringing it up to date with all decisions and opinions cited after it was written. These three parts were given the general name Beis Yisroel, but are today known as Derishah U'Perishah. The fourth part is known as Sma (an acronym for Sefer Me'iras Einayim), a short and sufficient commentary on the Shulchan Aruch itself. This last commentary brought him much fame in the realm of halacha, and was quoted frequently with much praise by all Shulchan Aruch commentators. R. Yehoshua Falk, however, did not live long enough to complete the Sma on the entire Shulchan Aruch. Only the section on Choshen Mishpat was written (Pague, 1606), and was thereafter published in most editions of Choshen Mishpat. His Tur commentary, which he completed on all four parts of that work, is published today in all editions of the Tur.

R. Yehoshua Falk also wrote a pamphlet containing enactments which were passed at the Council of Three Lands; most of these rulings concern the laws of usury. He also wrote responsa, chiddushim on the Talmud, commentaries on the Torah, and some kabbalistic and philosophical treatises. All were unfortunately destroyed by a fire in Lemberg.

R. Yehoshua's wife Beila was also noted for her piety, exemplary character, and erudition. She outlived her illustrious husband, settled in Eretz Yisroel after his death, and was buried in Jerusalem near the grave of the prophet Zechariah. Her son, in his preface to Derishah U'Perisha, cites a number of halachic customs that his mother had put into practice based on her own reasoning.