

## **RABBINIC LEADERS OF 16TH CENTURY POLAND (cont.)**

### **R. Moshe Isserles (Rema) (1530-1572)**

Rema was the leading disciple of R. Shalom Shachna. He was born into one of the most prestigious families in Cracow. His father, R. Yisroel Isser was himself a talmid chacham of note, an extremely successful businessman noted for his philanthropy. R. Yisroel was also a lay leader (parnas) of the Cracow Jewish community, which was one of the most respected in 16th century Europe. The name Isserles was an allusion to Rema's middle name, Isserl which was a common nickname for Yisroel. Rema's brother, R. Elazar, was a son-in-law of R. Shlomo Luria, and his sister, Miriam, was married to R. Pichas Horowitz, a noted scholar and rosh yeshiva.

Rema studied under R. Shalom Shachna of Lublin, the foremost rosh yeshiva in Poland. His master was so fond of him that he took him as his son-in-law. Shortly after his marriage, the young R. Moshe was appointed as a rabbi in Cracow, an extremely prestigious post for such a young man. Unfortunately misfortune stalked R. Moshe in 1551-52. First his mother died, then his 20 year old wife died, and then his maternal grandmother passed away. To perpetuate their memory Rema's father built a synagogue which came to be known as The Rama's Shul. R. Moshe then married the daughter of R. Mordechai Katz, a respected member of the Cracow community.

Rema established a yeshiva in Cracow where he delivered many brilliant discourses, and also supplied his students' material needs. This yeshiva soon competed with the great yeshivot of Lublin. Among his better known disciples were the Levush (R. Mordecai Yafeh). R. Yehoshua Falk Cohen (author of Sma), R. David Ganz (famed historian and astronomer), R. Hirsh Shor (one of the teachers of the Bach), and R. Avraham Horowitz (father of the Shelah).

Rema was recognized as a halachic authority while still a young man. He carried on an extensive halachic correspondence with his older contemporaries, such as Maharam Padua, R. Yosef Caro, and R. Shlomo Luria (Maharshal). His writings do not indicate that he was an enthusiast of the intricate pilpul method of study. He stressed instead the halachic aspect of Talmudic study, preferring the more apparent meanings of the texts. He showed great respect, however, for R. Yaakob Pollak and for R. Shalom Shachna, quoting their halachic opinions in his own works, even though he quietly disagreed with their scholarly style and method.

In addition to Talmud and halacha, Rema immersed himself in the study of medieval Jewish philosophy and kabbalah. He believed that the two systems were compatible, and that the differences between them were a mere matter of semantics. The keen interest in philosophy shown by students in Polish yeshivot in the period before the 1648 pogroms can be attributed to the Rema's interest in this subject. Rama's elder contemporary, R. Shlomo Luria, strongly took him to task for his interest in secular studies - especially philosophy. Rema also evinced a keen interest in astronomy and history.

Rema's fame rests upon his works, especially his annotations to R. Yosef Caro's Shulchan Aruch. Since R. Yosef Caro adopted the practices of the Sephardic communities, his code was not usable for Ashkenazic Jewry until Rema added his supplement, Sefer HaMapah, consisting of notes inserted into the text. (Cracow 1571) This work established Rema as the pre-eminent halachist for all of Ashkenazic Jewry. Thus the Shulchan Aruch - as modified by these notes - became the supreme code of law for world-wide Jewry. Rema's notes elevated R. Yosef Caro's Shulchan Aruch from an individual expression of halachic view, to the level of an authoritative halachic codex worthy of use by all of Jewry. It was Rema's humility which induced him to express his opinion in the form of glosses to a contemporary work, rather than opt for a personal accomplishment in the form of an original, individual work.

Rema's rulings are heavily based on the opinions of the Tosafot and other later German and French scholars, some preceding him by only a generation or two. In this he differed from R. Yosef Caro who based his choice of authorities almost exclusively on the views of Rif, Rambam, and Rosh, with heavy emphasis on Rambam. Rama also had a tremendous reference for time-hallowed custom. He warns us to be careful not to disparage Jewish customs as they were not instituted for naught. He also made extensive use of the rule that in cases involving substantial monetary loss (hefseid merubah), more lenient views may be followed.

Rema also authored Darchei Moshe, short comments on Tur and Beis Yosef which formed the basis for his glosses on Shulchan Aruch. He originally envisioned this as an encyclopedic work, elaborating on all the conflicting views regarding any matter touched upon in Tur. He would then conclude with the final halacha. Once the Shulchan Aruch had been published, Rema shortened his work and completed it in the form of a complement to Beis Yosef. This work was never published, but printed in a shortened form together with the Tur (Berlin, 1702-03). It is today a standard feature of that work.

Another of Rema's major works is Toras Chatas (Cracow. 1569), a codex on dietary laws modeled on R. Yltzchak of Duren's Shaarei Dura. R. Chaim ben Betzalel severely criticized this work in his Vikuach Mayim Chaim (Amsterdam, 1612). R. Chaim flatly rejected the entire trend to present halacha in codex form. He felt that Halacha had to be rooted in solid Talmudic scholarship, and that its codification would lead to the temptation to dispense with the arduous task of studying the texts. One would then rely only on the authority of the codifier. Rema was also criticized for considering only Polish customs, which even at that early date already differed substantially from the usage in Germany.

Beside his halachic works, Rema wrote an allegorical exposition on the Book of Esther. He wrote this work in the year 1556 when he fled Cracow because of a plague and found himself alone and without sefarim on Purim day. He conceived the novel idea to write this commentary on Esther, which

he then presented to his father in lieu of Shalach Manot. He also wrote a philosophical explanation of the Temple and its sacrifices (Prague, 1570). Altogether, his responsa contain over 132 halahic communications (Cracow 1640). In addition he wrote a commentary to the Zohar, but it has till today remained unpublished.

A unique contribution of the Rema was his expertise as a scribe. He obtained a special authoritative Tikun (manual for writing Torah scrolls) from Safed through the services of R. Yosef Karo. He then wrote a Torah scroll following its precise instructions. The scroll apparently contained 24 variations from most other scrolls then extant in Eastern Europe. This scroll which existed up till WWII, was deposited in the Rema's shul, and would be read from on selected occasions.

The great reverence for Rema was attested to by yearly pilgrimages to his grave on his yahrzeit. Jewry's appreciation for his accomplishments is summed up by the inscription on his tombstone which reads: "From Moshe (Rambam) to Moshe (Rema), there was no one like Moshe."