

## THE EARLY ACHARONIM - 16TH CENTURY ITALY

### R. Yehudah Chayat

R. Yehuda was forced to leave his birthplace during the Spanish expulsion. He originally settled in Portugal, but left again after the Edict of Expulsion in 1497. He was twice captured at sea by pirates, but was finally redeemed by the Jewish community of Italy where he lived till the end of his days.

He composed a commentary on Kabbalah called Minchas Yehuda, published in Ferrara in 1558. This work is a classic in kabbalistic literature in its own right and was acclaimed by the great kabbalist of Safed, R. Moshe Cordovero (Ramak).

### R. Yosef Yaavetz (1435-1507)

R. Yosef originated in Lisbon, Portugal where he became acquainted with both R. Yosef Chayon and Don Yitzchak Abarbanel. Following the Spanish expulsion in 1492 he first sailed to Sicily for refuge, but later went to live in Mantua. There he devoted his energy to consoling and giving spiritual direction to the Spanish exiles who were arriving in Italy in great numbers.

A strong opponent of philosophy, he turned to the Talmud and Kabbalah for all authentic religious instruction. R. Yosef stressed that strong belief and study of the Torah and Talmud were the very heart of Judaism. His works dealt primarily with ethics and religious dogma. He felt that Judaism could be contained within three fundamental beliefs:

- 1) The unique oneness and unity of G-d
- 2) His providence over the created world
- 3) The eventual perfection of the entire universe will come to be when all Creation will come to realize the true conception of G-d, and

will be led to serve Him.

R. Yavetz's works enjoyed great popularity among preachers, and he earned for himself the distinction of being known as the 'chassid Yavetz'.

### R. Yehudah Mintz (1408-1508)

Born and raised in Germany, R. Mintz emigrated to Italy in the mid 15th century, and eventually became the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazic community of Padua for 47 years. R. Yehudah was considered to be the leading halachic authority of Italy in his later years.

R. Yehudah headed a yeshiva in Padua, and many of the Italian rabbis of his era were his disciples. He was succeeded in his post by his son R. Avraham, and upon R. Avraham's death in 1525, his and the son-in-law of R. Avraham, R. Meir Katzenellenbogen, Maharam Mi Padua, became the Chief Rabbi.

Most of R. Yehudah's writings were destroyed shortly after his death, but sixteen of his responsa, and a short treatise on the laws of Get (divorce) and Chalitzta (release from the obligation of levirate marriage) were printed, together with Teshuvos Maharam Padua (Venice, 1553).

### R. Avraham Mintz (d1525)

R. Avraham, successor to his father as Chief Rabbi of Padua, was a recognized Talmudist and halachist. He added comments to his father's Seder Gittin, later printed together with the responsa of his son-in-law Maharam Padua.

Sometime in the 1500's R. Avraham got embroiled in a halachic controversy with R. Yaakov Pollak, a Talmudic scholar of Poland. The controversy arose concerning the adjudication of a complicated monetary case. The case involved two Jews from Bologna. More than 200 rabbanim wrote opinions about it. R. Avraham and R. Yaakov Pollak took opposite

stands on the matter, and the exchange of letters between them became very heated. Ironically, both gedolim died on the self-same day.

### R. Eliyahu Bachur (1468-1549)

R. Eliyahu was born in Neustadt, Germany and is often referred to as R. Eliyahu Ashkenazi. Like many German Jews of his time, he emigrated to Italy in order to escape the persecution and oppression of that era which was the lot of German Jewry.

In 1504 he was found to be teaching Hebrew language and grammar in Padua. To assist his students he wrote notes, called 'nimukim', based on the grammatical work of R. Moshe Kimchi, entitled Darchei Lashon HaKodesh. The manuscript was given for transcription to a man named Binyamin ben Yehudah who then published it in Pesaro in 1508 as his own work. The plagiarist interspersed the work with remarks from other works, and thus contained many errors. The book, though, soon gained great popularity and became the manual of choice for both Jewish and Christian Hebrew-language students. In 1546 R. Eliyahu published a corrected version of the book in Venice. After forty years the work was finally attributed to its rightful owner.

R. Eliyahu soon gained a reputation as one of the foremost Hebrew grammarians, and his lucid and concise style endeared him to all students of Hebrew. The Renaissance had brought with it a renewal of interest in the classical languages - Hebrew included - and R. Eliyahu's works were in great demand among the Christian intelligentsia.

R. Eliyahu's activities in Padua were interrupted in 1509 when the city was taken and sacked by the combined armies of Emperor Maximilian I of Germany, Louis XII of France, and other members of the League of Cambria. R. Eliyahu was now forced to seek a new place to live. He initially went to Venice, but finding no means there by which to earn a livelihood he continued on to Rome. There he was hired by Cardinal Viterbo who offered to maintain R. Eliyahu and his family in exchange for Hebrew lessons. R.

Eliyahu spent 13 years at the palace of the cardinal, translating Hebrew texts for him and composing many of his own grammatical works. The arrangement ended up proving beneficial for both parties. . R. Eliyahu, too, gained in knowledge, for he benefited scholastically from Viterbo's knowledge of Greek.

R. Eliyahu was widely criticized for giving instruction in Torah to a non-Jew, and he felt compelled to justify himself before the Jewish public. In a lengthy preface to his treatise, Mesores HaMesores. R. Eliyahu defended his actions based on 3 considerations: 1) his poverty 2) others before him had instructed non-Jews, and 3) the prohibition referred mainly to the transmission of the secrets of the kabbalah and other secrets of the Torah.

During this time period, R. Eliyahu composed Sefer HaBachur (Rome 1518), his classic grammatical work. That same year he published grammatical tables of verbs for beginners, entitled Luach BeDikduk HaPoalim V'HaBinyanim. He also published a work on unusual words to be found in the Bible.

In 1527, R. Eliyahu's serenity was once more disturbed when the armies of Emperor Charles V conquered Rome, and R. Eliyahu lost his property and most of his manuscripts. He returned to Venice where the printer Daniel Bomberg engaged him as a proofreader in his Hebrew publishing house. There, once again, he found pupils - both Jews and non-Jews - interested in studying the Hebrew language. R. Eliyahu resumed his literary activity and published Mesores HaMesores (Venice 1538) - how the traditional system is used to ensure the proper spelling and punctuation of the Bible. He also published a work Tuv Taam (Venice 1538) on the proper cantillation (taamim) to be used in reading the Torah. R. Eliyahu's reputation soon spread, and he was offered various prestigious teaching positions in Christian universities. However, he refused to be a professor of Hebrew and also have to live in cities, such as Paris, where his fellow Jews were not welcome.

In 1540 after Bombereg's printing firm had ceased to exist, R. Eliyahu accepted an invitation from another Christian printer to supervise his publishing house in Isny, Germany. There he published Sefer Tishbi. A dictionary containing 712 previously undefined words used in the Talmud and the Midrash. He also wrote Sefer Meturgeman (1541), a concordance and dictionary of Aramaic words found in the various targumim. In both these works, R. Eliyahu sometimes used German or Yiddish translations, making this the first instance where the Yiddish language appeared in scholarly works.

After returning to Venice in 1544, R. Eliyahu published a correct edition of his notes to the Michlol and Sefer HaShorashim of Radak (1546). He was especially appreciated by non-Jewish Hebraists, and many of his works were translated into Latin and other languages. R. Eliyahu was also the first to print secular material in Yiddish, and thus is considered to be the father of Yiddish literature. In 1541 he wrote Bava d'Antone - a paraphrase of a popular Italian chivalric novel - later printed as Bove Buch, thus originating the Yiddish expression "Bube Maise". R. Eliyahu also translated sections of the Tanach into Yiddish.

#### R. Ovadia Sforno (1470-1550)

R.Ovadia, aside from being a proficient Torah scholar and halachic authority, was also a physician and educated in secular subjects. While in Rome where he studied medicine and other disciplines, he also instructed the humanist, Johann Reuchlin in the Hebrew language and grammar. R. Ovadia lived in Rome for a long time, where he also made the acquaintance of Dovid HaReuveni in 1524. Later he settled in Bologna where his younger brother lived. There he supported himself by practicing medicine, as well as officiating as a dayan in the local beis din. He was also active in communal affairs, and was instrumental in the opening of a printing establishment in Bologna.

R. Ovadia is well known for the Torah commentary which bears his family name. (Venice 1567) He also composed commentaries on various other books in Tanach, plus the tractate Avos. His commentaries are distinguished for their terseness, lucidity, and adherence to the plain meaning. He also wrote short comments on the philosophical and ethical implications of the text. In his treatise Kavanos HaTorah he dwells upon the purpose of the narratives in the Torah, some of the chukim, and at great length on the Mishkan and its particulars. All of these works, except for the commentary on Avos, were published posthumously.

The only work of R. Ovadiah's which was published during his lifetime was Or Amim (Bologna, 1537). In this treatise he sets out to answer the philosophical questions raised against the Torah by both Jewish and Gentile scholars. He especially addresses himself to reconciling the Torah with Aristotelian thought when possible, and refuting those of its tenets which are incompatible with Torah thought. R.Ovadiah also personally prepared a Latin translation of his work which he sent to Henry II of France. He also sent Henry his commentary to Shir HaShirim together with a letter of dedication.

#### R. Yitzchak Leon ibn Tzur

R. Yitzchak is the author of Megillas Esther (Venice 1592), a popular commentary on Sefer HaMitzvos of Rambam. It mainly seeks to answer the critical comments of Rambam to that work. This commentary is considered to be the foremost commentary to Sefer HaMitzvos, and is printed in most editions of this sefer.

#### R. Yehoshua Boaz Baruch (1518-1555)

Almost nothing is known about R. Yehoshua Boaz's life except that his family had been exiled from Catalonia, Spain. However, his contribution to Jewish life is inestimable. Every day the Talmudic student encounters him on the pages of the Gemara, and benefits from his improvement of the Talmudic texts.

Observing that there were many diverse opinions regarding halacha, and no general rule used in decision-making, R. Yhoshua Boaz planned the compilation of two major works. Sefer HaTaamim, also named Sefer HaPeshutim, contains the basic source material necessary for arriving at an intelligent assessment of the halacha - e.g., the pertinent passages of the Gemara, Rif, et.al. - all in concise form. His Sefer HaMachlokes contains all the halachic material around which controversies had arisen, in order to aid the student in ascertaining the majority opinion.

R. Yehoshua's zeal to simplify the study of the Talmud, and the opportunity afforded to him by his association with the publishing houses in Italy, led him to introduce some important features into the printed editions of the Talmud which remain part of it today.

R. Yehoshua Boaz provided the Talmud with a reference apparatus which greatly facilitates its study. He provided references for all the Biblical verses mentioned in the Talmud. These references were printed in the margin of the Talmud under the name Torah Or. He also compiled Mesores HaShas, references to parallel Talmudic texts in which a particular passage occurs. (This was an upgraded version of a previously published Mesores), and he also wrote Ein Mishpat, references to the halachic conclusions reached by Rambam, Smag, and Tur based on the Talmudic discussions.

The latter two works were also printed in the margin of the Talmud page, and then were printed in every subsequent edition. R. Yehoshua also compiled a halachic index to the Talmud called Chikur Halacha, arranged according to the system of Rambam's Mishneh Torah, printed only once in the Sabbioneta edition of the Rif (1555). In addition he introduced the division of Rosh and Mordechai into numbered paragraphs so that these important poskim could be referred to accurately. Prior to this, references to these poskim had been by chapter only, making it difficult to find the cited passage.

In Sabbioneta in 1553 R. Yehoshua Boaz undertook to direct the publication of a new, improved edition of the Talmud, with many important features, but only one tractate, Kiddushin, was published. Shortly after the publication of this volume, Pope Julius III pronounced a ban on the Talmud (August 1553), and further publication of the Talmud in most of Italy was halted. R. Yehoshua died soon after, during the publication of the Sabionetta edition of the Rif.

R. Meir Katzenellenbogen (1482-1565)  
(Maharam Padua)

Born in Prague, R. Meir studied in his youth under R. Yaakov Pollak. He later traveled to Italy where he studied under R. Yehudah Mintz of Padua. The latter's son and successor, R. Avraham Mintz, was so impressed by the young student that he chose him to be his son-in-law. Upon R. Avraham's death in 1525, R. Meir was appointed to be his successor and became the Chief Rabbi of Padua, a position he held until his death.

R. Meir maintained a halachic correspondence with R. Ovadiya Sforno, numerous other rabbanim, and especially with the Rema, who also happened to be a relative of his. His responsa (Venice 1553) were printed together with what remained of the responsa of R. Yehudah Mintz, including some notes by R. Avraham Mintz on the laws of divorce and chalitzah. Some of R. Meir's responsa also appear in the responsa of the Rema. The Rema regarded R. Meir as one of the greatest scholars of the age.

R. Meir's notes on the Rambam were published in the edition of the Mishneh Torah printed in Venice by Aloisio Bragadini in 1550. In the same year, a competitor - Marco Guistiniani - printed a competing edition of Rambam and also included a selection of Maharam's notes, minimizing the scholarship of these notes and belittling their unnamed author. The consequences of this incident transcended the monetary squabble between the two non-Jewish publishers.

R. Meir, who was a partner to Bragadini in this edition of Rambam, turned to R. Moshe Isserles in Cracow to render his opinion on the matter. Rema responded with a beautifully argued responsum. He argued that although Guistiniani was a non-Jew, he was compelled to follow Jewish law in this regard. Thus he was to be restricted to selling his edition only after R. Meir had sold all the copies of his edition. Finally, Rema pronounced a cherem on Guistiniani's edition as long as the conditions stipulated in the verdict had not been fulfilled.

Guistiniani now appealed to the ecclesiastical powers, and the matter was brought before the pope. Testimony was given by various apostates, among them Solomon Morano, the grandson of R. Eliyahu Bachur, that the texts printed by Bragadini contained attacks against the Christian religion and Jesus. As a result of this, in 1553 Pope Julius III issued a law against the printing or possession of the Talmud.

As a consequence of all this controversy, R. Meir became one of the signers of a far-reaching rabbinic enactment, signed in Padua in 1554, forbidding the publication of any work without the approbation of recognized rabbinic authorities. This led to the establishment of the familiar custom, honored over all the Jewish world, to garner haskamos from prominent rabbanim prior to the publication of a sefer.

### R. Yosef ben Yehoshua HaKohen (1496-1574)

R. Yosef's father was a Spanish Jew, who upon being expelled from Spain in 1492, settled in Avignon. When his son Yosef was five years old, the family moved to Genoa, Italy where Yosef spent his childhood years. In 1515 the Jews were expelled from Genoa, and the family moved to the small town of Nova, north of Milano, where R. Yosef was married. Like many Italian Jews he took up medicine as a profession by which to earn his livelihood. In 1538 he returned to Genoa to practice as the official doctor of the town. However, twelve years later R. Yosef left Genoa because of competition and jealousy from other doctors. He settled in a town north of Genoa where he continued to practice his profession. In 1568 he settled in

Monferrato, n.w. of Genoa where he most likely died. It was there that he finished his work Emek HaBacha in 1575 when he was already 78 years old.

R. Yosef had always had a keen interest in history, and he expended considerable effort to collect historical data and to compile it. He was especially interested in the martyrdom of world-wide Jewry, and made it a point to highlight Jewish suffering in his works. He authored A history of the kings of France and of the Turkish Ottomans (Sabionetta, 1554). a world history with special emphasis on the histories of France and the Ottoman Empire. He also wrote Emek HaBacha, a chronological account of Jewish suffering. This work had special significance in recording the various reports of Jewish persecution in Italy during his lifetime.

#### R. Yochanan Treves (1490-1577)

Scion of a prominent French rabbinical family which traced its genealogy to Rashi, R. Yochanan was an expert halachist. Although not wishing to accept a full rabbinical position, he served as a posek and rav in the homes of the elite, who in those days employed their rabbis on their estates to look after their halachic needs. He also worked as an editor in the Bomberg printing firm in Venice, editing various halachic works,

R. Yochanan is best known for his work Kimcha DeAvishona (Bologna, 1540), a commentary on the Machzor Roma. He also composed a commentary on the laws of slaughtering which was unfortunately eventually lost. Some of his halachic responsa are also cited in the works of his contemporaries, among them the Rema and the Beit Yosef of R. Yosef Karo.

#### R. Azariah min HaAdumim de Rossi (1511-1578)

According to an old tradition, the family de Rossi was brought to Italy by Titus, after his victory over Jerusalem.

R. Azariah combined Talmudic erudition with a great proficiency in the Greek and Latin classics, as well as in the writings of medieval Christian scholars. In his works he draws upon Jewish, Christian, plus secular sources. De Rossi resided in Bologna and Ferrara, and was present in Ferrara during the terrible earthquake of November, 1570. He and his family narrowly escaped death during that catastrophe, and he devoted a section of his Meor Einayim to a narration of it.

R. Azariah is best known for his controversial work Meor Einayim (Mantua, 1573-75). This sefer is divided into 3 parts:

1. Kol Elokim - report on the earthquake, including an essay on the natural and supernatural causes of natural catastrophes
2. Hadras Zekeinim - a translation (in Hebrew) of the epistle of Aristeeas which contains the narrative about the Septuagint (translation of the Torah into Greek by 72 sages in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy II (Philadelphus), 285-246 BCE); a partial description of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the answers given by the Sages to some philosophical questions
3. Imrei Binah - an examination of the writings of Philo (1st century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Egypt), inquiries into the Talmudic chronology of the 1st and 2nd Temples, inquiries into the calendar systems in use among the Jews of the Talmudic era, and comments on some wondrous aggados in the Talmud and midrashim.

De Rossi's inquiries led to many conclusions which contradict the traditions of the Tannaim and Amoraim. He maintained that this was permissible in the realm of history and other areas not pertaining to halacha. R. Azariah's views raised a great furor in the Italian community of his day, and two prominent rabbis wrote letters protesting the author's views. Various local Batei Din banned the book, some restricting the ban to people under the age of twenty-five. News of the controversial sefer even reached Eretz Yisrael, and in Safed a general ban against it was drawn up and was to be signed by R. Yosef Karo, but he died before being able to do

so. The Maharal of Prague was outraged that the rabbis of Italy had allowed its publication, and he wrote a lengthy critique of the sefer in his Be'er HaGolah. Years later some other sages cited Meor Einayim, if only to refute its views.

### R. Gedalyah ibn Yachya (1526-1587)

R. Gedlyah was descended from an eminent family originating in Portugal. His father was an eminent pupil of R. Yehuda Mintz. He headed a yeshiva in Imola, Italy and authored a commentary to the five Megillos and the rest of Kesuvim (Bologna, 1538). He also wrote an ethical-philosophical work entitled Torah Ohr. His grandfather was the rav of the Portuguese community of Naples for 22 years until the dissolution of the Jewish communities for that entire area because of its annexation by Spain (1495). R. Gedalyah studied under his grandfather as well as R. Meir Katzenellenbogen of Padua, and R. Ovadia Sforno of Bologna.

R. Gedalyah was born in Italy and lived in various cities. In his writings he intimates that he was forced to change his living place very often due to political turmoil. In his works he refers to Pope Pius V's ban on moneylending by Jews (1567), followed by the expulsion of the Jews from the smaller towns in the Papal States (1569). R. Gedalyah suffered a severe financial loss, and had to leave his home and travel from city to city.

R. Gedalyah was well versed in the Bible and Talmud, and altogether composed about twenty works. The only work which was preserved was Shalshelles HaKabbalah (Venice 1587) in which his other works are enumerated. Shalshelles HaKabbalah is a historical work, arranged chronologically beginning with Adam and extending to his own era. It has a second part which contains dissertations on a variety of subjects. His work was severely criticized by later authorities for his lack of critical judgment. Still his work remains a valuable source for the history of the era in which he lived.

### R. Yehuda Muscato (1520-1590)

Born in Osimo he later moved to Mantua. There he was close to the circle of two Provençal brothers - one of whom was the rabbi of the city. Both of them were educated in secular disciplines, and R. Yehudah, in addition to considerable learning in Talmud and Halacha, also possessed a thorough knowledge of Greek and Arabic philosophy. R. Azariah min HaAdumim was also a close friend of his, and he showed R. Yehudah several passages of his Meor Einayim before it was published.

R. Yehudah preached regularly in Mantua and served as a model to the Italian darshanim (preachers) who followed him. His sermons are collected in Nefutzos Yehudah (Venice 1589) and have made a significant contribution to homiletic literature,

R. Yehudah's fame, however, stems from his excellent commentary to R. Yehudah HaLevi's Kuzari. This commentary is considered the very best written on the Kuzari, wherein R. Yehudah elaborates at length on all of the philosophical themes mentioned in the sefer. He draws on his own thorough knowledge of Greek and Arabic philosophy, plus science, and on all the subtle nuances in the language of the Kuzari.

#### R. Aharon of Pesaro (2nd half, 16th cent.)

R. Aharon is primarily known for his popular work Toldos Aharon (Freiburg, 1583), notes on the Bible containing references to passages mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud. The author also published a revised edition of his work to the Chumash and the five Megillos containing additional references to the Zohar as well as other sefarim (Basel 1591). This work was later printed in the margin of many editions of the Bible with additional references to the Talmud Yerushalmi.

R. Aharon was a wealthy, greatly respected and influential man who owned a significant library. He was the driving force behind the publication of Abarbanel's commentary to Devarim (Sabbioneta 1551).

## R. Shmuel Yehudah Katzenellenbogen (1521-1597)

The son of Maharam mi Padua, R. Shmuel became a recognized halachic authority during his youth and was appointed a member of the Venice beis din. He also maintained an active halachic correspondence with the Polish rabbinical authorities - the Rema and the Maharshal. From 1566 until his death R. Shmuel Yehudah served as Chief Rabbi of Venice where he headed a prominent Talmudic academy. There he authored a work comprising 12 philosophical dissertations containing eulogies on contemporary rabbinical figures, among them a eulogy on Rema, a relative of his.

R. Shmuel sent his son, R. Shaul Wahl, to study in the famous yeshivos in Poland. There he became very popular with the princes and officers of the kingdom whom he advised on strategic problems, as well as cases involving difficult mathematical calculations

## R. Avraham Yagel del Galiccho (1540-1606)

R. Avraham was born into a rich Italian family which was involved in the banking business. While drawn into the business, which he hated, he nevertheless devoted a great deal of his time to the study of Torah as well as secular disciplines. Because of his involvement in a bitter inheritance squabble, he was thrown into prison. There he wrote the most intriguing of his works, Gei Chizayon. The work uses the literary device of a conversation between the author and his dead father to set down the author's innermost thoughts. Therein he pours out to his father his pain and suffering, and the father then takes his son on a tour of Gehinom and shows him the people who inhabit this underworld. Not surprisingly, most of the people who inhabit this underworld are bankers.

R. Avraham also wrote Lekach Tov, parts of which were later incorporated into a 17th century work by R. Yeshayah Horowitz (Shelah) called Shnei Luchos HaBris. This work is designed for the education of the young, and is considered to be an important inspirational book of mussar. It

explains the fundamentals of Judaism in the form of a conversation between a teacher and his student. R. Avraham also wrote a book on prayers, and instructions on how to conduct oneself during a plague. He also wrote Eishes Chayil (Venice 1606), a guide for married life, in the form of a commentary on Proverbs 31. Many of his other works, however, were never published.