



The Story of Yosef Caro

Author of the Shulchan Aruch

The Story Thus Far

In 1496, the Spanish Inquisition has at last descended on the Portuguese Jewish community. Under pressure from his powerful neighbor, the King of Portugal has issued a decree expelling all Jews from the land, with conversion as the only alternative for those wishing to remain.

Among those who hear the unhappy news is Ephraim Caro, formerly a Spanish Jew and aristocrat who, along with many others, had fled to Portugal four years earlier. A man of natural eminence, it is now him to whom the others turn for help and guidance. With his young son Yosef at his side, he assures them that the Jews will eventually be free of their persecutors, to follow the Torah in peace.

CHAPTER II

“**M**ama! Papa!”
The child screamed as he was wrenched from his mother’s arms. His father, standing nearby, looked on in despair. The boy continued to struggle, even after he was cast into a cart already filled with children.

The friar, a haggard man in a shabby robe, hoarsely barked, “Silence! You are now subjects of the church! You must rejoice over her benevolence! If not for that, you would receive the fate of your cursed parents.” At this last sentence he spat in the couple’s direction.

In the foreground, the Caros forlornly watched as the miserable cargo was carted away to their

conversion, never to be seen again by family or community. Hiding behind his mother’s skirt, little Yosef peeked out in terror, while his father Ephraim solemnly turned to Yosef’s uncle Yitzchak.

“It has already begun,” said Ephraim grimly. “Already they seize our children . . . even before our time to leave has come.”

Yitzchak nodded. “My neighbor’s son was taken away this morning. His other son had managed to flee and hide in my closet.”

Slowly the Caros headed back toward the Jewish section of Lisbon. Ephraim Caro’s aquiline features darkened under the shadow of the bell tower, now chiming three o’clock.

“What shall we do, Ephraim?” his brother asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? We must leave at once.”

“Leave?” Yitzchak asked, so loudly that pedestrians turned to stare. “Don’t you feel that your decision might be premature?”

“It is not premature. We were given a year’s notice.”

“And much can happen within a year’s time. The king might have a change of heart. I’ve heard it said that he had initially been reluctant to issue the decree. It was only to appease the Spanish monarchs. Perhaps when he realizes how much we have been of service to his country he’ll rescind the order. You must have faith, Ephraim, that Hashem is with us.”

Glumly they turned the corner, up the steps to Ephraim’s house. His wife and Yosef trailed behind. When they

reached the top of the steps, all three turned and faced Yitzchak Caro.

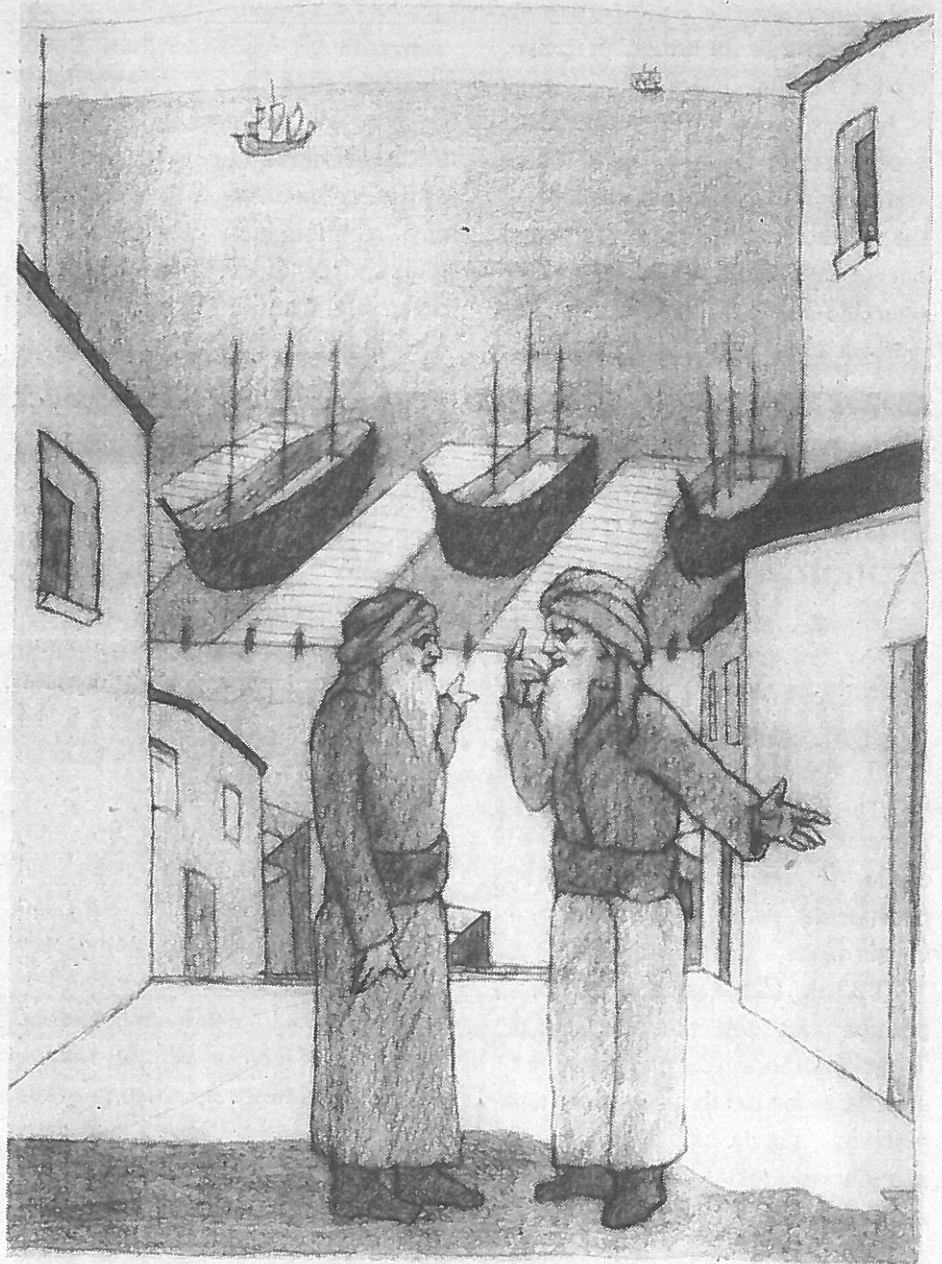
"Much else can occur within a year's time," Ephraim replied darkly. "More kidnaping, more torture. You may do as you wish, Yitzchak. I cannot dictate to you what measures to take. But I fear for myself and my son Yosef. I will not see him torn from our arms by those treacherous priests. You say I must have faith that Hashem is with us. I do, Yitzchak. I have faith that He is with us everywhere — in Egypt, as well as Portugal. We cannot remain here any longer. If we do, we'll die."

The Lisbon harbor was a cacophony of wailing and mournful goodbyes as hundreds of Jews boarded the various ships en route to Moslem countries. Ephraim Caro and his family stood waiting for a ship bound for Alexandria, Egypt.

"Don Ephraim," wept a merchant, "may G-d be with you." He himself was heading for Constantinople, the Turkish capital. With him were Yitzchak Caro and his family, now standing tearfully on the dock and waving farewell to the other Caros. Friends and relatives waited at the port for other boats, to transport them to places in the Near East, the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Gulf — anywhere that was favorable to Jews.

Standing on the deck, Ephraim Caro surveyed his beloved community for the last time. He prayed for those who were willing to risk dangerous waters and unknown lands, as well as those who were willing to risk a life of poverty and humiliation, if not worse, all for *Kiddush Hashem* — the sanctification of G-d's name.

Across the deck, his brother Yitzchak and his family waved mournfully. "G-d willing, I will contact you as soon as we arrive in Constantinople!" Yitzchak called.



His wife, too, waved, with their children. "Farewell," they called, as the ship pulled away.

One month later, Yitzchak Caro did indeed arrive in Constantinople — alone. His decision to follow his brother's advice and leave had cost him his entire family. During the long hard voyage they perished, one by one.

In great anguish, he beheld the Jewish community awaiting him at the harbor. Standing at the forefront were the community's most learned men, bread salt and in hand, the traditional sign of welcome. Yitzchak

scanned the crowd and for a moment forgot his grief. Quite a few of the members he remembered quite well from Spain and Portugal.

"Welcome to Constantinople, Don Yitzchak!" called a man who had once been a grain dealer.

Yitzchak Caro remained motionless. The men approached him, smiling, ceremoniously handing him the presents. Addressing him in Spanish, they then offered him a post as head of a prominent yeshiva, which had been established shortly after the arrival of the new immigrants.

"It would be an honor," Yitzchak replied, bowing.

In a short time Yitzchak Caro acclimated to his new home. There were many like him, to his delight — many who had fled the hostility and hate of the Spanish peninsula, to make their life in Moslem territories. The Turkish sultan was kind to the Jews.

Jews proved of immense value to the economy.

Evidently he had had the wisdom, if not the benevolence, that the rulers of Spain and Portugal conspicuously lacked, for these Jews proved of immense value to his impoverished economy. They quickly achieved prominence, just as they had in their former lands.

Yitzchak Caro enjoyed his new position. As the communities of Turkey swelled daily with new arrivals, so too did the synagogues and yeshivos. As in the old days, the rabbis and scholars took precedence over the merchants and craftsmen. At the head of the assembly was Yitzchak Caro, who was respected by all.

His brother Ephraim had a similar tale. Arriving in Alexandria, Egypt, he too was greeted by a transplanted Spanish community, which gave him a worthy position. Unlike Yitzchak, however, Ephraim was fortunate to arrive with his family intact.

Taking his place among the hundreds of boys his age, little Yosef studied in one of the numerous Jewish schools, while yeshiva life flourished in the new land. As in Spain and Portugal, Yosef excelled in his learning, and gained the approval of his teachers.

Besides his fellow emigres, Yosef also befriended many of the local Jews — those who had been in Alexandria for generations. In time the boy became acquainted with the diverse new communities. The Jews of Alexandria dressed and spoke differently than the Jews of Spain. Their customs, traditions, and convictions set them in a world far apart. It was an entirely different outlook, one that was incompatible with the ways of the foreigners. In time, unfortunately, communication between the two groups grew increasingly difficult.

Even among the Jewish emigres there were numerous differences, which the boy keenly noticed as he grew older. Himself having lived in an intensely religious environment, he was surprised to see Spanish Jews who were modernized, who spoke and acted like the average Spaniard. At times it was difficult to remember they were even Jews; perhaps even they themselves had trouble remembering. Not surprisingly, a certain friction developed between them and the more traditional Jews of Yosef's kind, who refused to ape gentile ways.

Yosef received a taste of this prejudice in his own home. His mother warned him constantly to avoid eating at the homes of the modernized Jews, whose *kashrus* was not trusted. In another matter, Ephraim Caro found himself disagreeing with certain acquaintances over the interpretation of a particular law. On the Sabbath he carefully bypassed certain synagogues where these Jews were said to frequent, and he often received cold stares, even verbal abuse, by those who had once treated him with the greatest deference.

In spite of internal differences, however, all the Jews were united against a common foe, a foe which

threatened them once more. One day, on the way home from school, Yosef froze in shock. In the distance, outside the central church, he saw a large cart filled with children, many of whom were friends of his. They dismally faced a priest, who was holding a silver basin and sprinkling holy water in their direction. Approaching the cart were several muscled men, each holding a child in his arms.

Yosef backed away and ducked behind a carriage, lest he too be seized by the kidnapers. Nevertheless, from behind a wheel he continued to watch.

A crowd of people were leaving the church and gathering outside the steps. A friar, standing before the cart, extracted a little girl and held her high so the churchgoers could see her well.

"What do I hear for her?" he called. The girl, terrified, squirmed and whimpered.

One man, a peasant in a sheepskin coat, called, "Five gold pieces."

"Five?" called the friar. "Do I hear more?"

"Ten," cried someone in the crowd.

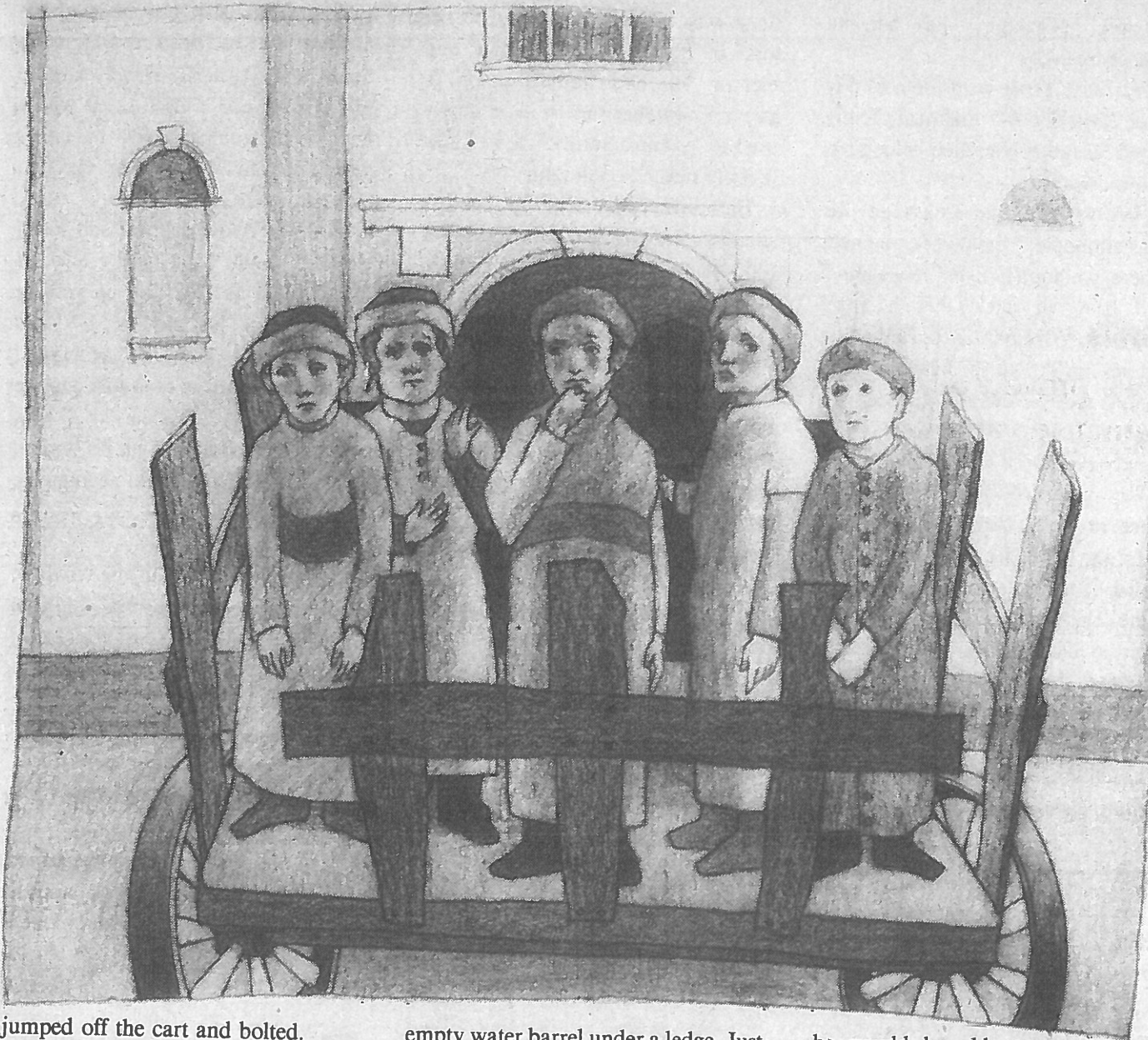
Yosef's legs went weak and he clutched the carriage wheel for fear of fainting away then and there. He imagined himself there on the auction

The little girl was finally sold for fifteen pieces.

block, a Jewish soul to be bought and sold into slavery, and eventual spiritual death.

The little girl was finally sold for fifteen pieces. Three more "sales" were conducted this way, as the populace walked away with their new Christian belongings.

Suddenly a boy, older than the rest,



jumped off the cart and bolted.

"Catch him!" cried the friar.

Seizing their spears and nets, the foremen raced after the youth, pursuing him around the market square. The boy pushed his way through the pedestrians, knocking down a few, and headed off toward a side street. Some of the crowd themselves gave chase, but in vain. Turning a corner, the boy dove into a passing haywagon and secreted himself within the large pile.

As soon as the wagon turned another corner, the boy leaped out from the hay, frightening an old woman, and curled himself inside an

empty water barrel under a ledge. Just in time, for the foremen had arrived, followed by a small band of soldiers. After prowling and poking, they finally left.

"Who was he?" asked a soldier.

"A former Jewish boy . . . a convert now," replied a foreman.

"What? No name?"

Inside the barrel, the boy sighed with relief. There were plenty at home who did know his name — Emanuel. However, in the activity of rounding up Jewish children, no one had bothered to write it down. This negligence was Emanuel's saving. Since he could not be traced, he knew

he would be able to return home safely.

Later that evening, he knocked on the door of his parents' house. His mother, in hysterics ever since she had heard the news from Yosef, wept with gratitude at the sight of her son. Desperately, she hugged him, while the boy's father thanked G-d for the deliverance of his son.

Yosef, too, embraced his friend.

Emanuel's mother rose from the table. "They will come back," she whispered. "They'll look for more. My daughter, my niece, my neighbor . . . no one is safe here."

"We must leave at once," said her

husband. "Alexandria has become another Spain."

Tearfully, Yosef went the next day to see his friend^t off. Emanuel silently helped his father load their belongings onto a donkey.

"We've booked passage to Constantinople," Emanuel explained. "There, we hope to live freely again."

"I have an uncle there," Yosef answered. "Yitzchak Caro. He's a *rav*; perhaps he'll help you once you're there. Goodbye, and may G-d be with you."

The years followed each other precariously. One day, Yosef, returning home from school, saw a crowd of people standing outside his home. This time, they were not a mob eager to take Jewish souls. Instead, they were Jews who had gathered to honor a soul just taken.

"Yosef," they announced, "your father died this afternoon."

During *shivah*, Yosef, seated on the

floor with his mother, wept over the loss of this wonderful man and mentor. He had further reason to grieve. Even after *shivah*, as he slowly tried to resume a normal life, he knew it could never be the same.

He morosely pondered his family's situation. Life in Alexandria had never been easy — with both the discord among the Jews as well as hostility from their neighbors. Unfortunately, over the years it had grown much worse. The Caros' efforts to reconcile the Jews came to naught; they themselves had been victim to internal quarrels over customs and legal interpretations. The modernized Jews looked down on the more traditional, and vice versa. The local and emigrant Jews avoided each other like lepers. There were quite a number of men, former friends of Ephraim's, who did not attend the funeral, not wishing to be seen with those they considered "riff-raff."

Financially, the Caros had managed

to do well, though not by the standards to which they had been accustomed in Spain and Portugal. However, here too Yosef found himself faced with a new set of problems. Now his father was dead, and his mother was too ailing to make ends meet.

In the past, the political and social troubles would have hardly affected Yosef, who sat all day in yeshiva immersed in his studies. He was considered brilliant by his teachers and his peers; there was even talk that he might some day become a *rav*, like his uncle. He hated to give up his studies; at the same time, though, he knew he had to confront the world, with its mundane problems.

Staring pensively out the window, Yosef at last made his decision. Actually, the decision had been made for him seven days earlier. It was up to him to leave the protective yeshiva walls, to support himself and his mother, and to take on a new role.

(To be continued)

Yad Batya L'Kallah

Helping A New Family

By ROCHELLE MARUCH MILLER

It should have been the happiest time of Malka's life. She had recently become engaged to a man considered to be his yeshiva's top *masmid* (a diligent student). And Malka herself was that rare combination of brains and *chain* (grace) — valedictorian of her graduating class, adored by all her

teachers and classmates. Little wonder, then, that when word of Malka's engagement went out, everyone rejoiced at the good news.

Yet, as the day of the wedding approached, Malka was overcome with worry and fear. The eldest of seven children, she shouldered a tremendous responsibility. Her father

was a yeshiva *rebbe* who was barely able to eke out a living for his growing family. Often he had to wait months for a paycheck. Food and other necessities were bought on credit, and the family was always months behind in rent.

Though accepted by top-notch schools in Jerusalem, Malka had

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Let My people go,
so that they may serve Me.



TO OUR READERS

We hope everyone had a good Chanukah! It certainly was a busy one for us at **The Jewish Reader**, as we were preparing the current issue.

Much of the focus on the Exodus, *yetzias Mitzrayim*, tends to center on the *makkos*, the plagues, and on the actual physical journey taken by the Israelites through the desert and into the Land of Israel. We talk often about Hashem's command to Pharaoh: "Let My people go." It is possible to forget that G-d added another word: *veya'avduni* — "so that they may serve Me."

The cover of this month's issue, with Moshe Rabbeinu looking toward Jerusalem through the bars of the Israelites' Egyptian prison, suggests not only the physical imprisonment they endured, but the spiritual one as well. This theme is discussed in "Torah Highlights."

"The Treasure" is the fascinating tale of a simple boy and his love for Judaism. "Across the Atlantic" is the third part of a story of historical fiction about Jews in pre-revolutionary America. There is also an inspiring true story about a young rabbi who risks his life in communist Russia to help keep Judaism alive.

The interesting history of Jews in India is the subject of another article. There is also a summary of important news events and a quiz corner.

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The Jewish Reader

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