



The Story of Yosef Caro

Author of the Shulchan Aruch

The Story Thus Far

The year is 1492. The Caros, fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, have made a new home in Portugal. However, a new edict expels them from Portugal as well. Although they have nearly a year to go, they are pressured to leave earlier by the forced conversions that are beginning to take place. Ephraim Caro, Yosef's father, boards ship with his family for Alexandria; Yosef's famous uncle Yitzchak leaves for Constantinople (now Istanbul).

After a perilous voyage, during which he loses his wife and children, Yitzchak arrives in Constantinople. There he is greeted and honored by the refugee Jews, and made the head of their burgeoning community.

Ephraim Caro's family arrives safely in Alexandria. There, a large group of emigrant Jews have settled. However, problems arise between them and the native community. The local Jews feel estranged from the sophisticated, modernized Jews of Spain. The Spaniards, in turn, look down on the Alexandria Jews, whom they consider backward. Disputes and open confrontations develop over Jewish laws and customs. Caught in the middle is Ephraim Caro, who tries to reconcile the differing opinions.

Meanwhile, a problem resurfaces, as young Yosef Caro watches a friend nearly snatched away by missionaries. His friend's family leaves Alexandria the next day, fearing another round of forced conversions.

Yosef Caro remains in Alexandria, watching the hostility increase among different Jews. This hostility shapes his own study of the Torah; it stimulates his interest in — and eventual research into — *halachah*, Jewish law.

A fine scholar, Yosef is on his way to a sheltered life in a yeshiva until tragedy strikes: his father dies. No sooner is the *shivah* over than he must think about leaving the yeshiva world in order to support himself and his mother.

CHAPTER III

Midnight had descended on the Caros. Though his mother had gone to bed much earlier, Yosef remained at his desk, fighting the urge to sleep. The candle, placed squarely in

front of a holy book, had burned down to a stub of wax.

He shut the *sefer*, realizing that he could no longer think. Placing his hands to his head, he shut his eyes and massaged his temples, which pounded with the flood of ideas. Day after day he had spent poring over the different *halachic* works, absorbing disputes

until his mind felt like a courtroom.

It had been this way for awhile. Ever since his father's death, Yosef had renewed his studies, determined to become a *posek*, an arbiter of Jewish law. He was not motivated by glory, but by the feeling that a *halachic* authority was needed — someone who knew all the laws and the

documented decisions on which they were based.

Now, more than ever, such a person was necessary, for the situation in Alexandria was becoming critical. The city was a battleground of different opinions and customs; each person insisted that *his* way was the best, and that everyone else was a heretic. Yosef Caro, anguished at both the ignorance and the baseless hatred, desperately wanted to prove that the differences among Jews were all based on the same source; therefore, all were valid. And all Jews were brothers.

"Yosef."

Startled, Yosef turned.

His mother, sick and pale, stood in

the doorway in her dressing gown. With sad eyes she gazed at her son.

Yosef rose. "Mother, did I wake you? I am terribly sorry."

"No, you did not, Yosef. I couldn't sleep. For hours I lay awake in my bed, listening to your words of Torah. You remind me so much of your father."

She advanced to the room and sat down. Yosef returned to his chair.

"Yosef," she began, "I'm afraid I have some bad news. Your father had owed money shortly before he passed away. I did everything within my power to repay his debts. Thank G-d they are done with. But now we are without a means of support. I am sorry to say that you may not be able to

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continue your education."

Yosef stared, stunned.

"But the inheritance," he argued, "the money Father left me. Surely that could sustain us?"

"It's gone, Yosef." She was silent.

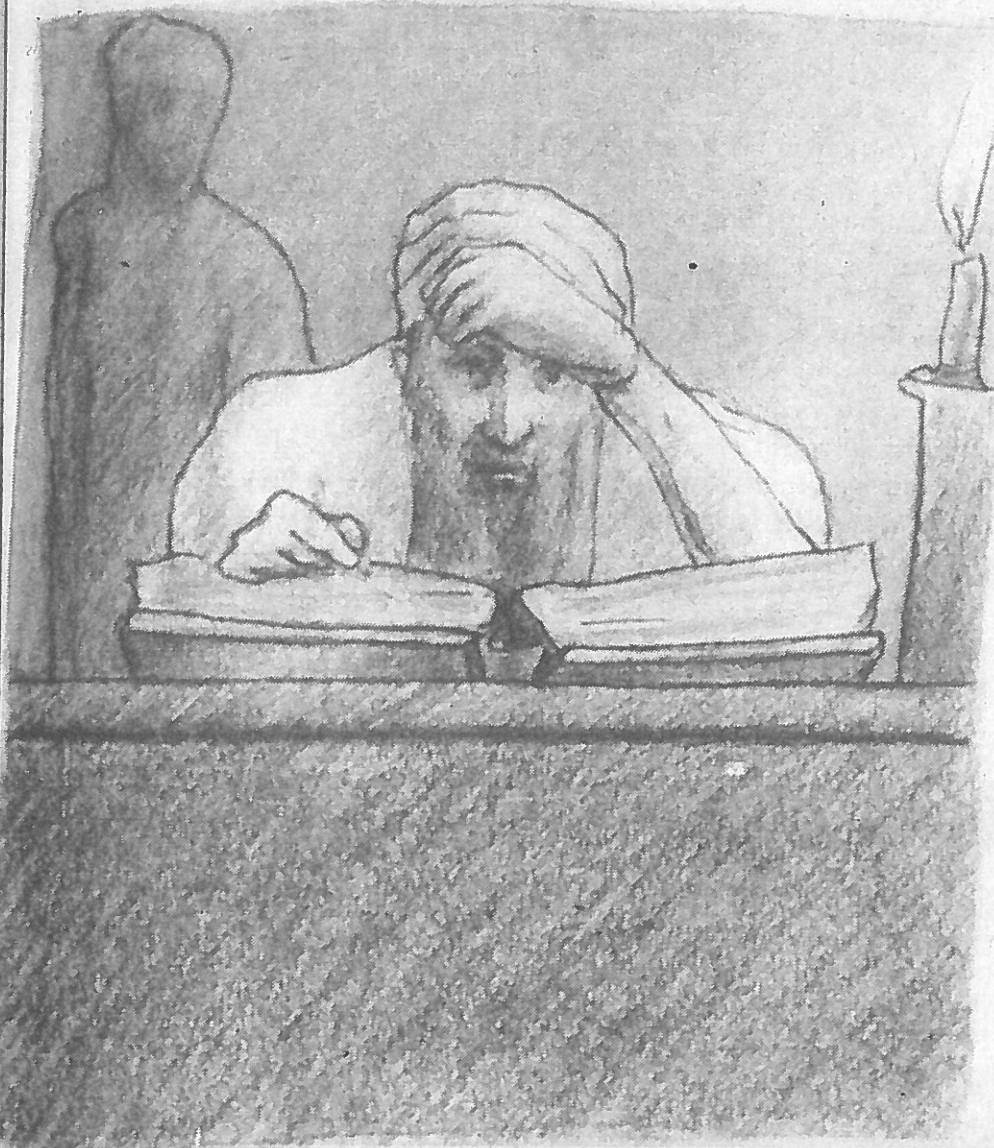
Yosef put away the *sefer* and stared out the window. The Alexandria sky was black and speckled with stars. Unfortunately, it offered little comfort.

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"Mother, you needn't worry about sustenance," he finally said.

His mother's face fell. "But Yosef," she countered, "are you truly aware of our calamity? I am an old woman; I cannot work. And you . . . what can you do? You have no trade, no skills. Who will hire a student?"

"Mother," Yosef said, smiling, "for months I have delved into legal decisions . . . problems that were realized and reconciled by our predecessors long ago. These men lived in a world of study. And yet, never once were they divorced from reality. Their decisions were based on day-to-day situations, the understanding and knowledge of the world around them. They saw the good and evil in people. Yet, they never forgot the Oné who ultimately governs the world. Hashem is with us. He will give us a means of support."



Two weeks later, a messenger appeared at the Caro home. Yosef took the letter and broke open the sealing wax.

The handwriting was his uncle's. Yosef's heart raced:

Dear Yosef,

I was upset to hear about your mother's financial difficulties. Also, I was informed of your decision to leave the yeshiva. It would be a loss to you, and to the Jewish people, were you to sacrifice your studies.

Therefore, you will find

When Yosef arrived at the harbor, his uncle Yitzchak stood on the deck, eyes bright with excitement. At the sight of his nephew, he threw himself into Yosef's arms.

enclosed a substantial sum for your mother. I hope it will provide for her needs; she can expect to receive further payments.

And you I invite to Constantinople. There is a fine yeshiva here and a reputable community. It would be a pleasure, as well as an honor, to study with you again. It would be just as it was before our unfortunate dispersal from Spain and Portugal. I will sit with you, training you and watching your brilliance. You are more than a nephew to me; since the loss of my family, I consider you as a son and an inheritor. I know that with your nobility you will become a leader as well.

*With love,
Yitzchak Caro*

Trembling with joy, Yosef fingered

the little envelope of money that was attached to the parchment. Yes, he thought, men like his uncle understood well the world around them — the sufferings and needs of others. Yosef thanked G-d for this change of fortune. His uncle, head of the Constantinople community and the yeshiva as well, had come through for himself and his mother.

He wistfully watched a group of children playing in the street. He would miss Alexandria; he had grown to love the city, in spite of its problems. Constantinople, he thought, was bound to be different.

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On the way to his uncle's home, Yosef caught a quick glimpse of Constantinople. It was a thriving metropolis — much larger than Alexandria, and far more sophisticated. The streets burst with stalls and shops; carriages competed for the pavement with horses and pedestrians. Veiled women scurried past, carrying jugs and baskets on their heads; in the cafes, men in turbans or Arab dress relaxed, sipping coffee and smoking from long pipes.

Above Yosef heard an eerie, lilting sound. He looked up and saw an old man, bedecked in robes, standing in a mosque tower, a minaret. Below, rows of Turks prostrated themselves in prayer in response to his call.

A group of women brushed by Yosef. Seeing them in black, he mistook them at first for Arabs, but when he saw them entering a cathedral, he realized they were nuns.

"The sultan is very kind to his subjects," his uncle explained, "and most tolerant of religion. He welcomes

anyone to his land, regardless of belief. Here Jew, Christian, and Moslem coexist in peace."

"It is different," mused Yosef as they approached Yitzchak's home.

A private room was arranged for Yosef. He spent hours poring over Jewish law with his uncle. At times Yosef felt his mind ready to burst, not only with the complexities of Jewish law, but with the diversity of opinions.

He enjoyed discussing his thoughts with his uncle. Yitzchak spent his free time writing ideas of his own. When

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he wasn't involved in scholarly pursuits, he was tending to the questions and needs of the populace. He greeted streams of callers every day — people with legal questions or simply needing personal advice. Watching his uncle, Yosef was amazed at how even a small piece of advice inevitably reverted to Jewish law. Jewish law governed human life.

Though Yitzchak continued to learn with his nephew, over the years he grew more frail. Eventually his public hours were curtailed. Nevertheless, with trembling hands he continued to write down his ideas.

In 1518, after a final bout with illness, he called Yosef to his side. Yitzchak presented his nephew with a stack of manuscripts.

"My life's work," he explained. "You might find it of interest for your own. May Hashem bless you in your endeavors, Yosef. I am sure that



greatness awaits.”

Shortly later he expired.

The funeral was large, much larger than the one for Yosef's father. Surveying the mass of people, all in different attire, Yosef realized how much his uncle had loved his fellow Jew — *any* Jew, regardless of life style or outlook.

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Not long after the funeral, Yosef

was approached by distinguished men of the community and asked to fill his uncle's positions. Normally, such status would be given to an older man, but Yosef, though only thirty, had the knowledge of a man twice his age.

Yosef smiled and politely shook his head. “I am most flattered by your offer,” he said, “but I am afraid that for me to abandon my studies right now would be impossible. As yet I cannot be burdened by the numerous demands of the community. I watched how my uncle devoted hours to private discussions. For the while I need time to further my education.”

With his uncle's inheritance, Yosef was able to continue to learn without financial worry. However, with his uncle's legacy, he would seldom have peace.

“Rav Yosef.”

Yosef was, as usual, sitting at his desk, body hunched over a holy book. He turned around.

A servant stood in the doorway, turning and ushering in somebody.

A middle-aged woman entered the room, weeping and wringing her hands. At the sight of Yosef she threw

herself at his feet and burst into even louder sobs.

"My son," she cried, "my little Daniel. The doctors cannot heal him; he is dying. I beg you to pray for him."

In embarrassment Yosef looked at the servant, who was still standing by the door. Putting his fingers to his lips, Yosef motioned to him.

"Dear lady," the servant gently said, "my master is unable to speak. He has taken upon himself a *ta'anis dibbur*, a vow of silence."

"I hear you are a holy man," she continued to Yosef, ignoring the servant, "like your uncle. He helped make people well. I hear you can do the same."

Yosef's eyes widened, and he vehemently shook his head.

The servant awkwardly approached the woman. "Madam, my master bids you leave. He cannot help you."

Yosef uncomfortably turned to his volume of Talmud. The woman, however, persisted. She remained on the floor, wailing and begging Yosef for Divine intervention.

After a quarter hour, Yosef looked up from his volume. He could not study with this sort of distraction. If the woman remained so adamant, he had no other choice.

He turned to the convulsing figure and announced, "Very well, madam, I must break my vow of silence, if it means saving a Jewish life. I shall pray for your son. Now please go."

"No," she insisted. "Right now."

"What?"

She raised her head. "I want to see you pray for him now."

"Now?" Yosef stared at her, then the servant. He rose from the desk, retreated to a corner, and faced east. Words flowed from his lips in a mournful, pleading melody. At times he choked with apparent pain and

sorrow. The woman rose from the floor; together she and the servant stood, watching.

Over an hour had passed before Yosef finally turned from the wall. There were tears in his eyes as he approached the woman and murmured, "I have done what I can."

The woman left. Wiping his eyes, Yosef returned to his desk and resumed his studies. So absorbed was he in the *sefer* that he did not hear the knock on the door an hour later. After a few more knocks, he turned.

It was the same woman. Standing at her side was a young boy, smiling and

"No sooner did I return home," she continued, "than I saw him sitting up in bed, asking for a glass of water. His fever was gone, and he started hopping about the room like a lamb." She clasped her hands. "A miracle! Hashem has heard the prayers of a *tzaddik!*"

glowing with health.

"My son Daniel," she said, beaming.

Yosef gasped, and reeled backwards.

"No sooner did I return home," she continued, "than I saw him sitting up in bed, asking for a glass of water. His fever was gone, and he started hopping about the room like a lamb."

She clasped her hands. "A miracle! Hashem has heard the prayers of a *tzaddik!*"

On the way home she almost danced through the streets, and her little boy as well. People stopped and stared at Daniel; they couldn't believe he was out of bed.

"He is well?" they asked.

"Yes. Completely!" the mother cried. "Thanks to Yosef Caro!"

By nightfall news of the miracle had spread to every section of Jewish Constantinople. By noon of the next day a line had formed outside the door of the Caro residence, and eventually circled the block. Crowds of beggars, cripples, and mourners waited alongside his house to get a glimpse at and possibly a blessing from this new saint.

Yosef apprehensively stuck his head out the window.

"There he is!" A man on crutches was pointing toward him.

Yosef backed away. At the knock on the door he jumped.

The servant entered. "Sir, they are waiting."

"Tell them to leave," Yosef stammered. "I cannot see them."

He remained inside his room, not leaving the entire day. Occasionally he glanced out the window to see individuals still hovering near his door.

Yosef waited until the sky had faded away into blackness and the people had at last gone away. Then, surveying the sleeping city, he plotted his escape.

Nikopol, a small city in the Ottoman Empire, rested squarely on the Danube River. Its port was constantly busy, welcoming the incoming ships bound with goods for transport to the isthmus. On one ship stood a young man, huddled in his cloak for warmth. He was thinner now, from days of fasting.

Yosef Caro waited until the boat touched the dock, then soberly alighted. Holding a small bag, he began a silent walk past the wharf, ignoring the other passengers, and headed off toward the center of town. His uncle was supposed to have owned a house there. Yosef had heard of Jews in Nikopol. He hoped they had not yet heard of him.

(To be continued)

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בס"ד

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וְדַבַּר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאָמַר
אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְעַתָּה אֲנִי שֹׁמֵר אֶת
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אֶרֶץ חֲסֵד וְשִׁעוּרָה וְגִפְן

TO OUR READERS

The fifth day of Shevat, which falls this year on January 9th and 10th, is the anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger, who is better known as the Sefas Emes.

The Sefas Emes is recognized as one of the outstanding Torah thinkers of the nineteenth century. His work on the Chumash, with its chassidic bent, is studied carefully and fervently every week by thousands. His commentary on the Talmud is just as highly regarded.

"Learning How to Listen" tells a story of the Sefas Emes when he was just a boy. Blessed with a great mind, he was nevertheless humble, and was prepared to hear words of chastisement from his grandfather, despite the fact that he had done nothing wrong.

One of the Sefas Emes's Torah thoughts is presented in "Torah Highlights." He expresses the idea that one must perform the **mitzvos** because that is G-d's desire, not because they make sense. Here too the humility of the Sefas Emes shines through.

The fifteenth day of Shevat is the minor holiday of Tu BiShevat, on which we celebrate the rebirth of plant life after the hibernation of winter. "The Tree and the Promise" compares the Jew to a tree. For the Jew to survive and grow spiritually, his or her roots must be strong. The home serves as the source of our Jewish education. If we make our home a Torah center, we help assure the growth of Judaism.

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greatly appreciated.



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