



## GEULAS YISRAEL

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RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

# The Table, the Ocean, and the Circle

Sometime in the early part of the sixteenth century, one of the greatest *talmidei chamamim* of our long *mesorah* made a dramatic decision—one that would permanently reshape the halachic landscape.

### DISRUPTED MESORAH

The Jewish world had become fractured and unsettled. Decades earlier, 100,000-150,000 Jews had been expelled from Spain and scattered across Europe, the Balkans, and North Africa. That upheaval tore at the fabric of Jewish life and generated immense halachic confusion.

Spanish exiles carried their traditions into unfamiliar settings, where those practices often collided with established local *pesakim* and *minhagim*. The Inquisition uprooted families; children were orphaned or separated from their parents and never absorbed halachah as it was lived and modeled in the home. The continuity of halachic practice—once transmitted

naturally from generation to generation—was suddenly at risk.

As this fragile system of transmission weakened, a second force accelerated the instability. A few decades before the Spanish expulsion, in the mid-fifteenth century, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in Germany. Printing written material suddenly became dramatically cheaper. Until then, publishing books had been prohibitively expensive. In the Jewish world, this created a natural process of self-selection: only works of the highest caliber justified the enormous cost of manual copying.

With the advent of the printing press, that barrier fell. Printing was now accessible to almost anyone who wished to publish a book. Torah works proliferated, and the tables of the *beit midrash* were flooded with new *sefarim*. But progress came with a cost. It became increasingly difficult to determine which works were authoritative and which were less so.

### RESTORING ORDER

Confronted by these two threats to halachic stability—the upheaval caused by exile and the confusion created by unchecked proliferation—Rav Yosef Karo, himself expelled from Spain and later resettled in Tzefat, made a bold decision: to create a standard and reliable framework for halachic decision-making. He proposed that halachah be determined by

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the consensus of the three greatest authorities of the preceding centuries—the Rif, the Rambam, and the Rosh. When all three agreed, the ruling was clear. When they disagreed, halachah would follow the majority opinion.

Rav Yosef Karo believed that this method, articulated systematically in his *sefer*, could restore order and clarity to a fractured halachic world. He called the work *Beit Yosef*—both because his name was Yosef and because, like Yosef in Egypt who sustained an entire region during famine, he hoped his *sefer* would nourish the Jewish people with halachic clarity in a time of confusion.

Toward the end of his life, he realized that his encyclopedic work was too extensive and demanding for the average person to master. He therefore composed a concise summary—almost a set of halachic “cliff notes”—to distill that larger work. He called this abridged code the *Shulchan Aruch*, which went on to become the gold standard for halachic rulings to this day.

He chose the name *Shulchan Aruch* by drawing upon the opening Rashi in Parashat Mishpatim. Moshe is instructed to present the Torah in a clear and orderly manner. Although Moshe himself heard the Torah directly from HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the rest of the people did not. They required careful and deliberate explanation.

Rashi explains that Hashem commanded Moshe to arrange the Torah *ke-shulchan aruch*—like a table that is set and organized before a person, ready for use. The image is precise and deliberate. It evokes the *Shulchan* of the Mikdash, perhaps the most carefully structured of all the Mikdash vessels: symmetrically built, supported by frames and rods, with trays designed to hold the *lechem hapanim*, baked and arranged according to exact

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The image of a *shulchan aruch*, an organized table, thus became a metaphor for clarity—ideas laid out systematically, accessible, and usable. Borrowing from this Rashi, Rav Yosef Karo named his highly organized system of halachic decision-making the *Shulchan Aruch*: a table set before the Jewish people, offering halachah in a form that is ordered and intelligible.

### A TABLE OR AN OCEAN

Not everyone agreed with this decision. Among the most forceful opponents was Rav Shlomo Luria (the Maharshah), who lived in Poland and penned a sharp critique of any attempt to standardize halachah. Torah, he argued, cannot—and should not—be reduced to a formula. There cannot be a single, uniform truth, even in halachic practice. Each competent rav must study the relevant sources and arrive at his own considered conclusion.

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To package Torah into one system and assume a single authoritative outcome, Rav Shlomo Luria warned, strips Torah of its breadth and its infinity. In this spirit, he named his own *sefer Yam Shel Shlomo*, invoking the massive mikveh constructed by Shlomo HaMelech in the Mikdash—so vast that it resembled an ocean. Torah, in his vision, is not an orderly table set with clear divisions. It is an endless sea—expansive, deep, and resistant to being confined to a single, definitive conclusion.

Who was right in this debate? In truth, both were—and it depends on what question we are asking.

Ideally, Torah is expansive and inexhaustible. It resists being flattened into a single formula. Most disputes in the Gemara are not the result of a broken *mesorah* or a failure to remember one lost, absolute truth. Each position recorded in Shas contains a kernel of divine truth. Torah truth is not always binary.

### MULTIPLE "PROFOUND TRUTHS"

Chazal teach that Hashem showed Moshe Rabbeinu at Har Sinai that a particular element could be *tamei*, and also that the very same element could be *tahor*. Our human minds struggle with this. We live in a world of either/or. For us, it is either day or night, but not both. Hashem, however, is not bound by binary categories. He is described as יוצר אור ובורא חושך, עושה שלום ובורא את הכל—the One who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates all.

Niels Bohr, a Danish physicist once observed that the opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound statement may be another profound statement. Human beings think in terms of true and false, on and off, zero and one. We are confined to binaries. Hashem is not. He

deals in layered, overlapping truths.

This is why, when we study Gemara, we do not seek only a final ruling. We seek to uncover the divine logic embedded in each position. Torah, at its core, is not a problem to be solved, but a depth of divine logic to be entered.

Prior to the forces that destabilized the halachic world, halachah itself was far more flexible. A rabbi in one city of Spain might follow the traditions of the Ramban, while another rabbi—perhaps only a few miles to the south—would rule in accordance with the Rambam. Each approach was seen as legitimate, because each emerged from a different, profound expression of Hashem's will.

Of course, in the realm of practical halachic observance—which is necessarily binary—no individual can live out multiple truths at once. That complexity belongs to the abstract arena of Gemara learning. In lived experience, a person must act in one concrete way. But on a collective level, the coexistence of differing halachic rulings reflected multiple authentic pathways of divine truth. Torah was unified not through uniformity, but through depth.

Rav Yosef Karo believed that the halachic landscape had become too fragile to sustain that level of pluralism. At that moment in history, he felt, halachah required stabilization through standardization. Rav Shlomo Luria disagreed. In his view, halachah should remain fluid and flexible, resistant to being fixed into a single authoritative form.

In practice, the Jewish people ultimately aligned with the *Shulchan Aruch*, relying on a unified code—augmented by the Rema for Ashkenazic practice—to guide halachic observance across communities.

Yet this entire debate unfolded within the boundaries of practical halachah. Even Rav

Yosef Karo believed that, in theory, Hashem's infinite word contains multiple truths. In lived halachic practice, we must confine ourselves to a shared framework in order to preserve communal coherence and unity. But in the world of thought—in learning, in reflection, in grappling with the eternal will of Hashem—we strive, as best we can, to move beyond binary thinking and to recognize the many shades and colors through which Hashem's Torah is revealed.

### MULTIPLE HASHKAFOT

Recognizing multiple truths within Torah should train us to appreciate multiplicity in *hashkafah* as well. *Hashkafah* is not Torah itself. It is the lens—the outer layer—through which we process Torah and interpret the world we inhabit. In the next world there will be no *hashkafah*, only Torah. *Hashkafah* belongs to the human condition, to life lived within history and culture.

Just as divine wisdom yields multiple truths in the realm of Torah facts, it can also yield multiple authentic *hashkafot*. There is no single, exclusive pathway to Hashem or to His Torah. Claims to the contrary are not expressions of religious strength; they diminish Hashem by confining Him within human categories and constructs.

This impulse risks framing Hashem in human terms. Limiting His transcendence, even subtly, distorts faith.

### THE CIRCLE

The final Gemara in Ta'anit depicts the end of days, when Hashem gathers all the righteous into a circle. He stands at the center, and the *tzaddikim*, arrayed along the circumference, point inward and declare: "זה ה' קנינו לו—נגיינו וְנִשְׁמָחָה בִּישׁוּעָתוֹ"

Why is this final alignment of the righteous described as a circle, rather than any other

geometric form?

A circle contains infinitely many radii, each equidistant from the center. Every point along the circumference stands at the same distance from the middle. Two Jews can occupy positions that appear opposite—180 degrees apart—seeing the center from entirely different vantage points. Each believes he is facing Hashem from his own direction, with his own orientation. And yet, each is seeing Hashem equally. Neither perspective is closer. Neither vision is more accurate.

When we practice halachah, we commit ourselves to an organized and unified framework—what Rav Yosef Karo sought to achieve through the *Beit Yosef* and the *Shulchan Aruch*. Practice demands coherence and shared action.

But when we seek to understand Hashem's will, when we form *hashkafic* lenses through which to encounter Him, we enter a different realm. There, multiple perspectives can coexist. Different positions may stand far apart, yet all face the same center. In that space, truth is not singular and linear, but layered, expansive, and infinitely divine. ■



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