

**SEVEN JEWISH CLASSICS:
Books That Shaped the Jewish Mind**

By
Rabbi Adam Mintz

With a Foreword by
Rabbi Haskel Lookstein



Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun
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This work is dedicated by
MR. AND MRS. E. MAGNUS OPPENHEIM
to honor the Bar Mitzvah of
JONATHAN (YONI) OPPENHEIM
on Shemini Azeret, 22 Tishri 5755.

On this occasion we remember the late
Rabbi Jacob S. Cohen זצ"ל of Troy, N.Y. who
was the Sandak at Yoni's Bris Milah ceremony
which took place at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun.

We are proud that Yoni together with his siblings,
Michelle (Michal), Simeon (Shimon) and Jay Joshua (Koby)
grew up in this community during the period when
KJ developed into a congregational role model of
תורה, תפילה וגמילות חסדים
in the New York Metropolitan area.

Foreword

The Jewish people has been called the *Am Ha-Sefer*—The People of the Book. The reference is probably to Torah but the title refers to the love affair of the Jewish people with books, particularly holy books, volumes that qualify for the name *sefer*.

A *sefer*, which contains thoughts and words of Torah, is both honored and loved by the Jewish people. Those reactions are implicit in a gesture well known to us all: When a *sefer* falls to the floor we pick it up and kiss it. We do this because we consider a *sefer* with words of Torah to be the embodiment of holiness, teaching us how to be better Jews, better servants of God, better human beings.

Rabbi Adam Mintz, my friend and associate here at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, has performed a great service for this community and for all who will read this booklet by summarizing and presenting a brief analysis of seven *sefarim*, books of inestimable value which enhance our lives and give us a direction for a Jewish existence. The original lectures of Rabbi Mintz from which this booklet is derived were brilliant analyses of these works. They show a mind deep in scholarship and broad in perceptions about this world and the Jewish and general civilizations of which we are a part. The author has the uncanny ability to get to the core of each book and surround it with authentic, academic, scholarly insights.

The reader of this booklet will gain a glimpse into a wonderful literature and a young, budding, master teacher. Further reading and additional listening will confirm the validity of these two judgments.

Haskel Lookstein
Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun
New York, NY

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Introduction

This booklet evolved from a series of lectures that I presented at Seudah Shlishit during 1992–1993. Each month I spoke on an important work that has helped to shape Judaism throughout the ages. The lectures were followed by lively discussion about each book. During the series, I felt that many in the audience wanted to explore these books in greater depth. At the urging of several members of the congregation, I have decided to write a synopsis of each of the lectures. In order to facilitate the use of this booklet, I have divided the presentation of each book as follows: After giving the name of the author and the date, I present a summary of the contents of the work. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of the work and a list of the different editions that are available. Finally, I have included a selection from the work in the hope that it will generate further study and interest.

I would like to thank all of those people who attended my lectures and helped make them such a success and I would especially like to acknowledge the assistance of the Kehilath Jeshurun Men's Club which organized and helped arrange sponsorship of Seudah Shlishit. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. E. Magnus Oppenheim and the Kehilath Jeshurun Couples Club, whose generosity in sponsoring this booklet has allowed the project to become a reality.

Adam Mintz
Associate Rabbi
Congregation Kehilath Jershurun
June, 1995

The Siddur

Name: The Siddur

Author: Rabbi Amram Gaon (died c. 875)

Date: 9th century

Contents of Book: *Seder Rav Amram*, the earliest existing written version of the Siddur was composed by Rabbi Amram Gaon, head of the yeshiva in Sura, Babylonia in the ninth century. The institution of public and private prayer existed before this period but the rabbis never compiled a formal prayer book. They were reluctant to do so because of the prohibition against writing down the Oral Torah. However, the Spanish Jewish community of that time lacked rabbinic leadership and was afraid that it would be fragmented into different religious sects if there was no single common prayer service. Therefore, members of the community asked Rabbi Amram Gaon to prepare a formal Siddur. Aware that the unity of the people was in great danger, he consented.

This first Siddur was divided into two sections. The first section contained the texts of the prayers recited during the week, on the Sabbath, and on holidays. It also included the service for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as well as a Haggadah. This liturgical portion of the "first Siddur" is very similar to the Siddur that is currently used. The second part of the Siddur contained detailed instructions about how to conduct a prayer service, as well as laws pertaining to each service. In this way, the reader was able to find both the prayers and all the relevant halakhic material in one volume. Rabbi Amram's Siddur also recorded various customs relating to prayer that were prevalent among the Jews of Babylonia at that time. These customs have been cited by later rabbinic authorities and serve as a basis for many of the practices that are found in the present-day prayer service.

Importance of Book: The Siddur, a book passed from one generation to the next in all parts of the Jewish world, serves the Jewish community first and foremost as a guide both to prayer and to the customs relating to the prayer service. However, the Siddur also reflects the history of the Jewish people throughout the generations. It contains material from the Torah, from the Talmud, by medieval poets, and even works from the contemporary period. It has personal prayers, national prayers, prayers on deliverance from tragedy, prayers on suffering and many, many others. Next to the Bible and the Talmud, the Siddur is truly the book of the Jewish people.

The traditional Siddur, first arranged by Rabbi Amram Gaon, developed over many centuries and reflects the Orthodox point of view. With the dissolution of Jewish religious uniformity, different versions of the prayer book developed. When the Reform movement began in the nineteenth century, it quickly realized the need to compile its own Siddur. The Conservative movement also has its own Siddur, as do the Reconstructionists. Each of these Siddurim reflects the respective movement's theological position. For example, not all contemporary Jews accept the legitimacy of the practice of sacrifices in the Temple or believe in their future restoration in the messianic era. Consequently, the Reform Siddur omits any references to sacrifices. The Reconstructionist Siddur has a new section in the Mussaf called "In Remembrance of the Ancient Temple Service" which replaces the traditional Mussaf and expresses the belief that sacrifices are an ancient ritual, no longer accepted today. The Conservative Siddur maintains the Mussaf service, yet substitutes the traditional phrase in the *Shemoneh Esreh* "and there we will offer sacrifices before You again in the future" with "there our ancestors offered sacrifices in the past," indicating that this practice is no longer acceptable to the Conservative movement.

Even among the Orthodox, the Siddur has been a vehicle to express differences in religious and political beliefs. The recently published ArtScroll Siddur does not include a

prayer for the State of Israel or for the soldiers of Israel. Furthermore, it does not make reference in the explanatory notes to either Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik or Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, two leading proponents of twentieth century Orthodoxy. When the Rabbinical Council of America decided to publish its own Siddur, it chose the format of the ArtScroll Siddur but included the prayer for the Israeli government and its soldiers. In addition, a lengthy introduction by Rabbi Saul Berman, a leading modern Orthodox thinker, provides the reader with the views of Rabbi Soloveitchik concerning prayer.

Editions and Other Works of Interest: *Seder Rav Amram* has been published in many editions. A critical edition, complete with an introduction and extensive notes, by Prof. Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt, was published by Mossad Harav Kook in 1970. The Siddur of Rabbi Amram Gaon was translated into English by David Hedegrad in 1971. This edition is not readily available in bookstores, but it can be obtained in major Jewish libraries.

Text for Study: This excerpt is from the Introduction to *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* as translated by Hedegrad. Rabbi Amram Gaon began his Siddur with a letter responding to the request of the Spanish community that he compose a fixed order for the prayer service.

Amram, son of Sheshna, president of the academy in the city of Mehasya (i.e., Sura), to Rabban Isaac, son of Rabban Simeon, beloved and dear and honored with us and in the whole academy. Great peace from the mercifulness of heaven be upon you and upon your children and upon all scholars and disciples and upon our brethren the Jews who live there. Receive salutation from me and from R. Zemaḥ, the vice-president of the academy of Israel, and from the *alufim* and from all the scholars of the academy, and from the students of the academy who are with us and in the city of

Mehasya that we are all well, the scholars and the students and our brethren the Jews who are living here, that we always salute you and have you in a good remembrance and pray for you and ask for mercy upon you, that the Holy One, blessed be He, may have mercy on you and protect you and save you from all grief and harm and that He may, in his great mercy, fulfill all the desires of your hearts. Rabban Jacob, son of Rabban Isaac, has sent us twenty gold coins which you have sent to the academy, five for us and fifteen for the fund of the academy. And we have given order and we have blessed you; may these blessings be fulfilled in you and in your children and your grandchildren. And an order of prayers and *berakhot* for the whole year that you have asked for, which they have taught from heaven, we have understood to arrange and to return in accordance with the tradition which is in our possession, in conformity with the institution of the tannaim and the amoraim. For it is said in a baraita: "R. Meir said: A man must recite a hundred *berakhot* every day" (Menahot 43b). And in the Gemara of the Palestinian Talmud we read the following: "It is taught in the name of R. Meir: There is no man in Israel who does not fulfill a hundred commandments every day, as it is said: *And now, Israel, what does The Lord thy God require of thee (Deuteronomy 10:12)*. Do not read *ma* ['what'] but *mea* ['a hundred']" (Berakhot 9:5). I require a hundred *berakhot* of thee. And David, the king of Israel, instituted them. When the inhabitants of Jerusalem told him that a hundred Israelites died every day he rose up and instituted a hundred *berakhot*. And it seems that they were forgotten, and the tannaim and the amoraim came and arranged them in order.

Rashi

Name of Book: Commentary of Rashi on the Torah

Author: Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac [Rashi] (1040–1105)

Date: 11th century

Contents of Book: Rashi's commentary on the Torah is a monumental work that has made the study of Torah possible and rewarding for the entire Jewish people throughout the centuries. Unlike his commentary on the Talmud, which was written for more educated readers, Rashi's commentary on the Torah was written for Jews of all levels. It consists of short, concise explanations of the verses of the Torah. The commentary combines an analysis of the *peshat*, the simple meaning of words and verses in the Torah, with *derash*, a midrashic approach to the study of Torah. In addition, Rashi placed great emphasis on the grammatical aspects of the text. Indeed, many Jews have learned Hebrew grammar by studying Rashi's commentary. In explaining the simple meaning of the Torah, Rashi translated many difficult words into Old French, the everyday language of the community in which he lived, and his commentary consequently has become one of the best sources for the study of Old French available today.

Importance of Book: Rashi has been called *Rabban shel Yisrael*, ("teacher of the Jewish people"), not only because the acronym of that title spells the name Rashi, but, more importantly, because his commentary has made the Torah vastly more meaningful for Jews. Rashi was neither the first nor the last scholar to write a commentary on the Torah. What is it about his commentary that makes it so special? The answer lies in the method that Rashi used in composing his work. Some commentators, most notably Rashbam, the grandson of

Rashi, wrote simple interpretations of the text which rarely deviated from its plain meaning. This approach, while useful in its own right, allows for only a limited range of interpretations. Other commentators, such as those in the Midrash, went beyond the simple meaning to explain the text in an aggadic and homiletic manner. Although utilized by many commentators, this method often gives the impression that the text is merely a point of departure for aggadic material. Rashi combined the presentation of the simple meaning with a more aggadic interpretation. When the text lends itself to a simple explanation, Rashi provided one. However, when the text cannot be fully understood with merely the literal interpretation, Rashi utilized the aggadic approach. It is precisely this balance between *pesbat* and *derash* that enables Rashi's commentary to make the Torah come to life. The commentary of Rashi has become such an integral part of Torah study that students are often unable to distinguish between what the Torah says and Rashi's explanation.

Editions and Other Works of Interest: The high esteem with which Rashi's work was regarded is reflected in the fact that the first printed and dated Hebrew book was an edition of his commentary on the Torah. It was produced in Italy in 1475. Since that time, Rashi's commentary has been included on the pages of every major edition of the Torah that is published with commentaries. There has also been an entire literature of supercommentaries on the commentary of Rashi. Rabbi Shabetai Bass (1641–1718), the first Jewish bibliographer, wrote one of the most famous of these supercommentaries. Entitled *Sifteï Hakhamim*, it contains a summary of other commentaries on Rashi.

In addition to the many Hebrew commentaries on Rashi's commentary, there are two recent English translations. A more scholarly translation, complete with extensive notes, was translated and annotated by A. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silvermann in 1934. A linear translation of Rashi by Abraham

Ben Isaiah and Benjamin Scharfman appeared in 1949. A third translation, also linear, but more readable, is in progress. Two volumes published by Ktav have appeared, and the third is due in the near future. The first two volumes of the ArtScroll series translation of Rashi, called the Sapirstein Edition, have recently been published and are complete with extensive notes.

Text for Study: Two selections from Rashi's commentary on the Torah, Genesis 4:8 and Exodus 21:6, from the Rosenbaum and Silverman edition. The first selection, from the story of Cain and Abel, is an example of Rashi's decision to reject the midrashic material and, instead, explain the verse based on the simple explanation. The second selection is from the law of the Hebrew slave. In this case, Rashi adopted the aggadic interpretation. Why did Rashi choose to explain the first *pasuk* based on the *pesbat* and the second *pasuk* based on the *derash*?

AND CAIN SAID TO ABEL HIS BROTHER ...
AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHEN THEY WERE IN THE
FIELD, THAT CAIN ROSE UP AGAINST ABEL HIS
BROTHER, AND SLEW HIM. (GENESIS 4:8)

AND CAIN SPAKE TO ABEL. He began an
argument, striving and contending with him, to
seek a pretext to kill him There are midrashic
explanations of these words, but this is the plain
sense of the text.

THEN HIS LORD SHALL CAUSE HIM TO STEP
UNTO THE JUDGES, HE SHALL ALSO CAUSE HIM TO
STEP UNTO THE DOOR, OR UNTO THE DOORPOST; AND
HIS LORD SHALL BORE HIS EAR THROUGH WITH THE
AWL; AND HE SHALL SERVE HIM FOREVER. (EXODUS
21:6)

AND HIS LORD SHALL BORE HIS EAR THROUGH WITH THE AWL. What is the reason that the ear had to be pierced rather than any other limb of the servant's body? Rabban Jochanan ben Zaccai said: The ear which heard on Mount Sinai, (Exodus 20:13) "*Thou shalt not steal*" and yet its owner went and stole and was therefore sold as a slave—let it be pierced! Or, in the case of him who sold himself from destitution, having committed no theft, the reason is: That ear which heard on Mount Sinai what I said, (Leviticus 25:55) "*For unto Me the children of Israel are servants*" and yet its owner went and procured for himself another master—let it be pierced! (Mechilta; Kiddushin 22b).

Sefer ha-Hinnukh

Name: *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*

Author: Anonymous. The author described himself as "a Levite from Barcelona" but scholars disagree as to his exact identity. Most identify him as Rabbi Aaron Ha-Levi.

Date: 1251–1256.

Contents of Book: *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, the "Book of Education," is a legal work which lists and analyzes the 613 mitzvot. It discusses them in the order in which they appear in the Torah, providing a description for each mitzvah consisting of four components. First, *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* teaches us the content of the mitvah. Second, it gives the reason underlying the mitzvah. The rules governing the mitzvah follow, and finally the book explains when the mitzvah applies and who is obligated to perform it.

Importance of Book: *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* was the first popular work both to present the mitzvot according to their order in the weekly Torah portions and to explain in simple language for the layman the reasons for each of the mitzvot. In his introduction, the author states that he wrote the book in order "to arouse the heart of my young son and the youngsters who are his friends." Thus, the purpose of this historic work was to teach young people about the laws of the Torah.

The tradition that the Torah contains 613 mitzvot is stated in the Talmud, but the Talmud does not identify each mitzvah individually. It is important to know which mitzvot are derived from the Torah and which are derived from rabbinic law because generally we adopt a stricter interpretation for Torah mitzvot. In the Geonic period (500–1000 CE), many rabbinic scholars prepared listings of the Torah mitzvot, but

there was some disagreement among them concerning exactly which mitzvot were derived from the Torah. Some rabbis opposed the listing of the mitzvot altogether. For example, Abraham ibn Ezra, the famous Spanish exegete, wrote that those who list the mitzvot are “like people who count the number of herbs in a medical book without recognizing what each one represents.” The most influential work listing the mitzvot was written by Rambam in the twelfth century. The name of Rambam’s work is *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (“Book of the Commandments”) and his listing of the commandments has become the most widely used.

Supplying the reasons for each of the mitzvot has a long history but has also been very controversial. Many rabbis opposed any explanations of the mitzvot, arguing that mitzvot should be observed solely because they are God’s command and therefore do not need any logical explanation. Furthermore, they reasoned, if a person thinks he knows the reason for a mitzvah he may rationalize and conclude that the mitzvah does not apply to him. However, both Rambam in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, a philosophical work, and Ramban (Nachmanides), in his commentary on the Torah, supplied reasons for the mitzvot. Indeed, the Torah itself contains explanations for some mitzvot; for example, we are told that a king may not have too many wives because they may turn him away from God (Deuteronomy 17:17).

The author of *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* followed the tradition of listing the mitzvot and offering explanations for them. The significant contribution of the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* is that it combines several elements in a single work which is both simple to understand and convenient to use. *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* arranges the mitzvot according to the portion of the week, so that they can be studied systematically on a weekly basis. Furthermore, the author added easily understandable explanations for the mitzvot and made them more accessible by including them in the same work rather than placing the

explanations, as Rambam had done, in a separate (and difficult) philosophical work.

Editions and Other Works of Interest: There are many Hebrew editions of the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*. The most recent scholarly edition, edited by Rabbi Charles Chavel, was published by Mossad Harav Kook in 1972. This edition contains an extensive introduction which analyzes, among other things, the controversy surrounding the authorship of the work. There is an excellent English translation by Charles Wengrov, with detailed notes and a lengthy introduction. The English edition, in five volumes, was published by Feldheim Publishers in 1978–1984.

Text for Study: The first mitzvah in *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. The translation is taken from the Feldheim edition.

There is one positive precept in it [this weekly portion]: the *mitzvah* of procreation—as it is stated: *Then God blessed them, and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply* (Genesis 1:28).

As regards root purposes of this precept, it is in order that the world should be settled, inhabited. For the Eternal Lord, blessed is He, desires its settlement, as it is written: *He did not create it a chaos; He formed it to be inhabited* (Isaiah 45:18). This is an important *mitzvah*, by virtue of which all the *mitzvot* in the world are fulfilled: For to human beings were they given, not to the ministering angels.

The laws of this precept—when a man is duty-bound to devote himself to it, how many children he should have in order to have acquitted himself [fulfilled it], and from which *mitzvot* he is left free while occupied with this, as well as its other details—are explained in [the Babylonian

Talmud] tractate *Yevamot* chapter 6 and tractate *Berakhot* (16a). It remains in force in every place and every time, and a man is obligated to strive for it from the time he is suited for it, this being the age that the sages of blessed memory set for taking a wife [i.e., at eighteen]. This religious obligation is not imposed on women. Anyone who fails to fulfill it [in his life] disobeys a positive precept, and his punishment is very great; for he shows personally that he does not want to fulfill the wish of the Eternal Lord to settle His world.

Shulhan Arukh

Name: *Shulhan Arukh*

Author: Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488–1575)

Date: 1565

Contents of Book: The *Shulhan Arukh* ("Set Table") is the code of Jewish law considered authoritative by Jews to this very day. Unlike the Talmud which includes discussion and analysis of various opinions and much non-legal, historical and aggadic material, the *Shulhan Arukh* simply contains rules of law. It was written by Rabbi Joseph Caro who lived in Safed and was one of the leading halakhic authorities of the sixteenth century.

The *Shulhan Arukh* contains four sections. The first section, *Orah Hayyim*, lists the laws pertaining to the daily life of a Jew from the time he wakes up in the morning to the moment he goes to sleep. This section also includes the laws of the Sabbath and holidays. The next section, *Yoreh De'ah*, contains ritual laws that are not related to any specific day on the calendar. It includes such subjects as charity, respect for parents, mourning, family purity, and kashrut. The third section, *Even ha-Ezer*, contains the laws of family life, including marriage and divorce, and the responsibilities of husbands and wives to one another. The final volume, *Hoshen Mishpat*, contains the civil laws which include both the procedural law of setting up the courts, as well as the substantive law of deciding both civil and criminal cases.

Importance of Book: The *Shulhan Arukh* was not the first written code of Jewish law. Two major codes, the *Mishneh Torah* of Rambam (Maimonides) and the *Tur* of Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, predated the *Shulhan Arukh* by several hundred years. However, in most Jewish communities around the

world, it is the *Shulhan Arukh* which is accepted as authoritative. In his preface, Rabbi Caro explained his rationale for publishing the *Shulhan Arukh*: "...when a scholar will be asked a matter of halakhah, he will not need to hesitate."

Previously, Rabbi Caro had written the *Bet Yosef*, a detailed commentary on the *Tur*. In compiling the *Shulhan Arukh*, he used everything from the *Bet Yosef* that pertained specifically to what one was to do in any given situation governed by the law, and omitted whatever was of primarily academic and historical significance. As a result, the *Shulhan Arukh* is the first completely practical code in Jewish history. Rabbi Caro did not include any halakhic material, not currently in force, as did Rambam, nor did he quote dissenting views, as did the *Tur*. Rather, he simply presented the halakhic decision itself. In this way, Rabbi Caro said, the reader would be able to look up the practical ruling and "the law will be clear to him."

In Sephardic communities, the *Shulhan Arukh* was immediately accepted as authoritative, since Rabbi Caro was one of the preeminent Sephardic scholars of that generation. In Ashkenazic communities, however, it was accepted as authoritative only after Rabbi Moses Isserles (1525–1572), known as the Rema, the leading Ashkenazic authority of the time, wrote explanatory glosses on it. Sometimes these notes disagree with the opinion stated in the *Shulhan Arukh*, but often Rabbi Isserles merely elaborated on Rabbi Caro's decision.

Since the sixteenth century, no other complete code of Jewish law has been compiled. Instead, scholars have chosen to write commentaries on the *Shulhan Arukh*. Some of these commentaries, such as the *Magen Avraham* and the *Shakh*, are printed in the margins of the large edition of the *Shulhan Arukh*. Others, such as the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* and the *Mishnah Berurah*, are published as separate volumes. These commentaries have added strength to the authority of the *Shulhan Arukh* by incorporating decisions of more recent rabbinic authorities.

Editions and Other Works of Interest: The *Shulhan Arukh* is generally published in folio-size volumes complete with commentaries and notes. With the exception of limited sections, it has not been translated into English. Recently, however, a translation of the *Mishnah Berurah* has begun, published by Feldheim Publishers, which includes the text of the *Shulhan Arukh*.

Text for Study: A selection from the Introduction to the *Shulhan Arukh* which describes Rabbi Caro's reasons for writing this work. This translation is from *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles* by Menachem Elon, vol 3, pp. 1320-1322.

The major work that I wrote on the . . . *Turim*, which I called *Bet Yosef*, includes all the laws to be found in all the [books of the] codifiers, new and old, together with their sources in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the *Tosefta*, *Sifra*, *Sifrei*, *Mekhilta*, commentaries, codes, and responsa, new and old, with each law fully and appropriately explained in its proper place. I realized that it would be beneficial to gather the lillies and the sapphires [*i.e.*, the halakhic conclusions] of its [*Bet Yosef's*] discussion, [and present them] briefly, clearly, and comprehensively, in an elegant and pleasant style, so that God's perfect Torah may be fluent on the tongue of every Jew. Thus, when a scholar will be asked a matter of *Halakhah*, he will not need to hesitate. . . . The law to be applied in practice on any question that will be asked will be clear to him because he will be fully familiar with this book [the *Shulhan Arukh*], which is so excellently constructed. It is divided into thirty parts, so that if one studies one part each day, he will have reviewed its contents every month. Of such a person it will be said, "Happy is he who comes here

with his knowledge readily in hand." (Moed Katan 28a) . . .

Furthermore, the younger students will study it constantly and commit it to memory. Practical *Halakhab* will thus become "childhood learning" absorbed in their earliest years; and when they grow old, it will not depart from them. The intelligent students will shine like the heavens because they will be spared the pain of great toil and will enjoy studying this book; it is entirely pleasurable, containing clear and definitive statements of the applicable law, without discursive debate or argument.

I called this book *Shulhan Arukh* [The Set Table] because the reader will find set out in it all kinds of delicacies meticulously arranged, preserved, systematized, and clarified. I trust that, by divine grace, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God by virtue of this book - the small and the great, the student and the accomplished scholar.

Tanya

Name: *Tanya*

Author: Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813)

Date: 1796

Contents of Book: The *Tanya* is a kabbalistic work dealing with Jewish religious ethics written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe. Its teachings constitute the basis of Lubavitch philosophy to this day.

It is called *Tanya* because it begins with the Aramaic word *tanya*, meaning "we studied." This work is divided into five sections; the most famous of which is the first section, *Sefer Benonim* ("Book of the Intermediate Man"). According to Rabbi Shneur Zalman, a *benoni* is a person who has an inclination to sin but is able to overcome it. According to the *Tanya*, everyone is able to reach this level and must therefore strive to do so. The discussion of the *benoni* leads to an analysis of God's role in the world and an explanation of how humans should relate to God in their everyday life. The other four sections of the *Tanya* deal with the concepts of divine providence, repentance, and *tzimtzum*, the kabbalistic belief that God deliberately limited himself in order to "make room" for Creation. The final two sections of the *Tanya* contain letters that were written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman to his followers.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman wrote in the introduction to this work that he had composed the *Tanya* for those "who are in pursuit of righteousness and seek the Lord. . . . whose intelligence and mind are confused and they wander about in darkness in the service of God, unable to perceive the beneficial light that is buried in books."

Importance of Book: The *Tanya* was the first systematic presentation of Hasidic thought. Prior to the publication of the *Tanya*, Hasidism centered around the personality of the Rebbe, and its doctrines were transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Rabbi Shneur Zalman explained in the introduction that when it became impossible for him to meet individually with all those who came to see him, he wrote the *Tanya* as a substitute for individual meetings.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman was criticized by some Hasidic leaders for committing Hasidic thought to writing. They felt that the masses might misunderstand a written work; as Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk wrote: "Too much oil in the lamp could, heaven forbid, cause the flame to be extinguished." In spite of the opposition, Rabbi Shneur Zalman persisted and the *Tanya* became one of the most important Hasidic works ever written.

To this day, the *Tanya* is studied regularly both by members of the Lubavitch movement as well as by others. In 1942, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, who was then the Lubavitcher Rebbe, divided the *Tanya* into 254 sections so that it could be studied daily. Today, many people follow this tradition and study a portion of the *Tanya* every day. Additionally, there is a daily *Tanya* class that can be heard on the telephone. A *siyyum* (celebratory banquet) at the conclusion of the cycle of study of the *Tanya* is held every year on the nineteenth of *Kislev*, the day that Rabbi Shneur Zalman was freed from prison in Russia. The importance of the *Tanya*, however, goes beyond the Hasidic movement, and it has influenced many Jewish religious thinkers. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, for example, often made use of the *Tanya* in his philosophical writings.

Editions and Other Works of Interest: There are many printed editions of the *Tanya*, one with an English translation. This edition, published by Soncino Press in 1973, was translated by Rabbi Nissan Mindel and contains an introduction by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn. Rabbi Adin

Steinsaltz, in his *The Long Shorter Way*, provided an English summary of each chapter of the *Tanya*. The importance of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's philosophy in the non-Hasidic world is discussed in Dr. Norman Lamm's, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake*.

Text for Study: Chapter 32 of the first section of the *Tanya*. It has been called the heart of the *Tanya*, because numerically the Hebrew word *lev*, "heart", equals thirty-two. More importantly, this chapter is studied because it contains a discussion of the obligation to love all Jews and bring them closer to Judaism, the central theme of the Lubavitch movement. The translation is from the Soncino edition.

As for the talmudic statement to the effect that one who sees his friend sinning should hate him and should tell his teacher to hate him also (Shavuot 30a), this applies to a companion in Torah and precepts, having already applied to him the injunction *Thou shalt repeatedly rebuke thy friend* (Leviticus 19:17), meaning, "Him who is with thee in Torah and precepts,"¹ and who, nevertheless, has not repented of his sin, as stated in *Sefer Haredim*.²

But as for the person who is not one's colleague and is not on intimate terms with him, Hillel said, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving the creatures and drawing them near to the Torah" (Pirkei Avot 1:12). This means that even in the case of those who are removed from God's Torah and His service, and are therefore classified simply as "creatures," one must attract them with strong cords of love, perchance one might succeed in drawing them near to the Torah and Divine service. If one fails,

one has not forfeited the merit of the precept of neighborly love.

Even with regard to those who are close to him, and whom he has rebuked, yet they had not repented of their sins, when he is enjoined to hate them, there still remains the duty to love them also, and both are right: hatred, because of the wickedness in them; and love on account of the aspect of the hidden good in them, which is the Divine spark in them, which animates their divine soul. He should also awaken pity in his heart for [the divine soul], for she is held captive, as it were, in the evil of the *aitra agra* (other side, i.e., the demonic forces) that triumphs over her in wicked people. Compassion destroys hatred and awakens love, as is known from the [interpretation of the] text. *To [the house of] Jacob, who redeemed Abraham* (Isaiah 29:22).

(As for King David, peace unto him, who said, *I hate them with a consummate hatred*, (Psalm 139:22), he was referring to [Jewish] heretics and atheists who have no portion in the God of Israel, as stated in the Talmud, tractate *Shabbat*, beginning of chapter 16).

1. A play on the word *amitekha* ("thy friend"): *im etkha* ("with thee").
2. By Rabbi Eliezer Azkari (16th cent.).

Iggerot Moshe

Name: *Iggerot Moshe*

Author: Rabbi Moses Feinstein (1895–1986)

Date: 1959–1986

Contents of Book: *Iggerot Moshe* ("The Epistles of Moses") by Rabbi Moses Feinstein, considered by many to have been the premier halakhic authority of his day, is a massive collection of responsa on subjects included in all four volumes of the *Shulhan Arukh*. These *teshuvot*, as they are called in Hebrew, are responses by Rabbi Feinstein to questions of Jewish law that were asked of him both while he was still living in Europe and after he came to the United States in 1936. His very first *teshuvah* deals with the question of how large a *kippah* must be. In other *teshuvot*, he discussed whether it is a lack of faith in God to purchase life insurance and whether it is permissible for Jews to wear American-style clothing. He included several *teshuvot* concerning the status of women who did not know the whereabouts of their husbands after the Second World War. In these *teshuvot*, Rabbi Feinstein was able, through brilliant analysis of the sources, to reach a humane decision permitting many of these women to remarry. Rabbi Feinstein also analyzed such difficult modern-day problems as whether civil marriage is acceptable according to Jewish law when not accompanied by a religious ceremony and whether brain death is considered to be actual death according to the *halakhab*.

Importance of Book: *Iggerot Moshe* is the contemporary collection of *teshuvot* most widely accepted as authoritative. It is highly regarded because of Rabbi Feinstein's vast knowledge and piety, and also because of his willingness to tackle difficult issues of concern to Jews today.

Iggerot Moshe is part of the body of work called responsa literature. This body of literature has its origins in the Torah, where Moses asked God to clarify such matters as the appropriate punishment for the violator of the Sabbath and the inheritance rights of women. Later, the Mishnah and Gemara incorporated many of the halakhic questions that were asked of the rabbis. In addition, many questions were sent between Babylonia and the Land of Israel. The responsa literature continued throughout the Middle Ages, when some of the greatest rabbis such as Rashi and Rambam, wrote *teshuvot* to halakhic inquiries that were asked of them. The rabbis of Eastern Europe wrote hundreds of volumes of *teshuvot*, and many *teshuvot* are being written today all over the world.

The responsa literature deals with questions and issues that are not dealt with directly in the legal codes. The material in the *teshuvot* does not contradict the decisions of the *Shulchan Arukh*, but, rather, is a supplementary text that enhances the code by applying the law to specific cases. *Iggerot Moshe* attempts to analyze many modern halakhic issues that are not specifically dealt with in the *Shulchan Arukh*, a legal code written over four hundred years ago. Rabbi Feinstein was willing to tackle a wide variety of issues with a sense of concern and compassion for the questioner but also with a keen sense of what was needed by the Orthodox Jewish community at the time. The story is told, perhaps apocryphally, that for years every rabbinical student received Rabbi Feinstein's telephone number together with his *semikhab*. In fact, Rabbi Feinstein's telephone number was printed in the New York telephone book, and he was always available to answer questions from both rabbis and lay people.

Rabbi Feinstein understood the need not only to respond to these halakhic inquiries but also to write down his answers so that the information could be conveyed to the next generation. He wrote in the introduction to *Dibberot Moshe*, his commentary on the Talmud, that part of the obligation of

studying Torah is transcribing one's findings so that they can be passed to future generations.

Editions and Other Works of Interest: *Iggerot Moshe* was published in seven volumes from 1959 to 1986. An index to these *teshuvot* has been printed in both Hebrew and English. *Iggerot Moshe* has not been translated because Rabbi Feinstein forbade the translation of his *teshuvot* lest they be misunderstood and misused (see his *teshuvah* in Yoreh De'ah 3:91).

Text for Study: In this selection from the Introduction to the first volume of *Iggerot Moshe*, Rabbi Feinstein explained his decision to write his *teshuvot* in spite of opposition to this practice among some of the earlier authorities. This Introduction, along with several *teshuvot*, were translated by Rabbi Moses D. Tendler in a forthcoming volume that will be published by Ktav. In his own introduction to this volume, Rabbi Tendler explained that while Rabbi Feinstein initially opposed all translations of his *teshuvot* he encouraged Rabbi Tendler to compose an accurate translation in response to the growing number of unauthorized and often inaccurate translations that have recently appeared.

This volume contains largely the responsa I wrote to those who requested my halachic opinion. Indeed it might have been proper not to answer them in definitive fashion (*balacha l'maaseh*) since so many Torah luminaries, great in their knowledge of Torah and in their piety, refused to issue instructive halachic rulings because of the warning recorded in tractate Sotah (22). Rav Aba, in the name of Rav Huna said "Many has she destroyed (Proverbs 7:26). This refers to a scholar who did not reach the status of a "posek", yet issues halachic rulings." It should be noted that it is also

written "And mighty are those she killed" which is interpreted to mean; a Torah scholar who is worthy of being a posek but refuses to do so. For this reason the sons of Rav Akiva Eiger recorded in their preface to their father's volume of responsa that he felt duty bound to respond to those who asked his halachic opinion lest he violate the second dictum and be amongst those who are guilty of not issuing halachic rulings even though they have attained the requisite knowledge.

Those who refrained from issuing halachic rulings did so because one must rule with absolute accuracy as in the days of Rav, Rav Huna and Rav Abba. But each generation has a different definition of "attained the level of a posek". Since decisors of the quality of prior generations are not available today, we are duty bound to issue halachic rulings to our generation, as stated by Rav Akiva Eiger. Surely one must be fearful lest he does not rule accurately, and therefore, many (great Torah scholars) refrained from doing so, Rav Akiva Eiger notwithstanding. Rav Akiva Eiger sensed the obligations to issue halachic rulings despite his many concerns, but he was a Torah giant and could take his own measure and decide that he must assume the mantle of a Posek. It follows, therefore, that those of minor accomplishment, such as I, who lack both Torah knowledge and wisdom should refrain from issuing halachic rulings, certainly not to publish them and thus in fact issue rulings for the entire world. However, in my humble opinion, despite their inferiority when compared to the Torah scholars of early generations, and, therefore, their concern lest they rule in error — an error known to G-d — they did not refrain from assuming the obligation to do so. We have been instructed in our

Torah "It is not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12). Each Posek must rule as he sees fit after meticulous study and analysis of all relevant texts and prior rulings, to the best of his ability, fully cognizant of the heavy responsibility he has assumed in applying Hashem's Torah to the life of the Jew. If after all his effort his ruling does not concur with that known to Hashem, he may take comfort in the statement of our Sages: "Both are the words of our Living Lord". If his decision was made after due diligence, he shall receive reward for his efforts, even though he did not divine the real truth.

Halakhic Man

Name: *Halakhic Man*

Author: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993)

Date: 1944, translated into English in 1983

Contents of Book: In *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Soloveitchik, known generally as “the Rav,” presented his philosophy of halakhah. Since Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote few works, this volume is of particular importance. His philosophy is expressed in terms of the “halakhic personality,” based on the personality of the author’s grandfather Rav Chaim. According to the Rav, the halakhic personality contains two elements. He is both a student, an “objective” analyst of the law; and a man of religious and spiritual sensibility. The Rav’s grandfather, Rav Chaim of Brisk (Brest-Litovsk, Lithuania) was the originator of the so-called Brisker method of study which the Rav continued and enhanced. The key element of this new method is the conceptualization of the legal principles of Jewish law. The laws of kashrut are not merely rules about pots and pans, but concepts upon which an entire halakhic system is based. However, the halakhic personality is also able to establish a pure halakhic system. As the Rav wrote, “Rav Chaim purified the legal system of all outside influences. According to his method, one must reject the psychological and the historical element in the interpretation of the halakhah. So, too, must we do away with the ‘baalabatish’ approach, which lacks the necessary creativity.” The “halakhic man” has no place for the compromises and concessions of politics or for the concession to the forces of reality that typify many *teshuvot*. Yet, Rav Chaim did not forget the moral purpose of the halakhah. He described the role of the rabbi as follows: “to redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect

the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor.”

Importance of Work: The editors of the Jewish Publication Society have said that the English translation of *Halakhic Man* is “arguably the most important book the Jewish Publication Society has ever published.” Its importance is due not only to the subject matter, which defines the model religious personality, but also to the fact that it was written by Rabbi Soloveitchik. The Rav was the premier example of the integration of the worlds of halakhah and philosophy, and therefore his authority is unmatched in the analysis of the halakhic personality. It is ironic that in order to define the halakhic personality in terms understandable to “outsiders,” Rabbi Soloveitchik was forced to make use of his mastery of philosophy. A purely “halakhic man” could never have written this essay.

This work is also important as a link between the present day and the Torah world of Lithuania, which no longer exists. It was written at the end of the Second World War. While it does not mention the Holocaust explicitly, the Rav lamented a society which he knew so well but was destroyed, never to be reborn in Eastern Europe. The Rav, however, did not write this work as a eulogy but rather as a way of exposing future generations to the halakhic personality, enabling them to appreciate what it comprised and to emulate it wherever possible.

The Rav’s definition of the halakhic personality was not limited to his written work. He personally embodied many of the elements of the “halakhic man.” At the end of his eulogy for his father in 1993, Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik posed the question as to what made the Rav so special to so many of his students. He responded that in the Rav’s Talmud classes, students experienced a reality that was more real than what others considered the real world outside. They had experienced the “halakhic man” in action.

Editions and Other Works of Interest: Originally, *Isb ba-Halakhah*, as it is called in Hebrew, was published in 1944 in a journal called *Talpiot*. It was subsequently republished in two different collections of Hebrew essays by the Rav. It was translated by Professor Lawrence Kaplan of McGill University and published by The Jewish Publication Society in 1983. The many articles that are presently being published about the Rav and his philosophy are valuable tools to understanding this essay as well as his other philosophic and halakhic works.

Text for Study: This selection from *Halakhic Man* (p. 120) depicts the continuity of the generations. While the "halakhic man" may no longer live in our generation, his personality and message are still alive through the continued study of Torah and commitment to mitzvot.

"Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua, etc." (Avot 1:1). This is the motto of the halakhah. The *masorah*, the process of transmission, symbolizes the Jewish people's outlook regarding the beautiful and resplendent phenomenon of time. The chain of tradition, begun millennia ago, will continue until the end of all time. Time, in this conception, is not destructive, all-consuming, and it does not simply consist of fleeting, imperceptible moments. This wondrous chain, which originated on that bright morning of the day of revelation and which stretches forward into the eschaton, represents the manner in which the Jewish people experience their own history, a history that floats upon the stormy waters of time. The consciousness of halakhic man, that master of the received tradition, embraces the entire company of the sages of the *masorah*. He lives in their midst, discusses and argues questions of Halakhah with them, delves into and analyzes fundamental halakhic

principles in their company. All of them merge into one time experience. He walks alongside Maimonides, listens to R. Akiva, senses the presence of Abaye and Raba. He rejoices with them and shares in their sorrow. "David, king of Israel, yet lives and endures" (Rosh Ha-Shanah 25a); "Our father Jacob did not die" (Ta'anit 5b; cf. Genesis Rabbah 96:4); "Moses, our teacher, did not die" (Zohar I, 37b). There can be no death and expiration among the company of the sages of tradition. Eternity and immortality reign here in unbounded fashion. Both past and future become, in such circumstances, ever-present realities.