

Notes on the Rema of Krakow  
Rabbi Moses Isserles

The story begins with a rabbi named Yaakov Pollack who was the chief rabbi in Krakow. It turns out that one of his brightest students was R. Shalom Shachna, who was later appointed to be the chief rabbi in Lublin. Shachna founded a Yeshiva in Lublin that became world-renowned.

1530 – Moses Isserles born in Krakow – Isserles, his family name is a contraction of his fathers name, “Yisrael Eliezer.” His father was a wealthy talmid chacham.

His grandfather was the brother of the grandfather of Maharshal, Rabbi Shlomo Luria, who later became a great rabbi in Lublin. The two men, the Rema and the Maharshal, were very different in philosophy, but corresponded frequently and were relatives.

When he was 10, the Rema was sent by his father from Krakow to attend the famous yeshiva in Lublin. When he got there, he had such personality and greatness in Torah that when he was 14, Reb Shalom Schachna took him as a son in law.

Reb Shalom Schachna became the chief rabbi in Poland after the death of Rabbi Yaakov Pollack. The Rema was appointed by his father in law as the chief rabbi of Krakow at the age of 20. In honor of the appointment, his father, who was quite wealthy, made a large donation to the community.

Nevertheless, the community quickly realized that it had in the Rema an exceptional rabbi.

The Rema lived another 22 years. He died when he was 42. He accomplished much during this time.

In Poland at that time, there was a council known as the *Vaad Arba Ha-artzot*, the Council of the Four Lands. It met twice a year at a winter and a summer fair, one in Lublin and the other in Yaroslav.

Often the rabbis would disagree, but during the 22 years that the Rema was in Krakow, the decisions were unanimous in the council and according to his opinion. Such was his stature. Those who opposed him would back up. Even Reb Shlomo Luria, with whom he frequently disagreed, would write him a long letter stating his disagreement, but at the end of the letter would write, if you say it then I accept it.

People felt that the Rema had holiness within him. What he said became “it” for Polish Jewry and because of this it became “it” for Ashkenazic Jewry. He became the great Posek for the Jewish people.

When he was 22 years old, his wife passed away during a terrible plague in Krakow. Almost a fifth of the Jewish community passed away in 13 months. We still have the records of the Hevra Kaddisha. In the 26 months prior to the plague, only 13 people died. But in the first two months of the plague, over 600 Jews die.

The Rema was a broken man. He was left with two daughters. His son would die before he died leaving no male heirs.

After his wife died, on her monument recorded the tragedy.

The community came to him after a year and said that they could not have a rabbi who was not married. They felt that a Rabbi who was not married could not perform the task.

Interesting that on the stone of his first wife, only her maiden name appears. He knew that the community would demand that he remarry and so, in order not to cause more pain to her family, he put her family name on it.

The Rema was wealthy. He had a great Yeshiva and paid much of the costs of the Yeshiva from his personal fortune including finding a place for his student to live. His students viewed him as a father figure. They tended to write less about his Halacha than about him as a person. One even writes that when he came to the Yeshiva, the Rema came in at night and put a blanket over him and tucked him in.

On his tomb stone was written the words, “Me Moshe ad Moshe, Lo kam ke Moshe.” “From Moses to Moses, there is non one like Moses.” This is the same epitaph on maimonides tomb. This is the greatest possible epitaph. This was given to him because of his compassion. This type of compassion would be never forgotten.

The Rema was buried on Lag B’Omer Thousands of Jews would come there to his grave on Lag B’omer.

He was a prolific writer.

The most famous of his work is called the Mapa, the tablecloth – the commentary to R. Yosef Caro’s Shulchan Aruch = the prepared table. Caro built and set the table. The Rema spread the tablecloth over the table.

The Mapa is an incredible work. Because of this he is to this day the posek of Ashkenazic Jewry.

## BACKGROUND TO THE SHULCHAN ARUCH AND THE MAPA

Mid 1500’s crises in the Jewish world. Effects of the expulsion beginning to be felt.

Caro was in Turkey and Greece before he came to Israel. Spoke about Halacha with an angel. These discussions are recorded in his book called the “Magid Meshearim.”

Caro write the Beit Yosef – Commentary on the Tur – written over a 20 years period.  
Brilliant –

The Rema receives a copy fo the Beit Yosef and sends a letter to Caro. Months later, he receives and answer and they begin to correspond.

After Caro came to Israel, his angel told him that his was a good time to restore the Sanhedrin. But someone who already had it could only give the semihca of the Sanhedrin and no one was alive who had it. Most of the Jewish world felt that the Messiah would come and start the semicha for the Sandhedrin.

The Rambam was a minority voice in this. He said that if the rabbi's who live in the land of Israel grant semicha, such a person could then give it to others.

For 300 years this opinion of the Rambam was well known, but no one did anything about it. But after the catastrophe in Spain, there was a great messianic upheaval among the Jewish people. Thousands came to Israel. One great Rabbi, Rabbi Yaakov Beirav who started giving semicha in the land of Israel after 1492. He gave semicha to R. Yosef Caro and to other leading rabbis in Israel.

Caro began to give it to others. The semicha as eventually rejected by the majority of the rabbanim in Israel.

Therefore Caro said that although we cannot have a Sanhedrin, we could have a book that would govern the Jewish people. So he wrote the Shulchan Aruch, a compendium of Jewish law. From that day on, the Jewish people living according to the Chulchan Aruch. In effect, the Schulchan Aruch became the substitute for the Sanhedrin.

In his introduction, Caro write that all of his opinions are based upon the opinions of three others:

1. The Rambam
2. R. Yitzchak Alfasi
3. R. Osher ben Yechiel as represented in the book written by his son (the book is the Tur).

He says that in the event of a disagreement, the will follow the majority. The Tambam and Alfasi were Sephardic. Because of this many things were not acceptable to Ashkenazic Jewry. It could have ended up to be a book for Sephardic Jewry only.

The Rema says we do not need another book. He was well aware fo the fact that Caro hardly took the Ashkenazic view into account. But he felt that we did not need to write an Ashkenazic version of the Shulchan Aruch. so he decides to put little notes on the side of the page wherever the Ashkenazic custom is ignored. He felt that Ashkenazic Jewry agreed with 85% of the book anyway.

What the Rema did saved the Jewish people. Gave a sense of unity between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry that exists until this day. One book – one Torah – one people! Ashkenazic Jewry buys into the Mapa 100%.

The greatness of the Rema is that he took a situation that was potentially terribly divisive and turned it not a unifying work.