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Sifrey Halachot

Over the years many great Torah sages studied the Sugyot of the Gemara, trying to understand how the Halacha should be done. Some of the sages wrote Sifrey Halachot to explain the Halacha to us.

Rabbenu Moshe Ben Maimon, known as **the Rambam**, was the first Sage to write a Sefer Halachot. He lived in Egypt about 800 years ago. The *Rambam* included all the Halachot of the Torah, even the ones about Sacrifices or Spiritual Cleanliness. He called his work “**Mishne Torah**” which means “A Repetition of the Torah.” The entire work has 14 smaller sefarim. In Hebrew the number 14 is written with the letters *Yod Dalet*. These letters spell the word *Yad* meaning “hand” in Hebrew. So the Rambam gave a second name to his sefer, calling it “**Yad Hahazakah**” or “The Strong Hand.” The Rambam worked hard to make sure that his sefer Halacha was very clear and exact. The Rambam also clarified the names of the 613 Mitzvot, so that everyone could know exactly which Mitzvah was being fulfilled when they followed the Halachah.

The Rambam was born in Spain, and moved to North Africa where he received many traditions from his teachers. These traditions go back all the way to the Amoraim of Babylon. But he did not have any connection with Rashi and the authors of the Tosafot, who lived in France and Germany. Rabbenu Moshe ben Ya’akov, who lived in the French city of Coucy, studied the Rambam’s list of the 613 Mitzvot and wrote his own Sefer Halachot, explaining the Halachot of each Mitzvah, and adding the opinions of Rashi and the Tosafot. He called his Sefer Halachot “The Big Book of the Mitzvot” or the **Sefer Mitzvot Hagadol**. It is often called the “**the Smag**” for short.

As time went on Jewish people asked Torah sages new questions in Halacha. The sages wrote answers based on the Sugyot of the Gemara. Someone had to organize all this new information and fit it together with the older Sifrey Halachot. About 700 years ago, a great Torah Sage named **Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel** lived, taught and wrote in Germany. When the Germans began to harm the Jews of their country, Rabbenu Asher ran away to Spain. Over the years he wrote more than a thousand answers to questions in Halacha. He also wrote a book of Halachot. Rabbenu Asher is often called “**the Rosh**” for short. His son, **Rabbenu Yaakov ben Asher** studied with his father, and with Torah Sages in Spain. He wrote a new Sefer Halachot, which he called **Arba’ah Turim**. This means “four rows.” Rabbenu Ya’akov chose this name because he organized his sefer into four sections. The first section deals with the laws of day to day life and the holidays. The second section deals with the laws of keeping Kosher and being Holy. The third section deals with laws of marriage and divorce. The fourth section deals with the laws of caring for other people’s money and things. Rabbenu Ya’akov explained the opinions of the Rambam and the Sages from North Africa and Spain. He also explained the opinions of Rashi, the Tosafot and other Sages from France and Germany. Then he explained why they sometimes argued with each other. He did not write Halachot about Sacrifices and most kinds of Spiritual Purity, since we don’t need most of these laws until the Mashiah arrives.

About 500 years ago, a great Torah sage named **Rabbi Yosef Karo** was born in the Spanish city of Toledo. As a child he was driven out of Spain by the King and Queen along with all the other Jews. His family wandered to Turkey. Eventually Rabbi Yosef succeeded in reaching the land of Israel, where he became the Chief Rabbi in the city of Tzefat. He wrote a wonderful commentary to the *Arba'ah Turim* which he called "**Bet Yosef**" meaning "the House of Yosef." Afterwards he wrote a new Sefer Halachot which he called "**Shulchan Aruch**" or "A Set Table." Rabbi Yosef Karo chose that name because wanted the Halacha to be clear and ready to do, like a set table that is neat and ready for the meal.

At the same time as Rabbi Yosef Karo was teaching and writing in the Land of Israel, **Rabbi Moshe Isserles** was teaching and writing in the Polish city of Krakow. When he saw the *Shulchan Aruch*, he thought it would be good to add the opinions of the Sages of Germany and Poland. He wrote additional Hagahot to the *Shulchan Aruch*. He called his additions "**HaMapah**" which means "The Table Cloth." Now the "Set Table" by Rabbi Yosef Karo has a beautiful "table cloth" by Rabbi Moshe Isserles. Both works are printed in the same sefer. One Sefer Halacha now has all the opinions in it.

Today Torah observant Jews fall into two categories:

The Jews from Babylon, Syria, Eretz Yisrael, North Africa and Spain are called **Bnei Edot Hamizrah**. This means "Children of the Communities in the East." Sometimes they are called **Sefaradim** which means "Spanish Jews" This does not mean that they all came from Spain. It means that many of the great Torah sages they follow, like the Rambam and Rabbi Yosef Karo, were born in Spain.

The Jews from France, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Russia and other places in Europe are called **Ashkenazim**. This means "German Jews." This doesn't mean that they all came from Germany. It means that many of the great Torah sages they follow, like the The *Rosh*, were born in Germany.

Sefardim usually follow the opinion of Rabbi Yosef Karo in the *Shulhan Aruch*.
Ashkenazim usually follow the opinion of Rabbi Moshe Isserles in *HaMapah*.