

## Strong's Concordance

**meshar: evenness, uprightness, equity**

Original Word: מִשְׁרִים

Part of Speech: Noun Masculine

Transliteration: meshar

Phonetic Spelling: (may-shaw'r')

Short Definition: equity

<http://biblehub.com/hebrew/4339.htm>

Like all leading rabbinic scholars of his time, [Joseph] Caro was also a kabbalist, profoundly concerned with kabbalistic doctrine and committed to the kabbalistic ideals of ascetic and spiritual perfection, even though the main focus of his activity as a writer and teacher was in the halakhic field. He belonged to a circle of scholars and ascetics that included the leading kabbalists of the age, many of whom were known to have had extraordinary visionary, auditory, and other mystical experiences. These kabbalistic circles flourished already in the Balkans (Salonika, Adrianople) even before Safed developed into the leading center of kabbalist teaching and piety. Among Caro's acquaintances and associates mention should be made of [Moses \\*Cordovero](#) (who considered Caro his "master"), of Cordovero's teacher, friend, and brother-in-law [Solomon \\*Alkabez](#) (who was also Caro's close friend), and of other leading kabbalists of Safed. In Caro's circle Kabbalah was not merely a matter of mystical theology and theosophical speculation, and several members experienced mystical revelations of diverse kinds ([Solomon \\*Molcho](#) , Joseph Taitazak, and others). Caro believed himself to be regularly visited – generally at night – by a heavenly mentor ("*maggid*") who revealed to him kabbalistic doctrines, as well as rules and predictions for his private ascetic life. This heavenly mentor (see [\\*Maggid](#) ) identified himself as the heavenly archetype of the Mishnah and the *Shekhinah*, and manifested himself in the form of "automatic speech," i.e., as a voice coming out of Caro's mouth which could be heard by others. The best-known account of this phenomenon is that contained in a letter by Solomon Alkabez, recounting such a "maggidic" manifestation during a [\\*Shavuot-night](#) vigil in Caro's house, probably in Nikopolis. These visitations, which continued for about 50 years, were not experienced in a state of trance, for Caro subsequently remembered the messages and wrote them down in a kind of mystical diary. A small part of this diary has survived in manuscript and was subsequently printed under the title *Maggid Mesharim* (1<sup>st</sup>, incomplete, ed. Lublin, 1646; 2<sup>nd</sup>, supplementary, ed., Venice, 1649; 1<sup>st</sup> complete ed., Amsterdam, 1708). Attempts to deny Caro's authorship of the *Maggid Mesharim* were mainly inspired by the prejudice that this lucid halakhist could not possibly have exhibited such mystical states (seen as irrational, trance-like, or even pathological); the authenticity of the book is, however, beyond doubt.

“Caro, Joseph ben Ephraim.” [Encyclopaedia Judaica](#)

Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 4. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. p488-491. COPYRIGHT 2007 Keter Publishing House Ltd. [David Tamar](#), [Louis Isaac Rabinowitz](#), [R. J. Zwi Werblowsky](#) and [Moshe Idel](#)



**Mesharim** - the angel for whom Joseph Caro (1488-1575) titled his book, *Maggid Mesharim*, that describes the visions that the angel gave to him. In the fifteenth century Caro served as the doyen of the cabalistic Safed community of Upper Galilee (Palestine).

<http://hafapea.com/angelpages/angels4.html>

straight ; honest, honorable, law-abiding, decent ; (biblical) righteous  
person, God-fearing person יָשָׁר

<http://www.morfix.co.il/%D7%9E%D6%B5%D7%99%D7%A9%D6%B8%D7%81%D7%A8>

# Joseph ben Ephraim Karo

Rabbi Joseph Karo	
<i>HaMechaber</i> Maran	
	
<i>Artistic conception of Karo's appearance</i>	
Personal details	
<b>Birth name</b>	Joseph ben Ephraim Karo
<b>Born</b>	1488 Toledo, Spain
<b>Died</b>	March 24, 1575 Safed
<b>Buried</b>	Safed
<b>Signature</b>	

**Joseph ben Ephraim Karo**, also spelled Yosef Caro, or Qaro, (Toledo, 1488 – Safed, March 24, 1575)<sup>[1]</sup> was author of the last great codification of Jewish law, the *Shulchan Aruch*, which is still authoritative for all Jews pertaining to their respective communities. To this end he is often referred to as **HaMechaber** (Hebrew: "The Author") and as **Maran** (Aramaic: "*Our Master*").<sup>[2]</sup>

## Early life

Karo was born in Toledo, Spain in 1488. In 1492, aged four years old, he was forced to flee Spain with his family and the rest of Spanish Jewry as a result of the Alhambra Decree and subsequently settled in Portugal. After the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal in 1497, the Ottomans invited the Jews to the Ottoman territory and Karo went with his parents to Nikopolis of the Ottoman Empire, and spent the rest of his life in the Ottoman Empire. In Nikopol, he received his first instruction from his father, who was himself an eminent Talmudist. He married, first, Isaac Saba's daughter, and, after her death, the daughter of Hayyim Albalag, both of these men being well-known Talmudists. After the death of his second wife he married the daughter of Zechariah Sechsel (or perhaps Sachsel), a

learned and wealthy Talmudist.

Already as a young man, he gained a reputation as a brilliant Torah scholar. He began by writing an explanation on the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*. He called his work the *Kesef Mishnah*. Here he cited and explained Rambam's sources.

Between 1520 and 1522 Karo settled at Edirne. He later settled in the city of Safed, Land of Israel, where he arrived about 1535, having en route spent several years at Salonica (1533) and Istanbul.

## Authority recognized

After his first wife died at a young age, he married the daughter of Rabbi Issac Sabba. For a short while he lived in Nikopol, but decided to make his way to the Land of Israel so that he could immerse himself in its sanctity and complete his written works. Passing through Salonica, he met the great kabbalist Joseph Taitazak. He continued his journey to the Holy Land via Egypt and eventually settled in Safed.

At Safed he met Jacob Berab and was soon appointed a member of his rabbinical court. Berab exerted great influence upon him, and Karo became an enthusiastic supporter of Berab's plans for the restitution of *semicha* (rabbinical ordination) which had been in abeyance for over 11 centuries. Karo was one of the first he ordained and after Berab's death, Karo tried to perpetuate the scheme by ordaining his pupil Moses Alshech, but he finally gave up his endeavors, convinced that he could not overcome the opposition to ordination. Karo also established a *yeshiva* where he taught Torah to over 200 students.

A Yemenite Jewish traveler, Zechariah (Yaḥya) al-Dhahiri, visited Rabbi Karo's *yeshiva* in Safed, in *circa* 1567 CE<sup>[3]</sup> and wrote of his impressions on this wise:<sup>[4]</sup>

“ I journeyed from Syria, the province, through Upper Galilee, unto the city of Safed, the land of Canaan... I then came into the city, and lo! Within her dwelt the Divine Presence, for within her there is a large community, frowardness being removed far from them, about fourteen thousand in number! In eighteen seats of learning they had come to study the Talmud. There, I saw the light of the Law, and the Jews had light. They surpassed all other communities... Then it was that I knew my estimable worth, based on all my strength and ability, and lo! I had been deficient in several matters. Now, ‘that which is lacking cannot be numbered’ (Eccl. 1:15). I made myself inconspicuous in her midst, while my thoughts were languorous. Within the synagogues and *midrashic* study halls I had come to hear the expositors who expound upon a certain matter in several ways, seeing that they know every secret thing, from the walls of the ceiling, all the way down to its foundation – but, especially, the great luminary, even the wise man, Rabbi Joseph Karo, from whose seat of learning the wise men of Safed do not quit themselves, for in his heart the Talmud is stored, after he had sat down in learning for seven years, within a confined chamber. Now, aside from several branches of wisdom, within his heart are sealed, both, revelations and mysteries. ”

I went one Sabbath to his seat of learning, to see his honourable and glorious magnanimity. I sat down by the entrance, alongside the doorpost of the gate, while my cogitations from foolishness were sorely gripped by fear. Now, that wise man the elder sat upon a chair, and with his mouth he did amplify the subject matter. By an utterance he would draw man away from his burthen caused by the vicissitudes of time, in drawing him nigh unto the faithful God. He would then clothe him, as it were, in sumptuous apparel fit for those who are free, by his recital of the verse: ‘The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul’ (Ps. 19:7). He then deliberated on a certain matter by explicating its plain and esoteric sense. Before him were seated about two-hundred very admirable and distinguished pupils, sitting upon benches. When he had finished his words of wisdom, he gestured to a certain disciple opposite him to speak... Now, when that wise man (i.e. Rabbi Joseph Karo) heard the words of that disciple, he was astonished by his eloquence of speech who had given plausible arguments about the soul, and he then raised him up and exalted him above all the pupils that were with him... I stayed there awhile, until the wise man (i.e. Rabbi Joseph Karo) had gestured to his pupils to stand up, and then gave order to each one to learn a Mishna. So they went their way, the pupils who were there gathered and the wise man (i.e. Rabbi Joseph Karo).

When Jacob Berab died, Karo was regarded as his successor, and together with Rabbi Moshe of Trani he headed the Rabbinical Court of Safed. In fact, by this time, the Rabbinical Court of Safed had become the central rabbinical court in all of Ottoman Syria, and indeed of the diaspora as well. Thus there was not a single matter of national or global importance that did not come to the attention and ruling of the Safed Beth Din. Its rulings were accepted as final and conclusive, and Karo's halachic decisions and clarifications were sought by sages from every corner of the diaspora. He came to be regarded as the leader of the entire generation

In a dramatic testimonial, Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz testified that in Salonica, Karo had become one of the rare individuals who merited to be instructed by a *maggid* - a private angelic teacher who revealed to him many kabbalistic teachings. The *maggid* exhorted Karo to sanctify and purify himself, and he revealed to him events that would take place in the future. In *Shaarei Kedusha*, Rabbi Chaim Vital explains that visitation by a *maggid* is a form of Divine Inspiration (*ruach hakodesh*). The teachings of the *maggid* are recorded in his published work titled *Maggid Meisharim*, although Rabbi Chaim Joseph David Azulai notes that only about one fiftieth of the manuscript was ever published, (see Works). However, in numerous places in *Maggid Meisharim* it is stated that, "I am the Mishna that speaks in your mouth," indicating that the Oral Torah itself (of which the Mishna is the fundamental part) spoke within him. (However, these two explanations are not necessarily contradictory—in the merit of the Mishna Karo constantly reviewed, he was worthy of an angelic teacher).



Karo's grave in Safed

The *Maggid* promised him that he would have the merit of settling in the Land of Israel, and this promise was fulfilled. Another promise, that he would merit to die a martyr's death sanctifying God's Name like Rabbi Shlomo Molcho had merited, did not transpire for an unspecified reason.

His reputation during the last thirty years of his life was greater than that of almost any other rabbi since Maimonides. The Italian Azariah dei Rossi, though his views differed widely from Karo's, collected money among the rich Italian Jews for the purpose of having a work of Karo's printed; and Moses Isserles compelled the recognition of one of Karo's decisions at Kraków, although he thought Karo was wrong.

When some members of the community of Carpentras, France, believed themselves to have been unjustly treated by the majority in a matter relating to taxes, they appealed to Karo, whose letter was sufficient to restore to them their rights (Rev. Etudes Juives 18:133-136). In the East, Karo's authority was, if possible, even greater. His name heads the decree of excommunication directed against Daud, Joseph Nasi's agent; and it was Karo who condemned Dei Rossi's *Me'or Enayim* to be burned. Several funeral orations delivered on that occasion have been preserved (Moses Albelda, *Darash Mosheh*; Samuel Katzenellenbogen, *Derashot*), as well as some elegies from Karo's passing.



## Works

Karo published during his lifetime:

- *Beth Yosef* (בית יוסף), a commentary on *Arba'ah Turim*, the current work of Jewish law in his days. In this commentary Karo shows an astounding mastery over the Talmud and the legalistic literature of the Middle Ages. He felt called upon to systematize the laws and customs of Judaism in face of the disintegration caused by the Spanish expulsion.
- *Shulchan Aruch* (שולחן ערוך), a condensation of his decisions in *Beth Yosef*. Finished in 1555, this code was published in four parts in 1565. The work was not accepted without protest and criticism, but after the lapse of a century, and in consequence of certain revisions and amplifications, it became the almost unquestioned authority of the whole Jewish world.;
- *Kesef Mishneh* (כסף משנה) (Venice, 1574-5), a commentary of *Mishneh Torah* by Maimonides;

After his death there appeared:

- *Bedek ha-Bayit* (בדק הבית) (Salonica, 1605), supplements and corrections to *Beth Yosef*;
- *Kelalei ha-Talmud* (כללי התלמוד) (Salonica, 1598), on the methodology of the Talmud;
- *Avkath Rochel* (אבקת רובל) (Salonica, 1791), Responsa
- *Maggid Meisharim* (מגיד משרים) (Lublin, 1646), and supplements (Venice, 1646)
- *Derashot* (דרשות) (Salonica, 1799), speeches, in the collection 'Oz Tzaddikim'.

Karo also left a commentary upon the Mishnah, as well as supercommentaries to Rashi's and Nahmanides' commentaries on the Torah, which have, apparently, not been preserved.

## *Maggid Meisharim*

Karo's literary works are considered among the masterpieces of rabbinic literature. The *Maggid Meisharim* (1646; "Preacher of Righteousness"), another major work, a strange and mystical diary, is a kind of diary in which Karo during a period of fifty years recorded the nocturnal visits of an angelic being, his heavenly mentor, the personified Mishna (the authoritative collection of Jewish Oral Law). His visitor spurred him to acts of righteousness and even asceticism, exhorted him to study the Kabbala, and reproved him for moral laxities.

The discussions treat of various subjects. The maggid enjoins Karo to be modest in the extreme, to say his prayers with the utmost devotion, to be gentle and patient always. Especial stress is laid on asceticism; and Karo is often severely rebuked for taking more than one glass of wine, or for eating meat. Whenever Karo did not follow the severe instructions of his maggid, he suddenly heard its warning voice. His mentor also advised him in family affairs, told him what reputation he enjoyed in heaven, and praised or criticized his decisions in religious questions. Karo received new ideas from his maggid in regard to the Kabbala only; such information was in the nature of sundry cabalistic interpretations of the Pentateuch, that in content, though not in form, remind one of the theories of Karo's pupil, Moses ben Jacob Cordovero.



Title page of Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*




The present form of the *Maggid Meisharim* shows plainly that it was never intended for publication, being merely a collection of stray notes; nor does Karo's son Judah mention the book among his father's works (Introduction to the Responsa). It is known, on the other hand, that during Karo's lifetime the kabalists believed his *Maggid* to be actually existent (compare Vital-Calabrese, *Sefer ha-Gilgulim*, pp. 119, 142, Vilna, 1885). The *Maggid Meisharim*, furthermore, shows a knowledge of Karo's public and private life that no one could have possessed after his death; and the fact that the *maggid* promises things to its favorite that were never fulfilled — e.g., a martyr's death — proves that it is not the work of a forger, composed for Karo's glorification.

## Karo's characteristics

Karo's mysticism was not speculative in nature; and he devoted time to the Kabbalah, his *maggid* often exhorted him not to neglect the study of it (*Maggid Mesharim*, p. 57b). The catastrophe that came upon the Pyrenean Jews made such an impression upon the minds of the best among them that many saw therein the signs of Messianic travail, (compare Jacob Berab); and Karo, according to a contemporary, took this dark view throughout his life. While men like Molkho and David Reubeni were led to commit extravagant and foolish deeds under the influence of this idea. Berab's and Karo's nobility of nature came to the fore. If Karo indulged in mystical visions, and, half dreaming, thought he heard heavenly voices in his soul, they served always as reminders to him that his life, his actions, and his accomplishments must surpass those of other people (ib. *Toledot*, p. 9; *Azharot*, p. 3b, and *passim*).

He died on the 13 Nisan 5335 (1575 CE), aged 87.

## References

- [1] Rabbi Joseph Karo (<http://www.ou.org/pardes/bios/caro.htm>), OU
- [2] Joseph ben Ephraim Karo (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/312602/Joseph-ben-Ephraim-Karo>), *Encyclopædia Britannica*
- [3] The date of al-Dhahiri's visit to the Land of Israel is alluded to in Chapter Twenty-Five of al-Dhahiri's book, *Sefer Ha-Musar*. There, he writes: "...Now, in Tiberius there was the wise man, [Rabbi Eliezer] Ben Yochai, in whose generation he was of singular character; in the year, *et ha-keves he-ehad* = אהד"ה הכב"ש"ש אה, I moved on from there into the village of Kanah, the city of Jonah, the son of Amitai, and from there to Shechem and to Jerusalem, and Hebron the place of my fathers." The year is denoted in Hebrew characters, in the form of a biblical verse (i.e. "the one **lamb**" — Exo. 29:39), each Hebrew character having a numerical value. The year given is highlighted as ש"ה הכב"ש"ש (ה = 5; כ = 20; כ = 2; ש = 300), which, being rearranged, is actually 327) (השכ"ב), believed to have been the abbreviated form of the year, without the millennium. By adding the numerical value of the first letter of the next word, ה, in the word האהד, it brings us to the millennium 5; that year being 5,327 *anno mundi*, or what was then 1567 CE. Thus is it explained in Yehuda Ratzaby's 1965 edition of *Sefer Ha-Musar*, p. 287, who relied upon the date of 1567, based upon Yaari's calculations. Mordechai Yitzhari, however, in his 2008 edition of *Sefer Ha-Musar*, p. 162, for reasons unexplained, appends the date of 1565. It should be pointed out here that if we were to strictly apply the numerical values in the word כ"השכ"ב alone, with the view that it already includes the millennium of 5, the year of al-Dhahiri's visit to the Land of Israel would have been in 1562 CE.
- [4] Zachariā Al-Dāhri, *Sefer Hammusar* (ed. Yehuda Ratzaby), Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem 1965 (Hebrew), pp. 116-117
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## External links

- Joseph b. Ephraim Caro (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=188&letter=C>)
- Lecture on Yosef Karo by [[Henry Abramson|Dr. Henry Abramson (<http://jewishhistorylectures.org/2012/01/27/rabbi-yosef-karo-the-kabbalah-of-halakhah/Video>)]]

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