

Joseph Caro

My name is Joseph Caro and I was born in Spain in 1488. I bet you're disappointed that there is no picture of me – the camera hadn't been invented when I lived and I don't have any paintings of me to share with you. Times were really difficult when I was born in Spain. The rulers decided that they didn't want Jews in Spain and so when all Jews were ordered to leave in 1492, my family left for Portugal. We didn't get to stay very long because the Jews were kicked out of Portugal in 1497 and we had to move again – this time to Greece. My father was a famous Talmud scholar and he started teaching me.

In 1535 I moved to what was then called Palestine, but what we now call Israel. I moved to place that still exists today – Safed. There I discovered the study of mysticism – that's a belief in things that we don't understand and which are connected to God. People still study Jewish mysticism today and I found it fascinating.

I am best known for a book called the *Shulchan Aruch*. You might know what *shulchan* means – it means “table.” *Aruch* is another Hebrew word and the two words together mean “set table.” I know that sounds like a funny name for a book. My book was a written catalogue of Jewish law. I wrote it because at the time that I lived, there were two main traditions on how to follow Jewish law. One tradition followed the writings of a brilliant man named Maimonides, and the other followed the school of the *Tosafot* which changed some of the laws based upon where people lived. What was happening was that Jewish practice was changing, and it's practice started to depend on where you lived. I thought that was a bad idea – all Jews should follow the same laws and understand them the same way. So I wrote the *Shulchan Aruch* in such a way that it was easy to understand. It is divided into 4 volumes – one on holidays and prayers, one on tzedaka, Torah study and kashrut, one on marriage and divorce, and one on Jewish civil law. Another Rabbi, Moses Isserles of Poland was also writing a similar commentary while I was writing the *Shulchan Aruch* so instead of having two different books, we combined them. Rabbi Isserles' comments can be found in italics near all of my rulings.

Did you know that to this very day, when people have a dispute over Jewish law or practice, they find the right section in my book and that settles it? I guess that makes me pretty important!

I was buried in Safed which is in Israel. When you go there, you should come to my grave and say, “Shalom!”