

## 7. “A Communal Bill of Rights and Responsibilities”

### The Obligations of the Association of Rabbi Moses Cordovero



Synagogue2000

#### Safed: A Center of Jewish Life in the 16th Century

The city of Safed, long known as a “holy city,” derives its reputation from the remarkable community of scholars who gathered there in the mid-16th century and the years that followed. The devotional community was devoted both to *halakhah*, Jewish law and practice, and to the study and application of the Jewish mystical tradition, the *Kabbalah*. While Jerusalem was the place to which all Jewish hearts turned, it was in Safed where the most important teachers of their generation gathered.

Two of Safed’s most famous residents during this period were Joseph Caro and Isaac Luria. Rabbi Joseph Caro compiled the *Shulchan Arukh*, the legal code that served as the guide to Jewish religious practice for centuries. Rabbi Isaac Luria was the charismatic mystic who revolutionized Jewish mystical teaching. Many Jewish customs and practices we observe today—for example, the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service—originated in the mystical circles of Safed.

#### The Impact of the Holy City

One of Joseph Caro’s students was Rabbi Moses Cordovero (1522 - 1570). Cordovero joined with other fellow students and scholars to create a spiritual fraternity of *Chaverim* (Associates). The specific purpose of this association is not known. The *Chaverim* may have joined together on excursions to the graves of holy teachers, and supported each other in their studies. Cordovero wrote down a list of spiritual practices that formed a sort of “manual” for all the *Chaverim*. In reading through these goals, we can infer that the association’s goal was to support its members’ spiritual lives through their participation in the *chavurah*. The practices listed here are above and beyond the demands of the *halakhah*; these were extraspirtual commitments that the *Chaverim* took upon themselves. Each associate was expected to work diligently on his own path, challenge others who may not be living up to the expectations of the *chavurah*, and receive chastisement for his own such failures. Similar groups with commitments to spiritual practice were common in the heightened spiritual atmosphere of 16th-century Safed.

#### Our Congregation: A Spiritual Association?

Beyond membership in any one synagogue in Safed, these individuals devoted themselves to helping one another develop their spiritual lives. They lived in a community suffused with religious fervor and devotion to practice. Can the synagogue serve as such a community for us? Do we seek to deepen our spiritual lives when we associate ourselves with a synagogue today? Or is this a concern of a group within the larger synagogue?

## The Obligations of the Association of Rabbi Moses Cordovero

- א. אל יפנה לבו מלהרהר בדברי תורה ודברי קדושה שלא יהא לבו פנוי וריק מהרהורי מצוה בתורה ובמצוות כדי שיהא לבו משכן לשכינה:
- ב. שלא יכעס כלל שהפעס מביא לאדם לידי כמה עברות וצא ולמד ק"ו ממרע"ה וכבר ידעת מרז"ל בזהר על ענין פגם הפעס בפסוק חדלו לכם מן האדם אשר נשמה באפו וגו' ובפסוק טורף נפשו באפו ואפלו יקומו כנגדו יהיה מן הנעלבים:
- ג. לעולם יהא דעתו מעורב עם הפרייות ויתנהג עמהם בנחת ואפילו על העוברים על התורה יתנהג בנחת:
- ז. שלא לומר גנאי על שום אדם אפילו על שום בריה ובהמה:
- ח. שלא יקלל שום אדם מישראל אפילו בשעת כעסו אלא אדרבה יברך ויבזה יתברך ואברכה מברכה:
- יב. שלא ישבע שום שבועה קלה כל שכן חמורה אפילו באמת:
- יג. שלא ידבר שקר ומדבר שקר ירחק ולא יוציא שקר מפיו בשום צד ואופן:
- יד. להתחבר עם אחד מהחברים בכל יום לשאת וליתן בענייני העבודה:
- טו. לשאת וליתן עם החבר הנזכר בכל ערב שבת מה שעשה בכל ימי השבוע ומשם יבא לקבל פני שבת מלכתא:
- יח. לברך ברפת המזון בקול רם כדי שיאמרו בניו אחריו אות באות מילה במילה:
- כא. שלא לקבוע סעדת רשות בביתו וזולתי סעדת מצוה:
- כד. לזהר שלא יהיה מאותם ארבע פיתות שאינם מקבלות פני שכינה והם פת חנפים
- פת שקרנים פת לצים וכת מדברי לשון הרע:
- כט. לזהר להתנודות קודם אכילה וקודם שינה:
- ל. לדבר בלשון הקודש עם החברים בכל זמן:



They are bidden not to divert their thoughts from the words of Torah and things holy, so that their hearts become the abode of the *Shechinah*; not to be betrayed into anger, as anger delivers one into the power of sin; not to speak evil of any creature, including animals; never to curse any being, but to accustom oneself to bless even in moments of anger; never to take an oath, even on the truth; never to speak an untruth under any condition; to be careful not to be included among the four classes excluded from the Divine Presence, namely, the hypocrites, the liars, the scoffers, and the tale-bearers; not to indulge in banquets except on religious occasions.

Solomon Schechter,  
"Safed in the Sixteenth  
Century: A City of Legists  
and Mystics," in *Studies  
in Judaism (second series)*.  
Philadelphia: Jewish  
Publication Society, 1908;  
repr. 1945, pp. 238-9.

They are enjoined to mingle their minds with the minds of their fellows (that is, not to stand aloof from the world, but to share both in its joys and in its sorrows), and to behave in a kindly spirit toward their fellows, even though they be transgressors; to meet with one of the Associates for one or two hours every day for the purpose of discussing matters spiritual; to talk over with an Associate every Friday the deeds accomplished during the week, and then to set out for the reception of Queen Sabbath.

### Probing the Text

1. In what kinds of activities do the *Chaverim* engage? How could these activities be grouped or categorized?
2. Which of these activities are the most surprising to you? Which make the most sense?
3. Which of these practices led you to say, "These guys need to get a life"? Which led you to say, "I wish I had time for that in my life"?

### Ourselves and Our Congregations

1. What requirements are there for membership in your congregation? Do any have to do with behavior—ritual, ethical, interpersonal, spiritual? Should there be any?
2. Can a community be both welcoming and demanding? Would placing expectations for behavior or participation attract or repel potential members?
3. What might make the members of your congregation feel bound to each other like the Associates (*chaverim*) above?
4. What obligations would you be willing to take on as a member of this congregation? What rules that do not presently exist would you like members to commit to?



## For Further Study

Arthur Green, ed. *Jewish Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad, 1989. Vol. 2, Ch. 1:  
“The Safed Revival and Its Aftermath.”

Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*. Northvale, N.J. : J. Aronson, 1996.

Lawrence Fine, tr. *Safed Spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984.

