

Book Review

Bach: Rabbi Joel Sirkes, His Life, Works and Times by Elijah Judah Schochet, Yashar Books, NY: 2006, 428 pp., \$26.95.

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BaH, a commentary of R. Joel Sirkes, achieved the enviable privilege of appearing on the top outer margin of the printed *Tur* (known more formally as the *Arba'ah Turim*), a position second in prominence only to that of *Beit Yosef* of R. Yosef Karo, which appears on the top inner margins.

Although so much is known about the life of R. Yosef Karo, very little biographic information is available on R. Joel Sirkes. In what kind of world did he live? What were his passions and beliefs? What were his attitudes toward science and Kabbalah? What were the burning issues of his day? Why did R. Sirkes choose to write his *magnum opus* on the *Tur* rather than on the *Shulhan Arukh*? Elijah Judah Schochet, in his *Bach, Rabbi Joel Sirkes, His Life and Times*, answers those and other questions.

R. Sirkes (1561–1640) was born in Lublin and his family name was 'Jaffe.' The appellation 'Sirkes' seems to have come about from a childhood nickname based upon the first name of his mother, 'Sarah.'¹ As a rav, he headed various communities (Pruzany, Lukow, Luboml, Miedzyboz, Belz, Szydlow, Brest-Litovsk) and ultimately attained prominence during his tenure as rabbi, *av bet din* and head of the yeshiva in Cracow (1618–1640).

¹ Pinhas Sirkis (p. 8) speculates that the name Sirkes may have been that of the BaH's mother-in-law, similar to the Maharsha (R. Shmuel Eliezer Eidels) who took on the name of his mother-in-law, Eidel's, who was wealthy and supported him. (See footnote 11 below for bibliographic information on the book by Pinhas Sirkis.)

Heshey Zelcer, a businessman, is the author of *Companion Mishnayot, Tractate Niddah* (1994) and *A Guide to the Jerusalem Talmud* (2002).

R. Sirkes's most famous work is *Bayit Hadash* (Cracow, 1631–39), and its acronym BaH is the name under which he is most commonly known. The BaH is a comprehensive commentary on the *Arba'ah Turim* of R. Jacob b. Asher, in which he traces each law from the Talmudic source and its development through succeeding generations of *geonim*, *tosafists*, Alfasi (Rif), Rambam and R. Asher b. Jehiel (Rosh).

His two minor works were *Meshiv Nefesh* on the Book of Ruth, and his *haggabot*, marginal notes, on the Mishnah, Talmud and their commentaries.

His responsa were published in three collections, *She'elot u-Teshubot Bayit Hadash*, *She'elot u-Teshubot Geonei Batrai* and *She'elot u-Teshubot Bayit Hadash Ha-Hadasbot*. This last collection also includes responsa that were not written by R. Sirkes.

In a sense R. Sirkes lived in a golden age of Polish Jewry. From the period ca. 1500–1650, the Jewish population in Poland and Lithuania increased from 50,000 to over 1.5 million. The Jews had autonomy, and commerce was booming. R. Sirkes, who became the Rabbi of Cracow as a poor man, received many gifts from his community for himself and for his yeshiva, and he died a wealthy person leaving “much jewelry, gold, silver, and a stone house” (28).

R. Sirkes's knowledge of Rabbinic Literature was encyclopedic (101), and his writings are clear, lucid and succinct (126). He had no formally acquired knowledge of the humanities or science of his day, but he did advocate the study of Hebrew grammar, languages and mathematics (50). He was among the signers of an education enactment decreeing that children be taught to read and write secular languages, the intricacies of Hebrew grammar, and mathematics (133). He also insisted that a father is duty bound to instruct his son in all of the Written Law, including the Prophets and Writings.

In his *Meshiv Nefesh* he raises questions pertaining to grammar and proper sentence structure (89), and yet in his others writings he is sometimes careless in proper grammatical usage. Schochet explains that grammatical carelessness as a desire by R. Sirkes to make his halakhic points as quickly and efficiently as possible and not necessarily to create well-written responsa. Schochet also points out that the “...Cracow Educational Decree does not specify gender among the essentials of correct grammar. Most of the errors appearing in Joel Sirkes' writing happen to be errors of gender.

Perhaps at that time, gender was not considered to be an important aspect of correct written form.”

R. Sirkes did not approve of excessive use of *pilpul* but rather a simple exposition of the text under discussion. He was very careful in reading his sources and had a sharp eye for detecting corrupt text. He had a very significant library of printed texts and manuscripts, and in his *haggabot* he made extensive use of those volumes to correct the texts in various printed editions.

He appears usually to accept Midrashic statements literally.² Yet at times he exhibits a more selective and critical sense in his evaluation of Midrashic material, claiming that a particular Midrashic text contains scribal errors, or that there are variant readings (87).

He was honest and straightforward, and was not ashamed to admit when he was in need of further study of a subject matter (42). He would not use flowery titles to address fellow scholars, and yet he was usually gentle when pointing out errors in the works of others. He possessed a fine sense of history (117) and was a keen observer of human nature.

While R. Sirkes had no objection to religious zeal and stringency, he was very concerned that one's own stringency should not become a source of embarrassment to others. Thus he rules that one may observe the prohibition of *hadash shel goyim* (refraining from eating grain of the new harvest grown by non-Jews in the Diaspora) only within the walls of one's home, but not when one partakes of a feast together with other scholars who are not observant of the prohibition (44).

Relation to the *Shulhan Arukh*. The *magnum opus* of R. Yosef Karo is his *Beit Yosef* on the *Tur*. It is important to note, however, that the *Beit Yosef* is not primarily a commentary on the *Tur*.³ Rather R. Karo

² Schochet p. 87 footnotes R. Sirkes's *Mesiv Nefesh* 35a כל זה כתבנו לפי דעת רז"ל הקדושים במדרשיהם שהם אמת ודבריהם אמת and then provides various examples where midrashim are understood literally.

³ Schochet proves this point (p. 110) by quoting from R. Yosef Karo's introduction to his *Beit Yosef*: "I have chosen not to make this work an independent composition, so as to avoid repetition. I have decided rather to base it upon one of the renowned codifiers. At first I intended to append it to the work of Maimonides, the world's foremost codifier. However, as he brings but one single view...I decided instead to structure my book around the *Arba'at Turim* of Rabbi Jacob, son of

uses the halakhic structure and order of the Tur as a springboard to analyze the individual halakhhot. R. Karo then summarized the halakhhot in the Beit Yosef and created his *Shulhan Arukh*, a much abridged work, in which he usually follows the majority opinion of the Rif, Rambam and Rosh.

While the Baḥ had a great admiration for R. Karo and his *Beit Yosef*, he did not have a high regard for what the *Shulhan Arukh* had become. He felt that people were idolizing it and that those who were using it were being misled. Since it is a concise work, giving only the bottom-line halakhah, people who do not understand the development of the halakha would not be able to apply it to real-life situations that vary from the exact case codified in the *Shulhan Arukh*. The Baḥ writes, “In the majority of instances it is impossible to render legal decisions from the *Shulhan Arukh* ... he who is not well versed in the study of Talmud is incapable of correctly adjudicating cases” (68).

Furthermore, R. Sirkes objected vehemently to the statement by R. Joshua Falk Cohen (Sma) that “it is forbidden to change one thing in the *Shulhan Arukh*, for it is as the Torah of Moses.” It was inconceivable to R. Sirkes that any book other than the Talmud could be viewed as the authoritative source. R. Sirkes was not the only one to have that opinion. R. Mordechai Jaffe (*Levush*) characterized the *Shulhan Arukh* as a “table set with all manner of refreshments; however, the dishes are tasteless, lacking the salt of reasoning which is able to cause the broth to boil and to warm the individual” (68).

Those objections to the *Shulhan Arukh*, however, were unsuccessful in diminishing its influence. Two disciples of R. Sirkes, R. Gershon Ashkenazi (*Avodat ha-Gershuni*) and R. Menahem Mendel Krochmal, were devoted followers of the *Shulhan Arukh*. Furthermore, R. Sirkes’s own son-in-law, R. David Halevi, the author of the *Turei Zahav* (*Taz*), leaves little doubt that his main purpose in writing his commentary is to establish once and for all that the *Shulhan Arukh* is the definitive Code of Law (131). Despite their different attitudes toward the *Shulhan Arukh*, however, the Baḥ and the Taz continued to have a very close and reverent relationship—one that prevailed

Rosh, who incorporates in his volume the majority of the views of the legal authorities.”

even as the Taz would often disagree with his father-in-law when he felt he made an error in halakhah (20).

Did R. Sirkes, in ignoring the *Shulhan Arukh*, “bet on the wrong horse”? Schochet argues that he did not, for, nevertheless, there is almost no page of the *Shulhan Arukh* on which the commentaries do not mention the BaH.

Interesting Halakhot and Practices. In his *Bayit Hadash* and his responsa we find some very interesting halakhot. For example, R. Sirkes was an advocate of starting the Sabbath early.⁴ He reminisces how, in the days of his youth, Jews would commence their Sabbath observance a full two hours prior to nightfall (42, 191, 195).

He permitted the chanting of tunes in the synagogue even if they were used in Church services, provided they were not used exclusively by the church (193).

R. Sirkes ruled that it is permitted to read almost any book of one’s choice on the Sabbath. That view, however, was challenged by his son-in-law, the Taz. R. Moshe Isserles limits this to books written in Hebrew (43, 53).

R. Sirkes permitted a widow who was guilty of having engaged in illicit affairs to marry again, on the grounds that as long as she is not married she remains a threat to entice other men (234).

He permitted non-Jewish musicians to supply musical entertainment for a wedding party held on the Sabbath, a practice that, according to R. Sirkes, had the approval of many legal authorities of his day (217).

Although the custom had been established for men to cover their heads while outdoors, R. Sirkes emphasized that wearing a head covering is an accepted custom but not a law. He was more concerned with those who walk about with an arrogant and haughty demeanor, albeit with their heads covered (227).

We are also told by Schochet of some unusual community practices. For example, the Jewish community would not allow a Jew to buy the home of a non-Jew in the Jewish quarter. That was because they feared that the area would become exclusively Jewish and be burned to the ground when the Christians’ passion would be aroused against them.

⁴ For a counter-argument see *Hakirah* vol. 1, *The Early Shabbos*, by R. Asher Benzion Buchman, pp. 39–58.

When the Jewish cemetery in Cracow reached capacity, the community authorities decided to spread earth over the existing graves so that bodies could be interred on top of one another. R. Sirkes was indignant at that practice and urged the cemetery authorities to ensure at least that a separation of six *tephahim* (cubits) existed between the two layers of graves (219).

Anti-Semitism. Despite the relative tranquility during that time, anti-Semitism simmered just below the surface. Responsum 43, which is the subject of Schochet's 1975 book, illustrates that rather vividly. The question posed to R. Sirkes in 1620, as translated by Shochet, is as follows:

“This concerns the false accusations leveled in the city of Kalish against a Jew who was arrested in the matter regarding [the stealing of] their “savior” (i.e., the host, or possibly a statue of the Nazarene). As he was being led away he handed over his purse to some co-religionists, among them his father-in-law and brother-in-law, who were standing amidst a large throng of non-Jews. Now after this Jew had suffered martyrdom his libelers leveled a charge against the *kahal* (the council representing the community) claiming that the [martyr's] father-in-law who was *shamash* of the *kahal* had taken the purse from the prisoner's hand and that the “savior” was contained within that purse. The officials of the Royal Court handed down the verdict that the elders [of the Jewish community] were responsible for surrendering the Shamash to [stand] trial before the Wojewoda. Should they not surrender him, it would be they who would suffer the punishment [intended for him] meted out by the Royal [Court]. In the interim this Shamash had made his escape and was now being hidden by a fellow Jew. There is reason to fear that if, God forbid, he were to be forced to stand trial before them, he would be unjustly subjected to tortures not even in keeping with their own [proper judicial] procedures. [This is evident] from the decree which they have issued against the [Jewish] community, for according to their own rules and regulations the community is under no obligation to stand trial. Since, as we have observed, they do as they please contrary to the rules, it is a matter of life and death should he be forced to stand trial. What is the ruling as regards this man? Is it or is it not permissible to surrender him to stand trial?” (345).

At the end of a lengthy response the BaH rules:

“... if the *shamash* took possession of the pocketbook⁵ in the presence of the non-Jews, he brought the responsibility of standing in judgment according to their laws upon his shoulders and we are permitted to hand him over to them. But if the *shamash* did not accept [the pocketbook] but another one took it, then it is forbidden for us to attempt to persuade or to coerce the *shamash* to appear for trial, for he in no way brought upon himself the obligation to stand before them in judgment” (359).

I will not reveal the end of that sad tale but will leave it for the reader to discover Shochet’s conclusion (411-412).

Superstition. Regarding superstitions, Schochet quotes Tobias HaCohen of Poland: “There is no country in the world where people occupy themselves with demons, amulets, incantations, conjurations, and dreams more than in this country” (193). It seems that among ignorant Jews the power of amulets, Hebrew letters, Kabbalah, and superstitions meshed in their minds into a powerful belief in magical powers. That belief was so strong among some Jews that the power of Hebrew letters seeped into Christian society as well.⁶ In fact, there were Christian women who would pass themselves off as recently baptized Jewesses who knew Hebrew, in order to be able to hawk their magical Hebrew cures and supernatural knowledge.⁷

It is therefore not surprising that R. Sirkes’s works echo certain practices bordering on superstition. His tolerance for such practices, however, had its limits. While he had no objection to the ritual of *kapparot*, he did object to the custom of procuring only white roosters (a practice approved by R. Isserles), which he felt had an aura of magic about it as well as a good deal of economic exploitation (193).

⁵ Previously Shochet translates the same word כֵּס as ‘purse.’ Either ‘purse’ or ‘pocketbook’ is, of course, acceptable, but a consistent translation would have been better.

⁶ Schochet (p. 152, note 40) quotes *BH, Orah Hayyim*, which alludes to Christians selling coins upon which were engraved the Tetragrammaton: יש להזהר על אותן המטבעות של זהב שיש עליהן שם בן ד' אותיות שטבעו אותן המינין לשם ע"ז שאסורים לתלות על הס"ת ואף אין להחזיק אותם ברשותם.

⁷ Seidman, Naomi, *Faithful Renderings, Jewish-Christian Differences and the Politics of Translation*. University of Chicago, Chicago and London: 2006, pp. 115–152, especially pp. 130, 152.

Censorship. Certain words automatically raised a red flag to the Christian censor, who was usually a Jew who had apostatized. One such word is גלח, priest. Schochet points out that in responsum 57 the phrase גלח גלח, he became a priest, was changed by the censor to גלח כותי, he became a gentile. In the context there was no need for any censorship. It refers simply to a Cossack who entered the priesthood.

While this type of censorship is more amusing than serious, other cases had practical effects on halakhah. For example, a segment of Responsa BH no. 127 on the permissibility of Church melodies within a Synagogue was deleted in later editions (97).

Kabbalah and Halakhah. Schochet writes that R. Sirkes was: “A great admirer of the Kabbalah and a fierce defender of its sanctity.” He quotes R. Sirkes that Kabbalah is the “very source and essence of Torah.”

That view of Kabbalah by R. Sirkes is made clear in his responsum BH, no. 4b, in which he speaks about a physician from Amsterdam who was accused, among other sins,⁸ that he “...raised up his tongue against the Kabbalah and mocks this true wisdom, speaking of it rejectingly and saying that it is of no account to his eyes, for only philosophy deserves to be followed after by all.”

In a later paragraph R. Sirkes writes, “...there is no doubt that this man deserves death, excommunication, and ‘*shamta*’ ... how much more so he who mocks the words of the wise and slights the wisdom of the Kabbalah, which is the very essence of the Torah and thoroughly God-Fearing. It is obvious that such a person deserves excommunication, for what greater mockery of Torah can there possibly be?” (297).

What is interesting is that although in his eyes that physician did a great evil, nevertheless R. Sirkes is in no rush to excom-

⁸ “For this man has so raised up his heart and hands as to mock the homiletical teachings of our rabbis of blessed memory.” And “[T]his man...granted permission to one to function as a ritual slaughterer of animals...The elders of the Maamad (board) of the two Synagogues appointed two scholars...to examine this ritual slaughter’s competence in the laws of slaughtering. However, he was ignorant of the questions involved in this area, deeming permissible that which is forbidden.” (296)

municate him based solely on the words of his accusers. R. Sirkes writes:

“However, as we have not seen any transcript of the physician’s (side) in this matter, we have to judge him as it were, in his absence ... Perhaps, he could have argued that the aforementioned scholars are his foes, and he would wish to bring to light his merit (justify his action) before some highly considered court which would clarify that he is not guilty of having done these things of which he has been accused in the correspondence about him... Therefore, there is no doubt that he ought not to suffer excommunication as of now...”

There are those who point to the words of R. Sirkes as a definitive statement that Kabbalah is an integral part of Judaism. Needless to say there are others who would disagree with the BaH’s statement about Kabbalah. See, for example, הלל צייטלין, בפרדס ההסידות והקבלה, especially pp. 55–104, for an analysis of the age and origin of the Zohar.⁹

⁹ There is wide acceptance that many of the kabbalistic ideas found in the Zohar predate the thirteenth-century and are quite ancient. As to the authorship of the text of the Zohar, that is another matter. While many attribute it to R. Shimon b. Yohai, others do not. Lawrence Fine, in his introduction to *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, New York: NYU Press, 1995, writes (p. 21, note 15), “The critical question of the authorship of the Zohar has long preoccupied kabbalistic scholarship. This question appears to have been settled with Scholem’s extensive investigation of this problem, whose conclusion was that Moses de Leon, a thirteenth-century Spanish Jew, was the sole author of the bulk of the Zohar (excluding the portions known as *Raaya Mehemna* and *Tiqunei Zohar*). Recently, however, Yehuda Liebes has proposed an intriguing and provocative alternative theory according to which the Zohar was authored by a group of individuals with Moses de Leon at the center.”

Whatever one’s view of the Zohar and the Kabbalah it is wise to heed the words of R. Menahem Azariah of Fano (הרמ"ע מפאנו) an Italian Rabbi and kabbalist (1548-1620): המכחיש מציאות הספירות מאיש שוגה ומפתי: שלא נגלה לו סודם אין ראוי שיקרא כופר בעיקר על פגם המלכות כדלעיל ולא קוצץ בנטיעות בשביל עזבו את השאר שא"כ היה ראוי להנך את הכל בחכמה הזאת גדולים וקטנים ככל שאר המצות ועקרים ולא לצוות להסתירה ושלא למסור אותה אלא לצנועים. (מאמרי הרמ"ע מפאנו, חלק ב' דף עט סימן ס')

Despite R. Sirkes's veneration of Kaballah, he repeats on various occasions that when Kaballah conflicts with halakhah we must ignore Kaballah. For example, R. Sirkes writes:

שהרי אנחנו מניחין תפילין בחולו של מועד ומברכין על התפילין של יד מעומד ועפ"י הקבלה אסור להניח תפילין בחולו של מועד ותפילין של יד צריך להניח מיושב.

“For we don *tefillin* on the intermediate days of the festival and we recite the blessing of the *tefillin* while standing even though according to the Kabalah one may not don *tefillin* on the intermediate days of the festival and *tefillin* on the arm should be donned while sitting.”

R. Sirkes likewise opposed the Kabbalistic practice (which was adopted by the *Shulhan Arukh*) of waiting seven days following the appearance of a new moon before reciting the prayer of sanctification.

About the book. Elijah Judah Schochet received his PhD for his dissertation (1967) on *The Life and Works of Joel Sirkes*. In 1971, his dissertation was reworked and published (Jerusalem–New York: Feldheim, 266 pp.) as *Bach, Rabbi Joel Sirkes: His Life, Works and Times*. In 1975 he published a related work, *A Responsum of Surrender: Translation and Analysis*, in which R. Schochet analyzes a specific responsum of R. Sirkes. The book being reviewed is a combination of two works: a slightly revised version of the 1971 work,¹⁰ and that of 1975.

Schochet's did not have a plethora of sources from which to reconstruct the life and times of R. Sirkes.¹¹ To compile that

¹⁰ While the book under review was typeset using a larger font with other stylistic differences, actual revisions from the 1971 edition are minor. The table of contents is slightly expanded, and some transliterations have been corrected. For example, while the original version refers to the “Arba Turim,” in the new version it is transliterated more accurately as “Arba’a Turim.”

¹¹ When Schochet published the first edition of this work in 1971, there was no other book-length biography on the life of R. Sirkes. However, in 1984 Pinhas Sirkis, a descendant of the BaH, published in Tel Aviv a Hebrew work titled פעלו משנתו, תולדותיו, משינתו, פעלו ספר הב"ח, רבינו יואל סירקיש זצ"ל, תולדותיו, משנתו, פעלו.

biography, Shochet was forced to analyze the responsa of R. Sirkes and reconstruct his life and times. To Shochet's credit, the biography is well-written, nuanced and offers a surprising wealth of details on both R. Sirkes's life and the community within which he lived.

No work, however, is perfect. R. Schochet, for example, relates that "Jewish legal authorities were, for the most part, ignorant of the basic rites of the Church, including even the transubstantiation doctrine."¹² Some authorities believed the wafer to be no more than food for the priests." (146) R. Schochet backs up that latter statement with footnote 25, "BH, *Yoreh Deah*, 139:7. This was the view of the *Turim*." That is not so.¹³ The *Tur* reads as follows:

והכרות שנותנים לכהני האליל אף על פי שכיוצא בו לפנים מותרין שאין מקריבין אותם להאליל אלא חק הוא לכהנים המשמשים. (קלט:ז)

"As for the loaves that are given to the priests, although this is similar to what was performed within (the *beit ha-mikdash*), they (the breads) are permissible (i.e., one may derive benefit from them) for they are not being offered to the god, but rather it is allotted for the priests who serve."

The *Shulhan Arukh* rules similarly:

הכרות שנותנים לכהנים מותרים שאין מקריבים אותם לעבודת כוכבים אלא חק לכהנים. (קלט:ח)

"The loaves that are given to the priests are permissible for they are not offered to the idol but rather it is allotted to the priest."

R. Shochet would have us believe that this statement refers to the Eucharist, the wafers that the priest put into the mouths of the congregants during mass and that to Christians represent the body of the Nazarene. R. Shochet, I presume, is implying that had the *Tur*

Unlike Shochet, this author includes more detailed "aggadic" tales regarding the life of R. Sirkes.

¹² The transubstantiation doctrine refers to the Christian ceremony in which wafers and wine are sanctified by the priests and become literally the flesh and blood of the Nazarene. Those are then offered to the congregants who, in effect, consume his flesh and blood.

¹³ It is more accurate to say that some of the commentaries struggled to understand this statement of the *Tur*.

and the *Shulhan Arukh* realized the true nature of the Eucharist, they would surely have outlawed deriving any benefit from it, as it is an idolatrous offering.

There is no indication that the *Tur* (or *Beit Yosef*) did not understand the nature of the Eucharist. The source of that halakhah as noted by the *BaH* (and also by the *Gra* on the *Shulhan Arukh*) is from *Tosafot Avodah Zarah* 50b line 10:

וככרות שמביאין דורון מותרין שהרי אין מביאין לעבודת כוכבים כי אם לשמשים ולכומרים. ותקרובת עבודת כוכבים לא הוה שאין דרכן להאכיל לעבודת כוכבים כדורות הראשונים.

“As for the breads that are brought as a present—they are permissible for they are not brought for the idol but rather for the servants and for the priests. And they are not offerings for the idols for it is not the practice to feed these to the idols as in earlier generations.”

Tosafot, the *Tur* and the *Shulhan Arukh* are not talking about the wafers (Eucharist) given *by* the priest but rather about loaves that are given as presents *to* the priests. It is those breads that are not considered as offerings to an idol. I imagine that the *Tur* and the *Shulhan Arukh*, both having been written under oppressive Christian societies, had no desire to state explicitly that the Eucharist, one of the most sacred rites in Christianity, is considered as an offering to an idol. Despite their belief in a Trinity, Christians consider their religion as monotheistic and would look unkindly at Jews referring to one of their most sacred ceremonies as idol worship. Jews have been killed by Christians for much lesser offensive statements.

Summary. Schochet’s book on Sirkes is a truly excellent and nuanced work that sheds much light on the life and times of the *BaH*. It is very well written although there are occasional typos.¹⁴ Also, I would have liked to see the responsum (which is in the original Hebrew) on pages 339–343, which is an offset of a previously printed work, re-typeset. The offset is difficult to read as many letters are not fully formed. But those are minor annoyances that do not significantly detract from this great work.

¹⁴ A glaring typo appears on page 108 where “of the” is repeated three times consecutively. That typo does not exist in the earlier, 1971 edition.

To Schochet's credit, his biography of R. Sirkes is mostly lacking in miraculous tales. Shochet does, however, quote a statement of R. Sirkes that, in hindsight, appears prophetic. In Responsum BH no. 61 R. Sirkes warns his co-religionists to be careful of economic and political pressure upon the gentiles. He urges them to refrain from any involvement in tax-farming, especially as regards collecting taxes on liquor sales: "...for the danger is exceedingly great. Cries of oppression are emanating from gentiles in most areas, that the Jews are lording it over them and ruling them forcefully, as would kings and officers." Eight years after R. Sirkes died, the Chmielnicki pogroms of 1648 (גזירות ת"ח ות"ט) broke out, in which hundreds of Jewish communities were destroyed and approximately one hundred thousand Jews were murdered. The Christian justification for such slaughter (not that they needed any justification for their heinous crimes) was remarkably similar to the warning issued by R. Sirkes only a few short years earlier. ❧