

INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Dr. Azriel Rosenfeld

The Shulchan Aruch ("Set Table") is a compendium of those areas of the halachah -- Jewish religious law -- that are applicable today. It was composed by Rabbi Yosef Karo of Safed (Israel) in the 1560's, and became generally accepted as authoritative after Rabbi Moshe Isserls of Cracow (Poland) supplemented it in the 1570's with notes (known as the Mappah - "Tablecloth") giving the rulings followed by Ashkenazic Jews. The Shulchan Aruch consists of four parts: Orach Chayim ("Way of Life") - Daily, sabbath, and festival laws Yoreh De'ah ("It Teaches Knowledge") - Laws about food; relations with non-Jews; usury; menstruation and immersion; vows and oaths; honoring parents and scholars; Torah study; charity; circumcision; proselytes and slaves; Torah and doorpost scrolls; new crops; mixtures; firstborn; offerings from bread, crops, and flocks; the ban; illness, death, burial, and mourning. Even Ha-Ezer ("Stone of Help") - Laws of procreation, marriage, and divorce Choshen Mishpat ("Breastplate of Judgment") - Laws about judges and witnesses; loans and claims; agents, partners and neighbors; acquisition, purchases and gifts; legacies and inheritance; lost and found property; depositing, renting, and borrowing; theft, robbery, damage and injury. The purpose of this course is to present a summary of the contents of the Shulchan Aruch which can serve as an introduction to further study. (References to chapter and paragraph numbers (x:y) in the Shulchan Aruch are given throughout.) The summary is based entirely on the Shulchan Aruch and Mappah themselves and emphasizes general principles; it omits many details and does not include rulings given in the commentaries or in later codes. It should be stressed that a summary must not be used as a basis for practical halachic decisions. When such decisions are needed a qualified rabbi should be consulted.