Rabbi Isaac Caro (1458-1535), from Toledo to Yerushalayim

Rabbi Isaac (Yitshaq) Caro was born in the city of Toledo, Spain in 1458. His father was Rabbi Yosef Caro haZaqen, a great Rabbi and Talmudist of his generation. Rabbi Isaac was a student of rabbi Isaac Canpanton.

In 1492, the year of the expulsion of the Jews from spain, Rabbi Isaac escaped to Portugal and established himself in Lisboa. In 1497, the Jews were given the choice to convert or leave. So, rabbi Isaac left with his family to Jerusalem. That trip was very tragic for him: he lost his wife and all but one of his children. He did not reach Yerushalayim but established himself in the city of Constantinople, Turkey (modern Istanbul). According to some versions, at a later period Rabbi Isaac embarked again to Israel. And he arrived to Damascus, Syria, where he was appointed as a dayan (Rabbinical judge). At the end of his life, he finally reached Erets Israel, probably Tsefat (Safed) where his nephew rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575), the famous author of the shulhan ‘arukh, lived.

His most famous book was Toledot Yitshaq, a commentary on the Tora. Since he could not afford the expenses of printing a whole book, Rabbi Isaac would publish his work in small pamphlets, Parasha by Parasha.

He is also the author of Hasde David, a book of Derashot (sermons) on philosophy and the Agada (=the non-halakhic aspect of rabbinic literature)

Rabbi Yosef Caro mentions his uncle, Rabbi Isaac, many times in his books. For example, Bet Yosef, OH, 31, where he discuses the obligation to wear tefilin in Hol haMo’ed, the intermediate days of the holidays of Pesah and Sukkot. After he brings the different opinions he says that his uncle, rabbi

Isaac wrote that the tradition in Sepharad was to not using Tefilin in Hol haMoed.

Rabbi Yosef Caro also mentions Rabbi Isaac in two more cases. One of them regarding the debate about yibbum vs. halitsa. If when a husband dies without children, his wife should marry his brother (Levirate marraige) or perform a special ritual called halitsa by which the widow is freed from the biblical obligation of marrying her brother-in-law, and then be able to marrying whoever she wants.

Rabbi Yosef Caro also quotes his uncle in a discussion about renting the house of a non-Jew, in that case, one of the officials of the city, for a matter concerning 'erubin, the boundaries of cities and neighborhoods to the effects of the laws of hotsa-a in Shabbat.

After quoting his uncle in these cases in eben ha'ezer 392, Rabbi Yosef caro writes: "These responsa are from my uncle, the great rabbi R. Isaac Caro z"l, and I copied them next to my own responsa".

Many of Rabbi Isaac's responsa and his sermons are still in manuscripts in libraries and museums in Oxford and New york.

Recently, professor Shaul Regev from Bar Ilan University published a new book with some of Rabbi Isaac Caro unpublished sermons. See here

To download the book Toledot Yitshaq, printed in Amsterdam 1708, click this.