**Abstract**

The halakhic writing of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, concentrated in his *Darkhei Moshe* and his *Mappah* (annotations to the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*,), has, over time, become the capstone of the religious legal literature of Ashkenazi Judaism. “From Moshe [i.e., Moses] to Moshe [Isserles], there was none like Moshe,” his contemporaries said of him in admiration of his great erudition in Jewish learning and of his broad knowledge of other fields. A look at other works Isserles produced reveals a rich world of knowledge in which halakhic inquiry existed alongside an interest in the Zohar, in other works of Kabbalah, and in the study of “external wisdoms,” metaphysical (philosophical and scientific) inquiry nourished by the contact Isserles maintained with other scholars in his environment and by exposure to relevant literature and oral traditions that made their way to Krakow, where he lived.

Active involvement in other realms of knowledge was shared by other scholars in Isserles’ milieu, but he set a historic precedent in the connections he wove among them. In his halakhic writings, he integrated many quotations from the three fields mentioned—science/philosophy, Zohar, and Kabbalah. This combination, its motives, and its implications have hitherto been unexplored.

This study examines the way in which Isserles reworked those citations—all of which may be subsumed under the term “metaphysics”—and argues that the finished product is far from homogeneous. Isserles’s writing, as arranged before us in the aforementioned works, is quite heterogeneous (we shall term it “bricolage”). A careful tracing of the practices of quotation he adopts vis-à-vis his various sources reveals the construction of various corpuses in his teaching—a scientific-philosophical corpus, a Zohar corpus, and a Kabbalah corpus. The treatment of each of them reveals the nuances in Issereles’s attitude toward his materials and uncovers the manner in which he stood them alongside the familiar halakhic sources, which naturally form the bulk of Isserles’ halakhic compositions.

The point of departure for our discussion is Isserles’ attitude toward the philosophical teachings of Maimonides, quotes from whose *Guide of the Perplexed* are woven into his halakhic codes (in the laws of what one does upon waking up in the morning, of prayer, of Torah study, and other areas)—for the first time in any halakhic work. From a broad discussion conducted by Isserles with Rabbi Shlomo Luria, his relative, we can discern significant ambivalence regarding both Maimonides in particular and philosophy in general. While Maimonides draws essential parts of his worldview from Aristotle’s writings, and even sees them as a source of “truth” in matters about which Jewish sages’ perceptions fell short, Isserles’ own position was different. He makes use of specific points in non-Jewish sources of knowledge, but he is careful not to ascribe to them superiority over the words of the Rabbis and in fact accepts those points only in an instrumental and local manner. In keeping with that outlook, Isserles’s quotation methods vis-à-vis the *Guide* are characterized by massive reworking, which sometimes distances the quotations from their original context and gives them a new character reflecting the nuances that distinguish Isserles’s positions from those of Maimonides.

A close examination of the Zohar quotations embedded in *Darkhei Moshe* reveals Isserles’s complex attitude toward the Zohar, which was very different from that reflected in the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*. While the latter sets the Zohar high in the ranking of authority, the former grants it no priority over the accepted halakhic sources. When there is a contradiction between the Zohar’s words and existing practice, Isserles’s tendency to favor current practice is evident.

Isserles’s sources of Kabbalah are varied, and they include a plethora of books of *midrash* and *aggadah* alongside works of biblical exegesis and writings by the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz. Isserles characterizes his attitude toward this collection of writings using a variety of expressions, reflecting a concept of social stratification regarding the best way to pass on this “esoteric” knowledge—by creating a deliberate haziness that would prevent the masses from gaining access to those contents but still render them accessible to the select readers for whom they are appropriate.

In summary, Moshe Isserles’s halakhic works constitute an unprecedented phenomenon, integrating corpuses of metaphysical knowledge into the world of halakhic writing. Examining Isserles’s modes of rewriting and integrating those corpuses reveals heterogeneity in his attitude toward them and offers a peek at his inner world and at the way in which he perceived various strata among the audience to which he directed his words.