

# Making Sense of the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah

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In the upper corner of the outer margin of the [standard page layout of the Talmud](#) (the so-called “Vilna Shas”) is a set of notes under the heading **עין משפט נר מצוה**. The notes under this heading cross-reference laws and principles mentioned in the Talmud with the places in the medieval halachic literature where they were codified. In this essay, I’ll teach you how to read it and locate the texts it references!

## What is it?

The *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* was compiled by R’ Yehoshua Boaz ben Shimon Baruch in the 16th century. The scion of a prominent Spanish family, he left Spain after the Jews were exiled from there and settled in Italy, where he published several different commentaries and sets of notes on the Talmud, which are still printed in the standard Vilna editions of the Talmud. He also wrote other commentaries, particularly the *Shiltei Ha-Gibborim*, a set of critical notes on the commentary of the Rif (R’ Yitzchak Alfasi), by which title R’ Yehoshua Boaz is also known.

The name *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* means “Wellspring of Judgment, Lamp of the Commandment”. The phrase “*Ein Mishpat*” is a reference to [Genesis 14:7](#), which refers to a place in Canaan called “*Ein Mishpat*”; here the phrase is intended to mean that the Talmud itself is the wellspring of the judgments and rulings of the *halakha*. Likewise, the phrase “*Ner Mitzvah*” comes from [Proverbs 6:23](#), which says **נר מצוה ותורה אור**, meaning “The commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light”; here, the phrase is used to mean that these notes “light the way”, as it were, to the locations of the codifications of the *mitzvot* in the law codes. (The continuation of the phrase, “*Torah Or*”, is the name of a different set of notes on the Talmud written by the same author, which give the citation to every quotation of a verse from Tanakh in the Talmud.)

The *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* is written in a very terse, abbreviated style. It is almost always printed in Rashi script, and many of the words in it are abbreviations and numerals.

## Which works are referenced?

The *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* refers to three (or four, depending on how you count) major law codes from the period of the Rishonim (medieval rabbis):

## ***Mishneh Torah***

The earliest code is the *Mishneh Torah* (“Repetition of the Torah”) by the Rambam (Maimonides), compiled between 1170 and 1180. Sometimes the *Mishneh Torah* is called the *Yad Ha-Hazakah* (“Strong Hand”). The *Mishneh Torah* has fourteen sections (“*yad*” in Hebrew has the *gematria* value of 14, whence the name).

## ***SeMaG***

The *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (“Great Book of Commandments”) was written by the French Tosafist R’ Moshe ben Yaakov of Coucy, completed in 1247. This work is often called by its Hebrew initials as גמס, or *SeMaG* (not to be confused with the atmospheric phenomenon or the dragon). It consists of two sections: one for positive commandments (“do this”) and one for negative commandments (“don’t do this”).

## ***Tur and Shulhan Aruch***

The *Tur* was composed by R’ Yaakov ben Asher in the early 14th century, in Toledo, Spain. The *Tur* is more properly called the *Arba’ah Turim* (“Four Rows”), referring to the four rows of precious stones on the breastplate of the Kohen Gadol, so called because it is divided into four sections. However, the work is very commonly called just the “*Tur*” in the singular, and its author is often referred to as the *Ba’al Ha-Turim* (“Master of the Rows”).

The *Shulhan Aruch* (“The Set Table”) was written by R’ Yosef ben Efraim Karo in 1563. R’ Karo, often called the *Mechaber* (“Composer” or “Author”), was another exile from Spain and Portugal, who moved around the Ottoman Empire, eventually settling in the city of Safed (Tzfat) in the Galilee. The *Shulhan Aruch* is largely based on his earlier work the *Beit Yosef* (“House of Joseph”), which itself is a long and intricate commentary on the *Arba’ah Turim*. The *Shulhan Aruch*, too, shares the same basic structure as the *Tur*.

## **Understanding the notes**

As I mentioned, the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* is a very pithy work, and many of the words in it are abbreviations or numerals. Irritatingly, you may find some words abbreviated in some printed editions but written out in full in others, or with different abbreviations. Another irritation is that the usage of single-*geresh* and *gershayim* (what we call apostrophes and double-apostrophes or inverted commas in English) is often inconsistent, especially with numerals—even within volumes produced by the same editor or publisher.

References in the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* are given in chronological order: citations from the *Mishneh Torah* are presented first, then the *SeMaG*, then the *Tur* and *Shulhan Aruch*.

But before you can read the note, you have to find the right note on the page! Here’s what you’re looking for.

## How to find the correct note

To illustrate this, we'll look at the very first note from the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah*, which occurs, of course, on the first page of the Gemara: [Berachot 2a](#).

References to the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* are block Hebrew letters in superscript, which come immediately before the text they refer to. The first line of the Mishnah has a small superscript א before the words משעה שהכהנים. The א points to the first note in the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* in the upper-left corner of the page. The astute reader will note that this note is preceded by two אs: the first one is the running number of notes from the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* in this chapter of Gemara, and the second one is specifically note א from our page.

Notice that on the next folio (page 3a—there are no *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* notes on page 2b), the first numeral keeps increasing (the first one is ז, meaning the seventh cumulative note in this chapter), but the second numeral (א) is the first note on that page (you can find it in the Gemara text about halfway down the page).

Note that sometimes multiple superscript letters refer to the same note—this happens with notes ב and ג on this very page!

## How to parse the text of the note

As we'll see, different editions sometimes print slightly different versions of the notes. In the volume of Gemara I'm looking at, the text of note א on page 2a says:

מ"י פ"א מהלכות ק"ש הלכה ט' סמ"ג עשין י"ח טור וש"ע או"ח סימן רל"ה סעיף א'

Remember, these notes go chronologically: first the Rambam, then the *SeMaG*, then the *Tur* (and *Shulhan Aruch*).

**Rambam (*Mishneh Torah*)** The *Mishneh Torah* is cited as מ"י (short for מיימוני or מיימונידס). The basic structure of a reference to the *Mishneh Torah* is: (1) chapter from (2) volume, followed by (3) the specific *halacha*.

The first abbreviation will tell you the chapter number: for example, פ"ב is short for פרק ב, meaning “chapter 2”, פ"ט is short for פרק ט, meaning “chapter 9”, and so on. In our case, we have a reference to א פרק = פ"א, “chapter 1”.

Then the note will refer to a specific volume of the *Mishneh Torah*, often also by abbreviation. In our example, הלכות ק"ש is “Laws of Reciting the *Shema*” (ק"ש is an abbreviation for קריאת שמע). The מ before הלכות ק"ש is simply the prefix meaning “from”.

Finally, the note will point to the specific law in that volume, written out as הלכה (or abbreviated as ה') followed by the number of the *halacha*: in our example, הלכה ט' refers to *halacha* 9. Sometimes you even see this whole phrase abbreviated, e.g. ה"א for “*halacha* 1”.

So the note from our example breaks down like this:

Hebrew	Expansion	Meaning
מ"י	מיימונידס	Rambam ( <i>Mishneh Torah</i> )
פ"א	פרק א	chapter 1
מהלכות		from <i>Hilchot</i> ("Laws of")
ק"ש	קריאת שמע	<i>Keri'at Shema</i> ("Reciting the Shema")
הלכה		<i>halacha</i>
ט'		9

Putting it all together: **Rambam (*Mishneh Torah*), *Laws of Reciting the Shema*, chapter 1, *halacha* 9.**

***SeMaG*** The *SeMaG* is organized into two sections: **לאוין** *lavin* ("noes", as in "negative commandments") and **עשין** *asin* ("do-s", as in "positive commandments"). There are 365 sections in the *lavin* and 248 in the *asin*. There is also a section of **עשין דרבנן**, "positive Rabbinic commandments".

Notes from the *SeMaG* are fairly uncomplicated: first, the positive or negative section is specified, followed by the section number(s). Occasionally there is a note that points to a section in the positive commandments and a section in the negative commandments, e.g. **לאוין רלה**, "negative commandments 208 and positive commandments 235".

So the note from our example breaks down like this:

Hebrew	Expansion	Meaning
סמ"ג	ספר מצות גדול	The <i>SeMaG</i>
עשין		positive commandments
י"ח		18

Putting it all together: ***Sefer Mitzvot Gadol (SeMaG), Positive Commandments*, section 18.**

***Tur and Shulhan Aruch*** Since the *Shulhan Aruch* is structured the same as the *Tur*, they have the same reference conventions, and you'll often see them referred to jointly as **טוש"ע**, which expands, simply, to **טור ושולחן ערוך**, "*Tur and Shulhan Aruch*". Sometimes you'll see them referred to separately, particularly the *Shulhan Aruch*, whose initialism is **שו"ע**.

The next word will be the abbreviation of one of the four sections of the *Tur/Shulhan Aruch* that the citation refers to. These abbreviations are:

Abbreviation	Full Name
א"ח or או"ח	אורח חיים ( <i>Orah Hayyim</i> )
י"ד or יו"ד	יורה דעה ( <i>Yoreh De'ah</i> )
אה"ע or אבה"ע	אבן העזר ( <i>Even Ha-Ezer</i> )

Abbreviation	Full Name
ח"מ or ח"מ	חושן משפט ( <i>Hoshen Mishpat</i> )

This will be followed by the סימן *siman* (chapter) and סעיף *se'if* (subsection) numbers. Sometimes these words are spelled out; often they are abbreviated, and it can be confusing because they both start with ס. Remember that the *siman* always comes before the *se'if*. You might see ס"קנ"ב סעיף א meaning *siman* 152 *se'if* 1, or perhaps an editor might write it as סקנ"ב ס"א, meaning the same thing.

So the note from our example breaks down like this:

Hebrew	Expansion	Meaning
טור		<i>Tur</i>
וש"ע	ושולחן ערוך	and <i>Shulhan Aruch</i>
א"ח	אורח חיים	<i>Orah Hayyim</i>
סימן		<i>siman</i>
רל"ה		235
סעיף		<i>se'if</i>
א'		1

Putting it all together: *Tur* and *Shulhan Aruch, Orah Hayyim 235:1*.

### The word שם

One word you'll encounter a lot in this work (as in many references) is the word שם *sham*, literally “there”, meaning “in the last place the text mentioned explicitly”. For example, to interpret a note that says “סמ"ג שם”, you have to find the nearest previous explicit reference in the commentary to the *SeMaG*. (Oftentimes, when you find it, it too will say שם, and then you'll have to find the next one back, and so on.)

Note also that sometimes שם will be preceded or followed by another partial reference, so you have to make a mental note of which part of the reference you need to find the previous reference to. If the note simply says מ"י שם, it's the same reference as the previous reference to the Rambam. But if it says, for example, מ"י שם ה"א, then you have to find the last reference to the Rambam and substitute “*halacha* 1” for the *halacha* number of that citation.

### Putting it all together: another full example, with editorial differences between editions

As I write this (spring 2026), the Portland Open Beit Midrash's advanced Talmud cohort right now is learning Chapter 7 of Tractate *Berachot*, שלשה שאכלו כאחת, about the laws of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. On [page 45b](#), the superscript ט before ברכות הא בשאר ברכות (three lines up from the bottom of the page) points to note ט in the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah*.

This note is confusingly prefaced by the numeral כ, meaning it is the 20th note in the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* in this *perek*.

### My printed (Tal-Man) edition

The note in my printed Gemara, edited and published by Tal-Man, reads as follows:

מ״פ א שם ה׳ יז סמג שם טוש״ע א״ח ס׳ קפח סעיף א׳ ובס׳ רטו סעיף א

The first part of the note, מ״פ א שם ה׳ יז, breaks down like this:

Hebrew	Expansion	Meaning
מ״פ	מיימונידס	Rambam ( <i>Mishneh Torah</i> )
א	פרק א	chapter 1
שם		“there” (we’ll come back to this)
ה׳	הלכה	<i>halacha</i>
יז		17

So what place does שם refer to in this note? Look back to note ח; its Rambam citation says שם פ״ה, “chapter 5 there”, so go back another note. Note ז doesn’t have a reference to the Rambam, so go back another note. Note ו also says שם, as do note ה, note ד, note ג, and note ב. So we go all the way back to note א, where we finally get an explicit reference: מ״פ א שם ה׳ יז, referring to chapter 5 of *Hilchot Berachot* (“Laws of Blessings”) *halacha* 17. So we know that the שם in our note refers to *Hilchot Berachot*.

Now we can translate the first part of our note, מ״פ א שם ה׳ יז, as: **Rambam (*Mishneh Torah*), *Laws of Blessings*, 1:17.**

The next part simply says סמג שם, “*SeMaG* there”. So we have to follow the same trail to find where the *SeMaG* was last referenced on this page. It, too, is in note א: **סמג עשׂין כז, *SeMaG* positive commandments, section 27.**

The final part reads:

טוש״ע א״ח ס׳ קפח סעיף א׳ ובס׳ רטו סעיף א

Breaking it down word by word:

Hebrew	Expansion	Meaning
טוש״ע	טור ושולחן ערוך	<i>Tur</i> and <i>Shulhan Aruch</i>
א״ח	אורח חיים	<i>Orah Hayyim</i>
ס׳	סימן	<i>siman</i>
קפח		188
סעיף		<i>se’if</i>
א׳		1
ובס׳	ובסימן	and in <i>siman</i> (note the standard prefixes ו and ב)
רטו		215

Hebrew	Expansion	Meaning
סעיף		<i>se'if</i>
א		1

So this part of the note translates as *Tur and Shulḥan Aruch, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 188:1 and 215:1*.

### The online Nehardea edition

As I mentioned, different editors and different editions sometimes write things out, well, differently. The equivalent note in the publisher Moznaim's [digitized "Nehardea" edition](#) reads:

מ"י פ"א שם ה"ל טז [יז] סמג שם טוש"ע או"ח ס" קפח סעיף א וסי' רטו סעיף א

There are a couple of differences. First, the citation to the Rambam points to *halacha* 16, and the editor has put the numeral 17 in brackets. I presume the editor was working from a source text in which the number 16 was written, but when you look at the text of the Rambam, you'll see that the correct citation is to 17, not 16, so he put 17 in brackets. I am at a loss to explain why the editor didn't just emend טז to יז like the editor of the Tal-Man edition apparently did. Or maybe the editor of the Tal-Man edition was working from a text that already said 17. I don't know.

The other difference is minor: the Tal-Man edition's text, in the citation to the *Tur/Shulḥan Aruch*, says ובסי "and in *siman*", while the "Nehardea" text doesn't have the ב "in".

### Conclusion

Reading the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* is like putting together the pieces of a puzzle. Once you know the basic structure of the notes, and the "signposts" for what to look out for, you'll have the tools to puzzle through these sometimes cryptic notes.