

Talmud Bavli, masechta
Bechoros, Venice, 1550.



THE PRINTERS' FEUD

AND

The Burning of the Talmud

BY RABBI AKIVA AARONSON

As the people to whom it belongs, the Talmud has been persecuted through the generations. One of the most infamous attacks took place at this time of year 450 years ago in Italy, caused by the conflict between two leading gentile printers of Hebrew books. In this article author Rabbi Akiva Aaronson examines the dispute, its tragic results and the ramifications that reach to our day.

The invention of printing in Germany in the mid-fifteenth century led to a revolution in society. The printed book was born, replacing the laborious work of the copyist. Virtually identical to the manuscript it replaced, the printed work was essentially a quicker and cheaper way of producing the same thing.

While the new invention remained solely in Germany, Jews were denied the opportunity to learn the new art, forbidden by the strict rules of German guilds. However, when the invention moved south to Italy soon afterward, the first Hebrew books began to appear, products of the fifteenth-century press, known as “incunabula” (cradle books), indicating the beginning of something.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

With the sixteenth century, the printing press came to maturity, no longer in the domain of pioneers but now the business of established printing houses, both large and small. The economic landscape of Europe also began to change. Now not only did the printing press become a common feature in the workplace, requiring several years for the apprentice to become a recognized printer, but a whole industry developed around it. This included bookbinderies, bookbinding being a separate skill performed under different auspices. In addition, the number of paper-making workshops increased greatly in order to meet a level of demand never known before. The first bookshops also began to make their appearance.

DANIEL BOMBERG

By far the single most important Hebrew printing house in the first decades of the sixteenth century was established by Daniel Bomberg, a gentile. Originally from Antwerp, Bomberg move to Venice, then one of Europe’s wealthiest cities, where in 1515 he applied to the Venetian Senate for permission to set up a Hebrew press. Because the request was accompanied by a substantial payment, and due to the fact that Bomberg was a Christian, permission, almost certainly denied to a Jew, was granted.



Early printing workshop c.1550

Bomberg spared no expense in operating his printing house and produced basic Hebrew works in unequalled quality in terms of typography, ink and paper. These include the first *Mikra’os Gedolos* (1516-17), the first complete printed edition of the *Talmud Bavli* (1520-23), and the first complete *Talmud Yerushalmi* (1523-24). Active until about 1550 — more than 30 years — Bomberg surely wears the crown among sixteenth-century Hebrew printers, and with him Venice became the principal center of Hebrew printing.

GIUSTINIANI AND BRAGADIN

Printing for Jews was profitable business and, encouraged by Bomberg's success — he was by then an aged man — a challenger entered the field. He too was a gentile, an Italian nobleman by the name of Marco Antonio Giustiniani.

The first *sefer* to come from Giustiniani's press, also located in Venice, was Ramban's commentary on the Torah, completed in 1545. Another *sefer* he printed was *Zevach Pesach* (Abarbanel's commentary on the *Haggadah*), completed in the same year. From his press also came an edition of the Talmud printed 1546-51, which was particularly important because it included for the first time the cross-references prepared by Rabi Yehoshua Boaz', which became standard in all Talmud editions to this day. A significant achievement under any circumstances, this printing was even more so for a printer in the early years of his enterprise.

From the start Giustiniani was an aggressive competitor to Bomberg, having no compunction about printing the same *sefarim*. His intentions, it seems, were even revealed by his printer's mark (logo), which was an image of the Beis Hamikdash in Yerushalayim. Over the Beis Hamikdash, in an unrolled scroll, appeared the words, "The glory of this latter

House will be greater than that of the first,"²² indicating that he intended to overshadow his forerunner, Daniel Bomberg. Giustiniani was one of the primary factors causing the eventual closure of Bomberg's press.

In 1550 a competitor to Giustiniani himself appeared on the scene. Also a gentile and Italian nobleman, Alvise Bragadin opened his printing press in Venice too, ending Giustiniani's brief monopoly in Hebrew printing after the closure of the Bomberg press. In that same year Bragadin printed Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* — based on Bomberg's edition of 1524 — with the addition for the first time of the annotations of Rabi Meir Katzenellenbogen, the Maharam Padua,³ *Rosh Yeshivah* in Padua and one of the greatest Torah authorities of the generation. For unknown reasons, the Maharam did not choose Giustiniani to print the work, instead turning to Bragadin's new printing house.

CONFLICT ERUPTS

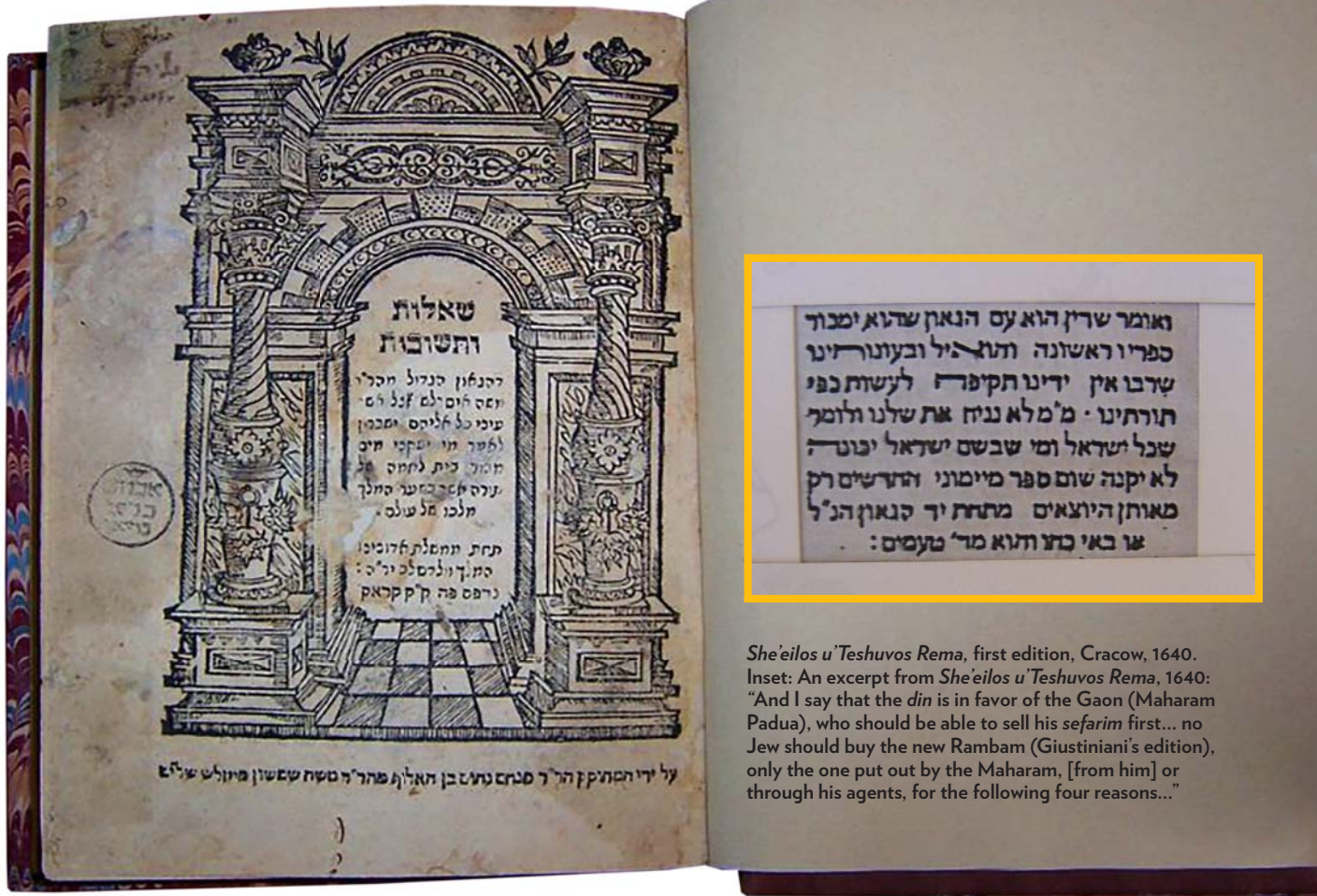
Angered by the fact that the Maharam had chosen Bragadin over himself — he had certainly earned a reputation as a printer of highest quality in contrast to the newcomer Bragadin — Giustiniani set out to bring about his rival's downfall.

Mishneh Torah, printed by Alvise Bragadin, Venice, 1550.



Mishneh Torah, printed by Giustiniani, Venice, 1551.





ואומר שרין הוא עם הנאון שדגא ומכר
 כפרו ראשונה ותגליל ובעונותינו
 שדגא אין ידו תקיפה לעשות כפי
 תורתנו. מ'לא נניח את שלנו ולומר
 שכל ישראל ומי שבשם ישראל יבטח
 לא יקנה שום ספר מיימוני והדושים רק
 מאותן היוצאים מתחת יד קנאון הנ"ל
 זו באי כח הוא מר' טעמים:

She'eilos u'Teshuvos Rema, first edition, Cracow, 1640.
 Inset: An excerpt from *She'eilos u'Teshuvos Rema*, 1640:
 "And I say that the *din* is in favor of the Gaon (Maharam Padua), who should be able to sell his *sefarim* first... no Jew should buy the new Rambam (Giustiniani's edition), only the one put out by the Maharam, [from him] or through his agents, for the following four reasons..."

Soon after Bragadin published the first volume of his *Mishneh Torah*, Giustiniani began printing a rival edition, deliberately pricing it lower than his competitor's. Giustiniani included in it part of the Maharam's glosses at the end of the volume — admittedly taken from Bragadin — and referred to them disparagingly as being of little use. The Maharam, who had at great cost invested in Bragadin's edition and faced financial loss, took the case to the Rema,⁴ one of the leading halachic authorities of the time.

In his responsum,⁵ the Rema ruled in favor of Bragadin, basing his decision on four *halachos*. First, citing a passage in *Bava Basra* (21b), which states that a resident who has established a flour mill can prevent a competitor from setting up another one in the same alleyway, he ruled that Giustiniani was trespassing on Bragadin's rights and threatening his livelihood (*hasagas gvul*). This was clearly the case, as Giustiniani had publicly announced that his edition would cost one gold coin less than Bragadin's, deliberately intending to cause him difficulties.

Secondly, based on *Bava Basra* 22a (the following *daf*), which says that if a Torah scholar is involved in a business enterprise — the Maharam here was a partner with Bragadin — one should purchase from him in preference to a businessman who is not a Torah scholar, so that he will have a livelihood and be able to learn Torah.

Thirdly, based on a *passuk* (*Vayikra* 25:14), "When you sell an item to your fellow or buy from the hand of your fellow..." (expounded on in *Toras Kohanim*), one should give preference to a fellow Jew in buying and selling, even when the gentile's product is cheaper.

Finally, based on the *Gemara* (*Kesubos* 19b) that states that one should not keep a *sefer Torah* in one's home for more than 30 days without having it checked, one should similarly not keep in one's possession a *sefer* that has not been properly checked — especially a halachic *sefer*. Bragadin's edition had been carefully checked by the Maharam himself.

Although, stated the Rema, Torah laws in money matters also apply to gentiles, nevertheless he did not have the power to impose his decision on Giustiniani. As a result, he placed a ban on anyone purchasing Giustiniani's edition until Bragadin's had sold out. Anyone who did so would be placed in *cherem* and, concludes the Rema, "not have *kapparah* until the day of his death, nor burial in a Jewish cemetery."

THE CHURCH IS BROUGHT IN

Despite the ruling of the Rema, however, the dispute did not die down. Instead, it took an unexpected turn. Both Bragadin and Giustiniani denounced each other to the Church for printing *sefarim* defamatory to it. Fired by rivalry, each side hired *meshumadim* (apostates), "experts" only too eager to

slander their former co-religionists, the subject under attack soon became the Talmud.⁶

Whatever the cause of the dispute, it came at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was facing a challenge from the breakaway Protestants. Feeling itself under attack, it demanded strict adherence to its rules about proscribed “heretical” material, which it banned and burned. In this charged atmosphere, the Church hardened its attitude toward Jews, showing them rigid intolerance.

Allegations against the Talmud were assigned to an investigation by the Congregation of the Inquisition, which reported in favor of burning it. Subsequently, on 2 Elul 5313/ August 12, 1553, an order was issued to burn both the *Talmud Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*, together with any books based on them. Owners of any such volumes were required to submit them within eight days. Anyone found afterward with a copy would be subject to two years’ imprisonment, and five years for a second offense. Informers were to receive a monetary reward.

On Rosh Hashanah 5314 (September 9, 1553) — a day likely chosen because it was a festival and Jews would be in their synagogues — representatives of the Inquisition conducted a house-to-house search in the Jewish residences of Rome. Unable or unwilling to distinguish one book from another, they took whatever came into their hands, and the huge quantity seized was set alight in Rome’s public square, Campo di Fiori.

Two weeks later, on Sukkos, the Talmud was burnt also in Bologna, and a month later, in the middle of Cheshvan, in Venice, where the conflagration consumed over 1,000 complete sets of the Talmud and 500 of the Rif. Hebrew printing was also banned henceforth in Venice.

No more copies of the Talmud could be found, other than a few *masechtos* hidden at great risk by their owners. The critical shortage of *sefarim* dealt a heavy blow to Italian Jewry, causing a decline in Torah scholarship. The lack of *sefarim*

was also felt keenly in other lands, since Venice had been a primary source of supply.

Within Italy, the emphasis in Torah study changed, turning to areas where *sefarim* were available and still permitted to be printed, especially the Rif and halachic *sefarim*, the Tur with the Beis Yosef commentary then being printed there for the first time.⁷ The period also saw a rise in the study of *Kabbalah*, the first editions of its main *sefarim* appearing at that time, although the question of its study was a matter of fierce controversy among the Rabbanim of Italy.

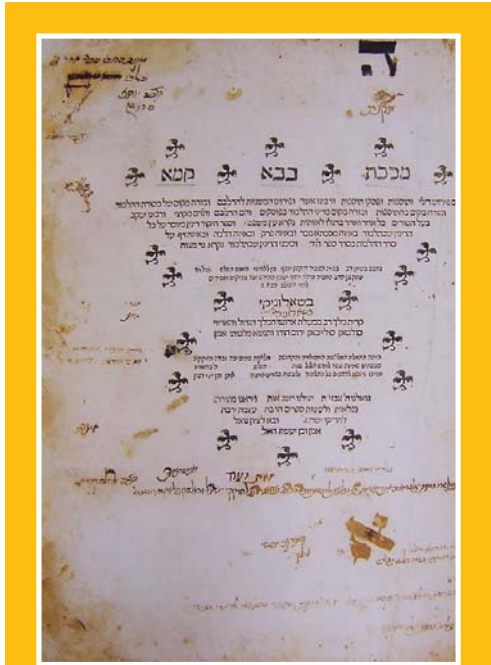
After a period of ten years, the Talmud was again permitted to be printed, but only after strict censorship and under a different name, conditions stipulated in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books) issued in 1564. Hence the introduction of the term *Shas* — *shin*, *samech* — representing *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah*, to replace the word *Talmud*. Where censorship was carried out prior to printing, the statement *con licentia de superiori* (with permission of the authorities) would appear on the title page, and if performed after printing, the “offensive” parts would be blacked out by the censor.

SALVATION FROM ELSEWHERE

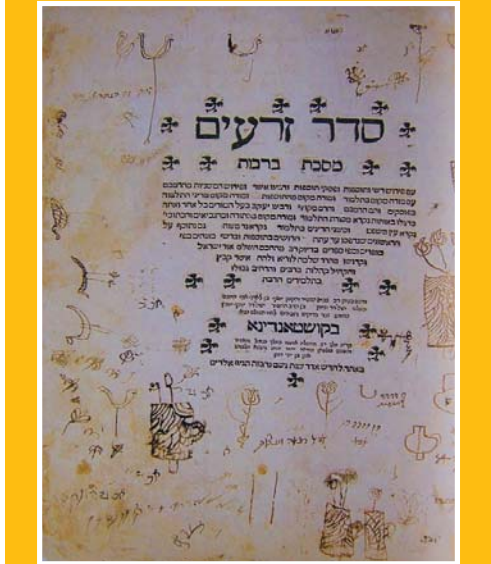
After the burning of the Talmud and the silencing of the Venetian presses — the Talmud was never again printed in Italy — the acute need for *sefarim* was taken up by printers elsewhere.

One of the earliest editions of the Talmud to appear after 1553 was printed in Lublin (1559-1577), bearing *haskamos* from the leading Torah authorities of Poland, Russia and Lithuania. They decreed that the yeshivos in their domain should learn the *masechtos* in the order in which they were printed to finance the printing.

Farther east, the Talmud was printed in Salonika (1563-7) and in Constantinople (1583-8); benevolent Ottoman rule in those years provided a haven for Jews persecuted almost everywhere in Europe.



Talmud Bavli, masechta Bava Kamma, Salonica, 1563



Talmud Bavli, masechta Brachos, Constantinople, 1583



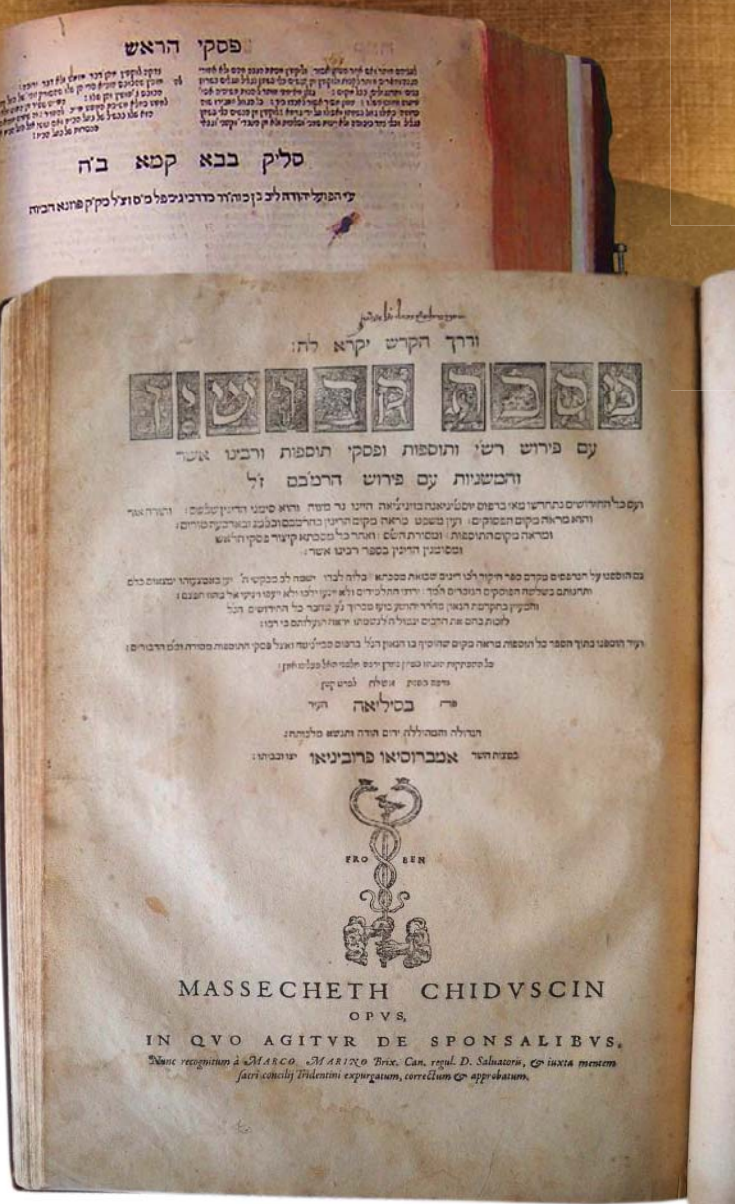
Talmud Bavli, masechta Bava Metzia, printed by Immanuel Benveniste, Amsterdam, 1646. The celebrated edition of the Talmud in which censored parts were largely restored.

Almost three decades after the burnings, permission was granted for a Talmud to be printed, provided it complied with Church regulations. The printing of this Talmud in Basel, Swiss Federation (1578-1581), came about as a result of the visit of the gentile printer Ambrosius Froben to the Frankfurt-am-Main book fair, where Jews there expressed the need for a new edition. A request for a resident's permit for a Jew to reside in Basel was granted in order for him to supervise the work, since gentile compositors were not well-enough acquainted with Hebrew for a work on such a scale.

The Basel edition, however, was heavily censored – *masechta Avodah Zarah* did not appear at all – and did not find favor among Jews, who looked for alternatives whenever possible.

In the next century, one of the most celebrated editions of the Talmud to appear came from the press of Immanuel Benveniste, printed in Amsterdam (1644-48). Due to the more tolerant attitude of the Church in Western Europe, parts forbidden elsewhere were largely restored, the edition nevertheless prudently censored by Jews themselves prior to printing in order to avoid any type of conflict again.

Thus were extinguished the flames of dispute and so settled the dust after the burnings of 1553, constituting another episode in the history of our long exile. The enemies of Israel come and go, their suns rise and set, but Israel remains eternal. ■



Talmud Bavli, masechta Kiddushin, Basel, 1579.

Rabbi Aaronson is the author of "People of the Book: Five Hundred Years of the Hebrew Book From the Beginning of Printing Until the Twentieth Century" (New York/Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2014).

Photo credits: Yeshivah Ahavas Torah, Baranovich-Jerusalem; Valmadonna Trust Library; London; Joseph Gradenwitz z"l.

1. Torah Ohr, Ein Mishpat-Ner Mitzvah, and Mesoras HaShas.
2. Chagga'i 2:9.
3. 1482-1565.
4. Rabi Moshe Isserles, 1530-1572.
5. Rema, She'eilos Uteshuvos #10, 4 Elul 1550.
6. According to some opinions, rivalry over the Mishneh Torah was not the cause of the conflict, since three years had passed since its printing. Instead, it was over rival editions of the Talmud from these two printers. By 1553 Giustiniani had completed the printing of his edition and attempted to prevent Bragadin from printing his own, then in preparation.
7. The first editions of the Tur with Beis Yosef sections Orach Chaim and Yoreh De'ah, were printed in Venice prior to the burning (1550-1), followed by section Even HaEzer after the burning (Sabionetta, 1553), and Choshen Mishpat (Sabionetta, 1559).