



Survival
and
Triumph

By Akiva Aaronson

Five Hundred Years
Of the Hebrew Book

At this time of year, students in our schools, yeshivos and kollelim are concentrating on studying from books. But do we adequately appreciate what we hold in our hands, and the *mesirus nefesh* of those who made our *sifrei kodesh* and books available to us?

In this article, based on his recently published book, Akiva Aaronson takes us on a journey through time and place, beginning with the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. We see the first printed *sefarim* as they appeared, then the classic works of subsequent generations as they came off the press. We see the dedication, difficulties, trials and triumphs of the printers of previous times. And we are left with an admiration for them, as well as a better appreciation of the *sifrei kodesh* we hold in our hands.

עירובין תלמוד בבלי

עם פרשיו וחומשות ומסקי ורכשי אשר ומסקי הראש ופדוש
ומשניות מרמב"ם ול

וליהוה נרמזה ודומות ישנים מה נאמרו על חכמים הראשי ככל דרש בחומשות המוחל על האוהב
דר ישעיהו מלין דלי וכל באשר ברמ"ם מר"ק כחשם שמה דין על דק לשון הכל מעלות רמב"ם
שמו ודק כחמה לא נקרייה:

דבר אלפי ע"כ כל סימול כלל או שני דתיים ואלהות רמב"ם דר"ק לוח
דבר דבמת שלמה סימול סימול דל: דבר מדרשא דרתי
ולוח: חזקיהו אר"ה: קטן לו רמב"ם קיים מה מה אלן חקטן לרד"י שנים מלכות קטן
דבר מדרש
מלכות לו מה מלכות המלכות בחזקת
מדרש מערני יום מנב דרברי המוחות מרמ"ק כעו חומשות המעב
על הראש: על לו חומשות המעב בחומ"ם ליל חמשה ימים ביום הרביעי לו מר"א ג ברית וכן דרתי
במחשבות הלה על דר מר"ק מר"ם חומשות מר"ם מרמ"ם חומשות חומשות חומשות חומשות

בסלאוריטא





Early printing workshop, c. 1500.

C. 1450 – Gutenberg Invents the Printing Press

Born c. 1400, Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz, Germany, invented the printing press. His training as a silversmith or goldsmith provided him with the skill of working with metals, and his invention was letters of metal type. He cut the shape of each letter out of hard metal, then pressed it into soft metal to form a mold. Into the mold he poured molten metal that, upon hardening, left him with individual letters of type for each letter of the alphabet. These could then be aligned together to form words, sentences and whole pages. The next stage was to apply ink, and the page was ready for printing. Afterwards the letters could be broken up and prepared for further text. Gutenberg's famous book — the "Gutenberg Bible" — was printed in 1455 with a quality that is hardly surpassed even in our day.

Advantages of Printing

The advantages of printing were quickly apparent. In the same amount of time that a scribe, with his quill dipped in ink, could produce a single book, hundreds could come from the printing press. This meant that from then on books would be available

to society at large for the first time, at a considerably lower price than the previous standard. Detractors of the printed work argued that it was merely a cheap imitation of the handwritten one for those who could not afford the superior original. In reality, however, the two were virtually indistinguishable, and subsequently printing spread rapidly throughout Europe.

C. 1469 – The First Printed Hebrew Sefarim

In contrast to gentiles, amongst whom few were literate, virtually every Jew could read. Jews needed *sefarim*, and were quick to realize the potential of the printing press in providing them with their needs. As a result, the first Hebrew books came off the press soon after the invention of printing, in about 1469, in Italy, Spain and Portugal. After little more than twenty years, however, Hebrew printing in Spain and Portugal came to an abrupt end with the Expulsion of 1492. This left Italy as the principal source of *sefarim* during that early period.

1475 – First Dated Hebrew Sefer

The first Hebrew *sefer* containing all the basic facts of publication — the date, place of printing and printer — was *Rashi's*

Commentary on the Torah, printed in 1475 in Reggio di Calabria (southern Italy) by Avraham ben Garton. It was a modest production by today's standards, containing only the text of *Rashi*, without *Chumash*. In the same year, the *Arbaah Turim* (Tur) of Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, one of the principal *halachah sefarim* of the period, appeared in northern Italy, printed by Meshullam Cuzi.



1483 – The House of Soncino

The most important name in early Hebrew printing belonged to the Soncino family. Originally from Speyer, Germany, they migrated south, settling in the town of Soncino, northern Italy. It was from there that they took their name, in gratitude for being granted the right of residence. Encouraged by the elder of the family, Yisrael Nasan, they turned to the new art of printing. This meant starting completely from scratch, purchasing a press, casting letters, and testing ink and paper.

The first *sefer* to come from Soncino's press was tractate *Brachos* of the Babylonian Talmud, printed at the end of 1483. Previously, in the era of manuscripts, the *Gemara*, *Rashi* and *Tosafos* would each usually have appeared on its own as a separate manuscript (if they were available at all). Soncino's great innovation in their edition of the Talmud was that for the first time, the *Gemara*, *Rashi* and *Tosafos* all appeared together on the same page — the *Gemara* at the center, *Rashi* on the inner column, and *Tosafos* on the outer one. This set the format of all future editions of the Talmud, until today. For a new printer, that was a remarkable achievement.

The Sixteenth Century

In the sixteenth century, the printing press was no longer the domain of pioneers but the occupation of established printing houses, both large and small. By then a familiar workplace in European towns, printing was respected as a trade and required several years' apprenticeship.

Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Brachos*. Printed by Joshua Soncino; Soncino, 1483–4.

1520 – Daniel Bomberg

In early sixteenth-century Europe, one press that surpassed all others was that of Daniel Bomberg of Venice. Employing Jewish workers, Bomberg systematically issued the basic texts of Judaism in unequaled typographical excellence. It seems he was sincerely interested in Hebrew *sefarim*, not motivated only by financial gain.

Bomberg's greatest achievement was the first complete printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud, which came from his press between 1520 and 1523. In it, he introduced continuous pagination from beginning to end, which is the origin of the standard pagination in use today. Furthermore, although the layout of the page came from Soncino, with *Rashi* on the inner column and *Tosafos* on the outer, Soncino's page was relatively short. It is Bomberg's edition that established exactly which words appeared on each page, also followed in all editions to this day.



Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Avodah Zarah*. Printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1520.

1565 – First Edition of the Shulchan Aruch

In the second half of the sixteenth century, one of the most important printers of Hebrew *sefarim* was Alvise Bragadin, also of Venice. From his press came the first edition of Rabbi Yosef Karo's

Shulchan Aruch, printed in 1565. It included only the *Mechaber* — Rabbi Yosef Karo — intended by him as a revision of his much longer commentary on the *Tur*, and was printed in four volumes.

Five years after the appearance of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the glosses of the Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserles) were added to it, and these were printed together for the first time in Cracow in 1570. In this way, the *Shulchan Aruch* became the *halachah sefer*

for all Jewry – Ashkenazic and Sephardic. In the following decades, the *Nosei Keilim* (commentaries on the *Shulchan Aruch*) also began to appear, at first printed separately, and subsequently included in the *Shulchan Aruch* on the same page.

The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the main areas of expansion in Hebrew printing were in the Netherlands (Amsterdam) and Germany. More prolific than any other location during that period, the output of Amsterdam's presses was matched only by the collective production of all of Germany's different Hebrew presses. In terms of quality, too,



First edition *Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer*. Printed by Alvise Bragadin; Venice, 1565.

Amsterdam was supreme; the statement on the title page “Printed in Amsterdam” was universally recognized as a sign of quality.

1626 – Menashe Ben Israel

Amsterdam's first Hebrew press was established by Menashe ben Israel in 1626. At that time, the Jewish community of Amsterdam was comprised predominantly of *anusim* – referred to disparagingly by the Spanish as “*marranos*” – like Menashe himself. These were Jews who had remained in Spain at the time of the Expulsion, outwardly adopting a Christian way of life but secretly practicing Judaism. Later, they managed to escape and return to Judaism. Menashe dedicated himself to helping them return to their faith, and set about providing *sefarim* for them.



Above: *Sefer Mesillas Yesharim*, first edition. Printed by Naftoli Hertz; Amsterdam, 1740.

Left: *Sefer Emunos v'Deios*, printed by Menashe ben Israel; Amsterdam, 1647.

From Menashe's press came classic *sefarim*, including three editions of *Tanach* and a *Chumash* with Rashi's commentary. He also printed *siddurim* according to both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic custom. In addition, he produced *sefarim* in Roman letters for Spanish and Portuguese returnees who, having been cut off from Judaism for more than a century, as yet knew no Hebrew.

1720-23 – Frankfurt Calmud

Frankfurt-am-Main was one of the oldest and most distinguished of the German-Jewish *kehillos*. It could trace Jewish settlement back nearly one thousand years, although this included periods of persecution and expulsion. From the narrow streets of its ghetto – the *Judengasse* (Jews' Street) – would come some of the most illustrious Torah figures of the period, and

Romm's 1880-1886 edition became the definitive one, superseding all others, and has been continuously reprinted. Even the new, computer-set editions of our era are replicas of Romm's Talmud.

also some of the wealthiest Jewish families of the time, well-known for their philanthropy.¹

In spite of Frankfurt's distinction, Jews there were not able to obtain a printing license from the guild authorities and had to bring their *sefarim* to print at gentile-owned printing houses. One of the most important of those was that of Johann Koellner, who between 1708 and 1728 printed about half the *sefarim* issued in Frankfurt. These included an edition of the Talmud printed in 1720-23.

The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In the nineteenth century, the center of Hebrew printing moved increasingly to Eastern Europe, the heartland of Ashkenazic Jewry, with the output of its presses eventually far surpassing those of Western Europe. In Central Europe, Vienna was also an important location of Hebrew printing, as were the presses of Livorno, Italy. The early decades of the nineteenth century saw the start of Hebrew printing in the United States.

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution began to be felt in Eastern Europe in the early nineteenth century,



Above: Babylonian Talmud, tractate Gittin. Printed by Johann Koellner; Frankfurt-am-Main, 1720.

Right: Babylonian Talmud, tractate Bava Kamma. Printed by the Widow and Brothers Romm; Vilna, 1882.



with the use of new raw materials — iron and steel — and new energy sources such as coal and steam power. As a result, fewer goods were being handmade locally by traditional methods; instead, they were manufactured by machines in factories. The occupations of craftsmen began to disappear as they were replaced by machine operators.

In the area of printing, one development was the stop-cylinder press, which brought wheels and rollers into printing for the first time. Printing machines were no longer operated by a lever that raised and lowered the press, printing one sheet at a time. Rather, paper was fed through at a rapid rate, increasing the volume of production.

1799 – Romm of Vilna

One of the most famous printing houses of Europe, and one the most prolific Hebrew printers of all time, was Romm of Vilna, founded in 1799.

Romm printed Hebrew *sefarim* in all areas of Torah, although they are chiefly known for their editions of the Talmud. Most famous was their third edition, printed between 1880 and 1886. Universally acclaimed, it became known as the “Vilna Shas.” It was the most extensive edition ever to appear and included many commentaries, both early and later ones, printed for the first time from manuscripts. It was also painstakingly edited by *talmidei chachamim* to ensure the text's accuracy.

Romm's 1880-1886 edition became the definitive one, superseding all others, and has been continuously reprinted.

Even the new, computer-set editions of our era are replicas of Romm's Talmud.

1800 – Wolf Heidenheim

A press of particular importance in nineteenth-century Germany was founded by Wolf Heidenheim in Roedelheim, close to Frankfurt-am-Main. In 1800 he began to publish his famous work, a set of *machzorim* in nine volumes. As an expert in Hebrew grammar, he was able to produce a precise text. He also had a full grasp of *piyutim* – liturgical additions to *davening* – on which he wrote a commentary, and he also provided an up-to-date German translation. As a result, Heidenheim's *machzor*, well-used by German Jewry, underwent numerous printings. After World War II, it was reproduced by photo-mechanical methods from the originals.



Above: *Machzor* for Rosh Hashanah, eighth edition. Printed by Wolf Heidenheim; Roedelheim, 1832.

Right: *Seder Avodas HaKodesh*, printed by Yisrael Bak; Jerusalem, 1841.

1832 – Yisrael Bak

Hebrew printing began in Eretz Yisrael in 1832 for the first time since the sixteenth century with the arrival in Tzfas of Yisrael Bak. Bak was a Ruzhiner Chassid from Berditchev, in the Ukraine, who made *Aliyah* with his printing equipment and two wooden presses.

From Bak's press in Tzfas came the famed *Pe'as HaShulchan*, dealing with *mitzvos* relating to growing produce in the Land of Israel – *mitzvos hateluyos baAretz*. The press ceased operation after only five years, brought to an end in 1837 by a massive earthquake that struck the region.

After the earthquake, Bak moved to Jerusalem where, to combat missionaries who were then active in the Holy City, he resumed printing. The first *sefer* that emerged from him in his new location, in 1841, was the Chida's *Avodas HaKodesh*. This volume has the distinction of being the first Hebrew book ever to be printed in Jerusalem.

1837 – Isaac Leeser

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, America's Jewish population stood at about six thousand. Immigrants arriving in the U.S. were met by a land wide open with opportunity,

but with little infrastructure in terms of *Yiddishkeit*. Sadly, this led to rampant assimilation into the American way of life.

Isaac Leeser, arriving in the United States from Germany as a young man, was determined to stem the flow of assimilation. In addition to his position as *chazzan* of Philadelphia's Congregation Mikveh Yisrael, he became one of the most important early pioneers of Hebrew printing in America.

Leeser translated into English and brought to print basic Hebrew *sefarim* for use by American Jewry. These included the first English





Today, Hebrew *sefarim* are available in abundance. This is in no small part due to the printers of previous generations who brought us the *sefarim* of their time.



Letters of metal type allocated according to compartment, for each letter of the alphabet. A composer's stick is also shown, in which the letters are brought together to form words and sentences, ready for printing.

translation of the Sephardic prayer book (1837), a translation of *Chumash* (1845), and a translation of the Ashkenazic *siddur* (1848). His most ambitious work was a translation of the entire *Tanach* (1853). From then on, American Jewry would have authentic Jewish sources to rely on, preventing the need to use “Bibles” of non-Jewish origin, and any undesired influence they might have.



The Hebrew printing industry had humble beginnings in fifteenth-century Italy, Spain and Portugal. Afterwards, production spread north and eastwards throughout Europe, wherever Jews settled and built communities. Its history is the history of the Jewish

people over the same period — a saga marked by persecution and exile, but also reestablishment and flourishing vitality — a miraculous story of survival.

Today, Hebrew *sefarim* are available in abundance. This is in no small part due to the printers of previous generations who brought us the *sefarim* of their time, overcoming the difficulties in their path, paving the way for the *sifrei kodesh* of our own generation. *Klal Yisrael* is forever indebted to them. ■

1. Most notably the Rothschild family, founded by Mayer Amshel Rothschild.

Akiva 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 (Feldheim Publishers, 2014).