



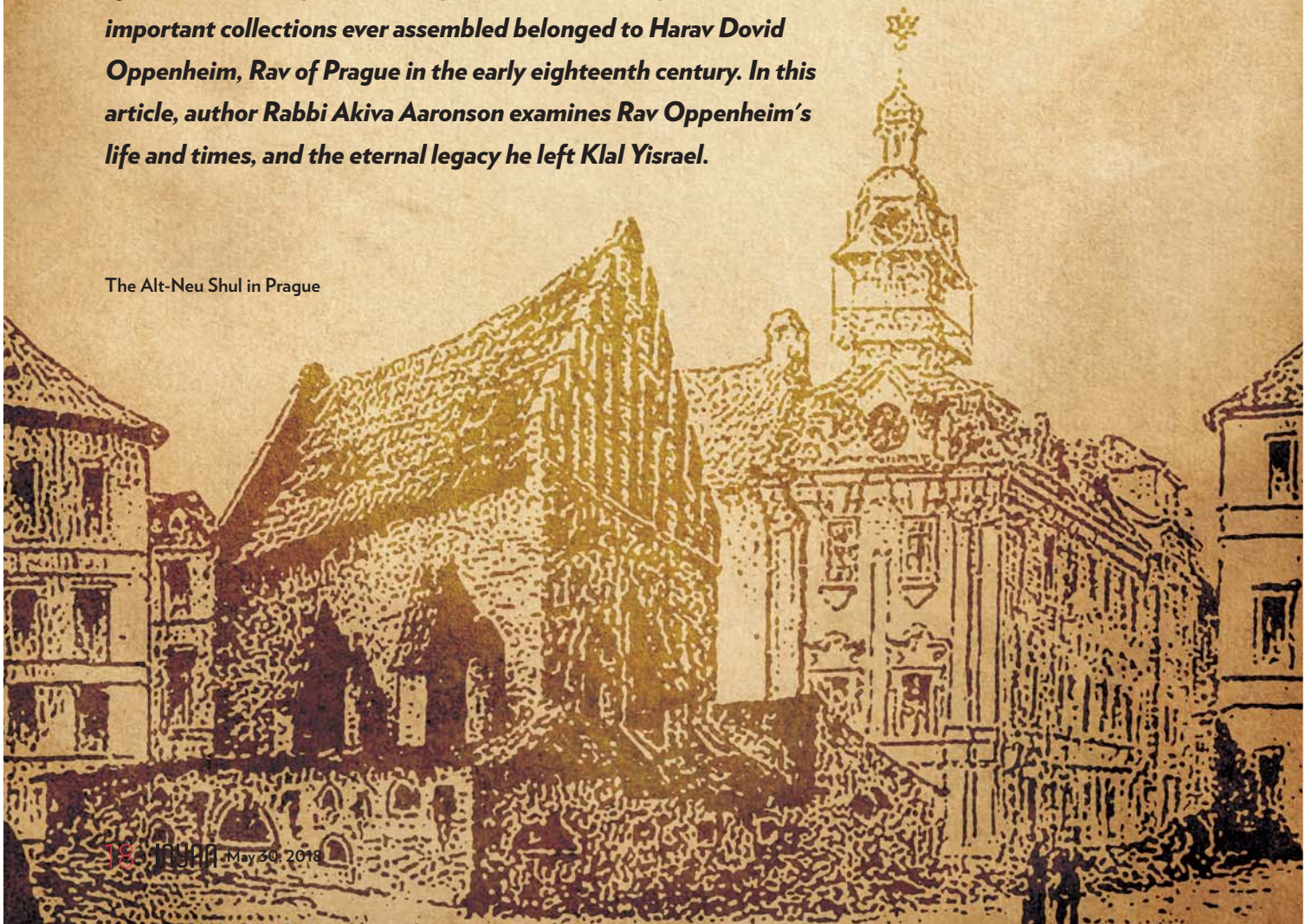
HARAV DOVID OPPENHEIM

RAV OF PRAGUE,
PRINCE IN KLAL YISRAEL

BY RABBI AKIVA AARONSON

We recently celebrated Mattan Torah, the giving of the Torah and, by extension, all sifrei kodesh of Klal Yisrael. One of the most important collections ever assembled belonged to Harav Dovid Oppenheimer, Rav of Prague in the early eighteenth century. In this article, author Rabbi Akiva Aaronson examines Rav Oppenheimer's life and times, and the eternal legacy he left Klal Yisrael.

The Alt-Neu Shul in Prague



Early Years

Born in Worms, Germany, in 1664, Rabbi Dovid Oppenheim (Oppenheimer) came from a distinguished, wealthy family whose ranks provided *Klal Yisrael* with many Rabbanim, *parnassim* (*kehillah* heads), generous benefactors and *shtadlanim*, who represented Jewish communities in the courts of gentile rulers. A nephew of Shmuel Oppenheim of Vienna — a court Jew and chief supplier to the Austrian army, and one of the wealthiest men of the era — Rav Dovid inherited an immense fortune from him upon his passing.

In his youth, Rav Dovid studied under some of the *Gedolei Torah* of the time, including Harav Gershon Ashkenazi of Metz,¹ and Harav Yaakov Ashkenazi, *Av Beis Din* of Oben, father of the Chacham Tzvi. However, his principal teacher was Harav Yitzchak Binyamin Wolf, author of *Nachalas Binyamin* and Rav of Landsberg. Even as a youth, the young Rav Dovid maintained scholarly correspondence with Harav Yair Chaim Bachrach,² who was 26 years his senior.

At the age of 17, Rav Dovid married Gendela, daughter of the wealthy court Jew Lipman (Leffman) Behrends of Hanover. The couple had four daughters and a son.

Rav of Nikolsberg

In Elul of 1689, at only 25 years of age, Rav Dovid was appointed to the distinguished position of Rav of Nikolsberg, one of the foremost Jewish communities of central Europe. As such, he became *Landsrabbiner* (Chief Rabbi) of Moravia, a leading province of the Austrian empire. Upon his appointment, the long-established rule that a Rav could serve for only three years without re-election was waived, and he was appointed for all his days.

As Rav of Nikolsberg, Rav Oppenheim's *takanos* included that every *kehillah* over a certain size was obligated to maintain a yeshiva, that all yeshivos should learn the same *mesechta*, and that no community could appoint a *maggid* without his authorization. He was also empowered to fine any *kehillah* that

did not follow his instructions.

In addition, he had to deal with the difficult questions of the time, especially relating to *agunos* — women whose husbands were missing and not proven dead — the period being one of war and strife in Europe.

Rav Dovid's reputation soon spread far beyond the borders of Moravia, and Rabbanim of *kehillos* farther afield turned to him with their *she'eilos*. He was also appointed *Nasi* for the Holy Land, responsible for the collection and transfer of funds donated by the European communities for the *yishuv* there, which was dependent on this money for sustenance. In turn, the community in Eretz Yisrael conferred upon him the honorary title of "Rav of Jerusalem."

Rav of Prague

In 1702, after 13 years in Nikolsberg, Harav Oppenheim accepted the position as Rav of Prague, an *ir v'eim b'Yisrael* and one of Europe's oldest and most revered *kehillos*. Later, in 1713, he was appointed *Landsrabbiner* of half of Bohemia, and afterwards of all of Bohemia, confirmed by decree of the emperor, Charles VI. In this capacity, he was often forced to travel to the court of the emperor in Vienna to deal with various decrees leveled at Jewish communities.

As one of the Torah luminaries of the period, many authors also turned to him for *haskamos* to their *sefarim*, of which about 80 are recorded. A prolific author himself, he did not, however, bring any single work to print during his lifetime — the only works of his being some *drashos* and *teshuvos* printed in others' *sefarim*. His *chiddushim* on the entire *Shas*, recorded by his *talmidim*, were largely lost in a pogrom, although he expressed the hope to later see them printed.³

Known near and far for his spirit of generosity, Rav Oppenheim used

his great wealth to provide for the poor and support *talmidei chachamim*, giving 20 percent of his income to charity. In addition, he assisted authors financially in bringing their works to print, often embellishing their *sefarim* with his own



Ksav Rabbanus given to Harav Dovid Oppenheim on his appointment as Rav of Prague, dated 26 Iyar 5462/1702.



Response of Harav Dovid Oppenheim accepting the position as Rav of Prague, dated 19 Elul, 5462/1702.

comments. Living in the generation that followed the exposure of the false messiah Shabsai Tzvi, Rav Oppenheim also fought resolutely against any sects that still adhered to him.⁴

The Oppenheim Collection

By means of his great wealth, Rav Oppenheim also became known for his collection of manuscripts and *sefarim*, the first listing of which he made in 1688 at the age of 24. It contained 480 titles, a considerable achievement at a time when *sefarim* were still expensive, each one a treasured item. His collection, the result of half a century of acquisition, eventually was estimated to include 780 manuscripts and 4,220 printed books; it remains one of the most important Hebrew libraries ever amassed.

No expense or obstacle was too great. Rav Oppenheim employed scribes to copy manuscripts not available for purchase and agents to travel long distances to obtain anything he might require. His collection included almost everything that had been printed, from when the printing press was invented until his time, securing the survival of what might otherwise have been lost to us.

Rabbi Oppenheim also maintained contact with the printers of his day, commissioning them to produce for him special editions printed on blue paper, and also on the much more expensive *klaf*, including the Frankfurt *Shas* of 1715. In addition, he made his manuscripts available to printers in order to bring them to print for public benefit, despite the fact that they would lose value once printed versions of the same were available. Moreover, he allowed *talmidei chachamim* to use his *sefarim* for their studies.

The Collection Remains in Hanover

Despite the age and distinction of the Prague Jewish community, the Jews of Prague had long endured an uneasy existence amidst their gentile



Maseches Brachos of Talmud Bavli, printed in Prague, 1728, during the tenure of Rav Oppenheim as Chief Rabbi. The word "Talmud" was censored, and printing was permitted only under a different title, Hilchos Brachos.



Catalogue of the Oppenheim Collection, printed in Hamburg, 1782, showing the first page of entries. Nine entries are shown for the commentary of Rav Yitzchak Abarbanel on Tanach, the earliest printed in Naples, 1483. Three entries are shown for Abudraham, Commentary on Tefillah, printed in Constantinople, 1514; Venice, 1566; and Amsterdam, 1726.

neighbors. They lived in constant fear of persecution, blood libel and expulsion, as the local clergy often aroused the townsfolk against them. Prague's Jews were also restricted in their means of earning a livelihood and subject to special taxes levied on them alone.

Censorship of Hebrew *sefarim* was also at its most severe in Prague under Jesuit priests, who considered any type of thought not consistent with their own — whether from Jews or Christians — as heresy. In Prague, it was even forbidden to possess copies of the Talmud, and the "Holy Office" sporadically searched the Jewish ghetto, confiscating anything deemed unsuitable. Despite the fact that the same *sefarim* had been approved by censors elsewhere in Europe, in Prague they were not permitted.

Accordingly, even after his appointment, Rav Oppenheim was not permitted to bring his collection with him to Prague. Instead, it remained for safekeeping with his father-in-law in Hanover; Rav Oppenheim would visit there periodically to enrich it. It remained there until the time of his passing in 1736.

Rav Oppenheim's Heirs

After Rav Oppenheim's death, his collection passed through a number of generations of his heirs. Initially, it was inherited by his son Rav Yosef, Rav of Helischau, who was *niftar* at a young age less than three years after his father. Afterwards, it passed to Isaac Ber Cohen, and then to Rav Yosef's daughter — a granddaughter of Rav Dovid — who was the widow of Rav Tzvi Hirsch, Rav of Hildesheim. The next heir was Isaac Seligmann Berend Salomon of Hamburg.

To facilitate sale of the collection a number of catalogues were printed, a partial one appearing in Hanover in 1764, 28 years after Rav Oppenheim's passing. A second one was issued in 1782 by Isaac Seligmann in Hamburg, where the *sefarim* were then held,



but without finding a buyer.⁵ In 1826, a third and final catalogue was issued in which it was announced that unless the collection was purchased as a whole, in Sivan, 1827, an auction would be held and it would be offered for sale in separate lots.

The Bodleian Library, Oxford

At this point, Dr. Alexander Nicoll, Professor of Hebrew at Oxford, began negotiations for the purchase of the collection. Conducting negotiations through his agent in Hamburg over a period of about two years, an agreement was reached with the trustees of the collection for a price of 9,000 Reichthalers (£2,080.0.0), which was considerably below its real value. The purchase, recorded in the Bodleian's records dated November 8, 1829, shows a total cost of £2,201.1.4, broken down as follows: Original cost £2,080.0.0; Brokerage £2.1.6; Insurance £23.8.6; Commission and packing £53.3.4; Freight and dues £31.0.0; and Carriage from London £11.8.0.

* "Bibliotheca celeberrima Hebraea, quam collegit R. Davides Oppenheimerus archisynagogus olim Pragensis, libros Hebraeos, ex omni fere literarum genere tam editos quam manu exaratos continens."

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			3338 16 11		
* Original cost	-	-	2080	0	0
Brokerage	-	-	2	1	6
Insurance	-	-	23	8	6
Commission and packing	-	-	53	3	4
Freight and dues	-	-	31	0	0
Carriage from London	-	-	11	8	0
			2201	1	4

Catalogues of this valuable collection, consisting of upwards of six thousand volumes, will be placed on the Library tables as soon as the books are arranged on the shelves.

Excerpt from the Bodleian Library Purchase Catalogue, covering purchases made 1826-47, which includes the Oppenheim collection, showing a final cost of £2,201.1.4.

to the people of Prague their Rav's last words. He meant: "How do you know that I will die? Because most people on their deathbeds die? Maybe the *halachah* is like Rabi Meir, who takes into account the lesser likelihood. Maybe I will be like the minority of those on their deathbeds who in fact survive, so you won't need a new Rav!"

His Matzeivah

So came to rest the *Gaon* and *Tzaddik* Rav Dovid Oppenheim, *zocheh* in his life to two "Tables": greatness in Torah and financial wealth. On his *matzeivah* in the old cemetery of Prague are engraved these words: "Light of Torah... *Av Beis Din*, *Rosh Mesivta*, *Resh Galusa*... unique in his generation... first in any matter of *kedushah*...the holiness of Israel... expert in the entire Talmud... delight of our eyes... pride of our strength... pious, humble, patient... outstandingly generous to the poor..."

Deathbed Remark

Just before Rav Oppenheim's passing after 34 years as Rav of Prague, the heads of the *kehillah* were standing around his bed when he suddenly opened his eyes. They asked him whom they should appoint as Rav after him. He answered, "*V'Dilma Rabi Meir hu!* (Maybe it is Rabi Meir!)" However, they did not know whom he meant.

After that, 20 years elapsed without the appointment of a successor, with the Jews expelled from Prague for part of that period, until the position passed to Harav Yechezkel Landau, the *Noda BiYehudah*.⁶ He explained

The kever of Rav Dovid Oppenheim in the Old Cemetery, Prague.



Eternal Legacy

Rav Oppenheim's *sefarim* also found rest, nearly 100 years after his passing, with the sale to the Bodleian Library. They are maintained faithfully in the halls of Oxford to this day, spiritual treasures spanning centuries, the eternal legacy of the one responsible for them.

Zecher tzaddik livrachah. ■

Rabbi Akiva Aaronson is 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.

Photo credits: Asufa Auction House, Jerusalem; The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; Jewish Museum, Prague; Valmadonna Trust Library, London.

Sources: Duschinsky Y.P., *Toldos HaGaon Rav Dovid Oppenheim, zt"l*; Budapest, 1922. Rabinowicz, Harry M., *The Jewish Literary Treasures of England and America*; New York, 1962.

She'eilos U'Teshuvos Nish'al Dovid, vol. II, Introduction; Jerusalem, 1975.

Stern, Rabbi Yechiel Michel, *Gedolei HaDoros*; Jerusalem, 1996.

1. Author of *She'eilos U'teshuvos Avodas HaGershuni*, Frankfurt-a-Main, 1699.
2. Author of *She'eilos U'teshuvos Chavas Yair*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1699.
3. At the time of Rav Oppenheim's passing, his unpublished works, still in manuscript form, included *Makom Dovid* (a dictionary of all places in the Talmud), *Yad Dovid* (commentary on *Chumash*), and commentaries on many works of *Kabbalah*. His most famous work to be printed after his passing is *She'eilos U'teshuvos Nish'al Dovid* (Jerusalem, 1975), covering all four sections of *Shulchan Aruch*.
4. In a lengthy responsum to the Rabbanim of Yerushalayim, he wrote: "Whoever shall audaciously mention the name of Shabsai Tzvi during *tefillah* shall be put in *cheirem*, with the extinguishing of candles and the sounding of the *shofar* before the *Kosel Hamaaravi*" (*She'eilos U'teshuvos Nish'al Dovid*, vol. III, *Nir Dovid*).
5. The prospect of a sale of such magnitude was in no way assisted by the Napoleonic wars and the ensuing instability then affecting Europe, brought to an end by his defeat in 1815.
6. 1713-1793.