

THE BOMBERG SHAS

A Jewel in Israel

BY RABBI AKIVA AARONSON

Recently the first complete printed edition of the Talmud Bavli went under the hammer at Sotheby's in New York for \$9.3 million. In this article author Rabbi Akiva Aaronson explains the significance of this edition, and why at a mere \$9.3 million it was a bargain.



The Invention of Printing

The invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century created a revolution in society. Up to that time texts were written by hand, a process that was both laborious and time-consuming. The invention of printing meant that in the same time as a scribe could write a single *sefer*, a few hundred could be produced. Books became available to society at large for the first time, and at a considerably lower price.

People of the Book

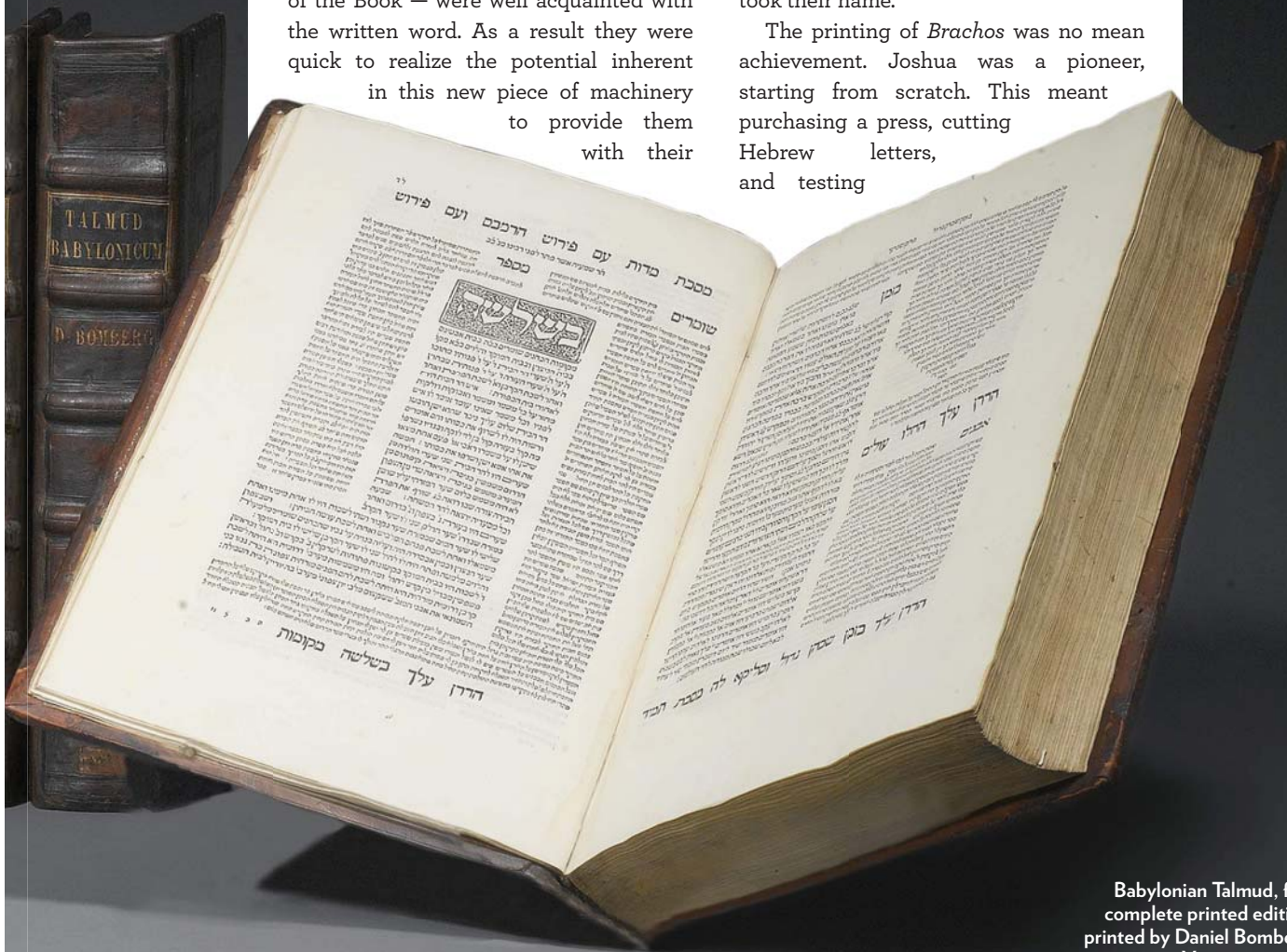
Unlike the rest of society, which was largely illiterate, *Am Yisrael* — the People of the Book — were well acquainted with the written word. As a result they were quick to realize the potential inherent in this new piece of machinery to provide them with their

needs. Accordingly, within 20 years of the invention of printing, the first Hebrew books came off the press. They were naturally those for daily use: *siddurim*, *machzorim*, *Chumashim*, *sifrei Tehillim* — and the Talmud.

The Soncino Family

The most important name in early Hebrew printing was the Soncino family, in particular Joshua, whose first *sefer* was printed in 1483: *maseches Brachos* of *Talmud Bavli*. Soncino's press was located in the town of the same name, in northern Italy, from where — in gratitude for being granted the right of residence there — they took their name.

The printing of *Brachos* was no mean achievement. Joshua was a pioneer, starting from scratch. This meant purchasing a press, cutting Hebrew letters, and testing



Photography: Saheb's, New York

Babylonian Talmud, first complete printed edition, printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1520-23.

inks and paper. However, this was only the beginning of his achievement. Previously, in the era of manuscripts, the Gemara, Rashi and Tosafos would usually each have appeared as a separate manuscript on their own — if they were available at all. Joshua had successfully aligned these together on the same page for the first time, text with commentary. For the initial work of a printer it was a remarkable achievement.

Joshua, however, only managed to print a handful of tractates, partly due to the printing process, which was then still in its infancy, but particularly because a papal ban on the Talmud was still in place, and printing of it had to be done quietly and with great courage. He was succeeded by the next-most-important member of the family, his nephew Gershom, who printed 23 tractates altogether,¹ but still far from a complete edition. For that great achievement, *Am Yisrael* would have to wait until the next century.

Right: *Talmud Bavli, masechet Bava Brachos. Printed by Joshua Soncino in Soncino, 1483-4*
Below: Early printing workshop, c.1550

The Sixteenth Century

In the sixteenth century Hebrew printing came to maturity, no longer the work of pioneers like Soncino but the occupation of established printing houses, small and large. The European economic landscape also began to change with the advent of printing, since an entire industry arose around it.

Besides the growing number of printing workshops, book binderies became a frequent sight, book binding being a skill of its own and performed on different premises. In addition, paper-making facilities became common, required to fulfill a level of demand never known before. In addition, the first bookshops made their appearance in the European marketplace.

Daniel Bomberg

Among those who played a decisive role in these developments was Daniel Bomberg, born in Antwerp around the year 1480 to a wealthy and educated family. He surely deserves to wear the crown of sixteenth-century Hebrew printing.

Bomberg left his native town and moved to Venice, then one of Europe's wealthiest cities and a center of European commerce. He applied to the Venetian Senate for permission to open a printing house and to print Hebrew books, but was refused. He applied again, and with his fourth request — accompanied by a substantial fee — permission was granted.



He was wealthy, influential and a Christian, which undoubtedly played a part in the granting of permission, which would almost certainly be denied to a Jew.

While the actual work of printing in Bomberg's enterprise was performed carried out by Jews — only Jews could recognize the letters and read the texts — Bomberg was in overall charge of the printing house, in particular over financial matters. He spared

no expense, employing a large staff that included leading scholars of the period, who obtained the manuscripts on which he based his editions and checked them for accuracy. Although printing for Jews was a lucrative business, it seems Bomberg was sincerely interested in Hebrew *sefarim*, not merely motivated by financial gain.

Over the next 30 years, Bomberg printed about 220 different *sefarim*, featuring superior ink and paper and an unequalled level of typographical excellence. One of the best-known of these is the first set of *Mikraos Gedolos*, printed over the years 1516 and 1517, which was the first of its kind to appear. Later, in 1524-1525, he printed a new edition of it,

this time with additional commentaries, which is reproduced to this day.

Another of Bomberg's achievements was the entire *Talmud Yerushalmi* — without commentary — printed over the years 1523 and 1524. This was not only the first complete printed edition, but also virtually the first time that any of it had been brought to press. His greatest achievement, however, was the first complete printed edition of the *Talmud Bavli*.

The Bomberg Talmud

In 1520 the papal ban on the Talmud was lifted, giving Bomberg the opportunity to print it officially. Even with this permission, due to its length and complexity, a complete *Talmud Bavli* edition would be no mean achievement and the pinnacle of a printer.

Despite the enormity of the task, Bomberg's edition was printed over a remarkably short period of three years, 1520-1523. This was even more

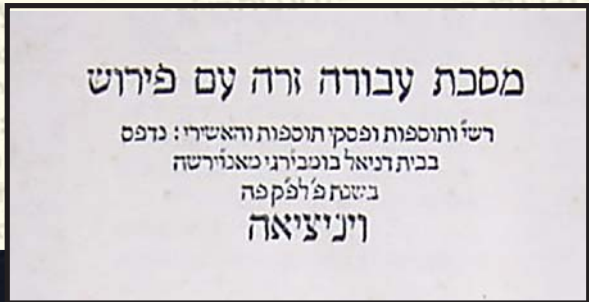
exceptional considering that it was largely produced from manuscripts, with few existing printed *masechtos* to serve as a guide.

Although the layout of the page of Talmud originated with Soncino, with Rashi on the inner column and Tosafos on the outer, Soncino's page was relatively short. Bomberg's edition contained more words per page, establishing exactly what appeared on each one together with the *tzuras hadaf* — the format of the page — broadly followed to this day.² Bomberg also introduced continuous pagination from beginning to end, which established it for subsequent editions down to our time.

Of additional significance, Bomberg's edition was largely free of censorship — a difficulty faced by later printers — so that it provided a valuable guide to an unaltered text.

Near his printing house, Bomberg opened a shop where he sold *sefarim*, not only from his own press but also those he imported from abroad, especially from the Jewish communities of Constantinople and Salonika. His bookshop was the largest of its kind in Venice, of great fascination to anyone interested in the new art of printing.

Due to its quality, Bomberg's Talmud was expensive and affordable only for the wealthy. Evidence from a surviving book catalogue indicates that it cost 22 Venetian ducats, a considerable sum in those days, and equivalent to the better part of a year's wages for a worker. Nevertheless, it quickly sold out and required reprinting, a success that led to the appearance of competitors.



Talmud Bavli, masechet Avodah Zarah [title page], printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1520



The Westminster Talmud

The Bomberg Talmud sold recently at Sotheby's has a remarkable story of survival and a journey into Jewish hands. It began in 1956 when the Victoria and Albert Museum in London staged an exhibition marking 300 years since the re-admittance of Jews into England under Oliver Cromwell. Attending the exhibition was Mr. Jack Lunzer of London, a well-known collector of early Hebrew *sefarim*, and already the owner of a substantial library. Displayed there was an early sixteenth-century *sefer* — incorrectly labeled as *Mikraos Gedolos* — which Lunzer correctly identified as part of the Bomberg Talmud. It had been on loan from the exhibition from Westminster Abbey, a well-known British institution that hosted the coronation of British kings.

Lunzer subsequently contacted the Abbey, only to make the astonishing discovery that it possessed no less than the entire set. Of equal significance, it was in immaculate condition. Although almost 450 years had passed, it looked as though it had just come off the press. Lunzer approached the Abbey with an offer of purchase, but to no avail. Although his request was rebuffed, he would not give up. Twenty-five years later an opportunity arose for its purchase.

Unexpectedly detained on a business trip abroad, Lunzer noticed a brief newspaper report that the founding charter of Westminster Abbey — owners of the Talmud — had been purchased by an American at auction, but because of its importance, the British government was withholding an export license. Lunzer saw immediately that an opportunity had presented itself and reached an agreement with the Abbey. If he could purchase the charter, an exchange could be made with the Talmud. Sometime later, at an official ceremony in London, the exchange indeed took place. Lunzer's dream had been fulfilled. The Talmud was in his hands.

A question regarding the Talmud, however, remained, namely how it had come — over four centuries earlier — into the possession of the Abbey. Their ownership of it was indeed fortunate, saving it from tumultuous years of Jewish history, during which it would almost certainly have been lost. But the question remained: How had the Abbey come into possession of it, and for what purpose? Had they intended to inaugurate *Daf Hayomi* in England?

Henry VIII

An early theory put forward was that the Talmud had originally been purchased by King Henry VIII of England, whose reign³ coincided with its printing. Henry was in the middle of his “Great Matter.” He was married to Catherine of Aragon, youngest daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Catherine had borne him a daughter, but no male heir, which left the succession to the throne in jeopardy. After 18 years of marriage, a male heir was no longer likely, and Henry sought to have the marriage annulled.

The stratagem put forward by Henry was that his marriage to Catherine had been invalid from the outset. She had previously been married to Henry's brother Arthur, who had died young and childless. Their marriage had originally been forbidden by the Church because they were too closely related, and he had only been able to marry her after obtaining dispensation from the pope. Henry now claimed that this dispensation should not have been given. In order to find support for his claim, Henry imported into England a copy of Bomberg's Talmud, for his advisors to examine. Jewish sages of Venice were also consulted — there were none to be found locally since Jews had long since been expelled from England.⁴

The conclusion of the matter, however, was that Henry's efforts bore no fruit. Annulment was not forthcoming, and



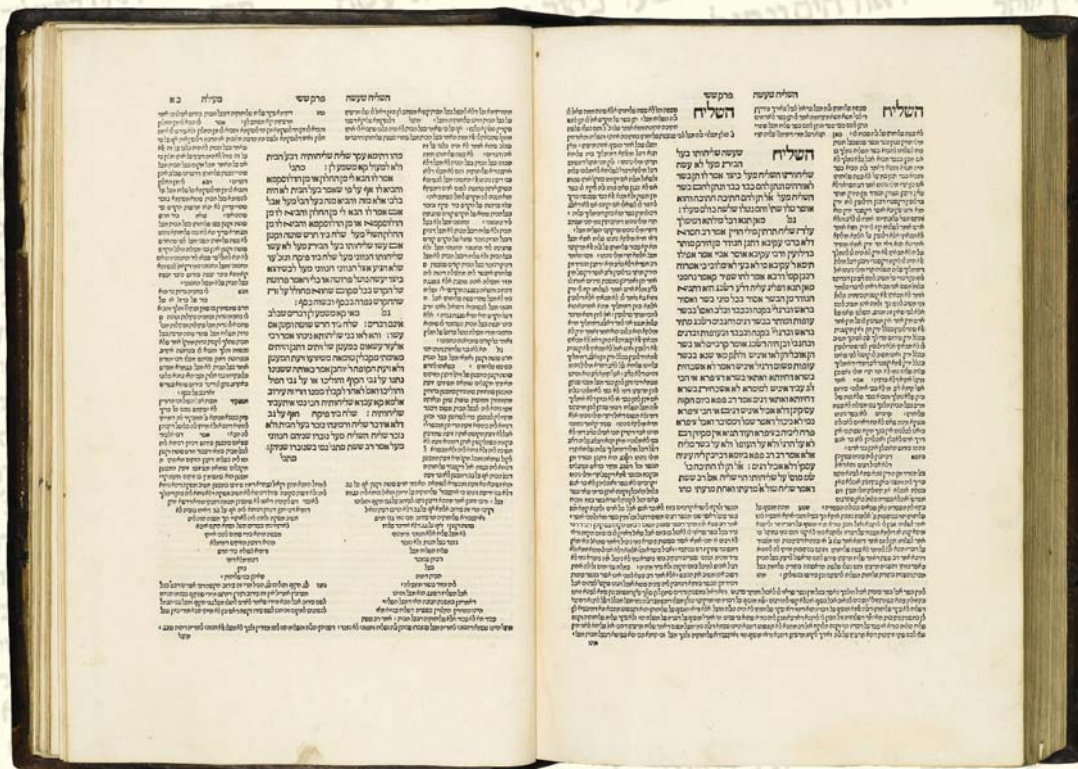
Midrash Mechilta, printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1546



Sefer Mitzvos Hagadol (Sma'g), printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1547



Rabi Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag), peirush on the Torah, printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1547



Talmud Bavli, masechet Me'ilah, printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1523

neither was support from the Talmud. Taking the matter into his own hands, Henry detached the Church in England from the authority of the pope, declared himself its head, and annulled the marriage under his own authority.⁵

Henry's ownership of the Talmud has proved, ultimately, to be unfounded. While he indeed purchased a set, it seems that it is not the one that came into the possession of the Abbey. Henry's Talmud appears to be in the possession of the British Library in London, another well-known British institution, although this has to be confirmed.

Oxford Professor

It now appears clear that the original owner of the Westminster Talmud was in reality the Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University. The initials R.B. engraved on it referred neither to the king of Britain — Rex Britannicus — nor to the royal library — Regio Bibliotheca — but to the professor at Oxford, Richard Braune, who had bequeathed it to the Abbey upon his passing. Its possession by non-Jewish hands was undoubtedly the reason for its remarkable survival and flawless, unused condition.



Talmud Yerushalmi, Seder Moed, printed by Daniel Bomberg; Venice, 1523-4

So ended the journey of Bomberg's Talmud, from Italy to England, from Oxford to London, and finally into Jewish hands. Like *Am Yisrael* — indestructible. Next time you take an early printed *sefer* off the shelf, handle it with care. It may not be the Bomberg Talmud, but it is certainly worth its weight in gold. ■

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* (Feldheim Publishers, 2014).

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1. See *Sefer Michol*, Constantinople 1534.
2. Finally established by the *Vilna Shas*, printed 1880-1886.
3. 1509-1547.
4. It seems that *Yevamos* was the *masechta* most consulted, the question being whether it was forbidden to marry a deceased brother's wife, or in fact an obligation to do so when he died without children — *yibum*, or levirate marriage — and if indeed these laws applied to non-Jews.
5. Henry then married his second wife, Anne Boleyn, who to his disappointment also bore him only a daughter — the future Elizabeth I.