

LIGHT OF THE EXILE

The House of Romm & The Printing of the Vilna Shas

By Akiva Aaronson

Each day in our *yeshivos* and *kollelim*, we open our *Gemaros*. But do we think about the *sefer* we hold in our hands? If it could speak, it would tell a remarkable story, one of tremendous *mesirus nefesh*, of great determination to make it available to us.

In *Light of the Exile: The House of Romm and the Printing of the Vilna Shas*, Akiva Aaronson takes us back to the end of the eighteenth century, to the very founding of the Romm printing house. We go on a journey through four generations of this family of printers, each one determined to continue the work of its predecessor. We see their trials, tribulations and ultimate achievement, the printing of the Vilna Shas, the Talmud edition universally used today.



THE YERUSHALAYIM OF LITHUANIA

Located in northeastern Europe, Vilna was the historic capital of Lithuania, a province of czarist Russia. Known among Jews as the "*Yerushalayim deLita*" - the Yerushalayim of Lithuania - its reputation was based on its outstanding Torah scholars who had illuminated Jewry for generations. Among these, one towered above all others: Rav Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman (1720-1797). Known as the Vilna Gaon, he was regarded as equal to the sages who lived centuries earlier.

Due to the Gaon's colossal spiritual and intellectual powers, his brilliant expositions and *chiddushim*, and his complete mastery of all areas of Torah, he created a common desire, a mass yearning to come close to the Torah. His influence reached well beyond

The Romm printing house in Vilna, ca.1900, showing the entrance to their premises. At left can be seen the sign reading "ROMM." At the center, behind the entrance gate, can be seen the press' main building.

the borders of Lithuania, to wider European Jewry, and to our own time. Among gentiles, Vilna was the capital of Lithuania. Among Jews, it was its Torah capital as well.

Vilna was also famed for its ordinary working Jews - its shopkeepers, artisans and traders. Each night, after a day's work, they would fill its *shuls* and *kloizen* (smaller study halls), poring over the heavy volumes in front of them. There was the *Chevrass* (group for learning) *Talmud*, the *Chevrass Mishnah*, the *Chevrass Shulchan Aruch*, the *Chevrass Medrash*, and the *Chevrass Chumash*, each comprised of its respective members. During the day, they were

involved in their occupations, often only eking out a meager living, but at night they were immersed in Torah.

In terms of *yichus* (ancestry), too, in Vilna, Torah reigned supreme. Distinction lay in any forebear who was a *rov*, rabbi, *mechaber*, or anyone who had achieved honor in the service of Torah. It was in seventeenth and eighteenth century Vilna that Torah found fertile ground - to a greater extent than even other more populous Jewish centers - and there it built a fortress.

HEBREW PRINTING COMES TO VILNA

Vilna gained everlasting renown among Jewry in one more way, through the Hebrew printing presses that were established there. Despite its prominence in Torah, however, Hebrew printing came to Vilna late compared to other places, not established until the end of the eighteenth century. This was due to the conditions of life in Russia in general, and for the Jews of Russia in particular.

The Russian empire had been largely impervious to change. Convinced of their divine right as kings, the czars ruled as autocrats, unyielding in face of the demands of the masses for greater rights. Whilst in Western Europe ruling monarchs had gradually relinquished power to the people, Russia had seen little change.

Not only was Russia behind the times politically, but in terms of material progress and technology it was also backward. Russia was an empire made up largely of poor, illiterate peasants, and in the factories an exploited workforce. In regard to printing, as in all other areas, Russia lagged far behind the west.

Within these general conditions of oppression, the Jews of Russia faced additional difficulties. Hardly was there a place where anti-Semitism was greater than in

Russia under the czars, deeply engrained and an integral part of Russian society. Only the degree of severity varied from one period to the next. Russian Jewry was restricted to living in the Pale of Settlement in western Russia, under the yoke of czarist rule. It was impoverished and persecuted, and subject to a continual flow of anti-Jewish laws.¹

The confluence of these conditions - the backwardness of the Russian empire and oppression of Jews in particular - meant that Hebrew printing came to Vilna late. However, once established, it soon gained pace. Within fifty years, Vilna had become one of the most prominent printing centers of Hebrew *seforim* in Europe, second only to Lemberg, and more prolific than even Warsaw and Vienna. Its printing houses satisfied the needs of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe - home to the bulk of *Ashkenazi* Jewry - and those further afield.

THE HOUSE OF ROMM

The most famous of the Hebrew printers of Vilna was the Romm family, beginning with Boruch ben Yosef. In 1789, he obtained permission to open a press in Grodna (Horodna), making him the first Hebrew printer in Lithuania. Its authorization by the gentile authorities of the time, in the anti-Semitic environment of Eastern Europe, was of significant note. Using a simple hand press, and in primitive conditions - this was the best Eastern Europe could offer - Boruch began his operation. Ten years later, he opened an additional press a hundred miles to the northeast in Vilna.

In 1803, only four years after the opening of the Vilna premises, Boruch passed away.



Talmud Bavli, printed by the Widow and Brothers Romm in Vilna, 1927.

any Hebrew printer: an edition of the Talmud. It was an enormous undertaking in terms of time - they expected it would take several years to complete - and unparalleled in terms of finance, too. They could also anticipate difficulties with the Church, for censorship was particularly severe in Eastern Europe.

In their first year of work on the Talmud, Romm printed *Maseches Brachos* with *Seder Zera'im*. However, before long, they came into conflict with the Slavita press, located further south in Russia, which had also commenced on a Talmud of their own. The dispute over printers' rights that ensued attracted wide attention among Jews and involved many of the leading *halachic* authorities of the time.²

In the dispute between Romm and Slavita, each side considered its case justified, Slavita because their period of exclusivity had not yet expired and Romm because Slavita's edition had sold out. Slavita also had a well-established record in regard to Talmud printing, having already produced two outstanding editions, whereas Romm was a newcomer to the field. Considering the enormous cost of printing and the general impoverishment of Russian Jewry, competition could mean financial disaster. As a result, the conflict between the two printing houses became particularly heated.

In order to settle the dispute, the case was brought before different *halachic* authorities. Eventually, it came before Rav Akiva Eiger, one of the foremost *poskim* of the time. He ruled in favor of Romm, i.e., that Slavita's rights had indeed expired. However, Romm was obligated to buy any individual remaining *masechtos* from Slavita's *Shas* in order to save them loss.³

The dispute between Slavita and Romm reached such proportions that it came to the attention of the Russian government. As a result, the czar ordered the closing of all

A particular factor that led to the success of the Romm press at that time was the introduction in 1810 of new Hebrew letters. Not satisfied with the existing form of lettering then in use, Menachem Mann commissioned an expert, Simcha Zimmel of Horodna, to carve new ones. They were superior to those of the printing houses of Warsaw and elsewhere, giving the product of Romm's press a clear advantage over others.

In 1815, Simcha Zimmel joined Menachem Mann as a partner, their press bearing the printing location "Vilna-Horodna." Among other important works, they printed *Yesod Veshoresh Ha'avodah* (1817), *Chayei Adam* (1819), *Shulchan Aruch* with the commentary of the Vilna Gaon (1819), and the first edition of Rav Chaim of Volozhin's *Nefesh Hachaim* (1824).

ROMM'S FIRST EDITION OF THE TALMUD

In 1835, after more than three decades in printing, Menachem Mann and Simcha Zimmel embarked on the ultimate goal for



Siddur Korban Minchah, printed by Menachem Mann Romm in Vilna, 1838.

After his passing, his son, Menachem Mann, took over the running of both presses, having previously worked only at the Vilna operation.



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1. Talmud Bavli, Masechet Shevuos, printed by Menachem Mann Romm and Simchah Zimmel in Vilna, 1843.
2. Talmud Bavli, Masechet Shabbos, printed by Yosef Reuven Romm in Vilna, 1859.
3. Talmud Bavli, Masechet Sukkah, printed by Yosef Reuven Romm in Vilna, 1861.
4. Talmud Bavli, Masechet Bechoros, printed by The Widow and Brothers Romm in Vilna, 1885.

but two Hebrew presses, the only ones permitted to remain open being Romm in Vilna and the press of Zhitomir further south. Thereafter, from 1838 onwards, Romm printed solely in Vilna. Their *seforim* no longer bore the printing location “Vilna-Horodna,” but simply “Vilna.”

One of the conditions of the czar’s decree allowing the two printing houses to remain in operation was that newly printed works were forbidden to be distributed outside of the region in which they had originated. This led to hundreds of Jews in Poland cancelling their orders with Romm, since the product was no longer available to them. The loss of subscriptions meant financial difficulties. In addition, the company was dealt another blow in 1840 with a serious fire, which made the financial situation even more precarious, and in 1841, Menachem Mann passed away. As a result, the project proceeded with difficulty.

Menachem Mann’s son, Yosef Reuven, continued work on the *Shas* begun under his father for an additional thirteen years. Finally, in 1854, he brought it to completion, having taken a total of nineteen years to print from beginning to end. It was regarded highly in terms of paper, print and binding, but in content suffered a great deal from the censor. *Maseches Avodah Zarah* was virtually unusable.

ROMM’S SECOND EDITION OF THE TALMUD

Four years after the completion of their first edition of the Talmud, Yosef Reuven embarked on a new, second edition. However, he died that same year, on *Purim* 1858. Despite his passing, and in honor of him, the edition continued to bear his name as the printer.

Yosef Reuven was succeeded by his three sons, Dovid, Chaim Yaakov and Menachem Mann Gavriel. Dovid was the oldest of the sons and head of the printing house, his brothers being much younger. However, he passed away suddenly on a trip to St. Petersburg in 1860, only two years after his father.

After Dovid’s passing, there was no choice but for the burden of running the printing house to fall on his wife, Devorah, since his brothers were inexperienced.



An all-iron printing press, ca. 1850, of the type used by Romm.

Thereafter, the press became known as the “*Defus Ha’almanah Veha’achim Romm*” - The Press of the Widow [i.e., Dovid’s wife] and Brothers [Dovid’s two brothers] Romm.

In face of growing competition from other printers - Romm was soon to lose the monopoly it had enjoyed on Hebrew printing in Vilna for years - they introduced certain changes to their printing house. These included more advanced methods of production to increase efficiency. Efforts were also made to deal with the censor, whose intervention damaged the integrity of the finished product.

Another innovation introduced by Romm at that time was new Hebrew letters, produced in conjunction with Reb Lipman Metz. They were superior to those of other printing houses and became known as “Vilna” letters, over which Romm had sole rights. They gave the products of Romm’s press prestige and distinction, and a decisive advantage over others.

Finally, in 1866, after eight years of work, Romm’s second edition of the Talmud was brought to completion with the appearance of *Masechtos Chullin, Bechoros, Krisos* and *Me’ilah*. It had taken less than half the time of Romm’s first edition to produce.

ROMM’S THIRD AND DEFINITIVE EDITION OF THE TALMUD

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the Romm printing house in Vilna had been producing Hebrew *seforim* in quantity for decades. These were usually characterized by important additions to previous editions of a *sefer*, carefully checked, and high quality in terms of print and binding. However, it would be for their third edition of the Talmud, printed over the years 1880-1886, that they would achieve greatest renown and secure their name ever after among Jewry.

Romm’s third edition of the Talmud be-

came known as the “Vilna *Shas*.” It was the most extensive edition ever printed and included many commentaries, both early and later ones, brought to print for the first time from manuscripts. These were located in various collections across Europe, in private and public hands alike. Many of them were old and in poor condition, and few had the ability to work with them. At great expense, Romm employed expert scribes to copy them.

In addition, Romm went to great lengths to ensure that their texts were free of errors that had crept in over the generations. To this end, they employed expert proofreaders who were *talmidei chachomim*, among them leading Torah figures of the generation.⁴

Due to the substantial costs of preparing this edition, prior to embarking on the venture, Romm issued a booklet announcing their new Talmud, called *Kol Rom*. Its name was itself a play on words, Rom (רם) meaning “loud,” and Romm (רומ) being their name. Its title could therefore be understood as both “A Loud Voice” and “The Voice of Romm.”

In the booklet, which included several pages of the new edition, Romm asked those who wanted to sign an agreement to purchase it when it appeared. They were met with an overwhelming response, with several thousand responses, more than enough to undertake the venture.⁵

Romm’s 1880-1886 edition was universally accepted as the most important one of its time and superseded all others. It made a vital contribution to the Torah world and to Talmud study, and was regularly reprinted. After the introduction of photomechanical methods of printing in the 1920s - a photograph essentially made of an existing text - it was this edition that was used. Even the new, computer-set editions of today are replicas of Romm’s Talmud.

After the passing of Devorah, Dovid’s wife, in 1903, the firm changed hands, although it continued to operate under the same name until World War II. After the Soviet annexation of Lithuania in 1940, the premises were confiscated and turned into a Russian-Lithuanian printing house. With the German invasion of Russia in 1941, it is reported that upon reaching Vilna, they made a point of melting down Romm’s printing plates, fully understanding their significance to Jewry. This was one more stage in the destruction of Jews and Judaism in Lithuania.

The Romm printing house in Vilna was the largest Hebrew press in the world in its time, in continuous operation for more than one hundred and forty years. The Romm family - especially the Widow and Brothers Romm - surely earned a place in the chain of Talmud printing, joining the most important printers of *Shas* since the beginning of printing until their time.

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Endnotes

1 Most infamous of the czarist decrees of the time was the Cantonist edict of 1827, which ordered Jewish communities to supply large numbers of boys for twenty-five years of service in the Russian army. Thousands were taken away, and few returned.

2 Eighteen years earlier, the Slavita press had begun printing an edition of the Talmud, receiving exclusive rights from the rabbinic authorities for

twenty-five years. However, by 1835, seven years before the end of the period of exclusivity allowed them, their edition had sold out. The Romm press then received permission to commence printing its own edition. The question therefore arose, to whom indeed did the rights to print the Talmud belong.

3 The dispute between Romm and Slavita, however, still did not die down. Instead it ended only through tragic circumstances. A worker was

found hanged on Slavita’s premises, and the Shapira brothers, proprietors of the press, were arrested for the murder. Instead of waiting to be cleared of the charge, they bribed a Russian official to release them. The Russian authorities then dropped the charge of murder, and charged them with bribery. They were sentenced to pass through a long line of Russian soldiers who would beat them as they passed - a virtual death sentence - and then exile to Siberia. As a result the press was permanently

closed.

4 Including Rav Shlomo Hakohen (*Cheishek Shlomo*) and Rav Avrohom Abba Kleinerman (author of annotations to the commentary of the Vilna Gaon on *Shulchan Aruch*).

5 See *Acharis Dovor* (“Afterword”), Romm’s own description of the printing of their classic *Shas* of 1880-1886, usually included in today’s editions at the end of *Maseches Niddah*.