

SURVEY OF DEVELOPMENTS ON THE ISRAELI SCENE

Hillel Goldberg

REVIEW OF ISRAELI INTELLECTUAL LIFE

EVALUATING THE BOOK-PUBLISHING EXPLOSION

The printing press, the Holocaust, and modern merchandising techniques have made it immensely difficult to ascertain the authentic worth of *seforim*, volumes of Jewish sacred writings. It is not just a question of the vast number of *seforim* published—mostly in Israel—though numbers tell a lot. Compare, for example, the publishing history of the works of Maimonides. As basic staples of Jewish scholarship, Maimonides' works are frequently reprinted, some works as often as once a year. Yet from 1553 to 1742—a period of 189 years—Maimonides's *Guide to the Perplexed* was not reissued even once.¹

Today—in contrast to the not so distant past—virtually every kind of *sefer* is published or republished including responsa literature, code literature, the Talmud itself, discontinuous critical investigations (*hiddushim*), ethical (*musar*), hassidic, and philosophical works.

How does one explain this publishing explosion, which is channeled mostly through Israeli publishing houses? By what criteria can one evaluate it?

A brief foray into the history of Jewish publishing provides perspective.*

*I acquired much of the information, though none of the views, set forth in Part I of this article from Prof. Frank Talmage of the University of Toronto. My thanks to him.

I

Before the invention of the printing press, *seforim* were “published” through arduous recopying of the original manuscript. Since reproducing manuscripts was very difficult, we can draw a rather accurate picture of the manuscript’s initial impact. For example, there now exist between 50 and 100 manuscripts of Radak’s commentary on Psalms. But there exists only one manuscript of his commentary on Proverbs, and even that is fragmentary. Clearly, for hundreds of years, the learned class—those who had the opportunity to study or to recopy manuscripts—found Radak far more attractive in his discussion of Psalms than in his discussion of Proverbs. The number of extant manuscripts is a reliable barometer of how the work was received in the Torah world during the medieval period. It was impossible for an enterprising publisher to issue an essentially unpopular work in an attractive binding, layout, and general format, preface it with a thoughtful or enticing introduction or prolegomenon and thus successfully merchandise an unwanted volume. Thus we have then a ready standard—the quantity of extant manuscripts—by which to measure the worth and acceptability of pre-printing press works.

There are complicating factors, but these too provide useful information. One may ask, who copied the manuscripts—Jews or gentiles? If only Jews, one has a fairly reliable standard not only of the contemporary Jewish evaluation of the work but also of the degree of cultural isolation of Jews from gentiles at the time the manuscript was written and recopied. If, on the other hand, a large number of gentiles recopied the extant manuscripts, different conclusions are to be drawn. As it happens, many pre-16th century Jewish manuscripts which survive today were recopied by Italian Christian Hebraists during the Renaissance. Only part of the popularity of Radak’s commentary on Psalms can be attributed to the positive evaluation by Jewish scholars; the positive Christian evaluation also played a role. Were it not for the relatively high degree of cultural interaction between Jews and Christians during the Renaissance, Jewish libraries today would probably be impoverished, there being few manuscripts surviving.

That certain manuscripts survived, their having been recopied by gentiles, does not indicate that the Jewish-Christian cultural interaction was necessarily affirmative. Crescas, the 14th-century Spanish Jewish scholar, was but one of many who either wrote or commissioned anti-Christian polemical tracts, whose purpose often was not only to convince Christians of the truth of Judaism but to persuade faltering Jews of the fallibility of Christianity.² These manuscripts too were recopied by Christian scholars in the Renaissance. As a

result, there now survive over 30 manuscripts of *Kelimat ha-Goyim*, the outcome of Crescas's commission of his student-associate (*talmid-haver*), Profiat Duran.

The invention of the printing press introduced new imbalances in Jewish publishing even as it eliminated old ones inherent in the earlier, cruder techniques. When the only way to reproduce a book was to recopy the manuscript certain volumes worthy of distribution were not reproduced. One major reason why the grammar book of Moshe Kimhi (Radak's brother), for example, caught on was simply because it was short and concise (many manuscripts exist in the original Hebrew and in Latin, both transcribed by Christian Hebraists). But Rashbam, a significant biblical commentator and published in standard editions of the Bible-with-Commentaries (*Mikra'ot Gedolot*), was largely unknown and unquoted until the 19th century. The printing press thus was able to disseminate neglected works, such as those of Rashbam; it was also responsible for works of questionable worth.³ The Holocaust too affected book publishing. During the Holocaust many private and public collections of Jewish books and manuscripts were burned. Because of the devastating loss of libraries, books, and manuscripts, there arose after the Holocaust an enormous desire to reprint every manuscript or rare volume for which financing could be found. What is more, notes of, and even memories of, lectures (*shiurim*) by *rashei yeshivat* found their way into print. *Seforim* of all sorts flooded bookstores. There was, and there remains, the strong feeling that every manuscript of some worth must be printed, for no one knows whether now is the last chance or whether the urge to remember will recede.

Much which is not worthy of publication has been published in this post-Holocaust rush to print manuscripts. On the other hand, the Holocaust provided the impetus to bring out much that otherwise might never have seen the light of day. It goes without saying that the publication even of those sacred writings which are worthy of publication does not necessarily entail an increase in *talmud torah*. A story, perhaps apocryphal or embellished, is worth introducing here for the point it makes, irrespective of its authenticity. The author of *Sh'agas Aryeh*, the outstanding 18th-century talmudic scholar, is said to have happened upon a small East European town whose study hall contained one worn, ragged copy of *Baba Batra*. He was overjoyed! He pulled it off the shelf and poured over it for six months. But surely—the story goes—he should have spent far less time because a student of his exceptional talent could master even a difficult tractate like *Baba Batra* quickly. Why six months? Because he was uncertain if and when he would ever see a copy of *Baba Batra* again; therefore

he committed it to memory—Gemorah, Rashi, Tosfos, *aharonim*, everything. That took six months. The point is clear and the question remains: Has the vast increase in the number and the availability of *seforim* actually served to increase the study of Torah? Or are the main beneficiaries the publishers and the bookcase manufacturers?

II

There are two of several unusual publishing projects which have taken root in Israel in the 1970s, that on the whole, not only make available worthy manuscripts and *seforim* but also stimulate actual study of these works. The first project is described in this column; the second project is reserved for a future column.

Makhon Yerushalayim (The Jerusalem Institute) was founded in 1967 by Rabbi Joseph Buxbaum in order to contribute to Torah literature in one area. The institute has succeeded not only in that area but also with four other projects that it subsequently undertook.

The purpose of the first project of the Makhon was threefold: 1) to provide a new and creative way for young, aspiring talmudic scholars to continue their studies; 2) to produce a compendium of commentators on each volume of the Talmud; and, 3) to produce that compendium not through soliciting individual articles from individual scholars, but to draw on the collective wisdom of many scholars working together on each page of the compendium. The result is *Otzar Mefarshe ha-Talmud* (Treasury of Talmudic Commentators), whose high level of scholarship and usefulness has stimulated sales of up to 40,000 copies per volume.

Rabbi Joseph Buxbaum was one of the first to perceive that *kolelim*—small institutes for young married men devoted exclusively to Talmud study—were producing an excess of potential scholars. As I indicated in my last column on new institutional efforts on behalf of Israeli penitents or *ba'ale teshuvah*, and as I shall indicate in a future column on still other kinds of new educational institutions in Israel, the educational outlets for *kolel* graduates have burgeoned. But even these outlets cannot employ the ever growing number of *kolel* graduates, nor can these outlets, notwithstanding their great variety, satisfy the professional inclinations of all of the *kolel* graduates, some of whom wish to pursue a life of scholarship. Rabbi Buxbaum has found a way for the most gifted of these scholars to continue their Torah studies while at the same time making a contribution not merely to their own personal growth but also to the Jewish community as a whole.

Rabbi Buxbaum established Makhon Yerushalayim as a *kolel*

where all students would participate collectively in the examination of talmudic commentaries—published and unpublished, well known and unknown—with the aim of producing single volumes which synthesized these commentaries. These volumes would open up the universe of talmudic commentaries to those who are unable to devote a lifetime to visiting libraries and examining manuscripts around the world. The authors of *Otzar Mefarshe ha-Talmud* draw on over 1250 commentaries in the production of each volume! These volumes also validate the principle of collective authorship, now deemed a necessity by leading talmudic scholars in Israel because of the vast number of commentaries being uncovered, catalogued, and classified. The 16 to 18 authors of each volume mutually discuss, analyze, and formulate the synthesis of the commentaries. Makhon Yerushalayim is the first institute to produce works of high quality by this method. Presently, volumes on tractates *Baba Metsia* (3 volumes), *Makkot*, and *Sukkah* (volume 1) have appeared.

After the initial, collective compendium is prepared by students in the *kolel* of Makhon Yerushalayim, it is then thoroughly reviewed by leading talmudic scholars in Israel. For its projects, Makhon Yerushalayim regularly benefits from the intensive participation of Rabbis Eliezer Goldschmidt (chief editor of *Otzar Mefarshe ha-Talmud*), Bezalel Zolti, Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, Ovadiah Yosef, and others. Until his recent death, the honorary head of Makhon Yerushalayim was Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner.

The high standard of *Otzar Mefarshe ha-Talmud*, reflected not only in its substance but also in its editing and style, led Rabbi Buxbaum and his subsequent partner, Rabbi Abraham Kabalkin, to develop Makhon Yerushalayim in two directions. First, they founded *Moriah* in 1970, a journal in Hebrew for novellae or *hiddushe Torah*, whose circulation has grown to 5000. More than 1000 articles have been submitted for publication from around the world. The journal's wide acceptance has been achieved not only because of felicitous editing but also because of its—and the Makhon's—policy of steering scrupulously clear of the sometimes treacherous waters of religious politics in Israel. The Makhon neither identifies with nor accepts funding from any single party and works with Torah scholars identified with all camps.

The second direction in which Makhon Yerushalayim developed was an extension of the original impetus behind *Otzar Mefarshe ha-Talmud*. The new direction expressed itself in two projects, *Miphal Chachmey Ashkenaz* ("The Writings of the Jewish Sages of Medieval Germany") and *Or Hamizrah* ("Institute for Research and Publication of Manuscripts of Great Sephardic Rabbis"). The aim, again, is

to enable budding talmudic scholars to concentrate their energies and to publish worthy but little known or unknown manuscripts presently hidden in archives, university libraries, or private collections.

In these projects the principle of collective authorship is not in force. Individual scholars are encouraged to specialize in the writings of one individual, so that as new manuscripts are uncovered a single scholar will be sufficiently knowledgeable about one author to determine the authenticity, the authorship, and the quality (or corruption) of the newly available manuscript. In this project, the quality of work varies, though none of it is considered poor, and some of it is considered outstanding—such as the volumes of the responsa of MaHaRIL, Yaakov Molin, whose decisions served as the basis of many rulings by Rabbi Moses Isserles, authoritative determinant of Jewish law according to Ashkenazi tradition. The volumes of the writings of MaHaRIL were edited and annotated by Rabbi Yitzhak Satz, a young talmudic scholar who never worked with manuscripts before entering the *kolel* of Makhon Yerushalayim. At the *kolel* he acquired all of his scholarly and editing training. One need not have a university education in order to produce certain kinds of first-rate scholarship. Makhon Yerushalayim plans the publication of 30 volumes by Jewish sages from medieval Germany over the next ten years—most to be first editions from manuscripts.

The equal attention paid to Sephardic and to Ashkenazic commentators is another reason for the breadth of cooperation which Makhon Yerushalayim has elicited. Just as honorary chairmen of *Miphal Cachmey Ashkenaz* include Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, Dr. Joseph Burg, and Dr. Yitzhak Nebenzahl (State Comptroller of Israel), so the honorary chairmen of *Or Hamizrah* include the Sephardic chief rabbis of Israel, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. Among the volumes which *Or Hamizrah* has published include: *Divre Emet*, by Rabbi Yitzhak Behar David, head rabbi of Constantinople 250 years ago; the novellae of Rabbi David Bonfid, disciple of Ramban; the responsa of MoHaRIT, Rabbi J. Tirani (15th century); two volumes by Rabbi Menahem Azariah of Pano (16th century); two volumes of novellae by Salonika *hakhamin*, judges in the rabbinical court of Rabbi Y. Taitachak; novellae of Rabbi M. Kazis, written after the burning of the Talmud in 1553; and responsa of Rabbi Eliezer ben Arha, rabbi of Hebron 350 years ago.

The goal of all these publications is, of course, the reclaiming of much that is forgotten in both the Sephardi and Ashkenazic talmudic heritages. But there are side benefits as well. For example, the publication of ten volumes of *hiddushe Torah* by Rabbi David Zinzheim should enable historians to understand better the origins of modern French Jewry. Rabbi Zinzheim was the Jewish authority

behind the answers conveyed to Napoleon by the *Sanhedrin* which he convened in the first decade of the 19th century. These answers, as is well known, generally confirmed Napoleon's desire to have Jews define themselves as a "religion" but not as a "people." Such a response from early reformers would not be surprising. But from an Orthodox rabbi who was also—as Makhon Yerushalayim's publication of his works now confirm—a talmudic scholar of high ranking is indeed problematic. Some echo of, or even direct rationale behind, his role in the *Sanhedrin* is probably contained in these works; their exploration by historians of the period would probably shed further light on the perplexing foundations of the first emancipated modern Jewry.

The fifth project of Makhon Yerushalayim is not officially constituted as a project. The Makhon has undertaken a series of miscellaneous publishing activities which have been immensely popular and of high quality. It recently published two memorial volumes, one in memory of the late *rosh yeshiva* of Mir, Rabbi Hayyim Shmuelevitz, and one in memory of the late chief *dayyan* of London, later of Jerusalem, Rabbi Yehezkel Abramsky. Both sold with astonishing speed; both contained *hiddushe Torah* of the same high quality as are printed in *Moriah*; both printed for the first time a number of manuscripts by renowned *rishonim* and *aharonim*; and both included superb biographical sketches and fascinating miscellany. Anyone who has worked on memorial volumes knows how extraordinary it is to turn out volumes of this size and caliber within one year.

Whereas almost every book issued by Makhon Yerushalayim originates from within its own *kolel*, its miscellaneous publications include manuscripts submitted from outside the Makhon. One such manuscript, recently published and selling briskly, is the edited and annotated *hiddushim* and responsa of Rabbi Abraham Avli Pasveller, a kind of successor to the Vilna Gaon as the head of the rabbinical court in Vilna from 1804 to 1836.

As diverse as Makhon Yerushalayim's publishing activities are—compendia of talmudic commentaries, unknown Sephardic and Ashkenazic talmudic manuscripts, memorial volumes, *Moriah*, miscellaneous manuscripts—they are, taken as a whole, entirely different from another creative and successful effort at publishing in Isreal, with which I shall deal in a future column.

NOTES

1. The 1742 edition, brought out by the Wulffian publishing house in Jessnitz, was the first since the 1553 edition of Sabbioneta. See Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia, 1973), p. 10.

2. Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977).
3. Jewish scholarship lacks serious studies of the effect of the printing press on the development of Jewish society. For brief evidence of how enlightening such studies could be, see Lucy Dawidowicz, *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (New York, 1967), pp. 22, 29-30, 36-37. Cf. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe* (New York, 1979).