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# Reviews

Zeev Gries, *The Book in the Jewish World 1700–1900*. Translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey Green. Oxford, Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007. xvii, 251 p. ISBN: 978-1-874774-97-0. \$39.95.

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## STUDYING THE JEWISH BOOK: A REVIEW ESSAY

An important milestone in the study of the Jewish book was marked in 2002 with the publication of Ze'ev Gries's *ha-Sefer ke-sokhen tarbut, be-shanim 1700–1900* ("The Book as an Agent of Culture, 1700–1900"). In this "slim volume," as he subsequently and modestly would refer to it, Gries introduced his readers to what he calls in Hebrew "toldot ha-sefer ha-Yehudi" (the "History of the Jewish book"). The book, based on his twenty-five previous years of research in the field, offered new insights and raised new questions. Thanks to this 2007 English-language edition, Gries's scholarship happily can reach a broader audience. Moreover, as Gries explains in his preface to the English edition, "the present volume draws heavily on (the Hebrew edition) but is not a direct translation." At the same time, Gries acknowledges and thanks Jeffrey Green for translating the original "Hebrew text as the basis of the present book." Originally published in Hebrew by ha-Kibuts ha-me'uḥad at the suggestion of its founding editor, Meir Ayali, the English edition is published appropriately by the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, a cultural broker that brings to the English reading public important works of classical Jewish literature and modern scholarship that were originally written in Hebrew. However, for those interested in a comprehensive survey of the topic, as the title seems to promise, this book falls short of that expectation in several important ways.

Gries, Professor in the Goldstein-Goren Department of Jewish Thought at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, specializes in what he calls Jewish cultural history, with a particular interest in the impact of Hebrew and Yiddish printing on traditional Ashkenazic societies in Eastern Europe. His important work on Jewish conduct literature, *Sifrut ha-hanhagot: toldoteha u-meḳomah be-ḥaye ḥaside ha-Beshṭ*, (1989) argues for the penetration of esoteric kabbalistic traditions into popular forms of religious observance via the agency of printing. Gries is especially well-known for his studies of Hasidism and Hasidic publishing, such as *Sefer, sofer ve-sipur be-reshit ha-ḥasidut: min ha-Beshṭ ve-ad Menahem Mendel mi-Ḳotsḵ* (1992). He also has published valuable bibliographical surveys and review essays of, for example, contemporary studies of Kabbalah and Hasidism and pioneering studies of both phenomena.

What is the "history of the Jewish book?" For Gries, as the original Hebrew title of his book indicates (it speaks of "the book" "as an agent of culture"—a formulation omitted from the English title), it means in part following in the footsteps of Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communication and Cultural Transformation of Early Modern Europe*. (Gries cites the fourth, revised edition, Cambridge, 1985.) Eisenstein is best known for her synthetic, intellectual history of the age of the hand-press, particularly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as her studies of the role of journalism as a force for secularization in later centuries. Eisenstein argued that the transition from manuscript to print technologies of communication produced revolutionary changes in the configuration of power and authority in early modern Christian Europe. The ability mechanically to fix a text and to duplicate it rapidly for widespread circulation led to decentralized control over and the popularization of knowledge and information. Eisenstein emphasizes the importance of vernacular printing

(i.e., printing in languages other than Latin) as a key factor which undermined the authority of the Catholic Church and paved the way for the spread of Protestantism and new forms of scientific knowledge. Gries's understanding of the history of the book is indebted also to Robert Darnton's model of "a communications circuit" by which a printed text makes its way into and affects the societies in which it circulates. Darnton has defined the purpose of this scholarly enterprise as the effort "to understand how ideas were transmitted through print and how exposure to the printed word affected the thought and behavior of mankind during the last five hundred years" (Darnton, 1982, p. 65).

Gries's bibliography refers to the scholarship of Adrian Johns and Roger Chartier but he does not grapple in the body of the text with their sharp critiques of Eisenstein and Darnton. It would be useful to know how different his study of the Jewish book might have looked had he adopted Johns's and Chartier's very different approaches, respectively, to the subjects of textual fixity, and the ways in which material texts—books as physical artifacts—signify meaning and affect reading habits and interpretation. To be sure, Gries does refer to Chartier for "a French perspective" on reading habits during the late eighteenth century—and to the importance of "changes in the internal and external design of the books produced for [readers]" (pp. 18–19)—but he confines these remarks to footnotes.

Gries takes pains to acknowledge his debt to Judaica librarians and pays tribute to two centuries of Judaic bibliographical achievements dating from the formative period of the German-Jewish *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars in the nineteenth century. Chief among those he praises are Leopold Zunz and Moritz Steinschneider, "the Moravian-born father of modern Hebrew bibliography," (p. 2). He calls the twentieth-century Israeli librarian Abraham Ya'ari a "hero of culture" and a "shining star" (p. 157). Gries grounds his own undertaking on their monumental research about the history of the transition from manuscript to print, even as he seeks to go beyond what he states has generally been regarded as a "tedious field of Jewish history, best left to bibliographers" (p. 1).

The book is divided into two parts. The first part roughly corresponds to the eighteenth century and the impact of print, particularly via the dissemination of kabbalah, ethical works, and the "elite literature" of Jewish legal works and commentaries, on the formation of what Gries calls a "nascent intelli-

gentsia." He then discusses sites of reading, such as institutional libraries, in terms of their growth and function both as places where reading materials were made available and as places of sociability, at least for men in the case of the libraries of the *bate midrash* ("houses of study") in the eighteenth century (pp. 66–67). Gries also analyzes the existence and contents of private libraries and the variety of works found there. In so doing, his analysis successfully complicates the picture of the actual readers of popular and elite literatures in order to call those presumptive categories into question. He quantifies and analyzes, for example, several different types of both Jewish literary content and non-Jewish sources which made their way, especially via Yiddish publishing, into the social consciousness of non-elite men, women, and children, and how these works subsequently expanded their intellectual horizons.

Gries's second section presents the conflicting forces of enlightenment and reaction witnessed in the output of the Hebrew press and the spread of Yiddish literature during the nineteenth century. Here, he argues against the thesis that the *haskalah*, or Jewish enlightenment movement, was a primary cause of the uprooting of traditional Jewish life. He is careful to point out the disparity between what we know about the lived experiences of Jews and literary depictions of them. Gries concludes with an "Afterword" about the beginnings of Hebrew literary criticism and the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language in Israel. Following the "Afterword," an appendix is found, containing a translation of the homage to Ya'ari, written by the philosopher and former director of the Jewish National and University Library, Samuel Hugo Bergman. (This article originally appeared in the Hebrew-language newspaper *Davar* in November 1966, shortly after Ya'ari's death earlier that year.) The book helpfully provides a new bibliography of secondary sources (otherwise lacking in the Hebrew edition), an index of primary source books and periodicals, and indexes of places, people, and subjects.

In short, Gries conceives of the history of the Jewish book as an exercise in cultural history built upon the technical labors of "bibliographers and librarians." On the shoulders of these giants, he proposes to analyze the impact of new technologies of communication on traditional Jewish life. He identifies the print revolution in Jewish society with a great awakening of non-elite, expanding circles of readers, both women and men, who earned their livelihoods outside the professional offices of

the Jewish community. This nascent intelligentsia played a crucial role as a catalyst for wider changes in the social consciousness of the public, evidence of which is mirrored in and discernible via the print output of the time. At the heart of this democratic narrative and the popular practices and audiences embedded in it are the historical experiences of highly literate Ashkenazic Jewish men living in Eastern Europe who were raised in traditional religious educational environments. Reading, writing, and publishing in Hebrew and Yiddish, and gradually finding their way into the modern era during a time when the civil and political status of European Jewry was changing, they eventually moved to Israel and participated in the renewal of Jewish national sovereignty.

In his preface to the English edition, Gries makes a point of differentiating his linguistic-nationalist approach from that of Benedict Anderson. Anderson has linked the spread of vernacular print culture and new media in the nineteenth century to the rise of modern nationalisms. By contrast, Gries looks to the “high” cultural language of Hebrew as the foundation of Jewish unity across the ages and the instrument of Jewish national consciousness in the modern period. “The linguistic factor uniting the Jewish people” Gries explains, “was not their vernacular language, as Anderson would have it, but rather their ancient sacred language, Hebrew, which lay at the heart of Jewish religious life and education wherever Jews lived and throughout the centuries, ‘till today.’” “Thus,” he continues, “a discussion of the history of the Hebrew book [notice his switch from a study of *ha-sefer ha-Yehudi* (the Jewish book) to *ha-sefer ha-‘Ivri* (the Hebrew book)] forms the core of my work here” (pp. vii–viii).

Gries points out another distinctive characteristic of the history of the Hebrew printed book, namely, that “although the printing may have been localized, the books themselves circulated throughout the Jewish diaspora” (p. 7). He is emphatic that the “history of the book in the Jewish world must therefore be considered not in the context of those places where books were *printed* but rather in relation to where they *circulated*” (p. 33; emphasis in the original). In contrast to Anderson, Gries finds the unifying force of the Hebrew language in extended networks of religious, economic, and social forms of oral and print communication that transcended national boundaries in advance of the creation of a Jewish nation-state. Pursuing this line of investigation Gries persuasively argues that the transnational agency of

Hebrew printing did not lead inevitably to a process of secularization but in fact played a crucial role in re-shaping and reinforcing ritually observant forms of Jewish worship and study even as it helped to create a new, secular Jewish national life (see, e.g., pp. 104–105).

Gries’s book is not so much about the “Book in the Jewish World” but about the Hebrew, and to a lesser extent Yiddish, printed book in the Ashkenazic world. The author does consider the printing output of Amsterdam and mentions in passing printing centers in Germany and Italy. Regrettably, he almost completely neglects the world of Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jews as well as the books that were printed or copied in the Balkans and Islamic lands or otherwise circulated there. This is surprising because Abraham Ya’ari, the hero of this telling, took a keen interest in and published numerous books and articles about the subject of non-Ashkenazic Jewries. Curiously, even within the geographical frame of Eastern Europe, Gries does not discuss Karaite Jewish publishing in Hebrew letters. Moreover, he downplays Ladino, Judeo-Spanish, and Judeo-Arabic works printed in Hebrew letters. In his treatment of Judeo-Arabic, for example, Gries refers to its heyday “during the ‘Golden Age of the Jews of Spain’ . . . between the tenth and twelfth centuries,” but he dismissively concludes that “the decline of Judeo-Arabic literature began halfway through the late Middle Ages, in consonance with the general decline of culture in those lands where it was used—the lands of Islam” (pp. 95–96).

In one of the only instances in which he mentions Sephardic culture, Gries recalls the travels of the distinguished Sephardic Rabbi Ḥayim Yosef David Azulai (known by the acronym “ḤIDA”). From his travelogue we find out that Jews used valuable books as a kind of portable commodity by which they could transfer their wealth from one place to another under the watchful but otherwise ignorant eyes of non-Jewish authorities (p. 24). However, Gries’s reliance on the ḤIDA’s observations about the “limited nature of people’s knowledge of Lurianic kabbalah” among the Jews of Tunis as evidence of the “limited availability there of books on the subject” (p. 23) does not tell us anything about the means, limited or not, by which knowledge of all kinds circulated among Jews living in Islamic lands. So, for example, the persistence of manuscript copying after the advent of Hebrew printing is mentioned in relation to the spread of kabbalistic teachings in Eastern Europe (p. 71) and among *maskilim* (enlighteners) who

copy by hand and circulate satires (p. 115). However, it is not investigated as an alternative to print as a form of communication among North African, Levantine, and Yemenite Jewish communities during this time.

Chief among the book's strengths must be counted the ways in which Gries deploys his bibliometric methodology. The book contains multiple instances of Gries's analyses of tallies of printed editions and quantitative comparisons of genres. His systematic approach illuminates, for example, the popularity of a given work (e.g., *Hok le-Yiśra'el*), and tells a reader much about the emerging canonical status of the *Zohar* or about a particular subject (e.g., ethical literature) and its wide circulation and popular appeal. He carefully explains and qualifies his statistical findings in terms of the underlying shortcomings of the various bibliographies upon which his calculations are based.

At the same time, Gries's reliance on numbers to draw general historical conclusions does not come to grips with the basic critique of a bibliometric approach: the book is not a fixed and stable entity. Its processes of composition, redaction, physical production, page layout, typographic choices, paper selection, format, binding, artistic illustration, distribution, re-issuance, and conditions of sale play an important, if not a more important role than, bibliometrics in explaining how communication occurs and meaning is transmitted. To his credit, Gries provides a valuable two-page section entitled "Topics in the history of the book that demand an author" (pp. 129–130). Here he calls for studies of "the design and illustration of books as agents of culture," "the technology of Jewish printing," "the increase in the number of Jewish public libraries during the nineteenth century," and "the opening up of Hebrew literature to the wonders of science" (p. 129).

Indeed, Gries's book sparkles with ideas and desiderata. And this is not to say that Gries, a self-described book-worm, has not done the kind of work he recommends. Yet despite Gries's apparent commitment to the idea, he does not engage here in a systematic way with the book as a material text, i.e., as an artifact operating simultaneously within and beyond traditional conceptions of interpretation. So, for example, one might have hoped to find Gries discussing the use of "*Rashi*" letters in Ashkenazic and Sephardic printing, or "*Vaybertaytsh*" ("women's" print type, which Herbert Zafren [1983b, 1986] has carefully studied) in Yiddish printing. And while Gries praises (pp.

170–71) Ya'ari, Chone Shmeruk, Yehoshua Mondshine, and Moshe Rosman for their studies of the changes made to the different editions of the *Shivḥe ha-Besht*, his own arguments are not similarly buttressed by these types of technical investigations. In short, many of the historical conclusions Gries derives from "the book" in the Jewish world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are not sufficiently grounded in evidence based on the "tedium" of a book's making.

Gries provides expert accounts of serialized Jewish publishing in Eastern Europe and insightfully points to the value of book reviews as a source of information. At the same time, he ignores the widespread circulation of non-Hebrew Jewish newspapers during the same period throughout Western Europe and the Atlantic world. He also ignores serialized publishing of Judeo-Spanish *belles lettres*. (Though it appeared too late for Gries to consult for the Hebrew edition of his book, Sarah Abrevaya Stein's 2004 comparative study of the Yiddish and Ladino press in the Russian and Ottoman empires might yet serve as a model for future comparative undertakings.)

On several occasions Gries refers to the migration of Jews from Eastern Europe to North America and in one instance he mentions the popularity of the literary output of one of the émigrés, Yehudah Yudel Rozenberg (Yudel Rosenberg). And yet, he treats Rozenberg as an extension of Eastern European culture and does not examine the local context of his adopted homes in Toronto and Montreal, where he not only served as a rabbi but also published at least three books.<sup>1</sup> And while Gries devotes a section of the book to the subject of censorship in Eastern Europe (pp. 131–135), he pays almost no attention to the emergence of Hebrew and Yiddish printing in North America, a region unfettered by governmental censorship of Jewish books, and thus an alternate outlet for publishing controversial literature.

Accounts of other locations of Hebraic creativity in the West beyond the confines of the Pale of Settlement during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are similarly attenuated. Consider for example, the almost invisible role assigned by Gries to the Italian port city of Livorno in this history. Yet, according to Yeshayahu Vinograd's bibli-

<sup>1</sup> See Goldman, 2006, entry nos. 631, 632, 661, 873. The third of these works by Rozenberg was published jointly in Montreal and in New York City; a fourth was published in New York City.

ography of books printed in Hebrew letters (1993), Livorno was the fifth largest center of Hebrew printing in the world before 1864. In short, Gries's focus on the "Hebrew" and "Yiddish" book in Eastern Europe consequently overshadows the depth and extent of diasporic Jewish printing in all languages throughout the Jewish world.

Gries's preference for studying the book in the Jewish world thematically—by examining the printing of works of Jewish law, commentaries, ethical literature, kabbalah, children's literature, and the sites of reading such as public and private libraries—provides a valuable entrée to some of the most recondite forms of Jewish learning and to often overlooked topics of investigation. However, his thematic approach comes at the expense of detailed analyses of the specific locales, time frames, and local conditions in which printing and reading occurred. When, for example, he compares Lemberg (Lviv) and Vilna (Vilnius) as important Jewish publishing centers in the second half of the nineteenth century, he bases his discussion on the memoirs of the literary critic Abraham Piperna (see pp. 113, 116) and on a quantified comparison of the printing output of those two cities, in an attempt to show that the traditional picture of them as bastions, respectively, of Hasidim and Mitnagdim ("Opponents of Hasidism") is not so clear cut. But his conclusion is not supported by any additional analysis of the local conditions that prevailed at the time. Similarly, though he occasionally refers in the course of the book to the rise and decline of book prices, and links those price levels to social and cultural factors (see, e.g., p. 49), he either minimizes or does not explore the demographic, economic, legal, and political conditions also affecting them.

Regrettably Gries, who has published a rich and detailed study of "The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture" (1996), rarely delves into the emerging, changing, and increasingly specialized roles of publishers, editors, typesetters, correctors, booksellers, and other human "agents" of the business of Jewish book culture. On those few occasions when he does—for example, his brief discussion of the role of *maskilim* as proofreaders and typesetters—the historical picture of how they made their living within the traditional world helps the reader to understand where these cultural figures came from. By contrast, when an extended discussion of a printer-publisher does come to the fore, as it does during his discussion of the *rebetsin* Yehudit Rosanes, the topic of printing and gender is marred by the patronizing comment that, "in the

spirit of the times I shall conclude with some remarks on books, printing and women" (p. 176; cf. the Hebrew edition, p. 182). Like his discussion of Judeo-Arabic, the subject of gender is left until the conclusion of the chapter, suggesting that it is an afterthought rather than an integral part of his story of an expanding nascent intelligentsia of male and female readers.

The shifting titles in the Hebrew and English editions of Gries's book point to additional methodological tensions. To recall, the Hebrew title includes the phrase *sokhen tarbut* (agent of culture); in an earlier formulation in 1992, Gries referred to printing as an *emtsa'i keshet* (medium of communication). In the English edition these concepts of agency are omitted from the title altogether. It is no semantic quibble to raise this underlying question of "agency" (perhaps the driving force of the book's overall argument): i.e., to what extent did Jewish printing cause great historical changes in Jewish life to occur? To say that Jewish books (in any languages) are a medium of communication is to say that they are a necessary factor but not a sufficient explanation for change over time. To say that the Jewish printed book is akin to an autonomous agent of culture, "the magic kiss" that awakens "the nascent intelligentsia as a kind of Sleeping Beauty" (p. 91), may lead some to conclude mistakenly that the technology of printing and the production of Hebrew and Yiddish literature were primarily responsible for changing the consciousness of the Jewish world between 1700 and 1900. The danger of misinterpretation requires greater clarification.

The bibliography of this book is a valuable entrée to both the field of general and Jewish book studies. However, it lacks entries for noted scholars and lay specialists of general print culture such as Philip Gaskell, Donald McKenzie, and Anthony Rota, as well as scholars of the Jewish book (manuscript as well as print) such as Mordechai Glatzer, Menahem Schmelzer, and Herbert Zafren. Also surprising, given the intended English-reading audience of this translation, is the absence of an entry for Raphael Posner and Israel Ta-Shema's basic yet still useful compilation of articles from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, entitled *The Hebrew Book: An Historical Survey* (1975). The bibliography (which is not found in the 2002 Hebrew edition, and hence we can infer was compiled for the 2007 edition) also omits the valuable recent study and bibliography of Karaite printing published by Barry Walfish in 2003.

The critique offered here is not intended to be a call to "add" more to the overall story, nor to mini-

mize the strengths of this important study, but to integrate some of the above-mentioned desiderata into the analysis itself. Anyone interested in the circulation through print of information and knowledge and how it affects communal praxis and authority, needs to consider the interplay and exchanges that took place among Jewish communities in and beyond the Pale of Settlement. To take one final example: in his brief discussion of “the Vilna-born Professor Nahum Slouschz, who was raised and educated in Odessa, and later in Geneva and Paris,” Gries (pp. 188–89) makes no reference to Harvey Goldberg’s fascinating studies of how Slouschz’s contact with Mordekhai Ha-Cohen in Libya was predicated on the imperial conditions then structuring European-North African relations (Goldberg, 2004; Ha-Cohen, 1980). Their personal relationship illuminates our understanding of the complex interplay of these conditions as a European-educated Jewish visitor encounters and exploits an educated North African Jew thoroughly versed in *haskalah* literature which had circulated there from Eastern Europe. Gries’s omission of such concerns from his discussion of Slouchz shortchanges his reader.

Gries seems to operate somewhere between the forest and the trees, between historians of the book and the historiography of Ashkenazic culture, between bibliographers and intellectual historians, between quantitative bibliometrics and qualitative judgments based on unproven assumptions about the relationship between numbers and lived experiences. A great deal of useful information can be gleaned from this path-breaking work. Indeed, I know of no better introduction in English to Hebrew and Yiddish printing and the Hebrew press in the Ashkenazic heartlands of Eastern Europe during this time period. Yet, readers will need to treat with caution many of the author’s approaches, generalizations, and conclusions.

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### SCOPE OF THE BOOK

The work under review is intended to convey concepts of indexing to native speakers of Hebrew. The book includes a Preface in English, but no table of contents in that language. The scope and organization of the book can most efficiently be conveyed through a translation of the Hebrew table of contents:

#### Chapter 1: Indexing: What is it?

- A. Indexing as part of information organization
- B. Purposes of indexing
- C. The place of indexing in the information system

#### Chapter 2: The history of indexing in Hebrew books

#### Chapter 3: Basic concepts of indexing

- A. Indexing versus classification
- B. Coordination at the indexing stage versus coordination at the searching stage
- C. Search techniques in databases