

# RARE BOOKS

## Hebrew Incunabula: an Agenda for Research\*

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The first questions in Hebrew incunabula research are most basic: how many incunabula are there, what are they, and where are they? The answers to these simple questions are by no means easy. Since incunabula were printed without title pages, and some without colophons, and since there are many early Hebrew printed books that survive only in a most fragmentary state, the identification of certain early Hebrew books as incunabula is doubtful and at times hotly debated.

There was a colorful and rather cantankerous scholar in the last generation by the name of Lazarus Goldschmidt, who is perhaps best known as the translator of the Babylonian Talmud into German, and who, incidentally, admitted in his old age that in his youth he had fabricated a work in the style of an ancient Aramaic Midrash in order to perpetrate a prank on his scholarly colleagues.<sup>1</sup> Goldschmidt was the author of a small book on Hebrew incunabula<sup>2</sup> in which he poked fun at collectors and dealers who purposely inflate the number of Hebrew incunabula to make their wares more attractive. He maintained that there are no more than 100 Hebrew books which can beyond doubt be claimed as dating back to the 15th century. This figure is the most conservative estimate; the most generous one is made by Herrmann Meyer in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, listing 175 books.<sup>3</sup> Current scholarship by Perez Tishby puts their number at 140.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, the total number of Hebrew incunabula known to us today does not amount even to one-half percent of the approximately 40,000 non-Hebrew incunabula. Even in the 16th century, their number was very low. The extensive booklists prepared in Italy for

the use of Church censors of Hebrew books demonstrate that, e.g., in 1595, among 20,000 Hebrew printed books, there were only about 100 copies of various incunabula.<sup>5</sup> There is no easy explanation for this. Perhaps one reason for the scarcity of 15th century Hebrew printed books is that they were produced in small editions, normally not exceeding 300 to 400 copies. Also, since many Hebrew incunabula contained basic and much studied texts, they were worn out quickly, and when new editions became available, the older, worn copies were put away as "shemot" [lit. *names*—referring to names of God in Hebrew sacred texts. Worn copies of such texts may not be discarded, and must be buried.—*Eds.*]

No wonder, therefore, that the number of Hebrew incunabula preserved today, even in the most prestigious institutions, is relatively small. The Vatican Library contains 42, the Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam 27, and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris 39.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the 29 titles represented in a total of 40 copies at Yeshiva University's Library place it among the ranking institutions holding 15th century Hebrew printed books, and the publication of Gershon Cohen's catalog<sup>7</sup> of this collection calls the attention of the scholarly world to it for the first time. This publication thus corrects the anomaly found in Goff's census of incunabula in America libraries,<sup>8</sup> in which the Hebrew incunabula of Yeshiva University were completely ignored. Cohen's catalog does more than just put this Library on the map of incunabula research; it also proposes to enlarge the number of known Hebrew incunabula. He describes a certain Italian Mahzor as having been printed shortly after 1486 and not in 1504 as previously assumed—thus making it an incunabulum.<sup>9</sup>

The first task of the study of Hebrew incunabula remains the establishment of a solid, reliable corpus of the books that belong to this category. This can be achieved by careful and thorough scrutiny of all physical aspects of each book, such as paper, parchment, watermarks, type size, type shape, decorative graphic materials, text ar-

range, and composition of sheets. Equally important is the study of all statements found in the book itself regarding its printing. The language of these statements, located mostly in the colophons, is often obscure or ambiguous and must be closely analyzed. Let me cite one example. In what is perhaps the most beautiful incunabulum that Yeshiva University possesses, the Mantua 1476 *Orah Hayyim*, the printer, Abraham Conat, states:

And mastered this craft so as to print properly, juxtaposing one forme to another, one thousand columns each day, [printing each sheet by processing it] twice with devotion and commitment; [printing] in one process four columns which are on one side of the large folio sheet. . . .

Michael Pollak interprets the colophon as meaning that Conat printed 2,000 columns on 250 sheets each day. Abraham Rosenthal, in a rejoinder, reduces this to mean 1,000 columns—namely, 125 sheets daily—while Gershon Cohen agrees with Rosenthal as to the number of sheets printed each day, but disagrees with him concerning other details of the interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

Information about Hebrew incunabula may also be found in later sources. Again, just one example: An Italian rabbi in a responsum dated 1566, quotes a passage from the Responsa of Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret that he identifies as having been printed in Rome. The discovery of this quotation, and the identification of the book to which it refers, was the first step that led to the con-

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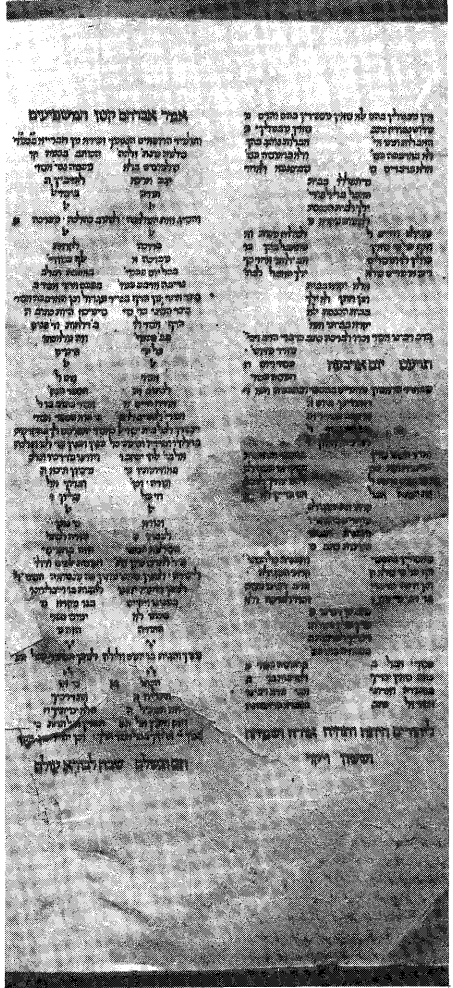
Bahya ben Asher. *Sefer Rabenu Bahya*. Naples: Azriel Gunzenhauser, 1492.

All photographs for this article are by Harvey Shaman, and are included in *Hebrew Incunabula: Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica-Judaica*, Yeshiva University, by Gershon Cohen. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1984.

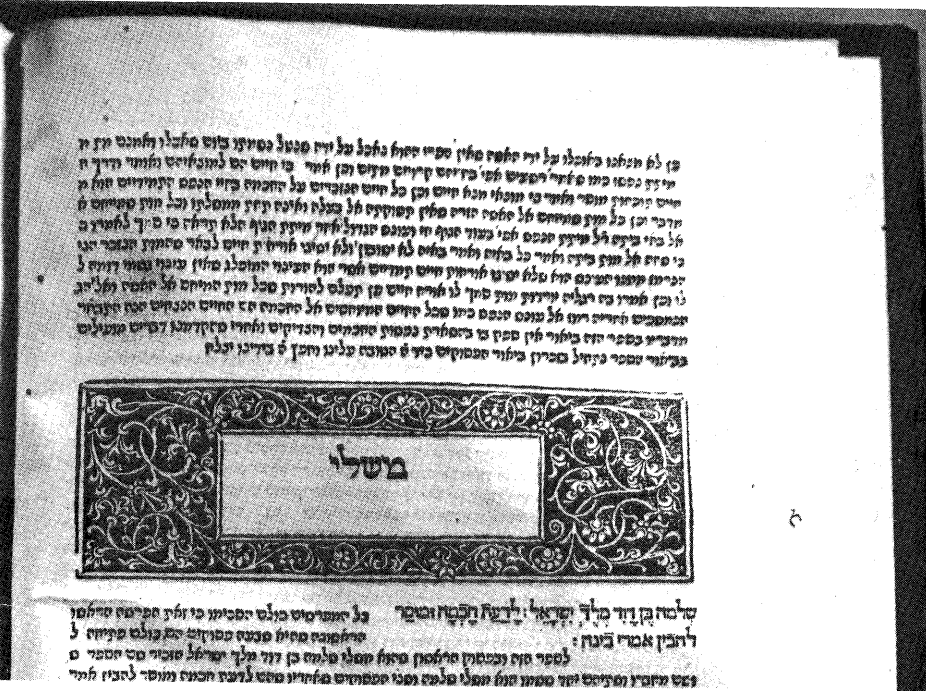
\* Originally presented at the Symposium "From Scribe to Printer" held at Yeshiva University on March 10, 1985 in celebration of the publication of Hebrew Incunabula: Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica-Judaica, Yeshiva University.



Bible. Former Prophets. Soncino: Sons of Israel Nathan Soncino, 1485.



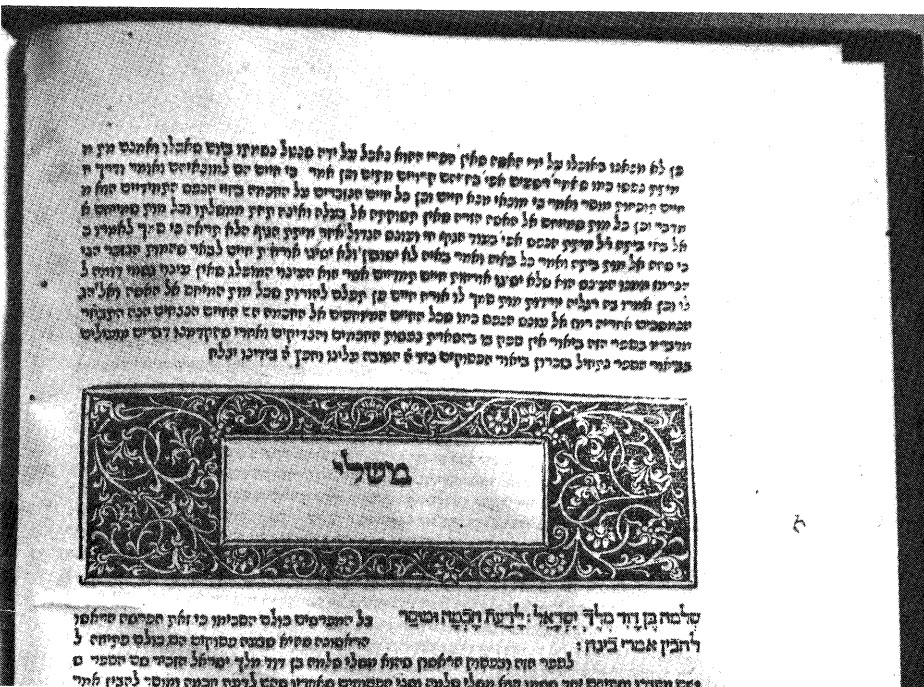
Jacob ben Asher. Arba'ah Turim: Yoreh De'ah. Mantua: Abraham Conat; Ferrara: Abraham ben Hayyim, 1476-1477.



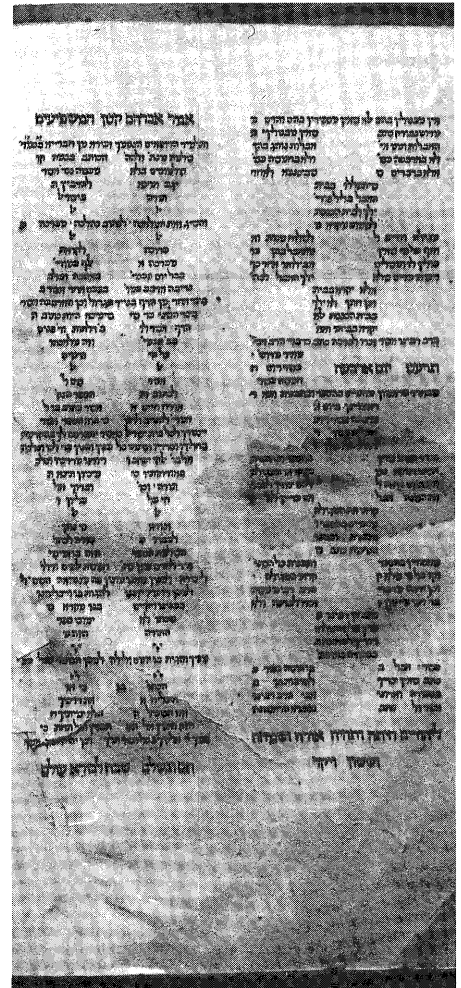
Bible. Proverbs. Naples: Joseph Gunzenhauser, 1487.



Bible. Former Prophets. Soncino: Sons of Israel Nathan Soncino, 1485.



Bible. Proverbs. Naples: Joseph Gunzenhauser, 1487.



Jacob ben Asher. Arba'ah Turim: Yoreh De'ah. Mantua: Abraham Conat; Ferrara: Abraham ben Hayyim, 1476-1477.

clusion that 9 books—otherwise lacking any indication of place and date—were the products of the very first Hebrew presses in the world that were active in Rome, presumably between the years 1469-1475.<sup>11</sup>

The correct and painstaking description of incunabula in catalogs of public or private collections provides the foundation for a further stage of incunabula research, which deals with the cultural, historical, literary, and religious significance of early Hebrew printing.

The questions that exercise the curiosity of scholars in these areas are the following: who were the first printers of Hebrew books; from whom did they learn their trade; on what basis did they select the books to be printed; what manuscripts did they use; what method did they employ for establishing the text; what was the religious status of books produced by the new craft; and—perhaps the most interesting one—in what way did the introduction of printing change and affect Jewish life?

It is now generally accepted that the very first Hebrew books produced by movable type were printed in Rome between 1469-1475. These books resemble in all physical aspects the non-Hebrew incunabula produced in Rome at the same time by the Christian printers Sweynheim, Pannartz and Han.<sup>12</sup> As their names betray, these early typographers were of German origin, as were many later printers of Hebrew books in Italy—the most prominent among them being members of the Soncino family. One may assume, therefore, that the printers of the Hebrew Roman incunabula were also Ashkenazi Jews, and that their Christian counterparts may have originally belonged to a circle of apprentices and assistants who had worked with Gutenberg, and parted with him in order to become independent. But there is another line of speculation, not necessarily contradicting or excluding the one mentioned just now. Isaiah Sonne was the first to suggest that with the return of the Pope to Rome from his exile in Avignon, a number of wealthy and learned Jews from Provence also settled in the Papal State.<sup>13</sup> As pointed out by David B. Ruderman, there was a large number of Italians in the Provençal city of Avignon, and some Jews, influenced by personal contact with them, may have chosen to try their luck in Italy.<sup>14</sup> There is an isolated piece of information about the Jew, Davino de Caderousse, who in 1444, in the city of Avignon, was involved in some kind of activity that may have been a precursor of printing.<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, Davino was also an expert in dyeing, an occupation that he shared with one of the first printers of Hebrew books, Abraham ben Hayyim the Dyer of Ferrara, who printed the

*Yoreh Deah* in that city in 1477. The craft of dyeing was apparently related to printing.

Another datum may be added: a Renaissance Jew by the name of Abraham Farissol, worked as a scribe of Hebrew manuscripts, among his many activities and talents. From a highly plausible reconstruction by Ruderman, we know that Farissol left Avignon for Italy in the year 1468 or 1469.<sup>16</sup> As noted above, 1469 was the year in which, in all probability, the first printed Hebrew book appeared in Rome. Farissol lived for a while in Ferrara, where Abraham ben Hayyim the Dyer was engaged in operating a printing press using the type of Abraham Conat from Mantua. Furthermore, Farissol's handwriting—which we know from numerous examples—was similar to the printed type employed in 1476-1477 by the Mantua and Ferrara printers. Ruderman

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therefore suggests that Farissol may have been one of the scribes whose manuscripts served as a model for the Conat type.<sup>17</sup> On the basis of Ruderman's study, one may further consider Farissol's career as having a bearing on the history of the infancy of Hebrew printing.

It is common knowledge that the early printers encountered opposition by practitioners of the ancient art of the scribes. The scribes had a vested interest in protecting their craft from the new invention that many considered to be the devil's work. We do not have any explicit sources in Jewish literature, as far as I know, about such tension between new printers and old scribes. Farissol's case may, however, suggest the existence of such tensions. At first, as just mentioned, Farissol may have been involved in the pioneering stage of printing by Conat.

Conat still refers to the new art of typography as *ketivah*, writing. Also, he considers, it *avodat kodesh*, holy work, probably indicating that printed works in Hebrew deserve the same amount of respect and possess the same sanctity as their manuscript counterparts. Interestingly, the question of the sanctity of printed books was the subject of numerous responsa.<sup>18</sup> Conat also states that what he does as a printer is like "writing with many pens," but "*be-lo ma'aseh nisim*," (not through miracles).<sup>19</sup> In these words, one hears an echo of the rejection of the notion that printing is the devil's work. We may thus speculate that Farissol at first saw printing just as another form of writing, and thought that his skills and talents as a scribe would continue to be in demand. But as typography developed and spread rapidly as an independent instrument of producing books, Farissol realized that the new technique would inevitably render his craft obsolete. His reaction was to disassociate himself from printing, and his name never occurs in any early printed book. Farissol continued to write beautiful manuscripts by hand well into the 16th century. His scribal activity at a time when printing was already highly developed may have been an act of protest, as if to demonstrate the excellence and superiority of the scribe's art above the mechanical skills of the printer.

The happy convergence of Provençal, as well as German scholars and artisans in prosperous Italy—in Rome, Mantua and Ferrara—in the third quarter of the 15th century, gave the impetus to the quick emergence and rapid growth of Hebrew printing.

When we turn our attention to questions concerning the kinds of books that were selected to be printed by the first printers, and the manuscripts that were used for establishing the texts, we are dealing with a topic that has a bearing on the general cultural, intellectual, and religious profile of the period. The scope of this type of inquiry must encompass not only Italy, but also Spain and Portugal, where Hebrew printing was practiced during a shorter period, beginning a little later than in Italy, and coming to an end with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497. In a recent publication, Robert Bonfil deals with the nature and contents of the libraries of Renaissance Jews.<sup>20</sup> Bonfil emphasizes the importance of comparing the degree of popularity of certain works with others, in order to determine the cultural interests of the community. A work that was rarely copied or printed, even if very learned and important in itself, could not have left its imprint on society. Bonfil, as did other scholars before him, examined some extant library inventories from that period, and found that there were very few books on phi-

osophy and Kabbalah in Jewish libraries in the second part of the 15th century. Indeed, among the incunabula, the most commonly found categories are: Bible; Bible commentaries by Rashi, Nahmanides, Kimchi, Gersonides and Ibn Ezra; codes by Maimonides, Jacob ben Asher and Moses of Coucy; several tractates of the Babylonian Talmud; liturgical works; certain popular ethical works; and works on grammar (e.g., Kimhi's *Sefer ha-shorashim* that saw 3 editions in fewer than 20 years). On the other hand, we have only two books on philosophy—the *Guide to the Perplexed* by Maimonides and the *Ikarim* by Albo—and none on Kabbalah.<sup>21</sup>

In this connection, one must also raise the problem of book distribution and book trade. Strangely, many of the rarest Hebrew incunabula, especially the Iberian ones, survived in remote places such as Persia and Yemen, and among the fragments of the Cairo Genizah. We know very little about how they got there.

Let us now turn to what is, in my view, the most fascinating area of research in connection with early Hebrew printing. What was the impact of Hebrew printed books on Jewish life in the generation in which it was introduced and in the period following it? The only comprehensive article on the subject was published by Abraham Berliner about a century ago.<sup>22</sup> There are, however, in the works of the Isaiah Sonne,<sup>23</sup> and in our generation, in those of Sh. Z. Havlin,<sup>24</sup> H. Z. Dimitrovsky<sup>25</sup> and others, discussions that offer many valuable insights about the decisive influences of printing on the mind of the Jews.

A number of practices were significantly changed as a result of Hebrew printing. In manuscripts, the order of Biblical books was not uniform. In most manuscripts, the Prophets were copied according to the order mentioned in the Talmud: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah. The sequence in early printed Bibles is Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. In manuscripts, the book of Ruth usually precedes Psalms; in early printed books, it is Psalms that stand at the head of Hagiographa. In both cases, all subsequent editions followed the arrangements found in early printed Bibles.

Perhaps the greatest influence of printing was on the standardization of liturgical texts. Many of the minor local variations disappeared once a small local community acquired a printed *Mahzor* or *Sidur*. The more generalized customs were adopted, and the local usage went out of practice. In addition, the role of the *hazan* as the person who had the authority of excluding or including certain non-obligatory *piyutim* or private prayers was assumed by the printer, and

once his prayerbooks were distributed, they became accepted as standard by worshippers.

The form and direction of Talmud studies, ever since the end of the 15th century, were shaped in a most decisive way by the first printed editions of the Talmud. H. Z. Dimitrovsky gathered and studied all the surviving fragments of the Spanish and Portuguese Talmud incunabula. He then pointed out the substantial variants that exist between the Iberian and Italian traditions.<sup>26</sup> The Iberian tractates preserve the textual traditions of the Spanish academies, whereas the Italian Soncino tractates reflect those of Ashkenaz. Since the Soncino volumes became the foundation of all later editions, and since the Iberian prints disappeared or were destroyed as a result of the expulsion, it was the Ashkenazi tradition of transmitting the text of the Talmud that became the dominant one for all Jewry. Similarly, the decision of the Soncino printers to print Rashi on one side of the Talmud text and certain kinds of *Tosafot* on the other side changed the learning habits of all students of Talmud for all times.<sup>27</sup>

The publication by Yeshiva University of Gershon Cohen's fine and beautiful catalog is surely an event worth celebrating. It carries incunabula research substantially forward, and we hope that it will help to provide inspiration and serve as the stimulus for further study of this multifaceted topic.

The people who made this great achievement possible deserve the gratitude of all lovers of the Hebrew book.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See *Areshet* (added t.p.: *Aresheth*), vol. 1, 1958, pp. 484–485.

<sup>2</sup>Lazarus Goldschmidt, *Hebrew incunables; a bibliographical essay*. Oxford, 1948.

<sup>3</sup>*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 8, 1971, col. 1335–1344.

<sup>4</sup>In the first part of his definitive study on Hebrew incunabula, see *Kiryat Sefer*, vol. 58, 1983, p. 808.

<sup>5</sup>See Sh. Simonsohn in *Kiryat Sefer* (added t.p.: *Kirjath Sepher*), vol. 37, 1961, pp. 106–107.

<sup>6</sup>On the Vatican, see Tishby's article quoted in note 4, pp. 853–857; on the Rosenthaliana, see A. K. Offenberger in *Studia Rosenthaliana*, vol. 5, 1971, p. 125; and on the Bibliothèque Nationale, see Israel Adler, *Les incunables hébraïques de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. Paris, 1962.

<sup>7</sup>Gershon Cohen, *Hebrew incunabula; Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica-Judaica, Yeshiva University*. New York, 1984.

<sup>8</sup>F. R. Goff, *Incunabula in American libraries; a third census*. New York, 1964, pp. 316–325.

<sup>9</sup>Cohen, op. cit., pp. 39–43.

<sup>10</sup>ib., p. 11; see Michael Pollak, "The daily performance of a printing press in 1476, evidence from a Hebrew incunabula," in: *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 1974, pp. 66–76 and Avraham Rosenthal's remarks in *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 1979, pp. 39–50 (the translation of the colophon is on p. 42).

<sup>11</sup>Moses Marx in *The Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, English section, New York, 1950, pp. 481–501 and see now Tishby's article quoted in note 4.

<sup>12</sup>See Tishby, op. cit., p. 815.

<sup>13</sup>See *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, vol. 2, 1955, p. 12 and esp. p. 19, note 22.

<sup>14</sup>David B. Ruderman, *The world of a Renaissance Jew: the life and thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol*. Cincinnati, 1981, pp. 10–11.

<sup>15</sup>See Sonne in his article quoted in note 13, p. 19, note 23.

<sup>16</sup>See Ruderman, op. cit., ib.

<sup>17</sup>ib., p. 22.

<sup>18</sup>See Isaac Zeev Kahana, *Ha-defus be-halakha*, in: *Sinai*, vol. 16, 1944–45, pp. 49–61.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted by Cohen, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>20</sup>R. Bonfil, *The Rabbinate in Renaissance Italy*. Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 174–179.

<sup>21</sup>See A. Marx, "The Choice of books by the printers of incunabula," in: *To Dr. R. [A. S. W. Rosenbach]*. Philadelphia, 1946, pp. 154–173.

<sup>22</sup>Abraham Berliner, *Ueber den Einfluss des ersten hebraeischen Buchdrucks auf den Cultus and die Cultur der Juden*, published originally in 1893–1894 and translated and published in his *Ketavim nivharim*, vol. 2, Jerusalem, 1949, pp. 113–143.

<sup>23</sup>See his "Tiyulim be-historiyah u-ve-bibliyografiyah," in: *The Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew section, New York, 1950, pp. 209–235.

<sup>24</sup>See his introduction to *Responsa of R. Solomon ben Abraham Adret; first edition, Rome ca. 1470*. Jerusalem, 1976.

<sup>25</sup>See his *S'ridei Bavli; an historical and bibliographical introduction*. New York, 1979.

<sup>26</sup>ib.

<sup>27</sup>See E. E. Urbach, *The Tosaphists*. 4th edition. vol. 1, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 29–31.

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