

RARE BOOKS

What Makes a Hebrew Book Rare?

Excerpts from an Essay by Israel Mehlman*

Translated by
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At the request of the New York Metropolitan Area Chapter of AJL, Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, Librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary, presented an introductory lecture on rare Hebraica at the Spring 1986 AJL/NYMA meeting. In his talk, entitled "What Makes a Hebrew Book Rare," Dr. Schmelzer referred to an essay by Israel Mehlman as the framework for his remarks. The article which follows is a translation of sections from Mehlman's Hebrew essay, with notes based upon Dr. Schmelzer's remarks.

Definitions of "Rare"

The term "rare" is flexible and varied in its meaning. It may refer to a book which is unavailable in the literary market and difficult to acquire. Well informed book dealers, past and present, who aim to guide their clients and to improve their book trade use the term in this manner. Much may be learned, therefore, from such dealers' lists (e.g., Ephraim Deinard's *'Atikot Yehudah*, Jerusalem 1915, and the various auction catalogs).¹

Another use of the term "rare" denotes books which exist in very few copies, usually in public or outstanding private libraries. Two great bibliographers, Moritz Steinschneider (*Catalogus Librorum Hebraeorum in Bibliotheca Bodleiana*, Berlin, 1852–1860)

*"Sibot li-Nedirut Sefarim 'Ivriyim," by Israel Mehlman, in his: *Genuzot Sefarim: Bibliographical Essays. Jewish National and University Library Press, Jerusalem 1976, pp. 129–40. Translated with the permission of the publisher.*

מהלמן, ישראל, "סיבות לנדירות ספרים עבריים," בתוך: גנזות ספרים: מאמרים ביבליוגרפיים. ירושלים: הוצאת בית הספרים הלאומי והאוניברסיטאי, תשל"ו.

and Joseph Zedner (*Catalogue of the Hebrew Books in the Library of the British Museum*, London, 1867), used this criterion for "rare." Steinschneider tried to identify rarity by degrees: *uncommon, rare, very rare, extremely rare, and one of a kind*, yet he could not avoid some subjectivity in his evaluation. Zedner gave the special designation only to books known to him to have three or fewer extant copies.²

The rarity of books changes from era to era and from place to place. Numerous books designated as rare in Steinschneider's list are not hard to find today, for example, *Shefa Tal* by R. Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz (Hanau 1612). According to Zedner's list, the first printing of the *Shulhan Arukh* of R. Josef Caro is one of a kind, while a number of copies of this print, complete and defective, have since been found.³ In any event, the "unique" do occasionally multiply! Over time, many copies of books once considered rare have been discovered and, on the other hand, books that formerly merited no special mention appear now to be very rare. Surprises are not uncommon. Even recently, previously unknown editions have been found (*Bible*, Venice 1511; *Tractate Berakhot*, Salonica 1580, etc.). Books whose existence and contents were not known to bibliographers have been discovered as well.

With respect to the different value accorded to books in different locations, one extreme but astounding example will suffice. The two first printings of Bahya's commentary to the Torah, one Spanish and one Italian, are both incunabula and very rare, especially the first. A few years ago, an English book dealer found several copies of the first Spanish printing in the Island of Rhodes, and many copies of the Italian edition (Naples, 1492) were found in Yemen, although most were tattered and not complete.

Factors Affecting Rarity

What makes a book, and particularly a Hebrew one, rare? To simplify the discussion, the causes of rarity will be divided into four categories. It should be kept in mind that sometimes a combination of factors explains the rarity of a particular book. The categories are:

1. Time and historical events.
2. Place and the place of printing.
3. Contents of the book.
4. Form of the book.

A fifth factor must also be considered—*sefer u-mazalo*—a book and its fortune.

1. **Time.** Time destroys books, thus reducing their number. The first Hebrew books printed until the year 1500, approximately 200 in number, are almost all rare. The oldest Hebrew book with a recorded printing date, Rashi's commentary to the Torah (Reggio di Calabria 1475), exists today in only one incomplete copy.

The earliest printed books are extremely rare, especially those printed in Spain and Portugal before the expulsion. The time frame for the earliest books should really be extended until 1550, since many books that appeared in the first half of the 16th century are very rare today, as, for example *Sefer Yosippon* (Constantinople 1510), and others printed during this period in Constantinople, Salonica, Prague, Cracow, Augsburg, etc.⁴

It is not time alone which destroys books, but historical events as well, specifically expulsions and persecutions. Owing to the Spanish and Portuguese expulsions of the late 15th century, many collections of Hebrew manuscripts and books were lost. While early prints from all countries are rare, Spanish and Portuguese books almost

disappeared because of these expulsions and the vagaries of travel. Some of the volumes survived in very few copies. Of others, we have only remnants, and sometimes merely fragments of pages. Still other books disappeared entirely, leaving no trace.

During the slaughter of the Jews in Southern Russia in 1648–1649 by Cossacks under Chmielnicki, many communities were destroyed, and with them, their libraries. Some of the printed materials that appeared before and during that time are most rare. Not only did small books disappear almost completely, (e.g., *Tikun Shetarot*, Cracow 1644), but books in large format as well (*Sefer Makabi Yehuda* of R. Yehuda ben Avraham of Posen, Cracow 1545–1546). Many books were again destroyed and burned in Russia at the end of World War I and during the Bolshevik Revolution and the slaughters in the Ukraine. Printed items from that time, both in Hebrew and Yiddish, are very rare.

It is important to note that Hebrew books—both sacred, such as liturgical and Hasidic works—and secular, as for example, *Ga'ash* by Novack (Kiev 1923) and *Ben ha-Zemanim* (Kharkov 1919) that were printed in the Soviet Union, usually in small editions, disappeared almost completely. Obviously, not much is left of the books that appeared in Poland and the Ukraine on the eve of World War II and of the underground literature published during the Nazi occupation—almost all were lost because of the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Cruel edicts of the Catholic Church were responsible for the decimation of collections of Hebrew books. The burning of the *Talmud* and *En Ya'akov* in 1554 is one instance. The elegant Sabbioneta *Talmud* edition which had just appeared, was burned almost in its entirety, and only a few copies of *Tractate Kiddushin* and fragments from several other tractates remain.

Disasters such as earthquakes and fires must also be counted among the events which lead to rarity. For example, *Sefer Zehav Sevah* of R. Shlomo Algazi (Constantinople 1683), was probably brought to Izmir, where, five years later, most copies were lost in an earthquake. Fires in the Jewish neighborhoods of Constantinople, Salonica, Izmir, and Frankfurt destroyed numerous valuable books as well.

2. **Place.** Rarity of books also depends in large measure upon the place of printing. Printers not located in commercial centers (such as Bomberg and Justinian in Venice) and whose product was not aimed for the international market, but rather for the immediate needs of their state or city, printed small numbers of copies. Lady

Reyna, widow of Joseph Nasi and owner of the printing house in Belvedere and later in the village of Kury-Tshesme, near Constantinople (1593–1598), published approximately 20 books, all in limited editions. Several exemplary 16th-century printing houses, all of whose imprints, few as they may be, are extremely rare, deserve mention: Adrianople, Ichenhausen, Oels, Tanhausen, Turin.

Every generation had its shortlived small presses with limited clientele, such as the one in Podberezce (Poland) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.⁵ The press in Cochin (India) functioned for only one year, 1877, and few copies remain of the six small books it produced.

3. **Contents.** What ruins books most is extensive use. In the Mehlman collection, there are three prayer books, not one of which has survived in a complete copy. These are: part of a Sephardic Siddur that includes the *Keter Malkhut* of the Rashbag (Solomon Ibn Gabirol); a Siddur lacking its title page from the house of Kristopoli Di Zanti in Venice (1564); and the beginning of *Siddur Tefilot Kol ha-Shanah* from Salonica (1610). All these are not mentioned in the standard bibliographies.

Prayer books reflecting special local customs no longer practiced have also vanished. The Mahzor according to the Rumanian custom was printed three times: twice in Constantinople, in 1510 and 1576–1577, and once in Venice between 1520 and 1540. Very few copies survived, and of those,

none in their entirety. The same is true for the Siddur according to Aram Zova (or Bene Halaf), which was printed in Venice before 1548 and in 1560. Of the two editions, only a few copies survive—almost all defective. Not only are the old prints rare, but later ones as well. The “Krimchaks” (Crimean Jews) printed the prayers *Ke-Minhag Kafah ve-Karasub* (according to the custom of Kafah and Karasubazar) twice, once in Kale in 1735, and once in Mezyrow in 1792. Very few copies remain of both editions. *Leket ha-Omer*, which used to be recited in Corfu, printed with a Passover *Hagaddah* and its translation into Italian (Venice 1718 and 1780), is also very rare. *Selihot* and *Kinot* that were printed to commemorate specific events are almost all lost, e.g., *Kina 'al Serefat Pozna* (a lament for the burning of Posen, Cracow, ca. 1591).

Tractates of the Talmud that were studied in the Yeshivot suffered a fate similar to that of liturgical books. Early editions of the tractates Berakhot, Shabbat, Bava Kama, Bava Mezia, and Ketubbot have almost disappeared. In this case, extensive use led to the same result as persecutions and burnings. As for old Bibles, especially the Pentateuch and Psalms, although they were regarded as holy both by Jews and non-Jews, and were thus protected from persecutions and fires, almost all disappeared because of much use.

Hasidic books, held very dear by the Hasidic community, also suffered the ravages of use. Those published before 1800 are mostly gone. Especially rare are the first books of tales, such as the Yiddish translations of *Shiv'he ha-Besht* (Korets, Laszczow, etc.).

Secular volumes, especially histories, travel books, and stories, were popular among the masses and disintegrated from use as did religious works. Few copies remain of the first novel in Hebrew, *Amadis de Gaula*, translated from the Spanish by Jacob Algabe and printed in about 1540 in Constantinople. Later works, which appeared in the 17th and 18th centuries are also rare, e.g., *Sefer ha-Galut v'ha-Pedut Yavo'u Bo Kol Si-pure Milhemet Mantuba v'ha-Magefah* (Book of the exile and redemption, including all the tales of the Mantua war and the plague, Venice 1634). Practical books dealing with such matters as dream interpretation, astrology, and popular medicine, as well as calendars printed from the 16th through the 18th centuries, have almost disappeared. Periodicals, even later ones like *Ha-Emet* (Vienna 1877), *Ha-Levanon* (Jerusalem 1864), or *Yehudah vi-Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem 1877–1878) are very rare. Books of this kind suffered from both extensive use and from the apathetic attitude of Torah scholars.



Title page of *Zohar*, Mantua, Italy 1558.

The dangerous combination of extensive use and disparagement, especially by the learned, wreaked havoc with the popular books written for the masses in Yiddish. The "Bikhelekh" did not merit honor or preservation. Stories in prose and rhyme from the 16th and 17th centuries are as rare as important incunabula, and sometimes even more so. Not a single complete copy of the story *Br'ie un Zimre* survives from its first edition (Venice 1597). Stories translated and adapted from foreign languages, e.g., *Ditrikh fun Bern* (Cracow 1597), *Mayse fun Kinig Artus Hof* (Prague, about 1660), *Pariz un Vyene* (Verona 1594), and *Oylenshpigl* (Prague), were opposed by influential rabbis and disappeared almost completely, especially in their first editions. Even a "kosher" book of stories taken from Jewish origins—the *Mayse Bukh*—survives in very few copies in its first edition (Basle 1602).

Occasional poetry in Yiddish that was published in the 17th and 18th centuries in single sheets or thin booklets, about persecutions, edicts, and sad or happy occasions, disappeared or survived in very few copies (M. Steinschneider, *Catalogus Librorum Hebraeorum* I, 3625–3706). Books of ethics in Yiddish, like *Brant-Shpigl*, are extremely rare in all editions. Popular medical books, such as *Kunstkikhil un Vayberhilf* (Amsterdam 1718), or *Be'er Mayim Hayim* of R. Yisachar Teler (Prague, after 1657), survive in very few copies.

Books written in other popular Jewish dialects, especially Ladino, experienced the same fate as Yiddish works.

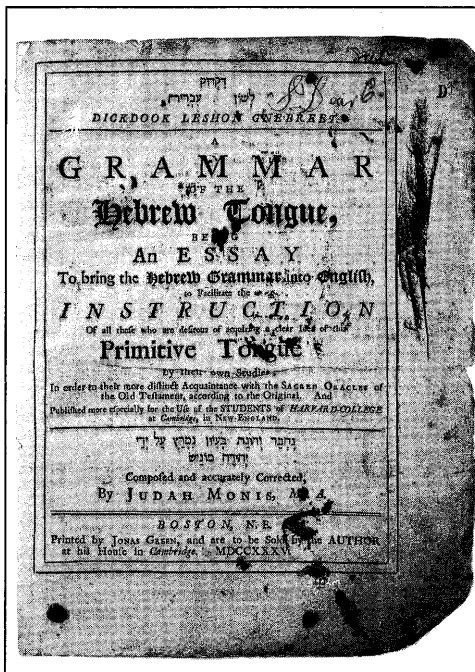
Parodies and other kinds of humorous works that were considered the fruit of levity did not last, due to extensive use and destruction. And again, not the earliest parodies, like *Masekhet Purim* (Pisaro 1513; Venice 1553), or *Mile Di-Bedihuta Li Yeme Hanukah* (Venice 1617), but also later ones from the 18th century are very rare.

The literature of disputes and controversies suffered persecution, excommunication, and destruction. Polemical books, and especially polemical pamphlets and proclamations, were destroyed when they fell into the hands of adversaries. Almost all the works of R. Jacob Emden and his students that dealt with the controversy with R. Jonathan Eybeschuetz are very rare, specifically *Sefer Shevirat Luhot ha-Aven* (Zolkiew 1756), *Bet Yehonatan ha-Sofer* (Altona), etc.

During the serious controversy over the growth and spread of the Hasidic movement, many books of its opponents, the Mitnagdim, were burned. This is true especially of works by the students of the Gaon of Vilna, such as *Zemir Aritsim* (Olexnitz 1772). Even writings reflecting controversies

amongst the different Hasidic sects in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the one between Sanz and Sadgora, became very rare. Several works of propaganda that appeared at the beginning of the Zionist movement are rare today, as, for example, *Mekits Nirdamim* (Cracow 1913). Many polemical books dealing with specific communities or personalities that were printed about 100 years ago are rare, e.g., arguments regarding the rabbinical seat in Hebron.⁶

4. **Form.** A general rule obtains: small books, both small in format, and having few pages—thin brochures and single sheets—get lost, sometimes only a few years after their publication. The thousands of works that appeared as single sheets, or two to three pages, are extremely rare. These include *Takanot* (statutes or regulations), Rabbinic decisions, poetry, proclamations, etc. Another factor relating to format which makes books rare is poor printing. Faulty print makes legibility difficult, and results in disparagement of the book.⁷



Title page of *A Grammar of the Hebrew Tongue*, by Judah Monis, Boston, Massachusetts, 1735.

5. **Mazal (Fortune).** A particular fate has befallen works whose publication was never completed. These remained defective, and were considered insignificant and therefore unworthy of preservation. On occasion, we find only remnants of books, sometimes only a few pages, and the assumption is that their printing was stopped in the middle. There are numerous books of this kind cited in A.M. Habermann's "Ha-Kol Talui be-Mazal, Afilu Sefer" ("Ill-starred books," *Aresheth* 1961, pp. 102–143.)

Few complete copies remain of works that were printed in successive parts rather than all at one time. Books of responsa were occasionally printed in limited numbers for the few people who were interested. A pamphlet of responsa by Rabbi Shemuel Azariah Roedelsheim—was apparently printed in an edition of 20 copies (Amsterdam 1898), and—perhaps a "record"—S.Y. Agnon published his *Ha-Mitpahat* in 1933 in Jerusalem, in an edition of 13 copies.

In recent decades, several books have appeared in limited "collector's" editions. A number of attractive works of this sort were published by Mossad Bialik in Jerusalem. Poetic works of unknown poets may appear in small editions and, with the passage of time, when a poet achieves fame, it becomes apparent that the first edition of his work is very rare.

There are some books whose first, original editions are very hard to obtain. An original copy of the book *Me'or 'Enayim* of Rabbi Azariah de Rossi (Mantua 1574) is one of the rarest. Six pages were replaced by the author with revised versions because of challenges and attacks by zealous rabbis, and the original pages are not to be found. Towards the end of the book, two extra pages were printed, of which only two copies are known to exist. In all the large public library collections, there is no original whole copy of this book, except for the Mehlman collection in Jerusalem's National Library. [An essay on this edition of the book is contained in Mehlman's *Genuzot Sefarim*, p. 21–39.—Ed.]

Notes

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¹Only 200 copies of Deinard's catalog were printed. The original edition has itself become rare, and was recently reprinted along with other bookdealers' catalogs.

²Recent lists of rare books which deserve mention are Herbert Zafren's "Printed Rarities in the Hebrew Union College Library," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* vol. 5 (1961), pp. 137–156 and *Ginze Yisrael*, Jerusalem 1984. This last, prepared by Isaac Yudlov, is a catalog of the Israel Mehlman collection which was presented to the Jewish National and University Library. It is elegantly printed and contains up-to-date, reliable, and extensive information on rare books.

(Continued on p. 107, column 3)

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Acceptance Speech by the Recipient of the Judaica Reference Book Award

Irene Heskes
Forest Hills, N.Y.

Thank you all for this wonderful endorsement of my lifelong dedication to the subject of Jewish music. It is a particular satisfaction to be honored by the Jewish librarians who labor in behalf of the creation, preservation and dissemination of the printed word in Jewish life. Beyond this honor to me and to my book, I believe that the award also pays a tribute to Jewish music itself, as a topic that is important to Judaic literature and learning. Not only the domain of the cantor and folksinger, Jewish music may rightfully take its place within the purview of Jewish education and scholarship, of research and history, of tradition and culture. We Jews are a specially musical people and throughout our history, melody along with text/words have had a creative partnership in ensuring our survival. Indeed for the Jewish people, the concept of music is central to the human spirit—for music, as we recognize it, is both the most universal and yet most personal of all God's gifts to mankind. For us, over the millennia, it has served to express spiritual matters and chronicle the calendar of the year and the cycle of life, and to bind us in historical continuity from past into present and forward to the timeless future ahead. But most of all, Jewish music is the essence of our Jewish selves. The Yiddish writer Isaac Loeb Peretz has left us with his description of such a personalized music: "For each

man is a musical instrument and the life of man is a song, whether a joyous or a sad song. When a man completes his song, it leaves his body and this song—this life-soul—joins a great chorus before Almighty God. But if a man live without a song, without a melody of his soul, his life has been a mere screech, a sigh, a cry-out; it has been no life at all. Without his special song, he has not lived truly a life."³

Thank you again for this honor to me and my book, and best of all, to the field of Jewish music.

³Peretz, I.L. "Mishnas Khsidim." In his: *Ale Verk*, vol. IV: *Khsidish*. New York: CYCO, 1947, p. 180.

פרץ, י.ל., "משנת חסידים." אין זיין: אַלע ווערק
בד. 4: חסידיש. ניו יאָרק: ציקא, 1947.

An active lecturer, Irene Heskes' two currently requested topics are: "The Evidence Lives On: Holocaust Songs as Historical Documents" (with music illustrations) and "Yiddish Popular Songs on the Bowery at the Turn of the Century: The Great 'Eili Eili' Controversy" (based upon current work in progress for a book to be published by the Library of Congress).

Schmelzer (Continued from p. 104)

³A clue to ascertaining whether or not a book is rare is to check Ch. B. Friedberg's *Bet Eked Sepharim*, 2nd ed., Tel Aviv, 1951. If Friedberg does not indicate pagination, it usually means that he did not see a copy of the book, and it is probably rare.

⁴The year 1600 has often been used as a cut-off date for rarity based on age alone. When it moved into its new quarters, the Jewish Theological Seminary Library set the date 1750 for inclusion of materials in its rare collections, allowing for such exceptions as Americana, where later dates are used as criteria.

⁵Hayim Liberman in his *Ohel Rachel* (Brooklyn, N.Y. 1980) deals with the obscure Eastern European presses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

⁶For a discussion of the effects of controversies on Hebrew books, see Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger's *Sefer Va-Sayif* (Book and Sword, New York 1966).

⁷Physical characteristics such as colored paper, vellum leaves, fine bindings, and marginal notes contribute to rarity. Rarities may also be hidden—binding boards should be inspected, especially in the case of oriental prints, as they sometimes contain leaves of rare books or manuscripts.

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