

# EXHIBITION REVIEW: "PRINTING THE TALMUD: FROM BOMBERG TO SCHOTTENSTEIN"

Bruce Nielsen

The recent exhibition mounted by the Yeshiva University Museum, New York, "Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein," was a masterpiece not soon to be challenged for its comprehensive presentation of so many elements illuminating the production and dissemination of the Talmud text during the last five hundred years. Let me be clear from the outset that while I made some modest and late contributions to the catalogue and the exhibition labels, I did not participate in the conceptualization of the exhibition. I am offering here the reflections of an "interested" friend and observer.

The exhibition organizers assembled a once-in-a-lifetime collection of exemplars from all the historical eras of printing of the Talmud, including fragments of the earliest printed tractates deriving from the Iberian Peninsula; the truly magnificent six-volume set of the Talmud printed by Daniel Bomberg in Venice between 1519 and 1543, which has survived as a set since the sixteenth century; early representative texts of the Talmud in translation (the 1705 Latin edition printed by Georg Edzard in Hamburg, or Lazarus Goldschmidt's complete German edition); and the crowning achievement of Schottenstein's seventy-three-volume edition. The museum surrounded these editions with a wide range of complementary

texts, such as a copy of the 1553 edict that actually prohibited and attempted to destroy the very activity explored and exalted by this exhibition, a copy of Johann Reuchlin's contemporary witness to the rapidity with which notice of Bomberg's Italian successes spread throughout Europe, and stand-alone



Bomberg Talmud, six-volume set, Venice, 16th century.  
Courtesy of the Yeshiva University Museum.

commentaries and reference works, many of which were included in later editions of the Talmud.

It is possible to uncover at least three guiding principles exercised by the organizers of the exhibition. First, by viewing more than three dozen Talmud editions in the original and ten editions in translation, printed on four continents, one may trace how printing the Talmud moved from the Iberian Peninsula, around the Mediterranean basin, to Italy, and to the centers of Jewish life throughout Europe, and finally to America, as well as, by necessity, to China. It was not just that the idea of printing spread, but even the typographical equipment, types, ornamentation,

and materials on occasion changed hands and were moved great distances. By a second guiding principle, the organizers of the exhibition included exemplars of more than twenty "firsts": e.g., the first complete printed Babylonian Talmud, the first printed Palestinian Talmud, a tractate from among those first dated, the only tractate printed in Sabbioneta, the first tractate printed in Africa, the first tractate printed in America, the first German and French translations, and so on. Yet, by following a third guiding principle, the organizers did not shrink from treating serious difficulties encountered by printers of the Talmud. While the Church's censorship and destruction was

primary, the disputes between rival Jewish printers the brothers Romm and Samuel Abba and Pinhas Shapira, or between Solomon Proops and efforts led by Judah Aryeh Lieb, also bore on the questions of how, where, and with what success the Talmud was printed.

The overwhelming centrality of the printed Talmud in this exhibition, both in terms of the number of items and physical space devoted to it, was spectacularly framed by earlier and later developments in the publication of the Talmud. From the earlier period the organizers were able to display for the first time outside of Israel the oldest extant Talmudic text, preserved on an exquisite eleven-by-fourteen-foot mosaic floor from the sixth-century synagogue in Beth Shean valley in Rehov, Israel. Correspondingly, with an eye toward the future, the printed Talmud was juxtaposed with a dizzying display of computer applications.

Finally, this exhibition forced viewers to consider what difference the media makes in how the Talmud was, and is, studied: a floor is not

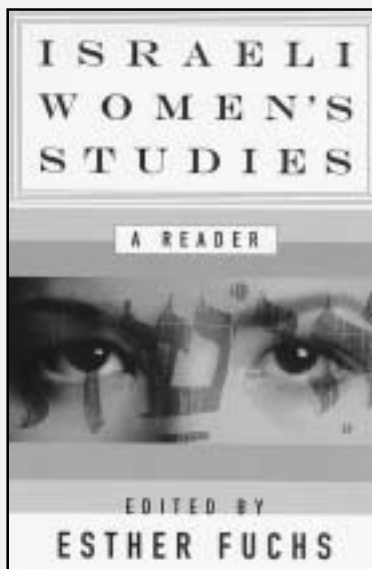
portable and to consult the Talmud, a student needed to walk perhaps a great distance; a manuscript was easy to transport but was subject to scribal error and change and depended on other codices to provide commentaries and reference tools; or with the standardization of a page of Talmud in the sixteenth century and the gradual addition of more commentaries, indices, and reference tools suddenly students need not have several volumes open in front of them. The exhibition helps us to think about how each of these steps transformed the means and practice of Talmud study; and yet, at the same time, underscores the fact that the study of the text perseveres through them all.

A comprehensive catalogue, *Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein* (Yeshiva University Museum, 2005) edited by Sharon Liberman-Mintz and Gabriel M. Goldstein, is especially valuable due to the wealth of essays which describe the cultural contexts in which to consider the printed Talmud, its study, and its centrality to Jewish life. Among the essays are three which elucidate the formative period of the Talmud, setting the stage for the printing era. Four essays treat the study of the Talmud in the medieval period and decisions concerning which commentaries and reference tools would be included on a page or at the back of a volume. Three essays focus specifically on the history of the printing of the Talmud during the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. An additional five essays focus on Talmud study since the nineteenth century, including the Talmud in translation, and the emergence of the computer as a valuable tool holding the potential of unlimited contributions for the future.

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