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HOOKED ON AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Dec 06 2006

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One of the most well-kept secrets in Flatbush is the Yosef Goldman Collection of American Jewish Books and Manuscripts. Area residents no doubt would be surprised to learn that this private collection is one of the most comprehensive in the world.

Yosef Goldman looks like many other residents of Brooklyn, unassuming and completely devoid of airs. But just mention to him anything about American Jewish history and you quickly discover his expertise. He recently published the book *Hebrew Printing in America, 1735-1926, A History and Annotated Bibliography*. Once this beautifully illustrated two-volume set appeared, it became *the* resource for information about Hebrew books published in America from the beginnings of Jewish life here through 1926.

How Yosef became a collector of books dealing with American Jewish history is a story that is almost as interesting as the topic itself.

Yosef's father, Rabbi Lipa Goldman, was the rav of Neipest (now known as Újpest, a district of Budapest located on the left bank of the Danube River). Before the German invasion, his father was able to secure papers for the family identifying them as non-Jews - a ruse that enabled them to live on a farm disguised as gentiles and thereby escape deportation by the Nazis.

In 1950, Rav Goldman, his wife, and their eight children arrived in America. Rav Goldman thanked God for bringing him to a land where he was free to choose how he could support his family without necessarily serving as a rabbi. He made his living as a *dayan* and a publisher of books, putting out a *Shas* as well as many individual *seforim*. He also dealt to some extent with used *seforim*. As a result, Yosef grew up in an atmosphere permeated with Jewish books.

The genesis of Yosef's remarkable collection of books and manuscripts was one of pure happenstance. "I always liked old things," he told me. "I ran an ad in the paper looking for old furniture. An old woman in Boston responded telling me that she did not have any furniture for sale, but that she did have bookcases to sell."

Advertisement

Upon arriving at her home Yosef found that her bookcases were filled with many *seforim*. She told him that her late husband was the son of Rav Zalman Friederman, who came to America in 1892 and three years later was called to serve as rabbi of Boston.

Rav Friederman was the son-in-law of Rav Yaakov Lipschitz, who served as secretary to Rav Yitzchak Elchanan.

"The son had inherited these *seforim* from his father," said Yosef. "So I not only bought the bookcases, but I also bought most of the books she had."

Yosef quickly realized there was a market for such books. He began to run ads in newspapers expressing his interest in buying old Jewish books. In the late 1960's there were a number of people - mainly the children of *rabbonim* who had passed away - who had inherited *seforim* from their fathers. Many of them, sadly enough, had no interest in these *seforim* and were happy to sell them.

This became a *parnassah* for Yosef and led to his specific interest in American Jewish history. He started to read about various personalities who had played key roles in American Jewish history. He was hooked.

Yosef told me, "In the 1970's, American Judaica was not really a commodity. People were not very interested in it. I bought and sold all sorts of books and *seforim* that were printed abroad, but I kept most of the things that were printed in America that came my way."

This eventually led to the Yosef Goldman Collection, certainly, as stated above, one of the world's most extensive collections of books about American Jewish history. It includes copies of many books and manuscripts that are available in only a few libraries anywhere.

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First Hebrew Handwriting In America

At one point during our interview I asked Yosef to show me the oldest thing he had related to American Jewish history. He casually picked up a very old-looking *sefer* that had been lying on his desk.

"This is a Paris *Tanach*, published in 1556," he informed me. "Written in English on the title page is the name Moses Hart. In Hebrew his name was Moshe Tzvi. In the middle of this *sefer* in a few places he signed it in Hebrew and wrote 'here in the city of NY, 1743.' His son also signed it in Hebrew, 'Yitzchok the son of Moshe Tzvi, 1748 from the city of Lisa' (Poland)."

Growing increasingly enthusiastic as he discussed the book, Yosef drew my attention to the handwritten notations.

"Take a look at this signature written fluently in a beautiful Ashkenazic script! You can see from it that Moshe Hart could write Hebrew beautifully. This signature is the oldest Hebrew script that we have on any *klei kodesh* from America!"

I asked him what he knew about Moses Hart. He told me that a Yitzchok Rivkin, who many years ago was a librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote an article in 1937 about the oldest Hebrew writing that existed in America at that time. It was a *Tosephos Kesuva* written by a Samuel Levy in 1718. Levy's writing was also in a beautiful Ashkenazic script.

"In this *Tosephos Kesuva*, Levy designates who the money should be given to," Yosef explained. "Most of it was to go to his wife, but some of the money was to be given to Levy's niece's husband - Moshe Tzvi, Moses Hart! So the oldest writing that we had at one time mentions the name of Moshe Tzvi. I say *had*, because today we no longer have this *Kesuva*. JTS does not have it, and no one knows what happens to it. Therefore, the oldest Hebrew handwriting that we have from America is what is in this 1556 Paris *Tanach*."

Yosef told me he purchased this *Tanach* at a Manhattan auction not long ago. There was only one other bidder, and he did not really know what this *sefer* represented historically. It is hard to describe the pleasure Yosef takes in owning this link to our Jewish past. The same can be said for many of the other items in his collection. To Yosef, each rare book and manuscript has a personality that he relishes.

Yosef suspects that there may well be other books still extant from before 1743. "After all," he said, "the first Jews who came to New York from Recife, Brazil, must have brought *seforim* with them. There were no wars here, no devastation. Things could very well still be around waiting to be discovered."

First Translation Of The Machzor

When I asked Yosef how many volumes he has in his collection, he could only venture an educated guess. "A few thousand - manuscripts, notes, books, etc. Anything that I find that was published up until 1926."

Yosef showed me a copy of a "volume [that] contains the first translation of the Jewish liturgy into English issued for a Jewish audience." *Evening Service of Roshashanah, and Yom Kippur, or the Beginning of the Year, and the Day of Atonement* was authored by Isaac Pinto and printed in 1761. Copies of this book are extremely rare; as far as anyone knows, there are only two other copies still extant.

(Considerable information about this book is to be found page 37 of *Hebrew Printing in America*. There one can see a copy of the title page as well as another page from the book.)

Evidence Of A Forgotten Jewish Community

The first Jewish community in the New World was established in Recife, Brazil in 1630 when the Dutch conquered part of Brazil from the Portuguese. This community ceased to exist in 1654 when the Portuguese reconquered this area. (See "Recife - The First Jewish Community in the New World" at http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19153/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_%28Part_3%29.html)

Yosef pointed out to me that there was at least one other Jewish community in Brazil. He brought out a copy of *Sefer Shefa Tal*, a kabbalistic volume that was printed in Hanau, Germany in 1612. It contains a handwritten statement of ownership by a Rabbi Jacob Lugarto of a congregation in Tamarica, Brazil. Rabbi Lugarto came to Brazil as a young man and was the author of a volume of aphorisms (copies of which, evidently, no longer exist). The book he showed me is our only physical link to this Jewish community, since there are no other known artifacts from it.

Isaac Leeser

Asked whom he considers the most important American Jewish personality of the nineteenth century, Yosef did not even hesitate. "Isaac Leeser," he said, without a trace of doubt.

Isaac Leeser was born in Neunkirchen, in the province of Westphalia, Prussia, on Dec. 12, 1806, and died in Philadelphia on Feb. 1, 1868. He received a good Hebrew and secular education as a youth and emigrated to America at the age of seventeen. For several years he worked in his uncle's business in Richmond, Virginia. In 1829 he became the cantor of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia and held that position until 1850.

Rev. Leeser was a visionary in all things Jewish. In addition to being a cantor, he was an author, preacher, translator, editor, and publisher. He introduced the giving of an English discourse during services on *Shabbos* at Mikveh Israel. He was a strong proponent of Jewish education for youth, and one of the few of that era who saw that a proper Jewish education could only be given in a "day school" environment.

In short, he was the most active proponent for Orthodoxy in America during his lifetime.

Rev. Leeser pioneered the publishing of many religious Jewish books. His publications

included translations of the *siddur* into English, a Hebrew spelling book, a Jewish Catechism, his discourses, and a translation of the entire *Chumash* into English. He began publishing the Jewish monthly journal *The Occident* in 1843 and served as its editor until his death.

The reader should keep in mind that all of these endeavors broke new ground in the United States. Further, Rev. Leeser had to overcome considerable obstacles while he pursued his varied activities. He was an idealist who devoted himself totally to the preservation of Orthodoxy in America. To do justice to his life would require a lengthy article unto itself, and it is this author's plan to publish such an article in a future issue of *The Jewish Press*.

Magnum Opus

Yosef spent about 15 years writing *Hebrew Printing in America, 1735-1926, A History and Annotated Bibliography*. Previously he had published catalogues dealing with, among other subjects, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and Jewish children's books.

"I have a problem with the way books about books are written," he told me. "Ordinary reference books are written strictly for 'book' people. They describe the physical features of a book. My book about Hebrew books gives all of this and more.

"I have tried also to include the 'environment' in which the book was published. How does a given book fit historically with other books published at the same time? What motivated the author to write the book? These sorts of things give one a 'feel' for the 'soul' of a book beyond its physical characteristics.

"My book tells you how a given book fits into American Jewish culture. It is not strictly for 'book' people. Anyone interested in American Jewish history will benefit from reading my book."

Yosef's book catalogues more than 1,200 items, covering all Hebrew books published in America prior to 1926. As one can imagine, a prodigious amount of research went into the preparation of this work. He was in contact with libraries throughout the world in order to guarantee accuracy.

Books are categorized by subject. The sections include Bible, Liturgy, Haggadah, Christian Hebraism, Bible Studies, Reference Works, Education and Pedagogy, Drama, Fiction, Humor and Poetry, Bibliography and History, Rabbinica, Derash, Periodicals, Zionism, Miscellaneous, Christian and Missionary, Americana, as well as an Addendum.

Many of the sections have interesting historical introductions that provide the reader unusual insight into the listed books. Wherever possible there is a picture of the title page of each book. In many cases there is also a picture of a page or two from the book under discussion.

America And The Jews

At the conclusion of our interview Yosef noted that until the establishment of the state of Israel, no country in the world other than the United States had welcomed Jews from the day of its founding.

"Our first president, George Washington, wrote a laudatory letter to the synagogues that were in existence during his presidency expressing his belief that Jews were free to practice their religion in America," he said.

"Jews have been unbelievably fortunate to live in a country where this positive approach to religious freedom has continued uninterrupted until today."

Dr. Yitzchok Levine, a frequent contributor to The Jewish Press, is a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. His monthly Jewish Press feature "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at ilevine@stevens.edu.

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amazing bibliophile

Date 05:04, 04-12, 09

What an amazing man and what an incredible pair of books with "Hebrew Printing in America, 1735-1926". Perhaps one day when I become more rich than Tevye, it will be possible to buy the set for the Vilnius Jewish Library.

Wyman Brent

shammes

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