

Hooked on American Jewish History

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Introduction

Editor's Note: This article is based on an interview with Reb Yosef Goldman.

A Secret in Flatbush

Most people are not aware that there is a well-kept secret in Flatbush. It is the Yosef Goldman Collection of American Jewish Books and Manuscripts. Residents of Flatbush would probably be surprised to learn that this private collection is one of the largest in the world. Who is Yosef Goldman and what is the story behind his remarkable collection?

Yosef Goldman is a man who looks like many other residents of Brooklyn. He is unassuming and completely devoid of airs. Yet, if you happen to mention anything about American Jewish history to him, you will discover he is an expert in this subject. He recently published the book **Hebrew Printing in America, 1735 – 1926, A History and Annotated Bibliography**. As soon as this beautifully illustrated two volume set appeared, it became *the* resource for information about Hebrew books printed in America until 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.

Collecting Books

Yosef's father, Rabbi Lipa Goldman, was the Rov of Neipest (now known as Újpest) in Hungary. Today Újpest is a district of Budapest located on the left bank of the Danube River. Yosef was born in Hungary in 1942. Before the German invasion of Hungary his father was able to secure papers for his family showing that they were non-Jews, enabling them to live in disguise as Gentiles on a farm and therefore escape deportation by the Nazis. In 1950 Rav Goldman, his wife, and eight children arrived in America. Rav Goldman's coming to America was considered so newsworthy that the New York Times carried an article about the arrival of a "well-known European Rov" containing a picture of the entire family.

Upon arriving in America Rav Goldman thanked HaShem for bringing him to a land where he was free to choose how he could earn a living without necessarily becoming a rabbi. He made his living serving as a Dayan and as a publisher of books. He published a

shas as well as many other seforim. He also dealt to some extent with used seforim. As a result, Yosef grew up in an atmosphere permeated with an interest in Jewish books.

Yosef's personal journey that led to his interest in Jewish books resulted from the following incident. "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." Upon arriving at her home Yosef found that her bookcases were filled with many seforim. She told him that her husband, who had passed away, was the son of Rav Zalman Friederman, Z"L. Rav Friederman came to America in 1892 and, in 1895, 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 Yitzchok Elchonon.

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

Buying, Selling and Collecting

Yosef then realized that there was a market for such books. He began to run ads in newspapers saying that he was interested in buying old Jewish books. In the late 1960s there were a number of people, 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 then became a *parnasah* for Yosef and led to his specific interest in American Jewish history. He then started to read about various personalities who had played key roles in American Jewish history: he was hooked!

Yosef told me, "In the 1970s 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. It is most certainly one of the most extensive collections of books about American Jewish history in the world. It contains copies of many books and manuscripts available in only a few libraries throughout the world. Let me give a few examples.

The First Hebrew Handwriting in America

At one point during my interview with Yosef I asked him, "What is the oldest thing that you have relating to American Jewish history?" He casually picked up a very old looking sefer lying on his desk. "This is a Paris Tanach, published in 1556. 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).

“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 then asked him if he knew something 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 the 1910s or 1920s about the oldest Hebrew writing that existed in America at that time. It was a Tosephos Kesuva written by a Samuel Levy in 1719 or 1720. Levy’s writing was also in a beautiful Ashkenazic script.

“In this Tosephos Kesuva Levy designates who the money should be given to. Most of it was to go to his wife, but some of the money was to be given to Levy’s sister’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 this Kesuva, and no one knows what happened to it. Therefore, the oldest Hebrew handwriting that we have from America is what is in this 1556 Paris Tanach.”

Yosef told me that he had bought 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 that Yosef has in owning this link to our Jewish past. The same can be said for many of the other articles in his collection. To him each rare book and manuscript has a personality that he relishes.

Yosef then went on to tell me 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.”

The First Translation of the Machzor

As I stated, Yosef Goldman is indeed an avid collector of American Judaica. When I asked him how many volumes he had in his collection, he gestimated, “A few thousand, manuscripts, notes, books, etc. I collect 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, and, as far as any one knows, there are only two other copies of this book still extant. Considerable information about this book is to be found page 37 of Yosef Goldman’s **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

Many people are aware that 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**, [http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19153/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_\(Part_3\).html](http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19153/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_(Part_3).html)). Yosef pointed out to me that there was at least one other Jewish community in Brazil. He showed me 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 that is no longer extant. 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

If you ask Yosef Goldman who he considers to be the most important American Jewish personality of the nineteenth century, he will immediately reply “Isaac Leeser.” Isaac Leeser was born at Neunkirchen, in the province of Westphalia, Prussia, on Dec. 12, 1806 and died at Philadelphia, Pa., 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, VA. In 1829 he became the *Hazan* of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. He served in this position until 1850.

Reverend Leeser was a visionary in all things Jewish. Besides being a *Hazan*, 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 at the time 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 life time.

Isaac 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. Furthermore, Reverend 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 will require an article unto itself. It is this author’s plan to publish such an article in a future issue of the Jewish Press.

A Magnum Opus

Yosef spent about 15 years writing his book **Hebrew Printing in America, 1735 – 1926, A History and Annotated Bibliography**. Previously he had published catalogues dealing with Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Jewish children's books, etc. "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' 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 this topic will benefit from reading my book."

Yosef's book covers **all** Hebrew books published in America until 1926. Over 1200 books are catalogued. As one can imagine, a tremendous amount of research went into the preparation of this work. He has been in contact with libraries throughout the world in order to guarantee accuracy.

Books are categorized by subject. These include sections dealing with 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 sections have interesting historical introductions that give the reader unusual insight into the books to be dealt with. 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. Yosef Goldman has indeed made a valuable contribution to Jewish scholarship.

America and the Jews

At the conclusion of my interview Yosef pointed out to me that until the founding of Israel no other country in the world, other than the United States, has welcomed Jews from the day of its founding. "Our first president George Washington wrote a laudatory letter to each synagogue that existed during his presidency expressing his belief that Jews were free to practice their religion in America. We are indeed fortunate to live in such a country where we are free to practice Judaism openly."