

# Hebrew Incunabula in the National Library of Israel as a Source for Early Modern Book History in Europe and Beyond

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**Abstract** Hebrew incunabula from the collection of the National Library of Israel contain a vast amount of manuscript annotations, many of them of historical, philological, linguistic, and palaeographical interest. The paper presents a few examples of owners' notes that shed light on the history of books in early modern Jewish communities. From the book owned by the well-known rabbi Moses Alashkar, to a reference to the participation of rabbi Mordecai Dato in a family ceremony, and the extensive glosses of Samuel Lerma, to the joyful message of an unnamed Jew whose daughter had been released from captivity. Such material is a valuable resource for research on the distribution and use of early Hebrew printed books in Europe and beyond.

**Keywords** Hebrew incunabula. Early modern book history. Notes of ownership. Deeds of sale. Handwritten inscriptions. National Library of Israel.

**Summary** 1 Hebrew Incunabula. – 2 National Library of Israel. – 3 From Portugal to Yemen: Copy Owned by Moses Alashkar. – 4 Multiple Notes of Ownership. – 5 Mordecai Dato in a Family History. – 6 Glosses of Samuel Lerma. – 7 On Release from Confinement. – 8 Conclusion.



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## 1 Hebrew Incunabula<sup>1</sup>

The art of printing reached the Jewish world already within a generation after Gutenberg's epochal invention. The first dated Hebrew incunabulum was printed in 1475 in Reggio di Calabria; however, a few years earlier several Hebrew books had appeared in print without indication of date. Although these pioneering editions make up a considerable group of books, perhaps too many to make it difficult to see them as just "a series of experiments",<sup>2</sup> the first appearance of a date in the 1475 book can be seen as a landmark for Hebrew printing. The first two dated incunabula belonging to the Sephardic (Spanish) as well as the Ashkenazi (Franco-German) traditions appeared, both in Italy, in 1475, and even the first attempt to use Hebrew characters in a Latin incunabulum is found in an anti-Jewish treatise by Petrus Nigri published in Esslingen in the same year.<sup>3</sup>

Although, within Christian Europe, the use of Hebrew letters in fifteenth-century printing can be traced as far north as the Netherlands,<sup>4</sup> all currently known Hebrew incunabula were printed in Southern Europe: in Italy, in the Iberian peninsula before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497, and one book in Ottoman Constantinople printed by Jews expelled from Spain. Early Hebrew printing is a well-known subject of historical and bibliographical research,<sup>5</sup> but the further history of the surviving copies of Hebrew incunabula in the early modern period deserves its own investigation.

This paper presents examples of manuscript inscriptions found in the Hebrew incunabula kept in the National Library of Israel (NLI) in Jerusalem. A colourful collection of personal names and geographical places, book prices and historical events, textual glosses and marginal translations enrich our knowledge of the distribution and use of early modern books. We can see that some Hebrew incunabula were

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**1** This article is the result of research carried out within the framework of the 15cBOOKTRADE project (University of Oxford) led by Cristina Dondi. The findings are recorded in the Material Evidence in Incunabula (MEI) database hosted and maintained by the Consortium of European Research Libraries. We would like to thank Dr Ilana Tahan, Lead Curator Hebrew and Christian Orient Collections, The British Library, for her revision of the English translation of the handwritten notes in incunabula, which have been transcribed and translated from Hebrew by the Author of the article.

**2** Iakerson, "That Pivotal Year", 71.

**3** Iakerson, "That Pivotal Year", 83-5. Nigri, Petrus, *Contra perfidos Judaeos de conditionibus veri Messiae*. Esslingen: Conrad Fyner, 6 June 1475. Folio and 4<sup>o</sup>. 50 leaves. GW M27101; ISTC in00257000.

**4** Offenberg, *A Choice of Corals*, 166-82.

**5** A summary description of the incunabula held in public libraries is given by Offenberg, *Hebrew Incunabula*. Detailed catalogue descriptions can be found in, for example, Iakerson, *Catalogue of Hebrew Incunabula*.

printed in Italy and stayed there for almost half a millennium, while others only a few decades after being printed found their way from Portugal to the Levant. Some books circulated in Europe and some arrived as far afield as Persia or Yemen.

## 2 National Library of Israel

The National Library of Israel is a rather young institution: it was established in Jerusalem at the end of the nineteenth century. Since 1892 it accumulated both new and rare books published in various parts of the Jewish world. Over the years its collection of Hebrew incunabula became one of the most important in the world.<sup>6</sup> Today the vast majority of the Hebrew books printed in the fifteenth century are represented by at least one copy in Jerusalem; some of them are unique or extremely rare editions.<sup>7</sup> Altogether there are approximately two hundred volumes, including fragmentary copies. Among the main donors, we can mention the German Jewish businessman and publisher Salman Schocken who donated his numerous incunabula in the 1930s. The latest acquisition of the library is the main part of the Valmadonna collection, the largest private assortment of Hebrew manuscripts and printed books, among which there are some important incunabula; it was purchased in 2016.

The recent history of the NLI Hebrew incunabula was described in an article about the creation of this collection.<sup>8</sup> Its multiple sources explain the richness and diversity of the records of ownership throughout the centuries which are found in the volumes. A number of notes written in early modern times can also shed some light on these books' long history.

## 3 From Portugal to Yemen: Copy Owned by Moses Alashkar

An example of a Hebrew incunabulum with a remarkable history is a copy of the Former Prophets printed in three volumes in 1494 in Leiria, Portugal. It arrived in the NLI with numerous other rare items upon the death of the distinguished scholar and book collector Abraham Shalom Yahuda (1877-1951).<sup>9</sup> The first volume contains the books

<sup>6</sup> The early history of NLI is studied by Schidorsky, *Sifriya ve-sefer*. On the search for Jewish books after the Holocaust and their arrival at NLI cf. Schidorsky, *Gevilim nisrafim*.

<sup>7</sup> The general corpus of Hebrew incunabula in Israel, mostly in NLI, was described by Tishby, "Ha-inkunabulim ha-ivriyim".

<sup>8</sup> Richler-Grebler, Prebor, "Yetzirato shel osef".

<sup>9</sup> On Yahuda and his collection cf. Ukeles, "Abraham Shalom Yahuda".



**Figure 1** Moses Alashkar, note of ownership, end of 15th or early 16th century. Jerusalem, NLI, RI Yah. A 5 (*Neviim Rishonim*, Leiria 1494, vol. 1), f. 1.1.r. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel

of Joshua and Judges, and on its first blank page, there is a note of ownership of Moses son of Isaac Alashkar, a prominent rabbi and judge who was expelled with other Spanish Jews in 1492, moved to North Africa, from there went to Ottoman lands and finally to Egypt.<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps the major historical find in the NLI collection: the three volumes belonged to a well-known historical figure and perhaps were in his luggage during his long journey from the shores of the Atlantic to the Levant.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Horodezky, “Alashkar”.

<sup>11</sup> *Neviim Rishonim*. Comm: David Kimhi and Levi ben Gershom. Leiria: [Samuel Dor-tas], 27 Jan.-2 Feb. 1494. Folio. 620 leaves. GW M35717; ISTD ib00525770; MEI 02122479

The text of the note of ownership [fig. 1] can be transcribed and translated as follows:

Miqnat kaspi sheli ani moshe al-ashqar ben yitzhaq y[ishmereni] tz[uri] v[e-goali] ha-dayan al-ashqar, ve-shalom al yisrael amen.

Purchased with my money, I, Moses Alashkar, son of the Judge Isaac Alashkar, may my Rock and Redeemer keep me, and peace to Israel, amen.

However, the journey of the three volumes was even longer than that with Alashkar: two centuries later they were bought in Yemen. Two deeds of sale from the mid-eighteenth century are written in Yemenite script and contain names of well-known Yemenite Jewish families [fig. 2]. Although partially erased, a common feature in many notes of ownership, they provide the names of the two parties involved in the transaction, the witnesses, and also the price. The first one begins:

Zikhron edut. Li le-miqne, le-olam yikhtov adam shemo al sifro shema yavo adam rasha min ha-shuq ve-yomar sheli hu, qaniti ze ha-hefetz asher hu shelosha sefarim sefer yehoshua ve-sefer shofetim ve-sefer shemuel ve-sefer melakhim u-mishna kaf nahat be-arbaa qurush va-reva hajar min salam al-gav'i ani yosef [ib]n david al-madai ve-a[men] k[en] y[ihye] r[atzon] me-harutz ve-kan yom hamishi shelishi be-adar sheni shenat b.s.

Testimony record of my purchase. A man should always write his name on his book lest a wicked person should come from the market saying it was his. I, Joseph son of David al-Madai bought this item [consisting of] three books - Book of Joshua and Book of Judges, and Book of Samuel, and Book of Kings - and Mishnah with [the commentary] Kaf Nachat for four and a quarter silver kurush from Salam al-Gav'i. Amen, may it be His will... on Thursday the 3rd of the second month of Adar year 2060 [of the Seleucid era].

The number written for the year is not entirely legible. Perhaps its last character is *mem* rather than *samekh*, which would make it 2040 of the Seleucid era (i.e. 1729 rather than 1749 CE). The letter's shape seems more like *samekh*, with the numerical value of sixty; however the year 2060 does not correspond to the precise date. The second deed of sale, although mostly erased, has an unambiguous date: the 2nd day of the month Shevat, year 2066, which is January 14, 1755. Among the witnesses, we find the names of Ghiyat son of Saliman, Said

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(3 vols: NLI RI Yah. A 5, RI Yah. A 4 and RI Yah. A 3).



Figure 2 Joseph ibn David Almadai, note of ownership, 1749(?). Jerusalem, NLI, RI Yah. A 5 (*Neviim Rishonim*, Leiria 1494, vol. 1), f. 10.8v. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel

son of Harun al-Qadis, Uad son of Saliman. Information on the price is rather interesting: the three volumes of the Leiria edition were sold together with a certain copy of Mishnah for four and a quarter kuruḥ, the highest value silver coin, indicated here as *qirsh hajar*, which means the actual coin and not its value in smaller change.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Tobī, *The Jews of Yemen*, 126.

#### 4 Multiple Notes of Ownership

Sometimes multiple manuscript annotations by different owners in a single copy can be striking, in the way they reveal the particular story of an incunabulum even when all we know about the persons mentioned there is what we get from the inscriptions themselves. As an example of this, there is a copy of the Soncino edition of the Latter Prophets, c. 1485: all its notes of ownership are distributed throughout the volume, at the beginning, at the end, and in the middle, but also by the end of the Book of Jeremiah, which might suggest that perhaps some parts of the book circulated separately.<sup>13</sup>

On the first page, the recto of the first blank folio of Isaiah, we see the rather detailed note of a certain David ben Isaac of Spoleto dated January 31, 1550 [fig. 3]:

Le-h[a-shem] ha-aretz u-meloah. Sheli refael b[en] r[abi] natan z[ekher] tz[adiq] l[i-beracha] mi-perusha. Qenitiv ze ve-ha-heleq sheni mi-yad r[abi] david y[ishmerehu] tz[uro] v[e-goalo] b[en] r[abi] yitzhaq y[ishmerehu] tz[uro] v[e-goalo] mi-spoleti ha-dar ata be-tori bi-sekhar y.b. yulio yetziat yanua[ri] sh.y., yehi ratzon she-ekze lahagot bo ani ve-zar'i, a[men] k[en] y[ihye] r[atzon].

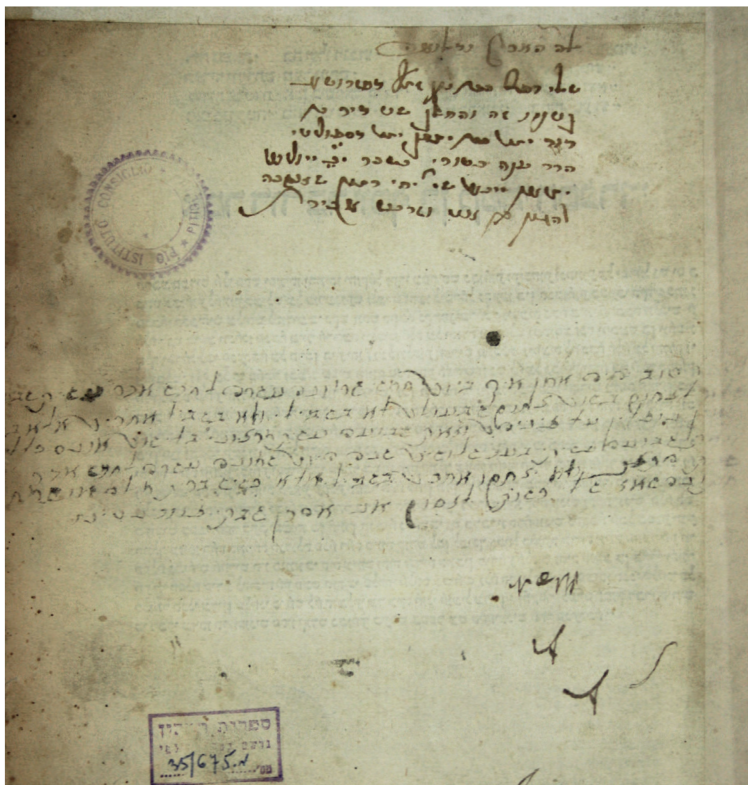
The Earth and everything in it belongs to the Lord. This belongs to me. Raphael son of R. Nathan (may the righteous' memory be blessed) from Perugia. I bought this and the second part from R. David (may his Rock and Redeemer keep him) son of R. Isaac (may his Rock and Redeemer keep him) from Spoleto who lives now in Torri, paying 12 giulii, at the end of January [5]310, let it be His will that I and my offspring be granted the privilege to study it.

The date is given in a style which was fairly common among Italian Jews: the year of the Jewish era from the Creation of the World is accompanied by the exact date according to the Christian (Roman) months. The price of the two parts together was 12 *giulii* (a *giulio* is a double *grosso*); however, it is not clear what the second part mentioned is.

On the same page there is a later (March 5, 1733) and only partially legible inscription, a peculiar ascetic vow:

Eikh be-yom hamishi shmone esre le-hodesh adar asiti shevua she-lo litzhoq be-shum tzhoq she-ba-olam lo bishvili ve-lo bishvil aherim ela... she-ein nofelim al peneihem, ve-zot shevua asiti me-retzoni bli shum ones kelal... ve-zot shevua asiti be-ad sheloshim shana ha-

<sup>13</sup> *Neviim Aharonim*. Comm: David Kimhi. [Soncino: Joshua Solomon Soncino, about 1485]. Folio. GW M35702; ISTC ib00525780; MEI 02123777 (NLI RI 71 A 3499 copy 1).



**Figure 3** Raphael ben Nathan from Perugia, note of ownership, 1550; Aaron Shabtai Fiorentino, oath not to laugh, 1733. Jerusalem, NLI, RI 71 A 3499, copy 1 (*Neviim Aharonim*, Soncino [ca. 1485]), f. 1.1r. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel

yom shemone esre le-hodesh adar... shenat h.t.tz.g, ve-lo yitzhequ aherim bishvili ela keshe-yesh berit mila... hatuna she-az yesh li reshut litzhoq, ani aharon shabtay fiorentino.

On Thursday, the 18th day of Adar, I took this oath not to laugh any laughter in public, neither on my account or that of others, except [...] on the days when we do not fall on our faces and I took this oath willingly, without any coercion [...] and I took this oath to last for thirty years from today, the 18th day of Adar [...] year 5493, and nor will others laugh on my account, except on days of a circumcision [or] a wedding when I have a right to laugh, I, Aaaron Shabtay Florentine.



We can assume that the person who made such a peculiar sort of note was also among the owners of the book. The days without the ritual “falling on one’s face” are mostly Sabbath and Jewish holidays, so it seems that on regular weekdays Aaron Shabtai the Florentine remained unsmiling over thirty long years.

At the end of the book, on its last blank page, three notes of ownership have been written in succession, with the first two crossed out by the later owners [fig. 4]:

Le-h[a-shem] ha-aretz u-meloah. Le-olam yikhtov adam shemo al sifro shema yavo adam min ha-shuq ve-yomar sheli hu, al ken katavti shemi kan. Sheli hu yosef b[en] k[evod] m[orenu] binyamin misqoli. (Emet qene ve-al timkor).

Qinyan kaspi yehuda y[ishmereni] tz[uri] v[e-goali] b[en] k[evod] m[orenu] levi tuluso z[ichrono] l[i-beracha] ha-yom yom h. i.g. adar h.sh.m.h.

Qinyan kaspi avraham tuluso ani shelomo levi ben k[evod] m[orenu] ha-r[av] yitzhaq ha-levi z[ekher] tz[adiq] l[i-beracha].

The Earth and everything in it belongs to the Lord. A man should always write his name on his book lest someone should come from the market saying ‘it’s mine’, this is why I wrote my name here. It is mine, Joseph son of Benjamin from Ascoli. (Buy the truth, and sell it not).

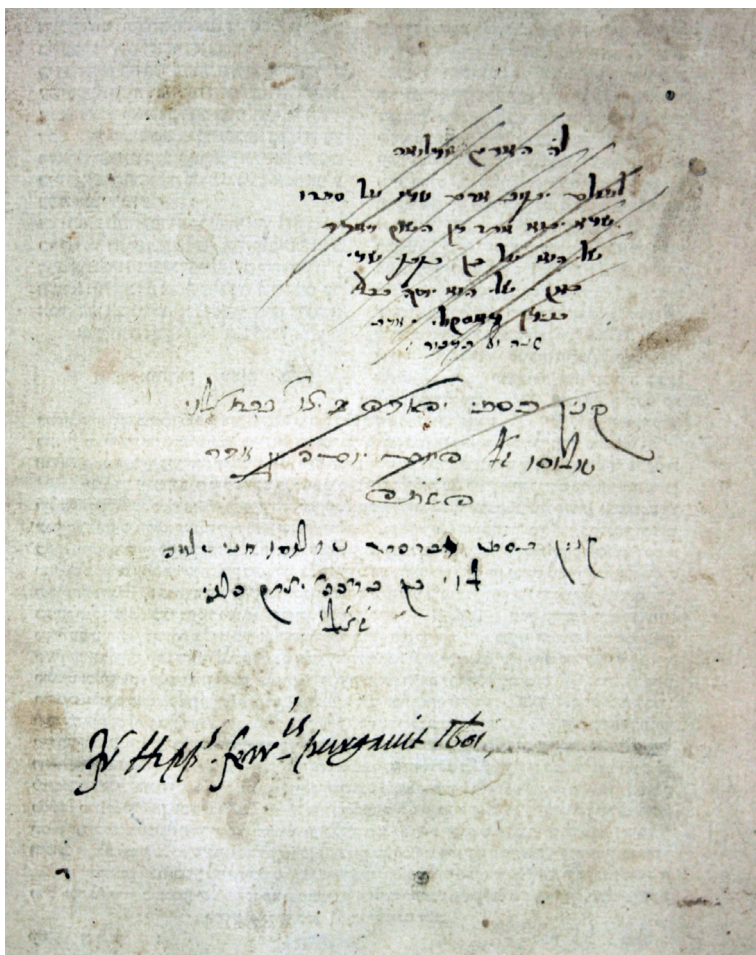
Purchased with my money, Judah, may my Rock and Redeemer keep me, son of Levy Tuluso of blessed memory, today, Thursday, Adar 13, 5345.

Purchase with my money, Abraham Tuluso, I, Solomon Levy son of our teacher and master Isaac Ha-Levy. May the righteous’ memory be blessed.

The second note has a precise date: although the year 5345 had two months of Adar, the weekday (Thursday) shows that it must be the 13th day of the second occurrence of Adar, i.e. March 14, 1585 according to the Gregorian calendar. In the third note the name of Abraham Tuluso appears without any explanation, but we can conclude that he was the seller here, apparently related to the family of Judah Tuluso mentioned in the second note.

On the same page we also have the signature of Hipp[olytus] Ferr[arens]is dated 1601, and on the recto of the same leaf another recorded censor, Giovanni Dominico Vistorini signed in 1609;<sup>14</sup> Hebrew books that came from Italy usually bear traces of expurgation and signatures of censors. All the notes of ownership in this volume,

<sup>14</sup> On the two Italian censors cf. the Index of Owners of Incunabula of MEI: <https://data.cerl.org/owners/00021039> and <https://data.cerl.org/owners/00021059>.



**Figure 4** Three notes of ownership, the second one dated 1585; Hippolytus Ferrarensis, censor's signature, 1601. NLI, RI 71 A 3499, copy 1 (*Neviim Aharonim*, Soncino [c. 1485]), f. 9.6v of the Twelve Prophets. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel

including the one of Abraham ben Isaac Ulma found at the end of the Book of Jeremiah (f. 154r), are written in the Italian style of Hebrew script. To judge from the stamp of the *Pio Istituto Consiglio di Pitigliano* [fig. 3] it would appear that our copy stayed in Italy until the twentieth century. Its rich provenance history can be reconstructed thanks to the manuscripts notes left in it by several generations of its owners.

## 5 Mordecai Dato in a Family History

In certain incunabula important figures are mentioned, not as owners, but referred to in handwritten notes in a particular context. Thus, a fairly common practice was the indication of the dates of birth and death of members of the owner's family, usually on the last blank pages of a book. In one such an inscription in the 1485 Soncino edition of Joseph Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, a popular theological work, we encounter the name of the prominent poet and kabbalist Mordecai Dato:<sup>15</sup>

Ve-h[a-shem] paqad et ahoti marat faustina eshet ha-rofe k[evod] m[orenu] r[av] yehiel eldad me-ha-tov y[ishmerehu] tz[uro] v[e-goalo] va-yiten lah ben zakhar be-yom g. le-et erev samukh le-bein ha-shemashot l. dizimer sh.l.t. bi-kerakh fomizini.

Ba-yom ha-shemini hutal besar orlato a[l] y[edei] he-hakham k[evod] m[orenu] ha-r[av] r[abi] mordekhay dato de-[ir] felishe y[ishmerehu] tz[uro] v[e-goalo] ve-hak[oa]h-k[oho] haya ha-rofe k[evod] m[orenu] shemuel me-ha-tov y[ishmerehu] tz[uro] v[e-goalo] ahiv mi-gisi y[ishmerehu] tz[uro] v[e-goalo] ha-n[izkar] l[eeil] ve-niqra shemo be-yisrael menahem yehi noam h[a-shem] alav ve-yatzliah oto la-ad a[men]. U-le-et ha-rauy hofda ka-rauy a[l] y[edei] ha-rofe k[evod] m[orenu] shemuel kohen tzedeq y[ishmerehu] tz[uro] v[e-goalo] toshav le-hena sasolo.

Mi she-hanano le-tashlum evarav u-lehagio el ha-shelemuyot han[izkarot] l[eeil] yehonenehu legadlo u-leharkivo el yeter ha-shelemuyot ha-nikhsafot le-zera emet ve-yimtza hen ve-sekhel tov be-einei eloq[im] ve-adam.

And the Lord remembered my sister Mistress Faustina, the wife of the physician Yechiel Eldad Mehatov (may his Rock and Redeemer keep him), and gave her a son, male offspring on Tuesday evening when it was nearly dusk, 30 December [5]339 in the city of Formigine.

On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised by the wise teacher and rabbi Mordecai Dato from the town of [San] Felice (may his Rock and Redeemer keep him), and his godfather was the doctor and teacher Samuel Mehatov (may his Rock and Redeemer keep him), brother of my brother-in-law already mentioned (may his Rock and Redeemer keep him), and his name was among those belonging to Israel: Menachem, let the grace of the Lord be

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Albo, *Ikkarim*. Soncino: [Joshua Solomon Soncino], between 31 Oct. and 29 Dec. 1485. Folio. 108 leaves. GW M15130; ISTC ij00479800; MEI 02123420 (NLI RI 71 A 3201 copy 2), f. 14.6v.

on him and give him success forever, Amen. And in due time he was redeemed in a due way by doctor and teacher Samuel Cohen Zedek (may his Rock and Redeemer keep him), resident of Sassuolo here.

The One who brought him out of the womb with all his body organs complete, He will give him all the completeness desirable for the true offspring for finding favour and a good name in the sight of God and man.

The note was made apparently in Sassuolo, referred to as “here” in the text. The birth of Mehatov’s son is dated December 30, 1578, which was indeed a Tuesday. The time and place agree with what we know about the figure of Mordecai Dato, who is known from other sources for his kabbalistic and poetic works.<sup>16</sup>

## 6 Glosses of Samuel Lerma

Early printed books were also used as a convenient means for philological collations and for writing glosses, commentaries and translations. Perhaps the most important glossed copy in the NLI collection is the 1492 Naples edition of the Mishnah.<sup>17</sup> In 1536 Samuel Lerma, probably the father of Judah Lerma, author of a commentary on *Pirkei Avot* and a book of *responsa*,<sup>18</sup> composed a long series of glosses on its margins. We know the exact date from his colophon on f. 45.6r [fig. 5]:

Be-yom g. h. y[amim] le-hodesh adar sheni shenat h.tz.u.r. li-beriat ha-olam hishlamti lehagiah elu ha-mishnayot, u-mi she-zikeni le-kakh yezakeni lehagot bam ani ve-zar’i ve-zera zar’i ad olam amen ken yomar h[a-shem], mi-yadi hayta zot shemuel lerma.

On Tuesday, the 8th of the second month of Adar, year 5296 from the Creation of the World, I completed the proofreading of these *Mishnayot*, and the one Who enabled me to do it will give me the grace to learn them, I and my offspring and the offspring of my offspring forever, amen, this be the Lord’s word; my hand did it, Samuel Lerma.

The day of the month, indicated here by the letters *chet* and *yud*, confused some scholars: the numerical value 18 does not fit with the weekday mentioned since Second Adar 18th in that particular year

<sup>16</sup> Gottlieb, “Dato, Mordecai ben Judah”.

<sup>17</sup> *Mishnayot* (Comm: Maimonides). Naples: Joshua Solomon Soncino, 8 May 1492. Folio. 348 leaves. GW M23779; ISTC im00624700; MEI 02126283 (NLI RI 71 A 3394).

<sup>18</sup> Epstein, *Mavo le-nusah ha-mishna*, 1286-7.

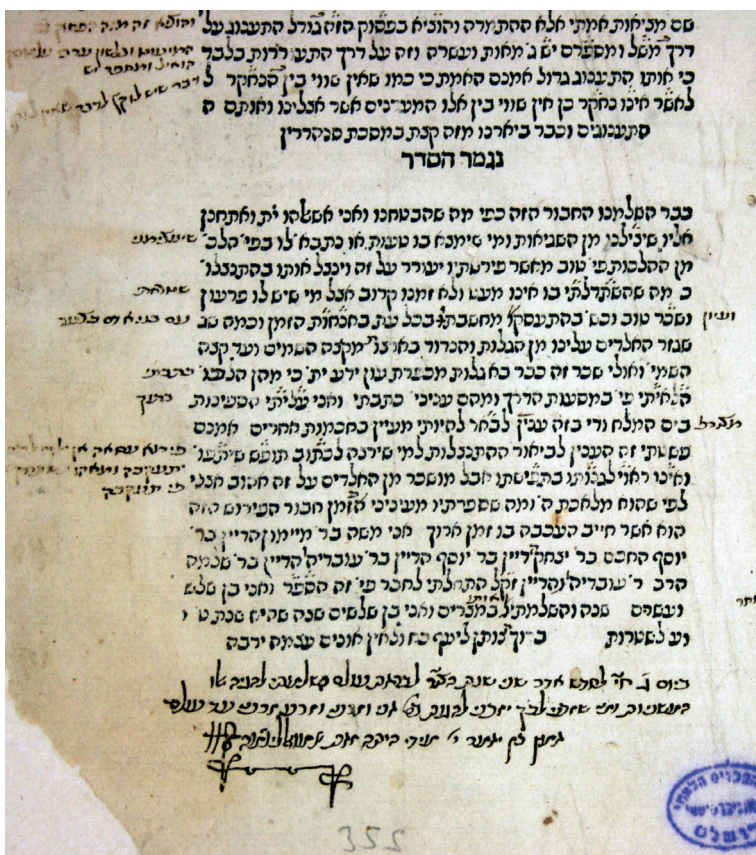


Figure 5 Samuel Lerma, glossator's colophon and the end of the printed text with his glosses. 1536. Jerusalem, NLI, RI 71 A 3394 (*Mishnayot*, Naples 1492), f. 45.6r. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel

was a Saturday.<sup>19</sup> However, it is virtually certain that the second character should be interpreted as an abbreviation of *yamim* (days), so the precise date is Second Adar 8, which is March 1, 1536.<sup>20</sup>

The glosses of Samuel Lerma are of great value for research on the text of the *Mishnah*, the first major work of Rabbinic literature. This glossed copy belonged to the Viennese Jewish community and was studied by Jacob Epstein a few months before the Nazi invasion. In his two volumes of textual analysis of the *Mishnah*, published in 2000, he consistently refers to Lerma, while regarding the incunabu-

<sup>19</sup> Sassoon, "Introduction", 38 fn. 10; Feintuch, *Masoret ve-nus'haot*, 129.

<sup>20</sup> This day was actually Wednesday, but the one-day discrepancy is familiar in medieval colophons and seems to indicate that these were written during the night.

lum itself as lost.<sup>21</sup> But it arrived in Jerusalem after the Second World War and was later studied by Israel Feintuch, who found some fascinating direct and indirect sources for Lerma's glosses, including some in Maimonides' own hand.<sup>22</sup>

## 7 On Release from Confinement

Some private stories found on the blank leaves in incunabula, even if they have no direct connection to the book itself, are of historical interest and on occasion even poignant. One example can be found in the 1485 Soncino edition of the Former Prophets, is full of praise for the Creator who returned the writer's daughter named Smiralta from a period of captivity where she came under pressure to convert to Christianity [fig. 6]:<sup>23</sup>

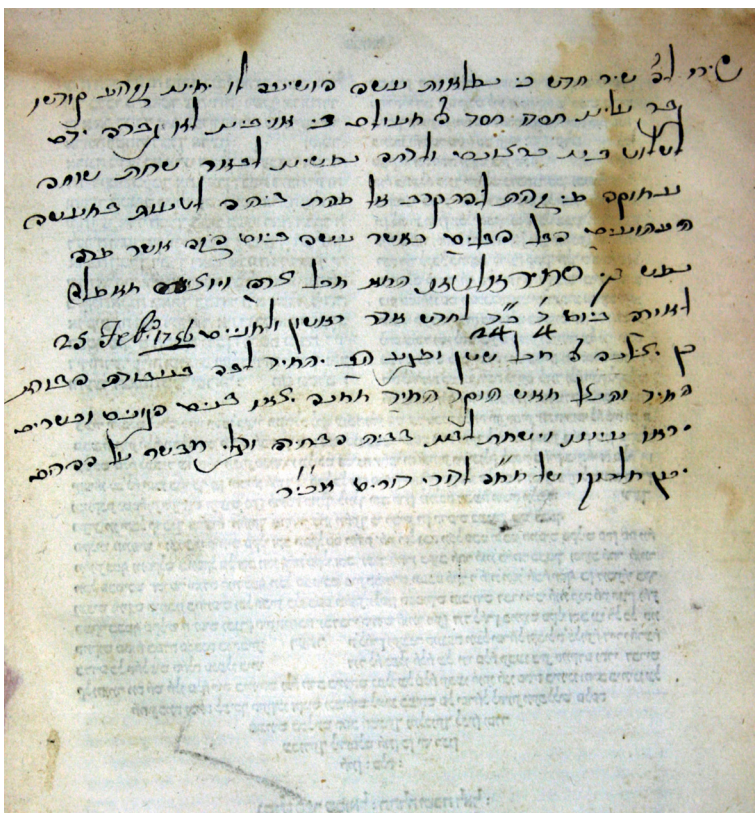
Shiru le-h[a-shem] shir hadash ki niflaot asa hoshia lo yemino u-zroa qodsho gavar aleinu hasdo hesed h[a-shem] me-olam ki oyveinu lo gavra yadam lishlot banu ki-retzonam ve-lidho[t] nafshenu li-beer shahat suha amuqa pi zarot lehitqarev el petah betah lit'ot be-maase ha-taatum hevel havalim ka-asher asa bayom ha-ze asher pada nefesh biti smiralta t[evorakh] m[i-nashim] a[men] mi-kol tzara va-yotziah me-afela le-ora be-yom d. k.d. le-hodesh adar rishon u-le-minya[na]m 25 Feb. 1756 ken yatzilenu h[a-shem] mi-kol satan u-pega ra yatmid libah ba-avodat ha-bore tamid ve-tinatzel me-esh tuqad tamid mimenah yitz'u banim hagunim u-keshirim yir'u eineinu ve-yismehu libeinu be-beit ha-behira ve-diglei mevaser al he-harim yikon malkhuto shel m[elekh] m[alkhei] h[a-melakhim] le-dorei dorim a[men] k[en] y[ihye] r[atzon].

Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has performed wonders, His right hand and His holy arm have brought salvation. His kindness has overwhelmed us, the kindness of the Lord is eternal, for our enemies did not succeed in conquering us as they wished to push us into the well, deep pit, mouth of weirdness, to be led astray with mirages, vanity of vanities, as He did on this day when He released the soul of my daughter Smiralta (blessed among women, amen) from total disaster and brought her from darkness to light on Wednesday, 24th of the first month of Adar, and in their reckoning 25 Feb-

<sup>21</sup> Epstein, *Mavo le-nusah ha-mishna*, 1286.

<sup>22</sup> Feintuch, *Masorot ve-nus'haot*, 129-42.

<sup>23</sup> *Neviim Rishonim*. Comm: David Kimhi. Soncino: [Joshua Solomon Soncino], 15 Oct. 1485. Folio. GW M35702; ISTC ib00525760; MEI 02123328 (NLI RI 37 A 2024 copy 2, f. 8.8v of Samuel).



**Figure 6** Blessing for redemption of the writer's daughter named Smiralta. 1756. Jerusalem, NLI, RI 37 A 2024, copy 2 (*Neviim Rishonim*, Soncino 1485), f. 8.8v of Samuel. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel

ruary 1756. Thus may the Lord save her from every enemy and all bad troubles so as to preserve her heart always to serve the Creator, and always save her from flaming fire, and decent and proper sons will come from her. Let our eyes see and our hearts rejoice with the chosen Temple, and the flags on the mountains will manifest the kingdom of the King of kings for all generations. Amen, let it be His will.

We can see that even as late as the mid-eighteenth century incunabula copies were used to record for posterity important events and as such are a valuable resource for historical research.

## 8 Conclusion

The examples looked at in this essay are merely a small part of the NLI collection; many other manuscript texts and comments found in the Hebrew incunabula in the collection could be cited here as being of historical, philological, linguistic or palaeographical interest.

On occasion the study of different books can reveal historical connections between them. Thus, copies of the Rome edition (c. 1468-73) of Solomon Ibn Aderet's *Responsa*, and of the Mantua edition (1475-6) of Gersonides' Commentary on the Pentateuch, both contain notes of ownership of a certain Benjamin Pesaro.<sup>24</sup> The same wording "qinyan kaspi binyamin pesaro" helped to identify this note in the NLI copy of the Rome edition, where half of the inscription had been cropped. The identification of two incunabula that belonged to the same owner, apparently from the sixteenth century, is of obvious historical significance. We can assume that more examples of this kind could be discovered through the investigation of all the known collections of Hebrew incunabula in the world.

It is well known that the spread of printing was one of the principal factors in the construction of modern Jewish civilization itself, in the way it forged strong links between different communities. Early modern Jewish readers and owners left remarkable traces in the books that have come down to us from five hundred years ago, and the NLI collection offers a good opportunity to study various manuscript sources in the context of the distribution and use of early printed editions.

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<sup>24</sup> Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret, *Teshuvot She'elot*. [Rome: Obadiah, Manasseh and Benjamin of Rome, 1469-73]. 4°. 142 leaves. GW M41203; ISTC is00625100; MEI 02122869 (NLI RI Schocken 8); Levi ben Gershon, *Perush ha-Torah*, [Mantua]: Abraham Conat and Abraham Jedidiah, [1475-76]. Folio. GW M18044; ISTC il00189700; MEI 02122230 (NLI RI 51 A 26 copy 1).



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