

## ***Adversity and Authorship: As Revealed in the Introductions of Early Hebrew Books***

By: MARVIN J. HELLER

Readers, regrettably, all too often ignore the front matter in books.<sup>1</sup> Introductions and prefaces are not without purpose, often allowing writers to express opinions and feelings and describe experiences that may not be related to a book's subject matter. Commenting on this I have written that "It is the reader's loss if he bypasses this prefatory matter, which is often not related to the subject matter of the book, for it may well equal or surpass the text in interest."

Among the interesting asides, that is apart from the subject matter of the book, are the reasons the author wrote his book and so entitled it, as well as pathos, halakhic methodology, festivals, *gematriot*, and much more. Among an author's motives may be describing his experiences, recounting hardships and travail encountered and overcome, often in conjunction with difficult periods in Jewish history, others purely personal events. What all of the front matter noted here, several by eminent rabbis, share, is that they are deeply moving descriptions of personal encounters.

***Kor ha-Behinah.*** We begin with R. Joseph Samuel Landau's *Kor ha-Behinah* (Breslau, 1837),

I am but thirty-seven years old. I had not thought to publish until I had reached an age of understanding. However, "the hand of the Lord has touched me" (cf. Job 19:21) these years and I have been ill. At this time my illness has worsened until all have concurred that I must travel to physicians in Berlin to seek help. [As our blessed sages say] "And to heal He shall heal" (Exodus 21:19). From here it can be derived that authorization was granted [by God] to the physician to heal" (*Bava Kamma* 85a). I trust in the Lord for "loving kindness

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<sup>1</sup> That readers all too often bypass the front matter in books has been noted previously by me in *Quntres*, 2:1 (<https://taljournal.jtsa.edu/index.php/quntres>, winter, 2011), pp. 1–21, reprinted in *Further Studies in the Making of the Early Hebrew Book* (Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2013), pp. 345–70.

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shall surround him who trusts in the Lord” (Psalms 32:10). I said who knows “what today may bring forth” (Proverbs 27:1), and thought to publish this small volume to be a forge כור בהינה for my other writings....

R. Joseph Samuel ben Israel Jonah ha-Levi Landau (1799–1836) further informs that he is resident in and *av bet din* of Kampania. Moreover, at the end of the introduction, due to Landau’s illness, the name Abraham has been added to his name.

*Kor ha-Behinah*, a small book (4<sup>o</sup>: [3], 35 ff.) comprised of twenty-eight responsa and seven discourses, is set in two columns in rabbinic letters. It has a subtitle, *Mi-She'eilot u-Derashot Mishkan Shiloh* מִשְׁכַּן שִׁיל״ה, so entitled because the initial letters of *Shiloh* שִׁיל״ה stand for his name, י Joseph ש Samuel ה ha-Levi ל Landau, and *Mishkan* מִשְׁכַּן because he is a resident in Kampania. The title page, devoid of ornament, describes *Kor ha-Behinah* as being by the youth R. Landau and informs that the author’s father, R. Jonah ha-Levi Landau, was an *av bet din* and author, continuing to describe several generations of this distinguished family. There are approbations from R. Zalman ben Abraham Tiktin, R. Moses Sofer (Hatam Sofer), and R. Akiva Eger. Landau’s introduction is followed by a second introduction, from R. Hayyim ha-Kohen, Landau’s son-in-law, that begins “it is known that due to our iniquities the gaon, the author, was gathered unto his people while the book was in press.”



Figure 1, 1538, *Torah Or*

**Torah Or.** We continue with an early work, *Torah Or*, R. Joseph ben David ibn Yahya’s (1494–1539) ethical and philosophical work on eschatology. Ibn Yahya studied under R. Judah Minz in Padua and was *Rosh Yeshivah* in Imola, Italy. He wrote, according to R. Gedaliah ben Joseph ibn Yahya (*Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah*), one of Joseph’s three sons, twenty-five works, only two extant today. His other published title is *Perush Hamesh Megillot*, with Psalms, Job, Daniel, Ezra, and Chronicles (Bologna,

1538). Both of ibn Yahya’s books were burned in Padua in 1554, caught up in the widespread burning of the Talmud that year.

*Torah Or* (1538, Bologna 4<sup>o</sup>: 36 ff.) too is a small book, printed by the partners known as the Company of Silk Weavers. Although there is a lack of information as to the terms of the partnership, David Amram suggests that perhaps their arrangement was analogous to that in Milan, where one

partner cut type and prepared the ink while the others provided the financing. Rent for the print shop was divided equally, but one third of the profits went to the active partner, the remainder to the four financiers. The reader, copier, and corrector were compensated with copies of the books, which could not be sold below the market price. All partners had to be in agreement before beginning any undertaking, all their decisions were taken in secret, they could not have any connection to another press, and the partnership could be dissolved after three years, in which case the press would belong to the active partner.<sup>2</sup>

The spare title page of *Torah Or* informs that in it is explained the final bliss of the soul, Eden and Gehinnom, the World to Come, and many other matters, divided into seventy-eight chapters. On the following page, in the shape of a menorah, are words of praise (see Fig. 1) and then the introduction. Ibn Yahya begins with a lengthy list of his forebears and describes their life and prosperity in Lisbon, followed by a recounting of his family's adventures and travails.

Joseph recounts at great length the numerous travails his family underwent, describing attempts to force them to apostatize, first in Portugal, pursued on dry land and sea, and after finding refuge in Castile, when his eponymous grandfather was condemned to be burnt at the stake but was spared due to the intervention of Duke Alverez of Braganza. Permitted to leave Castile for Italy, they had arrived at Pisa when the family was seized by French soldiers besieging the city. There, his mother, pregnant and disguised in men's clothing, fled surrounded by the French soldiers and leapt from a high tower, miraculously surviving, before giving birth to Joseph in Florence. His grandfather, released after paying a large ransom, settled in Ferrara where he had to deal with a cruel monarch who

“couching down between two burdens” (Genesis 49:14) saying “you deserve to die” (I Samuel 26:16) for you assisted with your wealth, talents [of silver], the *anusim* (Marranos, forced converts) to Judaize one time and fourfold. I was imprisoned “with fetters of iron” (Psalms 149:8) “upon the crag of the rock” (Job 39:28).

The elder Joseph was released after paying ransom but, aged and weak, died soon after.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Amram, *The Makers of Hebrew Books in Italy* (Philadelphia, 1909, reprint London, 1963), pp. 231-32.

<sup>3</sup> Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature IV* (New York, 1975), translated by Bernard Martin, pp. 56-59.



Figure 2, 1558, *Ma'arekhet ha-Elobut - Minḥat Yebudah*

***Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*** (The Order of God) is a classic kabbalistic work attributed to, among others, R. Perez ben Isaac Gerondi of Barcelona and R. Perez ben Isaac of the Ba'alei Tosafot. Printed twice in two years (Ferrara, 1557, 4<sup>o</sup>: [6], 286 ff., republished 1558, Mantua, 4<sup>o</sup>: 4, 208 ff., Fig. 2), the second Mantua edition of *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* is our interest, for, among its accompanying commentaries, is *Minḥat Yebudah* by R. Judah ben Jacob Ḥayyat (c. 1450 – c. 1510), one of the leading kabbalists of his time. Ḥayyat acceded to requests of the elders of Mantua that he write *Minḥat Yebudah*, today considered a classic kabbalistic work in its own right. He did so because of his high estimate of *Ma'arekhet ha-Elobut*, a work that opened the gate to kabbalistic subjects not well addressed elsewhere.

The title page has a pillared architectural frame, followed by two introductions, that of the editor, R. Immanuel ben Jekuthiel Benevento, and then that of Ḥayyat, the latter of interest to us. Ḥayyat begins by speaking of the wisdom of Kabbalah, and the value and importance of its study. Well into the introduction he provides a personal account of his departure from Spain, where he had “tasted a little of this honey” (I Samuel 14:29). He begins by informing that it was the merit of his dedication to the works of Kabbalah that saved him from all the travails he encountered. Ḥayyat describes what occurred,

I and my family, with two hundred fifty others, traveled in one ship in the middle of the winter in the year 1493 from Lisbon in the kingdom of Portugal by the command of the king. The Lord fulfilled “I will afflict them with the pestilence, and disinherit them” (Numbers 14:12) and this was the reason that in no place would they accept us “Away! Unclean! men cried to them” (Lamentations 4:15) and we wandered at sea for four months with “the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction” (Isaiah 30:20). At the end of this time a ship of ויסקאיינוש seized us and our wealth and brought us to the city of Malaga. We were there, unwillingly, on the sea, for we were not permitted to debark nor to depart. They decreed that we were not to be given bread, water, or any provisions. After several days, judges of the city and prominent individuals (priests) came to the ship and said until when will you refuse to respond to “who is the man who desires

life” (Psalms 34:13) etc.? In one day close to one hundred souls went out from the group for they were unable to withstand this trial. “We are left but a few of many” (Jeremiah 42:2). Our souls were ready for death. We said better “our death by the hand of the Lord” (Exodus 16:3). Then my wife, pleasant and perfect, died of famine, and “also virgins; [young men] old men, and children” (cf. Psalms 148:12), close to fifty souls. I too “here is but a step between me and between death” (cf. I Samuel 20:3), fulfilling what the prophet said “and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east . . . In that day all the pretty virgins [and young men shall faint for thirst]” (Amos 8:12-13).

Ḥayyat continues, describing how, finally allowed to leave, they were at sea for two months, finally reaching the Barbary Coast in the land of Ishmael, where they were imprisoned for allegedly disparaging Islam. He was sentenced to stoning, but promised that if he would apostatize he would be freed and given a post of significance. Ḥayyat was in dire straits for forty days until redeemed by a Jew, to whom Ḥayyat gave almost 200 books that were in his possession. Ḥayyat went to Fez where a famine compelled him to “eat the herb of the field” (Genesis 3:18) and to work at the mill of an Arab for a minute piece of bread hardly fit for a dog. He finally reached Italy, first Venice, then Mantua, where at the urging of R. Joseph Jabez and others, Ḥayyat prepared *Minḥat Yehudah*, his commentary on *Ma’arekhet ha-Elobot*. Today *Minḥat Yehudah* is considered a classic kabbalistic work in its own right.



Figure 3, 1558/59, *Meḥir Yayin*

*Meḥir Yayin*. A very different work, this too a small book, is *Meḥir Yayin* (Cremona, 1558/59, 4<sup>o</sup>: 22 ff.), a philosophical, allegorical, and kabbalistic commentary on the Book of Esther by R. Moses ben Israel Isserles (Rema, c. 1530–1572). The interests of Rema, author of the *Haggahot* or *ha-Mappah*, glosses on the *Shulḥan Arukh*, extended to Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah, reflected in *Meḥir Yayin* (Fig. 3), his first published work. He observes that the story told over in the Megillah alludes to the human condition and may be understood as an allegory of the life of man. *Meḥir Yayin* was first printed in Cremona at the press of Vincenzo

Conti (d. 1569), who was active in that location from 1556 to 1567, issuing more than forty titles. Of those titles, *Mehir Yayin* has the distinction of being the only work printed by that press in the lifetime of its author.<sup>4</sup>

Rema observes that the story told in the Megillah alludes to the human condition and may be understood as an allegory of the life of man. This is reflected in the title, taken from Isaiah 55:1, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy, and eat; come, buy wine (*mehir yayin*) and milk without money and without price.” The colophon ends with the words “the work was completed *Mehir Yayin* מֵהֵר יַיִן מְהִיר מְהִיר spelled defectively מֵהֵר thus having a numeric value of 318 = 1558). In the introduction Rema informs us that he was forced to leave Cracow for Shidlow because of an outbreak of cholera. Unable to send his father the traditional *mishlo’ah manot* (eatable gifts) for Purim, he wrote *Mehir Yayin* for his father in its place. The colophon ends with the words “the work was completed יַיִן מְהִיר *Mehir Yayin*” (spelled defectively), for a numeric value of the date, 1558. Rema writes,

I, Moses, son of my honorable father, the communal leader, Israel, called Moses Isserles of Cracow, was among the exiles from our city in the year [5]316 (1556) because of the plague [it should not come upon us], and we dwelt in a land that was not ours, in the city of Shidlow, a place without fig trees and vines, almost without water to drink except by contrivance... we were unable to observe Purim with feasting and joy, to remove “sorrow and sighing” (Isaiah 35:10, 51:11). I said, I will arise and rejoice in my undertaking, “also my wisdom remained with me” (Ecclesiastes 2:9). “The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart” (Psalms 19: 9). I took under my tongue “honey and milk” (Song of Songs 4:11). “I set my heart to seek and search out” (cf. Ecclesiastes 1:13) the meaning of the Megillah, the lesson of its words, the meaning of each and every term...

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<sup>4</sup> Meir Benayahu, *Hebrew Printing at Cremona: Its History and Bibliography* (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 43 [Hebrew].



Figure 4, 1569, *Yesha Elohim*

**Yesha Elohim.** R. Moses ben Ḥayyim ben Shem Tov Pesante (c. 1540, d. 1573), born in Jerusalem, resident in Safed before being forced to leave Eretz Israel due to financial exigencies, was the author of three books printed in Constantinople and Salonika. In several introductions Pesante bemoans that he was forced to leave Eretz Israel, traveling, from 1565 to 1573, in Turkey and the Balkans. His books are *Ner Mitzvah* (Constantinople, 1567, 4<sup>o</sup>: [8], 4-103 pp., reprinted in Salonika, 1569, 4<sup>o</sup>: 68 ff.), a commentary on the *Azharot* of R. Solomon

ibn Gabirol; *Yesha Elohim* (Constantinople, 1567, 4<sup>o</sup>: 65, [2] pp., reprinted in Salonika, 1569, 4<sup>o</sup>: 32 ff. Fig. 4), a commentary on the *Hosha‘not*; and *Hukkat ha-Pesah* (Salonika, 1569, 4<sup>o</sup>: 71 [1]), a commentary on the *Pesah Haggadah*, begun a week after *Ner Mitzvah* was completed and written by Pesante when only twenty-eight years old; as well as several unpublished works, including novellae and homilies, known only from his references to them in the above titles. In the introduction to *Ner Mitzvah*, his first book, Pesante bemoans his fate, beginning with alliteration that

“The troubles of the time pursued me, deception, fraud, hammered”  
 רמוני, הממוני, הלמוני “He will not let me take my breath” (cf. Job 9:18)  
 “I count them my enemies” (Psalms 139:22) “Bilhan, and Zaavan,  
 and Akan” (Genesis 36:27) “and afterwards he afflicted” (Isaiah  
 8:23) me for “the hand of the Lord is gone out against me” (Ruth  
 1:13) to smite me with harsh poverty worse than “fifty plagues” (*Bava  
 Batra* 116a) ...

Elsewhere he writes that he has “seen neither joy nor rest, but rather trouble, sorrow, and sighing, going from city to city, for my iniquities have driven me out of the land of the living, ‘from having a share in the inheritance of the Lord’ (I Samuel 26:19) to provide for my home.” Pesante again expresses his longing for Eretz Israel at the end of *Yesha Elohim* (Constantinople, 1567), writing that he longs “‘to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple’ (Psalms 27:4), my land and birthplace from which I departed, and I will be ‘at rest in my house, and flourish in my palace.’” (Daniel 4:1).

Pesante did not have the good fortune to return to Safed, necessity forcing him to continue wandering and selling his books. He was, while together with two Jewish merchants, seized by Turks in Greece. Attempts to ransom them were unsuccessful and the three were murdered. The

murderers, when apprehended, had cast Pesante's books into the sea for fear of being implicated by them in their crime.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 5, 1578 *Sefer ha-Hayyim*

***Sefer ha-Hayyim.*** We turn now to *Sefer ha-Hayyim* (Cracow, 1593, 4<sup>o</sup>: 46 [3] ff., Fig. 5), a highly regarded ethical work by R. Ḥayyim ben Bezalel (c. 1520-1588). Ḥayyim, the older brother of R. Judah Loew of Prague (Maharal, c. 1525–1609), was a noted Talmudic scholar and rabbi in his own right. He was a student of R. Shalom Shakhna (d. 1558), together with R. Moses Isserles (Rema), and also learned at the yeshiva of R. Solomon Luria (Maharshal, c. 1510–64). Ḥayyim went to Worms in 1549 to assist in the yeshivah where his uncle, R. Jacob ben Ḥayyim, was rabbi. About fourteen

years later, after the death of his uncle, Ḥayyim became rabbi in Worms, remaining there until called to Friedberg, where he officiated until his death.<sup>6</sup> *Sefer ha-Hayyim* is one of two titles written by Ḥayyim in Friedberg under the conditions described in the introduction—the other is *Iggeret ha-Tiyyul* (Cracow, 1605), an alphabetic explication of biblical, Talmudic, and Midrashic passages—where he recounts an occurrence of plague and its effect on him and his household.<sup>7</sup>

“I will recount the grace and praises of the Lord, according to all the good he has granted me and according to the abundance of his grace” (cf. Isaiah 63:7). In 1578, He “redeemed my soul from death”

<sup>5</sup> Yaakov Shmuel Spiegel, *Hagadah shel Pesah Ḥukkat ha-Pesah* (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 7–27 [Hebrew]; Abraham Yaari, *Shelubei Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1951), pp. 236 [Hebrew]; Shimon Vanunu, *Encyclopedia Arzei ha-Levanon. Encyclopedia le-Toldot Geonei ve-Ḥakhmei Yehadut Sefarad ve-ha-Mizrah* III (Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 1560–63 [Hebrew]

<sup>6</sup> Among the works addressing Ḥayyim ben Bezalel and his other books are Byron L. Sherman, “In the Shadow of Greatness: Rabbi Ḥayyim ben Betsalel of Friedberg,” *Jewish Social Studies* XXXVII (New York, 1975), pp. 35–60; and *Rabbi Ḥayyim ben Bezalel of Friedberg: Brother of the Maharal of Prague* (Jerusalem, 1987) [Hebrew]. The introductions to several of Ḥayyim’s other works are also of considerable interest but will have to wait for another article.

<sup>7</sup> *Iggeret ha-Tiyyul* is so entitled for in it one can journey (*ha-tiyyul*) and find delight from troubles and burdens. It is divided into four parts: *pesbat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod* (*pardes*, literal, allusive, discursive, and esoteric interpretations of Torah), as it says, “four entered the orchard” (cf. *Hagigah* 14b). All who read it will stroll (*tiyyul*) in the orchard of pomegranates and pick the lilies.

(cf. Psalms 56:14, Job 33:28), for death went up through the windows of my house. My maidservant died in the plague; my praise-worthy daughter and one lad were ill with that illness. We were saved due to the mercy of the Lord. I remained, I and my son, “in the midst of that [great] upheaval” (Genesis 19:29). The doors of my house were closed (quarantined) for about two months. No one “went out or came in” (I Samuel 18:16, II Chronicles 16:1). I was overwhelmed by the suffering and worries of the times... unable “to take pleasure and delight “in the discussions of Abbaye and Rava” (*Sukkah* 28a, *Bava Batra* 134a), to penetrate the depths of halakhah “because the discussion of a legal point requires clarity, like a clear day” (*Megillah* 28b). However, to sit idle from words of Torah, God forbid, for “it is our life, and the length of our days” (cf. Deuteronomy 30:20).

Unable to fully concentrate on halakhic studies, Ḥayyim turned to ethical and *aggadic* works, writing *Sefer ha-Ḥayyim* and also *Iggeret ha-Tiyyul*.

***Zok ha-Ittim.*** The Chmielnicki massacres *taḥ ve-tat* (1648–49) were the worst catastrophe to befall eastern European Jewry until the Holocaust. The incredible tragedies and sufferings of the Jews of that period are recorded in numerous works. *Zok ha-Ittim* (sufferings of the times, Cracow, 1650, 8<sup>o</sup>: [11] ff.) is by an eyewitness, R. Meir ben Samuel of Shcherbreshin (mid-17th century), a *payyetaṅ* (liturgical poet) in Shcherbreshin, near Lublin, Poland. He states his purpose on the title page, writing, “Recalling the troubles and sufferings of the times that we experienced, year after year, in *taḥ ve-tat*. On “‘the two tails of the smoking firebrands’ (cf. Isaiah 7:4), sharpened swords. ‘If the Lord had not left us a very small remnant’ (Isaiah 1:9) all of us would have perished, Heaven forbid. In order that it not be forgotten to later generations, by one special in his flock, and he raised his *kinah* (dirge) for the thousands slain...”

It is in his introduction that Meir ben Samuel varies from other like works, writing,

The Torah warns us concerning the burning of Nadab and Abihu, and let “the whole house of Israel bewail the burning which the Lord has kindled” (Leviticus 10:6), and also fixed *parashat* Nadab and Abihu to be read on Yom Kippur for mention of their death is in place of a *korban* (animal sacrifice), as is known (*Zohar* 3:56b) and implies specifically Nadab and Abihu because they were refined in the fire, judged in the burning, and so sanctified the name of Heaven. All those who were tested and refined by sanctification of the Name have a very great reward and those who mention the death of these holy ones have a great reward, and specifically those merciful ones who arouse mercy and their tears flow from their eyes, it is as if they

have offered a *korban* and their tears are in place of a drink offering.  
In the year *tah ve-tat* how many tens of thousands spread their necks  
for a sacrifice and how many tens of thousands were burned and  
how many tens of thousands were strangled...

The text, which is more historical, begins with several pages written in the form of a dirge, the initial letters of paragraphs forming an acronym of Meir ben Samuel's name. *Zok ha-Ittim* was reprinted in Salonika (1652, 4<sup>o</sup>: 10 ff.) and in Venice (1656, 4<sup>o</sup>: 11 ff.). The Venice edition was edited by R. Joshua ben David, who modified the title page and initial verse so that the acrostic spells out his name, not that of Meir, altering all other places where Meir's name appears. Avraham Yaari notes that variations in the Venice edition already appear in the earlier Salonika edition (1652, 4<sup>o</sup>: 10 ff.)<sup>8</sup>

*Penei Yehoshu'a* is novellae by R. Jacob Joshua ben Zevi Hirsch Falk (1680–1756). One of the leading Talmudists of his time, Falk also served as rabbi in several communities and founded one of the leading yeshivot in Poland. *Penei Yehoshu'a* was printed in four parts, the first two in Frankfurt am Main (1752). In the introduction to the first volume, on tractates *Berakhot*, *Shabbat*, and *Pesahim*, Falk describes what befell him and his response.

I accepted upon myself as an obligation and vowed at a time of “the fierce anger of the Lord” (var. cit.), 3 Kislev 563 (= November 28, 1802, *sic.* should be November 23, 1702<sup>9</sup>) in Lvov, when I was “in my house, and flourishing in my palace” (Daniel 4:1) with “companions and students who listened to my voice” (cf. Song of Songs 8:13) when “‘in an instant suddenly’ (cf. Numbers 6:12, Isaiah 29:5) ‘a city a heap’ (Isaiah 25:2) ‘overthrown in a moment and no hands were laid upon her’ (cf. Lamentations 4:6)” a sound of horror, a sound “of burning went out to separate” (cf. *Pesahim* 5b, *Keritot* 29b), “the appearance of a great fire” (cf. Numbers 9:16) spread out among homes and windows due an explosion of large barrels of gunpowder until many large dwellings were consumed and homes with walls to

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<sup>8</sup> Avraham Yaari, “Miscellaneous Bibliographic Notes,” *Kiryat Sefer*, XVI (Jerusalem, 1939), pp. 376-77 [Hebrew]; *idem*, “To the Land: Books Printed on the Way to Eretz Israel,” in *Studies in Hebrew Booklore* (Jerusalem, 1958), p. 16 [Hebrew].

<sup>9</sup> The date in the copy of *Penei Yehoshu'a* examined, albeit not the first edition, is given as ל"קסג (563 = November, 1802). A recent edition examined gives the date as ל"ק (503 = November, 1702), that is, with a space, omitting the ם error in earlier editions but not resetting the date.

the heavens were cast to the dust. Thirty-six holy Jewish souls perished. Among the dead were residents of my house, my first wife, mother, and grandfather, extending to my young daughter, only one to her mother, much beloved, and also I was among the wounded “From a roof so high to a pit as deep” (cf. *Hagigab* 5b) and I came to the very depths of the earth below, as into the press...

Falk continues that the beams of his house fell on him, heavier than the beams of the circular wine press and the oil press. He said, “I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world” (Isaiah 38:11). Saved from certain death he resolved, while still under the mound, that if God would extricate him “to build a faithful house” (cf. I Samuel 2:35, I Kings 11:35), not to limit himself from the walls of the Bet Midrash, to devote himself to learning Talmud and *poskim* “and to reside in the depths of the halakhah” (*Megillah* 3b, *Sanhedrin* 44b), which he did, his profound works being studied to this day.



Figure 6, 1784 *Einei Avraham*

***Einei Avraham***. A tragic example of loss of sight, actual blindness, is related in the introduction to *Einei Avraham* (Amsterdam, 1784, 40: [8], 76 ff.), a remarkable super-commentary on the Rambam on the subject of *korbanot* by R. Abraham ben Judah Tsefig. Born in Tunis, Tsefig was blind from birth. Overcoming this handicap, Tsefig based all of his learning on hearing and due to his great mental acuity, he achieved expertise in all the corners of Torah.

Tsefig went up to Jerusalem from Tunis in 1755 and learned in the yeshivah *Ḥesed le-Avraham*. Seven years later, R. Tsefig traveled to Amsterdam to publish his novellae. He traveled through several communities, among them Constantinople, always being greeted with great honor. In Amsterdam, R. David ha-Kohen di Uceda, rav of the Sephardim, and R. Saul Lowenstein, *av bet din* of the Ashkenazim, both spoke of R. Tsefig in the most laudatory terms. Tsefig subsequently traveled as an emissary for Hebron, reaching Adrianople in 1803, and the following year was in Rhodes. It is not known if he returned to Eretz Israel.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Vanunu, *Encyclopedia Arẓei ha-Levanon*, p. 43; Avraham Yaari, “Those Who Go in Darkness but See a Great Light,” *Studies in Hebrew Booklore* (Jerusalem, 1958), p. 8 [Hebrew].

In the introduction to *Einei Avraham*, in which each of its paragraphs concludes with Avraham, Tsefig informs that he so named *Einei Avraham* because,

due to the wrath of the Almighty “‘the gazers are dimmed’ (Ecclesiastes 12:3) and ‘do not see’ (I Samuel 26:12), ‘darkness is as light with you’ (Psalms 139:12). May these, my words, ‘go up and come’ (Exodus 7:28) in this work, for an ‘opening פתח עינים (cf. Genesis 38:14)’ for ‘Light means the Torah’ (*Megillah* 16b) ‘To open the blind eyes’ (Isaiah 42:7) ‘O river, O river’ (*Shabbat* 66b) and ‘he called the name’ (*var. cit.*).”<sup>11</sup>

***Sha’arei Zedek***. R. Abraham ben Jehiel Michal Danzig (Danziger, *Hayyei Adam*, 1748–1820) was among the foremost *halakhic* authorities of his time. He is best known for his *Hayyei Adam* on *Orah Hayyim* with an addendum entitled *Nishmat Adam* (Vilna, 1810) and *Hokhmat Adam* with an addendum called *Binat Adam* on the dietary laws in *Yoreh De’ab* (1814-15). Another important work by the *Hayyei Adam*, albeit less well known, is *Sha’arei Zedek* (Vilna, 1812, 4<sup>o</sup>; [3], 28:16 ff.), dealing with the *mitzvot* and relevant *halakhot* that are to be fulfilled in Eretz Israel. In the beginning of his introduction Danzig explains why he wrote *Sha’arei Zedek*. He notes the success of *Hayyei Adam*, that it is learned by men of all ages, and states that he was requested to publish additional works.

I said to bring to press one portion that is on the *halakhot* contingent upon [Eretz] Israel, for two reasons. One is that in each and every city the custom is to learn mishnayot. It is known that *Seder Zera’im* lacks general well-known rules so that there are many mishnayot that appear unclear. I was occupied with a portion of *Yoreh De’ab* and reached *hilkhot terumah* and *ma’aserot* and reviewed all the halakhot as done with *Hayyei Adam* . . . The second reason is that at the time [of an earthquake] when the houses in the courtyard in which I lived collapsed in 1804, as is explained at the end of *Hayyei Adam*, I vowed a great vow that when I had the merit to marry my sons and daughters, if able, I would go up to the holy city of Jerusalem [may it be built speedily in our day] to be there all the days of my life and to serve the Lord. I said perhaps I will have that merit if the Lord will be merciful and grant me permission from the court of our lord the

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<sup>11</sup> “O River, O River” refers to a procedure of taking a pitcher of water from a river, circling the vessel over one’s head, and then casting the water into the river in order to rid oneself of an illness. In addition to the entry in tractate *Shabbat* the phrase “O River, O River” also appears in *Hullin* 18b, 57a but in a different context.

Kaiser... if a man enters the court of the King and does not know its customs he certainly forfeits his life (*Ketubbot* 34a, 36b, *Bava Kamma* 71a, *Hullin* 14a, 15a), all the more so one who wishes to dwell in the Holy Land and is not expert in all the laws applicable there “his blood shall be upon his own head” (Joshua 2:19, Ezekiel 33:5) as it says of him, “who has required this at your hand, to trample my courts” (Isaiah 1:12)? Therefore, I have selected all the pertinent laws and called it *Sha’arei Zedek* for Jerusalem which is called *zedek* (righteous). If, God forbid, I do not merit do go up I will fulfill the *mitzvoth* dependent upon it with this work, as it says, “whoever occupies himself with Torah” (T. B. *var. cit.*)...<sup>12</sup>

***Ziyunim le-Divrei ha-Kabbalah*** is a very different work, prompted by diminished eyesight but not blindness. It is a clever and unusual compendium of 300 commandments skillfully clothed in the *gematriot* (sum of the numerical value of Hebrew letters) of their Biblical verses by R. Aaron ben Mordecai Baer Kornfeld (Aaron Jennikau, 1795–1881). An Austrian Talmudist, Kornfeld’s sole teacher was his father, whom he succeeded as Rosh Yeshivah at the age of eighteen upon his father’s death, serving as the last Rosh Yeshivah of Bohemia. Kornfeld’s reputation was sufficiently great that Sir Moses Montefiore, passing through Bohemia on his return from Damascus, undertook the difficult journey to Goltsch-Jenikau in order to meet Kornfeld. He was also the author of a dialogue between an orthodox father and a liberal son, published in the *Shomer Ziyon ha-Ne’eman* (1847).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Danziger, at the end of *Hilkebot Megillah*, *Hayyei Adam*, describes the miracle referred to in the introduction to *Sha’arei Zedek*. On 16 Kislev [5]564 (December 1, 1803) many died in his courtyard due to a conflagration. Many homes collapsed, including his own. Danziger describes the destruction and informs that his wife’s face was injured, her upper lip split and all of her lower teeth broken. The windows and door in the room in which he sat with his son were all shattered and his son’s back suffered somewhat, there was not one member of his household that did not lose some blood. Danziger accounted it a miracle akin to an atonement offering, all surviving, even though they had suffered considerable damage and great financial loss. He saw it as an act of divine kindness, value being exchanged for blood **דם לדמים** for thirty-one persons had died in his courtyard. That day was set for fasting for him and his descendants, in his and other courtyards.

<sup>13</sup> Lamed, Meir. “Kornfeld, Aaron ben Mordecai Baer.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 12 (Detroit, 2007) 312. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*.

*Ziyunim le-Divrei ha-Kabbalah* is a small work (Prague, 1865, 8<sup>o</sup>: [4], 68 pp.), printed once only. The title page is immediately followed by the author's introduction, in which he begins with the value of *gematriot* and afterwards describes why he wrote *Ziyunim le-Divrei ha-Kabbalah*.

Prior to relating what brought me to write these words, I propose to address the value of *gematriot*, for I have heard many disparaging them, saying that one is able to reach any conclusion desired with allusions such as these. They bring as a proof the first word in the Torah, *bereishit* בראשית (913), which has the value of “a false oath שוא ושקר (913)” (*Shevu'ot* 20b). I say God forbid for us to mock that which our holy rabbis, sages of the Talmud, taught us, as we find that they often expounded *gematriot* and also found support for laws such as unspecified periods of Nazirite are thirty days from the word “to be יהיה (30)” and so in many places...

Kornfeld continues, refuting the implication of “a false oath,” relating it to a false prophet “for the Lord your God tests you” (Deuteronomy 13:4). In the second paragraph of his introduction, Kornfeld explains why he wrote *Ziyunim le-Divrei ha-Kabbalah*, informing that which caused him to do so was to see if he could find *gematriot* of verses relating to halakhot for,

In the year 1863 I was healed from an illness in my left eye. I was unable, for a lengthy period, for many, many months, to look at any book. My mind sought a way to engage my intellect, and I remembered that which had been a wonder to me, for many years I had learned the Talmud “he who slaughters the Passover offering with leaven [in his possession]” (*Pesahim* 63a-b) and I resolved difficulties in the verses, except one thing was difficult, why did it write in *Seder Mishpatim* “You shall not sacrifice” (Exodus 23:18) and in *Seder Ki Tissa* “You shall not offer” (Exodus 34:25). I attempted to resolve this through *gematriot*. Our sages add that the verse in *Ki Tissa* includes a member of a group who possesses leaven and then I resolved other verses and judgments and this was a delight to me as I was unable to see in a book. I requested friends and relatives to record [my *gematriot*] for me. Afterwards I was able to see, slowly, slowly, and to write them down...

***Ha-Birkei Yehoshua***. Two independent works by R. Joshua ha-Levi Traitel ben Jehiel Fischel of Sochotchov are *Ha-Birkei Yehoshua* (Warsaw, 1892, 4<sup>o</sup>: 52 pp.) and *Hedvat Yehoshua* (Warsaw, 1894, 4<sup>o</sup>: [4], 104 pp.). *Ha-Birkei Yehoshua* is novellae on the laws of *eruv* (extending Sabbath domains), novellae on tractate *Erwin*, and other subjects. *Hedvat Yehoshua* is

explanations on the *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* and *Yoreh De'ab* with accompanying responsa. Traitel begins his introduction to *Ha-Birkei Yehoshua* by writing,

“And Joshua answered and said” (cf. Numbers 11:28) with a heart broken and depressed, “on his sick bed” (Psalms 41:4) he has written this small work. And if I said I will put on paper the troubles and the suffering that have befallen me to this day, to relate what has developed from this, but for waste of my time “If His Torah had not been my delight, I should have perished in my affliction” (cf. Psalms 119:92). Thanks to the Lord for the affliction and the suffering did not prevent me from being occupied in His Torah... Due to [our numerous iniquities] a decree went out at this time in the summer of 1891 to do away with *erwin* which are in every city and placed in synagogues in courtyards, nullified, as will be explained. Each and every house needs a room to make an *eruv hatzerot* (merging courtyards or private domains to enable residents of a courtyard to carry). There is a concern lest [the *eruv*] not be made according to halakhah... I girded myself as a mighty man to fulfill the mitzvah of [*eruv hatzerot*] to write this abridgment of the laws of [*eruv hatzerot*] so that with ease, without difficulty, every man knows what to do...

I entitled this book *Ha-Birkei Yehoshua* יהושע הברכי for the letters of *Ha-Birkei* (237) equal “my father Jehiel ha-Levi my mother Hannah” אבי יהיאל הלוי אמי חנה (237).

It is in the introduction to *Hedvat Yehoshua*, however, in which Traitel discusses the numerous difficulties, disrespect for rabbis, emphasis on worldly matters, lack of Torah studies, and then the personal tragedy that has befallen him. He writes,

And now, what is to say and what will I speak that [our numerous iniquities have brought on me “the great pain of raising children” (cf. *Shabbat* 89b, *Erwin* 100b, *Sanhedrin* 19b) who did not survive for me. I had an only son, his name was **Jehiel Fischel**, the name of my father. Very sharp and God fearing, he was ill for several years, passing on, his soul “bound in the bundle of life” (cf. I Samuel 25:29), encompassed by bodily afflictions. He who said to the world: Enough, say to my troubles, Enough. He who is my aid, he will give me strength. Through duress and affliction, I learned His holy Torah... Many thanksgivings on the good done to me in my illness in the past year, for I wrote my book *Birkei Yehoshua*...

I have called this book *Hedvat Yehoshua* יהושע for the letters of *Hedvat* הדות equal (418), and the value of Fischel פישל (420), my late father, plus two for the sum of the words in the title of *Hedvat Yehoshua*

(418+2 = 420), and I saw in the introduction to the *Sefer Roke'ah* that it is appropriate to call by the name of the author and his forebears (Yehoshua) ...<sup>14</sup>

As we noted in the beginning, readers, regrettably, all too often ignore the front matter in books. The introductions in this article are comprised of thirteen prefaces by twelve rabbis, many prominent, such as the Rema, R. Hayyim ben Bezalel, and the Hayyei Adam, whose works are still studied today. Others are by rabbis less well known today but nevertheless authors of valuable titles. What they all share are varied experiences, reflecting the difficulties of Jewish life in such periods as *tah-ve-tat* or personal trials, such as R. Abraham ben Judah Tsefig's blindness. Prefaces, such as the examples in this article, are enthralling. Hopefully, more readers will be encouraged to peruse front matter in the future. 

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<sup>14</sup> Again, concerning the titling of books, including the comments of the *Roke'ah*, see my "*Adderet Eliyahu: A Study in the Titling of Hebrew Books.*"