

Dr. Philip Birnbaum's Forgotten H̄umash

By: YOSEF LINDELL

In the days leading up to the *Yamim Noraim*, anticipation builds in the synagogue. Bleary-eyed worshippers shuffle in and out for the late night or early morning *Selipot*. The regular *parokhet* comes down, a white one takes its place. And the box of Birnbaum *mahzorim* comes up from the basement.

Although the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *Mahzor* translated by Dr. Philip (Paltiel) Birnbaum was first published in 1951 and has been out of print for more than two decades, it remains a High Holiday mainstay in many American Orthodox congregations.¹ Likewise, Birnbaum's edition of the *siddur*, first published in 1949, ruled Orthodox pews for decades before being supplanted by the *ArtScroll Siddur* in the 1980s and 1990s.²

Yet I imagine that many will be surprised to learn—as I was—that Birnbaum also published a complete synagogue *H̄umash* with *Haftarot* in

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- ¹ Philip Birnbaum, ed., trans., *High Holyday Prayer Book* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951). Little popular or scholarly attention has been paid to Birnbaum. Limited biographical information is available in David Olivestone, "A Most Obscure Best-Selling Author: Dr. Philip Birnbaum," *Jewish Action* 79:2 (Winter 2018), 78-82; "Obituaries," *American Jewish Year Book* 90 (1990), 607; "Author Birnbaum Dead at 83," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin* (March 23, 1988), 4, <https://www.jta.org/archive/author-birnbaum-dead-at-83>; Ari L. Goldman, "Philip Birnbaum, 83, Author of Books for Jewish Liturgy," *New York Times* (Mar. 22, 1988), B5, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/22/obituaries/philip-birnbaum-83-author-of-books-for-jewish-liturgy.html?scp=1&sq=birnbaum&st=nyt>; Steve Lipman, "Birnbaum version: Bible purged of 'thees' and 'thous'," *The Jewish Week* (Jan. 27, 1984), 24; Tovia Preschel, "A Jewish Press Profile: Paltiel Birnbaum," *Jewish Press* (Feb. 24, 1967), 5, 18; Margaret Cosse Richard, "New Version of Jewish Prayer Book Wins City Man Acclaim," *The Wilmington News Journal* (May 13, 1949), 2.

- ² Philip Birnbaum, ed., trans., *Daily Prayer Book* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949).

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1983.³ Unlike his other works, the *Birnbaum Humash* vanished into obscurity. This article will explore three likely reasons for its failure: (1) it was not that good compared to its competition; (2) it lacked an audience; and (3) its publisher went out of business. Along the way, I hope to provide a partial intellectual portrait of its author, a man whose erudite works elucidated Jewish tradition for countless English-speaking Jews with their remarkable concision and clarity.

A Biographical Sketch

Much of Birnbaum's early life may be lost to the mists of history. He was likely born in 1901 in Żarnowiec, Poland, about 35 miles north of Cracow.⁴ The youngest of three children, his family remembers him sitting at night under the table with books and candles, always studying. He was something of an autodidact, and it is not known whether he studied at a yeshivah in his youth. He immigrated to North America in 1920, perhaps to continue his studies. His family did not accompany him, and tragically, most of them perished in the Holocaust.⁵

After spending a short time in Montreal and then New York, Birnbaum settled in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1923, perhaps to escape “the

³ Philip Birnbaum, ed., trans., *The Torah and the Haftarah* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1983).

⁴ Birnbaum was inconsistent regarding the year of his birth. Biographers commonly provide 1904, which seems to be based on Birnbaum's own statements later in life. For example, Steve Lipman, in his January 1984 interview with Birnbaum, notes that Birnbaum was 79 at the time; Lipman, 24. However, in his immigration and naturalization papers, Birnbaum states that he was born in 1901, and this is confirmed by Social Security records. See Ship Manifest for the *Melita*, bound from Liverpool to Montreal (Oct. 22, 1920) (stating that Birnbaum was 19); U.S. Petition for Naturalization (N.D. Ala. Jun. 14, 1927) (recording Birnbaum's birthdate as April 15, 1901) (both documents on file with the author); Index Record for Philip Birnbaum, Social Security Death Index, <https://www.fold3.com/record/23065818/philip-birnbaum-social-security-death-index> (also listing his birthdate as April 15, 1901). I want to thank Chaim Motzen for tracking down these documents and others, as well as for performing invaluable genealogical research.

⁵ The information about Birnbaum's early life in this paragraph is based on an October 9, 2022, email conversation with his relatives Arnon and Tilli Shafir. See also Richard, 2 (recounting horrifying anecdotes of his family's fate at the hands of the Nazis).

crowds and bustle.”⁶ There he taught at and then headed the local Hebrew schools, and financed his undergraduate degree at Southern Baptist-affiliated Howard College by lecturing in Greek and Hebrew.⁷ In 1935, Birnbaum left Birmingham for Philadelphia, and in 1939, he received his PhD in Jewish history from Dropsie College for his critical edition of the Arabic commentary on Hosea by the medieval Karaite commentator Yefet ben Ali.⁸ While in Philadelphia, he was principal of the nearby Camden Talmud Torah.⁹

In 1943, Jacob Kraft, the rabbi at Beth Sholom Congregation in Wilmington, Delaware, invited Birnbaum to Wilmington to teach there.¹⁰ Birnbaum remained in Wilmington for 20 years, first heading the Associated Hebrew School and then the Advanced School for Jewish Studies.¹¹ His students remember him fondly as a kindly and erudite teacher, and in 1946, he founded a Hebrew speaking group, a *Hug Ivri*, to promote the study of the Hebrew language, which still exists today.¹² In 1963, he moved to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and although he never married and was known to keep to himself, he regularly attended synagogue at the Jewish Center.¹³

⁶ Petition for Naturalization (stating that Birnbaum arrived in the United States from Montreal, lived in the Bronx, and had been residing in Birmingham since 1923); Richard, 2 (mentioning why Birnbaum came to Birmingham).

⁷ Lipman, 24; Preschel, 5; AJYB, 607; Mark H. Elovitz, *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie: The Birmingham Experience* (University of Alabama Press, 2003), 135; Knesseth Israel Celebrates Centennial, 138 Cong. Rec. E402 (Feb. 25, 1992).

⁸ “Monday in Birmingham,” *The Birmingham News* (Aug. 5, 1935) (noting Birnbaum’s departure from Birmingham to study at Dropsie); The Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning Register 1939-1940 (Philadelphia, 1939), 32; Philip Birnbaum, *The Arabic Commentary of Yefet ben Ali the Karaite on the Book of Hosea* (Dropsie College, 1942).

⁹ Phil Cohen, “Camden, New Jersey: Congregation Beth El” (last updated Jan. 10, 2015), <http://www.dvrbs.com/camden-religion/camdennj-congregationbethel.htm>; “Directories and Lists,” *American Jewish Year Book* 45 (1943-1944), 526, http://www.ajcarchives.org/ajc_data/files/1943_1944_12_directorieslists.pdf.

¹⁰ November 23, 2022, telephone conversation with Leonard Wasserman, a student of Birnbaum’s in Wilmington.

¹¹ Zev Amiti, “Local Scholar Publishes New Book,” *The Jewish Voice* (Jewish Federation of Delaware, Oct. 7, 1983), 3.

¹² Wasserman conversation; Amiti, 3; Marla Fogelman, “Bubby and Birnbaum,” *Tablet Magazine* (Nov. 16, 2022), <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/bubby-birnbaum-siddur-author>.

¹³ Olivestone, 79-80.

In 1944, Hebrew Publishing Company, at the time located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and one of the premier publishing houses of classical Jewish works, including liturgy, published Birnbaum's abridged version of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.¹⁴ Birnbaum newly vocalized and punctuated selections from the *Mishneh Torah*, and while he did not translate the text, he included explanatory English footnotes.¹⁵

Shortly thereafter, Hebrew Publishing Company approached Birnbaum and asked him to prepare a new edition and translation of the *siddur*, which took him five years to complete.¹⁶ Unlike some prior editions of the *siddur*, the text of Birnbaum's was all one size, its directions were clear, and the translation was more modern than that of its predecessors.¹⁷

Birnbaum's *siddur* and *mahzor* were runaway successes. Over the course of his life, he composed around 35 books, including English translations of seminal Jewish works, English anthologies and companion works, as well as books in Hebrew.¹⁸ Additionally, Birnbaum was on the board of the Histadrut Ivrit of America, an organization that promoted Hebraic culture in the United States. He was a regular columnist and book reviewer for the Histadrut's Hebrew weekly, *Hadoar*, and he wrote for a number of other Hebrew periodicals, including *Bitzaron*, *Shvilei ha-Hinukh*, and others.¹⁹ He received Yeshiva University's Mordecai ben David Award and the Body of Works Citation from the Jewish Book Council in 1986.²⁰ Upon his death in March 1988, a *New York Times* obituary called him "the most obscure best-selling author."²¹

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁵ Ibid.; Philip Birnbaum, *Maimonides' Mishneh Torah (Yad ha-Hazakah): Abridged Edition* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1944).

¹⁶ Richard, 2.

¹⁷ Olivestone, 80.

¹⁸ Lipman, 24.

¹⁹ Ibid.; for more on the Histadrut and *Hadoar*, see Michael Weingrad, "The Last of the (Hebrew) Mohicans," *Commentary* (March 2006), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/michael-weingrad/the-last-of-the-hebrew-mohicans/>. A selection of Birnbaum's Hebrew articles are collected in *Pleitat Sofrim: Iyyunim ve-Ha'arakhot be-Hakhmat Yisrael ve-Safrutab* (Mosad Harav Kook, 1971).

²⁰ JTA Daily News Bulletin, 4.

²¹ Goldman, B5.

Why a New *Humash*? Birnbaum as a Lay Educator

Before exploring why the *Humash* failed, it is instructive to examine why Birnbaum prepared a new edition of the *Humash* in the first place. Simply put, Birnbaum believed the Torah needed a more modern translation to make it more accessible. In 1983, when his *Humash* was released, there had not been a new Hebrew-English synagogue *Humash* aimed at Orthodox or Conservative congregations for decades. The 1936 edition prepared by British Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz and a 1947 edition edited by Dr. Abraham Cohen were still in wide circulation.²² Both were published by Soncino Press and used the 1917 Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation of the text, which only slightly modified the 1611 King James Bible.²³ In some respects, these translations were antiquated. In his preface to his *Humash*, Birnbaum laments the “traditional ‘Bible English’” and “misleading archaisms” of earlier translations, which use words such as “howbeit, aforetime,” and “would fain” among others.²⁴ Birnbaum elaborated on his motivations to reporter Steve Lipman shortly after the *Humash* was published: “My purpose was that if a person opens it up and begins to read, he should understand it. I want everyone to know what the Bible is.”²⁵

Indeed, Birnbaum was defined by his commitment to teaching his fellow Jews about Judaism and his fear of ignorance. “At the present time,” he writes in the introduction to his 1964 *Book of Jewish Concepts*, “when we are confronted with widespread indifference, we have great need of a spirituality based upon genuine knowledge of our heritage.”²⁶

²² J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 2nd ed. (Soncino Press, 1960); A. Cohen, ed., *The Soncino Chumash* (Soncino Press, 1947).

²³ Leonard J. Greenspoon, “A Book ‘Without Blemish’: The Jewish Publication Society’s Bible Translation of 1917,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79:1 (1988), 17-18.

²⁴ Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarah*, ix. He also attacks the repetitive use of “and” when a Hebrew word begins with the letter *vav*—a hallmark of the King James—as “superfluous and confusing.” The *vav*, Birnbaum explains, often merely changes a word from future to past tense or vice versa and should not be translated at all. The meaning of *vav* has long been a point of debate among biblical translators. For a contrary opinion to Birnbaum’s, see Robert Alter, “Beyond King James,” *Commentary* (Sept. 1996), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/robert-alter-2/beyond-king-james/>, who feels that the incessant “ands” are part of what makes the Bible feel biblical.

²⁵ Lipman, 24.

²⁶ Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1964), vii.

“I’m an educator,” he told Lipman in 1984, “I want to help Jews remain Jews.”²⁷

Aside from one book reprinting several Karaite studies²⁸—the subject of his dissertation—Birnbaum’s work in English focused on elucidating the basics. He translated the *siddur*, the *Passover Haggadah*, *Pirkei Avot*, and parts of *Mishneh Torah*, among other books. *A Book of Jewish Concepts*, an alphabetical compendium of hundreds of short topics, sought to illuminate the fundamentals of Judaism. Rabbi Tovia Preschel, in his 1967 profile of Birnbaum in the *Jewish Press* recounts the story of a lawyer who walked into a Jewish bookstore and said, “I am an Am Ha-aretz. Give me Birnbaum’s book on Jewish concepts.” After studying it with a group of other lawyers, he returned to the bookstore and proclaimed: “I have lost the title Am Haaretz.”²⁹ Professionally, Birnbaum never worked as a university professor, teaching instead at Hebrew schools and Talmud Torahs over a period of 40 years.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of Birnbaum’s educational focus is that in the first edition of his *siddur*, he calls the prayer book “a rich anthology of our literary classics” over which “many generations have brooded and wept” but has “never been sufficiently appreciated as a vehicle of Jewish knowledge.”³⁰ In this introduction, Birnbaum waxes poetic about the *Siddur’s* educational function, but entirely neglects to discuss how prayer facilitates communication with God. He only adds such a discussion in the second edition.³¹ One gets the impression that for Birnbaum, prayer was almost the *siddur’s* secondary function. Cultivating Jewish knowledge was more important.

Although Birnbaum focused on elucidating basic works, his treatments of those works was often anything but basic. Consider that *A Book of Jewish Concepts* has an entry for *Tanakh* but also one for *Taḥkemoni*—the rhymed travel narrative of the medieval poet Judah al-Ḥarizi.³² Birnbaum was a scholar, and it shows. His *Ḥumash’s* introduction, for example, is a fount of concepts from the simple to the abstruse.

²⁷ Lipman, 24.

²⁸ Philip Birnbaum, ed., *Karaite Studies* (Hermon Press, 1971).

²⁹ Preschel, 5.

³⁰ Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book*, ix, x.

³¹ In the 1977 edition, he included a new section in which he wrote, among other things, “Prayer is the natural expression of the religious feelings of man. . . . We breathe our feelings and our emotions into the classical forms of the traditional prayers.” Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1977), xvi.

³² Birnbaum, *Jewish Concepts*, 634, 645-649.

Birnbaum highlights the importance of the Bible, surveys the contents of each book of the Torah, and explains how when read, the Torah is divided into *aliyot* that are received by members of the congregation.³³ Yet, elsewhere in the introduction, he launches into a discussion of the Septuagint, the specific features of *Targum Onkelos*, and the history of the Masoretes.³⁴ Birnbaum's writing remains accessible throughout, but he never confines himself to rudimentary topics. His educational goals were ambitious.

And it worked. Birnbaum produced bestseller after bestseller. His 1964 *Book of Jewish Concepts* went through three printings in three years.³⁵ Birnbaum's name had such currency that when his translation of the Haggadah was reprinted in 1976, the publisher simply called it *The Birnbaum Haggadah*.³⁶ By the time of his death in 1988, the *Birnbaum Siddur* had been through 40 printings, sold somewhere between 300,000 and half a million copies, and made its way as far as Tokyo and Hong Kong.³⁷

The *Birnbaum Humash* represents a natural extension of Birnbaum's desire to make the Jewish library accessible and seemed well-poised to sweep synagogue shelves like his *siddur* and *mahzor*. As noted, the *Hertz Pentateuch* was quite old. In his review of *Birnbaum's Humash* published in early 1984, Steven T. Katz suggested that it had "set itself a clear target to replace" the Hertz Pentateuch and was "sure to win many users."³⁸ Birnbaum told reporter Steve Lipman, "This is my magnum opus."³⁹ The *Humash* was his swan song, and it should have also been his capstone work.

Yet it was not to be. Few synagogues ever used the *Birnbaum Humash*. Although the Jewish Center in Manhattan—which Birnbaum

³³ Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarat*, xi-xvi, xxi-xxii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi-xviii, xxi-xxv.

³⁵ Preschel, 5.

³⁶ Compare Philip Birnbaum, trans., ed., *The Passover Haggadah* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1953), with Philip Birnbaum, *The Birnbaum Haggadah* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1976); Oct. 30, 2022, email conversation with David Olvestone, who was the editor of Hebrew Publishing Company from 1974 until 1980.

³⁷ Preschel, 5; AJYB, 607; Goldman, B5; Lipman, 24.

³⁸ Steven T. Katz, "Two Bible Translations Bring New Insights," *The Jewish Week* (Jan. 27, 1984), 24.

³⁹ Lipman, 24.

attended—purchased copies, it was an outlier.⁴⁰ It was only after ArtScroll released its *Stone Edition Chumash* in 1993 that the slow pivot from the Hertz began in earnest in Orthodox congregations in the United States.⁴¹ Birnbaum’s edition fell by the wayside, forgotten. Its first edition in 1983 was also its last. Why?

Problems with the *Humash’s* Layout, Translation, and Commentary

The initial barrier to the *Birnbaum Humash’s* adoption was that overall, it was no better than the editions it sought to replace. First, unlike his 1949 *Siddur* and 1951 *Mahzor*, which were game changers with their evenly sized text, clear directions, and simple translation,⁴² the Hebrew text of the *Humash* is no sharper or clearer than the print in the much older Hertz Pentateuch.⁴³ And Birnbaum’s decision to group the verses by range only (e.g., 12-16), thereby eliminating the individual verse numbers on the English side, is disorienting to the reader. While Katz found this feature to lend “to increased readability and intelligibility,”⁴⁴ it is hard to match up the Hebrew with its English translation. By contrast, a decade later, ArtScroll released the visually appealing *Stone Chumash*, which has an attractive faux-leather cover and laser-sharp print, along with graphics, charts, and tables to guide the reader.

⁴⁰ June 11, 2021, conversation with Binyamin Edinger, an attendee of the Jewish Center at the time.

⁴¹ For some statistics and analysis of ArtScroll’s journey to liturgical dominance, see Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the ArtScroll Revolution* (University of California Press, 2010), 16, 72.

⁴² See, for example, *Form of Prayers for the Day of Atonement* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1903), 346, featuring prayers in different fonts and sizes, Hebrew instructions to close the *Aron*, Yiddish instructions about which prayers the *Mahzor* omits (but not where to find them), and prayers both with and without vowels. It translates the first line of *Anim Zemirot*, “Sweet hymns I will sing, and songs will I indite, for unto thee my soul panteth,” *ibid.*, 479. To be sure, there were better prayer books than this confusing *mahzor*, such as the British *Authorised Daily Prayer Book* by Rabbi Simeon Singer and the *British Mahzor* by Herbert Adler and Arthur Davis, but their translations were still somewhat more old-fashioned than Birnbaum’s.

⁴³ The Hebrew text itself is based on Wolf Heidenheim’s early nineteenth century Roedelheim edition. Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarah*, x.

⁴⁴ Katz, 24.

Second, although Birnbaum was a master Hebraist and a stickler for accuracy,⁴⁵ his *Humash* translation remained firmly in the past. It is more modern sounding than the 1917 JPS translation used by the Hertz and the Soncino *Humashim*, but not by that much. Although Birnbaum detested “Bible English,” he fails to excise many of the “thees” and “thous,” found in earlier *Humashim*.⁴⁶ This choice reflects his view that when “addressed to God,” these pronouns “convey a more reverent feeling than the common *you*,” but for 1983, it seems antiquated.⁴⁷ Birnbaum seemed to have ignored the Jewish Publication Society’s much more modern sounding translation completed in 1962.⁴⁸ It is also worth noting that Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s 1981 translation, which was essentially contemporaneous with Birnbaum’s, jettisons the literal for the colloquial.⁴⁹ Not only does Kaplan omit excessive “ands,” but he sometimes even takes out the word “said,” and places dialogue directly in quotation

⁴⁵ Birnbaum believed, for example, that the *Hosbanot* recited on Sukkot should not be translated at all because there was no effective way to render the complex acrostic-based and allusion-heavy Hebrew poetry into English (Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book*, xvii-xviii). In fact, when the Rabbinical Council of America published a new translation of the *siddur* in 1960 by Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool of Congregation Shearith Israel in Manhattan, Birnbaum attacked it in the Hebrew weekly *Hadoar* for being insufficiently literal and worse (Philip Birnbaum, “*Siddur Hadash Ba le-Medinah*,” *Hadoar* 40:6 [Dec. 9, 1960], 85-86). In particular, he detested the *RCA Siddur*’s incorporation of stylized poetic compositions by British intellectual and cultural Zionist Israel Zangwill to serve as translations of the *Hosbanot* and other *peyyutim*, which he considered “not translations, but free imitations infused with expressions from another world, the world of Christianity” (ibid., 85). Indeed, in his Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *mabzar*, Birnbaum reproduced a translation by Zangwill simply to criticize it (Birnbaum, *High Holyday Prayer Book*, 536). Birnbaum’s *Hadoar* article elicited an equally spirited defense from Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel, the chairman of the *RCA Siddur* Committee (*Hadoar* 40:6, 87-90), and their exchange spanned several issues of *Hadoar*. For more on the 1960 *RCA Siddur* and the controversy in *Hadoar*, see Jonathan Krasner, “American Jews in Text and Context: Jacob Behrman and the Rise of a Publishing Dynasty,” *Images* 7 (2015), 74-77; Louis Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission: The Emergence of the English Speaking Orthodox Rabbinate* (Shengold, 1982), 260-64.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarot*, 24, where he translates, “Wilt thou really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? . . . Far be it from thee to act like that, to slay good and bad together, letting the good fare as the bad fare!” (Genesis 18:23, 25).

⁴⁷ Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book*, xx.

⁴⁸ *The Torah: The Five Books of Moses* (Jewish Publication Society, 1962).

⁴⁹ Aryeh Kaplan, ed., trans., *The Living Torah* (Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1981).

marks.⁵⁰ Even if one considers Kaplan's turn away from literalism excessive (*Yom ha-Shevi'i* in *Parashat Beshalah* becomes "Saturday"⁵¹), his language is remarkably simple and clear, and he includes subject headings to orient the reader.⁵² When Kaplan's translation appeared in a Hebrew-English synagogue edition in 1985, it made more headway than Birnbaum's.⁵³

Third, Birnbaum's commentary was deficient. For example, Birnbaum's terse comments pale in comparison to Hertz's eloquent and far more comprehensive commentary that includes in-depth essays at the close of each book of the Torah. Birnbaum is also sloppy at times in the commentary, repeating the same information within a few pages of its first mention.⁵⁴ Typographical errors abound.⁵⁵ In short, in terms of the commentary, Birnbaum's *Humasb* was a step backward from the Hertz.

⁵⁰ Birnbaum's reasonably traditional translation of the beginning of the *Akedah* in Genesis 22 reads: "And it came to pass after these things that God put Abraham to the test, and said to him: 'Abraham'; and he answered: 'Here I am'" (Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarah*, 30). By contrast, Kaplan, 97, translates: "After these events, God tested Abraham. 'Abraham!' He said. 'Yes.'"

⁵¹ Kaplan, 339.

⁵² For some highlights of Kaplan's approach to translation, see Leonard Greenspoon, *Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics, Progress* (Jewish Publication Society, 2020), 184-85. Although Birnbaum never addressed Kaplan's translation, there is little doubt that he would have been thoroughly displeased with its approach, as he was with the less-than-literal translations by de Sola Pool and Zangwill in the *RCA Siddur*. See also, for example, his critical review of Rabbi Charles Kahane's (father of Meir Kahane) *Torah Yesbarah*, an idiosyncratic 1963 translation of the Chumash that liberally used Midrash as translation, often ignoring the simple meaning of the Hebrew (Paltiel Birnbaum, "Targum Angli be-Ruah ha-Masoret," in *Pleitat Sofrim*, 70-76).

⁵³ Kaplan, *Living Torah* (note date of 1985 on Hebrew title page); Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, *The Kosher Directory: Passover 1985 Edition* (containing a full-page advertisement for the *Living Torah*, stating, "Now with the complete Hebrew Text included!") (courtesy of Yeshiva University Archives). Still, perhaps because it lacked a commentary, Kaplan's *Humasb* was also no match for the later *Stone Chumash*.

⁵⁴ Compare, Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarah*, 150, "The Mishkan served as a visible emblem to the people of Israel that God dwelt in their midst, being near to all who call upon him in truth. According to Maimonides, the main purpose of the sanctuary was to wean the people from idolatry and to turn their attention toward the one and only God," with 154, which repeats the same two sentences with only two words changed and the word "*Mishkan*" italicized. Lest one surmise that Birnbaum found it useful to repeat a comment in separate *parshiyot*, both of these comments are in *Parashat Pekudei*.

⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, 27, "The Torah impartially relates the failings and the *virtues* of its heroes," is but one example among many.

The *Humash*'s Lack of an Audience

It is also unclear how much of an audience for Birnbaum's *Humash* existed in 1983. As noted, Birnbaum sought to familiarize an illiterate population with the classics of Jewish literature, and his *Humash* often feels like it is taking this approach as well. In fact, some of the material in it was taken from two other more basic works: his 1957 *A Treasury of Judaism* and his 1976 *Concise Jewish Bible*. The first is an eclectic anthology of passages from *Tanakh*, the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, *Josephus*, *Zohar*, *Rambam*, *Ramban*, and many other sources, including, at least in later editions, writings by Modern Orthodox leader Dr. Norman Lamm, Reconstructionist founder Mordecai Kaplan, and Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise.⁵⁶ Birnbaum then published the same excerpts from *Tanakh* in a stand-alone 1976 work, *The Concise Jewish Bible*. This highly abridged *Tanakh*, which he wrote "to provide a short version of the Bible which is easy to read, a joy to handle, and intelligible to many people," is a somewhat idiosyncratic work because of its many omissions.⁵⁷ For example, although many of the stories in Genesis make an appearance, the entire book of Leviticus spans only four pages.⁵⁸ Throughout this work, Birnbaum not only leaves out entire chapters and verses, but freely omits words within verses.⁵⁹ Although Birnbaum's translation in his 1983 *Humash* thoroughly modified these abridged translations, much of the introduction was lifted from *The Concise Jewish Bible*.⁶⁰

But in the decades following World War II, Orthodox day school enrollments soared while the number of more tenuously observant and poorly educated Orthodox Jews dwindled.⁶¹ Not as many synagogues-

⁵⁶ Philip Birnbaum, *The New Treasury of Judaism* (Sanhedrin Press, 1977). The book went through several editions.

⁵⁷ Philip Birnbaum, *The Concise Jewish Bible* (Sanhedrin Press, 1976), 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-52. Birnbaum excerpted only passages from *Parashat Kedoshim* concerning holiness, the holidays found in *Parashat Emor*, and the freedom-centered passages about the Jubilee year in *Parashat Behar*.

⁵⁹ One need not look far to find examples of this. Already in the creation story in Genesis 1, great liberties are taken with the text. See *ibid.*, 19-20.

⁶⁰ Compare Birnbaum, *Concise Jewish Bible*, 5-17, with Birnbaum, *The Torah and Haftarah*, xi-xxv. Birnbaum often recycled material between one book and another. Compare, for example, the introductions to the *Daily Prayer Book*, the *High Holyday Prayer Book*, and to a lesser extent, the preface to the *Torah and Haftarah*, which address aspects of translation methodology using identical language and with identical examples.

⁶¹ See Yoel Finkelman, *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy* (Academic Studies Press, 2011), 21-23; Zev Eleff, *Mod-*

going Orthodox Jews lacked the fundamentals as they did when Birnbaum published his prayer books. A *Humash* so focused on the basics was less likely to appeal to the Orthodox masses.

Another barrier to achieving a broad Orthodox appeal was Birnbaum's heavy reliance on academic scholarship. In many ways, the style of the *Humash's* commentary was very similar to the Hertz Pentateuch, albeit without as much detail. Birnbaum, like Hertz, had few qualms about incorporating academic insights from non-traditional scholars.⁶² Birnbaum mentions the Second Temple apocalyptic literature surrounding the figure of Enoch.⁶³ He discusses the existence of other flood narratives in Ancient Near Eastern literature but notes that only the Torah's account possesses "ethical and spiritual significance."⁶⁴ Like Hertz, he notes that each of the Ten Plagues, "except the last, has a basis in natural phenomena or disasters that occur in Egypt, annually or at intervals."⁶⁵ For Birnbaum, not only was the splitting of the sea due in part to the "eastwind blowing all night, and acting with the ebbing tide," but the tree at Marah that sweetened the water may have been among a type of "thorn trees whose leaves and bark have antisaline properties" still growing in the region.⁶⁶ He also attempts to explain how the Children of Israel procured materials for the Tabernacle in a desert, suggesting that the skins of the *tahash*, "a porpoise-like creature," came from the Red Sea.⁶⁷ And like Hertz who accepted the academic convention that Isaiah was written by multiple authors,⁶⁸ Birnbaum has no problem acknowledging that scholars believe that the book of Zechariah, whose first half reads very differently than its apocalyptic second half, may have been composed by two different authors.⁶⁹

ern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History (Jewish Publication Society, 2016), 196.

⁶² For example, in support of the historicity of *Megillat Esther*, he cites the opinion of the non-Jewish nineteenth-century British biblical scholar Samuel R. Driver, who said that "the sacred writer of the book of Esther is well informed on Persian manners and institutions, and commits no anachronisms." Philip Birnbaum, *Five Megilloth* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1973), 115-16.

⁶³ Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarot*, 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁵ Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarot*, 95-96; Hertz, 400.

⁶⁶ Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarot*, 106-07, 109.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁸ Hertz, 941-42.

⁶⁹ Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarot*, 403.

Birnbaum even appears accepting of multiple authors in the Torah in one instance. He writes that the differences in wording between the Ten Commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy could be due to the fact that the two accounts shared a short textual core that was later supplemented, a view widely held by biblical scholars today.⁷⁰ He does not say when these additions were made to the text, but he seems to be contemplating post-Mosaic authorship of a limited but highly significant portion of the Torah, a view largely shunned in Orthodox circles.⁷¹

These comments may have made an Orthodox audience uncomfortable. What's more, large swaths of Orthodoxy were moving away from academic scholarship in general.⁷² The burgeoning Orthodox communities influenced directly or indirectly by institutions such as the Yeshiva Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey, had little interest in what Birnbaum had to offer.⁷³ When the *Birnbaum Humash* was published, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications was already making waves with its popular translations of various books of Tanakh.⁷⁴ Its approach was quite different than Birnbaum's. Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz wrote in his 1976 introduction to ArtScroll's first work, *Megillat Esther*, "No non-Jewish sources have even been consulted, much less quoted. I consider it offensive that the Torah should need authentication from the secular or so-called 'scientific' sources."⁷⁵ Further, ArtScroll, unlike Birnbaum,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 116. See Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (Jewish Publication Society, 2014), 139.

⁷¹ Some traditional figures, however, such as Ibn Ezra and Rabbi Yehudah he-Hasid, also contemplated limited post-Mosaic additions to the Torah. See Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Maggid Books, 2020), 204-17.

⁷² Changes in Orthodox views can even be seen in the publication history of the *Birnbaum Siddur*. In the acknowledgments to the first edition of his *siddur*, Birnbaum thanked a slew of professors and rabbis affiliated with Dropsie College, the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, and Dr. Chaim Tchernowitz, who at that time was affiliated with the Reform Jewish Institute of Religion. But that acknowledgments page was dropped from later editions. See Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1977).

⁷³ See Finkelman, 23-30.

⁷⁴ On ArtScroll's approach to Tanakh translation and commentary see B. Barry Levy, "Judge Not a Book by its Cover," *Tradition* 19:1 (Spring 1981), 89-95; Levy, "ArtScroll: An Overview," in *Approaches to Modern Judaism*, Marc Lee Raphael, ed. (Brown Judaic Studies, 1983), 111-40; Finkelman.

⁷⁵ Meir Zlotowitz, trans. & ed., *The Megillah: The Book of Esther* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1976), x.

often favors *derash* over *peshat*,⁷⁶ and is uncomfortable with ascribing fallibility to biblical characters. Birnbaum, on the other hand, writes, “The Torah impartially relates the failings and the virtues of its heroes.”⁷⁷ But this view was falling out of favor in many Orthodox circles.

Birnbaum never explicitly identified his *Humash*—or for that matter any of his works—with one stream or denomination. For example, although Birnbaum opposed changing the text of the prayer book, he reasoned that modifying the prayers would mar a classic work “to which the terms orthodox, conservative or reform do not apply,” and would increase sectarian divisions.⁷⁸ He says nothing about halakhic concerns, which suggests that he wanted his prayer book to appeal to those who might not be swayed by halakhic arguments. As a teacher in Hebrew schools and Talmud Torahs, he never catered to the Orthodox. He maintained ties with teachers at both the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Yeshiva University.⁷⁹ He described himself as a “Jewish Jew,” refusing to be pinned down as Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform.⁸⁰ One might think that Birnbaum’s middle-of-the-road approach might have made his *Humash* appeal to synagogues of different flavors, including Conservative ones. But it seems unlikely that Conservative congregations would have adopted a *Humash* that did not use the new JPS translation, which had already been available for 20 years. Birnbaum likewise missed his chance with Reform; Rabbi Gunther Plaut published that movement’s synagogue *Humash* in 1981 using

⁷⁶ For example, Birnbaum understands the prohibition against cooking a kid in its mother’s milk as proscribing an idolatrous Canaanite practice but does not mention the Sages’ widely known halakhic derivation that the verses prohibit cooking, eating, or benefiting from milk and meat cooked together (Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarah*, 305). ArtScroll, on the other hand, in its widely used *Stone Chumash*, only mentions the Sages’ view. (Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Stone Edition Chumash* [Mesorah Publications, 1993], 437).

⁷⁷ Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarah*, 27. Intriguingly, Birnbaum assigns blame to every actor in the story where Rebecca convinced Jacob to trick Isaac into giving him Esau’s intended blessing. Jacob suffered all sorts of troubles as a punishment for his role. Rebecca never saw her son again. Esau suffered because he despised the birthright. And Isaac would have fared better had he not preferred Esau over Jacob (ibid., 39-40). The *Stone Chumash*, however, vilifies Esau but defends Rebecca and Jacob’s actions as entirely righteous and justified (*Stone Chumash*, 134-39).

⁷⁸ Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book*, xi.

⁷⁹ Ibid., “Acknowledgments”; Preschel, 5 (discussing Birnbaum’s relationship with R. Hayyim Heller, who taught at Yeshiva University).

⁸⁰ Amity, 3.

the new JPS translation. And the synagogue in particular is a highly denominational space. There, at least, you had to be Orthodox, Reform, or Conservative. Perhaps a *Humash* that was none of the above had nowhere to be.

The End of Hebrew Publishing Company


Nevertheless, it is likely that these considerable problems alone did not sink the *Birnbaum Humash*. Throughout his writing career, Birnbaum worked with the venerable Hebrew Publishing Company, but by 1983, the company was no longer on sure footing. Founded in 1901 on the Lower East Side by Joseph Werbelowsky, it published and sold everything from religious texts and Yiddish classics to greeting cards and sheet music. The publisher courted American immigrants trying to navigate between the old and new worlds: it printed Yiddish translations of Leo Tolstoy and Jules Verne, Yiddish textbooks, guides to learning English, and pirated editions of *siddurim* from Europe sometimes featuring slapdash English translations. Its fiftieth-anniversary catalog ran nearly 200 pages.⁸¹

Even when Hebrew Publishing's sales began to decline after midcentury, Birnbaum's books were perennial bestsellers, and the company was able to sustain itself on sales of his *siddurim* and its greeting card business. But matters went downhill, and in 1976, the company sold its iconic building on Delancey St. where it had been for 75 years. In 1980, Lawrence Werbel, the owner and part of the family who had founded the business, sold Hebrew Publishing to Charles Lieber, who took the company's remaining stock to a warehouse in Brooklyn.⁸²

⁸¹ Jonathan D. Sarna, "Two Ambitious Goals: American Jewish Publishing in the United States," in Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway, eds., *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 4 (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 387-88; Zachary M. Baker, "The Storied History of Yiddish Publishing," *PaknTreger* 74 (Winter 2016), <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/pakn-treger/storied-history-yiddish-publishing>; Israel Shenker, "It's Onward and Uptown for Hebrew Publishing," *New York Times* (Aug. 1, 1976), 40, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/08/01/archives/its-onward-and-uptown-for-hebrew-publishing.html>.

⁸² Much of the information in this paragraph comes from a July 10, 2019, conversation with David Olivestone. See also Shenker, 40; Lieber, Charles D. (death notice), *New York Times* (Apr. 19, 1976),

The *Birnbaum Humash* was birthed in these days of decline. After its publication in 1983, it seems like Hebrew Publishing released only one other new work; in 1987, in conjunction with the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, it published a single volume containing *Business Ethics in Jewish Law* by Rabbi Leo Jung and *Jewish Business Ethics in Contemporary Society* by Rabbi Aaron Levine.⁸³ In the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Hebrew Publishing continued to reprint some of its more popular works, such as Birnbaum's *siddurim* and *mahzorim*, but no new books were forthcoming.⁸⁴ Then the company vanished entirely. Lieber died in 2016, and the location of Hebrew Publishing's remaining inventory and papers is unknown.⁸⁵ Thus, I would conjecture that in addition to the problems noted above, the failure of the *Humash* was due to Hebrew Publishing Company's decline throughout the 1980s and its inability to market new titles.

Forty years on, the *Birnbaum Humash* seems a mere historical curiosity, unused and overshadowed by several new and more user-friendly editions. Nevertheless, we ought not to forget Dr. Birnbaum and his oeuvre. Equally at home in the ivory tower and the synagogue, Birnbaum uniquely straddled the worlds of academic scholarship and popular religious literature. Although he defended traditional Judaism, he spoke to all Jews, regardless of denominational affiliation. As American Judaism fractured, fewer would cross those divides. Birnbaum's capstone work, coming 30 years too late, may have failed to achieve its goals, but perhaps there is still a place in Jewish thought for his broad-minded and yet uncompromisingly traditional vision. 

<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nytimes/obituary.aspx?n=charles-lieber&pid=179665968>. The back flap of the dust jacket for Birnbaum, *Torah and Haftarah*, lists Hebrew Publishing's address as 100 Water St. in Brooklyn, NY.

⁸³ To determine Hebrew Publishing's final titles, I searched online used booksellers such as Abebooks (<https://www.abebooks.com/>) and library cataloging services such as WorldCat (<https://www.worldcat.org/>).

⁸⁴ For example, the *Birnbaum Mahzor* was reprinted as late as the year 2000. See https://www.worldcat.org/title/mahzor-ha-shalem-le-rosh-ha-shanah-veyom-kipur/oclc/419496535&referer=brief_results.

⁸⁵ A message board thread speculating on the fate of Hebrew Publishing Company is available at <https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/coffeeroom/topic/hebrew-publishing-company>.