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קראו ספר המדע לפני שכל בני המצות התלויות במחשבה ובידע ובעצות והלכות ראשונות הלכות יסודי התורה קראו  
 כך למי שהמצות הכללות נזקקו עיקר התורה ויסודותיה שאם לא יתחלףו תחילות השם ונשארו ידע מעשה בני האדם  
 לא יתקדו האמנה בתורה ולפי קורין למי שאינם מרמז במציאות השם כפיכר מפני שהאל ית' הוא עיקר הכל וטעם  
 ודע שעיקר הדת לידע שיש שם אלוהים שאין עמו אלוה אחר וככלל תחת ידיעת שמי מצינו לו נעניין מעשה בראשית ומעשה

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## מטנה תורה

הוא כפר ה'ר שחיבר הרב הגדול רבינו  
משה בן הדיין רבי מייזון הכפר רבי זצ"ל

עם המגדל קיוונם הסגור ששנה ועם ההנהגות מיוסדות נדפס  
מחדש סוף ומדויק כדרכו העיון בדרך ספרים קדמונים נכבדים  
בדפוס ובתבנית יד מעיינים וסוגה ס מחנכים נידה ס אנשי שם  
על האנן ראש דגולה כלייר דוד מייזון וז' : ועם דעהקית  
של הרב גדול כדורו סהרר עזריאל דינה זל :

עוד הסבנו קרבה הנחות שזיאלו בכנסים וסגים וקדמונים  
והנהגות עולם : גם לתהדש על הנדבכים כהחלה היגור ויטן  
היטות שהיבר הדינים זל סקח עקר נחל ליה הסכר : נכזה  
לשונות זה הקצנות אשר השני הדין זל על היגור המו למען  
יהיה שלם בתכלית השלימות לא ירכה כלבני : עוד הוסבנו כי  
יהיה מיקום ויהיה מיקום בספרים ויטוין כל דין בגיליון בחינה כיוון  
יהיה מיקום ויהיה מיקום : גם בכל י קום שחכיד היגור משה מו  
הנהגל עזי סכח או סכח ייטוין על דגלו לחיות בלוח דף  
כיוון : עוד כדכס עיון היכחות סכדכו לכנים ולא  
כתבשנו בגלילות חלו סקה הכחות מחד למחל  
כל דין בקלות :

גם הסבנו להדפוס באחרונה זה סכת בגיליון סכת אחד ואלס חרובי פדוואה  
הרכיב מחד סהגים לבקרים סכת חלנו נדבכים המי חוסי אשר הדם סחחד  
הנהגות וסככים ראשו בין הקדמונים גד ליטול אשר מייזון סכת סחחד  
ולחיים קדמונים ויהיה מיקום באחת סלח להדפוס סכת סחחד וסחחד  
לא יחדקו להיכרה לחייה מחד סכח ייטוין כל דין בגיליון בחינה סכת  
סכת לך זה סכת הדפוס להיכרה סכת כל סכת  
ולגשות כדכס אים וסכת :

## פה ויניציאה

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## 1. The Printer

“**A**nd what is a book?”

Benjamin Pardo hated the question before he even heard it. He saw Giustiniani's dark eyes sharpen their focus, watched as the tightened lips tried to suppress the grin, and knew that the quick-witted Italian had him right where he wanted him.

He was prepared to hate the question. But this question! What *kehutzpah*! This presumptuous Christian was going to question him about books? He, who from his youth had been singled out as a maker of books! He, who held more books in his head than this supposed printer ever held in his hands!

Of course none of this showed on Benjamin Pardo's face. How could it? He lived from this man's enterprise, which kept his wife - and helped keep their two daughters, their husbands and now a grandchild - in bread and fish and even meat on *Shabbat*. Giustiniani's pay kept all those bodies in warm clothing and dry shoes against Venice's cold winds and flooding winter canals. And it did all that by filling the world with words of Torah and Talmud.

And besides all that, Giustiniani was clever. Cleverer than he. He would have been a great Talmudist had he been born a Jew. That was what rankled most.

For three months, Pardo had labored over Marco Antonio Giustiniani's new edition of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. Together with a crew of typesetters and printers, they had produced

hundreds of copies of two massive folios in less time than it should have taken them to produce one. Yet Pardo took no pride in the accomplishment, for this huge effort was deployed for the sole purpose of driving a would-be-competitor out of business.

Benjamin knew firsthand how cut-throat his boss could be. He had been on the other side when the then upstart Giustiniani had driven the revered Daniel Bomberg out of the printing business. Now it was Giustiniani's turn to face the upstart, Alvise Bragadini, who intended to break into the business with a new edition of *Mishneh Torah* edited by Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen of Padua. Giustiniani would not only undersell Bragadini on price, he would mock Rabbi Meir's editorial work even as he appropriated the good rabbi's commentary. The job's shame was there on page two.

That page was the work of Pardo's taciturn mentor Cornelio Adelkind. Pardo first met him nearly thirty years earlier when Adelkind was running Bomberg's print-shop. He was a quick, accurate compositor of text, a careful, thorough corrector, and a respected, natural shop foreman. But the true source of quality in Adelkind's work came not from his many talents, but from his enormous pride - a trait he shared with Bomberg. Both men were determined to produce the finest Hebrew books available, and to that end, they were lavish in their preparations. When Bomberg took on a print job, he invested heavily in quality manuscripts with variant versions of the text. Such variations were the natural result of hundreds of years of hand-copying. Bomberg turned those manuscripts over to respected editors who had the intelligence and learning necessary to reconcile the variations and establish what they considered a correct reading. They, in turn, handed their labors over to Adelkind who bore gravely the responsibility of rendering their efforts permanently in ink. Pardo vividly recalled the day he and Adelkind watched as David ben Eliezer Ha-Levi Pizzeghettoni pored over five separate

manuscripts of *Mishneh Torah*. “I cannot imagine how you choose among so many variant readings,” Adelkind innocently remarked to the great Talmudist and physician.

“Young man,” he was told, “I have peered into these manuscripts so long, may the Lord - Blessed be His name - strike me dead if He has not taken me inside Rambam’s very heart!” With that, he pounded his fist on the desk so hard that Benjamin could still hear the ringing a quarter century later. He imagined that Adelkind - whose face had gone ashen from the outburst - could still hear it too.



Marco Antonio Giustiniani was the scion of a Venetian patriarchy which traced its roots back to the tribunes who governed the city a thousand years earlier. When he decided to open a print shop specializing in Hebrew rabbinical texts, he set his sights on Daniel Bomberg, the most successful and respected printer of Hebrew books. He intended to drive Bomberg out of business and to steal away Adelkind, his most valued employee. In truth, it was not a particularly hard task. For more than a decade, Bomberg’s output was practically nonexistent. He printed but a single title in both 1532 and 1533, then nothing for four years. Two somewhat productive years were followed by another three years of idleness, the shop not returning to full operations until 1544. All the while, the quality of Venetian printing had declined to such a state that the city’s books were banned in Rome, and the Venetian Senate was forced to regulate minimal standards for paper used by their printers.

Adelkind, meanwhile, was doing his best to keep the Hebrew printing business from moving to Germany by encouraging the firm of Giovanni Dei Farri and Brother to expand into the suddenly vacant market. Yet Dei Farri ultimately deferred to the well financed Giustiniani who

was young, smart, arrogant and fiercely competitive. Cornelio Adelkind did not like Marco Antonio Giustiniani. But with Bomberg on the sidelines, he knew that, for the time being at least, the future of Hebrew printing in Venice rested in his well-pampered hands.

He had no choice but to move on.

Out of loyalty, Adelkind returned to his mentor Bomberg for one last flurry of productivity in which they published sixteen tractates of Talmud in little more than a year. But he knew the future would be with Giustiniani who now was beginning to produce his own Talmud tractates - a scattered few at the beginning, but an onslaught was clearly in store.

One night, late in 1548, Adelkind sat at the compositor's table in Bomberg's press room. At his feet were the final printed pages of *Masekhet Menakhot* - their latest Talmudic tractate. Propped on the table before him was an unbound copy of *Masekhet Bava Metziah* - a tractate from the Giustiniani press. The edition was obviously based on his own work here in this print shop, but what of that? His editions were based on those of Gerson Soncino half a century earlier. Adelkind was admiring the quality of Giustiniani's French cut typefaces when his old master entered the room. Signore Bomberg looked older by candlelight, his face drawn, his eyes deeply recessed. The pace at which they were working would exhaust a man half his age. He had wondered whether Bomberg would have the strength to go on, but now, looking at the hunched, shrunken figure before him, all doubt was erased. They were at the end.

Bomberg nodded slightly at the book occupying his master printer's attention. "Giustiniani's latest," he said with a sad certainty.

"Yes."

With that, Bomberg turned the book back to its title page. His fingers lightly brushed the printer's mark that had been an outrage and a goad to both men. It was the image of the Temple in Jerusalem surrounded by the words of the prophet Haggai - "*Greater will be the honor of this house,' says the Lord of Hosts.*" "I'm afraid," said Bomberg, "that Signore Giustiniani might have appropriated the proper verse."

So it was that Adelkind returned to Giustiniani, while Bomberg quit more than just the travails of the world of printing.



With Adelkind now in control of his press room - and with his loyal minions - men like Benjamin Pardo - in key positions in correcting and compositing - Giustiniani's output exploded. Entire tractates of Talmud were coming off his presses at a rate of one every three weeks. And while there were a world of Hebrew books to be printed - Bibles and commentaries, law codes and responsa - the quality of their volumes of Talmud were the key to both a printer's

sustenance and his reputation, which is why Giustiniani was so annoyed at the prospect of having to waste an hour talking with the rabbi of Padua, Meir Katzenellenbogen.

The elderly Rabbi Meir was a beloved figure in Padua and Venice and a respected scholar throughout the Jewish world. Kindly, patient, revered by his students, Rabbi Meir was a supreme rationalist in the mold of Maimonides. It rankled that *Mishneh Torah* - written in the clear elegant style of the *Mishnah* itself - never achieved respect as the definitive code of Jewish law. Yet for 350 years, many rabbis viewed Maimonides' entire project with suspicion. Some were angered at the substance of the decisions he rendered. Others were incensed that he failed to cite sources for those decisions, or even acknowledge contrasting views. All, however, were afraid that his clear, lucid style would blind students to the subtleties of law and logic that are the very essence of Talmudic study.

"What I have tried to produce," explained Rabbi Meir with his customary humility, "is an edition of *Mishneh Torah* that I hope will go a ways to address these concerns. I have provided references to some of Maimonides' more obscure sources, but left out those references where I believe people should learn the Talmudic material for themselves. I have also added contrasting views to those of Maimonides' in order to encourage readers to delve into these controversies."

"Forgive me, Rabbi, but I do not understand," asked Giustiniani. "Signore Bomberg's edition of *Mishneh Torah* is, I believe, highly respected and contains many commentaries that address these same concerns. Is this not true?"

"Oh no!" replied the Rabbi, anxious that he not be misunderstood, "Signore Bomberg's edition is a wonderful edition. The scholarship and erudition of its editors is marvelous and I, at first,



saw little value in gleaning the last remaining crumbs. Yet fine as that edition is, it has, I am afraid, failed to achieve for the text the recognition that I think it deserves.”

"No doubt the crumbs you have gleaned will prove sumptuous feasts for many." Giustiniani's tone betrayed none of his inward disdain for the metaphor. "Yet as a printer desirous of producing the finest rabbinic texts, I am hoping you can tell me more about your views of the editorial process. I hope you will not object if my shop manager Signore Adelkind joins us?"

Rabbi Meir sensed the conversation had taken an unfortunate turn. Giustiniani had so far shown more interest in discussing Bomberg's shortcomings than his own work's merits. Yet Cornelio Adelkind's reputation as a printer preceded him and he could think of no objection to inviting him into the conversation. Perhaps his proposed project would prove more appealing to ... to ... What was the man? A Jew? A convert? A Christian Hebraist?

What Rabbi Meir did not know about the man entering Giustiniani's office was that his professional name, Cornelio, had only recently become his baptismal name. Giustiniani had a strong sense of how the doubt-plagued man born Israel Adelkind would react to this rabbi's criticism of his previous work.

Introductions, pleasantries and the requisite avowal of respect for Bomberg dispensed with, Rabbi Meir hesitantly opened his criticism of the previous work: "Rav Pizzeghettoni, I fear, took too many liberties and introduced too many textual conjectures for my taste. I understand he consulted five or more sources for Rambam's words, is that correct?" Giustiniani shrugged, but Adelkind was unexpressive. "I believe that where he found such ambiguities, he should have left the text as is rather than trying to correct it. That is what I have done. I have kept any of my own conjectures to my marginal notes."

So much for peering into Rambam's very heart. Giustiniani saw Adelkind's lips tighten and he knew he had his man.

"Rabbi Meir," he said in his most sweet and conciliatory tones. "I am flattered and honored that you have brought such an important work to my little print shop. But I fear that at the present time I am completely engaged in the printing of the Talmud. When, God willing, I complete its printing, I have already committed to a volume that traces every Jewish law back to its Talmudic source by tractate, chapter and page. With so much work before me, I am afraid I must decline the fine opportunity you have presented me today. As you yourself have acknowledged, as a source of Jewish scholarship, the Talmud must come first."

When the disappointed rabbi had left, Giustiniani took the opportunity to enforce his message to his shop manager: "I fear he is unimpressed with Rav Pizzeghetton's work."

"Rabbi Meir seems to have his own ideas about textual editing." The neutrality of Adelkind's words was undermined by the hint of a sneer in his tone.

Yet Giustiniani's sense of relief at having gotten rid of the rabbi was tempered by a current of unease. The work Rabbi Meir had shown him was too extensive and too fully developed for the old man merely to consign to an office shelf. He would continue to try to get it published. But who would produce the work? Would Meir actually travel to Prague or Constantinople to get it done? Giustiniani was unsure. "Perhaps," he worried, "the rabbi has another alternative."

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Young Benjamin Pardo never expected to be a printer. He had been raised and educated as a *sofer* - a writer of Hebrew manuscripts. His education began at age three when he had first learned his *aleph-bet*. As soon as he could read Hebrew with understanding, he was expected to commit ten verses of Torah to memory every week. By age nine, he had the entire Torah in his head. By thirteen, he knew much of the *Mishnah* by heart as well. Early practice had made young Benjamin a prodigy of memorization. This, coupled with his patience and penchant for order made him the very model of a Hebrew scribe. He began, as all scribes do, by developing the fine control of the quill needed to create *mezuzot* - the three biblical passages that by religious law adorn virtually every Jewish doorway. He also wrote those same passages for *tefillin* - the prayer boxes that Jews strapped to their arms and forehead in fulfillment of the biblical command to affix the Torah's words to one's very body.

Soon after Benjamin began work repairing Torah scrolls themselves, his father arranged for his marriage to Leah Cardoza. Venice's Jewish population was steadily swelling with immigrants from the West - many carrying their own hand-written Torah scrolls with them. There would, for some time, be steady work at scroll repair. But with so many Torahs around, the chances of getting a commission to write a new one looked bleak. And Benjamin Pardo lived for the day he would get to write his own *Sefer Torah* - his own Torah scroll.

One spring day in 1521, with a new baby on its way, Cornelio Adelkind entered Benjamin's small, second story workshop in the *Ghetto Nuovo*. How would he like a job manuscripting pages in Daniel Bomberg's print shop? Typesetting a page of Talmud – or any other text that was accompanied by extensive commentary - was a terrifically complicated task. Following the lead set in the previous century by Gerson Soncino, the Talmud was not so much a single book as three books paginated in unison. In the middle of the page -now by developing convention four lines down from the very top - ran the text of the Talmud itself. Along the text's inside margin

was printed Rashi's running elucidation of the text, while along the outside margin were the supercommentaries of the Tosafot - Rashi's grandsons and spiritual heirs who added their own subtle and esoteric take both on Rashi and the original text.

Efficient printing required the ability to set and print many pages simultaneously. In order to properly paginate the book, typesetters would count the number of words in all three texts and then calculate the apportionment of space on each page to determine their proper balance. Often printers like Bomberg and Adelkind could use the pages of an earlier printer – like those of Soncino – to model their own pages for their typesetters. But when they had no earlier model – or when their own pagination varied significantly from those models, they needed talented scribes like Benjamin to manuscript each individual page. A typical page might have anywhere from a dozen to more than fifty lines of the central text in block Hebrew letters surrounded by sixty or more lines of commentary in much smaller cursive Hebrew. Soon after he began work in Bomberg's shop, Benjamin began teaching himself to write left-handed. It took him more than a year to perfect his ambidexterity but it allowed him to work harder and longer and earn more money in those early years when Bomberg's printing focus was volume after volume of Talmud. Besides, there was something quite natural about writing a right-to-left reading language with one's left hand.

Benjamin's two handed writing talents did him little good in 1528 when Bomberg began his second edition of the Talmud. There his typesetters could use corrected versions of their previous printed editions to guide them. But Adelkind liked this quiet, diligent and obviously pious would-be *sofer* and he gladly put him to work as a text corrector when there was no manuscript writing to be done. Benjamin, in turn, remained loyal to Adelkind and followed him from Bomberg, to Dei Farri, and then to Giustiniani.

That last move was the hardest. Pardo did not like Giustiniani, but Adelkind in very short order came to despise his new boss. Every printer he had worked for was in the business for the money. But most - and most particularly Bomberg - were also in love with the very notion of the printed word. They brought a craftsman's sensibility to a work that had forever been touched with a spirit of the divine. The Christian Bomberg knew the tall tower of Jewish shoulders on which he stood. That made his own work a sacred trust. When Bomberg briefly resumed printing, both Adelkind and Pardo flew back to him. When his presses stopped forever, the two packed their tools and returned to the only remaining printer of Hebrew in Italy. There was no one around at the time, but Pardo was sure that Adelkind was speaking to someone else when he said quietly "This man will, in the end, burn more Hebrew books than he prints. And I, God forgive me, will be his accomplice."

Pardo suspected that Adelkind was baptized shortly thereafter.

For the first few months back in Giustiniani's shop, things went smoothly, if grimly. Regardless of the weather outside, the press room remained oppressively hot as fires were continuously burning to make the printed ink dry faster. Despite the heat, things moved quickly. There was a cacophonous hum to the place. In one corner was the constant clicking of lead-type slugs being slapped into their compositing sticks as each irregularly configured page was assembled. Next to them, the correctors checked the text by having one person read aloud from the manuscripted page while another followed along in the reverse-image type form. Next to them came the clanking of printing forms being disassembled, their type being sorted for reuse. The press itself made the most noise - from the banging of the printing forms as they were wedged into place, to the rustling of paper being whisked on and off its plates, to the squeaking of the pressing mechanism itself, accompanied always by the sounds of muscle strain.

And so page after page, volume after volume of Talmud came off of Giustiniani's press. And Pardo watched as Adelkind went about the business of running the shop with a cheerless intensity.

The day Rabbi Meir arrived in the press room was in every way typical, yet his presence made Benjamin acutely aware of his surroundings. He recognized the rabbi who would attend his synagogue whenever he was in Venice. The few times Benjamin had spoken with him, he found Rabbi Meir to be quiet, friendly and unassuming - characteristics he found appealing in a man known for his great erudition. But standing along the wall of the press room, Rabbi Meir looked quite old and frail. He was obviously waiting to meet Giustiniani and Giustiniani just as obviously had no compunction about making him wait. Every so often Pardo would look up from the form he was correcting and see the old rabbi still standing there. Was Giustiniani trying to wilt the man? Sometime after Rabbi Meir finally disappeared into Giustiniani's office, word came down that Adelkind should join them, and the grim-faced printer silently consented. Less than a quarter-hour later, Benjamin watched Rabbi Meir hurry out of the office and out into the street. Adelkind followed soon thereafter, looking now angry as well as grim.

For a time, Benjamin wondered what had happened in Giustiniani's office, but those wonders faded behind the constant flow of Talmud. He had heard rumors of a new press but had no way of associating those rumors with the mysterious rabbinical visit. Then, nearly a year later, as they were about to turn their attention to the Talmudic tractate on vows, word came down of a change in plans. They would be next printing the *Mishneh Torah* and the job would have to be rushed through.

Quickly, the rumors began to take form. Alvise Bragadini was indeed setting up a new press for Hebrew books and his first effort would be an edition of the *Mishneh Torah* edited by Rabbi

Meir. Word had it that Rabbi Meir was even financing some portion of the printing costs. Of course Venice was a small town, and the Jewish ghetto was itself an even smaller town. It wasn't long before sheets of the newly printed text were finding their way into Giustiniani's shop and onto Adelkind's desk. The two press's print jobs were progressing nearly simultaneously - Bragadini's lead in time nearly cancelled out by Giustiniani's advantages in resources and experiences.

"Rav Pardo," commanded Adelkind.

"Yes Signore Adelkind."

"These are the pages of the new press's *Mishneh Torah*. I want you to glean from them a complete record of Rabbi Meir's commentary and prepare them as a manuscript to use as an addendum to our own edition."

Benjamin had never done such a thing. Virtually every word he ever composed for printing had been written by a hand long dead. And those works by living authors that he had printed were always prepared with their knowledge and consent. He stared at Adelkind.

"Yes, Rav Pardo?" A long pause and no response. "Is something on your mind, Rav Pardo?"

Benjamin hesitated, and when he finally did speak, he did so slowly, hesitantly. "Should we really be doing this?"

Adelkind stared for a long time at his trusted assistant. "You are doing well, are you not, Rav Pardo?"

“Yes Signore.”

“And your family and children and, yes I think now, a grandchild, no? They too are doing well?”

“Yes Signore.”

“Then kindly do as I have asked.”

The manuscript was prepared, set in type and printed at the back of Marco Antonio Giustiniani's new 1550 edition of the *Mishneh Torah*.

Yet disturbed as Pardo was by his own role in appropriating the work of Rabbi Meir, he was more disturbed by the part written by his mentor, Cornelio Adelkind. There it was on page two of the new book: a full throated denunciation of Rabbi Meir and his work. Adelkind announced that scholars from “Yemen to the West” were alike in declaring that Rabbi Meir's commentary did not belong within the text itself as it was so full of errors, or busied itself explaining things “understood even by one who is one day old.” Why, Adelkind wanted to know, had Rabbi Meir not heeded Maimonides' own advice and stuck to providing Talmudic sources rather than supplying a confusing commentary to what was already the most lucid of texts? In a generous spirit, Adelkind reported that he had agreed to append Rabbi Meir's commentary to the back of this text so that readers could make up their minds for themselves - and no doubt judge its worthlessness - “having been written for nothing.”

It was those words - there on page two of this rush print job - that caused the quiet Pardo to confront his boss in his own, non-confrontational way. It was late on a Friday afternoon.



Every Jew in Giustiniani's employ had already left the shop to return home for the Sabbath. By being slightly less inconspicuous than usual, he succeeded in attracting the printer's attention. "It is the mark of Cain," he said, barely audibly.

Giustiniani's ears were as sharp as his mind. "It is the mark of an experienced and dedicated printer who takes pride in his craft," he replied, disingenuously.

Giustiniani liked Benjamin. He enjoyed teasing and besting in argument the earnest little man who toiled away in his taciturn boss's shadow. He could see that Benjamin was troubled by what they had done and wondered if he could beguile him out of his scruples. At the very least he'd have some fun.

"Do you really believe that Adelkind took pride in this?" asked Benjamin.

"I think he takes pride in the work that he did with Bomberg, and I think he felt that Rabbi Meir insulted that work."

"Then should not we have printed the book we wished to make and not taken Rabbi Meir's book?"

"Rabbi Meir's book?" Giustiniani asked. Then a long pause. "Rabbi Meir's book." Giustiniani stared deeply into Benjamin Pardo's eyes for a long time. Then his dark eyes sharpened their focus and his lips tried unsuccessfully to suppress a grin. Benjamin knew what was coming next. And he knew he would not like it.

“And what is a book? Your people, Rav Pardo, hand write your stories on pieces of animal skin which you stitch into a continuous sheet and then roll around spindles of wood. I, on the other hand, use a machine to impress inked, lead slugs on paper which I fold and cut and stitch into individual leaves. And yet we both call what we make a book, do we not?”

“Pardon me, Signore, but I have no idea what you mean” Benjamin said, confused.

“You accuse me - us really - of having stolen Rabbi Meir’s book. I, in turn, ask you to define the word ‘book.’ Indeed, I offer you two alternative definitions: a book is a handwritten scroll, or a book is a machine pressed codex. Which is it?”

“It is both.”

“It is both, or it is either?”

“That depends. A *Sefer Torah* must be a handwritten scroll.”

“But something like Bomberg’s Rabbinic Bible is almost unimaginable as a handwritten scroll.”

“True,” replied an anxious Benjamin.

“Yet the essential text in both books remains the same. One is more suitable for ritual recital, the other is more suitable for study, no?”

“Again, true.”

“So the form in which a book is preserved might affect how it is used, but there still remains something about it that is independent of that form. So what is it? What is a book?”

Benjamin’s eyes widened. He had no idea where Giustiniani was leading.

“Is the *Mishnah* a book?” Giustiniani asked, referring to the early rabbinic text that systemizes, explains and teaches Jewish law and serves as the scaffold around which the Talmud is built.

“Yes,” agreed Benjamin.

“And is the *Gemara* a book?” Giustiniani asked, referring to the extended commentary on the *Mishnah* that makes up the bulk of the Talmud.

Benjamin hesitated, unsure how to answer.

“What do you think, Benjamin? You are unsure because you cannot imagine the *Gemara* without the *Mishnah* can you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Nor does it make any sense to think of Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud without the *Gemara*. Or Tosafot without Rashi. For that matter, what are the Spanish commentaries *Migdal Oz* or *Maggid Mishneh* without the *Mishneh Torah* itself?” Giustiniani paused to let his message sink in. “So let me ask you again, Benjamin - *what is a book?*”

“It is a dialogue” answered Benjamin Pardo with simple comprehension.

“We have stolen nothing from Rabbi Meir. In fact, we have given him something that Bragadini could not. We have made him - without any benefit to ourselves - part of the dialogue.”

Giustiniani turned and walked back toward his office. Benjamin Pardo knew it was getting late for *Shabbat* and hurried to leave. Just as he was about to open the door, he heard Giustiniani again.

“Unless,” he said.

He came toward Pardo. “Rav Pardo, is it true you know the entire Torah by heart?”

Benjamin was embarrassed. He cast his eyes to the floor and, without looking up, he admitted that he did.

"What is a book? Maybe, Rav Pardo, you are the book."

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From his second story office, Marco Antonio Giustiniani watched Benjamin Pardo hurry across the Rialto Bridge on his way to the *Ghetto Nuovo*. The sun was already very low in the sky and Giustiniani wondered whether Pardo would make it home in time for his Sabbath. He wondered too how much of that “book as a dialogue” harangue Pardo actually believed. Perhaps some. Perhaps some of it was even true. It didn’t much matter. By Sunday Pardo would be busy correcting forms of the new tractate of Talmud that even now his Christian typesetters were assembling. The Talmud was what mattered in this business.

That was what he was thinking when his eye caught sight of a barge sailing down the Grand Canal, on its way to the basin at the *Plaza de San Marco*. He stared intently at it as if by doing so

he might be able to see into its hold. It would, he was certain, be stuffed with crates of books - books from Alvise Bragadini's new press. Today they would be copies of *Mishneh Torah*. But tomorrow, there would be volumes of Talmud sailing past his soon-to-be-shuttered print shop, on their way to the wider world. The Talmud was what mattered in this business. And if he could undersell Bragadini and deny him an influx of capital, he might just keep the start-up from seriously challenging him in a part of the business that really mattered. It was, he believed, his one real hope.

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On Saturday morning, Benjamin Pardo sat in synagogue next to his aging father-in-law. Yitzkhak Cardoza had a small pawn business right inside the *Ghetto Nuovo* and even now, well into his seventies, he continued to earn a small but comfortable living from it, thanks in large part to the assistance of his daughter - Benjamin's wife Leah. As the *chazzan* droned slowly through the introductory prayers, Benjamin and his father-in-law chatted quietly.

"Giustiniani asked me what a book was."

"The man is a printer and he is asking you what a book is? Well, he is also a Christian, I guess. Who better to ask than one of the People of the Book - and a *sofer* no less! What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything. He told me. A book, he said, is a dialogue."

Yitzkhak Cardoza paused and thought. “A smart man, your Giustiniani. He might be right. What is the Torah but people asking questions of God? What is the Talmud but rabbis asking questions of one another?”

“And what don’t people like about the *Mishneh Torah* but that Rambam isn’t asking questions of anybody,” he said in response.

They paused and listened to the *chazzan* ask “Who is like You among the god’s My Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness?” Then they stood and offered their silent devotion to God - stripped as it was of all its usual requests out of respect for the holy Sabbath. When they sat down, Benjamin turned once more to his father-in-law and picked up the thread of the conversation.

“He said something else.” continued Benjamin. “He asked me if I knew the entire Torah by heart and when I said yes, he told me that maybe I was the book.”

His father-in-law sat quietly for a long time and then nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe you are, Benjamin.”

The Torah reading began. Benjamin Pardo closed his eyes and watched the words of that perfect Torah of his mind’s eye drift past. A voice from deep inside him began to chant along with the Torah reader. Eventually the interior voice took over the reading and lulled Benjamin to sleep.

## 2. The Rabbi

**M**oshe Isserles was in a bind. He never disobeyed his father-in-law and teacher Shalom Shakhna, but he never disobeyed his mother-in-law either. She was now ordering him to go out and buy bones for a broth for her ailing daughter, Moshe's wife, Hannah, while he was cautioning him to stay put. Moshe reasoned that his mother-in-law was issuing an actual command while his father-in-law was merely offering advice. He went to the market.

Twenty minutes later, he was regretting his choice.

"How did you get back here so fast?" his mother-in-law demanded.

"The butcher is only two streets away."

"You idiot! You can't buy meat from Bocian! Don't you know anything? How many years did you eat in my kitchen and in all that time you never learned that we don't buy meat from Bocian!"

Shalom Shakhna watched with a wry smile as his wife denigrate the intelligence of his best student, his beloved son-in-law. Moshe's head dropped to his chest and his entire body slackened. Shalom wondered whether the sack of bones, now turning a brownish-red and dangling from Moshe's limp right hand, would fall to the kitchen floor.

“One year and you’re so long gone that you forget what it means to be a Jew in Lublin? Things are so different in Cracow? And you!” she turned to her husband. “You always talked about him like he was such a great *gaon* - a genius! Who’s going to clean up this mess!”

For a moment, Shalom thought she was referring to the small but growing pool of blood gathering below the swaying sack. “Did Landau sell bloodless bones?” he wondered. But then he remembered, stood up and put his arm around the sagging young man. Moshe stiffened at his touch and smacked him in the leg with the sack. Shalom knew his pant leg was now blood spattered. He grimaced to himself.

“Don’t worry Mama. Moshe and I will take care of it all.” And with that, he led his shuffling son-in-law - bloody bag and all - out the back door.

The brisk air had its effect on Moshe. He claimed ignorance of any concerns over Bocian’s meat, but apologized profusely anyway.

Shalom couldn’t help but grin as he stared at his son-in-law whom he loved as a son. Moshe Isserles was his most brilliant student - reason alone to marry him off to his daughter. His family was wealthy too - yet another thing in his favor. But Moshe had the sweetest, quietest disposition. He carried his Talmudic brilliance with humility - always conscious not to show up another student - let alone an elder or a teacher.

But for all of that, Moshe was just twenty years old, and Shalom Shakhna knew that some genius cannot come from books.

“You know, Moshe, I once bought a duck from Bocian. Have I ever told you this story?”



Moshe shook his head.

“I was maybe thirteen or fourteen. My mother gave me nine *groshen* and a budget to buy everything for *Shabbos*. My first stop was Bocian’s meat stand. Back then Jacob Bocian’s father Samuel ran it. He was thrilled to see me. How wonderful, he said, that my mother had entrusted the shopping to me! He promised me the plumpest, freshest, most beautiful duck for our *Shabbos* meal - the best duck we had had since any of us could remember. Right away, I knew something was wrong.

“As I’m walking away from the stand, who walks up but Rivka Pollak, the rabbi’s daughter. “Oy, what a beauty! Those ...” Shalom broke off, suddenly aware of what he was about to say. A quick shake of his head and then, “She says to me, ‘Shalom! what are you doing here? You know your family buys its meat from Landau! *Our* family buys from Bocian!’ Well I, of course, knew nothing of the sort. To tell you the truth, I’m not sure how many times I had seen a duck with its head off and its feathers on. But she then explains it all to me. Ours, she says, are the two most prominent Jewish families in a town that has two kosher butchers. So naturally, we each get one butcher for ourselves. After all, if both prominent Jewish families went to the same butcher, what would the rest of the town conclude about the other?”

Moshe got the point, but his father-in-law’s story was just beginning.

“‘So,’ Rivka demands of me ‘what are you going to do about this problem?’ ‘What problem?’ I ask. ‘You have to go buy your duck from Rav Landau, otherwise the entire town is going to know that your family switched butchers, and that will be the end him!’”

“So now I’m stuck. I’ve just spent five groshen on a duck and I only have four groshen left. With that, I have yet to buy flour, potatoes, carrots, cabbage, olive oil, eggs, candles. What am I going to do?

“Then I get an idea. The knife I just got from my father: maybe I can pawn it. Sure enough, I find it in my pocket and I run to Joseph Dresel’s pawn shop. What a sight I must have been! Scampering through the streets of Lublin, a knife in one hand, a headless duck in the other! Kind of like ... well ...” His voice trailed off.

“So I get to Dresel’s little shop. I’m so frantic that the first thing I put on his table isn’t the knife. It’s the duck. Dresel snorts a little as I explain my situation. Then he asks his daughter to look after the shop for a while. He tells me to leave the knife and the duck and follow him.

“We head off into the market with all its stalls and all the people running around, buying what they need for *Shabbos*. To me, it’s one great mass of humanity. But Dresel picks his way around the place like he knows every vendor, every ware, every price - which in fact he does. He knows who’s got too many carrots this week, and who has flour left over from last week. He knows who will give him a deal if he buys two dozen instead of one dozen eggs. And he knows whose candles aren’t quite as clean but cost a little less. Item by item we pick through my mother’s list - saving a quarter *groshen* here, a quarter *groshen* there. In the end, I leave the market with all my mother’s items and still one and a quarter groshen in my pocket.

“And then you know what Dresel does? He leads me back to his shop where he gives me back my knife and pays me three and three-quarter *groshen* for my duck. I get my duck from Landau and everyone is happy. Except, of course, my mother who says that the flour I bought was too

course, the candles too smoky and the oil was on the point of turning rancid. She would never send me to the market again.”

Moshe raised his sad eyes as Shalom Shakhna finished his story. He knew his father-in-law was driving at something. Shalom stared back. Then a slight smile curled the older man’s lips and he said, “I suspect no one has sent you to the market for a long time either.”

“Why do you say that?” Moshe asked, suspecting, but not presuming, that he knew the answer.

“I read your responsum to Rabbi Meir.”

“And?”

“A clever piece of work.”

Moshe knew that clever was a derogatory term to his father-in-law. “So you don’t think I made a good case?”

When Rabbi Meir learned that Marco Antonio Giustiniani was preparing an edition of *Mishneh Torah* and that he intended to undersell his own edition on price, he scurried to find some way of protecting his place in the market. He sought a rabbinic authority to condemn the rival edition. Moshe Isserles seemed the obvious choice. He had been a student with Isserles’s father-in-law, Shalom Shakhna, and both he and the younger man were eager, Maimonidan rationalists. Besides, thought Rabbi Meir privately, the newly installed 20-year-old chief rabbi of Cracow would be honored by the request and perhaps likely to want to please.

“I think your implementation of your decision was,” Shakhna paused for a newer word, then realizing he had the right one, pressed on: “clever. Obviously you had no recourse to enforce the judgment of a rabbinical court - in Poland, no less - against a Christian, Venetian printer. Excommunicating those Jews who purchase the rival edition, that was,” again a pause, “clever.”

“And the reasoning of the decision?” Moshe pressed in the way one does when wondering if the flaws that are obvious to you are also obvious to others. His father-in-law did not disappoint.

“To begin with, Maimonides himself - in the very book you are arguing over - encourages competition. And the sages in the *Mishnah* itself – May they be remembered for blessing! - say that a competitor who lowers prices is remembered for good.”

Shakhna went on: “You cite legal precedents to argue that Giustiniani is acting like a man who builds his store such that one could not enter his competitor’s without walking through his own. Why is this so? First of all, the analogy doesn’t work because Giustiniani was there first. But even were that not the case, what is the connection here? Is it that he is selling at a lower price? Is it, as you say, that he is one of the wealthiest men in the country? None of that makes any sense to me, for shouldn’t competition encourage lower prices? Or if not lower prices, greater value? Did I ever tell you of the letter I sent to the printer, Daniel Bomberg?”

Moshe shook his head.

“My teacher had just shown me an old, hand-copied manuscript of one of the *masekhtot* of the Talmud. I was astonished. How could Jews learn Talmud without Rashi and Tosafot right there?”

"Jews did for 500 years," commented Moshe, feeling it was his first statement all day that showed any learning.

"Be that as it may, I wanted to know what made him think to put them there. Didn't it add to the expense of the book? Well, sometime later I get a response from Bomberg's printer, a Signore Adelman or Adelberg - something like that. He tells me that in adding the Rashi and the Tosafot, Bomberg is following the path of Soncino and other, earlier printers. Those printers, he says, were afraid that if they produced mere copies of the existing texts - even at a lower price - that that would not be enough. Since it is so very expensive to print a book, they wanted to add everything they reasonably could to encourage people to buy their work. And that too is a way of getting more for less."

"My point," defended Moshe, "is that Giustiniani, being rich, can afford to sell his books at a loss for no other purpose than to drive Rabbi Meir out of the market and into bankruptcy. He did the same to your Signore Bomberg and Signore Adelkind, did he not?"

"I think it was Adelberg. Or maybe Adelstein. And do you really want to be the person who decides which advantages make the competition unfair? After all, Giustiniani, being an established printer had other advantages over Rabbi Meir and his printer: the right equipment, experienced workers, who knows what else? And does not Rabbi Meir have advantages of his own? Friends, for instance, like you and me and important rabbis all over the world who can recommend his edition over his rival's despite the small difference in price? After all, you say in your responsum that the Talmud teaches that it is better to teach less with greater accuracy. That being the case why would anyone who listens to your advice even consider buying Giustiniani's edition? Why indeed would you even allow him to sell it after Rabbi Meir has sold out his edition if, as you say, it is so inaccurate in comparison?

“Is that all?” Moshe was now feeling defensive and a bit angry.

“Yes, Adelstein,” replied his father-in-law distractedly. “Or maybe ... I’m not sure. But I am sure it had an ‘Adel’ in it. *Adel-something*. And no, it’s not all. I don’t know why you didn’t base your responsum on the idea of theft. You started with theft. You started by saying that this was a case of theft - but then you dropped that line of argument. You never suggested that Giustiniani stole Rabbi Meir’s work by publishing his commentary without his consent and without compensating him. In fact, you say that one cannot own something that is not tangible. Still, a man puts years of labor and effort into a work of scholarship and someone else profits from it?”

“I didn’t think I could make the argument,” replied Moshe. “Beside, Rabbi Meir has no right to Maimonides’s work which is the principal text.”

“True, but that argument would have been more interesting than the one you made.” He paused for a long moment. “Maybe it was Adelklein.”

“Adelkind,” Moshe corrected. “His name is Cornelio Adelkind.”

“So you know the man?”

“Only by reputation. And even that is sketchy. But he works for Giustiniani now.”

Shalom stared at his son-in-law. After a long while he said, “Well then you will be all the more interested in what I have to show you.” He led Moshe across the familiar courtyard and through

the door into the study hall. The scene was at once familiar to him and strange. Pairs of chairs facing this way and that, straddling tables on which were left open volumes of Talmud. It being midday, most of the students were off for their meal. One older child - perhaps 15 or 16 - remained with his head bent over a tractate of Talmud, his study partner's seat empty. But had the room gotten smaller? He looked for his old study table - back of the room, right side, next to the window. Was he misremembering, or was there always another table behind his?

"More crowded than you remember, Moshe?" Moshe gave a slight nod. "I have more students than ever. I've added a couple of extra tables. And I've added a lot of extra books. Let me show you."

They walked to the back of the room. A new folio of Talmud sat open, propped up on another volume. Moshe noted the tractate and page - *Masekhet Bava Metz'ia, Bet, Amud Bet*. A new student, he knew. Shalom stood beside him and flipped the book to its title page, at the bottom of which was a woodcut of the Temple surrounded by the words of the Prophet Haggai, "*Greater will be the honor of this house.*" "I just bought six volumes from Signore Giustiniani and your Signore Adelkind." He put extra emphasis on the last syllable. "I need Giustiniani. The Jewish people need Giustiniani. There are too many places - important places like Venice - where we Jews are dependent on Christians for our books. Is it so bad that one of the richest men in Venice, as you say, bases his livelihood on our custom? Have you really located some foundational principle of Jewish business ethics that we need to use it to threaten a powerful man through whose offices we educate ourselves and our children?" Shalom paused. He relaxed his tightened lips into just the hint of a smile. "And besides," he added, "for such a large order he offered me a special price on his edition of *Mishneh Torah*."

Moshe looked up apprehensively at his father-in-law whose grin broadened into a smile as he answered the young man's concern: "Tempted as I was," he said, "I declined."

Moshe grimaced. "But he is trying to destroy Rabbi Meir!" This wasn't an argument, Shalom knew. It was a plea. And it was a plea that got to the heart of the young man's responsum - contrived, but deeply felt; the work of one who wanted to aid an older colleague and mentor who needed it. He looked downcast and Shalom knew it was time to let up on the young man. Here he had just traveled three days from Cracow to Lublin, leaving his new post so that his ailing wife - Shalom's daughter! - could be cared for by her mother. And what had he gotten for his troubles? Yelled at by his mother-in-law and mocked by his father-in-law.

"Oy Moshe," he said, putting his arm around the young man, "Such trouble! Let's go find the *parnas* and see if he knows anyone in need of some soup bones. Then you and I can walk over to Landau's and buy ourselves some proper bones. And all of this talk has gotten me in the mood for your mother-in-law's roast duck." Shalom put his arm around his son in law. "And on the way, you can tell me why a good Ashkenazic boy like yourself is getting mixed up with a Sephardi like Rambam."

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It was a lonely carriage ride back to Cracow. Hannah was sickly and the trip to Lublin made her worse. She stayed with her parents while Moshe went back to his duties. On the way, he thought about it all - the soup bones, the market, the study hall, the books. He thought a lot about the books. And he thought about his father-in-law's offhand remark about the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim.



As soon as he got to Cracow, he went directly to the synagogue. He climbed the stairs and found himself in the *genizah* - the synagogue's storage room for old and worn out objects and texts. The room was drafty, dusty, and thick with spider's webs. There were piles of paper around the room stacked haphazardly wherever one could find a space. Moshe searched for almost half an hour before finding what he was looking for. The binding was cracked and torn. A quire of pages from the center of the volume had come loose and was stuffed in amid the rest of the leaves. The pages themselves were thick, yellow and brittle. He carried the book downstairs where the light was better.

In the study hall, Moshe pulled up a chair at his favorite table. Second row, right side, near the window. It occurred to him for the first time what a creature of habit he was. He propped the hand-copied book up on another volume and opened to the first page. The Talmud. *Masekhet Bava Metzia*. Yet it more resembled a page of Torah than that of Talmud. There was but a single column of text, extending the full length of the page. The first word of the Mishnah was set off in a larger script. There were some notes in the margin and, in three places, the scribe had inserted missing words in the space between the lines. How old was this book? 100 years? 200 years? He did not know.

He began to read: "Two are holding a tallit ..." By habit, he began to fill in Rashi's commentary: "They are holding it precisely the same, such that this one has no more control over it than that one ..." Instinctively, his eyes turned to the inside margin of the page to continue reading the words he was reciting in his head. Of course they were not there. All he had before him was the unadorned text of the Talmud. The way it was studied before the printing press.

The way it was studied before Rashi.

Moshe stared blankly out the window for a long time. His mind returned to his father-in-law's words about a good Ashkenazic boy getting mixed up with the words of a Sephardi like Maimonides. Was he being warned against Maimonides? Surely not. Were Sephardic students being warned against Rashi? Certainly they knew Rashi in those lands. But what was the impact, he wondered, of putting Rashi right there on the page? A name popped into his head: Joseph Caro, originally of Toledo, now living in the Holy Land. Perhaps he would be a man to sound. He picked up his quill:

Most Honored Rabbi Joseph, whose words are sweeter than honey:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, continue to support you, whose work glorifies His name and illumines our paths!

It has been my cherished honor to correspond with you on matters of Jewish law. Now, I find my heart troubled by matters that fall somewhat outside the strict considerations of law or custom and hope to unburden myself in the soothing balm of your great wisdom!

I was recently asked to render a legal decision in a case involving rival editions of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*. I am enclosing the question and my response with this letter, so there is no need to rehearse the details here. Your thoughts on my opinion - which I took up with enthusiasm but which I now look upon with no small amount of anxiety - would be a great gift to me. Yet the heart I open before you today is troubled less by this decision than by the question of what our books teach us and where they lead us.

My most honored colleague Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, May the Holy One sustain him in his years and his wisdom! has recently published an edition of *Mishneh Torah* that attempts to resolve some of the controversies surrounding that text. He, in his great learning, has attempted to edit it in such a way as to blunt the criticism that studying *Mishneh Torah* - with its ready answers to *halakhic* questions - will dissuade students from the more arduous but also more fruitful task of studying the Talmud.

Yet I also suspect that the fear with which many of our colleagues greet the *Mishneh Torah* betokens a far deeper chasm that separates brother from brother. This fear goes beyond a concern that Maimonides's rulings obviate the need for Talmudic study, Heaven Forefend! It goes instead to a concern shared by many of my fine and honored teachers - Heaven protect them all! - that Maimonides, in making his rulings, not only failed to reference contradictory opinions, he deliberately ignored and left out all reference to them. Thus, in the judgment of these esteemed colleagues of mine, Maimonides views the Talmud

as - God Forbid! - something to be picked apart for right answers while the rest is to be disregarded!

I now stare down on my work table at an ancient volume of Talmud that I have extracted from my synagogue's *genizah*. It is a hand-written affair with a few marginal notes, but no commentaries. In reading its text, I find myself wondering about the hands and heart that set these words on parchment, God knows how many years ago. Did they know Rashi or his grandsons? Or did they read these holy words with the piercing comprehension of the great *gaonim* who came before me?

For my own poor part, Rashi and his grandsons echo on in nearly every word and every phrase of the Mishnah and Gemara. And what is that they tell me? They tell me that each one of those words and phrases must be understood as they relate to every other word and phrase - in spite of any seeming contradictions! They tell me that the Talmud in all its vast and swirling intricacy is, in fact, a single, unified whole. I ask you, my honored teacher, is this teaching not the very opposite of the tradition represented by Maimonides - who saw in the Talmud's seeming contradictions a need to discriminate between true and false rather than to harmonize what is black or white?

And so of this ancient volume at which I am staring I ask, "what are you?" Are you a fork in the road whose one path leads to Maimonides and whose other leads to Rashi? Or are you instead a mirror of its scribe's singular genius that stood above and beyond what followed after? I stand this hand-written, ancient book alongside its modern, printed successor. The central words are the same. But now there are others; surrounding it, inside and out. And I ask, "what are you?" Are you the same book as your ancestor here? Can you lead me to Maimonides the way it did, or have you closed that road? Perhaps you too are a mirror - a mirror of the printer's genius and a reflection of his distinct understanding? If so, is it only he whom I will see when I look into you?

My honored teacher, I burden you with these my thoughts in the hope that you, whose customs trace the path that Maimonides followed, will be able to shed light and perspective on them. Are the printed volumes of Talmud that flood your schools, encased as they are in Rashi and Tosefot, viewed there with suspicion the way some of us here view *Mishneh Torah*? Are our books really but mirrors of their authors whose reflection now obscures their original, and holy light? Or is that supernal truth still within - waiting for us to find it out?

I pray that your wise counsel will not be withheld from my troubled mind for very long. And I pray that the Holy One, Blessed be He! shall enlighten and protect you on your path and along your way!

Moshe ben Israel

Moshe put down the quill and stared out the left side of the North facing windows. The sun was sinking low and the light was strong and slanting from the West. Perhaps his father-in-law was right. Perhaps he had acted more out of compassion for a colleague than concern for a

Jewish principle. And if he were right about books being mirrors of the men who create them, his actions - which would hurt one of the principal publishers of Jewish books - would necessarily dim that reflection. "I just don't know," he said aloud, to no one.

Then his thoughts turned to his young, fragile wife. It was now a week since he had seen her. How was she? Had her mother's watchful care strengthened and healed her? He thought about his trip to the butcher and smiled. He wished he had a letter.

He heard noises coming from the nearby study hall. Men were gathering for the afternoon prayers. Moshe Isserles took one more look toward the sunset. Then he collected himself and headed in to say his prayers.

He had much to pray for.

### 3. The Priest

Father Andreas Masius stared into the eyes of his Lord and Savior. He saw no pain in them. The nails, the crown, the wounds from the scourging - these could no longer touch him. What remained was acceptance, acceptance that his father had brought him into this world precisely for this purpose.

Father Masius closed his eyes and prayed. “Heavenly Father! Grant me such acceptance! For I am surrounded on all sides by ...” He stopped. His words failed him. He was angry and anxious and his heart wasn’t in his prayer. He didn’t want to pray - not for acceptance, not for understanding. He wanted to fight.

Father Masius kept his eyes closed and tried to focus his mind. He needed his wits about him. He needed to listen carefully, think clearly and speak forcefully. When he finally opened them, his eyes were no longer focused on the large crucifix on the wall facing him. He scanned the Congregation of the Inquisition. He looked down the baize-draped dais behind which he was sitting to the row of cardinals - all but one sitting back in their seats, listening to the convert. Only Oliviero Cardinal Carafa leaned forward, intent in his questioning. Masius followed Carafa’s gaze across the room to where the convert was sitting, facing the tribunal. Giovanni Battista Eliano looked every inch the Jew - the complexion, the nose, the hair - all of which made the silver crucifix decorating his simple, priestly habit seem like a costume.

He compared the man before him with the image he formed in his mind nearly two years ago, when they first met. The then new convert had been sent to petition an ecclesiastical court on

behalf of his client - the Venetian printer Marco Antonio Giustiniani - for what amounted to an exclusive privilege to print the Babylonian Talmud. Soon after his arrival came other converts representing Giustiniani's rival, Alvise Bragadini.

That hearing was a farce - just as his fellow judges warned it would be. Eliano praised Giustiniani as the only Christian pious enough to be trusted with such a potentially troublesome book as the Talmud. As proof, Eliano pointed to Bragadini's close relationship with Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen of Padua. Their collaboration in printing the *Mishneh Torah* had won accolades from foreign rabbis. Was not Bragadini beholden to these rabbis for his business? And would he not edit and publish books with their approbation in mind? Would he not indulge these rabbis's perverse heresies so that they would drive the God-fearing Giustiniani from the business? And once that most Catholic pillar was gone, all that would be left - not just for the Jew but for the thoughtful Christian scholar - would be editions of Talmud that preserved the greatest calumnies against Christ and Mother Church!

Eliano's harangue fooled no one. The judges could recognize an argument designed to knock a competitor out in court rather than compete against him in the marketplace. Bragadini had done the same to Giustiniani - getting Rabbi Moshe Isserles to effectively ban the sale of Giustiniani's rival edition of *Mishneh Torah*. The ban may have given Bragadini a short term advantage. But it looked to Father Masius as though Rabbi Isserles's decision had ultimately hurt everyone. Printing, he well knew, required a great initial outlay of money which could be recouped only over time as the volumes sold. By raising the specter of a book being subject to a rabbinic ban, Rabbi Isserles had effectively increased the riskiness of the printing business still further.

The results were obvious. It had now been almost a year since Giustiniani had printed his last book. Bragadini, he suspected, could not be doing well either. All of which led Father Masius to marvel at Eliano's ability to transform himself. The young man got to Rome by representing - poorly as it turned out - a printer of Hebrew books. Now he was a priest in the Society of Jesus and a sworn enemy of the merchants whom he once represented.

"The word you used was ...ta - ta - taka - ..." Cardinal Carafa stumbled over the Hebrew word. It wasn't a hard word and Masius suspected he was doing it for show.

"Takanot," finished Giovanni Battista Eliano. "Takanot are rabbinic enactments that subvert biblical law. The Talmud is filled with them."

"Filled with subversions of the bible's law?" Cardinal Carafa's feigned surprise caused the veins in Father Masius's head to pound.

"Rabbinical authority, you must understand, is absolute" Eliano continued. "The rabbis typically enact takanot when they seek an end that is contrary to the clear ways of the bible. They do so under various guises - 'for the sake of the ways of peace' they will claim, or 'in order to heal the world.' Regardless of their reasons, the power they claim knows only the bounds of the Jewish people's willingness to follow them. And to that end, the Talmud not only teaches Jews the law of the rabbis, it conditions them to accept their authority as absolute."

"Absolute?"

"The Talmud teaches the Jews that they must listen to the rabbis even over the voice of God Himself."

Father Masius grew exasperated. He should have sought permission to speak from Carafa, but instead, he jumped right in. “And how, pray tell me, is the Talmud’s teaching different from that of your Jesuit founder Ignatius?” Masius intentionally chose the derogatory term Jesuit to try and rile the young convert.

“I’m sorry, Father Masius?” The boy remained quiet and deferential.

“Did not Ignatius say that should the Church define something as black which, to our eyes, appears white, that we should likewise call it black?”

“Father Masius,” interjected Cardinal Carafa, “are you questioning the pronouncements of our Holy Mother Church?”

“I am questioning the notion that there is something unique or different about any ecclesiastical authority - be it a church or a rabbinical court - declaring its opinions to be dispositive.”

“And are the pronouncements of a rabbinical court dispositive?” Carafa challenged.

Masius did not answer. He couldn’t.

Carafa pressed his advantage: “And are we still not left to explain the intransigent perfidy of the Jew who inhabits our city? Who walks brazenly among us, showing contempt where, by his own choosing, he should be consigned to eternal servitude? To what beyond the perversion of this ...” the word stuck in his throat “... *Talmud* can we ascribe not only the Jew’s indifference to the



messiah and his own salvation, but the threat he poses to our eternal souls as well.” Carafa’s eyes froze those of Father Masius: “I know you have been to the dungeons recently.”

Carafa was referring to Father Masius’s visit with Corneglio da Montalcino, the Franciscan friar who converted to Judaism and then preached his conversion in the marketplace. Masius sought to understand what had happened to the man, but found him desperate and frightened. Da Montalcino was convinced that he would be tortured into renouncing his conversion or burned at the stake - or both. Father Masius knew he was right. And while he felt a few pangs of sympathy for the man, he also loathed him as Carafa’s most powerful, if unwitting, ally. It crossed Masius’s mind to condemn da Montalcino publicly right there and then. But he thought better of such opportunistic and, to his mind, un-Christian behavior.

Masius turned away from Carafa’s glare and faced Eliano once more.

"Brother Eliano, you are 21 or 22, are you not?"

Eliano saw that the argument was going in Carafa’s direction, so he was content to be deferential to the older priest. “I am 23, Father.”

“And how long did you study Talmud?”

“From the time I was six years old - until shortly before I saw the true path through our Lord Jesus Christ, Father.”

Father Masius was mild. “And what would you say brought you to such a glorious deliverance, my son?”

“Jesus taught us that everything that must happen will happen before the slightest mark in the Torah will pass away. And those who teach others to disregard the Torah’s laws will be considered as being among the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. I tell you Father Masius, in all the years that I studied the Talmud, I never understood how the rabbis could arrogate such power to themselves until I read those words of Matthew. That is when I understood who it is that truly teaches others to disregard the Torah’s laws.”

“This is precisely what makes the Talmud such a retrograde book” interjected Cardinal Carafa. “It has perverted the Jews from their own faith - and blinded them to the saving power of Mother Church!” The cardinal was playing to his audience, and doing so quite effectively.

“You speak the truth, Brother Eliano,” Father Masius hastened to add. “And yet is it not curious that it was precisely your knowledge of Talmud that led to your appreciation of the truth of the Gospel according to St. Matthew?”

“Excuse me, Father. I do not understand what you are asking.”

Masius thought a moment, then ventured “Were you a prodigy in Talmud, Brother Eliano?”

“I exhibited some talent for its methods, I think.”

“And yet ...” Masius was leading. Eliano duly followed.

“And yet the more I learned, the more troubled I became. The message of Torah is simple. That of the Talmud is convoluted to the point of perversion.” Eliano’s mildness was beginning

to slip as his passion grew. “I mastered the techniques of biblical exegesis taught in the Talmud, yet I could never accept them as genuine. Indeed, they struck me as leading one to the most twisted and retrograde understanding of the simplest concepts: dietary laws that encourage isolation rather than foster brotherhood; legalisms that reduce holiness to lists of dos and don’ts. The more I learned Talmud, the more I became open to the teachings of our Lord and Savior.”

Masius’s eyes brightened. “The more you learned Talmud, the more you became open to the teachings of our Lord and Savior,” he repeated.

The room stood quiet for a long moment.

Carafa’s incredulity broke the silence. “You are not seriously suggesting that the way to rescue the Jew from his perfidy is to teach him more Talmud?”

“I am suggesting, your eminence, that the way to rescue the perfidious Jew is to confront him with the very Talmud that perverts his mind. For to instead take the Talmud *from* him is merely to confirm *in* him the now deeply inbred sense of persecution that has led to such perverse thinking in the first place. Your own witness has made that point for you, has he not?”

Carafa remained silent. His thin, sharp-featured face stared expressionlessly at Masius. And Masius turned back to Eliano.

“Brother Eliano, under what name were you born?”

“Solomon Romano.”

“And how did you choose your baptismal name Eliano?”

“It is an adaptation of my grandfather’s name.”

“Your grandfather was ...”

“My grandfather was Elijah Levita. He was a poet and Hebrew grammarian. He taught Hebrew to many Christian scholars. He even lived in Cardinal da Viterbo’s home for thirteen years while he taught Hebrew to the Cardinal and many others in the Church.”

“He was a printer too, I believe?”

“He was a proofreader for Daniel Bomberg and he ran a press at Isny for a number of years.”

“He wrote, as I recall, a lexicon of Hebrew in the Talmud, did he not?”

“*Tisbbi*, it was called. I used it frequently in my studies.”

“Do you still own a copy?”

“I left it when I left Venice two years ago.”

“Do you suppose it will be burned when, with your help, Cardinal Carafa burns the Talmud?”

Carafa and Masius watched the shock and outrage register on the young man's face. Both knew that the last question struck home. Carafa turned sharply to Masius. "Why do you plague this boy?"

"No!" Eliano said, barely audibly. "My grandfather ..." His voice trailed off. He knew what he had to say. "... who is in hell with all the other sinners ..." The tone was bold, but the heart was clearly not in it. Then he became quiet, plaintive. "He tried." Then, with a kind of pleading hopefulness "He taught our most Catholic clergy Hebrew so that they could understand the Old Testament from its source." And finally, with returning confidence and even boldness: "Would that I had been raised with such simple directness! Instead, my teachers polluted my mind with endless rabbinic hair-splitting. 'Never mind studying the Bible,' they told me, 'you'll learn everything you need to know from Talmud.' Or if I did study Torah, it was never on its own. 'One finger in the Chumash,' they said 'and one finger in the Rashi!' Like Jacob and his promised bride, everything was through a veil - a veil made for me by the rabbis. And like Jacob, it was never what was promised."

"And your grandfather?" Father Masius asked, now genuinely curious.

"My grandfather sensed the truth, but hadn't the strength - or maybe the courage - to break away. Yet he taught those who could. 'Not an unadorned *yud*, not a decorative pen-stroke that crowns a single letter - none of it will pass away until what must happen has happened!' I bear his name because I have the courage to complete what he began - even if he didn't know what it was that he was beginning."

Father Masius stared at the young man. Was he delusional? Was he merely a zealot, consumed with the most extreme passion? He had to remind himself of how destructive the boy's actions were so as not to pity him.

"Enough for today," said Cardinal Carafa. "Father Masius, you've had your fun. Now come with me, please."

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Cardinal Carafa seated himself behind the large, ornate desk in his office. He was a tall man with a long head and a thin, yet unbroken swath of sideburn extending down to his full beard. Normally his eyes were hooded and sad. Yet when engaged - or enraged - those same eyes widened and darted about incessantly. Father Masius thought of Cardinal Carafa as possessing a keen and cutting intellect which, unhappily, was not linked to either curiosity toward or sympathy for others. All of which made the man quite malignant.

Carafa leaned back in his chair far enough that his hooded eyes nevertheless stared up at Masius. "You're a clever priest," he said evenly. "So why are you making my job difficult?"

"You misunderstand me, your eminence. I don't want to make your job difficult. I hold no brief for the Jews. I view them as an obdurate people and theirs as a disgraced faith. We must do all we can in our power to convert them to the saving truth of Christ - both for the sake of their souls and the safety of ours. Our disagreement goes only to their books. You would burn them. I would use them to convert them."

"How old are you, Masius?"

“Thirty-eight, your eminence.”

“Thirty-eight and you still believe that you can convert the Jews using their own books?”

“Not only do I believe it, I believe it the only way possible to do so. I have studied the Talmud for many years. It is built on layer upon layer of rabbinic teaching. When you clear away the newest layers - when you clear away all that is pernicious and perverse that was written by those blind and obstinate men who sought to deny the truth of Christ’s new covenant - you then come upon the pure Talmud. You come upon the Talmud that was handed by the prophets to the earliest of the rabbis. You come upon the Talmud that our Lord and Savior knew and studied. You come upon the Talmud that Gamaliel taught to Saint Paul! It is there and it *our* heritage! When we can lay that pure Talmud before the Jews, then - and only then - will we be able to turn their obstinate hearts to the one true faith!”

Cardinal Carafa stared at Father Masius for a long time. It really was true, he thought to himself. This thirty-eight-year-old was as much the ideologue as the Jesuit convert in the next room. Smarter, perhaps. Maybe even with a hint of wisdom. But not enough to actually impress any sense in him. “Father Masius,” he finally asked. “Do you know why we are here?”

“To be frank, I am not really sure. We were originally asked to adjudicate a commercial dispute between two Venetian printers. But that was a long time ago. One of the printers is out of business.”

“You are right, Father Masius. That was what we were asked to do. But the printing of damnable books is by nature a damnable business. And those who get drawn into such damnable business will invariably discover the sad and sordid truth, at which point they may

choose to walk away, or to confront the evil that they did not seek, but has instead been placed before them. So let me ask you a very simple, direct question. What does a book maker do?”

Masius was unsure how to answer. Thinking that Carafa might be asking about the implications of the commercial dispute that first came before them, he dove into a detailed explanation of the printing business: “A book maker must first determine if there will be a market for the books he wishes to produce. He must make an educated guess as to the interest in the book and whether it can be manufactured and sold profitably. If it is an established text, a good book maker will invest heavily in determining a correct version. He must also determine the most proper and sensible format for the book - a folio, for instance, or a quarto or octavo - then he must set the book in type, correct it, print it, cut it and stitch it into quires.” As he spoke, Masius watched the slightest hint of a smile cross Carafa’s lips. The old man’s eyes gazed at him serenely, and Masius knew he had answered wrongly.

“Father Masius, you answer like a Jew. I told you the question I would ask you was simple and direct: what does a book maker do? Three words will suffice in reply.”

Masius complied: “He makes books.”

“That is correct. A book maker makes books. And you, my dear Father Masius, have read too many books. In particular, you have read too much Talmud. You have been infected with its pernicious capacity to turn the simplest truth into the most complex speculation. Do you honestly believe that you can dive into that morass of convoluted thinking and extract from it something pure and holy? No! You will be sucked into its perversion and you will never recover. Indeed, I fear that you are already in beyond what is safe for your soul.” With that,



Cardinal Carafa turned down to his desk and began to busy himself with its contents - a tacit dismissal of the priest before him.

Andreas Masius would not be so perfunctorily dismissed. He was angry. Angry enough to bend the deference he owed to this prince of the church. Nevertheless, his tone was calm.

“You ask me, your eminence, what a book maker does. And you say you want a simple answer. ‘A book maker makes books.’ But you do not ask why he makes them. I will tell you. A book maker makes books because of what a book is. It is the human longing for eternity. It is born of the idea that one’s thoughts deserve to be preserved - to achieve permanence.

“A book is a monument to human curiosity. It is a response to our insatiable quest to know - to know things and places, ideas and times, prejudices and superstitions.

“A book is an escape from our own narrowness. It impresses upon us the certainty that the world extends beyond our personal limits.

“Most of all, a book is the distillation of that which makes ours the image of the Almighty. It is reason and speech set down for the sake of that which is eternally true.”

Father Masius was shaking with rage as he spoke, but he was also satisfied with his own eloquence. He reminded himself that the strength and power of his arguments came from God’s righteousness. He was just fortunate enough to put that righteousness into words.

Cardinal Carafa stared at Father Masius throughout this impudent harangue. Yet he was not angry. He was, rather, ever-so-slightly pitying of someone whose case he now considered

hopeless. “Father Masius, you speak with the confused passion of a man who can no longer discover the simplest truths. So let me try to impress upon you the simple answer to the question you have raised, and the one that we will now have to teach to the Jews. A book, Father Masius, is fuel.”

#### 4. The Scribe

**A**nother printing job in Venice - this one far simpler than any Hebrew book. It was a hand bill, but a single column wide. The page's only adornments were two woodcuts, one of a winged lion that crowned the page, and the second, a highly decorated, dropped letter. These woodcuts were wedged into the printing form which was then affixed to the press. The form was inked and impressed with sheets of paper which, when they had dried, were distributed throughout the city of Venice, instructing its citizens to surrender all volumes of Talmud and related commentaries to local authorities.

The Venetian *Esecutori Contro la Bestammia* - the Executors Against Blasphemy - had it on good authority that they were acting in the Jews's best interests. A papal manifesto from the previous month informed them that

this Hebrew people, obstinately and eagerly pursuing that which is harmful for them, have almost entirely closed and sealed the Sacred Scriptures and now study, day and night, only certain works which they call 'Talmud.' And they teach their children from earliest childhood now in place of piety, blasphemy; in place of open and sincere divine worship, fables and foolish superstitions; in place of a longing for the Savior and Messiah, a deadly hate of Christ and curses against all Christians ...

M D LIII Die XXI. Octobris, in Consiglio X. cum Additione.



HE cadauno, così Christiano, come Hebreo, Librari, Boteghieri, & qualunque altro di che grado, & condition si voglia, etiam Ecclesiastici, che si ritrouassero hauer in qualuncq. modo appresso di se, & nelle case, & boteghe loro, ouer modo aliquo in poter suo ouer hauessero dato, o deposto appresso de altri Talmud Hebrei, ouer parte alcuna di quelli, Cōpendij, Summarij, o altra opera dependente da esso Talmud, Debbano in termine de giorni otto prosimi presentar tutte esse opere in questa Città alli effecutori contra la Bistema, & di fuori alli Rettori delli luoghi, & manifestar a chi le hauessero date, o depostate, Iquali Rettori debbano subito

mandar de qui ad essi effecutori tutte le opere che li saranno presentate, & così quelle che saranno mandate de qui usupra, come quelle che li saranno presentate in questa Città debbano essi effecutori far subito brufar publicamente nella piazza di S. Marco, senza alcuna eccectione. Passato veramente il detto termine de giorni otto, se si ritouera che alcuno non habbia obedito al proclama sopradetto, et che habbia appresso di se modo aliquo, & in poter suo l'opera del Talmud, o parte di ella, o Cōpendio, Summario, ouer altra cosa, dependente da esso Talmud, o che non habbia manifestato, usupra, sia bandito in perpetuo di tutte le Terre, & Luoghi del Dominio nostro, così da Mar, come da Terra, & anco di questa nostra Città di Venetia, & del suo destretto, con taglia de 2. 600. de picoli a chi quelli, ouer alcun di loro prendera dentro li confini, & consegnara nelle forze della Giustitia, da esser pagati delli beni di essi presentati se ne saranno, se non dalla Cassa di questo Consiglio delli danari deputati alle Taglie, Li presi veramente, & cadaun di loro debbano vogar anni doi in Galea de condanadi, & porriròmino al bando, & questo tante uolte quante contrafaranno, & non essendo atti a vogar, il che debba esser giudicato per li prediti effecutori, star debbano anni cinque in pregione ferrati, & poi ritornar al bando usupra. Et se alcuno accusera qualunque delli desobedienti sopradetti, ouer cadaun altro che in ogni tempo hauesse, o tenesse quomodocunq. usupra, delle opere sopraditte sia tenuto scereto, & guadagni hauer la verita 2. 400. da esserli pagare vt supra, & se vno compagno, & complice accusasse li altri suoi complici sia assolto dalla pena, nella qual potesse incorrere, & guadagnar la taglia sopradetta, & tutti quelli che si ritoueranno colpeuoli in ogni tempo delle cose sopradette faccorrino, & incorri se intendino nelle pene, & bandi sopracetti cō tutte le taglie, & modi usupra espressi, & l'effecution della presente parte per le cose di questa Città sia comessa alli effecutori contra la Bistema, & per le cose di fuori alli Rettori delle Città & Luoghi oue occorreranno simili cose.

Publican sopra le Scale de San Marco, & de Riato,

Con licentia delli superiori, che nissun'altro ardisca stamparla.

Tens of thousands of volumes were collected throughout the city. The inventories of Giustiniani, Bragadini, and even the late Daniel Bomberg were all swept up. Among the books seized was an entire set of Bomberg's Talmud belonging to a priest, Andreas Masius. Father Masius wanted the books held for him until he left Rome and returned to his native Germany. The flames to which all these books were consigned on the Sabbath of October 21 continued to burn until the next day. It was, indeed, a grander fire than the one in Rome's *Campo di Fiori* the previous month when they burned that city's volumes of Talmud. Rome, however, had the important distinction staging its conflagration on Rosh Hashanah, ushering in the New Year 5314. And it was heralded, five days before, by a dramatic opening act: the burning at the stake of Corneglio da Montalcino, the Franciscan friar who converted to Judaism.

Benjamin Pardo saw the smoke of the fire, but avoided witnessing its flames. He was never among the *vateekin* - the particularly scrupulous Jews who rushed to perform a commanded act at the first possible moment. Yet there he was among them this particular morning, saying the *Shema* at the first glimmerings of the sun. He tried to lose himself in his prayers which he recited more slowly that day than any time since first learning them in childhood. The Torah portion was *Lekh-Lekha*. As was his habit, he visualized the words in his head as though the scroll were unrolled before his eyes. He chanted to himself:

*Lekh-Lekha*  
*Mey artzekha*  
*U'mi moladetkha*  
*U'mi beyt avikha*  
*...Get yourself from your land, and from your birthplace and from your father's house.*

Perhaps, he thought, he too should have followed God's command to Abram and gotten himself and his family out of Venice. He had the opportunity more than a year ago when Giustiniani closed his print shop. He could have followed his mentor, Cornelio Adelkind, to Sabbioneta where he was running the printing press established there by Tobias Foa and his partners. Benjamin had heard that they were - even now - attempting to produce their own

edition of the Talmud. But Benjamin's father-in-law was ill at the time. His wife would not leave her father, and Benjamin would not leave his wife. So he set himself up in a well-lighted corner of the older man's pawn shop and once again took up the scribe's quill - *mezuzot* and *tefillin*, but mostly the repair of old scrolls and codices. One day, he continued to hope, he would have a chance to write his own Torah scroll.

Benjamin rarely asked for an aliyah, but he did on this *Shabbat*. He read from the Torah about Abram and his nephew Lot quarreling over pasture land - Lot choosing to settle in the Jordan plain - near the city of Sodom. When he completed his reading, Benjamin asked that a prayer for healing be said for his own son-in-law who had fallen ill with fever three day before. The young man had grown weaker and more delirious with each passing day. Benjamin's wife was helping to care for him - his daughter was nearing confinement at the end of a relatively easy pregnancy, thank God!

Benjamin lingered through the additional service for *Shabbat*. When he finally left the *shul*, he did so with great reluctance. Instead of walking directly to his apartment across the *campo*, he walked along the sides of the buildings. He hoped that doing so would block his view of the southern sky - the direction of the *Plaza de San Marco*. Benjamin Pardo knew enough about loss and enough about pain and anxiety that he felt it sinful to cry over an inanimate object like a book. Nevertheless, as he turned north along the perimeter of the *campo*, there were dozens of men and even some women staring over the roof tops behind him - jaws slack, eyes wet. A young man - thin and pale with wisps of side locks but no discernable beard - grabbed Benjamin's arm with one hand and pointed up to the sky with the other. "Don't you see what they are doing?" Benjamin turned to break the young man's grasp. When he did, he caught the briefest glimpse of the cloud of black smoke hanging in the distance over the buildings. He

returned to his path and made it back to his apartment. He put his hand to his eyes to wipe them. “Still dry,” he thought with sad satisfaction.

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To the most esteemed Rabbi Moshe, whose star is ever rising:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, cause His face to shine upon your work, bringing the Light of Truth to the brilliance of your logic!

I have read your responsum to Rabbi Meir, May the Holy One bless him in all his meritorious work! The ease with which you assemble your arguments and the originality you display in your use of our sacred texts is a marvel to behold. Moreover you have assembled your formidable abilities in the service of what is obviously a profound sense of the justice done to Rabbi Meir. No doubt the seasoning of experience will add ever deeper layers of wisdom to your formidable brilliance.

Two years later, Joseph Caro’s words still reverberated bitterly in Moshe Isserles’s ears. Then he heard in them a distinct echo of his father-in-law’s charge of “cleverness.” Now he saw even darker images. Yet Moshe was a kindly, self-reflective and modest man and such traits had the power to transform brilliance into wisdom. It was with growing wisdom that he took in the news from Italy.

That news had been reaching him for months now. The confiscation and the burning in Rome, the orders from the Vatican to the rest of Italy, the zealotry of the Venetians - not only in Venice but in every province they controlled. Was there a printed copy of the Talmud left on that entire peninsula?

As was his wont, Moshe Isserles initially took responsibility for this disaster upon himself. Had he not written that clever but unwise responsum, perhaps Giustiniani would have never taken his case to the Vatican. And if Giustiniani had not taken his case to the Vatican ...

Moshe sat by his window, staring at the mid-afternoon scene. Cracow's citizens, its Jews among them, were going about their business on this darkening afternoon - quite oblivious to the catastrophe in which he had played a part. It was late in the fall and shadows were already lengthening. It was beginning to get cold. The grey indifference of the scene before him only deepened his sense of gloom.

No longer able to bear the sight of a world oblivious to his own feelings, Moshe turned his gaze inside. It fell upon a small book, tucked in amid his shelf of miscellany. He had not thought about that book in a long time, but he recognized it as soon as his eyes lay hold of it. It was a small volume detailing the laws for the writing of a *Sefer Torah* - a Torah scroll for public reading. The book had been a gift to him from Rabbi Joseph Caro.

He found the letter from Rabbi Caro when he opened the book. He knew it intimately, even though he had not read it in more than two years. He was afraid to read those opening paragraphs in light of all that had happened since. They were precisely as he remembered them to be - a kindly, diplomatic criticism of that now hated responsum. Yet far from deepening his despair, Moshe found that reading those words actually lessened it a bit. Much as he despised that responsum today, it had, indeed, been motivated by an underlying passion for what he believed was right. It was, therefore, wrong for him to assume the burden of premeditated evil just because that evil was somewhat facilitated by his youthful passion. It was a sign of Rabbi Isserles's growing wisdom that he forgave himself - perhaps somewhat grudgingly - for being young.

With a growing sense of personal calm, Moshe Isserles continued to re-read Rabbi Caro's letter.

Your thoughts as to the nature of our books are most profound and insightful. You suggest that a book is a mirror of its author. *Mishneh Torah* and the many things that our great Rambam, peace be upon him, both put into and left out of that volume certainly



reflects on how he read the Talmud. And Rashi and his inheritors too had their own way of reading the Talmud which is reflected in their estimable commentaries.

Then you ask a most perplexing and troublesome question. Can our present day, printed volumes of Talmud lead us along the path that Rambam followed, or must they invariably lead us to Rashi's view of the text - given his prominence on the page and the lucidity with which he explicates its many difficulties? In trying to answer this question, permit me to offer a change in metaphor. Rather than seeing a book as a mirror, what if we think of it as a window? One of a window's amazing properties is that we can change the perspective of our view by changing how closely we stand to it or the angle from which we do so. We can even, if we choose, open the window and drop its limitations altogether.

But what if we consciously choose to distance ourselves from the window? Then our perspective necessarily becomes narrower. We can control what we see out our windows - and in our books - by consciously selecting the distance from, and angle through, which we view them.

The key, I believe, is our *kavanah* - our intentionality. If our intention is to learn our sacred texts as they are taught to us, then the perspective we will have on them is naturally that of someone else's choosing - be it Rashi or Rambam or Shalom Shakhna or whomever. If, however, our intention is to develop our own perspective, then the choice is our own.

We must accept this power with a great humility. To ignore Rashi is to purposely ignore a great and important tradition that has now informed more than 300 years of learning. We should not try to go back to a Talmud before Rashi. Nor to one before Rambam. But we can approach the Talmud knowing that it has led to both Rashi and Rambam. And knowing that can lead our knowledge to insights that neither man, peace be upon them both, could have found from where they stood.

Here, then, is the great power of our modern books. They allow an Ashkenazic Jew like you to learn Rambam from a perspective informed by the study of Rashi. And they allow me, a Sephardic Jew, to do the same from the reverse perspective.

May, then, God's blessings of peace and prosperity be upon those who make our books! To that end, I am sending to you this volume on the traditions and customs of creating a *Sefer Torah*. You, my esteemed colleague, were destined by the Holy One to be a maker of books. Perhaps this book will broaden further the sense in which you become one.

May God be ever generous in His blessings upon you.

Joseph ben Ephraim

Moshe Isserles put down the letter and returned to the window. The shadows were noticeably longer now. But somehow the day seemed less gloomy. God's exalted purpose, he trusted,

would one day emerge through the smoke and the flames of these terrible days. In the meantime, he knew, he must set to work writing a Torah.

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Benjamin Pardo awoke well before sunrise, certain he was on the cusp of an idea. He stared up at the ceiling, hoping he could put his still formless notion into words.

That ceiling was a lot lower than it had been. After his son-in-law had died, his daughter and grandson had moved into his and Leah's small apartment. The ceilings had once reached more than a full body length over his head. Now he felt as though he needed to duck when walking under the sleeping loft he had built for the widow and child. All throughout the Ghetto Nuovo, residents were building such lofts, covering over gardens, breaking small rooms into even smaller spaces as more and more Jews moved in. There was talk of extending the Jewish quarter into the adjacent Ghetto Vecchio, but Benjamin didn't concern himself with such issues. He had room for his family. That was enough for him.

It was more than four years since Marco Antonio Giustiniani had asked him what a book was. The question puzzled him for a while. It was the sort of thing one thought about while staring at the now too low ceiling in the middle of the night. Bigger concerns - like how to make a living when Giustiniani's printing business slowed and ultimately stopped - soon crowded out all room for such idle speculation. But the question came back to him after the fire. Now, on this day of all days, he felt as though the answer was right before him. He thought for a long time in the morning darkness. It was right there, he knew. Why couldn't he get to it?

He got out of bed as quietly as he could - trying not to disturb his wife by his side, or his daughter and grandson just upstairs. He walked across the room to the small set of shelves in the corner. He struck a match and lit a candle, hoping his body would block the light so as not to disturb the others. He took out the first volume of the rabbinic bible that he acquired many years earlier before when he worked for Daniel Bomberg. He turned to the first page of the biblical text. *Berayshit bara elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz* - *In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth* ... The folio page was covered with words, but these seven were the only ones in large, block letters. They were the only words of Torah. The rest, as they say, was commentary. Rashi, who lived in the 11th century in Northern France, held the right hand side of the page and his commentary extended to thirty-two lines of small print. Ibn Ezra, fifty years younger than Rashi and a man who wandered throughout Europe and the Middle East his entire life, held the left hand side of the page. The last eleven of his forty-four lines of small-print commentary extended under the Rashi, the full width of the page. So much commentary for seven words! And these were only but two. Benjamin knew there was more going on here than just an inter-generational dialogue. To each commentator the text raised different questions. From each, it elicited different insights. Why was Rashi silent where Ibn Ezra saw a problem? Did that problem not occur to him or did he prefer to ignore it? One thing was clear to Benjamin. Ibn Ezra and Rashi saw the text through different eyes.

**אמר** ליוסף

פתח  
 לתתו את התורה  
 אלף מחרם חזק  
 לבם מזה מזה  
 ראשית מנחת  
 ומזל וזה טעם פתח

[illegible]

והנה ארס דתעפוק  
טמיה תלמי רוחות  
ומחלה וקרוז ומתר  
וטמא את כמו פסח  
וידיה קדוש נש וקחת  
ומעלה וכן בלמן  
כקורה ואנשים כחו  
דעת כי חלה המים  
ובטני כפסת ידיו  
אלי חלהם עשר יחד  
פארבאם שער יחד

So a book was ... it was ... what? What was he missing? In frustration, he slammed the volume shut which caused the baby to stir. Benjamin grimaced with regret, but his daughter, instinctively in her sleep, shushed the child who was quickly calmed. "Enough of this," thought Benjamin. He hadn't the time. Though it was long before first light, he dressed quickly and quietly. He wanted to be at the ritual bath early this morning. He had only been there on his wedding day and in the days before Yom Kippur. Like those, this day was special.



Rabbi Meir had been busy in the months following the burning of the Talmud. He had organized and led a congress of Italy's Jewish leaders which met in June in Ferrara. Rabbis of all the major communities were there - Mantua, Bologna, Modena, Rome, Reggio. They agreed that no book should be permitted to be printed unless three properly ordained rabbis and the heads of the local congregation agreed to its publication. These names should all be printed in the book's preface. Any Jew buying a book without such an approbation was to be fined 25 gold *scudi*. Rabbi Meir hoped that such self-imposed restrictions might mollify the papal authorities.

Soon after the conference, Rabbi Meir made one of his regular trips from Padua to Venice. Benjamin noticed him as he was leaving the synagogue on a Thursday morning. He would have greeted him, but the elderly man looked to be deep in prayer so he walked past as quietly as he could. He was nearly to the door when he heard his name called. It was Rabbi Meir.

"Rav Pardo, you worked for Signore Giustiniani, did you not?"

"I did."

“And what are you doing now, if I might ask.”

Benjamin told Rabbi Meir about his scribal work. He had never spoken more than a few words to the great rabbi, but this morning he found himself going on at length about his education, his training as a scribe and his experience. Rabbi Meir looked at him with open and attentive eyes. He seemed, at least, to be interested. When Benjamin had exhausted his experience, Rabbi Meir asked a question.

“Rav Pardo, I have a grandson who is just now coming of age. I would like to give him a set of *tefillin*. Could I impose upon you to make the scrolls for them?”

“I think, Rabbi, that I have a set of scrolls in my shop which I can bring back to you in just a few minutes.”

“No, Rav Pardo,” Rabbi Meir answered. “I would like these *tefillin* to be very special. Could I ask you to make me a very special set of scrolls - the best scrolls you can make? I can pick them up from you the next time I visit Venice.”

A month later, Rabbi Meir found his way to the pawn shop where Benjamin did his work. His wife Leah led him to the work bench where Benjamin was re-sewing the seam between two parchment panels of an old Torah scroll. “Delicate work,” the rabbi commented.

Benjamin replied without looking up “Oh, this is a particularly thick *klaf* and, though it is old, it is still quite flexible and tough. Here, come feel it at the margin.” Only then did he look up and identify his interlocutor. He dropped the thread of sinew with which he had been working.

“Rabbi Meir ... uh ... excuse me.”

“For what?” Rabbi Meir was genial. “Have you the *tefillin* scrolls I asked of you?”

“Yes, Rabbi, they are right here, waiting for you.” Benjamin reached for a small box on the topmost of the shelves behind him. “I have kept them here for safekeeping.”

Rabbi Meir examined the scrolls for what seemed like a long time. Finally, he looked up at Benjamin, smiling. “Rav Pardo, have you ever written a *Sefer Torah*?”



There was no one at the ritual bath so early in the morning. Benjamin undressed, then lit a lamp so that he could see himself as he cleaned his body. His fingers were ink-stained and he scrubbed them until they were raw and pink. He noticed that they were shaking. Maybe it was just cold in the room. The waters of the *mikvah* were cold and Benjamin submerged himself quickly, said the blessing and then submerged again. He got out, dried and dressed and hurried off to *shul*.

He was again early to the synagogue. He tried to focus on his prayers - closing his eyes tightly and saying them slowly and deliberately. Yet his mind wandered. It even wandered during the Torah reading. He found he could not conjure the words into his head as he normally did. Had he forgotten it all? Today? He realized he was sitting on his hands to try and keep them from shaking. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Why was he so nervous?

It had taken Benjamin three months to acquire and prepare all the parchment he needed for the Torah scroll. He had soaked, scraped, dried and cut the skins to the proper shape and size.

Then he had engraved the columns and lines and margins into each sheet. He had more than eighty stacked before him in his shop. There was nothing more to do, he knew, other than get to work.

Benjamin Pardo left the synagogue and hurried across the *campo* of the *Ghetto Nuovo* and into the shop. Low, early morning sunlight streamed in from the window. Benjamin took the first sheet from the pile. He examined it carefully. It was three columns wide. He counted the number of lines. Forty-two. He checked the widths of all the margins. Everything was in order. But his hand was still shaking.

He withdrew a small scrap of parchment. He filled his quill with ink which he then splattered over the table. Gripping the quill harder to try and stop its shaking, he brought it to the scrap of parchment and began to write - *ayen, mem, lamed, koof* - *Amalek* - he who struck the stragglers among the exhausted, famished Israelites as they left Egypt. Amalek was the personification of pure evil. He may come in different guises, but the Torah assures that God will be at war with him and his people in every generation. By inscribing his name, Benjamin followed the ancient and paradoxical custom of remembering Amalek in order to blot him out.

He stared at the shaky lettering. And as he did, his mind's eye opened to the sight that he had denied to his other eyes.

There were the carts. There were the angry, wild men dumping their contents into the plaza. There were the purple robed Executors Against Blasphemy watching the ever growing pile, torches in hand.



Now the torches fly through the air. They land on the pile. The exposed paper takes up the flames eagerly. The closed bindings smolder and blacken.

A wind kicks up and Benjamin thinks it is God's breath. It will blow the flames out! The flames indeed bend in the wind, but they do not go out. They spread. They burn higher. Eventually, the smoldering bindings too ignite and the fire grows hotter. The wind blowing through the books draws the flames down deeper into the pile. And it blows the acrid smoke into Benjamin's face. But he can no longer turn away. The fire continues to grow. It makes a deep, rolling sound, punctuated by crackles and exploding sparks.

The fire develops a heart as the books at its center turn to coal. The wind blows through them and they glow an angry, menacing red. The heat builds. The wind off the fire drives Benjamin back. All the while, men continue to hurl books onto the blaze, but by now the fire has grown so hot that the books ignite before they even reach the flames. The sky grows dark. Is the sun setting or is it just the huge cloud of smoke that hangs over the plaza, now obscuring the *Basilica di San Marco*? Benjamin's eyes begin to water. "Why am I crying?" he asks himself. "Or maybe it is just the smoke."

A door slams, shattering Benjamin's vision. A customer has entered the pawnshop and Leah is rushing over to take care of him.

Benjamin looks down at the shaky lettering on the scrap of parchment. *Amalek*. He stares at this word for a long time. And then, the thought that had been with him all morning becomes clear.

"A book," he says to himself, "is words on a page."

Benjamin once more filled his quill with ink and, with three decisive strokes, blotted out the name of *Amalek*.

He turned to his first sheet of parchment. His first letter, a *bet*, would have to be larger than all the rest, yet look properly in proportion. He boldly drew his first mark - a horizontal line - above the inscribed line from which all the other letters would hang. Without turning the quill, he extended a thin vertical line down from the right side of his thick horizontal. Then he closed the letter's bottom with another thick horizontal - this one extending ever so slightly past the vertical.

The second letter, *resh*, was accomplished with a simple right-angle turn. The next two letters - *aleph* and *shin* - offered more line-width variance and also some subtle curves. *Yud* was the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet and *tav* was its last - another three sided study in thick horizontals and thin verticals. When all the letters were complete, Benjamin crowned the *shin's* left side with three tiny pen-strokes. The *bet* and the *yud* each got one.

Benjamin's hesitation when he had completed that first word was so slight, an observer would hardly have noticed. But he took in the word. The *bet* looked well proportioned to him - just large enough to set it apart. The rest of the word he compared with that perfect Torah that appeared in his mind whenever he heard its verses chanted. It was right, he concluded.

And with that, Benjamin Pardo took up his quill and began to write his book.