THE SECRET LIVES OF BOOKS

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with Professor Joseph Skloot. Joseph Skloot is the Rabbi Aaron D. Panken Assistant Professor of Modern Jewish Intellectual History at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. He's an historian of Jewish culture and religious thought in the early modern and modern periods. He received his PhD in Jewish history from Columbia University and his rabbinical ordination from HUC-JIR. His writings have appeared in modern Judaism, the CCAR Journal and Civil Anthologies. And today we're going to discuss his new book, "First Impressions: Sefer Hasidim and Early Modern Hebrew Printing" which won a 2023 Jordan Schnitzer First Book Award from the Association for Jewish Studies. Joe Skloot, welcome to the College Commons podcast.

Joseph Skloot: Thanks so much for having me. It's a real honor to be able to speak to your listeners. This is a podcast that I do listen to.

JH: It's gonna be a treat for everyone I know. Before we get into the Jewish content of your book, I'd like to ask you to tell us about the power of printing, not merely as a technical advance in mass dissemination of ideas, but also as a key part of the ideas themselves. In short, tell us why printing is more than just the transcription of handwritten words verbatim from one page to printed words on another page.

JS: So, this is a crucial point, concealed in your question is an argument. The argument is that printing is in fact something more than just the transmission of information, more than a means of communication. We popularly think of printing as something akin to a Xerox machine. That is to say printers took preexisting texts, and rather than copying them one by one by hand, we're able to make multiple copies at the same time. Now, it's true that printing did allow for the mass dissemination of information, and no doubt that a printed book in the 16th century could have a print run of up to a thousand, sometimes even more copies. In the medieval period, a book that was produced by hand very often could take a year to produce. So yes, printing was a means of mass dissemination, but it was not like a Xerox machine.

JS: It was not a means of duplication. It was actually a creative act, a process whereby information in one medium was transformed, adapted, packaged in new ways, in ways that actually hereto for did not exist. So an example of this is the title page. Handwritten books did not have title pages. We go into a bookstore today and we look at the cover and the title page of a book in order to discern whether we should buy it or not. Manuscript books did not have title pages, but printed books did, and that changed the way books were marketed and appreciated by consumers. There are a whole host of other ways that printed books differed from handwritten books, but what is notable is that all of those differences, those title pages were created by someone and that someone was almost always very different from the person who actually wrote the text within the book. And that person who created the title page was the printer. So printers had immense power to shape the way books were read, appreciated, understood, and purchased.

JH: All of which shaped the trajectory and ultimately the actual nature of the ideas contained therein. So there's a lot at stake in printing, and there's also something at stake in understanding the role of Jewish civilization outside of the confines of Judaism. Why is it that Jewish texts are relevant to the history of printing at large beyond the Jewish world and Jewish readership?

JS: If you permit me, I'd love to expand the question and say, how is it that Jewish texts are important to the history of written culture generally and of reading generally? And I would argue that they are essential to this story. You can actually go to Broadway today and see a musical about the invention of movable type pioneered by Gutenberg in 1455 in the city of Strasburg. And then in that show, and as is well known, Gutenberg of course produces his Bible, which importantly does not look all that different from the manuscript Bibles that preceded it. In the period of the five decades, or four and a half decades following Gutenberg's invention, printed books very much looked like manuscript books. Beginning in the year 1501, something begins to happen where books begin to acquire the recognizable forms of our books today. They begin to acquire the title pages that I mentioned earlier and other features as well.

JS: Jews, Hebrew printers were among the second generation of printers to pioneer the development of all these new technologies that are associated with printing. Jews represent a highly literate minority within European societies, and they have a tradition of studying books. And so, they represent a market that can be exploited by entrepreneurs, and it's precisely that market that printers both Jewish and Christian exploit in order to pursue profit. It's in the process of the development of that market that many of the technologies and ideas associated with printing that become widely replicated emerge within the context of Hebrew and Jewish printing. So that's one important point. The other important point is that the history of Jewish printing represents in some ways a kind of microcosm of the larger story of the history of the development of movable type printing more generally, we can use the data from the story of the emergence of Hebrew printing to generalize about the emergence of printing in Europe and beyond.

JS: And that is a crucial point, right? If for instance, Jews are by and large more literate than the rest of the population in Europe, then you can pose the question, are the phenomena that you

observe among Jews and Jewish readers ones that are replicated at a later stage among European readers as literacy increases? And it's notable that literacy takes a long time to increase within Europe. Not until the 19th and 20th centuries do you see mass literacy in a way that existed within the Jewish community in the centuries beforehand. So, the Jewish community represents a kind of microcosm of the story of printing. And I would just add, we are now in the throes of another media revolution, the digital revolution, and what we observe and the way Jews adapt and adopt digital technologies to produce and transmit and consume text, those can be fruitfully studied to understand the broader impact of digitization on cultures of reading and scholarship.

JS: The notion of reading as a religious practice is one that is of course, as I mentioned, embedded within Judaism. It is also one that is embedded within Protestantism as well. And so, it is a very fruitful comparison that could be made to talk about how Jews read printed Hebrew books and how Protestants read printed Hebrew books. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

JH: We've spoken a lot about the forum, but tell us a bit about the content of the topic of your book, Sefer Hasidim, what is it? What does it teach and what does it mean?

JS: So, my book "First Impressions" is a book about books, and in particular, it's a book about one book, which is meant to serve as a kind of model, or a broader case study for talking about other books as well. This book "Sefer Hasidim" was produced in 1538 at the printing press of the partners of Bologna known as HaShutafim. This was a group of Jewish scholars and entrepreneurs who worked in the silk business in the city of Bologna in central Italy. Bologna is famous for being the site of the oldest European university. It's also famous for its delicious food. It's known in Italy as La Grassa the fat one, because of the quantity of oil and butter that is used in the cooking, which signifies its wealth. And Bologna achieved such great wealth through its silk mills. In the 16th century, Bologna became the center of silk production in Europe, and silk was and remains a very desirable textile.

JS: The printers of this book, "Sefer Hasidim", worked in the silk business. They proudly identify themselves as makers of silk on the title pages of their books, and they produced nine books over the course of five years from 1536-1540. One of them being this book "Sefer Hasidim". Sefer Hasidim is actually a... You might say a compendium, an anthology of texts that are much older that come from the 12th and 13th centuries in the land of Rhine River Valley in what is now Germany, and also from the area of Alsace, France. And these texts are short blocks of stories. They're laws, they're illegal cases. They are extracts from other older materials, and they generally have a Germanic or French flavor. There are very frequent German-Yiddish and Judeo-French expressions and phrases noted in them.

JS: In one case, famously at the very beginning of the book, there's a French song that's cited, and all of these blocks of text existed in multiple manuscripts that circulated throughout Europe, in the beginning of the 13th century, and continuing in the 14th and 15th century. And then, in the 16th century, this group of silk makers in Bologna decide to print a copy of the book. What's notable is that the manuscripts that we have differ significantly, not entirely, but significantly from

the printed book. And what I have done in my book, "First Impressions", is try to understand what the partners of Bologna, those printers did in order to create the printed book of Sefer Hasidim out of the purported fragments of manuscripts that we still have today. Out of those manuscripts that are older than the printed book, what can they tell us about when I compare them to the printed book?

JS: And in that comparison, we learn a lot about the intervention, the work of creation, of adaptation, of packaging, of transformation that the partners of Bologna, the printers did when they created Sefer Hasidim. And by implication, what I argue is that this is actually not a unique process. This was emblematic of the processes that all Hebrew books went through in, especially in this early period of the 16th century, in order to create the Hebrew library that actually persists 'till this day. In fact, the addition that the partners created of Sefer Hasidim was printed numerous times between 1538 and the late 19th century. In the late 19th century, another version of the book was printed, and today the Bologna Edition continues to be reprinted, alongside the other version of the book as well.

JH: The title of the book, "Sefer Hasidim" means Book of the Pious. And as such, it's laden with all kinds of religious implications. And those religious implications seem to persist, but they also draw us back not only to the printing, which layered on meaning and purpose, but to all the manuscript generations prior to the printing. When historians think about the importance of manuscripts that is of handwritten texts, we tend to think in two dimensions, quantity and consistency. That is to say, if we find many, many copies of a given text of manuscript handwritten, as you said, which takes so much time and effort, we infer that such a text had great currency. And then separately, if we find great consistency among such handwritten copies, we attribute great authority to the text.

JH: Many of us will know that if a historian were to assess the importance of the Sefer Torah, the Torah scroll, they would note on the one hand it's wide distribution, and on the other hand, how remarkably consistent the content is, even from Modern Scrolls today. And so, from these facts, a hypothetical historian would conclude that the Torah scroll has great importance, both currency and authority among its consumers, namely worldwide Jewry in any given generation. By these measures how does Sefer Hasidim stack up and what do we conclude about it?

JS: I would suggest to you that Sefer Hasidim it exists to us in about 20 different manuscript forms today. Those manuscripts have been cataloged and transcribed by the scholar Peter Schäfer, formerly of Princeton. And one can go online and actually see those manuscripts. They've also been digitized by the National Library of Israel. The fact that there are 20 such manuscripts indicates that this was a text that was read by Jews, and that the fact that those manuscripts come from among other places, Italy, Spain, of course, France and Germany, we can make determinations about the origins of these manuscripts based on the handwriting. There was awareness of the existence of this text in the Medieval period. And we can say the fact that we have 20 manuscripts means that we can make certain assumptions that there were perhaps many more manuscripts that just have not survived, right?

JS: That are not available to us because they were destroyed through the vicissitudes of history. But these manuscripts are not consistent, and that's a crucial point. On the most basic level, they don't all share the name Sefer Hasidim. Some of them do, but some of them have other names such as Sefer Hasidut, which is somewhat different. Instead of the book of the Pious, it's the Book of Piety. A number of them are titled with a variation on the phrase, Liqqutim mi-sefer hasidim, which means gleanings taken from something known as Sefer Hasidim, as if to say that these are scraps extracts from a much larger work that a scribe chose to write down, the choices extracts of a book known as "Sefer Hasidim".

JS: So when we speak about consistency, we can say that these manuscripts are remarkably inconsistent, and it is primarily the judgment of scholars that places them all in the ambit of "Sefer Hasidim", because some of them lack titles all together, right? And that's crucially important because what happens when Sefer Hasidim is printed in 1538 is that whereas previously there was a very diffuse awareness of something known as Sefer Hasidim. What printing does is it creates a certain kind of a standard against which other versions of Sefer Hasidim might be measured. So that after 1538, when a scholar speaks about Sefer Hasidim, he is most definitely speaking about the Sefer Hasidim that was printed in Bologna for the first time in 1538. He's not speaking about a manuscript that might differ significantly from that Bologna edition.

JH: The College Commons podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclasses for HUC alumni with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out @huc.eduhucconnect. Now back to our interview. Let's talk for a minute about language, both in the macro and the micro. What do we learn from the language of Sefer Hasidim on the macro level and what do we learn from the word choice of Sefer Hasidim in the printed edition on the micro level?

JS: So when we talk about language, it's important to note my study here is in the subtitled, "Sefer Hasidim and Early Modern Hebrew Printing". I really do have the focus on Hebrew works. That is A, my area of expertise, but, it also speaks to my own interests in thinking about texts that achieve a certain kind of canonicity. That is to say they become part of the canon, part of the library of Jewish sacred literature. And that literature is primarily, almost always as Jews have perceived it written in the Lashon Hakodesh, the Hebrew language. So I'm interested in Hebrew books and Sefer Hasidim is one of them. But as I mentioned earlier, Sefer Hasidim includes words and phrases in other languages as well. That is Yiddish and that is Judeo-French.

JS: And that is notable because until the founding of the state of Israel, Jews did not use Hebrew as a language of communication in their day-to-day lives. They used vernacular languages, right? In the ancient world, they may have used Greek or Aramaic. In the medieval world, they may have used Yiddish or Spanish, what ultimately comes to be known as Ladino or a Judeo-Italian, right? The Jews are using other vernaculars. And notably, when we speak about printing, what's crucial to note is that Jewish printers who sought out Jewish readerships, not

only printed in Hebrew, but also printed in the vernacular languages that Jews spoke and read as well. And that is one very important feature of 16th century printing, is the explosion of vernacular books. But when we turn to Hebrew and we turn to Sefer Hasidim in particular, one of the things that the first printers, the partners of Bologna, do when they print their book, is they put the text through a rather intensive process of censorship.

JS: They're eager to make their book more palatable to potential readers who are not only Jews, but may also be Christians. They also don't want to run a foul of their rulers. In 1536, Bologna is ruled by the Pope, and it is from the Pope, Pope Paul III, that the partners of Bologna receive what's known as a Condotta charter to print Hebrew books. They manage, they engage in a remarkable backroom lobbying campaign to get the pope to grant them a license to print Hebrew books in Bologna. And actually, that license is confirmed multiple times, which means that they maintained ongoing diplomatic relations, as it were, with the Pope that required wealth, that required influence. That's a whole other story. But part of their Condotta, part of their license stipulated that nothing they printed would, in the words of the license, blaspheme the name of Jesus Christ.

JS: And so, any reference to Christianity and to Jesus needed to be removed from the text, and more than that as well. The partners knew that if something was found in the text that would be considered offensive to Christians, they would ultimately suffer for it and they would lose more than their license. And so, they subjected Sefer Hasidim, which comes from, as I said, the medieval Rhinish context, a universe where Jews and Christians are encountering each other, where Jews are suffering persecution at the hands of Christians, where Jews and Christians are engaged in ongoing business transactions where Christian clergy are proselytizing to Jews, where Christian clergy are also learning and studying with Jews.

JS: And Sefer Hasidim records all of this. And so the partners had to make sure that no pejorative terms that exist in the text were passed on into the printed version. And so, they subjected the text to a rather tensive form of censorship. Among other things, words like "goy" which refers to a non-Jew, but which Christians perceived and Jews too, as an insult, the partners removed that term from the text. Now, one last point which is notable because of course we are all familiar with digital technologies. Printing was not like scanning today. There was no OCR and there was no find and replace function, right?

[chuckle]

JS: So the printers didn't need... Couldn't type in, "find all references to goy and replace with X." So combing through these texts, even if it was intensive, it was a rather haphazard process. And so, words like goy did slip through even their editorial process.

JH: And we can imagine how such censorship and the cracks through which the censorship fell in a combined and haphazard fashion could affect the composite text and its meeting and how it was received. So, it seems pretty consequential in a number of different directions. But there's an even sort of deeper level of complexity and cultural situation that I think is very counterintuitive for contemporary audiences. And that complexity is the very idea of an author at

all. And the way printing inflicts our notion of authorship. First of all, we don't properly know who wrote the Sefer Hasidim or the... As you said, that it even constitutes a book in the first place. But in truth, the very idea of a singular author altogether has changed dramatically since the 13th century when the cortex of Sefer Hasidim was composed, as you point out in your book. So what does Sefer Hasidim and its printing story teach us about the evolution of the very idea of a book's author?

JS: So I mentioned title pages, for instance. What's notable is that the title page has the title of the work very often, but... And it also has prominently the author's name following from Foucault, the author serves a certain function, right? Foucault, the theorist talked about the role of the author as someone who could be disciplined if the contents of the work was found by those in power to be transgressive. We see this 'cause, of course, we're living in times where new modes of censorship are being deployed in societies around the world. We are seeing how authors are disciplined for their texts. But one role that an author's name on the title page has, Foucault tells us, is that's the person where the buck stops. The buck stops with the author. And if I say something wrong in my book, you can go to the author and blame me.

JS: Another function that the author has is, the author's name lends authority to the work, right? If I am a notable person, if I am known in a society among readers as a reputable person, then my name on the title page of my book lends authority to it. And potentially, we all know going into a bookstore, "Oh. I see that there's a book by a favorite author," let's say, Josh Holo. Oh, and Josh Holo has produced just now another book. I know him, I trust him. I like his work. So I'm going to read that book too." So the author function also has a way of generating interest along with authority. With regard to Sefer Hasidim, what is notable is, is that in the medieval period, that is prior to the period of printing, books generally didn't have title pages, and authors were not always associated with them, especially in Northern Europe.

JS: Something different happens in the Southern Mediterranean and the Arabic speaking world. But in Northern Europe and in the formerly Roman Empire, books were generally seen as collaborative entities. A book was meant to encapsulate wisdom that was deemed canonical over the centuries and writers, that is people who wrote them, scribes, would often collect the work of multiple figures, multiple writers, multiple thinkers, multiple teachers and gather them together in one volume. What emerges with printed books is, is that books become associated with a single named individual rather than the collected wisdom of a particular place or society, or some ancient figure no longer living. Right? And what happens in the case of Sefer Hasidim is, is that the addition that the partners of Bologna produce is tied to one individual, in this case a medieval figure by the name of Yehuda HeHasid, Judah the Pious, and not on their title page, interestingly enough, but in their introduction, they say, "This is the book that Yehuda HeHasid, Judah the Pious, the great Sage wrote.

JS: So the printers tie their book to this individual. Why do they choose him? Well, very likely there were traditions that associated those manuscripts with him, but notably, the book that they produce, Sefer Hasidim, says that all books should be written anonymously. And so, the partners of this first edition of the book contravene the book's own advice, and they place the name of an individual, this fellow Judah, in the introduction, in order to associate it with him. And

you can speculate that the reason why was because Judah was a somewhat well-known figure from around the same period. We have books of stories, which include stories about him, folk tales about him. So it is likely that he was understood as a venerable precursor, an ancestor, and that these stories could be associated with him, and that his name would confer authority upon the book.

JH: Okay. So, there's an interesting contradiction whereby the book attributes to a single author, that the book itself thinks is a bad idea, that shouldn't have an author. I wanna dive into another contradiction or complexity, which is deeply, deeply interwoven into the DNA of Jewish civilization, which is the relationship between the oral and the written. The very rabbinic tradition, which essentially is the Judaism that we have today relies on the principle that Moses received two Torahs from God on Mount Sinai. One that was written down and that we call Torah today, meaning the Torah scroll, and the other one, which was oral and ostensibly handed down from generation to generation without being written for over millennium, millennium and half until it was committed to writing in the form of what we call the Mishna and the Gemara or the Talmud. In fact, we still call the Talmud the oral law today, even though it's been written down. Similarly, Sefer Hasidim seeks to capture an oral tradition or traditions and a partially secret tradition at that in a written medium. So what's going on with Judaism's relationship to speaking, teaching, writing, and printing as a religious exercise?

JS: This is a question that I am fascinated by. I think about it all the time, and it's not lost on me that again, living in a digitized world, that we are in some ways returning to some of the features of the oral culture that predominated in the ancient world. That the digital actually has led to a renaissance of the oral in some ways. We need but go to YouTube or TikTok to recognize that. The tradition that you speak of, of Moses receiving two Torahs on Mount Sinai, one written and one oral, is crucial to the self understanding of the rabbis and of rabbis in general. It's notable that according to the Talmud itself, that which is written should only be taught in writing, and that which is oral must remain taught orally. So there was a prohibition on writing down the oral tradition, and then we are told that the oral tradition had to be written down because in the face of persecution and in the face of the potential for forgetting, that is there would be a break in the telephone, it was better to violate the commandment of not writing down the oral tradition to prevent Torah from being forgotten in Israel.

JS: That is the way the tradition understands how the oral Torah ended up in writing. So there is this ancient bias against the written word, which actually goes back and is shared in the classical tradition. Plato in the Phaedrus has Socrates come out as the foremost skeptic of writing. And so, Judaism shares that skepticism of the written tradition.

JH: Yeah. I think it actually inverts it. I think Socrates was suspicious of writing because it promoted forgetting, it was a crutch, whereas we accepted writing as a hedge against forgetting.

JS: Well, at least the way the tradition makes it clear, we accepted writing as a hedge against forgetting grudgingly.

JH: Yes.

JS: And then, we willingly embraced it with wild a abandoned. Okay.

[chuckle]

JH: Great. It's the moral of the story of your book.

JS: And that is the moral of the story of my book. What is notable, and this was Plato's critique, it's also the rabbi's critique, and it's not just the rabbis of antiquities critique, one of my favorite passages of Moses Mendelssohn's Jerusalem, Moses Mendelssohn, the late 18th century German Jewish philosopher. One of my favorite passages in that text is where Mendelssohn says that he's living in a generation post printing, by the way, where no one talks to anyone anymore, where if you wanna learn anything, you just go and read the book. And that in earlier generations, Jews talked to one another and teaching, he says, was passed down face-to-face from person to person in the course of life. And so, without a doubt, Mendelssohn's critique is, is that writing, instrumentalizes learning. He says, "Everything is a dead letter." Great phrase. And yet, Jews have become some of the most enthusiastic producers of writing and consumers of writing as a means of the religious act.

JS: So your point is very important. And I would just suggest that we're living at a time now where we're seeing the potential in some ways for a return to that orality. And I'll give you an example. I routinely... When I work with students who are interested in learning how to lay tefillin, the leather straps that some Jews wear in morning prayers, I routinely will instruct them to go online and to watch a video on YouTube, rather than to read any number of the written explanations of how to do it. Right? So that actually in today's moment, Jewish tradition is being packaged and repackaged digitally, but in ways that are much more embodied. And that might actually please someone like our friend Moses Mendelssohn.

JH: Well, I'd like to end the interview with a customary question of mine. You in particular, Joe, I have been thinking about this topic for a long time, but I think you'll agree that one of the great satisfactions of deep scholarship is the experience of discovery. So share with us something that you discovered in researching and writing this book that surprised or delighted you.

JS: Now, what a lovely question. The book not only deals with the printers of the first edition in Bologna, but also the printers of the second edition of Sefer Hasidim in Basel. And that printer was a fellow named Ambrosius Froben, who was not Jewish, who lived in the city where no Jews were permitted and for some reason decided a print this Hebrew book. And he didn't just produce Sefer Hasidim, but he may have produced a number of other books. In that print shop, he hired an expert and got the City of Basel to permit the presence of a Jew in the city. One Jew named, Israel Sifroni. And Sifroni writes in another book of his, how he worked in Froben's print shop and he worked in collaboration with a whole host of non-Jews, of Christians who worked with him. And he apologizes in this other book for the errors that might have crept into that book and the other books that he printed, because he says that the Christians with whom he worked were not experts in reading Hebrew and they worked on days like Saturday, on Shabbat and on holidays when he wasn't working, and so that he couldn't supervise them.

JS: Now, I have to say that this is a little convenient, right? He's blaming his collaborators for problems that he could have avoided or not. The story is indicative of the complex world of Hebrew printing in the 16th century. The print shop was a place where Jews and Christians collaborated sometimes face-to-face at the same tables, at the same presses. Sometimes as in the case of the partners of Bologna, with the supervision of the Pope and his hierarchy of authorities, Jews and Christians were bound up together in the creation of these books. These books that have become canonical. These books that have become part of the basic Jewish bookshelf. Our sacred tradition. Our sacred tradition is one that has been adapted and changed over the centuries, especially in the light of printing. And it has been Jews and non-Jews together who've been engaged, sometimes collaboratively, sometimes acrimoniously but it is that history that is written into the volumes of the Hebrew library, the volumes that are often embossed in gold, bound in leather.

JS: The volumes that we perceive as part of that Torah Sheba'al Peh, the oral Torah. The oral tradition of Judaism. It is that history that's embedded in those volumes and that history is what I have determined to make my career exploring and investigating with the help of my students at HUC-JIR.

JH: Well, it's absolutely been a pleasure to have this conversation with you, Joseph Skloot, to share your work and to get the benefit of being your colleague at HUC. Thanks for the pleasure and for the learning about this world that sometimes we take for granted when we hold a book in our hand.

JS: Thank you.

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