

## The Baruch Strauss Collection at Yeshiva University

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Description: Approximately eight thousand printed volumes, most of them in Hebrew, are included in the rare collections at Yeshiva University. Many of the rare books were originally part of the library of Berthold Baruch Strauss (1901-1962), a London collector. This important collection, catalogued in part in his *Ohel Barukh* (1959), was acquired after his death for Yeshiva. The discussion will center on his acquisition of the volumes, some of the highlights Hebrew imprints in the collection and their most recent cataloging, and will feature some examples.

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### [SLIDE 1]

Baruch Strauss begins the introduction to his catalog of his books in Hebrew characters, אהל ברוך,<sup>1</sup> with a section entitled “My Library.” In it he describes the passion of a book collector and his reluctance to see his library incorporated into a larger institution.

Most of the well-known collections of Hebraica and Judaica, including those of academic, governmental or religious institutions, originated as private collections. When books are incorporated into such official libraries, their brief enjoyment of personality comes to an end. From that moment they may stand on their shelves for hundreds of years, rarely disturbed by applications from the reading room but more frequently by deft sweeps of the duster. A turning point in the life of a book has thus been reached. Its intimate relationship with the owner has come to an end; the book has been relegated to retirement in the form of mere

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<sup>1</sup> London: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1959.

numerical membership of a bulky catalogue.

Most private collections exist for only a limited period, but the life of each book in them is full and exciting. The books and the collections in which they are embodied have individual stories to tell, stories that reveal the approach, educational background, sphere of interests and character of their owners. Almost all of them were acquired singly--a process enlivened by the pleasures of selection and acquisition that can only be fully appreciated by those who are themselves collectors. Every addition is an animating and stimulating event. The private collector is deeply attached to his books; they are his children, often born in pain--which only increases his affection for them. I have known connoisseurs who have spent literally every penny on the enlargement of their libraries. They were willing to forgo all the amenities of life, even food, for the purchase of books they could only afford to pay in instalments. To the private collector books constitute a cherished part of life, and only adversity or death can break his intimate association with them.

Unfortunately for Strauss, his “intimate association” with his library was broken by his death in 1962 and the acquisition of his library by Yeshiva University in 1966. However, some of the collection does retain the accession numbers Strauss assigned to the volumes, in alphabetical order, prefaced by “Strauss” and therefore sits in a designated place in the Rare Book Room. Strauss’s life-long occupation with book collecting began when, at the age of 12, he was ushered into the private study of the late chief rabbi of Leipzig, Rabbi Simon Hurwitz (1810-1900). [SLIDE 2] This rabbi was a descendent of the של"ה, Pinhas Horowitz (1731-1805) and Shmelke of Nikolsburg. Rabbi Hurwitz found himself in Leipzig, a small and poor community whose Jewish population only grew with the business cycle of the Leipzig Fair. So with time on his hands, he took to writing articles, commentaries, and even participating in academic research. The rabbi’s daughter had kept his study just as he had left it before he died. Strauss was so impressed with this מקום קדוש, as he

describes it, that his passion was ignited. In 1923 he learned, sadly, that that collection of some 1500 books had been sent to England and dispersed. Years later, in 1941, he was to be delighted to be able to purchase some of the books owned by Rabbi Hurwitz and even to acquire some with the rabbi's own handwritten notes.

By the time of his bar mitzvah, Strauss already owned 100 books and was collecting even more from money he had saved and bar mitzvah presents. He continued to purchase books all over Europe, especially in Leipzig and other places in Germany. He describes himself as “ransacking” the Jewish bookshops of Hamburg, Berlin, Breslau, and Frankfurt. When the German revolution of 1918 manifested itself in riots in the streets, he was oblivious to it although he was in the midst of it, because at that moment he was on a ladder in a Jewish bookstore.

By the time of his move to London in 1933, he had amassed quite a few books. German refugees on their way to the United States or Palestine came to sell their books in an effort to make some money for the passage or to save the expense of bringing their books to their new locations. Strauss felt guilty about buying these books, seeing how attached the sellers were to their ספרים, and often declined to buy them. Meanwhile, his collection grew by ordering from catalogs from Leipzig, Frankfurt, Vienna, Oxford and Jerusalem.

During the blitz he had to move his precious books to a country house out of range of the Nazi bombardment. Without book shelves and in cramped quarters, the house could barely contain its human inhabitants as well as its shipments of books that were spirited away from London a box at a time so as not to arouse suspicion.

As Strauss wanted to preserve the cultural legacy of the Jews of Europe, his collection is mainly ספרים; he specifically avoided volumes of sermons. We may characterize the collection as mainly rabbinics. His emphasis is on German-Jewish

authors in an effort to preserve especially their “spiritual heritage”<sup>2</sup> in spite of the destruction of the community. Strauss’s almost mystical connection between Jewish books, Jewish history, and God Himself, propelled him to amass his collection with an intention to reveal the secrets of each book—its historical background and facts about the author. Therefore, he noted particularly the הסכמות (approbations) and הקדמות (introductory remarks).

So too, was Strauss conscious of all the many aspects of book production. His family was in the business of distributing printing metal, and so he was encouraged to learn about type as well. He recorded the origins of books, noted their watermarks, typefaces, artists, censors, proofreaders, printers, approbations, autographs, and marginal notes. Of necessity he became an expert in bibliography, and he then decided that a proper collection must have its own catalog. His catalog, אהל ברוך, published in 1959, [SLIDES 3-4] is the printed version that he wrote in three years in his spare time. It is quite accurate so that we still find valuable information in it to help us with our cataloging. In addition to its 6973 numbered entries, אהל ברוך includes indexes of publishing locations, a special list of Karaite books, 32 incunabula later studied intensively by Gerson Cohen in his catalog,<sup>3</sup> [SLIDE 5] 25 manuscripts (no time to talk about them today) including letters, names of those who left their autographs or notes, private library owners, and censors. Strauss identified 250 signatures of owners who wrote their names in their books.

The Strauss library was bought in 1966 from the estate with the financial aid of Ludwig Jesselson, a philanthropist and trustee of the University, and Max Stern, trustee and founder of Stern College for Women. Dr. Samuel Belkin, president of

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<sup>2</sup> P. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> An intensive study of these volumes was done by Gerson Cohen, *Hebrew Incunabula, Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica-Judaica, Yeshiva University* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1984).

the University, called it “the most significant step in the development of the Manuscript and Rare Book division of the new Central University Library.”<sup>4</sup> (That library, by the way, now known as the Mendel Gottesman Library, is undergoing its first renovation since it was opened in 1969.) The Strauss collection was sent by sea with its most valuable parts flown into New York.<sup>5</sup>

Yeshiva University, in its announcement of the purchase of the collection, proudly pointed out that it had acquired the first printed edition of the Book of Psalms, Bologna, 1477, with commentary by David Kimhi, the renowned Biblical scholar and grammarian (1160-1235).<sup>6</sup> Other highlights included the first history book printed in Hebrew; the first complete code of rabbinic law; a two-volume Hebrew translation of the medical encyclopedia by the Moslem physician and philosopher Avicenna (930-1037); the first dictionary of Talmudic and Midrashic terms, ספר הערוך; and one-third of the surviving 100 Hebrew titles printed before 1500, known as incunabula.

After Baruch Strauss had published his printed catalog, it was digitized and can be accessed through the YULIS catalog.<sup>7</sup> However, it is not searchable, and the standards of cataloging have been changed since it was published. In order to make our collection visible through individual, full records in OCLC, we embarked on a campaign to catalog the bibliographic items individually-- at a slow but steady pace. Some items in the collection were removed initially to be placed on the library shelves. Those that were deemed rare have maintained their original call numbers reflective of the alphabetical order of אהל ברוך . Any volume that we already own is simply added to the existing catalog record in our system, but the volume is not removed from its location in the Baruch Strauss collection. In that sense, many of

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<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, March 13, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> “Manuscript, Rare Book Collection is Acquired,” *Inside Yeshiva University* 9:7 (March 1966), 1,3.

<sup>6</sup> “Baruch Strauss Collection,” *YU News*, Spring 1966.

<sup>7</sup> <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.digital.library.yu.edu/misc/catalogueofthebooks.pdf>

the titles in the original collection have been able to maintain their connection to the private library and its owner.

Let's look very briefly at some highlights of the collection. We start with a few of the 32 incunabula.

**3588 [Inc 17, p. 55]** סמ"ג, ספר מצות גדול, by Moshe ben Yaakov of Coucy. Soncino, 1488. [SLIDE 6] It has no title page, and the pages are not numbered. At the end are two stamps; one features a castle and the other a coat of arms. [SLIDE 7] Three censors signed: Luigi da Bologna in 1598; Giovanni Monni Inq. di Modena, and Camillo Jagel (active between 1554 and 1624) in 1613. In addition we have the signature of Moses Gaster, former owner. We know a few things about Luigi da Bologna: he was a converted Jew working for the Inquisition as a censor, active between 1596 and 1606 in Mantua, Modena, Ancona and Reggio. Knowing about the censors is useful in dating books and manuscripts.

**5855 [Inc 39, p. 84]**<sup>8</sup> Sefer ha-Shorashim, David b. Yosef Kimhi, Naples, 1490 [SLIDE 8] Intending to explain all difficult words in Tanakh. Title pages were not in use in these early days of printing.

Censorship was promulgated in Italy by the Popes, beginning in 1542 and lasting until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> There were harsh penalties for possession of a book that had not been seen by the censors. When the censors took rare printed books for inspection, the owner could be deprived of them for years. It was tempting to hide such volumes, but the papal officers could arrive in the middle of the night and search the house, confiscating any uncensored books.

Strauss noted the censors who had, five or six times over the course of the years, inspected the same book and crossed out passages they deemed offensive to

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<sup>8</sup> "Inc number" refers to the incunabula catalog by Cohen.

<sup>9</sup> Strauss, *Ohel Baruch*, xxxii-xxxiii.

the Church. Strauss attempted to identify the censors. Some were designated “Renatus,” “the newborn,” indicating they were baptized Jews. (Conversely, Strauss also lists contributors to a number of books who were גרים, converts to Judaism.)

**593** R. Bahya, ביאור על התורה, Pesaro, 1514 [SLIDE 9] features much censorship. Strauss lists 5 including Luigi da Bologna, who had also censored the סמ"ג, Camillo Jagel in 1614, and J. Giovanni Mon. Inq. di Modena (Inquisitor). Eight lines have been crossed out. [SLIDE 10] Inscribed by owner Mardochei Lisbonne. [SLIDE 11]

**3201** There are volumes whose former owners signed their names or stamped their books. In this copy of מחזיק ברכה, Livorno, 1785, [SLIDE 12] Hayim Yosef David Azulai, known as the חיד"א (1724-1806) dedicates a copy to his son, Raphael Isaiah Azulai (1745-1826) who was rabbi in Ancona. [SLIDE 13] This copy includes some of the handwritten notes of Raphael Azulai. Here is another page [SLIDE 14] showing the typography.

**4480** This volume was once owned by Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-88). [SLIDE 15] עץ אבות, on פרקי אבות by Yaakov Yisrael Emden, Amsterdam, 1751. It was subsequently owned by R. Hirsch's son, Julian, of Frankfurt am Main who stamped it in 1889.

**68** אגרות הרב חיד"א, Livorno, 1867. Sticker indicating this book once belonged to J. H. Hertz (1872-1946), Chief rabbi in London [SLIDE 16].

**686-91** בית המדרש by Aharon (Adolph) Jellinek (1821-93), Leipzig, 1853. Stamp of Esriel Hildesheimer (1820-99) “a founder of Modern Orthodox Judaism,”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia, “Azriel Hildesheimer.”

[**SLIDE 17**] especially known for having founded the rabbinical seminary in Berlin in 1873. The stamp indicates that he was rabbi in Eisenstadt, Austria (appointed in 1851). He acquired this book before he relocated to Berlin. Signature of Strauss in top left corner. Note the chronogram is equivalent to the title.

**4112-13 (2 v.)** Karaitica was a category that Strauss collected specifically. Here we have a sample of a Siddur from Cairo. סדור תפלת הקראים, Cairo, 1903, printed in Budapest. [**SLIDE 18**] This is the first volume, containing daily prayers and services for Rosh Hodesh, Purim and fast days.

**3616** Here is a historic volume by Menasseh b. Israel, Amsterdam, 1650. [**SLIDE 19**] the title מקוה ישראל has a double meaning: It alludes to the ingathering of Israel as well as the “Hope of Israel,” Spanish, *Esperanca de Israel*. This book of 126 pages endeavors to prove that the lost tribes of Israel were to be found in America, and was also written for the purpose of obtaining the re-admission of the Jews into England. First written in Spanish, *Esperanca de Israel* was translated into Latin and English and met with much favor in England. The printer of this book was Manasseh’s own son, who went to England with his cousin, David Dormido, to open negotiations with Oliver Cromwell on the return of the Jews to England.

**6291** Considering the book as an artifact, an artistic production, we may cite תורת העולה, Prague, 1569 by Moses ben Israel Isserles (approximately 1525-1572) and its elaborate binding, complete with a key. [**SLIDES 20-21**] On the inside of the cover is the sticker of Baruch Strauss. [**SLIDE 22**] The text deals with the Temple and sacrifices. [**SLIDE 23**] This copy was given by R. Bezalel Ronsperg (Rendsburg) as a present to his friend R. Samuel Löw Kauder in 1819. [**SLIDE 24**] Kauder was a dayan in Prague (and RBR died in 1820).



**2086-7 (Inc 55, p. 17)** טור, עורך חיים, יורה דעה, 2 vols. bound together. R. Yaakov b. Asher, Mantua and Ferrara, 1476-77. [**SLIDE 25**] It is thought to be the third Hebrew book to explicitly give the date of its printing. This is another one of the incunabula with many censors who worked over a long period of time. Censor Luigi da Bologna dates his reading of the book to 1598; [**SLIDE 26**] Camillo Jaghel to 1611; then F. Filippo Peruzzotti, censored it in 1745. So the book had been around for 269 years and it was still being censored. Cohen says it is probably the only complete copy in the world.

## **Conclusion**

The Baruch Strauss collection is a rich source of material about rabbinical works, the history of the book and its crafts, the history of Hebrew printing, censorship, and private libraries. The collection reflects historical events and connects to famous personalities. Since this collection was regarded as a treasure early on, it had been cataloged in print form in אהל ברוך and in Gerson Cohen's analysis of the incunabula. The manuscripts have also been carefully described. With their presence on OCLC, the rare volumes will be able to take advantage of today's technology for retrieval, hyperlinks to further information, and, with the advent of RDA, we can now trace the printers, publishers, censors, proofreaders, former owners and others that we were not previously mindful of. Now the Baruch Strauss collection, including some books that are over 500 years old, will travel into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.