CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MOSES BEN ABRAHAM AVINU
AND HIS PRINTING-PRESSES

The history of Hebrew printing is replete with outstanding personalities. Among the more colorful is Moses ben Abraham Avinu, who printed Hebrew books for more than three decades in Amsterdam and Germany. His life is of interest due to the insights it allows us into Hebrew printing at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries and because it is instructive as to the adversities of Jewish life in that period.

Moses ben Abraham was a convert to Judaism. His name, prior to his conversion, is given as Haase, and he is referred to as Moses Polak in Dutch records. Originally from Nikolsburg or Prague, Moses ben Abraham came to Amsterdam, together with his wife Friede Israels, either as a proselyte to Judaism or converted in Amsterdam. The name ben Abraham Avinu [our father], suggestive of the progenitor of the Jewish people, is one often taken by converts. Avinu appears on the title pages of his Amsterdam imprints but not on his later books.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam was not only the leading book city in Europe, but was the first city of Hebrew printing, having supplanted Venice in both the number and quality of books printed for many decades. The output of Amsterdam’s presses exceeded the combined number of books printed by all the other print-shops in Europe, with the industry employing no less than 30,000 people; from the time of Menasseh ben Israel’s first book in 1627 to 1732 there were 318 Jewish printers in Amsterdam, and from 1680 to 1789 there was not one decade in which less than 100 books were printed with Hebrew letters, with as many as 246 books being issued in the peak decade from 1710 to 1719.

1 The original version of this article was published in European Judaism XXXI n. 2 (London, 1996), pp. 123–32.
2 Moses ben Abraham Avinu is not to be confused with the Constantinople printer of the same name who was employed at the printing-houses of Jonah ben Jacob and his sons Reuben and Nissan Ashkenazi (1743–46) and Benjamin ben Moses Roshe of Venice (1746).
3 Bloom, Herbert I., The Economic Activities of the Jews of Amsterdam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (Port Washington, 1937, reprint, 1969), pp. 45 and 59; Vinograd,
In Amsterdam, Moses ben Abraham worked as a compositor in the printing-presses of Uri Phoebus Ha-Levi, David Tartas, and Moses Kosman. Moses ben Abraham’s name appears in 1687 as the type-setter for Phoebus of a Yiddish book of kabbalistic prayers to be recited on the fast day preceding the New Moon. Besides his work on Hebrew titles, Moses ben Abraham also set the Yiddish newspaper *Dinstagishe un Freytagishe Kurantin*, first for Uri Phoebus and, after it changed hands, for David Tartas.\(^4\) It has also been suggested that Moses ben Abraham was involved with the non-Jewish printer Casper Steen, and that ‘Casper Steen’s first Hebrew printing-office which can be traced in 1692 might well have been identical with that of Moses Abrahamsz’.\(^5\)

In 1689/90 Moses Kosman, a businessman who had established a print-shop that issued three books only in two years, concluded that operating a printing-house detracted from his other business interests, and was more complex and less remunerative than he had foreseen. Kosman therefore sold his print-shop to Moses ben Abraham for Fl. 1,600. Moses ben Abraham supplemented Kosman’s type with fonts cut by Hermanus Mandelslo.\(^6\)

Moses ben Abraham Avinu printed in the attic of his house on Batavierstraat Street. His first title is recorded as a small Ashkenazic rite prayer-book, issued with the imprint of Moses Kosman; no copies of this work are extant today and it is known only from a deed which indicates 2,600 copies were printed. Moses ben Abraham Avinu was permitted to sell 250 copies to Germany, evidence that he had business connections in that country, an important customer for the Amsterdam Hebrew presses. Moses ben Abraham printed eight titles in 1690, primarily small works, several with an approbation from R. Moses Judah ben Kalonymous, the rabbi of the Ashkenaz community of Amsterdam. They are *Prayers for the Eve of Shavu’ot and Hoshana Rabbah*; R. Joseph

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\(^2\) Van Eeghen, I. H., ‘Moses Abrahamsz, printer in Amsterdam,’ *Studia Rosenthaliana*, VI, Amsterdam, 1972, p. 70.

\(^3\) Van Eeghen, p. 70.