CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE BATH-SHEBA/MOSES DE MEDINA

SALONIKA EDITION OF BERAKHOT: AN UNKNOWN

ATTEMPT TO CIRCUMVENT THE INQUISITION’S

BAN ON THE PRINTING OF THE TALMUD IN

16TH-CENTURY ITALY

Abstract

On September 9, 1553 (Rosh Ha-Shanah, 5314) the Talmud was burned in Rome and shortly thereafter in several other cities in Italy. Publication of the Talmud was forbidden and Italian Jewry was denied access to one of the most basic works of Judaism. While attempts to secure the Church’s approval to print an expurgated edition of the Talmud are well known, there is scant evidence of any attempt to circumvent the ban on the Talmud. While it is also known that Talmudic treatises were issued by a number of print-shops in Salonika, no causal relationship between those editions and events in Italy has been previously suggested, much less proven. It is my contention that at least one print-shop, the Bath-Sheba/Moses de Medina press, issued treatises intended for the Italian market in defiance of the ban on the Talmud. Although the Bath Sheba family’s intention to print the Talmud was publicly stated, there was no evidence, until recently, that any tractates were actually printed. Now, however, a unique copy of tractate Berakhot from this press has come to light. A review of the circumstances of the publication of this tractate affords us an occasion to revise our understanding of the Jewish response to the burning of the Talmud.

The recent discovery of an edition of tractate Berakhot, printed in Salonika by the Bath-Sheba/Moses de Medina press in 1592, confirms what was previously unsubstantiated by either extant tractates or contemporary records: the Bath-Sheba/Moses de Medina press had indeed issued talmudic treatises. An inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the publication of this tractate affords us an occasion to revise our understanding of the Jewish response to the burning of the Talmud.

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1 The original version of this article was published The Jewish Quarterly Review LXXXVII (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 47–60.

2 I am grateful to Mrs. Sharon Liberman Mintz, Assistant Curator of Art, Jewish Theological Seminary, for alerting me to the existence of the Bath-Sheba Berakhot. I also thank the owners of this edition of Berakhot, who allowed me to examine the tractate. They have requested that their identities not be made public.
Talmud in Italy in 1553/54. It is the contention of this paper that the Bath-Sheba/Moses de Medina Berakhot represents a previously unknown response to the burning of the Talmud and an attempt to circumvent the Church’s ban on that work.

On September 9, 1553 (Rosh Ha-Shanah, 5314) the Talmud was burned in Rome and shortly thereafter in several other cities in Italy. One of the worst conflagrations occurred in Venice (Saturday, October 21, 1553), where Hebrew printing-houses had previously issued four fine and influential Talmud editions. Italian Jewry was traumatized. The Talmud, as well as other works, were proscribed and later placed on the Index librorum prohibitorum. Permitted Hebrew books were subject to censorship. Publication of both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud was forbidden—the last volume of the Babylonian Talmud printed in Italy was issued in Sabbioneta in 1554—and possession of the Talmud was prohibited. When permission to reprint the Talmud in Basel was granted in 1578 the edition was heavily expurgated. Attempts to have the decree against the Talmud reversed failed. Study of the Talmud consequently declined in Italy. Moreover, Hebrew printing in Italy was affected: Hebrew book production in Venice dropped from 206 titles in 1550–59 to 93 in the next decade and to 79 in the decade after that. Scholars who previously had sent their works to Venice to be printed now refused to do so, whether out of concern for how their books would be treated, or as a protest against the book burning and censorship.

Echoes of the tragedy that befell the Talmud and Italian Jewry are expressed in a number of contemporary works. R. Abraham Menahem Porto (Rapaport, d. 1596), an eyewitness to the burning of the Talmud in Venice, compared it to the destruction of the Temple and designated the day as one of “fasting, weeping, and mourning” for the rest of his life.

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4 Meir Benayahu, The Relation Between Greek and Italian Jewry (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1980) 98–100. Benayahu remarks that after several decades had passed, scholars in Salonika once again chose to have their works printed in Venice because of the high quality of the imprints of the Venetian presses. Venice was always preferred by the sages of Safed, notwithstanding the hazards of sending a manuscript on a long journey by sea, and typesetting and editing by strangers without the author present.