**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

**Shiur #11:**

**The Invention of the Printing Press I (1440)**

One of the greatest inventions that dramatically changed the world was the printing press. It was invented in 1440 in Strasbourg by [Johannes Gutenberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Gutenberg) of Mainz, Germany.

Printing wasn’t invented by Gutenberg, as it had existed for several centuries earlier. His great *chiddush* (innovation) was movable type.

Until then, printing had been done with pages or images carved on a woodblock. Gutenberg, however, realized that by using metal stamps of single letters he was able to create words, sentences and entire pages of text easily. In a large, manually-operated machine, the stamps were arranged. Once they were covered with ink, a page of text could be printed.

The following legend suggests the story behind the great invention:

Gutenberg was experimenting with making blocks of letters welded together to make words. He had come up with the idea of “movable words,” but not yet with movable individual characters. One of his children suddenly burst through the door into his workshop, knocking the blocks of letters, joined together as words, to the floor. Gutenberg cursed his child’s clumsiness and began to pick up the letters, which had separated from one another. As he did so, Gutenberg realized how much simpler it might be to keep all the letters separate. By so doing, he could arrange and rearrange the characters on his press and be ready to set type for a new page without having to either cut a new woodblock or permanently set the words together.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By 1454, Gutenberg’s new printing press in Mainz had produced a complete Bible. Named the Gutenberg Bible, it is still regarded as one of the most important books ever to be printed.

By the beginning of the 16th century, printing presses were producing millions of books all over Europe.

One of the first Hebrew books to be printed may have been the Ramban’s commentary on the Torah. This book is among eight or nine Hebrew books printed between the years 1469 and 1472, known as the Rome Incunabula.

The Five Books of the Torah were first printed in Bologna, Italy, in 1482.

The first edition of the Babylonian Talmud, with the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot, was printed in Venice in 1523.

Printed books allowed millions of people access to knowledge that until then was unknown to them. The opportunity to share ideas and knowledge brought on a new era of change and enlightenment never seen before.

This affected the religious world drastically. It is no coincidence that a few years later, in 1517, Martin Luther succeeded in his “rebellion” against the church. By taking advantage of the capability to spread his religious ideas by massive printing as well as translating the Bible into German, he successfully reached the masses.

The Jewish world was clearly impacted by this revolution. Judaism values teaching and studying Torah, and this new technology vastly expanded the opportunities for all Jews to engage in these pursuits. In fact, as we will soon see, acquiring printed Judaica may even be considered a mitzva!

**Is There a Mitzva to Buy Books?**

The Rambam, basing his view on the Gemara (BT *Sanhedrin* 21a), rules:

It is a positive commandment for each and every Jewish man to write a Torah scroll for himself…

Even if his ancestors have left him a Torah scroll, it is a mitzva to write one himself. If a person writes the scroll by hand, it is considered as if he received it on Mount Sinai. If he does not know how to write himself, [he should have] others write it for him.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, Rabbeinu Asher (Rosh) argues that the mitzva already in his time had changed:

Nowadays, when Torah scrolls are written and placed in synagogues for public Torah readings, it is a positive commandment for every Jewish male who can do so, to write volumes of Torah, Mishna, Gemara and their commentaries.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This ruling is accepted by the *Shulchan Arukh,*[[4]](#footnote-4) and some understood that accordingly, since people no longer study Torah from scrolls, the mitzva nowadays is only to write and print books.**[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Once people could buy printed books, Posekim accepted that there was no need to physically copy the books by hand.

Rav Mordekhai ben Avraham Jaffe (c. 1530–1612) understands that our mitzva may be achieved by writing or buying books,[[6]](#footnote-6) and Rav Chayim Palachi (1788–1868) explicitly mentions that buying is a viable alternative to writing.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In fact, Rav Eliezer Papo (Bulgaria, 1785–1828) argues that acquiring books is a great commandment of the Torah. He demands that all Jewish people, even those who are not Torah scholars, buy as many books as they can.[[8]](#footnote-8)

There is a discussion among the Posekim regarding making the blessing “*She-hecheyanu,”* “Who has kept us alive,” upon acquiring new books, in the same way it is recited when making significant purchases. Rav Chayim Mordekhai Margaliot (1780-1818) mentions those who are in favor (e.g. Radbaz); however, he concludes that this is not the custom. He reveals that Rav Ya’akov Emden )1697–1776) holds that if one writes a book, and even more so if one has his own *chiddushei Torah* printed, a *berakha* should be recited.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**New Questions**

The printing revolution created new challenges and new questions arouse which were never discussed before.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Torah requires certain texts to be written. Ritual objects containing biblical texts, such as Torah scrolls, *mezuzot* on the doorposts of Jewish homes and *tefillin* worn every day for prayer, must be handwritten by *soferim* (scribes). The same is true of certain documents described in the Torah, such as a *get* (bill of divorce). With the invention of the printing press, the question arises whether or not printing and writing are halakhically the same. Is a printed Torah scroll kosher? Can a *get* be printed?[[11]](#footnote-11)

This practical question is connected to another question regarding the *kedusha* (sanctity) of a printed book. Do printed religious texts have *kedusha* in them? Do old, torn books of Torah have to be put in *geniza,* to be stored until they can be buried?[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Is Printing Halakhically Considered Writing?**

Referring to a ruling of the Tur regarding reading *Megillat Esther* from a printed volume, Rav Yoel Sirkis(1561-1640) rules that printed *Megillot* cannot be used. Quoting the verse from *Esther* (9:32), *“Ve-nikhtav ba-sefer,”* “And it was inscribed in a book,” he argues that only handwritten texts are kosher for the fulfillment of the mitzva.[[13]](#footnote-13)

His son-in-law, Rav David Ha-Levi Segal (Taz, c. 1586–1667), discussing the *kedusha* of printed books, rules that the printed word is halakhically acceptable and is considered writing. He explicitly rules that a *get* cannot be printed, but he does not discuss a Torah scroll.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Rav Avraham Hirsch Eisenstadt(1812–1868) understands that Rav Segal would allow a Torah which has been printed to be used for public reading in the synagogue![[15]](#footnote-15) However, he quotes others, like Rav Yair Chayim Bacharach )1639-1702(, who disagree.

In his discussion, Rav Segal attempts to substantiate his opinion that printing is halakhically considered writing and not *chakika* (engraving). The Gemara rules that the words on the high priest’s breastplate must not be written; rather, they must be engraved in stone. The method of engraving was accomplished by writing letters on the stones and then going over the letters with the *shamir* (a worm that had the power to cut through stone).

If printing is considered engraving, argues Rav Segal, why didn’t they print the letters on the stone? It must be because printing is considered writing!

It is fascinating how different rabbis respond to this view. Rav Yair Bacharach, mentioned above, argues against this idea:

This proof of the *Turei Zahav* is incorrect as the printing method is new. Although I have seen books that mention earlier methods of printing molds of metal, this was only done by entire word molds and not separate letters. Thus, one cannot use this Gemara as proof.

However, Rav Yechezkel Katzenellenbogen (1668-1749) of Altona, Hamburg, defends the view of the Taz by arguing that surely King Shelomo, who was considered the smartest man ever alive, could have invented the printing press. Therefore, if he decided to use the *shamir* when the time came to build the Temple, it must have been because printing would not be accepted halakhically.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chajes (1805-1855) a distinguished [Galician](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galician_Jews) [Talmudic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud) scholar, responds to this claim and argues that the fact that King Shelomo was a smart man is not relevant to the discussion.

He explains that God plants in each and every generation people with the capacity to make discoveries and innovations that no one has seen before. Thus, he rejects the above arguments.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Rav Ovadya Yosef concludes that all the discussions in the past regarding printed texts as being halakhically acceptable relate only to the printing presses of the past, which employed manual printing. However, the modern presses of our days, which are automated, are different. Thus, the writing they produce would not be halakhically acceptable as such.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In next week’s *shiur,* we will discuss further challenges created by the invention of the printing press.

1. Samuel Willard Crompton, *The Printing Press* (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hilkhot Tefillin* *U-mzuza* *Ve-sefer Torah* 7:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Beginning of *Halakhot Ketanot, Sefer Torah.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *YD* 270:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Shakh ibid. 270:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Levush, YD* 270:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Responsa Semikha La-chayim, YD*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Peleh Yo’etz*, *Samekh, Sefer*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Sha’arei Teshuva*, *OC* 223:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a list of all halakhic matters that arise, see Yitzchak Ze’ev Kahane, *Mechkarim Be-sifrut Ha-teshuvot,* Mossad HaRav Kook*,* pp. 272-305. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The following articles deal with these questions: *Techumin* 16, pp.395-406; and *Techumin* 22, pp. 469-477. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This question has been discussed in *Shiur* #4, which can be found at <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-04-17-june-1242-burning-talmud> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Bayit Chadash,* *OC* 691:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Turei Zahav***,** *OC* 271:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Pitchei Teshuva,* ibid. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Responsa* *Knesset* [*Yechezkel*](http://hebrewbooks.org/43092)*,* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Responsa* *Maharatz Chajes*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Responsa* *Yechaveh Da’at,* 6:57. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)