



# A Passion for Rare Sefarim

## Q & A

Photo: Yehoshua Halevi

with

## RABBI ELIEZER KATZMAN

BY BAYLA SHEVA BRENNER

*Expert collector Rabbi Eliezer Katzman, a consultant and appraiser of Judaica and Hebrew books for Kestenbaum & Company, has also worked for Sotheby's, Christie's and other auction houses. Rabbi Katzman, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, has appraised the collections in the Rare Book Room of the Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica/Judaica at Yeshiva University, the collection in the Jewish Public Library of Montreal and the rare books and manuscripts of the Annenberg Research Institute in Philadelphia. He has published many scholarly articles on Jewish history, Jewish law and bibliography and serves as associate editor of Yeshurun, one of the foremost scholarly biannual publications on Jewish law, history and bibliography.*

**Jewish Action:** Tell us about your extensive library of rare *sefarim* and how you became involved in collecting.

**Rabbi Eliezer Katzman:**

I own an eclectic collection of about 10,000 *sefarim*. Originally I bought *sefarim* for my own learning. If I had to prepare a *shiur* and needed a *sefer*, I couldn't go hunting for it in shul late at night. [But] my interest in rare *sefarim* began with my father, Rabbi Asher Katzman,

who was a *rosh yeshivah* at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. He had between 30,000 and 40,000 *sefarim*. I inherited the bug. A lot of the *sefarim* I have are from him; others I bought on my own.

**JA:** Where do you keep your vast collection?

**RK:** I have *sefarim* filling my garage, shed and basement.

A young collector called me once, lamenting his *shalom bayis* problems; there was no room left

in his house. He had run out of shelf space and began piling *sefarim* on all of their chairs. His wife complained that there was no place to sit. He solved the problem by purchasing the Otzar HaHochma digital library that has approximately 71,000 *sefarim* scanned in page after page. He told me it saved his marriage.

**JA:** What are the most important factors when assessing a *sefer's* market value?

**RK:** The first factor is obviously age. The rarest books are known as incunabula—books printed before 1501, when printing was in its infancy. Jewish incunabula are especially rare. For example, a Jewish book printed in 1492 is worth considerably more than a non-Jewish book from the same period. The Jewish people studied their books throughout the exiles, so complete, intact Jewish books are extremely rare. Jewish books were often burned over the centuries—another reason they are rare. There were books printed right before the Holocaust, most of which were destroyed by the Nazis. Those that survived are very valuable.

Currently, I write the descriptions of the *sefarim* and manuscripts featured in the Kestenbaum & Company catalogs. The catalogs describe the importance of each *sefer*,

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when it was printed, its condition and what it's worth. If a famous person wrote marginal notes in a *sefer*, it increases the *sefer's* worth. A *sefer* that once belonged to Rav Moshe Feinstein that contains his notes is worth much more [than a *sefer* without notes]. Rabbi Baruch Frankel-Teomim, known as the Baruch Taam [1760-1828], the father-in-law of Rav Chaim Sanzer, wrote notes in the margins of all his *sefarim*. Recently, Rabbi Baruch Shimon Schneerson, the son-in-law of Rabbi Dov Berish Weidenfeld, the Tchebiner Rav, published a collection of the Baruch Taam's marginal notes on various *sefarim*.

There are two categories of rare Jewish books: printed *sefarim* and manuscripts. Many people view a letter or manuscript by a Chassidic *rebbe* or the Chofetz Chaim as intrinsically holy. [Nowadays,] a handwritten letter by the Chofetz Chaim . . . is worth approximately \$20,000. Even a typed letter with only his signature may be worth a few thousand dollars.

[To command a high price,] a *sefer* has to be complete; a book missing a title page is worth substantially less. It should be in good condition (not wormy). Noncollectors often assume that older books are in worse condition than later ones. But that's not necessarily the case. After 1860, chemicals were added to paper. That's why books from later periods often have brittle pages. The paper used in earlier books—rag paper—remains fresh.

Another factor that determines the value of a *sefer* is the element of mystique. For example, a *siddur* was published in Amsterdam with the kabbalistic commentary of Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz, known as the Shelah HaKadosh. There's a *haskamah* (letter of approbation) in the *siddur* from the Bach, who writes that anyone who prays from this *siddur* will have his prayers answered. Collectors pay a lot of money for it. The Shelah probably meant that anyone who studies his commentary and adheres to the suggestions will be answered. But people will pay between \$20,000 and \$30,000 for the *siddur*.

First editions of Chassidic *sefarim* also command high prices. Chassidim like to have a connection to their *rebbe*s and their dynasties. In the town of Slavuta, Ukraine, Rabbi Moshe Shapiro was the town's rabbi and printer. He was a descendant of the famous Chassidic rabbi, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Chassidim view any *sefer* printed by the descendants of his family as imbued with inherent *kedushah*. For example, a Tehillim printed in Slavuta could go for \$5,000. They are in great demand, especially by Skverer Chassidim, who are willing to pay top dollar for them.

#### **JA: How do collectors go about finding rare *sefarim*?**

**RK:** When I was growing up, there were still *sefarim* stores on Manhattan's Lower East Side that sold many out-of-print *sefarim*. There was a time you could get [these works] at a relatively low price. In Eretz Yisrael today there's a rapidly growing industry of book dealers selling antique books and manuscripts. There are a lot of *sheimos* and old *sefarim* found in many of the old houses in Yerushalayim. I know a book dealer in Israel who finds out when a home is being demolished and makes a deal





The rarest books are known as *incunabula*—books printed before 1501, when printing was in its infancy. Jewish *incunabula* are especially rare, says Rabbi Eliezer Katzman, an expert in *Hebraica* and *Judaica*. Seen here is an example of Hebrew *incunabula* that is very valuable. Colophon of *Arba'ah Turim: Orach Chayim*, published in Mantua, Italy, by Abraham Conat, ca. 1476. Images courtesy of Yeshiva University, Mendel Gottesman Library.

with the builder to give him entry to the attic before the structure is torn down. He's discovered many ancient *sefarim* and letters this way. [He recently discovered] precious items owned by Rabbi Zundel of Salant, who lived in Jerusalem in the mid-1800s. In 1948, when the Old City was destroyed, a number of his *sefarim* survived and were preserved by members of his family. A recent auction featured letters and articles that belonged to him.

**JA: With the advent of the Internet and digitization, does actively building up one's physical library really make sense?**

**RK:** In the past, if someone needed certain *sefarim*, he had to go to four or five different libraries. Some were found only at Oxford University or the British Museum in England or at the National Library of Israel at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In America, some of the researchers use the library at Yeshiva University and the Jewish divisions at The New York Public Library and at Harvard University. Harvard has one of the largest collections of Hebrew books—about 60,000 to 70,000 works. The Library of Congress also has a large collection. Nowadays, you can go to a site called [Hebrewbooks.org](http://Hebrewbooks.org), which has about 50,000 digitized *sefarim*. One can also purchase CDs containing thousands of *sefarim*.

However, there is a tremendous advantage to having access to a physical *sefer*. Not everything is on the Internet, and some people enjoy holding a 300-year-old *sefer* in their hands; it enables them to feel a greater connection to the author and the time period.

**JA: What do you think of those who collect *sefarim* primarily as a hobby, but not for personal study?**

**RK:** They say of collectors in general that it's the excitement of the hunt [that drives them].

One of the foremost collectors of rare Jewish books is Jack Lunzer, a retired industrial diamond merchant in London, who has one of the most valuable collections in the world—some 13,000 Hebrew works. In 2009, Sotheby's exhibited a portion of his massive library, which included the most prized work of his collection, the first complete printed Shas, known as the Bomberg Shas. It previously belonged to King Henry VIII. As is well known, the king didn't have any male heirs and wanted to annul his marriage so that he could remarry and attempt to have a son. [In order to legitimize his divorce,] an advisor informed him that he may find a solution in the Talmud. He ordered a copy of the first Shas, printed in the early 1500s. He received a deluxe edition, bound especially for the king. Eventually, he gave it to the Church of England. Mr. Lunzer wanted to own this Shas and was initially unsuccessful in convincing the church to sell it. He bought the original charter of Westminster Abbey and persuaded the church to sell him the Talmud in exchange for the charter.

**JA: Do you have any favorite *sefarim*?**

**RK:** One of my favorites is the *mussar sefer Marpe Lashon* (Healing of the Tongue) by Rabbi Raphael HaKohen, rabbi of Hamburg, Germany. In his youth, Rabbi Chaim Volozhin was one of his disciples. He is famous for his responsa and *chiddushim* on the Talmudic tractates of *Kodshim*. The *sefer*, printed in 1790 in Altona, Germany, covers topics such as *teshuvah*, humility, *tzedakah*, Yom HaDin and various other topics. Although I already owned subsequent editions, as the *sefer* had been republished in Vilna and after that, in America, I decided to buy the original for two hundred dollars. Later, when comparing the editions, I observed that the Vilna edition didn't have the lengthy introduction found in the original, as well as *divrei Torah* from the author's son and son-in-law. After further comparison, I noticed that the chapters on *tzedakah* and humility, which were around twenty pages in the original, were only two pages long in the reprinted versions.

This *sefer* was one of Rabbi Aharon Kotler's favorite *sefarim*; he quoted from it many times in his lectures. He also had difficulty trying to make sense of what the author was saying due to these incomplete chapters. I approached Rabbi Binyamin Zeilberger, *rosh yeshivah* of Bais HaTalmud in Brooklyn at the time, who had reprinted the *sefer* from the Vilna edition. I showed him the original edition and told him about the missing fifty pages. In 1987, he printed the full version of the *sefer* from my copy, thanking me in the introduction for giving him the original text. This shows the importance of



obtaining original editions and comparing them to subsequent editions.

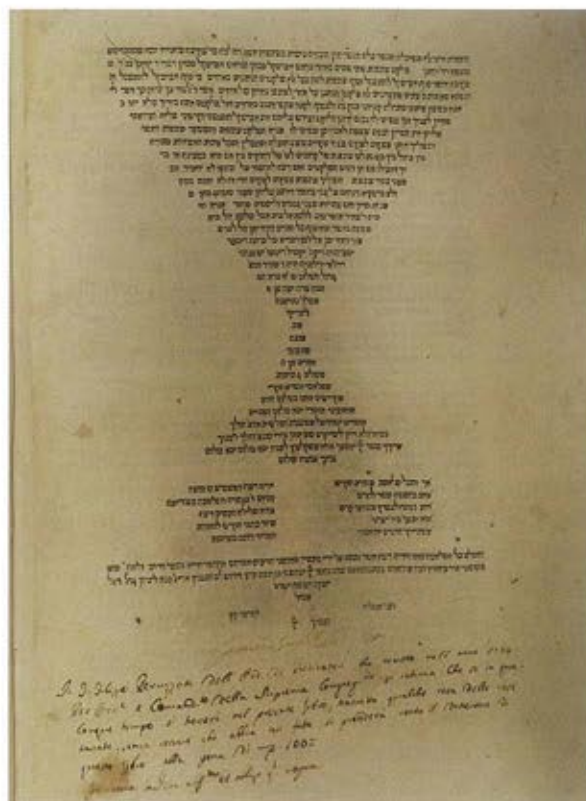
**JA: Are there many collectors such as yourself out there?**

**RK:** There used to be a *chevrah* of collectors that included both rabbis and *ba'alei batim* who possessed large private libraries. Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld, *zt"l*, owned a large library. I assessed it after he passed away. There's a story told that he and Rabbi Berel Perlow, an avid collector of newly published *sefarim*, saw each other at Biegeleisen JS Books, a popular *sefarim* store in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn. Rabbi Freifeld put his arm around Rabbi Perlow and quipped, "Reb Berel, we're like two drunks in a bar."

They say the Gerrer Rebbe, known as the Imrei Emes, also had the bug; he had one of the world's largest libraries. Much of his collection disappeared during the Holocaust. He was once in Krakow in an old *sefarim* shop and climbed up a ladder to the top shelf, hunting for rare *sefarim*. He came down covered in dust. The owner of the store asked him, "Rebbe! *Iz dos nisht ah yetzer hara ozozi vi alla yetzer haras?*" (Is this not a *yetzer hara* like all the other *yetzer haras*?) He responded, "You're right, but it's a kosher *yetzer hara*."

**JA: Were you ever subject to significant danger while acquiring *sefarim*?**

**RK:** I personally wasn't, but I know people who were. My father-in-law, Rabbi Chaim Uri Lipschitz, former editor of the *Jewish Press*, was friends with Rabbi Harry Bronstein, who founded the Al Tidom Association, established to help Russian Jewry struggling behind the Iron Curtain. As an experienced *mohel*, he traveled to Russia many times to perform *brissim* and to train *mohels* there. During these trips, various people came to him, asking him to smuggle their manuscripts out of Russia. One of these requests came from Rabbi Yitzchok Isaac ben Dov Ber Krasilschikov, also known as the Gaon of Poltava. He gave Rabbi Bronstein his manuscript on Rambam while he lay in the hospital on his deathbed. He also made him promise to publish his monumental twenty-volume commentary on the *Yerushalmi* he had worked on. [An extraordinary *talmid chacham*, Rabbi Krasilschikov authored a massive commentary on the *Yerushalmi* in Moscow between the years 1952 and 1965. This was, of course, illegal in Communist Russia.] Because of the illegal *brissim*, Rabbi Bronstein was arrested and tortured by the KGB. He subsequently suffered a heart attack. He miraculously survived and returned to America. He worked hard for many years to obtain the manuscript on the *Yerushalmi*. [In 1980, the first volume of Rabbi Krasilschikov's commentary on Tractate *Berachot* was finally published. The printing of Rabbi Krasilschikov's colossal commentary on the



Colophon of *Arba'ah Turim: Yoreh De'ah*, published in Mantua, Italy, by Abraham Conat and completed in Ferrara by Avraham ben Hayim, ca. 1477. The handwritten portion on the bottom of the page was written by a censor.

*Yerushalmi* is an ongoing effort, currently overseen by Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky.]

**JA: What is the future of the *sefarim* industry?**

**RK:** It continues to grow. There were more *sefarim* printed in the last few years than in any prior period. Moshe Biegeleisen of Biegeleisen JS Books stated recently that in just three weeks he got eighty new *sefarim*. It's much easier to publish books with computers. One can do a lot by himself at home.

**JA: How do current *sefarim* reflect contemporary Orthodox life?**

**RK:** There are many more *sefarim* published in English today than in previous generations, obviously with the many [Anglo] consumers in mind. In Eretz Yisrael numerous scholarly *sefarim* are constantly being published, as well as the more popular *sefarim* containing stories and *parashah*-related insights that families could share at the Shabbos table. The most popular books of this genre are written by Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein, Rav Elyashiv's son-in-law. They are best sellers both in Israel and in America. I'm sure that, despite all of the new technologies, *frum* Jews will continue to value and utilize the actual printed word, especially on Shabbos and *yom tov*. A *sefer* is a more personal, hands-on connection to previous, current and future generations of Torah scholars. ■