The period between the 16th century and 1880 saw approximately 70 known editions of the Babylonian Talmud, the most important, fundamental text within the Jewish scholarly-religious canon. Each publisher amended or appended something or other, added or omitted this or that commentator. The common denominator for all editions was the commentary of 11th century French-Jewish scholar Rashi, traditionally printed around the Talmudic text together with the Tosafists – a selection of annotations by Rashi’s students.

In 1880, the Vilnius-based publishing house of the Ream brothers and widow began printing a new edition of the Babylonian Talmud. The Ream family had already been involved in the publication of two previous editions of this fundamental Jewish text. This time, however, they had made it their mission to publish an edition that would far surpass its predecessors.

After assessing the profitability of such a venture, the family turned to collecting the materials. Scholars were sent from Vilnius to copy manuscripts from all over Europe: Ancona and the Vatican Library in Italy, Oxford and the British Museum in England, among other locations. The printer and publisher designed a unique layout – some of the commentators were featured in the margins of the Talmudic text, while others opened or closed each and every tractate. Almost immediately upon publication, this version of the Talmud achieved canonical status. Nearly every edition of the Talmud to be published in Europe after 1886 made use of the Ream layout. In fact, for nearly a hundred years to come there was scarcely an edition of the Babylonian Talmud to see print in Europe or America that was not printed according to the Vilnius design. Within European and Jewish scholarly circles, the term “Shas Vilna” became synonymous with “Babylonian Talmud.”

That being said, until well into the 20th century decidedly different versions of this texts were to be found in the Muslim world. Moreover, editions from the last two decades saw a general deviation from the Shas Vilna layout. The question of these editions’ acceptance within traditional scholarly circles stands at the heart of my research – particularly the relationship between Jews in Europe and in Muslim countries with respect to religious scholarship. The canonical status of Shas Vilna had a far-reaching impact over Jewish erudition. Indeed, the commentators included in that edition are still studied today, while those omitted from it continue to be largely overlooked.

The Babylonian Talmud – the most fundamental text of the Jewish religious canon – was not the only text to be remodeled by the Reams. The Ream brothers and widow made a significant contribution to the composition of “the Jewish bookshelf” in the modern era: whether with regard to what got published, or in terms of how different books were printed. The sheer scale and eminence of this printer and publisher rendered it a powerful cultural agent within the Jewish world, particularly within erudite-orthodox circles, which form the specific focus of my research. There was a strong reciprocal relationship between orthodox scholars and the Ream publishing house. The publisher dispensed knowledge, a prized commodity among Jewish religious scholars, whose expenditure in turn supported the Ream enterprise. Financial considerations determined what would get published, while what came under the printing press was then distributed and purchased by consumers of knowledge.

An example of this reciprocity can be found in one of the publisher’s later endeavors: unlike the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud had not been widely prevalent throughout the ages. It had barely been studied in medieval batei midrash (Jewish study halls) and attracted little commentary compared to the Babylonian Talmud. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Ream family sought to recreate the resounding success of the “Shas Vilna” and published an edition of the Jerusalem Talmud in its image. The mere act of publishing this edition made waves among scholars of the Jerusalem Talmud, prompting other publishers to come out with new editions of their own. I shall have to consider whether the Ream edition of the Jerusalem Talmud spurred the rising scholarly attention toward it, or whether it was rather this renewed interest that urged the Ream publishing house to print it in the first place. Either way, both producers and consumers of the Jewish canon fed into each other in a reciprocal process.

In light of the above, I wish to examine the publisher’s activity from two different angles: the canonical design of the Shas Vilna, and the assemblage of the Jewish book corpus. The term “canonical” refers to two separate things in this context. The first is the Shas’s layout, which gained canonical status and fast became the exclusive configuration for printing the Talmud after market forces led to its widescale reproduction. The second is the Jewish canon, indicating the corpus of Jewish scholarly texts. This was largely determined by the Ream family as the largest European publisher at the time, whose decisions dictated what would be included in the Jewish book inventory.

I will thus pursue the following questions: what role did the Ream publishing house play with regard to bringing the Jewish canon to print? Which commentators and writers were featured in printed editions of Jewish canonical texts, thus achieving canonical status themselves, and which ones were left out? Who was behind these decisions –the layout of the canonical Shas Vilna on the one hand, and the makeup of the contemporary Jewish corpus on the other? Through these questions, I wish to examine the roles played by the different decision makers involved: the owners of the publishing house, the scholars who helped collect the manuscripts, and others.

These questions, pertaining to the publisher itself, form but one layer of the subject at hand. Beyond it, I wish to look into the consumers of the Jewish canon among the erudite-orthodox population.

One of the most important social and cultural phenomena to appear in this period is “daf yomi” (daily page), the brainchild of Rabbi Meir Shapiro from August 1923. Daf yomi denotes the study of a single page of the Babylonian Talmud every day, in consecutive order, starting with the first tractate, berachot (“blessings”), and continuing cyclically. Initially, Rabbi Shapiro targeted members of Agudat Israel, a Jewish-orthodox political party founded around that time. His vision was that group learning would become a unifying factor among the movement’s members across different countries, founding an “imagined community” of sorts among scholars. The practice, however, gained an enthusiastic following well beyond party circles, with thousands of groups forming to study in this manner over the years. Yet the vision of one big scholarly community across the entire Jewish world required a standardized edition. Moreover, the daf yomi project was not only meant for yeshiva students but for Jews everywhere. This rendered it all the more important to have a canonical edition amassing all the commentators in one place for the benefit of the scholar. We have here, therefore, a unique case study in Jewish history that goes back to the 16th century and reached its peak in the late 19th, and whose further aspects, persisting within Jewish culture to this day, require the help of sociological tools. I plan to dedicate a considerable part of my research in the coming years to the diverse impact of Shas Vilna in particular, as well as the general Jewish corpus forged by the Ream publishing house and the learning culture it spurred over the past 150 years.

The most pressing question, summing up the scope of my research in its entirety, is: what was the Reams’ secret? How did they manage to crack the code and become such an important milestone of Jewish erudition, for such a long time? There had already been several printers and publishers bringing Jewish canonical texts to print. And yet something about this particular publisher made it stand out. The Jewish canon as prescribed and printed by them was qualitatively different to what it had been until then, in both form and content. I will pursue this question in my research by juxtaposing the knowledge I will attain on the Ream publishing house with existing knowledge on Jewish publishers from previous research. In this manner, I hope to trace the singularity of this particular institution.