**The Cultural Influence of the Romm Publishing House on Orthodox Society in the 20th Century**

When we last met, I showed you the crowning glory of the Romm Press’ canonical handiwork: a page from the Vilna Shas. I also showed how their very creation of a fixed page format continues to influence the way Gemara is studied in Jewish society to this day. On this occasion, I would like to broaden the scope of my discussion. Furthermore, I would like to more precisely formulate some of the questions which I wish to raise as part of my participation in this research group.

The Jewish canon would seem to be well defined: it includes the Bible, the Siddur, the Mishna, the Talmud, Halakhic works, and Midrashim. When I refer to a process of canonization taking place at the Romm Printing House, I am referring to two types of activity: the first is the definition of the Jewish canon. Take for example the case of the *Talmud Yerushalmi*. For generations, Jews did not learn the *Talmud Yerushalmi* in their study halls. True, it was considered, without a doubt, a sacred text. But it was, nevertheless, not part of the accepted Jewish canon. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Romm printers decided to publish a unique edition of the *Talmud Yerushalmi*. As in the case of the Talmud Bavli, the first edition of the Yerushalmi had been prepared by the printing house of Daniel Bomberg; in both cases, *Yerushalmi* and *Bavli*, the Romm printers followed in Bomberg’s footsteps. The decision to print a modern edition of the *Talmud Yerushalmi* greatly influenced its return to Jewish consciousness – that is, its return to the canon, and its being studied, once again, within a traditional study framework. To be clear: the *Yerushalmi* could still not compete with the *Bavli*; the *Bavli* was still studied much more. Nevertheless, the publication of the *Yerushalmi* by the Romm press represented a notable shift; it was no longer entirely disregarded as it had been in earlier medieval periods.

The second process related to canonization is connected to the act of printing itself. The Romm printers developed a unique page format and special printing methods for the publication of certain, fundamental Jewish books. Chief among these is the page format of the *Talmud Bavli*, but there are other examples as well. Some were accepted and attained canonical status. Others were subsequently rendered in new, alternative formats by other publishers is subsequent years.

In light of the above, the first question I wish to address in my research is – what exactly did the Romm printers do? What was printed in their print house? Which commentaries did they choose to include in their editions of Jewish canonical texts – thus affording them canonical status? And which commentaries did they reject? Who made these decisions? Whose work shaped the face of the Jewish canon? Here as well, I’ll give an example: We are familiar with the figure “Shafan Ha-Sofer,” the most influential and important member of the printing team at the Romm press. Shafan ha-Sofer, in consultation with Devorah Romm, decided which commentators to print on each folio of Talmud, which to relegate to the back of the volume, and which to omit all together. In doing so, he essentially determined for generations to come how Gemara would be studied – until this day, most students of Gemara study the texts they find in front of them on the printed page. Shafan ha-Sofer’s activity and decisions are therefore a key to understanding the cultural changes that overtook the Jewish learning community and which shaped the character of its study. These trends were dramatically influenced by the Romm publishing house – even more than a hundred years after Shafan’s death or the closing of the printing house.

The second question, which is largely a corollary of the first, is how did the activities of the Romm printers differ from those of their predecessors? They were certainly not the first to print editions of Jewish canonical works. The assumption that guides all our research is that there was something special about this printing house. The way they published the Jewish canon was different from the way it had been printed until that point – be it in terms of content or form. I wish to address this question by comparing my findings in regard to the first question with existing information about other Jewish publishing houses discussed in previous studies. Thus, I hope to assess the uniqueness of the Romm press.

The third question pertains to duration: which works and formats designated as part of the canon by the Romm publishing house remained canonical even after the printing house in Vilna was closed. We have already mentioned, today as well as in our previous meeting in Leipzig, the establishment of a fixed printed format for the Vilna Shas. Obviously, one must address this issue already at the beginning of any research, and write a well-argued study pertaining to it. But the Vilna Shas is not the only example. Other books were added to the basic Jewish canon by virtue of their being printed by the Romm Publishing House. I have already mentioned the *Yerushalmi* as an example. Other printed works had their formats “sanctified” due to their being printed by the Romm press.

I wish to analyze what long-term impact the shaping of the canon had upon Orthodox study culture, as well as the definition of the Jewish canon over the last 150 years.

The last question – the sum of all the previous ones and perhaps the hardest to answer – What was the secret of the Romm Publishing House’s success? We have already said that the Romm press shaped and essentially defined the modern Jewish canon – both by choosing which materials to print, as well as designing and establishing their formats. This being the case, the biggest question, one that can only be answered after all the others have been given sufficient scholarly attention is: how did the Romm printers, Devorah Romm and Shafan Ha-Sofer, crack the code of “canon-shaping?”

I will reiterate what I said at Leipzig. What is needed is careful archival research and tracking down printed editions and archival materials that will affirm the assumption we share – and to which I personally subscribe to – that the Romm publishing house was a new phenomenon and a turning point in Jewish culture in the modern period.