The Vilna Shas: On the Most Important Talmud Edition in the History of Hebrew Printing

One of the most important books printed by the Widow and Brothers Romm press, the famed Jewish publishing house located in Vilnius, was a nineteenth century edition of the Babylonian Talmud. This version of the text was based on a close examination of the manuscripts and includes numerous traditional commentaries. The edition won an almost canonical place in the Jewish publishing world in Europe as well as America. Many other publishers began to print the Talmud in the format adopted by the Romms, which became known, even outside of Vilnius, as the “Vilna Shas.”

In my lecture, I want to trace the process of the creation of the Vilna Shas, as it is documented in letters written by one of the chief editors of the project, Shmuel Shraga Feigensohn, known by his initials as “Shafan the author [*hasofer*].” Prominent members of the Jewish Enlightenment movement as well as leading rabbis were among the many who participated in the Vilna Shas project. The process of gathering sources and editing the text reflect clearly the contacts between tradition and renewal that were forged in the Romm publishing house in particular, and in Vilnius overall. My claim is that there is a close connection between the location of the press in Vilnius, with its particular urban character, and the final product of the Vilna Shas.

Thus, I will seek to present the different layers of the Vilna Shas and how the different knowledge layers it contains were created. In this way, I hope to begin to answer one of the most pressing open questions in the field: What unique quality of the Vilna Shas made it the central, almost canonical format for printing the Talmud in the dozens of years following the appearance of the first edition, published in the 1880s?