Imagining the Jewish Library: the SHEM HAGDOLIM of Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai

In his book *Ad Heinah*, Shai Agnon describes the work of the bibliographer Dr. Mittel, a resident of Leipzig. In the course of his description he notes that there are two kinds of bibliographers:

Here I'll say a word about the profession of bibliography. There are bibliographers who systematically compile lists of books, authors, and dates and places of publication, and there are those who read for their pleasure, jot down what interests them, and eventually publish their notes.

In this lecture I would like to discuss one of the first bibliographers of the Jewish world – R. Haim Yosef David Azulai, the Hida – and address how he saw himself and the world of books to which he dedicated so much of his life.

The Hida was born in Jerusalem in 1724 to a family with a distinguished Italian and Ashkenazi pedigree. In his youth he learned in the yeshivot of Jerusalem, and at a young age was already engaged in the study of halakhah, homiletics, and esoterica. The Hida was sent on two missions as an ambassador of the rabbinic leaders of Hevron, in 1753 and 1773. In the course of these missions he visited several communities in central and western Europe and, at the end of the second journey, settled in Livorno, Italy, where he died in 1806.

The Hida was a complex figure, a rabbinic sage who represented a new type of Jewish scholar – though immersed in and obligated to the world of traditional halakhah, his diverse writings reveal an openness to an array of pursuits far wider than one might expect given his background.

One of the Hida’s compositions that most strikingly expresses the breadth of his horizons, his departure from parochial norms, his bibliographic knowledge, and his historical sensibility is the book *Shem haGdolim*, which crosses cultural boundaries and highlights the Hida’s special relationship with books.

*Shem haGdolim* is counted among the first Jewish bibliographical works and was truly unprecedented in Jewish literature at the time of its writing. The Hida’s understanding of the need to organize the Jewish literary field, combined with his systematic collection of written works, testifies to a new level of scholarship the likes of which had never been seen in the Jewish world. The result was a lexicographical creation of more than 3,000 entries of sages and their compositions. The work was published serially, in five sections over twenty-seven years, brought to press in Livorno by the Hida himself.

The system of classification used in *Shem haGdolim* allows us to draw a number of conclusions about the Hida’s areas of interest, his goals, and his self-understanding in composing such a catalogue of the Jewish library. Three-hundred and ninety-six out of one-thousand, four-hundred and twenty-four book entries were compositions that in the Hida’s time were not available to the public – mostly manuscripts, as well as a few books that were either no longer extant or extremely rare – yet the Hida thought it important that his readers know of them. This intention is alluded to on the title page of the second volume of *Shem haGdolim*, where it is written, “I have been blessed with hundreds of writings of the righteous…whatever can be found in print or the manuscripts of the early sages.”

The latter words, printed in bold in the original edition, underscore the importance the Hida attributed to the task of revealing the existence of works that had never been published and so had been effectively censored out. These features testify to the unique reach of *Shem haGdolim* and the unique role of the Hida in establishing a new Jewish library, one not bound by any cultural space nor defined by any particular canon.

The Hida’s methods for gathering materials for his bio-bibliographic work are also illustrative, revealing his self-understanding as a bibliographer. Several entries in *Shem haGdolim* show that, as the Hida traveled around Europe and the Levant, he visited libraries, private collections, *genizot* and *batei midrash*, conducting research surveys and collecting material. For example, under the entry “R. Eliezer of Metz,” the Hida wrote:

It is already known that the printed version of *Sefer Yere’im* is an abridgment, and I merited to see the complete *Sefer Yere’im* in manuscript, among the Jewish manuscripts in the grand library of the king of France in Paris (where there are more than fifty-five thousand files of manuscripts from all religions and tongues, several rooms full of them, and at their start a large room of Jewish manuscripts, where there are more than two-thousand of our manuscripts). There I saw the complete *Sefer Yere’im*, which is large, containing four-hundred and sixty-four entries. It is written there that he followed the order of *Hilkhot Gedolot* by Rav Yehudai Gaon, and sometimes included several commandments within a single entry, while the printed version seems to have less than a third of this book.

Here we have testimony – one example out of many – to the Hida’s methods of research and collection. While staying in Paris in 1777, he paid a visit to the royal library, accompanied by a non-Jewish French friend, a visit he used to collect materials and bibliographic and biographical information. After seeing R. Eliezer of Metz’s manuscript, the Hida was able to conclude that the author was influenced by the work of R. Yehudai Gaon and compare the published edition to the manuscript. The Hida testified to a number of cases in which he was able to draw such conclusions about an author or his work from seeing the original version.

The Hida arranged similar visits to the libraries of the duke of Modena in Florence and other places he visited in the course of his missions for the community of Hevron. *Shem haGdolim* was the result of this ceaseless search for materials – a new form of scholarship that routinely produced new bio-bibliographical data. We are speaking of a new level of erudition, one that did not necessarily stem from a preexisting bibliographic intention but rather was inherent to the nature of the learner as part of a consciousness of an established library, which did not necessarily depend on being in a physical library. The Hida’s bibliographical awareness prepared him for the possibility that he would come across various books, and in this understanding he presented a new cultural consciousness: the world is a library, of which every locale can be a branch.[[1]](#footnote--1)

However, such a project requires a critical eye, and *Shem haGdolim* provides us with the opportunity to address the Hida’s approach to the raw material of his work. The Hida understood that a book is the product of an individual person and as such is likely to contain mistakes, and so must be approached critically. The Hida was a careful researcher, always checking the reliability of his sources and striving to locate and personally review their first editions. An example of the Hida’s critical approach to his sources can be found in his entry on “The Ra’avad” (R. Avraham ibn Daud, a student of the Rif), where a discussion of chronology shows his critical inclination:

It is written in many places in *Sefer Shalshelet haKabbala*h that it was this Ra’avad who praised Maimonides in his letters, and not the Ra’avad who wrote the gloss. And he brought proof from *Sefer haKabbalah* that it was the year 4921, and he did not mention Rashi because Rashi lived in the time of Maimonides, and he brought many proofs from Rashi’s commentary on Chronicles. **And truly, one should not waste time trying to comprehend this, for whatever he heard from anyone or found written he would write down, and his words are not reliable, and “a mixed multitude went up with them.”** I was even more astounded at how the esteemed author of *Seder haDorot*, who was very great in wisdom, could accept *Shalshelet haKabbalah* and repeatedly copy his words, which are incorrect […] Rashi certainly lived before Maimonides, and there is no proof in the fact that the Ra’avad did not mention Rashi, for the latter had died many years earlier, and due to the physical distance between them he mentioned only Rabbeinu Tam, who was his contemporary and whose fame was great. And this Ra’avad did not mention Maimonides. What’s more, the commentary on Chronicles is not Rashi’s. So there is in fact nothing to his proofs and his imaginings.

Here we have a methodological critique, delivered in the course of addressing a question of chronology. The Hida criticizes the dating of Rashi’s life given in *Sefer Shalshelet haKabbalah* by Rabbi Gedaliah ibn Yehaya (who lived in the 16th century) and even expressed amazement at the carelessness evidenced by Yehiel ben Shlomo Heilprin, the rabbi of Minsk, in his 18th century book *Seder haDorot*.

In the Hida’s opinion, there is no value in this historiographic material, which is not only useless but even dangerous in its uncritical approach. The Hida’s dedication to approaching all sources critically sets his bio-bibliographical book apart as a pioneering example of modern scholarship.

The Hida’s work in mapping the Jewish library reveals an awareness of its own uniqueness and the methodology required for it. It is evident that the Hida’s nature as a systematic collector, who routinely produced bio-bibliographical data, and not necessarily out of a preexisting bibliographic intent, did not cancel out his “professionalism” in the field of bibliographic literature.

I opened my lecture with Agnon’s description of two types of bibliographers. To which type would the Hida belong? To the one for whom bibliography is a profession, or perhaps the one who comes to such work through his studies? It may be that, like the literary figure Dr. Mittel, the Hida too could have testified of himself, “I have been both kinds.”

1. This is in contrast to the widely-used *Siftei Yeshanim*, which was based almost entirely on book collections, in particular the libraries of Amsterdam. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)