

The Printing of the Babylonian Talmud in the Two Publishing Houses (1834-1836)

In the world of traditional Jewish scholarship the Babylonian Talmud is the foundational, and single most important, Jewish composition. However, consisting of a large number of volumes, its printing required considerable, and rather complex, financial and technological means. Moreover, the many commentaries on the Talmud written over the course of time, and incorporated by the printers into their Talmud editions, rendered that printing progressively more and more complex and expensive. It is important to note that more than a third of the titles printed over the years by the Shapira family were tractates of the Talmud, showing just how significant the printing of the Talmud was for the continuing existence of the printery. Already in the early years of their activity, the Shapira family published a printing of the Talmud (beginning in 1800). This printing was financially supported by the *Alter Rebbe* of Chabad, Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who also took the majority of the profits, respectively—only one sixth went to the Shapira family.

Nonetheless, once all the copies of the first print run had been sold, the *Admor* granted Moses Shapira the printing rights. Consequently, between 1808 and 1813 the Shapira family printing press published a further edition of the Talmud, more ornate than the former. This new edition was printed twice in close succession (first printing 1808–1813; second printing 1816–1822).

As Shapira's press prepared for the printing of the Talmud, they were careful to garner *haskamot*¹ from different rabbis, through which they protected their rights. The intention of the *haskama* was to prevent other Jewish printers from producing any further publications of the Talmud for twenty-five years, thus serving as a kind of 'copyright' within the traditional Jewish world, anchored in the *halakha*. In this particular case, the *haskama* was supported by the most important *tsaddiqim* of the period—chief among whom was Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad Hasidism.

¹ I leave this untranslated, as a *terminus technicus*, though 'endorsements' or 'approbations' could be used.