

The printing of the Babylonian Talmud in two printing houses (1834-1836)

The Babylonian Talmud is the most important and fundamental Jewish work in the world of traditional Jewish studies.¹ The Talmud is composed of a large number of volumes and its printing required numerous and complex economic and technological resources. Over the years many commentaries on the Talmud were written and were added to the editions of the Talmud by the printers. As a result, the printing of the Talmud became more and more expensive and complicated. It is important to note that more than a third of the titles printed over the years by the Shapira family were Tractates from the Talmud, demonstrating how important the printing of the Talmud was for the existence of the printing house.² In the first years of the printing house's activity, the Shapira family published an edition of the Talmud (starting in 1800). This edition was supported financially by the Rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman ben Baruch of Liadi. Accordingly, the profits went mainly to the Rebbe and only a sixth was transferred to the Shapira family³.

After selling all the copies of the first printing, Moshe Shapira received the printing rights⁴ from the Rebbe, and between 1808 and 1813, the Shapira family's printing house published another, more lavish printing of the Talmud, in two consecutive editions (the first edition was printed in 1808-1813, the second in 1816-1822.)

Before the Shapira printing house began printing the Talmud, they made sure to collect letters of approval from various rabbis through which they protected their copyright. These letters of approval in effect banned other Jewish printers from printing further editions of the Talmud for a period of twenty-five years. This was a form of copyright used in the traditional world that was anchored in Jewish law, and in this case based on the letters of approval (“haskamot”) of the greatest saintly rabbis of the Hassidic courts of the time, headed by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad⁵.

¹ Dolgopolski Sergey, *What is Talmud? – the art of disagreement*, Fordham 2009.

Jay M. Harris, *Talmud Study*, The Yivo Encyclopedia, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Talmud_Study

² See: the Vinograd & Rosenfeld computerized edition of the *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book*. [VR – would need to check if this is the right source]

³ Shneur Zalman of Liadia, *“Igrot Kodesh”*, Brooklyn: 2012. pp. 249-252.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-357

⁵ A long discussion on the “haskamot” for the Talmud in the first editions of the Slavita press – see in Marvin Heller above, note 6.