


# Parchments Burning, Letters Soaring, and Books Lost and Found: S.Y. Agnon's Library Fire 100 Years Later

 [seforimblog.com/2024/09/parchments-burning-letters-soaring-and-books-lost-and-found-s-y-agnons-library-fire-100-years-later](https://seforimblog.com/2024/09/parchments-burning-letters-soaring-and-books-lost-and-found-s-y-agnons-library-fire-100-years-later)

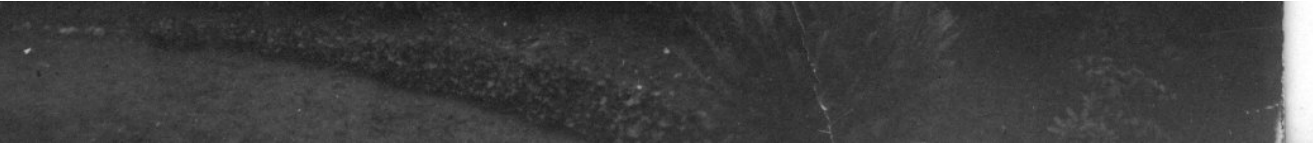
## Parchments Burning, Letters Soaring, and Books Lost and Found: S.Y. Agnon's Library Fire 100 Years Later

*Jeffrey Saks*

“All day I see the parchment burning, but its letters are soaring to heaven—and even at night my heart will not rest,” wrote S.Y. Agnon a century ago after the burning of his home in Bad-Homburg, Germany [*S.Y. Agnon-S.Z. Schocken* (Schocken, 2003), Letter #163]. The chilling image is an allusion to the martyr Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon, burned by the Romans while wrapped in a Torah scroll (*Avodah Zarah* 18a), and points to Agnon's perception of the magnitude of the personal tragedy that had befallen him.

The fire broke out on the night of the 4th of Sivan 5684, between the 4th and 5th of June 1924 (as shown in my [recent article](#) in *Haaretz*, May 31, 2024). Aside from the manuscripts of two nearly-completed books, he lost “four thousand Hebrew volumes, most of which had come down to me from my forebears and some of which I had bought with money set aside for my daily bread,” Shmuel Yosef Agnon reported 42 years later in his famous [Nobel Prize banquet speech](#). The importance of the book as object and writing as pseudo-magical act are central symbols in Agnon's work. It is therefore not surprising that one of the burning meta-literary questions he raises is how writing, and books as memory agents, can save the past from oblivion. In his *A City in Its Fullness (Ir u-Meloah)*, Agnon recreates his beloved Galician hometown of Buczacz, and the Jewish lives and culture that were lost there are memorialized in its pages. But what of the stories that were forgotten, lost, burned, or misplaced? How do the parchments that are burned obtain metaphysical immortality? These are themes he explored in works such as “The Book That Was Lost,” “Forevermore,” “The Sign,” and the yet untranslated “*Lefi ha-Tza'ar ha-Sakhar*,” among others.





Agnon's house in Bad-Homburg, Germany, on June 5, 1924, the morning after the fire (courtesy: Agnon House).

After the fire, Agnon, his wife Esther, and their two small children were left almost destitute, with only the clothes on their backs and a few possessions saved from the blaze. What did survive was the memory of the loss, which left its mark on Agnon's writing for many years to come.

On the eve of Passover 5728 (April 12, 1968) an essay titled "Old and New" appeared in *Haaretz*, containing twelve short reminiscences written by Agnon about his childhood in Buczacz. Among other things it relates the adventures of the young bookworm S.Y. Czaczkes, as he was known at birth. For reasons not clear (perhaps due to space limitations in that issue) only a third of what Agnon wrote was published. The remaining chapters sat in his archives, and were published posthumously in the journal *Molad* (October-December 1973), 549-562; the two sections were then later united in his volume of non-fiction, *MeAtzmi el Atzmi* (Schocken, 1976), 351-378. At one point, Agnon writes about the Yiddish writers and the status of *mamaloshen* in the town:

Other books were in our humble grandmothers' possession, such as the laws of salting meat and the laws of women and *takhines* [women's prayers], all written in Yiddish and in Yiddish letters. The book *Lev Tov* and the *Simhat HaNefesh* I never saw in our parts; needless to say I never saw the book *Menekes Rivkah*, which even the greatest of bibliographers have not seen. A defective copy of *Menekes Rivkah* was among the charred remains of my books after the fire that fell upon my house, and I gave the book to my brother-in-law, Rabbi Alexander Marx z"l, and he gave it to the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. If the book escaped the fire in my house only to be consumed in the fire that befell the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York I do not know (*MeAtzmi el Atzmi*, 363-364).

Alexander Marx (1878-1953), brother of Esther (Marx) Agnon, was a graduate of the University of Berlin and the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in that city. There he was influenced by the great bibliographer Moritz Steinschneider, and was a student (and later son-in-law) of Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann. In 1903 Marx accepted an invitation to join the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary (hereafter, JTS). He served as Professor of Jewish History, and published important books and articles in the field of Jewish bibliography. But his most enduring contribution to the institution was in his capacity as the chief librarian of JTS. When Solomon Schechter offered him the position the collection contained some 5,000 volumes and only 3 manuscripts. Upon his retirement after a half-century, there were

over 165,000 volumes and 9,000 manuscripts, including some of the most important and rare ever assembled. When Marx had completed his life's work, the treasure trove he had amassed was considered among the greatest in the world.

Prof. Alexander Marx (Wikimedia Commons).

On the morning of April 18, 1966, flames broke out in the stately tower of the Seminary library at the corner of Broadway and West 122nd Street. The building was a firetrap. Its narrow staircases, inaccessible entrance, and single stairwell made it difficult for the firefighters to do their work. The library was soon a towering inferno and burned all day until the forces had gained control in the evening. Sadly, many of the books saved from the fire were ruined by water sprayed from the firefighters' hoses. Jews from all communities of Greater New York came to help dry the wet books by placing layers of paper towels between the pages. The volunteer corps included students from Yeshiva University and other Orthodox yeshivot. In normal times their feet would not have trod the flagship of the Conservative movement, but this was a "time to do the Lord's work" when Torah was burning.



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The fire in the library tower at JTS, April 18, 1966. Magazine of the New York Firefighters Association, vol. 17:2 ([www.fire-police-ems.com](http://www.fire-police-ems.com)).

Fortunately, the book *Menekes Rivkah*, which had been saved from the fire in Germany in 1924, was not among the 7,000 books that ascended to heaven in flames in 1966. The fire did not reach the archive containing the manuscripts or the collection of rare books.

What then is this rare book, *Menekes Rivkah*, which was twice saved from destruction, on two different continents?

Rivkah, daughter of Rabbi Meir Tiktiner (died in Prague on 25 Nisan 5405 [1605]), was a woman preacher, poet, and writer in Yiddish. To the best of our knowledge, she was the first Jewish woman to write an entire book. *Menekes Rivkah* was published only after her death, in the original Prague edition (1609) and later in the Krakow edition (1618). The book was probably written in the 1580s or 1590s. Only one copy of each of the original editions is extant today. The Prague edition is in the Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen-Nuremberg in Bavaria (a digital scan can be viewed at the [library's website](#)). The only extant copy of the Krakow edition was in the possession of Agnon—although it is unknown where, when, and how he obtained it. A Hebrew analysis and survey of the book was published in the 1990s by the scholar Meir Wunderin in his book *Ateret Rivkah*, with a facsimile of the original (Makhon le-Hantzahat Yahadut Galitziah, 1992), and the book also appeared in an English edition, *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women*, introduction and commentary by Frauke von Rohdon (JPS, 2009).





Grave of Rivkah bat Rav Meir Tiktin; Old Jewish Cemetery, Prague (Wikimedia Commons).

*Menekes Rivkah* belongs to the genre of moral literature and is addressed to married women, but it is likely to have been read by men as well, especially the unlearned who—along with their wives—were limited to “easier” Yiddish religious books. The sources that Tiktiner cites attest to her familiarity with Midrash, Pirkei Avot, and books of Jewish ethics. Most of *Menekes Rivkah* focuses on the behavior of the wife toward her husband, on instructions for relations with her parents and with her in-laws, and on the education of her children in piety. The author warns her readers against gossip and slander, and against superstition and witchcraft. In addition, she writes about “the wisdom of the body”: rules of health and diet and also matters concerning the laws of *niddah*.

The question is: Does this rare book, which was in Agnon’s library, possess some special quality that protected it for centuries and saved it from conflagration not once but twice? The answer seems to be: Yes. In a pleasant visit to the JTS library during a visit to New York (on May 15, 2024) I was privileged to hold it in my own hands. In the *JTS Register (Academic Year 1925-26)*, Marx reported on the arrival of *Menekes Rivkah* in the Rare Book Collection:

A few very rare and important items were added to the Judaeo-German Collection: Rebecca Tiktiner, מינקת רבקה, a Judaeo-German treatise on education, by a woman, Cracow 1619. This is an excessively rare volume, no copy of it being recorded in any library. Its rarity was already attested by Wagenseil hardly half a century after its appearance. Since 1719, when Zeltner wrote a dissertation on this book, none of the scholars who refer to it have seen it.

Alexander Marx, *JTS Register (Academic Year 1925-26)*, p. 136. Chief Librarian Alexander Marx’s report for the 1925-26 academic year in which he announces the acquisition of a rare copy of the book *Menekes Rivkah*, published in 1618, not as stated here.



In the acquisition report pertaining to this important item, Marx did not mention that he had received it from his brother-in-law, S.Y. Agnon, but did note that the book had been received and catalogued in November 1924, a date consistent with the fire in early June of that year, after which Agnon's family with the remnants of their property had taken refuge in the home of Georg Marx, father of Esther and Alexander, in Koenigsberg. We know that Alexander visited the family in Germany at that time [*Esterlein Yakirati* (Schocken, 2000), Letters #19 and #21]. But when Agnon wrote in 1968 that "I gave the book to my brother-in-law" he was not being precise. In a letter to Esther dated September 25, 1924, we read:

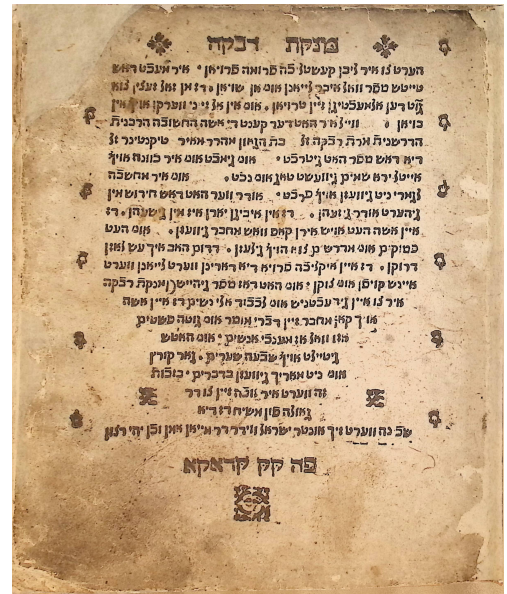
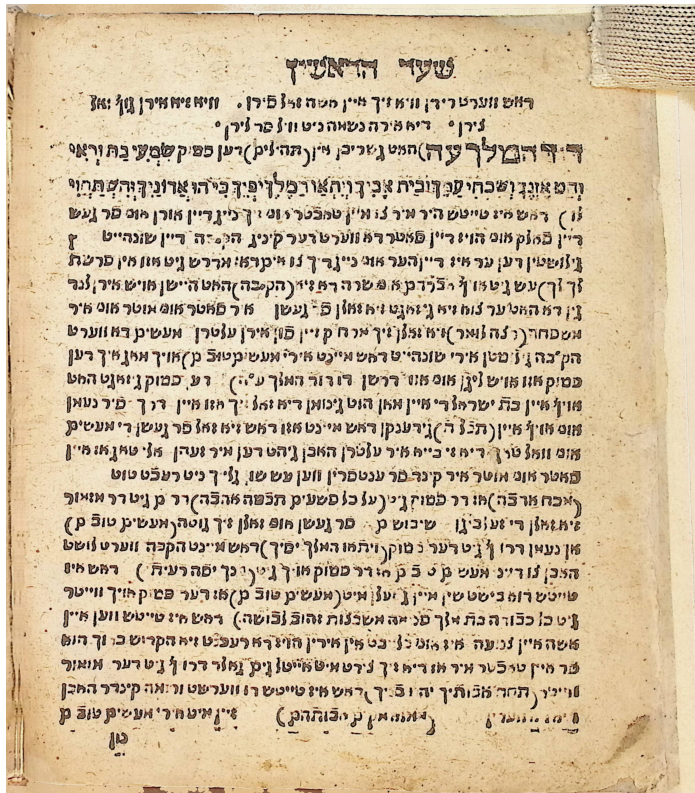
Say hello to Alexander, *shlita*. I am very sorry that I did not see him. Tell him that if he does not want the book *Menekes Rivkah* you can send it here to Mr. Schocken, because he is ready to buy it (*Esterlein Yakirati*, Letter #21, p. 39).

I presume Marx did not receive the copy of *Menekes Rivkah* as a gift but bought it from his brother-in-law with the budget at his disposal as librarian of the growing collection in New York. (Had this not been the case, the book would probably be found today on the shelves of the Schocken Institute in Jerusalem.) The omission of Agnon's name from the New York catalogue also indicates that he did not donate it (as the custom is to list the donors), along with the fact that Marx reported it in the list of "books acquired" rather than in the list of donations.

In a letter to his patron S.Z. Schocken [op. cit., #163] written a few weeks after the disaster, Agnon informed him: "Among the books saved from the fire I found several in Yiddish, and since I do not wish to hoard books that I do not need in particular for my work, I have sent them to you as a gift. Accept them from me willingly, the offering of the poor." Clearly, *Menekes Rivkah* was not included in the box of books for disposal, for Agnon knew its worth—its cultural value and its monetary value as a "*yasom*" or "orphan" (in the argot of book collectors). It seems that Agnon, who lost almost all his possessions in the fire, was forced to sell any remaining item of value. There can be no doubt that he was loath to part with such a rare Jewish volume, and, in a story published two years later, he described how he felt when the flames consumed his worldly possessions:

I was content with a crust of bread. True, I did wear new clothes, but that was because all of my old clothes had burned in the fire. When I came to the synagogue and put on my *tefillin*, my friends did not look on with disapproval, nor did they bombard me with words. On the contrary, they sympathized with one whose house had burned and who did not have a roof over his head. Pay no mind to his new clothes, his old ones all burned; even his *tefillin* burned and that's why he's wearing new ones. I folded my tallit over my head so as not to hear their comments. When I got to the prayer that tells of God opening His hand and satisfying all living beings, I raised my hands to feel my *tefillin*. I was reminded of how I used to touch my old *tefillin*, and I thought to myself that those old ones were like a charm that let me live peacefully, and the new ones were to make sure that no one would envy me. I took a breath and sighed [S.Y. Agnon, "Two Pairs," in *A Book That Was Lost* (Toby Press, 2008), 84].

The *Menekes Rivkah* almost disappeared from the world. Beyond a few isolated mentions over the centuries, it was completely ignored until Professor Chone Shmeruk published the first study of it in 1978. (A historiographical survey of *Menekes Rivkah* appears in the introduction to the English edition by von Rohdon.) Even in the years since, few have investigated the book and its author, and until now we did not know that the ember twice snatched from the fire had come to us via a long chain through the author and bibliophile S.Y. Agnon.

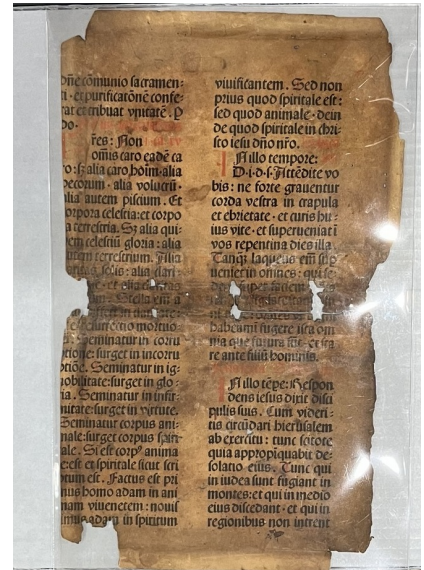
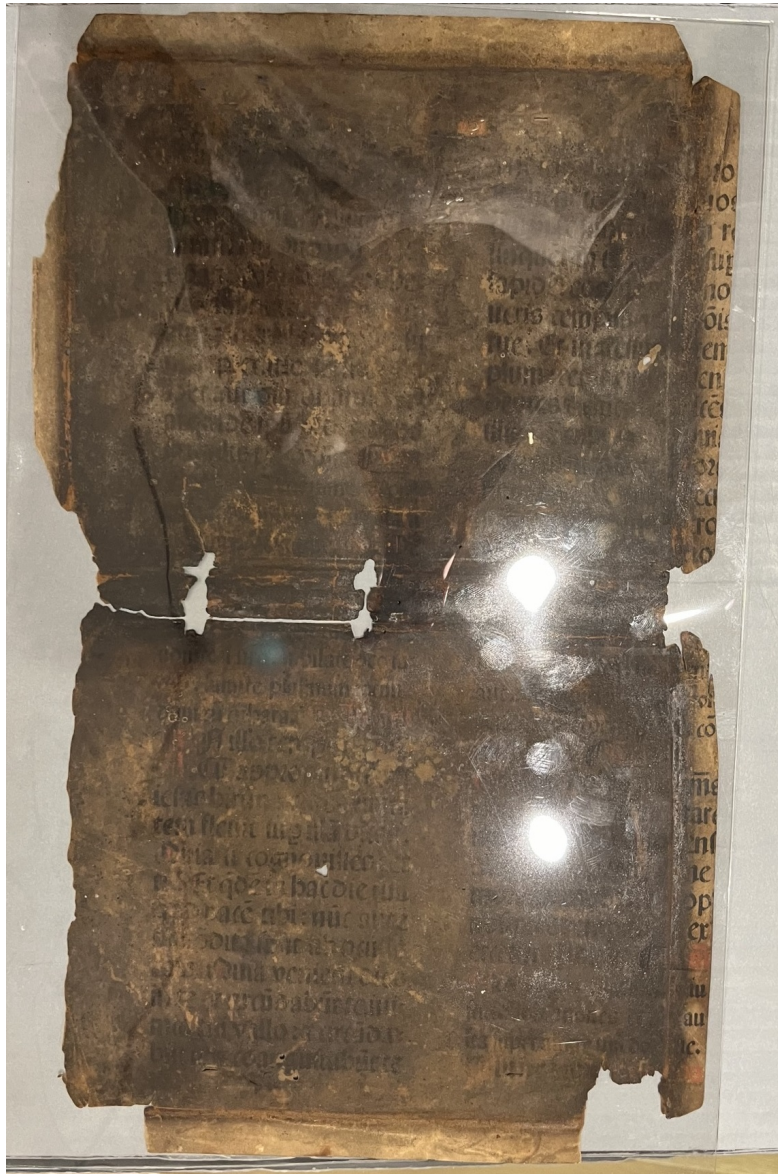


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*Menekes Rivkah* (Krakow, 1618). Courtesy: Library of Jewish Theological Seminary, SHF 1882:2 RB 5715.

The copy preserved at JTS bears the scars and scorches of its long journey. The book has been restored and rebound (the catalog entry is unclear as to when). When Agnon described it as “a defective copy” he meant that the second chapter (except for the first page) and half of the third chapter were missing (out of the seven chapters of the book). In their place are inserted nine pages of the Mishnah Avot in Yiddish (from a Krakow edition of 1617). The original cover (or at least the cover of the book in 1924) was apparently badly burned. The person who restored the book preserved the page that had been inserted as part of the binding of the original cover. As is well-known, bookbinders would use worn-out pages from other books or manuscripts to glue the endpaper to the cardboard or wooden covers of the binding. Those who recall the film “Footnote” will remember how Professor Grossman (Shkolnik’s rival) discovered a lost version of the Jerusalem Talmud hidden in the binding of a Christian book in the Vatican archives. This time, to our surprise, nestled within the cover of *Menekes Rivkah*, a Yiddish book, we found a text in Latin, black and charred on the outside and clear and legible on the inside. (The directionality can be discerned from the folding of the page.)

The page hidden within the scorched binding of *Menekes Rivkah* was taken from a manuscript (date unknown) of the poem “On the Nature of Things” (*De Rerum Natura*), Book XXII, by the Roman poet Titus Lucretius Carus (99-55 BCE). The long poem, consisting of some 7400 dactylic hexameters, presents a summary of Epicurean philosophy to its readers. In an interesting coincidence, it too was almost lost and forgotten during the Middle Ages, but the admirers of the poem and its author brought it back to the consciousness of Renaissance scholars and it has since influenced great and good (as well as evil) men: Lord Tennyson wrote a poem in its honor and the Marquis de Sade was influenced by it.



Binding paper from Titus Lucretius Carus, "On the Nature of Things" (*De Rerum Natura*), Book XXII. Left: Outer side; right: inner-facing side. Courtesy: Library of Jewish Theological Seminary, SHF 1882:2 RB 571.

In his 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning study, *The Swerve*, Harvard historian of culture and literature Stephen Greenblatt tells the tale of papal emissary and obsessive book hunter Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), who located the lone surviving copy of *De Rerum Natura* in a German monastery. Thanks to his resurfacing of the work's varied and important ideas, suggests Greenblatt, the fuse of the Renaissance was lit. For this reason Greenblatt's subtitle is *How the World Became Modern*.

Lucretius denied, among other things, the position of Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) that "fire is the source of all that is made." It is therefore fitting that a page from *De Rerum Natura* was used to wrap and protect *Menekes Rivkah* and prove that whether it is the source of all that is

made or not, fire at least is not the *end* of all things. (Although, in all honesty, the particular page found in the JTS archives is discussing the virtues of a good, healthy breakfast.) When Martin Buber informed the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig of the fire in Agnon's home and of the fate of their joint project on a collection of Hasidic tales (whose letters had soared to heaven), Rosenzweig consoled him:

When I received your letter and read about the misfortune that had struck Agnon, I naturally thought first that something had happened to him or to a member of his family, so that as I read on, I felt a great sense of relief. Certainly books and manuscripts are not simply material goods, but even though they are part of the *body*, they are still a replaceable *limb*. Frederick the Great rewrote the *History of the Seven Years' War*, which his valet had used for kindling; and Carlyle's *French Revolution* was also a second draft—the complete first draft was burned while in the possession of [John Stuart] Mill. No, death alone erases, not fire [*The Letters of Martin Buber*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr (Schocken, 1991), #306].

Today, a century after the burning of Agnon's library, we can appreciate how the works of three great writers—in Latin, Yiddish, and Hebrew—have not been forgotten and have not been erased despite the oblivion and the flames.

**POSTSCRIPT:** After this research was prepared and recently published in Hebrew I became aware that Prof. Menahem Schmelzer, at the beginning of his own long tenure as librarian at JTS, had made mention of Agnon's description of his *Menekes Rivkah* surviving the 1924 fire and his speculations about its fate in New York. Shmelzer's report appeared as "The Librarian's Column" in the bulletin *News from the JTS Library* 1:2 (Spring 1974). Shmelzer confirms that the JTS copy was the same received from Agnon via Marx, although he makes no mention of whether it was purchased, as I suggest above, or donated. He errs in Rivkah Tiktiner's date of death, saying it was "the middle of the sixteenth century"; her tombstone, likely unknown a half-century ago when Shmelzer wrote, established the date as 1605. He was also unaware of the existence of the sole Prague edition in Erlangen-Nuremberg, nor had he deciphered the nature of the Latin manuscript page in the binding, but he does draw our attention to an early seventeenth-century discussion of *Menekes Rivkah* by the Christian Hebraist, Gustav Georg Zeltner. It is appropriate to mention Menahem Schmelzer z"l (1934-2022) in the context of all we've written above: He had been two years into his post as chief librarian when the fire erupted in 1966. He spent the next two decades, until retirement, committed to restoring the remnants and rebuilding the collection to its former glory. My thanks to Mr. David Selis for bringing this to my attention and for providing a photo of the brief column by Schmelzer, which can be [viewed here](#).

**Rabbi Jeffrey Saks**, Director of ATID and its WebYeshiva.org program, is Director of Research at Agnon House in Jerusalem. Thanks to Prof. Mordecai Schwartz and Andrew Katz of the JTS Library for their assistance, and to Curt Leviant, whose questions prodded this research.

