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Dictionary of Rhymes

In Hebrew, manuscript on paper

[Italy or the Balkans (?), before 1520, likely 1500]

ii + 275 + ii (collation: binding too tight to determine), paper size 302 x 205 mm., single watermark not in Briquet (first half sheet has prancing horse with head turned facing over back with a two strand flying scarf; the second half sheet has Roman capital initials "AGC"), modern foliation in pencil, written in Sephardic script in black ink, triple column text ruled in hard point (justified 63 x 280 mm.; 70 x 280 mm.; 63 x 280 mm.), lines vary per page based on entry, text smudging on f. 140v, severely torn leaves ff. 50, 139, 142, 264, upper right corner torn on f. 71, very small fore edge cuts on ff. 17-18, first folios show slight worming, heavy soiling and staining on fore edge ff. 1-9 and 275v, soiling to upper right corners on ff. 1-24, slight to moderate browning and spotting on ff. 1-25 in text and on upper center margin on ff. 64-90, modern paper repairs on f. 1, modern notations in pencil in cursive Hebrew script on rear pastedown, unidentified small inks stamps on ff. 6r and 186v. Bound in nineteenth-century half polished calf on spine and corners over green pebble cloth over cardboard by E. de Haas, Bookbinder, 2, Mitre Sq., Aldgate, E.C. (stamp on rear pastedown), gilded ex libris to rear cover, gilding and raised bands on spine, spine blind stamped, green card stock used as front and rear paste downs, affixed to first flyleaves (of heavy bond paper) in front and rear, corners bumped and worn through. Dimensions 310 x 215 mm.

Anonymous collection of a dictionary of rhymes, a popular genre in Hebrew literature, used mostly for occasional poems, greetings in letters, poems in honor of weddings, etc., and by preachers to embellish their sermons. Since the folio numbers from the 1520 Venice edition of the Talmud are not used in this work, it must have been produced before 1520, probably around 1500.

PROVENANCE

1. Although the script is Sephardic, the manuscript may date just after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and thus have been made by Spanish emigres in Italy or the Balkans. Since folio numbers from the Venetian edition of the Talmud in 1520 are not used in this manuscript, it likely predates 1520.

2. Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), his MS 496, stamped on spine, and rear pastedown, his initials in gilt at foot of spine "M. J. M." [Sir Moses Montefiore]. Most famous English Jew of his time, Montefiore became a legend in his lifetime, fighting worldwide for the lives and rights of Jews. He founded after the death of his wife Judith Lady Montefiore a college in Ramsgate, which with the appointment of Rabbi Moses Gaster acquired many manuscripts including the Halberstam Collection and the Zunz legacy.

3. London, Jews' College, on deposit since 1899, as part of the Montefiore Endowment.

TEXT

Dictionaries of rhymes are a popular genre, dating from the early Middle Ages (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) until recent times. There are a dozen or so works whose authors can be identified, some of them printed and some extant in multiple copies. There are also many more anonymous collections, probably composed by their authors for their own use. Altogether, the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, Jerusalem, lists over 100 copies of these works. The earlier dictionaries may have served serious poets, but it seems likely that those dating from the fifteenth century and later were probably used mostly for occasional poems, greetings in letters, poems in honour of weddings, etc. and by preachers to embellish their sermons.

Before the Venice 1520 edition of the Talmud, there was no standard way of quoting passages from the Talmud. References were made only to the name of the tractate and the chapter number. Shortly after the Venice edition appeared, it became the norm to quote Talmudic texts by the folio numbers in that edition. Since the folio numbers from the Venice edition are **not** used in this work, it must have been produced before 1520, probably around 1500.

LITERATURE

H. Hirschfeld, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts of the Montefiore Library*, London, MacMillan, 1904 (reprint from *JQR*, 1902 and 1903), no. 496 (reprint Farnborough, 1969).