

## ANONYMOUS, *Sefer alilot devarim* (The Book of Accusations)

In Hebrew, manuscript on paper

Trino or Mantua, 1468

*i + 26 + i folios on paper, modern marbled paper pastedowns and flyleaves, modern foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals in upper-outer corner of rectos, complete (collation i<sup>12</sup> [-1 and 2, removed along with the first portion of the codex, see Provenance below] ii<sup>12</sup> iii<sup>6</sup> [-5 and 6, removed along with the last portion of the codex, see Provenance below]), horizontal catchwords on versos (for main text, except f. 1v; sometimes for commentary as well), ruled in blind (justification approximately 140 x 85 mm.), single-column text, with frequent, extensive inset glosses, written in an elegant Italian Ashkenazic semi-cursive script (except the very first word of the main text and commentary, written in square script) in brown ink in 30 lines, slightly enlarged initials or incipits, Tetragrammaton abbreviated to the letter he followed by an apostrophe, justification via insertion of space fillers, abbreviation, use of anticipatory letters, and dilation and contraction of final letters, episodic strikethroughs, marginalia and marginal "highlighting" in primary and secondary hands, manicules on ff. 2v, 11, slight scattered staining, lower-outer quadrant damaged and replaced throughout with paper extensions and text written by a very similar (probably contemporary) Italian Ashkenazic semi-cursive hand, lower-outer corners rounded, small repairs in outer edges not affecting text, small hole in upper edge at center throughout, ff. 2-7 loose, minor losses mostly of individual letters near foot of ff. 2-8v, 10v-11, 26r-v, small hole affecting a few letters on f. 5, short tears in lower edge of f. 11. Modern blind-tooled maroon leather over pasteboard, slightly scuffed, blind-tooled rosette on lower board, upper board entirely detached from text block and resting at a diagonal thereon due to insufficient width of spine, the upper flyleaf slit in a few places. Dimensions 182 x 133 mm.*

A biting satire of late medieval Ashkenazic society originally composed in either the fourteenth or fifteenth century, *Sefer alilot devarim* found new readers in the modern period with the rise of the Jewish Enlightenment and Reform movements. The present copy is the earliest of the ten known to have survived, the only one preserving the work's introduction, and one of two currently held privately (the other having apparently been copied from this one in 1831). Its sterling provenance, fictitious authorship, and named scribe all increase the manuscript's interest.

## PROVENANCE

1. The colophon on f. 26v reads: "Its work was completed Tuesday, 13 Nisan [5]228 [April 5, 1468]," with the signature of the scribe on the following line deleted. More than a century ago, Solomon Joachim Halberstam (1890) identified the scribe as Isaiah ben Jacob Alluf da Gerona of Masserano, a prolific copyist active mostly in Mantua in the latter half of the fifteenth century, and subsequent scholarship has confirmed that identification (Freimann, 1950 and Sotheby's, 2004). Da Gerona signed a grammatical miscellany (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS Or. Qu. 647) in Trino, Northern Italy, on Thursday night, 29 Tammuz [5]230 (June 28, 1470), before completing two different works (both part of Frankfurt am Main, Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg, MS Oct. 5) a bit less than a month later, Tuesday, 26 Av [5]230 (July 24, 1470), in Mantua.

The present manuscript was once part of a philosophical miscellany comprising 65 folios (including two flyleaves at the fore), whose original collation was: i<sup>4</sup> ii<sup>8</sup> iii<sup>2</sup> iv-vi<sup>12</sup> vii<sup>6</sup> viii<sup>4</sup> ix<sup>6</sup> (6 [presumably blank] removed); our manuscript consists of quires five and six and the first four folios of quire seven. One of the colophons in the latter part of this larger codex (see now TM 1268, on this site, f. 10) discloses the location where the scribe did his work, as well as the party on behalf of whom he labored (himself): “May it be [His] will that just as I merited to write it, so may I merit to arrive at a true, correct understanding of it that follows the clear path without straying from the straight line, amen. I began this on Sunday, finished it the next night, and wrote it for myself. It was completed 9 Tevet [5]231 [December 2, 1470], here, in Trino,” with da Gerona’s signature on the following line again deleted. It is thus possible that our manuscript, too, was copied in Trino, but, given the passage of time (April 1468 to December 1470) and the itinerancy of the scribe, Mantua cannot be ruled out. (It is also noteworthy, in this context, that the as-yet unidentified watermarks of our manuscript differ from those of TM 1268.)

2. The full volume’s front flyleaves, apparently now lost, had preserved two Italian owners’ names: Marco di Dona Luzzatto(?) and a certain Samuel, who added a short appreciation of *Sefer alilot devarim*.
3. The manuscript eventually came into the possession of Halberstam (1832-1900), a wealthy Polish Jewish scholar and bibliophile. Halberstam inscribed the manuscript’s shelf mark (117) in pen on the first front flyleaf and provided a brief overview of its contents when he printed the catalog of his collection in 1890.
4. The Judith Lady Montefiore College in Ramsgate, England, purchased 412 manuscripts from Halberstam’s collection, including the present one. The transaction was carried out by Rabbi Moses Gaster (1856-1939), principal of the college between 1891 and 1896. The larger codex contains the library stamp of the institution, known in Hebrew as Yeshivat Ohel Mosheh vi-Yehudit, on its first and final folios (see now TM 1254, formerly on this site, now sold and in our archives, f. 1, and TM 1268, f. 11v). According to Sotheby’s (2008), its limp vellum binding also featured the Montefiore shelf mark (266).
5. Between 1898 and 2001, most of the Montefiore manuscripts, including ours, were placed on permanent loan at Jews’ College in London. In 2001, they were returned to the Montefiore Endowment Committee.
6. The full volume was sold at Sotheby’s New York on October 27, 2004 (lot 223). It was offered again four years later at Sotheby’s London on July 8, 2008 (lot 19), and at Kestenbaum & Company on December 18, 2008 (lot 313), both times without result. It has since been split into three parts—ff. 1-26 comprising TM 1254, ff. 27-52 comprising our manuscript, and ff. 53-63 comprising TM 1268—and each has been rebound and sold separately.

TEXT

f. 1, [Introduction to *Sefer alilot devarim*], incipit, "shitah h[ashem] le-pi nitserah al dat[!] sefatai... shuvu el h[ashem] ulai yehenan h[ashem] ts-eva'ot et she'erit yosef," [followed by pen trials in Hebrew and the Latin translation of Ps. 20:2: "exa[u]diate dominus in die tribulationi[s]"];

ff. 1v-26v, [*Sefer alilot devarim*], incipit, "zeh sefer alilot devarim le-r[abbi] palmon ben pelet mi-benei beli shem... tammu divrei palmon male devarim ke-rimmon," [accompanied by a commentary], incipit, "ne'um yosef beno meshullam li-beno meshullam... petahav ba ve-gam yatsa be-shalom ve-hodia alilotav be-ammo," [followed by the scribe's colophon (see Provenance above)].

At the height of the Black Death in 1348-1350, Jews living in communities across Western and Central Europe were falsely accused of having spread the plague to their Christian neighbors. Entire Jewish populations were destroyed by Gentile mobs or expelled by their municipal authorities, resulting in a mass population shift southward to Italy and eastward to Bohemia, Moravia, Austria, and Poland. These persecutions and ruptures severely curtailed the intellectual creativity of Ashkenazic Jewry in their immediate aftermath and profoundly affected the trajectory of European Jewish history more broadly.

*Sefer alilot devarim* (The Book of Accusations) is an anonymously authored polemic against late medieval Ashkenazic religious culture attributed in its opening lines to "Rabbi Palmon ben Peleth, a son of No-Name who had taken one of the daughters of So-and-So as a wife." (Palmon ben Peleth is a play on the name of the biblical figure On ben Peleth, one of the collaborators in Korah's rebellion; see Num. 16:1.) All ten surviving manuscripts of this text are accompanied by a commentary that identifies its author as Joseph ben Meshullam. Scholars have long suspected, however, that this name is fictitious and that the gloss, which is almost as long as *Sefer alilot devarim* itself, was written by the same person who composed the larger work (see, e.g., London, British Library, Additional MS 27088, f. 71).

The earliest copy of the treatise extant is the present one, produced by a well-known immigrant scribe in Trino or Mantua in 1468. On f. 3, the text makes reference to the fact that "we have been in exile approximately 1,400 years," which, according to traditional Jewish chronology about the start of the exile, would yield the year 1468. The next oldest manuscript of *Sefer alilot devarim*, dated 28 Nisan [4]233 (April 26, 1473) and copied in Mantua by another celebrated immigrant scribe, Abraham ben Mordechai Farissol, gives the number of years that have passed in exile as "more than 1,400" (Moscow, Russian State Library, MS Guenzburg 180, f. 1v). Researchers have generally assumed, therefore, that the book was originally compiled in about 1467-1468.

However, Robert Bonfil, author of the most thorough study of *Sefer alilot devarim* (1980), noted that these two early manuscripts represent two different recensions of the tract. In his view, it cannot be that the divergences found here developed in the span of a mere five to six years. He therefore argued that the aforementioned lines in these manuscripts have been "updated" by their scribes and that the work's original composition probably took place about a century earlier, in the 1360s or 1370s, in the wake of the Black Death. This, in turn, allowed Bonfil to sketch a portrait of the author as a non-Ashkenazic Jew coming into contact with Ashkenazic society for the first time in the latter half of the fourteenth century and thereafter leveling a severe critique of its mystically inflected anti-rationalism, its opposition to philosophical

inquiry, its casuistic method of Talmud study, and its religious practice, which he deemed deviant and corrupt. Even the great Northern French biblical commentator Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi; 1040-1105) comes under attack as "devoid of the science of logic" and as "distancing Jews from rationality" in his exegeses (Lawee, 2019). Based in part on the recurrence of the name Joseph in the introduction to the treatise, uniquely preserved in the present manuscript, Bonfil suggested that the Spanish Rabbi Joseph ben Eliezer Tuv Elem may have composed the text, perhaps during or after a sojourn of his in Southern Italy or Candia (Venetian Crete).

Whether or not Bonfil's suggested emendation of the date and identification of the author are correct, there is no doubt today that *Sefer alilot devarim* was written for an Ashkenazic audience (Kupfer, 1976; Mondshine, 1977; Schacter, 1980; Wieder, 1981). What is more, almost all of its known surviving manuscripts were written in Italy and/or in Italian hands (Ta-Shma, 1976) (the one exception seems to be New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 2230, copied in a Provençal hand on paper bearing watermarks similar to Briquet 3272 [Perpignan, 1478]). This latter insight makes it likely that the tract's barbs were actually directed specifically at communities of Ashkenazim living in Northern Italy.

When, in the nineteenth century, adherents of the Jewish Enlightenment were searching for historical antecedents for their programs of religious and educational reform, some seized on *Sefer alilot devarim* and its anti-establishment rhetoric. Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855), one of the founders of the rabbinical college in Padua, intended to publish the text in its entirety. A title page and introduction that he prepared for the edition, as well as the text itself (perhaps based on our manuscript or one very similar), are preserved in several handwritten copies, all apparently with connections to Padua: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Reggio 22 (Reggio's undated autograph?); London, British Library, Additional MS 27088 (dated 1830); Holon, Eli Zeituni, Ms. 10 (dated 1831); Budapest, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS K 108 (dated 1831); and *ibid.*, MS K 107 (dated 1832). The person who commissioned the last manuscript, Rabbi Lelio Della Torre of Cuneo (1805-1871), who taught Talmud and homiletics at Reggio's seminary, noted that the work had not yet been printed and expressed doubt that it ever would be, perhaps because of its piquant content (f. 1). In fact, Reggio only ever succeeded in publishing a relatively brief excerpt (1834). Another short passage appeared eighteen years later, in 1852, in the journal of a different Enlightenment figure, Osias Heschel Schorr of Brody (1814-1895), which was assailed on account of its anti-rabbinic sentiments (Wiener, 1904 and Carmilly-Weinberger, 1966).

The full text of the tract, based on the aforementioned Moscow manuscript (which was, at the time, located in Paris), would not appear until eleven years later, in 1863, edited under a pseudonym by the reform-minded Raphael Kirchheim of Frankfurt am Main (1804-1889) (Steinschneider, 1864 and Zeitlin, 1911). Interestingly, "most" surviving copies of the journal in which Kirchheim published the treatise lack this portion of the volume, perhaps because of the anger aroused by the work's content (Wiener, 1893 and Carmilly-Weinberger, 1966). Bonfil had hoped to issue a new edition of *Sefer alilot devarim* but appears never to have actually done so, leaving the task for the next generation.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

Our MS

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH990000651540205171/NLI#\\$FL29814021](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990000651540205171/NLI#$FL29814021)

TM 1254

<https://www.textmanuscripts.com/medieval/mivhar-ha-penanim-choice-of-pearls-205576>

Sotheby's New York sale, October 27, 2004 (lot 223)

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/important-hebrew-manuscripts-from-the-montefiore-endowment-n08040/lot.223.html>

Sotheby's London sale, July 8, 2008 (lot 19)

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2008/western-oriental-manuscripts-l08240/lot.19.html>

Kestenbaum & Company sale, December 18, 2008 (lot 313)

<https://www.kestenbaum.net/auction/lot/auction-42/042-313/>

Moscow, Russian State Library, Ms. Guenzburg 180

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH990000866710205171/NLI#\\$FL76937033](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990000866710205171/NLI#$FL76937033)

London, British Library, Ms. Add. 27088

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH990000817640205171/NLI#\\$FL35279520](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990000817640205171/NLI#$FL35279520)

Budapest, Jewish Theological Seminary, Ms. K 107

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH990000651800205171/NLI#\\$FL81552706](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990000651800205171/NLI#$FL81552706)

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