

THE CHALLENGES AND BLESSINGS OF THE
INTERNET: TECHNOLOGY FROM AN HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVE

by

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A. The Internet

The existence of the internet has wrought a revolution in the world in general and in the Jewish world as well. It has done so in several ways, both as a blessing and as a challenge.

The internet has made it possible for Jewish learning to flourish on a scale hitherto unimaginable. The number of websites and apps with Jewish content available at, literally, one's fingertips is staggering. The easy access that they provide to primary texts and secondary literature, *divrei Torah* and *pisqei Halakhah*, rabbis and teachers, and more, has revolutionized the study of Torah and has significantly broadened the community of learners. The internet has brought Jewish study and practice to many who would otherwise have had difficulty accessing the tradition, and it has expanded the knowledge of those who already live their lives within it.

In addition, social networking via the internet has been a real benefit to those in the Jewish community, like those in the general community, who seek human connection, medical information, professional advice, funds for worthwhile projects, and more—much more. There is no doubt that the existence of the internet has enhanced Jewish life in myriads of ways.

With the advent of the internet, a number of new halakhic questions were raised that required attention: Must a business shut down access to its website on Shabbat and *yom tov*? Can one effect ownership over an object via the internet? Can one sell *hametz* over the internet? What is the legal responsibility one assumes for spreading a virus over the internet? What issues need to be considered when downloading material—books, articles, songs—from the internet? Must one install a filter on one's computer? Is it permitted to utilize another's wireless internet connection without permission? Can one erase God's name that appears on one's computer screen? Can one fulfill the mitzvah of listening to *Havdalah* on Motzaei Shabbat, or *Megillat Esther* on Purim, by hearing them recited via Skype? Can one be counted to a minyan if connected via Skype? Can one fulfill the mitzvah of visiting the sick or comforting a mourner via Skype? Can a man betroth a woman via Skype? What if the witnesses view the betrothal via Skype? Can someone be released from a vow via Skype? Is it appropriate to adjudicate halakhic matters over the internet or via SMS? And there are more. Many, many, more.¹

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¹ There is a large and growing body of literature raising—and addressing—these questions. See, for example, D. Lichtenstein, *Quntres ha'Internet baHalakhah* (Monsey, 2012); N. Aviv, *Ma'aseh Reshet: ha'Internet baHalakhah* (Jerusalem, 2013); A. Maimon, *Derekh ha'Atarim* (Jerusalem, 2014); A. Brueckheimer, "Halacha and Technology: Erasing G-d's Name from a Computer", *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 45 (2003), 50-64; Y. Amsel, "Im Yotz' im Tanhumim beEmayl", *Hama'or* 71:6 (2018), 76-78; C.A. Zakutinsky, *UMeqarev beYemin* (New York, 2018), 82-86. Some of these issues are addressed in various volumes of *Tehumin* (vv.18, 20, 22, 27, 29, 31). For the debate surrounding SMS response, see A. Katz, "Darkhei Shu"t Hadashot (Telefon, Internet uMesronim)—Yitronot, Hesronot uMaskanot", *Hama'ayan* 55:2 (Tevet, 5775), 56-62; M. Zion, "'Od al Shu"t Mesronim", *Hama'ayan* 55:4 (Tammuz,

In addition, the advent of the internet has posed many challenges that are not necessarily specifically Jewish in nature but certainly are of great particular concern to the Jewish community as well.

First, the inability to ensure the quality of posted material. Once upon a time, manuscripts had been expensive to produce, requiring substantial financial means and great professional expertise. They, therefore, had been commissioned only if the necessary significant investment of time and money could be justified by the clear worthiness of the project being undertaken. Books, however, were different. Anyone with access to money could print whatever they wanted. As Edgar Allen Poe wrote in 1845: “The enormous multiplication of books in every branch of knowledge is one of the greatest evils of this age; since it presents one of the most serious obstacles to the acquisition of correct information by throwing in the reader’s way piles of lumber in which he must painfully grope for scraps of useful lumber.”²

And, if this was true of printing, then a fortiori, *qal vahomer, ben beno shel qal vahomer*, it is true with the internet. One can write and disseminate literally whatever one wants. Neither financial capability nor even the tiniest measure of professional or scholarly expertise is necessary. This quote from Poe is cited by Clay Shirky in his *Cognitive Surplus*, and he went on to add, “The easier it is for the average person to publish, the more average what gets published becomes.”³ Shirky also notes that even printing came with costs that precluded merely mediocre books from being published in the interest of insuring economic benefit, but this consideration is simply absent in the world of the internet.⁴ We are “being drowned in the data deluge.”⁵

Second, the proliferation of error due to the permanence of postings, including even those posted innocently and inadvertently. Errors made will be perpetuated forever and the truth about an event, a person or a text can thus be lost forever.

Third, the ease with which one is able to embarrass others and destroy another’s reputation. In 2010, Jeffrey Rosen published an article entitled, “The End of Forgetting”. The superscript of the article is, “Legal scholars, technologists and cyberthinkers are wrestling with the first great existential crisis of the digital age: the impossibility of erasing your posted past, starting over, moving on.” The article begins by describing an innocent posting by a graduate student which was discovered by her university’s administrators who deemed it inappropriate, resulting in very severe consequences for her. Once something is posted, it remains, somewhere, in cyberspace. “The internet records everything and forgets nothing...Every online photo, status update, Twitter post and blog entry by and about us can be stored forever.”⁶ Anything posted lives on for all time and can come to haunt the one who posted it in multiple severe ways. The hitherto transient has now become permanent.⁷

5775), 75-77. My thanks to Mr. Lawrence A. Kobrin for bringing this last source, among other ones relevant to the theme of this article, to my attention.

² See C. Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 47.

³ C. Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 47. Already at the turn of the sixteenth century, Erasmus complained about the multiplicity of books. See E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early Modern Europe*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 18, n.44.

⁴ C. Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 60; idem, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 97-98.

⁵ A. Smith Rumsey, *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory is Shaping our Future* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 7.

⁶ J. Rosen, “The End of Forgetting”, *The New York Times Magazine* (July 25, 2010), 12.

⁷ D. Coupland, “Transience is Now Permanence,” in J. Brockman (ed.) *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 160-61. Coupland goes on to write, “At the same time, things that were supposed to be around forever (newspapers) are now transient. This is an astonishing inversion of

What is true for oneself is certainly true for others. The enormous damage caused by speaking ill of someone else, *lashon hara'*, is well known and has received much attention in general and Jewish ethical literature. Words have always been recognized as having enormous power and, when used to defame, can be deadly. Once they are uttered, they can never be recalled and the damage they can do is potentially irreparable. This is more so the case with books which reach a much larger audience and, a fortiori, *kal vahomer, ben beno shel kal vahomer*, it is true with the internet. Bloggers hiding behind anonymity can destroy a reputation with a click of a finger or the press of a button, and the consequences can be highly destructive. What used to be a “proximate” or geographical community has become “a virtual community”; “word of mouth” has become “word of link.” Virtually an entire world can be reached, with potentially devastating results.⁸

Fourth, a waste of time. There is much evidence that points to how exposure to the internet is distracting, drawing significant attention towards frivolous pursuits and away from more valuable and meaningful activities. Low culture predominates at the expense of exposure to socially redeeming beneficial and worthwhile information.

Fifth, diminution of authority. Thankfully, the old “paternalistic model”—where the client or patient passively accepts with respect whatever the expert says—is, in many cases, a reality of the past.⁹ However, the propensity of some to go to the opposite extreme—to assert an inappropriate level of knowledge without evincing due respect for the position of a real expert—is now common. After all, people can post anything on the web and present themselves as experts on any given subject. Clients routinely walk into the office of a lawyer, or patients into the office of a doctor, and claim expertise on any given legal or medical situation as a result of research done on the internet. This argument has recently been sharply formulated in a Jewish context as follows: “Who needs a rabbi or rebbe to deliver a judgement about laws... Anyone who studied in a yeshiva can deliver a judgement or adjudicate on the basis of his own reasoning. This is especially [true] in our times where it is possible to search for and find everything on the internet, in *Otzar Online*, the Bar-Ilan Responsa Project and similar places. It is possible for everyone to consider himself a scholar and halakhic adjudicator and arbiter even on weighty matters as if he knows all of the sources and all the opinions on his own, [but, really, only] with the assistance of all the above.”¹⁰

Sixth, the easy accessibility of inappropriate material. Everything—pornography, heresy, and more—is easily available with no effort at all, just with the flick of a finger. This ubiquitous reality is reflected in a “Prayer for the Surfers of the Internet” that someone sent me a few years ago. While it was probably composed in jest, it contains more than a small element of truth:

תפילת הדרך לגולשים באינטרנט

May it be your will to connect us in peace,

יהי רצון מלפניך שתחברנו בשלום

time perception that I've yet to fully absorb.” See also J. Enriquez, “Immortality”, in J. Brockman (ed.) *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?*, 311-12; D. Halber, “Up for Grabs: The Meaning of Privacy in the Digital Age”, *Colloquy* (Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences; Summer, 2017), 20-25.

⁸ Chapter 4 of C. Shirky's book, *Here Comes Everybody* (81-108), is entitled, “Publish, Then Filter”.

⁹ See, for example, E.J. Emanuel and L.L. Emanuel, “Four Models of the Physician-Patient Relationship”, *Journal of the American Medical Association* 267:16 (April 22/29, 1992), 2221-26.

¹⁰ R. Z. Schachter, “Kol ha'Eidah Kulam Qedoshim”, *Beit Yitzhaq* 45 (2014), 59-60. See, too, R. Schank, “Everyone is an Expert”, in J. Brockman (ed.) *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?*, 355-56. Tom Nichols has drawn attention to the general irrelevance of expertise in contemporary American culture. See his *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also, in this volume, Yishai Ofran and Amos Israel-Vleeschhouwer, “Authority Crisis in the Era of Information Flood: A Challenge Shared by Rabbis and Physicians”.

To enable us to surf in peace and to reach the site of our desire in peace.	ותגלשנו בשלום ותגיענו לאתר הפצנו בשלום
Connect us in peace and with little expense.	ותנתקנו בשלום ובזול.
Save us from the hand of every virus and falling on the way,	ותצילנו מכף כל וירוס ונפילה בדרך
and from all sorts of sites of garbage, licentiousness and idolatry that are wont to exist in the world of the virtual.	ומכל מיני אתרי זבל פריצות ועבודה זרה המתרגשים לבוא בעולם הוירטואלי.
Send a blessing in every act of our mouse and grant us grace and mercy in the eyes of every screen.	ותשלח ברכה בכל מעשה עכברנו ותתננו לחן ולרחמים בעיני כל מסך.
Hearken unto the voice of our wallet.	ותשמע קול ארנקנו
For You are one who hears prayer and supplication.	כי שומע תפילה ותחנון אתה
And protect us from the wasting of time.	ומגננו מביטול זמן.

This multiplicity of challenges posed by the internet have resulted in a series of reactions in both the general as well as Jewish communities. These range from outright rejection and banning of the internet to various compromises such as instituting filters, as well as other attempts to limit full exposure to inappropriate online material, to begrudging acceptance of what has become a ubiquitous reality (“All my children’s friends have one. What can I do?”).¹¹

B. The Early Years of Printing

In thinking about the internet, I have come to realize that none of the factors I have mentioned—both the blessings and challenges—is new. In fact, they are but the latest iteration of a set of considerations that were explicitly expressed in the Jewish community beginning more than four hundred years ago, with the invention of printing or, more precisely, moveable type. Although it is manifestly obvious that there are vast differences between printing and the internet, it is nevertheless instructive to note that, at their core, the current realities pertaining to the internet have much in common with those that surfaced regarding printing over four centuries ago.¹²

¹¹ This issue of concern about exposure to inappropriate material is discussed in a number of articles in *Klal Perspectives* 3:1 (Fall, 2015) devoted to “Technology and the 21st Century Orthodox Community”. For other articles on the impact of the internet on the Orthodox community, with specific focus on this concern, see “Confronting the Dangers of the Internet”, *The Jewish Observer* 36:9 (November, 2003), 8-27; “The Social Media Revolution: What Does it Mean for Our Children”, *Jewish Action* 73:1 (Fall, 2012), 24-41; the articles in various volumes of *Zohar* (vv. 27, 33). See also the remarkably balanced position on this subject by Rabbi Barukh Meir Ya’aqov Shochet, the Karlin-Stolin Rebbe, available at gye.org.il/ksbook. My thanks to Rabbi Moshe Shapoff and Rabbi Ronald Schwarzberg for bringing this remarkable document to my attention. See also www.thedigitalcitizenship.com, a resource spearheaded by Dr. Eli Shapiro.

¹² I have found the following articles and books particularly helpful: Y.Z. Kahana, *HaDefus baHalakhah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1945); repr. in idem, *Mehqarim beSafrut haTeshuvot* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973), 272-305; A. Berliner, “Hashpa’at Sifrei haDefus haRishonim al Tarbut haYehudim,” in idem, *Ketavim Nivharim*, v.2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1949), 113-43; S. Assaf, “Am haSeifer v’haSeifer,” in idem, *Be’Oholei Ya’aqov* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1965), 1-26; E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); idem, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); M. Beit-Arié, “The Relationship Between Early Hebrew Printing and Handwritten Books: Attachment or Detachment?,” in D. Schidorsky (ed.) *Library Archives and Information Studies (=Scripta Hierosolymitana 29)* (Jerusalem, 1989), 1-2; idem, “Transmission of Texts by Scribes and Copyists: Unconscious and Critical Interferences”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 75:3 (1993), 35-51; Z. Gries, *The Book in the Jewish World 1700-1900* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007); idem, *HaSeifer keSokhen Tarbut* (Tel Aviv: Haqibbutz Hameuhad Publishing House, 2002); Z. Eleff, “Digital Discourse and the Democratization

Here, too, the advent of printing raised new halakhic questions that required attention. The key underlying issue was: Does the printed word enjoy the same level of sanctity as words written on parchment? In the technical language of the halakhic decisors, the question was—and is—Does printing have a legal status of *ketivah*, or writing, or it considered *haqiqah*, or engraving? The range of issues raised in this context were many. For example: Can one print the Divine Name, the *shem Hashem*? What are the implications of erasing a printed Divine Name? Does a printed Hebrew text require placement into “*shemot*?” Can a printed Hebrew text be brought into the bathroom? Can a printed document be used for a *seifer Torah*, for *tefillin*, for a *mezuzah*, for *Megillat Esther*, for a bill of divorce, etc.? Is there a difference between the old method of printing done by hand and the more recent electronic photo-offset method of printing? Can one use discarded printed galleys as part of the binding of books? Can one have sexual relations in a room containing printed Hebrew books? How far do copyright claims extend for a printed book? Does printing something on Shabbat or *Hol haMo'ed* violate the prohibition of “writing,” or “*ketivah*?” Can one use a siddur or other Hebrew book printed on Shabbat? Does it matter if the printer is a Gentile? Does printing a Hebrew Bible fulfill the mitzvah of writing a *seifer Torah*? What is the status of a Hebrew book printed by an apostate? Indeed, beginning shortly after the advent of printing and through today, these questions were—and are—being addressed.¹³

of Jewish Learning,” <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/digital-discourse-and-the-democratization-of-jewish-learning/>; B. Kohen, “Sofo shel Aron haSefarim?”, in “HaHevrah haHareidit veba’Internet”, *Tzarikh Iyyun* (online journal) (Sivan, 5778), <https://iyun.org.il/article/תורכים-ברשת>; C. Murphy, “Before Zuckerberg, Gutenberg”, *The Atlantic* 325:1 (January-February, 2020), 22-24. Adrian Johns disputed some of Eisenstein’s central theses in his *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Also relevant is his spirited exchange with Eisenstein, introduced by Anthony Grafton, in the pages of the *American Historical Review* 107 (2002), 84-128. I am pleased to express my deep thanks to Rabbi Ari Rockoff who, in 2011, first challenged me to think about this issue. For an essay utilizing this same methodology but with an entirely different focus, see J.A. Dewar, “The Information Age and the Printing Press: Looking Backward to See Ahead”, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1998), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P8014.html>.

¹³ See, for example, R. David Halevi, *Ta’z*, *Yoreh Dei’ah* 271:8, end; R. Binyamin Aharon Slonik, *Seifer Mas’at Binyamin* #99; R. Menahem Azaryah miFano, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Bei’urim uPeirushim* #93; *She’eilot uTeshuvot Rabbeinu Moshe Provenzalo* zz”l 1:73 (discussed in V.B. Mann and D.D. Chazin, “Printing, Patronage and Prayer: Art Historical Issues in Three Responsa”, *Images* 1 [2007], 91-97); R. Issakhar Ber Eilenberg, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Be’er Sheva* #43; R. Yair Hayyim Bakhrakh, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Havor Ya’ir* #184; R. Yehezqel Kazenellenbogen, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Knesset Yehezqel* #37; R. Ya’aqov Reischer, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Shevut Ya’aqov* 3:10, 11; R. Ya’aqov Emden, *Mor uQezi’ah* #154, s.v. *katav bemagen avraham*; R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Mohara’z (Hayot)* #11; R. Hayyim Yoseif David Azulai, *Yoseif Omez: She’eilot uTeshuvot* #16:5; R. Eliezer Flekeles, *Teshuvah Mei’Ahavah* #1:9; R. Yishmael HaKohen, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Zera Emet* #2:117; R. Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, *Arukh haShulhan, Yoreh Dei’ah* 271:39; R. Naphtali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Meishiv Davar* #1:80; R. David Zvi Hoffmann, *Melamed leHo’il* #2:89; R. Shalom Mordechai Schwadron, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Maharashda”m* #3:39; R. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim* #2:17; R. Moshe Sternbuch, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Teshuvot veHanagot* #3:326; R. Eliezer Waldenberg, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Tzitz Eliezer* #15:7:1; 18:80; R. Ovadyah Yoseif, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Yehaveh Da’at* #6:57; idem, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Yabi’a Omer* 4 (Yoreh Dei’ah), #20, 21; R. Ya’aqov Epstein, *Hevel Nahalato*, vol. 10 (2001), 227-47; N.W. Netanel, *From Maimonides to Microsoft: The Jewish Law of Copyright since the Birth of Print* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a responsum on the status of a book that was photocopied, see R. Binyamin Aryeh Hakohen Weiss, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Even Yeqarah*, Mahadura Tinyana #33. It would also be, parenthetically, interesting to examine how the phenomenon of photography was dealt with by halakhists when it was first introduced. See, for example, R. Shalom Mordechai Schwadron, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Maharashda”m* #3:192, 256; #7:40, 89; J.D. Bleich, “Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature”, *Tradition* 45:2 (2012), 83-84. For background, see D. de Font-Réaulx, *Painting and Photography, 1839-1914* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012). For information about the invention and impact of the telegraph, also relevant in this context, see T. Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century’s On-line Pioneers* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1998).

But of special interest here are the issues which anticipate the kinds of questions or challenges that we have seen raised in the context of the internet.

I begin with the positive. In the colophon of the first printed tractate of the Talmud, *Berakhot*, printed in 1483-1484, R. Gabriel b. Aaron of Strasbourg referred to the invention of printing as “the work of Heaven.”¹⁴ R. David Gans (1541-1613), author of the historical work *Tzemaḥ David*, took note of Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of printing in the entry for the year 1440 in the second volume of his book, and went so far as to write that “nothing as valuable as it is found in all the wisdoms and clever devices from the day that God created man on the earth.” He considered printing to be the most significant discovery ever made from the day the first human being was created!¹⁵ R. Yair Ḥayyim Bakhrakh (1638-1702) noted, with satisfaction, that the advent of printing made it possible for all—“even women and minors”—to have access to the texts of the prayers.¹⁶ In the nineteenth century, R. Eliezer Papo (1785-1826) waxed eloquently about the great value of printing, encouraging wealthy Jews to contribute to the publication of books because “every expenditure for a mitzvah is for a limited time, one begins the mitzvah and completes it, but one who contributes towards printing ‘his righteousness remains forever’ (*Ps.* 112:9) for generation after generation.”¹⁷ There are other even more strongly positive statements asserting the great importance of printing, such as, “Were it not for printing, God forbid Torah would have been forgotten from Israel.”¹⁸ To borrow from the work of Benedict

¹⁴ See M.J. Heller, “And the Work, the Work of Heaven, was Performed on Shabbat”, *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 11 (2002-2003), 174; Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha'Ivri: Hadar haMeḥaber* (Jerusalem, 2017), 105-10.

¹⁵ R. David Gans, *Tzemaḥ David*, vol. 2 (Warsaw, 1878), 150. This passage is cited in R. Yair Ḥayyim Bakhrakh, *She'eilot uTeshuvot Ḥavot Ya'ir* #184. See too Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha'Ivri: Hadar haMeḥaber*, 133; S.Y. Agnon, *Seifer Sofer veSippur* (Jerusalem: Schocken Press, 2000), 158; “Printing,” in G. Khan (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, vol. 3 (Boston: Leiden, 2013), 234; David Sclar, “History for Religious Purposes: The Writing, Publication, and Renewal of *Tzemaḥ David*”, *Zutot* 12 (2015), 20-21; R.L. Greenblatt, “‘Asot Sefarim Ein Qeitz Ḥibber’: Defus, Zikkaron, Ketivah Otobiografit uMahara’! miPrag”, in E. Reiner (ed.) *Mahara’! Aqdamot* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2015), 75. My thanks to Dr. Zev Eleff for bringing Agnon’s book to my attention. This is one of a handful of passages in Gans’s book considered significant enough to have been translated into English in André Neher, *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: David Gans (1541-1613) and his Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 56. See also G. Sarton, *Six Wings: Men of Science in the Renaissance* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1996), 3, “The discovery of printing was one of the great turning-points in the history of mankind”; A. Johns, “The Coming of Print to Europe”, in L. Howsam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 107, “Johann Gutenberg’s innovation was the most important turning point in human history.” Johns writes that making this point was the purpose of Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin’s *l’Apparition du Livre* published in 1958. For the most recent English translation of this important book, with much relevance to issues discussed in this article, see L. Febvre and H.-J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

¹⁶ *She'eilot uTeshuvot Ḥavot Ya'ir* #238.

¹⁷ R. Eliezer Papo, *Pele Yo'eiz*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1903), 38b-39a.

¹⁸ R. Yoseif Teomim, *Pri Megadim*, introduction. See also, for example, R. Yisrael Lifshitz, *Tiferet Yisrael*, *M.Avot* 3:1, and the many sources cited in Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha'Ivri: Hagahot uMaghim*, 2nd ed. (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2005), 217-21; idem, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha'Ivri: Hadar haMeḥaber*, 122, 155-59, 163-64. There are also many such comments in general literature as well. Martin Luther described printing as “God’s highest and extremist act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward.” This is cited in E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, 304 (see too *ibid.*, 317, 377). In addition, see, for example, the words of Johannes Kepler written in 1606: “All by itself the art of printing alone provides ample proof that in those days men were efficient to a degree that cannot be expressed in words...Do we not today by the art of printing bring to light all the ancient writers, as many as are extant?...For my part, I believe that now at last the world is alive, and indeed is in a state of intense excitement.” This quote is cited in E. Rosen, “In Defense of Kepler”, in A.R. Lewis (ed.), *Aspects of the Renaissance: A Symposium* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 142-43. See also Johan Sleidan’s remarks in 1542, cited in E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, 305. For a comment from 1641, see *idem*, 378.

Anderson, printing created an “imagined community,” not in the context of nationalism in which he uses the term, but in the context of a broad community of learning or wisdom.¹⁹ A new community of learners was created. More people were able to learn, and learn more deeply, than ever before in Jewish history.

But many voices were raised expressing great concern about the ramifications of the “move from the copyist’s desk to the printer’s workshop”, the “shift from pen to press” or “from script to print.”²⁰ These were the same concerns that we have seen raised centuries later in connection with the internet.

First, the inability to ensure the quality of printed material. Already in the middle of the sixteenth century voices in the Jewish community bemoaned the fact that, since the advent of printing, “every person arrogates unto himself the authority (lit. “assumes the crown for himself, *notel atarah leatzmo*”) to compose books...saying...that my name should be inscribed with an iron stylus and lead” (*Job 19:24*)” and some described such individuals as “the rabble who cultivated a craving (*Num. 11:4*) to make for themselves a name (cf. *Gen. 11:4*).”²¹ In 1587, the rabbinic leadership in Ferrara, Italy, expressed concern over the fact that “we have already seen people from our generation who composed and printed books that need to be discarded or thrown into fire, the books and their authors, because they are not proper (*delo kehilkheta ninhu*). Not everyone who wishes to assume a [good] name may take it (*Ber. 16b*), unless he is acknowledged as being able to grant rulings in Israel.”²²

The most well-known and oft cited source for this sentiment is a statement made by R. Yoseif Shlomoh Delmedigo (1591-1655). He noted that, in earlier times, manuscripts were extremely costly to write and, as a result, only those with worthwhile content were produced and those deemed to be unworthy simply disappeared. But now printing changed this. In a play on words in a verse in the *Esther* (8:17), “*rabim mei’amei haaretz mityahadim*, many of the people of the land professed to be Jews”, he wrote, “*rabim mei’amei haaretz mityaharim*, many ignorant people become boastful”. And, he continued, in a desire to become famous, they “make crooked that which is straight” by publishing books that feature introductions in which they are described by exaggerated and undeserved honorific titles. He even went so far as to write that “the business of printing perverted Torah (*melekhet hadefus qilqeil haTorah*).”²³ Later, in 1786, a proclamation was

¹⁹ B.R.O’G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983; rev. ed., 1991). My thanks to Dr. Mark Lichbach for bringing this work to my attention.

²⁰ For these formulations, see E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, 3, 317, 325, 327, 389, 431, 433.

²¹ See R. Eliyahu Menahem Halfon’s introduction to the *Beit Yoseif* of R. Yoseif Qaro, printed in the Venice, 1551 edition of that work, cited in M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Zvi and Mossad HaRav Kook, 1971), 83 n.2. My thanks to Dr. Jeremy Brown for bringing this book to my attention. See also Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 126-27.

²² This is cited in M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 94. For more on this enactment, see below. For other examples, see *ibid.*, 95 n.2 (from Amsterdam, 1662) and 125 n.3 (from Frankfurt, 1681).

²³ See R. Y.S. Delmedigo, *Novelot Hokhmah* (Basilea, 1631; repr. Brooklyn, 1993), introduction, n.p., 13. R. Delmedigo’s harsh negative assessment was cited by R. Yonah Landsofer, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Me’il Tzedaqah* (Prague, 1757), introduction n.p., 5, s.v. “*umah yashru*”; R. Eliezer Flekeles, *Teshuvah mei’Ahavah #2:259*, beginning. Delmedigo’s assessment was so influential that R. Flekeles elsewhere felt the need to argue that Delmedigo only meant to demean the publications of those authors who were unlearned but did mean it as a general indictment against any printed books. See R. E. Flekeles, *Teshuvah mei’Ahavah*, vol. 1, “*Haqdamah Sheniyah*,” beginning. See also S.Y. Agnon, *Seifer Sofer veSippur*, p. 158; M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 96 n.1; Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hagahot uMagihim*, 300; *idem*, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 138-39, 155-56; J. Teplitsky, *Prince of the Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 133. This sentiment is reminiscent of that expressed by Martin Luther who was cited earlier (Supra n.19) as praising printing. In 1569 he observed,

issued in Prague at the behest of its then Chief Rabbi, R. Yehezqel Landau, who viewed with grave concern the proliferation of what he considered to be unworthy and misleading books. In his proclamation, he banned anyone under the age of forty from publishing commentaries on the Talmud or their own halakhic rulings.²⁴

Second, the proliferation of error due to the permanence of print. R. Menahem b. Aaron Ibn Zerah (d. 1385) noted that, originally—prior to R. Judah the Prince’s redaction of the *Mishnah*—teachings were deliberately not committed to writing to insure that people not be able to copy these texts erroneously.²⁵ And the problem he described regarding written manuscripts was only magnified many times over with the advent of printing. The challenge became particularly acute when prohibitions were established against hiring Jewish typesetters. Under this new arrangement, non-Jews set the type and then Jewish “correctors” would review their work for accuracy. It often occurred, however, that the non-Jews did their work late Friday afternoon or on Shabbat and the book went to press without the benefit of Jewish oversight, often resulting in errors that were too late to be corrected. There is evidence that this, indeed, occurred dozens of times in the sixteenth century.²⁶

Worse, as R. Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha; 1555-1631) noted, individuals’ incorrect and irresponsible emendation of texts were now becoming entrenched by being replicated many times in printed works. Before printing, an individual who did not understand a given passage in the Talmud, Rashi or Tosafot might assume that the text must be corrupt and would go ahead and “correct” it in the margin of the text he was using. Now, a printer will see the “correction” and, thinking that it is authoritative, will substitute it for the original version. However, the reality is that the first reader erred and the original text was correct. But, because the passage was now committed to print, it will be corrupted forever.²⁷ True, the opposition on the part of a number of scholars to making any corrections in a text began already in the days of the manuscript, but those voices only became stronger after the advent of printing.²⁸

Third, the ease with which one is able to embarrass others and destroy another’s reputation. In 1619, the responsa collection of R. Meir of Lublin (1558-1616) was published in Venice. One responsum addressed an Italian matter that was brought to R. Meir’s attention. A bitter controversy in the community of Mantua between a R. Asher Grasito and a R. Raphael Zividal had resulted in personal besmirching and slandering.

“The multitude of books is a great evil. There is no measure of limit to this fever for writing: everyone must be an author; some out of vanity, to acquire celebrity and raise up a name; others for the sake of mere gain.” See C. Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, p. 47.

²⁴ His ruling is cited by his student, Rabbi Eliezer Flekeles, in his *Teshuvah mei’Ahavah* #3:375 (Prague, 1821, 50a). My thanks to R. Ari Zivitsky for bringing this source to my attention. See also R. Ovadya Yoseif, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Yabi’a Omer*, vol. 4 (*Hoshen Mishpat*), #1, for an extensive analysis of this issue. In the course of his discussion there, he cites this proclamation. See 467. See too N. Abrahams, “Ma’amar Darkhei haHora’ah”, *Hama’or* 72:5 (2019), 147-50; *idem*, “Ma’amar Darkhei haHora’ah, Heleq Bet”, 82-83.

²⁵ R. Menahem Ibn Zerah, *Tzeidah laDerekh* (Warsaw, 1880), introduction, 2b.

²⁶ See M.J. Heller, “And the Work, the Work of Heaven, was Performed on Shabbat”, 174-85, and the references noted there, 183 n.5. See also Shmuel ibn Dysus, editor of *Sefer Keter Shem Tov* by R. Shem Tov Melamed (Venice, 1596), 136b; S.H. Kook, *Iyunim uMehqarim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1963), 374.

²⁷ R. Shmuel Eidels, Introduction to *Hiddushei Aggadot* of Maharsha, *Berakhot*. R. Hayyim Yoseif David Azulai referred to this passage of the Maharsha in his *Birkei Yoseif*, *Yoreh Dei’ah* 279:3. See also Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hagahot uMagihim*, 322. For other sources, see Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 147-52.

²⁸ See the sources cited in Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hagahot uMagihim*, 249-83. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Fernando de Rojas complained that printers consciously made changes in the text of his work, against his will. See R. Chartier, “Texts, Printing, Readings”, in L. Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 160-61. For another example, from 1515, see E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, 347.

When rabbis from Venice sided with R. Zividal, R. Grasio disparaged them. A group of prominent rabbis ruled that he be stripped of his rabbinic title until he pacifies his opponent as well as their Venetian colleagues. They were joined by R. Meir who expressed in this responsum harsh words against R. Grasio and ruled that he be punished until he admits his wrongdoing.²⁹ Shortly after the publication of R. Meir's responsa, R. Grasio's children appealed to Venice's rabbinic authorities to remove these negative words from the book. They argued that R. Meir's perspective was one sided and did not include other, more favorable, assessments of their father and, moreover, why perpetuate a controversy when both protagonists are no longer alive? The Venetian authorities ruled in their favor. They tried to correct the damage by requiring that the volume including the offending page be reprinted without it and that owners of the current version of the book replace their copies of the offending page with a new one. They added that if, in the future, someone was to discover that he had a copy of the original version of the book with the offensive passage, that page was to be burnt.³⁰

R. Ya'ir Hayyim Bakhrakh adopted a proactive solution to this problem of potential public embarrassment. In the introduction to his collection of responsa, *Havot Ya'ir*, he explained why he tended to omit identifying names or places of residence of contemporary scholars with whom he disagreed. He noted that if such an individual were still alive, "may God lengthen his days and years", he might be embarrassed by everyone finding out that "a lion" like him turned to R. Bakhrakh, only "a fox", for guidance. In addition, that individual might be upset by R. Bakhrakh's clear refutation of his position. The public nature of committing something to print could potentially be embarrassing and, therefore, he wrote, should be avoided. The dangerous power of the printed word was recognized and acknowledged.³¹

Furthermore, R. Moses Isserles noted in one of his responsa that putting *lashon hara'* in writing is more egregious than verbally stating it.³² Reputations are more likely to be ruined the greater the number of people exposed to pejorative information about that person. And if this is true about writing, it is surely true when the damaging information is published in the more authoritative and lasting medium of print.³³

Fourth, a waste of time. The 1587 Ferrara enactment cited earlier bemoaned the fact that the easy accessibility of mediocre books pushed more meaningful, substantive and worthwhile works, "full of wisdom and knowledge", to the margins. People spent their

²⁹ See *Seifer She'eilot uTeshuvot Maharam Lublin* #13. For a description of this responsum, and the event that precipitated this controversy, see D. Fränkel, "Diquduqei Sefarim", *Alim leBibliografiah veQorot Yisrael* 4 (1935), 112-14; I. Rivkind, "Diquduqei-Sefarim", in *Seifer HaYovel Likhvod Aleksander Marx* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 427-28. See there for a facsimile of these few lines.

³⁰ See J.A. Modena, *She'eilot uTeshuvot Ziqnei Yehudah*, S. Simonsohn (ed.) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1956), 44-45, #28; Y. Boksenboim (ed.), *Iggerot Rabi Yehudah Aryeh MiModena* (Tel Aviv: Daf Hhen Press, 1984), 255-60 (see 33 for the background of this controversy). In fact, in subsequent printed editions of his responsa (I examined those printed in Warsaw, 1881; in Brooklyn, 1961; and in Jerusalem, 1997) this responsum appears without this passage. In each of these cases, the type was reset to allow for the original pagination to remain intact and unchanged. See too M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Veneziyah*, 79 n.3.

³¹ R. Ya'ir Hayyim Bakhrakh, *She'eilot uTeshuvot Havot Ya'ir*, introduction; cited in Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer halvri: Hadar haMehaber*, 153-54. Spiegel there notes other examples where this consideration is expressed by some after the fact, either themselves regretting having printed the names of individuals about whom they were critical or finding fault with others for having done so.

³² R. Moshe Isserles, *She'eilot uTeshuvot Ram" a* #11 (A. Ziv, [ed.] [Jerusalem, 1971], 55). This ruling is cited by R. Shalom Mordechai Schwadron, *She'eilot uTeshuvot Maharashda" m* #7:93.

³³ See R. N. Hoffner, *Taharat haLashon vohaNefesh* (Tel Aviv: Mossad Eliezer Hoffner, 1992), 47. My thanks to Rabbi Joshua Flug for bringing this reference to my attention.

time with frivolous pursuits rather than with books that could bring them much benefit.³⁴

Fifth, diminution of authority. Until the invention of printing, the learned elite enjoyed a virtually exclusive monopoly on knowledge and its dissemination. Now, the relatively easy accessibility and availability of the printed text undermined their hitherto exalted status. Social and intellectual hierarchies were disrupted by new forms of access to knowledge now available to many.

Admittedly, this kind of a complaint has a long history. In early rabbinic Jewish culture, primacy of place was reserved for knowledge transmitted orally (*Torah shebe'el peh*), so much so that one was enjoined from committing it to writing (*Gitt.* 60b). Even after the oral tradition was written, the preferred mode of imparting wisdom was still to do so in a direct unmediated way, from teacher to student. In fact, this mode of instruction characterized the practice in the Babylonian academies headed by the geonim. Such a personal encounter between master and disciple became unsustainable, however, with the dispersion of Jews across areas of the Middle East, North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula in the aftermath of the Muslim conquests and with the later emergence of Ashkenazi Jewry in Germany. The text now replaced the teacher as the source of knowledge; anyone with access to the text could now claim the mantle of rabbinic authority that hitherto had been the sole prerogative of a limited rabbinic elite.³⁵

This shift—from knowledge gained through close proximity to a teacher to knowledge gained from a text—became highly intensified with the advent of printing. By making it possible for the book to become the primary source of Torah knowledge on an unprecedented level, the primary role of the teacher became seriously undermined and threatened. The printed book, now relatively easily available to large numbers of people, could—and did—take the place of the teacher or head of the yeshivah, who had, until that point, still enjoyed prominence in the process of the transmission of Torah wisdom. Traditional categories of appropriate sources of Torah knowledge (personal study in the yeshivah and learning from its head) collapsed as a new community of learners was created consisting of those who now had unfettered access to the knowledge contained in newly printed books, independent of a teacher and outside the framework of any traditional Torah institution.

Moshe Rosman described this well:

Groups formerly unassociated with book culture, such as artisans, merchants, women, and children, constituted new audiences. Rather than acquire only such knowledge as the clergy or the teachers decided to impart, they could now study on their own and believed that they had the right to do so. Many were threatened by the fact that the elitist nature hitherto inherent in the oral transmission of Torah knowledge was being undermined and threatened by the written text.

As Rosman went on to describe, this new reality carried implications:

This new state of affairs altered the relationship between knowledge and authority. Formerly, the transmitter of knowledge had nearly complete control over it. Only he had the book; he conveyed its contents by way of an oral interpretation that was automatically authoritative to his listeners... Yet once people could read the books for themselves, they could

³⁴ See M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 95-96.

³⁵ This was addressed by Elli Fischer at the paper he delivered at the conference that served as the basis for the essays in this volume.

listen to interpretation critically. The authority of the teacher was no longer guaranteed. In fact, the necessity for a teacher was reduced. A person's encounter with the wisdom of the past could be direct, without an intermediary. Knowledge would not be reserved by an elite for itself. People could choose whether to learn, what they wanted to learn, and how they wanted to learn it.³⁶

Johannes Pederson noted that the Muslims solved this problem by simply outlawing printing, pointing to the fact that the earliest books in Arabic were not printed in Muslim countries but in Italy.³⁷ But Jews, however, did not outlaw printing and, therefore, had to confront this issue.

A clear example of a work that threatened the special status of the rabbinic elite was the *Shulḥan Arukh* written by R. Joseph Qaro and first published in Venice in 1564-1565. R. Qaro's earlier work, his *Beit Yoseif* commentary on the *Turim* of R. Jacob b. R. Asher first published in 1550, to wide acclaim, had already aroused criticism. R. Shlomoh Luria had complained that "through it, small (*qetanim*) and large (*gedolim*), young (*ne'arim*) and elderly (*zeqenim*) were equalized."³⁸ The criticism was raised to a new level, however, with the publication of the *Shulḥan Arukh* in 1564-1565 and with the joint publication of both the text of the *Shulḥan Arukh* and the comments of R. Moshe Isserles in 1570-1571. While both versions of the text merited almost immediate widespread acceptance,³⁹ they also engendered much opposition. In his introduction, R. Qaro stated that he composed the *Shulḥan Arukh* "so that 'the perfect Torah of the Lord' (*Ps. 19:8*) should be fluent in the mouth of every Jew (*shegurah befi kol ish yisrael*)," which led some to believe that he was clearly indicating that his intended audience was laymen and not the rabbinic elite.⁴⁰ Indeed, the *Shulḥan Arukh*, with the comments of R. Moses Isserles, was widely adopted by laymen to circumvent extensive study and to obviate the need to consult with the rabbinic elite. R. Shmuel Eidels, among others, sharply disapproved of this work because it enabled non-scholars to base their rulings on it "and, behold, they do not know the reason for every matter." He condemned them as "evildoers (*mevalei olam*)" and concluded that "one should scold them (*veyeish lig'or bahen*)."⁴¹ R. Judah Aryeh Modena

³⁶ M. Rosman, "Innovative Tradition: Jewish Culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth", in D. Biale (ed.) *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 530-32.

³⁷ J. Pederson, *The Arabic Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 131-34. See also M. Eliav-Feldon, *Mahapekhat haDefus* (Jerusalem, Misrad haBitahon, 2000), 66-67. For a comprehensive analysis of this issue, see K.A. Schwartz, "Did Ottoman Sultans Ban Print?", *Book History* 20 (2017), 1-39.

³⁸ R. Shlomoh Luria, second introduction, *Yam shel Shlomoh, Hullin* (Offenbach, 1718). For further evidence for the acceptance of, as well as opposition to, this work on a number of different grounds, see B. Landau, "LeToledot Maran Rabi Yoseif Qaro," in Y. Refael (ed.), *Rabi Yoseif Qaro* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1969), 32-34.

³⁹ Within a very short period of time, the *Shulḥan Arukh* was printed nine times in Venice (from 1564-1565 to 1597-1598) and once in Salonika (1567-1568), the first four in the lifetime of its author. Additionally, it was printed eight times together with Rabbi Isserles's comments between 1570-1571 and 1632, seven times in Cracow and once in Venice. See N. Ben-Menaḥem, "HaDefusim haRishonim shel ha'Shulḥan Arukh'," in Y. Refael (ed.), *Rabi Yoseif Qaro*, 101.

⁴⁰ R. Mal'akhi b. Ya'aqov haKohen, *Yad Mal'akhi*, "Kelalei haShulḥan Arukh", #2 (Jerusalem, 1976), 196b, cites this position in the name of Rabbi Yom Tov Tzahalon (*She'eilot uTeshuvot Yom Tov Tzahalon* #67) and disagrees, claiming that it was also written for scholars. See also R. Ḥayyim Yoseif David Azulai, *Sheim haGedolim, Ma'arekhet Sefarim*, "Shulḥan Arukh." On this, see H. Tchernowitz, *Toledot HaPoseqim*, vol. 3 (New York: The Shoulson Press, 1947), 25-28; M. Fogelman, "Piskei Halakhot ad le'Shulḥan Arukh'", in Y. Refael (ed.), *Rabi Yoseif Qaro*, 126. One should note that the very next words after those cited here are, "for when one asks a scholar (*talmid hakam*) [regarding] a matter of Jewish law he will not hesitate." There is an ambiguity here; the sentence begins with "*kol ish yisrael*" and continues with "*talmid hakam*."

⁴¹ R. Shmuel Eidels, *Maharsha, Hiddushei Halakhot, Sotah* 22a, s.v. *yeira*. For a response to this critique of the Maharsha, see *Pithei Teshuvah, Yoreh Dei'ah* 242:8.

recorded even more glaringly that, “After the printing of the *Shulhan Arukh*, my ears heard an ignoramus (*am ha’aretz*) . . . say: ‘When I have the *Shulhan Arukh* under my arms I do not need any one of you rabbis.’”⁴²

Elchanan Reiner has also drawn repeated attention to R. Hayyim b. Betzalel’s introduction to his *Vikuah Mayyim Hayyim* where that author levels this critique overtly at the *Torat Hataat* of R. Moshe Isserles and, more obliquely but quite clearly, at the entire enterprise of codification itself.⁴³

Less confrontationally, customs of public study from a community’s scholar were significantly curtailed. For example, in the course of discussing the dual obligation to study the laws of a holiday starting thirty days before its arrival as well as on the holiday itself, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1812) noted, twice, that the scholar no longer expounds upon those laws either prior to or on the holiday itself “because everything is written in a book.”⁴⁴ The scholar has lost his special status. The text, and not the teacher, is now the ultimate authority. Knowledge has become “democratized” and anyone now could become a rabbinic decisor; “The householder [has been transformed] into a priest.”⁴⁵

In short, before the spread of printed codes, the recognized rabbinic decisor enjoyed an exclusive status as a member of the small rabbinic elite. Only he and his colleagues had

⁴² R. Yehudah Aryeh Modena, *Ari Noheim* (Jerusalem: Eretz Yisrael, 1929), 51. For this statement in the context of Modena’s thought, see Y. Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 55-56. Dweck notes there that no fewer than eighteen editions of the *Shulhan Arukh* were in print by the time these words were written. For this sentiment, see also R. Ya’aqov Emden, *Mor uQetzi’ah* #178. For more on the impact of the *Shulhan Arukh*, see Y.M. Toledano, “Matay uveEilu Meqomot Nitqabel ha-Sh”A leHalakha Pesuqah?”, in Y. Refael (ed.), *Rabi Yosief Qaro*, 184-88; Y. Faur, “Yahas Hakhmei haSefardim leSamkhat Maran kePoseiq,” in Y. Refael (ed.), *Rabi Yoseif Qaro*, 181-97; Joseph Davis, “The Reception of the Shulhan ‘Arukh and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identity”, *AJS Review* 26:2 (2002), 251-76. The entire volume three of H. Tchernowitz, *Toledot HaPoseqim*, is devoted to this issue. For a later, nineteenth century example, see the comment reported in the name of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin who is said to have refused to provide an approbation to the code entitled *Hayei Adam* because the book would result in the diminution of honor due Torah scholars due to the fact that everyone will fancy themselves an expert in Jewish law. See M.S. Shmukler (Shapira), *Toledot Rabbeinu Hayyim miVolozhin* (Jerusalem, 1968), 60.

⁴³ E. Reiner, “Temurot veYeshivot Polin veAshkenaz beMei’ot ha-16 ha-17 vebaVikuah al haPilpul,” in Yisrael Bartal et al. (eds.), *KeMinhag Ashkenaz uPolin: Seifer Yoveil leHone Shmeruk* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1993), 46; *idem*, “The Ashkenazi Élite”; *idem*, “Aliyat ‘haQehillah haGedolah,” esp. 17-23. For other references to R. Hayyim b. Bezael’s critique, see H. Tchernowitz, *Toledot HaPoseqim*, vol. 3, 91-100 (Tchernowitz attributes the fact that the book was only republished twice, and each time minus the introduction, to the fact that R. Hayyim’s critique was considered to be too harsh); I. (E.) Zimmer, *Rabi Hayyim beR. Betzaleil miFridberg* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1987), 82-83; *idem*, *Gahalatan shel Hakhamim* (Jerusalem: Ben Gurion University Press, 1999), 210-13, 307-17. See also Joseph Davis, “The Reception of the Shulhan ‘Arukh”, 264.

⁴⁴ R. Shnayer Zalman of Lyady, *Shulhan Arukh HaRav, Hil. Pesah* 429:3, 4. Similarly, R. Moshe Shternbuch notes that for the same reason people tended to be lenient in fulfilling the obligation to visit their teacher on a holiday. He would, in any case, not be expounding on the laws of the holiday, wrote Rabbi Shternbuch, “because there are many books.” See his *She’eilot uTeshuvot Teshuvot veHanahagot*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1994), 272, #322. See too R.P. Zevihi, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Ateret Paz*, part 1, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1998), 612-13; repr. in *idem*, *Quntres Mizvat Qabbalat Penei Rabo baRegel* (Jerusalem, 2001), 61.

⁴⁵ For this last phrase, see E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, 427. See also S. Yahalom, “Historical Background to Nahmanides’ Acre Sermon for Rosh Hashanah: The Strengthening of the Catalonian Center”, *Sefarad* 68:2 (2008), 9; T. Turán, “Terse Analogical Reasoning in Responsa Literature: Four Medieval Examples”, in V. Bányai and S.R. Komoróczy (eds.), *Studies in Responsa Literature* (Budapest: Center of Jewish Studies, 2011), 37-38. See also R. Moshe Isserles, *She’eilot uTeshuvot Ram”a* #24, end; D.B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 99-105. For this phenomenon in Christian culture, see E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, 305; C. Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 189; E. Reiner, “‘Ein Tzarikh Shum Yehudi Lilmod Davar Raq haTalmud Levado’: Al Limud veTokhnei Limud beAshkenaz Bimei haSeifer haRishonim”, in A.(R.) Reiner et al. (eds.), *Ta Shema: Mehqarim beMada’ei haYahadut leZikhro shel Yisrael M’ Ta-Shema*, vol. 2 (Alon Shevut: Hotza’at Tevunot, 2012), 738.

the authority to determine Jewish law. With the spread of the printed book, however, this exclusivity was undermined and destroyed.

There is one specific context where this challenge had practical consequences. In premodern times, a special category of scholars who were distinguished by their deep and wide-ranging knowledge gained by a lifetime of study (“*talmidei ḥakhamim*”) were granted certain privileges like exemption from taxes.⁴⁶ Now, however, with the advent of printing, R. Yehezqel Katzenellenbogen (d. 1749) ruled that this special category of scholar had disappeared because, now, many—even mediocre scholars—had the ability to read a book and demonstrate knowledge and expertise. As a result, the practice became that only universally acknowledged scholars whose wisdom was recognized by all could, from here on, benefit from this prerogative.⁴⁷

Sixth, the easy accessibility of inappropriate material. Rabbis recognized early on this serious danger posed by the new development of printing. Already in Salonika in 1529, some thirty years after the establishment of the first printing press in that city, the rabbinic leadership there took steps to curb what they had already begun to experience as a challenge to traditional Jewish life. Having seen that the printers “published a number of things that were not appropriate to print”, they resolved not to allow any Jew to print anything at all without the permission of six rabbis (*talmidei ḥakhamim marbitzei Torah*), and placed whoever would transgress their enactment—both printer and purchaser—under the ban.⁴⁸ Although it does not appear that this rabbinic ordinance had an impact, it indicates that this matter was of deep concern to rabbinic authorities. This concern is also further indicated by the fact that similar ordinances were repeatedly promulgated by the authorities in Ferrara (1554 and 1587), by the Council of the Four Lands (1594), and by the leadership of the Frankfurt community and the nearby cities of Worms, Mainz, Fulda, and Friedberg, among others (1603).⁴⁹ For our discussion of the challenges of the internet, it is parenthetically worthwhile to note that, unlike the Salonika ordinance, the first Ferrara ordinance did not explicitly include books that had already been printed. It appears that they acknowledged that once a book had been published and circulated, the chance that it

⁴⁶ See *Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh Dei'ah* #243. This exemption has a long history. See, for example, Y. Ta-Shema, “*Al Petur Talmidei Ḥakhamim miMisim be-Yemei haBeinayim*”, *Iyyunim beSifrut Ḥazal beMiqrā ubeToledot Yisra'el Muqdash leProfesor Ezra Tzion Melamed* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1982), 312-22; Y. Hacker, “*Petur Talmidei Ḥakhamim miMisim beMei'ah haShesh Esreh*”, *Shalem* 4 (1984), 63-117; R. Bonfil, *HaRabbanut beTalyah beTequfat haRenaisans* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 55-56, 229-34; B. Septimus, “*Kings, Angels or Beggars? Tax Law and Spirituality in a Hispano-Jewish Responsum*”, *Studies in Medieval Jewish Literature* 2 (1984), 309-35; B. Rosensweig, “*Taxation in the Late Middle Ages in Germany and Austria*”, *Diné Israel* 12 (1984-1985), 87-89; H. Gefen, “*Ha'im Yeish 'Talmid Ḥakham' beZmaneinu?*,” *Shma'atin* 172-173 (2008), 101-02.

⁴⁷ R. Y. Katzenellenbogen, *She'eilot uTeshuvot Knesset Yehezqel* #95. This responsum is cited in *Pithei Teshuvah, Yoreh Dei'ah* #343:3.

⁴⁸ A. Danon, “*Les Communauté Juive de Salonique au XVI^e Siècle*”, *REJ* 41 (1900), 264, no.23; M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 72-73; Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha'Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 138.

⁴⁹ For the Ferrara 1554 enactment, see L. Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1924; repr. New York: Phillip Feldheim, Inc., 1964), 300-01, 304; M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 80-81. For the Ferrara 1587 enactment, see M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 92-95. For the 1594 enactment by the Council of the Four Lands, see I. Halperin, *Pinqas Va'ad Arba Aratzot*, vol. 1, I. Bartal (ed.) (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1990), 7, nos.16-17. For the 1603 Frankfurt enactment, see M. Horowitz, *Frankfurter Rabbinen* (repr. Kfar Haroeh: Ahuva Co-op Press, 1969), 40-42, 277-78; idem., *Rabbanei Frankfurt* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1972), 29-31, 196; L. Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages*, 80, 263; M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 125; B.E. Klein, “*The 1603 Assembly in Frankfurt: Prehistory, Ordinances, Effects*”, *Jewish Culture and History* 10:2-3 (2008), 111-24; J. Teplitsky, *Prince of the Press*, 164. For a discussion of all of these enactments, see J.R. Hacker, “*Sixteenth-Century Jewish Internal Censorship of Hebrew Books*,” in J.R. Hacker and A. Shear (eds.), *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 110-14.

could be recalled was minimal. Finally, it is also interesting to note that the Ferrara 1587 enactment was the first one to explicitly include women among those who would be enjoined from purchasing these books.

There are many more references to the concern that printing was making inappropriate material more accessible. A famous example is the controversy that raged around the printing of Azariah de Rossi's *Me'or Einayim* which was completed in 1575. Some of the most prominent rabbinic authorities of that time were deeply upset by what they considered to be de Rossi's unacceptable non-literal interpretations of various talmudic and midrashic stories (*aggadot*) and by his challenging the validity of the traditional rabbinic chronology for dating the creation of the world. As a result, a series of *herem* proclamations were promulgated against the book in a number of Italian cities and even as far afield as Safed.⁵⁰

Elchanan Reiner has pointed out that printing raised the possibility that even worthwhile books would be rendered inappropriate when made too widely available. He drew attention to books that were printed primarily in Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century which began to appear in the Ashkenazi world a few decades later. This expanded the kinds of texts that had hitherto constituted the traditional canon of study in the Ashkenazi *yeshivot*. This new reality aroused great consternation and concern among parts of the then rabbinic elite. Some welcomed the exposure to this new material, like Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* which was first printed in Venice in 1551, and other philosophical works. But others were deeply disturbed by, and railed against, their easy accessibility.⁵¹ In their eyes, the boundaries of the traditional rabbinic canon were being inappropriately and dangerously broadened.

This matter was addressed most comprehensively in the context of the first printing and resultant dissemination of the *Zohar* and other esoteric works in Italy in 1558-1560.⁵² A huge controversy erupted with many, at that time and later, expressing grave concerns that material best left private was being brought indiscriminately, and inappropriately, into the public domain.⁵³ This objection was later extended, in the middle of the seventeenth

⁵⁰ For descriptions of this controversy, see M. Benayahu, "*Ha-Polmus 'al Seifer Me'or Einayim le-Rabi Azariah min ha'Adumim*", *Asufot* 5 (1991), 223-37; R. Bonfil, "Some Reflections on the Place of Azariah de Rossi's *Meor Enayim* in the Cultural Milieu of Italian Renaissance Jewry", in B.D. Cooperman (ed.), *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 25-31; *idem*, "Mavo", *Kitvei Azariah min ha'Adumim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1991), 96-119; J. Weinberg, *The Light of the Eyes: Azariah de' Rossi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xlii-xliv. See too J.R. Hacker, "Sixteenth-Century Jewish Internal Censorship of Hebrew Books", 116-17; Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha'Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 143.

⁵¹ See, especially E. Reiner, "*Ein Tzarikh Shum Yehudi*", esp. 709, 711, 713-16, 718-24, 731, 741. The classical article that began the discussion of this issue is P. Bloch, "Der Streit um den Moreh des Maimonides in der Gemeinde Posen um die Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts", *MGWJ* 47 (1903), 153-69, 263-79, 346-56. It is dealt with at length in E. Reiner, "*Ein Tzarikh Shum Yehudi*", 705-46; *idem*, "*Yashan Mipnei Hadash: Al Temurot beTokhnei Limud beYeshivot Polin beMei'ah ha-16 veYeshivato shel Ram" a beKrakov*", in S. Glick (ed.), *Zekhor Davar leAvdekh: Asufot Ma'amarim leZeikher Dov Rappel* (Jerusalem: HaMerkaz leHagut beHinuakh haYehudi al sheim Dov Rappel, 2007), 189-93. See also Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha'Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 141-42.

⁵² For a chronology of the first printings of the *Zohar*, see M. Benayahu, *HaDefus Ha'Ivri biKremona* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Zvi and Mossad HaRav Kook, 1971), 121-37.

⁵³ For many examples of this argument, see S. Assaf, "*LePolmus al Hadpasat Sifrei Qabbalah*", in *idem*, *Meqorot uMehqarim beToledot Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1946), 238-46; Y. Tishby, "*HaPolmus al Seifer haZohar beMei'ah haSheish Esrei be'Italyah*", *Peraqim* 1 (1967), 131-82; repr. in *idem*, *Hiqrei Qabbalah uSheluhotehah: Mehqarim uMeqorot*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 131-82; Y. Hacker, "*Iggeret Hadashah min haPolmus al Hadpasat haZohar be'Italyah*", in M. Oron and A. Goldreich (eds.), *Masu'ot: Mehqarim beSifrut haQabbalah ubeMahshevet Yisrael Muqdashim leZikhro shel Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb z"l* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1994), 120-30, and the additional references cited there in n.1; M. Benayahu, *Haskamah uReshut biDefusei Venetzyah*, 82 n.1. See, also, B. Huss, *KeZohar haRaqi'a* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Zvi and Mossad Bialik, 2008), 227-42; D.B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry*, 103-

century, to the printing of other esoteric works. It was formulated on three levels: First, the easy availability of printing caused respected classics of the kabbalistic tradition to lose their special status. Second, it enabled authors to popularize their own esoteric kabbalistic views in an inappropriate fashion, a further example of the complaint about a lack of proper quality control already discussed above.⁵⁴ Third, it enabled people to study these works without proper preparation thereby leading them to misunderstand and distort what they were reading.

One final example. In his *Shulhan Arukh*, R. Yoseif Karo ruled that one should avoid reading certain fables or riddles and works that describe battles or arouse desire. And he went on to write that, “One who composes them, and one who copies them, and certainly one who prints them causes the public to sin.”⁵⁵ Writing and copying inappropriate material is wrong, but publishing them, thereby making them accessible to a much larger number of people, raises the egregiousness of the act to a new level.⁵⁶

C. Contemporary Implications

Looking back, there is no doubt that the advent of printing irrevocably altered Jewish learning and the nature of rabbinic authority. Jay R. Berkovitz wrote that “the social and intellectual foundations of medieval Judaism were shaken by the invention of printing.”⁵⁷ This new mode of transmitting knowledge definitely had a significant impact. But, despite the challenges it posed, the printing of Jewish works flourished. And it did so because many in the Jewish community recognized how important and useful it would be for their own scholarly and communal agendas.

I already noted how the *Shulhan Arukh* was widely acclaimed. Moreover, it was precisely R. Yoseif Qaro and R. Moshe Isserles—the most respected representatives of the rabbinic elite in the sixteenth century when printing began to influence Jewish life—who recognized printing’s significant power and utility.⁵⁸ Furthermore, as Professor Reiner has

05; J.H. Chajes, “‘Too Holy to Print’: Taboo Anxiety and the Publishing of Practical Hebrew Esoterica”, *Jewish History* 26 (2012), 247-62. For the centrality of this issue in the Hayon Controversy in the second decade of the eighteenth century, see Paweł Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 88-89.

⁵⁴ See, for example, R. Berekhiah Berakh b. Yizhak Eizik, *Zera’ Berakh* (Amsterdam, 1662), introduction; cited in E. Reiner, “*Yashan Mipnei Hadash*”, 198 n.30. See also G.D. Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 119; Y. Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah*, 56-57, 70-74; Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 139-41. For an example of those who welcomed the opportunity to disseminate this material, see E. Reiner, “*Yashan Mipnei Hadash*”, 197-98.

⁵⁵ R. Yoseif Qaro, *Shulhan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim* 307:16. On this, see Y.Z. Kahana, *HaDefus beHalakhah* (1945), 32; (1973), 298.

⁵⁶ Many more expressions of each of the five concerns outlined here are forthcoming in a variety of other sources but, strikingly, almost all of them are found in one source, a responsum of Rabbi Moses Sofer, See *She’eilot uTeshuvot Hatam Sofer*, Liqutim, #6:61. This responsum is cited in R. Barukh Halevi Epstein, *Meqor Barukh*, vol. 3 (Vilna: Rom Publishing, 1928), 1266. See Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri: Hadar haMehaber*, 146-47. For Hatam Sofer and printing, see D. Nimmer, “In the Shadow of the Emperor: The Hatam Sofer’s Copyright Rulings”, *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 15 (2008-2009), 24-67. For examples of this in the Christian tradition, see N.Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1975), 220-23; C.S. Clegg, “The Authority and Subversiveness of Print in Early-Modern Europe”, in L. Howsam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, 125-42.

⁵⁷ J.R. Berkovitz, “Rabbinic Culture and the Historical Development of Halakhah”, in J. Karp and A. Sutcliffe (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 7, “The Early Modern World” (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 349.

⁵⁸ For Rabbi Qaro, see A. Raz-Krokotzkin, “*Haqiqah, Meshihiyut veTzenzurah: Hadfasat ha-Shulhan Arukh keReishit ha-Modernityut*”, in E. Baumgarten, R. Weinstein, and A. Raz-Krokotzkin (eds.), *Tuv ‘Elem: Zikkaron, Qehillah uMigdar beHevrot Yehudiyot biYemei haBeinayim ubeReishit ha’Eit haHadashah: Ma’amarim Likhvodo shel Reuvein Bonfil* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2011), 306-35. For Rabbi Isserles, see the articles by E. Reiner referenced supra n.44; Y.S. Spiegel, *Amudim beToledot haSeifer ha’Ivri*:

demonstrated, these two figures did not stand alone. The use of printing was also championed by some who he characterized as members of the secondary rabbinic elite. These included R. Eliezer Altschul of Prague at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, and R. Avraham ben Binyamin Ze'eiv of Brisk in the second half of the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ They too saw in printing an opportunity to advance their interests.⁶⁰

Furthermore, David ben Menashe Darshan—born in Cracow in 1527—wrote in the introduction to his *Shir haMa'alot leDavid* (Cracow, 1571) that he wanted to establish a *bet midrash* (study hall) open to all, not only the scholarly elite, a kind of popular learning center similar to a public library. He proposed creating a space where the more than four hundred of his personal books that he would make available there would serve at the heart of his educational enterprise, rather than the traditional teacher. This remarkable new and forward-looking institution of learning was never established, but it demonstrates the new forms of learning made possible by the advent of printing.⁶¹

This raises the possibility that new forms of learning will also be made possible by the advent of the internet. Some are already taking place. But who knows? Perhaps the internet's impact will be far more dramatic, far-reaching, and much more fundamentally disruptive of how Jewish learning and rabbinic authority are understood. Although we have handily adapted to print, it is still too early to tell what the full impact of the internet will be. What can be said, however, is that a review of the challenges and impact of printing can help us better make sense of the new challenges and upcoming changes that are being wrought by the internet even as it may in the future develop in ways that we cannot yet fully appreciate.⁶²

Hagahot uMagihim, 302-08. For information about Erasmus and Calvin who both appreciated the power of the press, see E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, 401-02.

⁵⁹ E. Reiner, "A Biography of an Agent of Culture: Eleazar Altschul of Prague and his Literary Activity", in M. Graetz (ed.), *Schöpferische Momente des Europäischen Judentums in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2000), 229-47; *idem*, "Darshan Nodeid Madfis et Sefarav: Perek Alum beToledot haTarbut ha'Ivrit be'Eiropah beMei'ah haSheva' Esrei", in I. Bartal, G. Chazan-Rokem, et. al. (eds.), *Hut shel Hessed: Shai leHavah Turniansky* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2013), 123-56.

⁶⁰ E. Reiner, "The Ashkenazi Élite at the Beginning of the Modern Era: Manuscript versus Printed Book", *Polin* 10 (1997), 85-98; *idem*, "Aliyat 'haQehillah haGedolah': Al Shoroshei haQehillah haYehudit ha'Ironit bePolin be-'Eit haHadashah haMuqdemet", *Gal Eid* 20 (2006), 13-37; *idem*, "Ein Tzarikh Shum Yehudi", 705-46; his articles cited below, nn.44, 46, 60.

⁶¹ E. Reiner, "Ein Tzarikh Shum Yehudi", 717 n.22. See also H.H. Ben-Sasson, *Hagut veHanhagah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1959), 254-56; M. Rosman, "Innovative Tradition", 532-38; A. Bar-Levav, "Mah Efsar La'asot be-400 Sefarim? Haza'ah leSifriyah Yehudit, Krakov, Shnat 1571", *Zemanim* 112 (2010), 42-49. For an English translation and annotation of this work, see H.G. Perelmutter, *Shir Hama'alot l'David (Song of the Steps) and Ktav Hitnatzzelut leDarshanim (In Defense of Preachers) by David Darshan* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1984). See, especially, 39.

⁶² My thanks to Dr. Neil W. Netanel for helping me formulate this conclusion and to an anonymous reviewer of my article for her or his suggestions. I also want to express my gratitude to Dr. Elisha Ancselovits for his many insightful comments. And, finally, thanks to Laurence J. Rabinovich and Dr. Phillip Lieberman for their many kindnesses in seeing this article through to publication.

Jewish Law Association Studies XXIX

**The Impact of Technology, Science, and
Knowledge**

Edited by

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and Amos Israel-Vleeschhouwer

The Jewish Law Association
2020