Often Overlooked:
Examples of Front-matter in Early Hebrew Books
By
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It is regrettable that readers all too often ignore the front-matter in books. The preliminary pages preceding the text may include approbations (*hascamot*), prefaces, and introductions by printers, editors, financiers, the individual(s) who brought the book to press, and, most often, by the author. It is the reader’s loss if he bypasses this prefatory matter, which is often not related to the subject of the book, for it may well equal or surpass the text in interest.

Approbations, generally found on the first leaves after the title page, served varied purposes. Initially, from the mid-sixteenth century, they provided assurance that a book’s contents would not offend the Christian church. Later, approbations provided assurance to Jewish readers that the contents were consistent with Jewish beliefs and had the approval of prominent rabbis. A third form of approbation, actually a restrictive license, was granted to publishers and served as a copyright, forbidding republication for a fixed period of time, thus assuring the initial printer a secure income.¹

The editor’s preface may praise the book or author, but frequently it is also an apologia, stating “who can discern his errors” (Psalms 19:13), a reference to uncorrected errors. In other instances, particularly when the apologia is in the colophon, the editor writes that he should not be held responsible for errors, since the non-Jewish compositors set type and printed late the day before the Sabbath or on the Sabbath itself, when the Jewish editor was unable to correct the sheets.²

In this article I address the phenomenon of introductions in early Hebrew books that relate to the author’s harrowing or miraculous personal experiences. They are not linked by a common thread, but the reader who passes over this preliminary material,

¹ Restrictive approbations granted the publisher the sole right to print the protected work for a specified period of time, usually ten to twenty-five years, to allow the printer time to recoup his investment. These restrictive approbations often had a deleterious effect, resulting in disputes between printing-houses and reducing competition. One of the earliest usages of this form of approbation appears in the 1697-99 Frankfort on Oder Talmud (Berman Talmud). Raphael Natan Nuta Rabbinovicz, *Ma’amor ’al Hadpasat ha-Talmud with additions*, ed. A. M. Habermann (Jerusalem, 1952), p. 154-56 [Hebrew], observes that despite opposition from the Church, the Talmud was reprinted numerous times before restrictive approbations were instituted. Afterwards, however, the Talmud was printed only eight times between 1697 and 1797, and the price of a complete set of the Talmud was exorbitant. He concludes that after 1797 the use of restrictive approbations declined, with the consequence that the Talmud was printed nine times in the next four decades.

going directly to the subject text, is often bypassing the most fascinating account in the book. What distinguishes these introductions, particularly those with a wondrous element (such narratives often discounted as being aimed at the credulous), is that they are all either first-person narratives or written by someone who heard the story directly from the participant. This adds an element of credibility that would otherwise be absent from the narrative.

We begin with R. Abraham ben Jacob Saba’s (d. c. 1508) experiences, recorded in his ‘Eshkol ha-kofer on Megillat Ruth and Esther (Bardejov, 1907). Saba is best known for his Tseror ha-mor (Venice, 1522-23), a commentary on the weekly Torah readings. In his introduction to ‘Eshkol ha-kofer on Megillat Ruth—the title is from “My beloved is to me a cluster of henna (‘eshkol ha-kofer) in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi” (Song of Songs 1:14)—Saba records his experience at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. In the middle of a lengthy introduction he relates that he had intended to write a commentary on the five Megillot, and had done so, when:

“the anger of the Lord burned against his people” [Isaiah 5:25] and all the Jews in Portugal were subjected to the cruel decree of Manuel, King of Portugal, may his name and remembrance be blotted out. This, moreover, was insufficient, for he commanded that all the [Hebrew] books in his kingdom should be taken, after he had [already] taken all the sons and daughters and synagogues. I left all my books in the city of Porto because of the King’s decree. However, I endangered myself by bringing to Lisbon my [unpublished] commentaries on the Torah, Pirke ‘avot, the Five Megillot, and Tseror ha-kesef, which deals with legal matters and was composed by me in my youth. When I arrived at Lisbon, Jews from the city informed me that anyone found in the city with [Hebrew] books or tefillin would be put to death. Therefore, before entering a lodging outside the city, accompanied by two Jews, I buried my books under an olive tree, for although it fulfilled the description in the Torah “green olive tree, fair, full of beautiful fruit” [Jeremiah 11:16], I called it ‘alon-bakhut [the tree of weeping, Genesis 35:8] for there I buried “all that was precious in my eyes” [cf. I Kings 20:6]… for through them I was comforted for my two sons who were taken involuntarily to be baptized.

Bereft of all, Saba said “‘this is the heritage of the servants of the Lord’ (Isaiah 54:17) and it is better to me than sons and daughters.” When Saba returned to ‘alon-bakhut he was apprehended by the King’s guards, who confiscated his manuscripts and tefillin and incarcerated him. Released after six months, Saba was permitted to travel to Fez where, after a period of illness, he rewrote his books from memory.

There is a sequel to Saba’s sufferings. R. Hayyim Joseph David Azulai (Hida, 1724-1806), quoting a manuscript of the Divrei Yosef, relates that Saba boarded a ship to Italy. En route a terrible storm arose and the captain, in despair, requested that Saba pray for the ship’s safety. Saba agreed on condition that if he died at sea the captain would not bury him but would take him to a Jewish community for burial. The captain agreed, Saba

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3 I have elsewhere previously addressed a number of the titles described in this article, but all earlier discussions are here modified or adapted.
prayed, and the storm abated. Two days later Saba died. The captain brought his body to
Verona, where the Jewish community buried him with great honor.4

Several decades after Saba’s misadventures but almost four centuries before their
publication, Gershom Soncino, the foremost pioneer of early Hebrew printing, published
R. Vidal Benveniste’s Melitsat ‘Efer ve-Dinah (Rimini, 1525). It is a poetical allegory on
pleasure written for Purim. First printed eight years earlier, this edition is included in a
volume comprising several midrashic works. What makes this edition of Melizat ‘Efer
ve-Dinah of interest is the material appended by Soncino, recounting the events that
resulted in his having to leave Italy for Salonika. While Soncino was in Venice, at the
print-shop of Daniel Bomberg, he met an apostate, perhaps Fra Felice, who was
instrumental in establishing the Bomberg press. The two men engaged in a dispute,
described by Soncino in a mixture of prose and poetry:

In the month of January, 1525, came a Marrano apostate from Rome to Venice. The
entire day he spoke against God and His Torah, and against our people most wickedly.
He leaped at our young and old like a goring ox. His dreams and words caused fear.

It came to pass that while I was in the winter house of Messer Daniel, speaking to him
about business matters in the presence of Cornelio Israel [Adelkind]… the worthless one
[lit. naked], his mouth full of vulgarities, challenged me to versify with him. He wrote
upon paper wrong and meaningless words, unintelligible even to understanding, which he
himself did not believe. He raised his voice, took hold of my coat, and pressed me to
respond to him. He praised his verses to the skies, answering words unsaid. I entered into
a spice store and quickly wrote these few words. I was beside myself because of him,
ashamed of his untoward behavior, he being brazen enough to praise himself:

Don Daniel I saw a strong man who attempted to write verse,
But when he recited them to us we saw that they were laments.

He is no man, he has no eyes to see. He thought in [Rome] to rise, he fell to the depths
when he displayed his verses, because they are frightful and odiferous. Better to remain
silent as the dumb beasts than to open the mouth to demonstrate the errors of one sunk so
deep, he is but a boor.

Soncino continues in this vein, with references to Christianity. The aggrieved
apostate appealed to Rome, accusing Gershom of printing Talmudic treatises without a
license and mocking his new religion. These accusations depleted Soncino’s savings as
he strove to defend himself from an unfavorable ruling from Rome or escape a
foreordained punishment. Previously a wealthy printer of Hebrew, Latin, and Italian
works for forty years, Gershom was forced to flee to Salonika in an impoverished state,
which he attributed primarily to the incident with the apostate.5

4 Hayyim Joseph David Azulai, Shem ha-gedolim ha-shalem with additions by Menachem Mendel Krengel
1 (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 13-14 [Hebrew].
133-35; Moses Marx, “Gershom (Hieronymus) Soncino’s Wander-Years in Italy, 1498-1527,” HUCA XI
Among the most prominent of the Spanish exiles was the noted Bible commentator and statesman Don Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel (1437-1508). Abrabanel was the author of a comprehensive and detailed work on the Torah and Prophets. In contrast to his other volumes, his commentary on Deuteronomy, *Mirkevet ha-mishneh* (Sabbioneta, 1551), was begun while he was still in Lisbon. Its completion was postponed, however, because of his responsibilities at the Portuguese court. The incomplete manuscript of *Mirkevet ha-mishneh* was lost when, as the result of court intrigues, Abrabanel was forced to flee to Spain in 1483. In his introduction to Deuteronomy he describes the hardships suffered by the Jewish exiles from Spain in poetic terms and, after his peregrinations, his arrival in Corfu, where he discovered his manuscript:

“The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars” [Psalms 29:5] “and Israel is to the plunderers” [Isaiah 42:24], in a strange land, downcast and plundered. They who were the mighty in their land went out as one divorced. They did not forget the name of their God “in all their afflictions” [Isaiah 63:9] “everyone holy” [Numbers 16:3]. They went from downfall to downfall, “from evil to evil” [Jeremiah 9:2] for three years, “nettles had covered them over, overgrown with thorns” [cf. Proverbs 24:31].... “The Lord bore through my ear with an awl” [cf. Exodus 21:6]. To go out “of the midst of the upheaval” [Genesis 19:29], going and wandering. I entered a ship in the heart of the sea, “and the Lord was merciful to me” [Genesis 19:16] and I came to the island of Corfu and resided there, and behold, “the Lord arranged for me” [Genesis 27:20] my commentary on this book. My soul was glad and rejoiced, I “caught hold of it and kissed it” [Proverbs 7:13].

Another work by a Sephardic sage is R. Menahem ben Aaron ibn Zerah’s (c. 1310-85) *Tseidah la-derekh* (Ferrara, 1554), a concise code of law, unique in that it is directed towards the wealthier strata of Jewish society. Ibn Zerah’s parents were among the Jews expelled from France in 1306. They settled in Estella, Navarre, where Menahem was born. In the introduction to *Tseidah la-derekh*, he relates:

In the year 5088 [= 1328] “the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people” [Isaiah 5:25] “and the king [of France who ruled over Navarre] died” [1 Kings 22:37] and the people rose up and took counsel together “to destroy, slay and annihilate” [Esther 3:6] “all the Jews who were” [Esther 3:6] in their kingdom and they slew in Estella and other places in the land about 6,000 Jews, including my lord, my father, my mother, and my four brothers, younger than me, dying in sanctification of the Lord’s name. I alone survived from my father’s house “stricken, struck by God, and afflicted” [Isaiah 53:4], for twenty-five of the wicked “struck me and wounded me” [Song of Songs 5:7] and I was cast naked among the dead....

Menahem goes on to say that at about midnight a knight who was a friend of his father found him, removed him from among the dead, brought him home, and nursed him back to health. Menahem then went to Toledo, where he studied under R. Joshua ben Shuaib and R. Judah ben Asher, grandson of R. Asher ben Yehiel (Rosh). Menahem Ibn Zerah subsequently moved to Alcala de Henarez (in the vicinity of Toledo), where he studied under R. Joseph ben al-Aysh, whom he succeeded as rabbi in 1361. Eight years later a civil war between two aspirants to the throne left Menahem impoverished. The
courtier Don Samuel Abrabanel interceded on his behalf, and Menahem was appointed rabbi of Toledo and head of the rabbinical academy.

Menahem composed *Tseidah la-derekh* in honor of Don Samuel, whom Menahem praises in the introduction. The book is directed towards those who, due to their responsibilities and lifestyle, including social intercourse with non-Jews, are not always rigorous in the observance of *mitzvot*, nor do they have sufficient time to master a detailed code. For this reason his code is directed towards the practical. As its name, *Tseidah la-derekh* (“provision for the way;” Genesis 42:25, 45:21), implies, it provides for the traveler’s necessities in a manner that is not too onerous. In addition to its halakhic content, *Tseidah la-derekh* provides reasons (based on the Maimonides) for commandments, philosophical and moral precepts, and medical advice. The book concludes with a discussion of the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. In this, the first edition of *Tseidah la-derekh*, the section on the ‘Amidah includes a discussion of the twelfth benediction, *malshinim* (slanderers, informers). This paragraph, comprising almost an entire leaf, is omitted from later editions of *Tseidah la-derekh* and the enumeration of the prayers comprising the ‘Amidah is adjusted accordingly. In some instances, rather than inking out so many lines, the censor removed the entire quire. Although *Tseidah la-derekh* has been republished several times, the commentary on *malshinim* has never been reprinted.

In 1554, the same year that *Tseidah la-derekh* was first printed, the Sabbioneta press of Tobias Foa, with Cornelius Adelkind as the master printer, published *Lehem Yehudah*, R. Judah ben Samuel Lerma Sephardi’s commentary on *Pirke avot*. Little is known about the author, except for the events related to the publication and burning of *Lehem Yehudah*. The commentary is philosophical but traditional in nature, based on the writings of R. Joseph Albo, Don Isaac Abrabanel, and R. Isaac Arama, as well as on Talmudic and Midrashic sources. Nevertheless, Lerma is an original thinker, often expressing his own views.

In his introduction Lerma extols the value of ‘Avot, noting (paraphrasing the gemara) that, “He who wishes to be pious must look into ‘Avot” (Berakhot 30a). Lerma promises to resolve difficulties in earlier commentaries, whose authors did not fully comprehend the depths of ‘Avot. He titles his commentary *Lehem Yehudah* because “the bread (lehem) from which I have benefited is the bread of Torah, for we find the Torah is called bread, as it states, ‘Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mixed’” (Proverbs 9:5). Lerma continues, recounting what befell the first edition of his book:

I printed my book [*Lehem Yehudah*] in Venice at the beginning of “for the Almighty שד (1553) has dealt very bitterly with me” [Ruth 1:20] and the ruler of Rome [= the Pope] decreed throughout the kingdoms of Edom that the Talmud and the aggadot of the Talmud of R. Jacob ben Habib [‘Ein Ya’akov] should be burned. In Venice, in the month of Marheshvan [bitter Heshvan], which is as its name, it was decreed that the Talmud, the aggadot mentioned above, and Rav Alfasi and Mishnayot should be burned on the Holy Shabbat, and with them they burned all of my books, of which 1500 copies had been printed. I lost all that was in Venice and not even a single copy remained to
me, not even a single leaf from the original for a remembrance. I was forced to rewrite [my book] from memory from the beginning. After I had completed three chapters, I found one copy from the original press in the hands of a non-Jew who had saved it from the fire. I acquired it from him at a dear price, and when I looked into it, may His name be blessed, I saw that the second [copy] was more complete than the first.

Four years later, in 1558, Toledot Yitshak, the Torah commentary of R. Isaac ben Joseph Caro (mid-fifteenth century to after (?) 1518) was published in Mantua by Meir ben Ephraim of Padua and Jacob ben Naphtali ha-Kohen of Gazolo at the press of Venturin Ruffinello. His work emphasizes the literal meaning of passages, but also includes allegorical and kabbalistic interpretations. Born to a distinguished family in Toledo, Caro headed a yeshiva in that city, but before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, he and his yeshiva relocated to Portugal. In his introduction to Toledot Yitshak, Caro recounts what befell him there six years later. In 1497, conversionary decrees were issued against the Jews by the king of Portugal. All of Caro’s sons died, but he was able to escape to Constantinople, where he served as a rabbi. We can still hear his anguish when he writes:

“And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then I would fly away, and be at rest” [Ps. 55:7]. “Blessed be the Lord; for he has marvelously shown me his loving kindness [in a besieged city]” [Ps. 31:22], “And he shall pass through the sea with affliction” [Zech. 10:11], for “it is beyond the sea” [Deut. 30:13]. And I fled to Turkey for a succor. “My iniquities have gone over my head,” [Ps. 38:5] all my male sons have gone to the grave, the old and the young, their visage as the sons of kings.

Paraphrasing Rashi (on Gen. 6:9), Caro goes on to say that a person’s primary offspring are good deeds, and nothing is better than Torah. He therefore decides to publish his commentary, which is “sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:11). Another reason for publication is to cleave to the Divine presence, for Torah provides completeness in this world and in the World to Come, as it says, “for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day” (Deut. 6:24). Toledot Yitshak is written in a concise but clear style. Five editions of this popular work were issued in the sixteenth century, two—in Mantua and Riva di Trento—in the same year, 1558. The first edition, printed in Constantinople by Solomon ben Mazzal Tob, was completed on Wednesday, the 18th of “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine [Elul]” (Song of Songs 6:3) in the year “Blessed be you of the Lord (September 4, 1518)” (I Sam. 23:21 and Ps. 115:15). A noteworthy feature of the Constantinople edition is that it was issued in segments, that is, each week the author distributed portions of his book.

Not all orders of prayers are alike. One of the lesser-known rites, with variant wording and piyutim, is the Romanite rite of the Byzantine (Greek) Jews of the Balkans. This ancient liturgy, once prevalent throughout the Balkans, was largely supplanted by the influx of Sephardim in the sixteenth century and is almost unknown today. A Mahzor Romania for the entire year, titled Seder tefilot ha-shanah, minhag kehilot Romania, was published in c.1573-1578 in Constantinople by the Jabez brothers and Eliezer ben Isaac
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Ashkenazi. First printed in Constantinople (c. 1512), this edition was reprinted, as indicated on the title pages, according to the Venetian edition (1523) of Daniel Bomberg, sponsored by R. Abraham Yerushalmi of Constantinople. The move to reissue the Romaniot prayer book was initiated by R. Elijah Galmidi, head of the Romaniot community in Constantinople. The work is in two volumes. The first, printed by Solomon and Joseph Jabez, contains weekday, Shabbat, and festival prayers from Hanukkah through Tish'ah be-Av. Work began, “on Thursday, the fourth of the month of Heshvan, in the year, ‘Break forth into joy, sing together ויהי וחג [(334 = October 11, 1573), [you ruins of Jerusalem]’” (Isaiah 52:9). The second volume, containing prayers from Rosh Ha-shanah through Sukkot, is credited to Eliezer ben Isaac Ashkenazi, although he did only a small part of the work.

Eliezer, who came from Lublin to Constantinople, began printing in his new location in partnership with David ben Elijah Kashti, a Romanite Jew who sponsored publication of Seder Tefilot. Eliezer printed She’elot u-teshuvot ha-geonim (1575) before undertaking the prayer book, which begins with an introduction by Kashti. Kashti’s reason for changing printers, that is, leaving the Jabez press to complete the prayer book with Eliezer, is detailed in the introduction on the title page. He explains, with harsh references to Joseph Jabez, that he entrusted the second volume to Eliezer to print because of prolonged delays in publishing, the squandering of his money, changes in paper and ink, and many other excuses. He adds that after two years the work was still not complete. However, before this volume was finished Kashti reconciled with the Jabez brothers and restored the prayer book to them for completion. In the colophon Kashti retracts his earlier complaints, instead expressing criticism of Eliezer. This did not, however, prevent him from again printing with Eliezer (Lev Hakham, Constantinople, 1586). Since the fonts employed by the two print shops are distinct, the portions printed by each printer are easily identifiable, the first forty two pages being set with type from Lublin and the remaining two-thirds of the volume with the Jabez-type and ornamental florets.

A popular supercommentary on Rashi and R. Elijah Mizrahi is R. Nathan Nata ben Samson Spira’s (Shapira, d. 1577) 'Imre shefer (1591-97, Cracow/Lublin). 'Imre shefer was brought to press by R. Isaac Spira (d. 1623), the son of Nathan Spira. Isaac was Rosh yeshiva in Kovno, and from there went to Cracow, where he began publication of 'Imre shefer. Before the work was finished, Isaac accepted a position in Lublin, where 'Imre shefer was completed. In the introduction Isaac explains the conditions of the printing and that parts of the book printed in Cracow had to be reprinted in Lublin. He informs the reader that the work is titled 'Imre shefer from the verse, “he gives goodly words והנתן אמרי שפר ("Genesis 49:21), the first word alluding to the author’s first name (Nathan, נתן) and shefer שפר hinting at Spira_SPIRA, the author’s surname. Isaac then alludes to an

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found and published by men who lack the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. A work discovered, who knows the identity of the author, perhaps a boy wrote it and wanted to credit it to an authoritative source (יִדְוֵ֣דֶד, יִדְוֵ֣דֶד, [my father my lord].) God forbid that his holy mouth should bring forth words that have no substance, vain, worthless, and empty, a forgery, “[And, behold], it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered it over” [Proverbs 24:31].

Isaac Spira took his complaint to the Va‘ad Arba‘ Aratsot (Council of the Four Lands), requesting that they prohibit the distribution of the Bi‘urim in Poland. The response of the Va‘ad is printed at the end of the introduction:

It has been declared, by consent of the rabbis, and the [communal] leaders of these lands, that these books shall neither be sold nor introduced into [any Jewish] home in any of these lands. Those who have [already] purchased them shall receive their money back and not keep [such] an evil thing in their home.

Ta‘am le-musaf takanta Shabat (Venice, 1604) is a Romanite (Byzantine) rite commentary on the Sabbath musaf prayers by R. Joseph ben Abraham ha-Kohen of Corfu. In approximately 1599 Joseph went up to Erez Israel. Ta‘am le-musaf takanta Shabat was written to fulfill his vow to God for delivering him “from the captivity of pirates who plundered him.” In his introduction he informs us that Maltese pirates waylaid him on his journey. Joseph concealed five elderly men on his ship, thus saving five Jews from captivity, although one of them died from fright. Joseph lost all, his money, his books ספרים, his precious sapphires ספירים “And delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy’s hand” (Psalms 78:61). But he wept and mourned only for his books, both old and new, some of them great rarities that he had accumulated over a span of forty years, from his youth to the present. For this he wept and his eyes dimmed, and for his lost writings “and now I remained ‘naked and bare’” (Ezekiel 16:7). But I “came up in a night, and perished in a night” (Jonah 4:10). He held fast to his talit and tefilin and said to God “give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself” (Genesis 14:21).

Hibure leket (1611-12, Lublin) is a commentary on Nevi‘im and Ketuvim with an explanation of difficult terms in Yiddish by R. Abraham ben Judah Hazzan of Kremenets (16th cent.). It is based on midrashei aggadah and other midrashim that Hazzan gleaned from his teachers, as well as other sources such as Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, and R. Abraham ibn Ezra. Hazzan was the hazzan in Kremenets, where the events recounted in the introduction occurred. This, the only edition of Hibure leket, Hazzan’s only work, was published posthumously. There are three pillared title pages, a front-piece title page for the book, including Nevi‘im rishonim, and separate title pages for Nevi‘im ‘ahronim, and for Ketuvim. The first title-page is dated, “And Abraham was old, and well advanced in age; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things (371 = 1611)” (Genesis 24:1). The other title pages are dated “may there be
abundant peace שלמה (371).” The colophon dates completion of the work to Tuesday, 24 Tamuz 372 (July 24, 1612).

Abraham begins his introduction by informing the reader that he will describe the wonders wrought for him by the Lord, recounting an illness that left him at death’s door. He goes on to say that he beheld a man standing before him, a lit candle in his hand. The man (who was actually the Angel of Death) extinguished and relit the candle. Upon Hazzan’s urging, he informed Hazzan that the days of his life had passed, the candle being an allusion to his soul. His relighting it was an allusion to the Lord restoring his soul, the Heavenly Court having weighed Hazzan’s deeds, found in his favor, and added to his days. Arising from his illness three days before Shavu’ot, Hazzan went to the synagogue to praise the Lord. Consequently he considered what could be done for the public good, and resolved to write a book on the Prophets and Writings to serve as a remembrance.

R. Menahem ben Judah de Lonzano (1550–before 1624) was a kabbalist, poet, ethical writer, and masorete. Among his works is the multi-part *Shete yadot* (Venice, 1618), consisting of midrashic and original writings. The title-page states that *Shete Yadot* (two hands) is divided into two parts: *Yad ‘ani* (the poor man’s hand), so called because, “I am ‘poor and lowly’” (Zephaniah 3:12) and “the second *Yad ha-melekh* (the King’s hand) because it contains portions of rabbinic midrashim not previously printed.” Both hands are subdivided into five parts, titled *etsba’ot* (fingers), each one an independent work.

The title-page notwithstanding, only *Yad ‘ani* and ‘Agadeta di-bereshit, the first *etsba’* of *Yad ha-melekh*, were printed. In the introduction, Lonzano writes that he is well aware that one who desires to profit by printing a book should publish a small work at little cost. A wealthy person will buy it for the same price as a large work, for he is not sensitive to cost. This was the case with Lonzano’s *’Avodat mikdash* and *Derekh hayyim* (he names his benefactors), though not with this work. Lonzano writes that he had to borrow money, even at interest (for which he found permission), but that he was nevertheless unable to complete the book. His purpose in printing the book, he says, was not to profit but to do the will of the Almighty and to benefit the public. In the colophon, Lonzano repeats that, due to lack of funds, the book was not completed.

A versified philological work praising creation, in which all roots are used but once, is R. Benjamin ben Immanuel Mussafia’s (Dionysius, 1606–1675) *Zekher rav* (Amsterdam, 1635). It was published by Manasseh Ben Israel, to whom Mussafia was related by marriage. Mussafia, who is believed to have been born in Spain to a Marrano family, moved to Hamburg, where he became physician-in-ordinary to Christian IV of Denmark. When that monarch died in 1648 Mussafia relocated first to Glückstadt in Holstein and then to Amsterdam, where he spent the rest of his life. He served as Rosh Yeshiva of the bet midrash Keter Torah and was among the leaders of the Sephardic community. An individual of broad education and great erudition, Mussafia was not only a talmudic scholar but a philologist, competent in Latin, Greek, and Arabic. In his last years Mussafia became an enthusiastic advocate of Shabbatei Zevi, and as a result he was
attacked by the eminent R. Jacob Sasportas (1610-98) in the latter’s *'Ohale Ya’akov* (Amsterdam, 1737). Mussafia later repudiated his support for Shabbatei Zevi.

Zekher rav is Mussafia’s first published work. Written in memory of his late wife, Sarah, the title page states that Zekher rav is “a recollection of your great (zekher rav) [goodness]” (Psalms 145:7). ‘He remembered the days of old,’ (Isaiah 63:11) ‘the root of the matter found’ (Job 19:28) in our holy language. Continually before Sarah…. Printed in the month of Adar 5395.” A popular work, Zekher rav has been reprinted at least fourteen times, including translations and a Karaite adaptation. Zekher rav is divided into seven sections, reflecting the seven days of creation. Mussafia cleverly wrote this versified praise of creation in such a manner that all of the three letter roots of biblical Hebrew, and most of their derivatives, appear only once.

Mussafia’s name does not appear on the title-page but is found in the colophon, which records his name and states that he was a physician. The introduction (2a-3a) begins: “With a recollection of your great (zekher rav) [goodness], ‘To You I lift up my eye [with tears], O You who are enthroned in the heavens’ (Psalms 123:1).” He continues by informing the reader that his wife, Sarah, was born on 11 Adar, 372 (1612), the only daughter of her father Dr. Samuel de Silva and her mother Rivkah, whom he married in Sivan, 388 (1628). Finally, he writes, “it came to pass at the end of two full [years]” (Genesis 41:1) that his wife became ill and, “Rachel [sic] died by me” (cf. Genesis 48:7) in Hamburg, motsa’e nahamu (13 Av, 5394 = August 7, 1634) and he buried her in Altona. This work was written in her memory.

Publishing books has never been easy for authors, and most early books were, if not financed by sponsors, of necessity funded by the author. Rabbinic scholars, more often than not of limited financial means, found it particularly difficult to finance the publication of their works, especially if they were not well known. One recourse for penurious scholars was to print only portions of their work, in the hope that the sample would enable them to find sponsors for the entire book. This was the case with R. Zevi Hirsch ben Judah Leib Kahana’s *Derush le-hag ha-Shavu’ot* (Venice, 1656). In his introduction Kahana writes that he came from Poland, devoid of all, traveling to Venice, a city of Torah, where he remained for a year and a half. He had saved a little money and was able to begin writing a concise book containing all the laws from the early and later decisors, its description taking up most of the introduction. He wrote this book, he says, so that he would not leave Venice “empty” (that is, without visible accomplishment). Nevertheless, “in a troubled time” (Daniel 9:25) even publishing this small work (160: 16 pp.) was beyond his ability “until the Lord in His mercy brought him the young man, R. Raphael ben Solomon Silva,” who sponsored publication. *Derush le-hag ha-Shavu’ot* concludes with an entreaty (bakeshet) from the author. Kanaha writes that, on his twenty-fifth birthday,

“I cannot go out and come in” [cf. Deuteronomy 31:2] with words of Torah, to bring to press the book that I began on the poskim. “It is in the power of my hand” [Genesis 31:29] to write discourses such as this one on hamishah humshe Torah, but here too I am pressed.
Kahana is obviously seeking a sponsor for the cost of publication, but to no avail, for his entreaty was unanswered.\textsuperscript{8} Derush le-hag ha-Shavu’ot is Kahana’s only published work, and this is the sole edition of the discourse.

Among the worst disasters to befall the Jewish people in Europe were the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648-49 (tah ve-tat). General descriptions of this calamity and personal misfortunes are addressed in numerous works. ‘Ohel Ya’akov (Venice, 1662) is a discourse recalling the matriarch Sarah and ‘akedat Yitshak in connection with the events of tah ve-tat by R. Jacob ben ha-kadosh R. Simeon of Tomashov (“the holy,” suggesting that he was among the murdered). A resident, and possibly the rabbi, of Nemirov, Tomashov departed for the Land of Israel, going first to Venice, where ‘Ohel Ya’akov was published. The title page states that Jacob took a single branch from his discourses, in remembrance of Sarah and ‘akedat Yitshak, to show the astute and “nobles of the peoples” [Psalms 47:10], individuals whose heart will move them to acquire this book, to be of some limited help to fulfill the vow that he took upon himself at the terrible time of the gezerot Polania (Polish decrees) in the year \( \text{תשתנ} \) [1648] in Nemirov, where his wife and three sons were murdered, and in the year \( \text{תשס} \) [1656] when the old decrees were renewed and also new ones [were issued]. From under the sword that laid upon his neck he took upon himself to go up to Jerusalem, the holy city, and by virtue of this righteousness the Lord should go before them, bringing the redemption of the Messiah speedily with “gladness and rejoicing”[cf. Esther 8:15].

Tomashov’s introduction follows, in which he discusses the events in Nemirov in greater detail. He begins by writing that he saw great wonders from the Lord in Poland in 1648 when “there came fire” [Leviticus 9:24, 10:2, Judges 9:20, Ezekiel 19:14] on Nemirov, the enemy prevailed, a cruel people, and slaughtered “ten thousand men” [Judges 4:10] with children and women of the children of Israel. “Light became darkness” [Job 18:6] for me, for they killed my wife and three sons, “and I lived in the land of Nod” [cf. Genesis 4:16] until 1656. In that year arose grievous troubles, old and also new, and I came upon midat ha-din (strict justice) and “Disaster upon disaster” [Ezekiel 7:26], plunder after plunder, until finally I encountered pestilence, sword, famine, and captivity and every day was worse than before.

\textsuperscript{8} Renown did not always insure financing. No less a personage than R. Nathan Nata ben Moses Hannover, (d. 1683), dayyan in several communities and today best known as the author of Yeven metsulah (Venice, 1653) on the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648-49, wrote a discourse on the festival of Sukkot entitled Ta’ame Sukkah, because, among other reasons, the numerical value of Ta’ame \( \text{טעמי} \) (129) is the equivalent of his name Nata \( \text{נטע} \) (129). In his introduction Hannover, too, writes that lack of funds has prevented him from publishing the entire work; therefore, at this time he is printing this discourse only, delivered in Cracow in 1646. Other examples of contemporary small works with similar entreaties are those of R. Joseph ben Abraham ha-Kohen of Corfu’s Ta’am le-misaf takanta (Venice, 1604, 4\(^9\), 8 ff.), noted above; R. Jacob ben Isaac of Bet ha-Levi Fintsi Ashkenazi’s Diskul – Divre’i ‘agur (Venice, 1605, 16\(^9\), 16 ff.); R. Samuel ben Isaac ben Joseph Algazi’s Toledot ‘Adam (Venice, 1605. 16\(^0\), 16 ff.); R. Abraham ha-Levi Shimshoni’s Derush le-Shabat ha-gadol (Venice, 1649, 4\(^9\), 10 ff.); R. Jacob ben Simeon of Tomashov’s ‘Ohel Ya’akov (Venice, 1662, 16\(^9\), 7 ff., see below); and R. Moses ben Issachar Jaffe’s Pene Moshe (Lublin, 1681, 4\(^9\), [16] ff.).
Tomashov continues, with great poignancy, that he, his wife and his children, were taken captive in:

“fetters of iron” [Psalms 149:8] by a cruel people who did not respect old or young, “and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none” [Psalms 69:21], who beat me harshly and sorely so that at all times I was “at the point of death” [cf. Genesis 25:32] so that I preferred death rather than life” [cf. Jeremiah 8:3]. I spread my hands to God in heaven “and Jacob vowed a vow” [Genesis 28:20] at a time of trouble “saying, If God will be with me” [ibid.] at this time of trouble and deliver me “and will give me bread to eat, and a garment to put on, So that I come back to my father’s house [in peace]; then shall the Lord be my God” [ibid., 20-21], to go to the holy land.

Tomashov’s great poverty prevented him from fulfilling his vow, so he came first to Venice to publish this discourse. It was Tomashov’s hope that subsequent to the publication of ‘Ohel Ya’akov, he would merit to publish Toledot Ya’akov, discourses on the Torah, of which ‘Ohel Ya’akov was only a part. Unfortunately, that was not to be. Not only is this the only edition of ‘Ohel Ya’akov, but the larger work was never published. 9

Another work, which takes an interpretive approach to the Chmielnicki massacres, is Shivre luaḥot (Lublin, 1680), kabbalistic homilies on the weekly Torah reading by R. Jehiel Michael ben Eliezer (d. 1648). The introduction is by Jehiel’s nephew, R. Isaac ben Yedidah Liberman. Isaac does not recount the terrible events of that period but rather provides a kabbalistic and interpretive explanation of the events and of the coming of the Messiah. He quotes frequently from the Zohar and the works of kabbalists such as R. Hayyim Vital, interweaving references to hevelei ha-meshiah (birth pangs of the Messiah) ושהות and tah ת. He begins by writing that 1648 ת was the beginning of hevelei ha-meshiah , the numerical value of both being 408—and that the year tah was appropriate for the resurrection based on the verse, “In the year of this jubilee” (Leviticus 25:13). But, he writes:

the resurrection did not occur, tens of thousands were slain and not buried; dogs ate their flesh, alluded to in the Torah in the verse, “and [Abraham] spoke to the Hittites ה (408), saying . . . give me possession of a burying place” (Genesis 23:3-4). For Abraham and Sarah are allusions of the body and soul, as explained in the Zohar, [and they are] all a reference to the resurrection. And we should

9 Similar tragic experiences are recorded in the introduction to Nahalat Zevi (Venice, 1660) on Pirke ʾavot by the kabbalist R. Zevi ben Simeon Tuchfrer, who writes that his five sons died “due to his iniquity” in the upheavals that beset Poland. “The wife of my youth died ‘in difficult labor’” (Genesis 35:7) on the way to Lublin, where he buried her. “She was fortunate to find a resting place, unlike so many sages of the time who, in their hundreds and thousands, were buried together, both the righteous with the wicked.” Tuchfrer remained alone to see this, “and from my beloved house I went out childless, without children. The crown of fathers, sons, taken from me…” Also, in the preface to his Selihot and kinot for tah-ve-tat, the renowned R. Shabbetai ben Meir ha-Kohen (Shakh, 1621–1662) describes, in rhymed prose, the terrible tragedy that befell Eastern European Jewry during tah-ve-tat. Megilat ṣehah begins “Do you not know, if you have not heard, all the people of the Lord are a remnant…. the wicked, accursed and arrogant have slain thousands and tens of thousands, the righteous, upright, devout and pious precious children of Israel, ‘comparable to fine gold’ (Lamentations 4:2).”
rejoice in the Holy One, blessed be He, believe in the redemption, and pray to be spared hevele ha-mashiah.”

Me’irat ‘eynayim (Constantinople, 1666) is a kabbalistic work on prayer and associated subjects by R. Solomon ben David Gabbai. The author was a corrector for the Gabbai press in Constantinople but was probably not related to that family. The title page of Me’irat ‘eynayim (“enlightening the eyes,” Psalms 19:9) informs us that it is a “booklet that includes kavanot (devotions) in prayers, the tikun of repentance, and the miraculous deeds that occurred to the holy, godly, R. Isaac Luria (ha-Ari), which I have compiled and gathered from the book ‘Emek ha-melekh and from the holy writings of the kabbalist, R. Hayyim Vital…” It is dated “And saviors shall ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be באה (426=1666) the Lord’s” (Obadiah 1:21). In his introduction, Gabbai recounts that on Friday night, 19 Menahem [Av], 5419 (August 15, 1559), he dreamt that R. Simeon bar Yohai called to him, and that he had the merit of sitting and speaking with him:

“mouth to mouth, in clear speech, and not in riddles” [cf. Numbers 12:8] “and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of the Lord, very awesome” [Judges 13:6]. He commanded and said to me, in my Torah “meditate day and night” [cf. Psalms 1:2] and I merited to sit with him on two stools and to read with him in the Zohar. “The matter proceeds from the Lord” [Genesis 24:50] for I had no books of Kabbalah “but God caused to come into my hand” [cf. Exodus 21:13] the Zohar and many other kabbalistic works, manuscripts and specifically the Sefer ha-kavanot of the Ari….

We now turn to the works of R. Hayyim ben Abraham ha-Kohen (1585-1655). Hayyim ha-Kohen belonged to a family in Aleppo that traced its ancestry to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. A leading disciple of R. Hayyim Vital, Hayyim ha-Kohen served with distinction for two decades as rabbi in Aleppo. R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai writes that when he came to Livorno, where Hayyim ha-Kohen is buried, “I prostrated myself on the grave of Hayyim ha-Kohen, author of Tur barekhet, etc.”10 Among Hayyim ha-Kohen’s works are Torat hakham (Venice, 1654), a book of sermons, and Mekor hayyim (pt. I, Constantinople, 1650; II, Amsterdam, 1654; III, Livorno, 1655-56), an extensive kabbalistic commentary on the Shulhan ‘arukh.

In his introduction to Torat hakham, Hayyim ha-Kohen describes his trials in attempting to publish his works. Initially, the manuscript of ‘Ateret zahav, on Esther, was sent by sea to Venice to be printed. After several years, receiving no response, ha-Kohen took all of his manuscripts, of which only single copies existed, and embarked for Europe to personally attend to their printing. Encountering a storm, the ship took refuge at Malta, where it was boarded by pirates. Seeing that all was lost, and being in shallow water, ha-Kohen, jumped ship and made his way ashore, where he faced hunger and wild beasts, before coming to an inhabited area. All of his manuscripts, written over twenty years, were lost in one night. With thanks to the Lord for his salvation, Hayyim ha-Kohen rewrote his manuscripts from memory.

10 Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, Magal tov ha-shalem (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 4.
Hayyim ha-Kohen’s literary trials did not cease, however, even after his death. His kabbalistic commentary on Ruth, *Torat hesed*, was reputedly published by R. David ben Aryeh Leib of Lida (c. 1650-96) under his own name as *Migdal David* (Amsterdam, 1680).

It is evident from *Migdal David* that not all introductions are straightforward. The introduction to that work has material that, while ambiguous, I would suggest is Lida’s admission of plagiarism. The title page attributes *Migdal David* to R. David ben Aryeh Lida, chief rabbi of several communities and the author of highly regarded books. Lida’s career was clouded by charges of slander, Sabbateanism, and plagiarism. Although cleared of the first two charges by the *Va’ad 'arba' 'aratsot*, the accusation of plagiarism has remained a blemish on Lida’s reputation. As noted above, *Migdal David* is today regarded as having been authored by R. Hayyim ha-Kohen. That ha-Kohen was indeed the author of *Migdal David* is affirmed with certainty by such authorities as Hida and Hayyim Michael.11 Although Lida continued to refer to himself as the author of *Migdal David*, as on the title page of *'Ir Miklat* (Dyhernfurth, 1690), in the introduction to *Migdal David* Lida alludes to another author, writing:

I named it [*Migdal David*], for in it will be explained [that] “He is a tower of [our] king’s salvation” [II Samuel 22:51], our anointed, the breath of our nostrils, David, or a son of David, and He will redeem us. “Now while it is true that I am a redeemer, there is also another redeemer closer than I” (emphasis added).” [Ruth 3:12]

More telling, Lida also informs us, through an allegory taken from the *Zohar* and elsewhere, of a rooster who, while pecking and seeking food, uncovered a beautiful, bright pearl. Startled by the pearl’s brightness and beauty, the rooster recoiled, wondering how such a beautiful object, fit for a place of honor, came to be concealed. A man, observing the rooster recoil, came to see what had disturbed it and, finding the pearl, took it in his hand. Appreciating its great value, he presented the pearl to the king to be placed as a diadem on his crown. The king, too, rejoicing in this precious stone, honored the rooster, who had not found the pearl of his own volition but by chance. Lida continues, using language that is understood to refer to a publisher rather than an author:

so is this matter, for I found in this scroll blossoms and fruit which give forth a brightness, delightful to the sight and desirable to the eye, its fruit is “good for food” [Genesis 2:9]... when this distinguished book comes to the hand of one who appreciates

its value… and also he who publishes it will be remembered for good before the King, King of the universe….

Sha'ar 'Efrayim (Sulzbach, 1688) is comprised of one hundred and fifty responsa on the Shulhan 'arukh from R. Ephraim ben Jacob ha-Kohen (1616–1678). A student of R. Moses Lima (Helkat mehokek), Ephraim served for twenty years as dayyan in Vilna. In 1655, during the war between Russia and Sweden, the Jewish population was forced to flee Vilna. Ephraim found refuge first in Trebitsch, then in Prague and Vienna, and finally in (Ofen) Buda (which was then under Ottoman rule), establishing yeshivot in these locations. At an advanced age he accepted the position of rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Jerusalem, a position earlier held by his grandfather, but he died before he could go to Jerusalem. Ephraim’s grandson was R. Zevi Hirsch Ashkenazi (Hakham Tsevi).

The title page dates the beginning of the work to Tuesday, “the day that the Torah twice says ‘that it was good’ (Genesis 1:9-12), 8 Tammuz, in the year, ‘Therefore [my heart] is glad שמח לכן (448 = July 6, 1688)’ (Psalms 16:9).” It refers to Ephraim as one upon whom the divine presence rested, a descendant of Aaron ha-Kohen, and provides some personal information, stating that these details would be expanded upon in the introduction. Printed posthumously, the introduction is by Ephraim’s son, R. Aryeh Judah Leib, who describes in detail what befell the family, including the account of a plague in Ofen in 1678. His older brother died, he writes, and during the seven days of mourning, Aryeh Judah Leib also became ill. Ephraim wrapped himself in his talit, raised his hands to heaven, and prayed that he be taken in his son’s place. Aryeh Judah Leib recovered and the father died shortly afterwards. Prior to his death, Ephraim requested that his son publish this work and Mahaneh 'Efrayim, discourses on the Torah. The latter manuscript, however, was never published.

The richness of introductions is not limited to older works. We conclude, therefore, with an unusual occurrence recorded in a modern work, the last published volume of R. Moses Feinstein’s (1895-1986) responsa, 'Igrot Moshe. The foremost halakhic authority of his time, Feinstein served as rabbi of Luban, near Minsk, until coming to the United States in 1937, where he became Rosh Yeshivah of Mesivta Tiferet Yerushalayim in New York. The final volume of 'Igrot Moshe, published posthumously, contains a lengthy introduction by the author’s grandsons, in which an incident is recorded that took place at the onset of winter in 1922. An individual became ill with a strange illness, his tongue swelling in his mouth. During a visit to this person by the local rabbis, the ill person requested that everyone leave except R. Feinstein, to whom he related the following:

The previous week, parashat Vayerah [Genesis 19:31-38], he had questioned how the daughters of Lot could merit having the Messiah descend from them, not being ashamed to reveal that they had had relations with their father, and speaking of them with great disrespect. That night, two elderly women, their faces and heads covered, appeared to him in a dream and stated that they were the daughters of Lot. They said that, having heard his complaints, they had come from beyond to respond to him. Being from the family of the Patriarch Abraham and delivered by a miracle from Sodom, they could have
defended themselves from the charge of an illicit relationship by claiming that everything that occurred was due to a miracle. They could have contended that they were impregnated by the Divine presence and founded a new religion, as the Christians had done. Therefore, they named their children Ammon and Moab, to make it known that when a woman is pregnant the child has a flesh and blood father. For this merit they deserved to have the true Messiah descend from them. Furthermore, the daughters of Lot continued, he, the sick individual, had committed a great sin by speaking of them in such a contemptuous manner. For having done so he would be punished measure for measure, as were the meraglim (spies, Rashi, Numbers 14:27) ¹². When this individual finished telling his tale, he turned his face to the wall and died.¹²

As noted above, there is no common thread among these books, at least from the perspective of subject matter. What they and numerous other works share is their fascinating and often revealing introductory material, frequently unrelated to the text of the book. It is here that the author imparts personal experiences or opens his heart to the reader. The reader who overlooks the introduction does so at his or her own loss.

¹² Moses Feinstein, Igrot Moshe VIII (Jerusalem, 1996), p. 15 [Hebrew].
Marvin J. Heller | Examples of Front-matter in Early Hebrew Books

1525, Melizat Efer Ve-Dinah, Vidal Benveniste, Rimini

Courtesy of the Jewish Theological Seminary
1558, *Toledot Yizhak*, Isaac ben Joseph Caro

Courtesy of the Jewish Theological Seminary
1593, *Be’urim*, Nathan Nata ben Sampson Spira (Shapira), Venice

1591-97, *Imrei Shefer*, Nathan Nata ben Sampson Spira (Shapira), Cracow/Lublin

Courtesy of the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad Ohel Yosef Yitzhak
1662, Ohel Ya’akov, Jacob ben Simeon of Tomashov, Venice

Courtesy of the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad Ohel Yosef Yitzhak
1680, *Migdal David*, David ben Aryeh Leib Lida, Amsterdam

Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of Hebrew Books