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AN UNKNOWN LIST OF HEBREW BOOKS*

“כבדתיך בהרבות לך ספרים. ולא הצרכתיך
לשאול ספר מאדם כאשר אתה רואה רוב
התלמידים ישוטטו לבקש ספר ולא ימצאו.
ואתה שבח לאל! משאיל ואינך שואל.
וברוב הספרים יש לך שניים שלישים.”

“I have honored thee by providing an extensive library for the use, and have thus relieved thee of the necessity to borrow books. Most students must bustle about to seek books, often without finding them. But thou, thanks to God, lendest and borrowest not. Of many books, indeed, thou ownest two or three copies” [1].

The world of medieval books has always attracted the attention of a large number of historians, art specialists, palaeographers, bibliographers, etc. Without its study, it would be impossible to have an adequate picture of the development of culture and science, or the picture of everyday life. Certain circumstances, however, complicate the scholar's path into the world of medieval Hebrew books; these are the dispersion of the Jewish population, its partial migration (both forced and voluntary), and variations in the legal status, economic position, and cultural level of Jewish communities in various regions within various geo-political structures. All these factors resulted in varying economic opportunities and spiritual needs among the literate part of the Jewish population. The tradition of Hebrew books [2] is multi-lingual and exclusively original, yet it remains unquestionably dependent on regional literary traditions both codicologically and palaeographical [3].

A distinctive feature of Hebrew books is perhaps the absence of “institutions” for the production of manuscripts such as the scriptoria which so significantly influenced the formation of a book market in Christian Europe [4]. Taking the above into account, one can easily grasp why our knowledge of medieval [5] Hebrew books seems, at least in my personal view, akin to a partially restored mosaic with broad, empty expanses between “islands” of information.

Lists of books are one of the most reliable bibliographic sources for filling in such kind of “informational lacunae”. By analysing these, we can throw a certain amount of light on the contents of private libraries and their “statistical average size”, the selection of books in circulation and their

prices, and the bibliographic and aesthetic criteria which guided contemporary readers in their perceptions. At a relatively late period, these lists can give us a sense of the ratio of print to manuscript books in particular libraries and society.

Lists of books are also a most important source for amplifying our knowledge of specific books. In some cases, they contain information about utterly unknown works and publications [6]. A considerable number of such lists from various periods and regions has received scholarly attention and been published. One need only mention the works of S. Poznansky, E. N. Adler, S. Assaf, I. Sonne, E. E. Urbach, E. Worman, N. Allony, R. Bonfil, Sh. Baruhzon [7], etc. and note that these publications far from exhaust the field [8].

The manuscript list under consideration in this article is a significant addition to the corpus of currently known documents. It is, to my knowledge, the **first** Hebrew book list from Spain during the period of the Expulsion to be brought into scholarly circulation. It is also the **first** dated Hebrew book list from the period of incunabula, which enumerates both manuscripts and early printed books [9]. I discovered the list during my work on the Catalogue of Hebrew incunabula from the collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (henceforth, the JTS) in New York. The list is on the first blank folio before the text in the Spanish edition of the second volume (*Tur yore de'ah*) of Jacob ben Asher's (ca. 1270—ca. 1340) *'Arba'ah turim* [10]. The list is written in hurried Spanish cursive, in brown ink. The ink has faded badly, but the list can be discerned with the aid of ultra-violet rays.

* The present article is based on the paper, delivered at Jerusalem to the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, 31 July 1997.