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Introduction

In the fall of 2004 a deliveryman came to my home and handed me what would prove to be one of the most fascinating packages I've ever received. It was a heavy cardboard box—about the size of a large briefcase—and clearly it had traveled far on its way to my doorstep in suburban Seattle. It bore a patchwork of frayed brown packing tape, my name in large handwritten letters, and a generous spray of American and Israeli customs stamps. The return address indicated that it had come from an antiquarian bookseller in Jerusalem.

"Glad you're here!" I said to the man in brown. "I've been expecting you."

"Lemme guess," he said. "eBay?"

"Yep," I responded. "eBay. They haven't failed me yet."

I carried the box to the kitchen table, opened a pair of scissors, and using only the tip of one side, carefully cut along the seams. Slowly, I pulled back the cardboard flaps, and there, nestled in a protective frame of crumpled packing paper, was what I had been waiting for. My *Alfasi* had arrived.

Hilkhot Alfasi, to be precise—a work whose title literally means "Jewish Laws of the Guy from Fez." Its author was Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi, a prominent eleventh-century Moroccan sage who is still renowned as one of the greatest Jewish legal scholars in history. Born in a small

1. A seventeenth-century volume of *Hilkhot Rav Alfasi* (*Alfasi*). Photo by Shoshana Glickman.

Algerian village in 1013, Alfasi studied for the rabbinate in the Tunisian city of Kairouan (whose incoming and outgoing parades of cargo-bearing camels gave us the modern English word "caravan") and then spent most of his adult life in Fez, namesake city of the tasseled Shriners' cap.

For Alfasi and other Jews throughout North Africa, the eleventh century was a time of immense political, cultural, and intellectual change. The power of Islam rose rapidly during those years, bringing with it magnificent art and architecture, advanced science and math, and a series of relatively pluralistic Muslim dynasties. Partly as a result of this progress, Muslim leaders were becoming increasingly tolerant of Jews, and Jews in the region tended to live more peaceful lives than did their counterparts in Europe. In Muslim countries there were successful Jewish merchants, high-ranking Jewish government officials, and Jews with Arab names who spoke Arabic as their first language.

Jewish and Muslim communities both became far less insular, and the friendly atmosphere allowed Jewish religion—Juda*ism*—to encounter

Islam as it never had before. Jews saw how Muslims studied ancient texts; Jews heard discussions of Islamic mysticism; Jews saw the Muslim legal system at work. All of these new ideas and perspectives gained toeholds in Jewish thought, and as a result Jewish life would never be the same. Still today Judaism bears hints of its encounter with Islam—the exactitude with which Jews parse the words of sacred texts, the methodology of rabbinic courts, the meditative practices of Kabbalah.

The foundational text of Jewish study was then—as it is now—the Torah. But coming in as a close second was the Talmud, a record of the Rabbis' debates in the ancient academies of Babylonia and the Land of Israel. The Talmud, codified by stages in 200 CE and 500 CE, is an enormous, meandering, fascinating, frustrating, baffling, bewildering, and brilliant text. Divided into six major "orders" and subdivided into sixty-three individual tractates, it addresses all areas of life—everything from blessings to bathing, marriage to menstruation, and Sabbath to sacrifices.

It is also notoriously difficult to study. Some of it is written in Hebrew, but even more is in Aramaic, the Jewish vernacular of the ancient Near East. Its arguments are often governed by logical principles utterly foreign to modern readers, leaving vast swaths of the text incomprehensible even to those who can decipher its language. Its passages often seem to wander from law to lore and back again, with no apparent reason for the journey. Perhaps most frustrating is that the Talmud is notoriously impractical as a guide for daily practice and behavior. Many of its passages are about Jewish sacrifices—rituals last practiced almost two millennia ago in Jerusalem's ancient Temple. Other sections are purely theoretical: "When a wedding procession and a funeral procession meet at an intersection, which has right-of-way?" "What happens if a mouse carrying a piece of bread enters a Jewish home during Passover?" "When we build a sukkah [the booth in which Jews reside during the festival of Sukkot] is it OK to use a dead elephant as one of its walls?"[1]

Despite these difficulties, however, the Talmud was the primary text

of Jewish study during the eleventh century. Many rabbis had released legal opinions by then, and others had written Torah commentaries. But none of this material had ever been assembled into collections of any significant size. Therefore, after the Bible, the baffling and bewildering Talmud was about the only Jewish text left for the serious student of Judaism.

With such an intensifying rumble of political and ideological change afoot, the rabbis of the Arab world grew concerned. Islam was thriving; now it tolerated Jews; some Jews even considered converting. To make matters worse, the oppression and intolerance that did occur in Muslim society *also* induced some Jews to consider jumping ship and adopting the majority religion as their own. Many Jews, the sages noticed, felt drawn to the growing light of Islam. Somehow they needed to resist the allure of that light, but how?

A big part of the problem was that in their resistance campaign the rabbis had only one arrow in their quiver—the Talmud, replete with all its difficulties and complexities. The Talmud may have been good for scholars, but now teachers needed sound bites and slogans, not complexity and hermeneutics. For the rabbis' efforts to succeed they would need to capture Jews' minds and hearts, and the Talmud was rapidly losing its ability to do so. Clearly, they needed something else—a text that, compared to the Talmud, was snappier, clearer, and far more applicable to everyday life.

Enter Alfasi. As an acclaimed scholar and rabbi of one of North Africa's largest and fastest-growing communities, he was well-positioned to devise this new tool. Obviously the tool would need to be a text; the written word was the best way of communicating with large audiences of Jews across the Arab world. And just as obviously the text would need to be based on the Talmud. But it would need to repackage and reframe the Talmud's contents in a way that eleventh-century students could understand.

So Alfasi got to work. He couldn't—and certainly wouldn't—simply

dispose of the Talmud. Instead, he pored through twenty-four tractates of the ancient text, copying only those sections that he felt had practical import for Jews of his day. Out went the material about sacrifices and other no-longer-practiced rituals; out went talmudic passages recording the arcane back-and-forth of ancient Rabbinic debate; out went the sages' nonbinding minority positions and much of the Talmud's entertaining but legally extraneous folklore.

What remained was a Talmud digest, a shortened and far more usable version of the massive ancient text. Now Jews wanting to know what they could eat, how they should celebrate Jewish festivals, or what constituted appropriate conduct in business had a source to which they could turn for help. The Talmud, as a result, was no longer under the sole purview of scholars and sages. Now, suddenly, it was far more available to the Jewish rank and file. Just as *Reader's Digest* would render modern classics widely accessible to twentieth-century Americans, so too did *Hilkhot Alfasi* open the Talmud to the Jews of North Africa nine hundred years earlier.

The book was enormously successful, drawing praise on all fronts. Maimonides, the renowned rabbinic sage of Cairo who lived a century after Alfasi, wrote, "The Laws of our great teacher, Rabbenu Isaac, of blessed memory, have superseded all their predecessors, because they include everything useful for the understanding of the decisions and laws that are now in force." Maimonides's contemporary, Isaac ben Samuel Hazaken, joined in praising the compendium. "A man will toil in vain to produce such a work," he wrote of *Hilkhot Alfasi*, "unless the spirit of God rests upon him."[2]

Isaac Alfasi died in 1103, but scribes copied his Talmud digest, and it spread quickly throughout the Jewish world. Soon it became a common "first stop" for students on their way to the study of Jewish law—almost, but not quite, as central as the Talmud itself. Over the years, other sages would compose clearer and more concise codes of law, often citing Alfasi as their inspiration. Unlike Alfasi, however, these newer law codes tended to be so concise as to make it difficult to trace their teachings back to

the Talmud. The newer works may have been more user-friendly than Alfasi's, but it was Alfasi who remained the primary bridge between the Talmud and contemporary Jewish practice.

A few centuries later the Catholic Church inadvertently helped sell Alfasi's books. In 1553 the Pope banned the Talmud in Italy—existing copies were to be burned, and printing new copies was absolutely forbidden. At the time Italy was the world center of Jewish printing, so the ban had a huge effect on Jewish communities everywhere.[3] For a while, most Jews realized, the Talmud would need to go underground. *Hilkhot Alfasi*, however, wasn't technically Talmud, so it escaped the papal ban. Unlike the Talmud, Jews could still get copies of *Alfasi*; and unlike the Talmud, studying it was perfectly legal. As a result the influence of *Hilkhot Alfasi* grew even further.

An edition of *Alfasi* is said to have been printed in Spain as early as the late 1400s—one of the first printed Jewish books ever—and a printer in Constantinople is known to have come out with another edition in 1509. In due course Jewish presses elsewhere published their own *Alfasi*s. There were Venice additions in 1521 and 1552. Another was printed in Alfasi's hometown of Fez and released in 1523. Then came Riva de Trento in 1558, Krakow in 1597, and Amsterdam in 1720. And in the 1760s yet another edition—the tenth, if you're counting—was published in the Bavarian town of Sulzbach.[4]

Sulzbach, a small hamlet in the rolling hills of southeast Germany, is just a few miles from the borders of France and Luxembourg. In the eighteenth century its Jewish community numbered only a few dozen people, two of whom were printers, Meshulam Zalman Fraenkel and his son Aaron. Their press released each of *Hilkhot Alfasi*'s three volumes individually, in 1762, 1764, and 1767, probably in print runs of about one thousand copies. They are large, folio-sized books, each about ten-by-fifteen inches, and three inches thick. They have black leather spines and matching heavy-cardboard covers.

Although the Fraenkels of Sulzbach sold their books all over the Jewish

world, their largest market was certainly in eastern Europe. Hundreds of thousands of Jews lived in Russia, Poland, and other eastern lands—some in large communities such as Kiev, Vilna, or Odessa, others in small *Fiddler-on-the-Roof*-type shtetls, with names like Bedzin, Yazlovets, and Plock. Most Jews in these areas eked out meager livings in small shops and other businesses, often under the looming specter of oppression from non-Jewish neighbors and governments. Despite their hardships, however, the shtetl Jews needed books—lots of them. Children of all ages needed reading primers and Bibles for school; older students and adult learners needed volumes of Talmud, rabbinic commentaries, and prayer books; and sometimes women needed prayer books with Yiddish translations, because they hadn't received the education they needed to learn the original Hebrew and Aramaic. To be sure, there were printers throughout eastern Europe who could supply many of these needs, and they printed countless schoolbooks, novels, and other literature. Books such as the Talmud and *Alfasi*, however, were far more difficult to produce. Each page used several typefaces of different sizes, marginal notes demanded columns of varying width, and the books were huge. The demands of such printing often exceeded the resources of the printers in these small, impoverished Jewish communities, so eastern European Jews had to import their Talmuds and *Alfasi*s from areas whose printers were better equipped to tackle such difficult jobs. As a result, prominent Jewish publishers arose in places such as Warsaw, Amsterdam, and Prague. And, yes, in Sulzbach too.

We can imagine, then, the large, freshly printed editions of *Hilkhot Alfasi* coming off the Fraenkels' press in 1764. There, behind the small shop, two or three brawny workers load boxes of the heavy books onto horse-drawn carts. Aaron Fraenkel, forty-four, shouts orders, and his seventy-one-year-old father Meshulam Zalman watches calmly from inside.[5] When loaded, the carts, creaking under the weight of their cargo, roll out of Sulzbach and into the Bavarian countryside, parting company with one another as they head to their different destinations.

Most of the carts head east, toward Russia, Poland, and other nearby lands. One cart in particular goes to Vilna, the largest Jewish community in Lithuania, where its driver sells several books to a local itinerant book dealer. The dealer thanks the driver politely and heads to his home in a small nearby shtetl. The next day he makes his normal rounds to the surrounding towns, and one of his first stops is to see the rabbi of a *beis midrash*, a house of study. "The rabbi is a regular customer," the dealer reminds himself. "Surely he'll be interested in this new stock from Bavaria." Carrying a perilously tall stack of books, the bookseller walks toward the wooden building, and the rabbi greets him warmly at the door. "Yankel! *Sholem aleykhem*—it's good to see you. Please come in."

In just a few minutes, the deal is done. Yankel leaves with a shorter stack of books, and the rabbi places his heavy, newly purchased volume of *Hilkhot Alfasi* alongside other similar books on one of the shelves lining the walls of the *beis midrash*.

The following morning the students file in, and soon they are engaged in *khevruse*—tandem Torah study with a partner. A pair of young men walk to the shelf, take down the new *Alfasi*, and carry it to their study table. Opening its black covers, they quickly find the page they are looking for, and across the centuries Alfasi begins to speak.

For almost two hundred years the book remained in that *beis midrash*, allowing generation after generation of students to plumb its depths and discover its riches. Some of the students surely found the experience frustrating; others found it deeply satisfying. Still they came back, year after year, parting the book's covers to read the words inside.

And then one day in late 1941, the door of the *beis midrash* opened. This time what came into the study house was not a hopeful salesman or a group of eager young students. This time what came through the doorway was darkness.

Carefully, I removed the large book from its package and laid it on the table. There were some rub marks on the cover, but otherwise it was in

remarkably good condition. The pages were soft and un-torn, the text was completely readable, and the age-old binding was still doing an excellent job of holding everything together. I turned to the title page. For me, seeing the frontispiece of an old Jewish book is just as exciting as feeling an airplane's final acceleration before takeoff or first stepping into the summer sunshine at Wrigley Field. Despite my middle-aged jadedness and cynical remove, it never fails to give me a thrill.

This book was no exception. Bold, banner-sized letters across the top of the page read, "Part Two of the Laws of Rabbi Alfas." (The letters spelling the author's name were the largest ones on the page—an author's dream!) Then, in slightly smaller letters, came the words "Containing all that is found in the versions of *Alfasi* printed until today—new, and old as well." Moving down the page, the font size grew smaller. Tiny letters listed all of the commentaries included in the book and the previous versions of *Alfasi* that the editor consulted as he assembled his own. Then came the ornate printer's mark; inside the intricate logo was a Hebrew banner reading "Zalman the Printer." Just underneath, once again in a larger typeface, "In Sulzbach."

The page also bore a couple of haphazard stamps indicating that the book had once been at Heichal Shlomo, the office of the chief rabbi in Jerusalem. That's probably where the dealer who sold it to me first got it. Near the left side of the page, somebody had written "Z 302/2" in large penciled letters. The Z was crossed, European-style; it looked like it had been put there in the twentieth century. What could that strange marking mean?

A horizontal black line crossed the page near the bottom, beneath which was a phrase in Latin: "*Cum Licentia Serenissimi Domini Electoris Palatini qua Ducis Solisabacensis*"—"Licensed by His Most Revered Lordship, the Elector Palatine and Duke of Sulzbach." Evidently, printers needed copyright protection back in the 1700s, too. Next came the printer's credits—"In the publishing house of the honorable Meshulam Zalman (may his Rock guard him and give him long life), son of the


חלק שני

מהדפוס

רב אלפס

עם כל הנמצא בספרי האלפסי שנדפסו לפניו עד היום הרשם גם ישנים:

והגדלנו והוספנו בזה על אשר היו לפניו · דהיינו מהחלוקות אשר לבעלי התוספות ומימון ומס"ג ומגר ויחר הפוסקים והמפורשים עם הרב אלפס ז"ל עם איזה דינים וקושיות ותירוצים וחדושי רביני ישעיה אחרון ז"ל הנקראים בשם שלטי הגבורים ובגד חלקי הספר הזה בכלל הוספנו על הראשונים השטורת מי מן החכמים שהשיגו כנגן בעל העיטור הראב"ד רביני יונה הרא"ש ז"ל · אי נמי תשובות שעשו שום אחד מהגבורים ז"ל · על השטרת שנעשו לרביני אלפסי ז"ל או שביאר דעתו ודבריו של הרב או תשובות שהשיב הרב ז"ל בעצמו לשואלים עם הדושים ותוספות מהחלוקות בכל אשר תמצא ידינו ויכול הגליון:

בזולצבאך

Cum Licentia Sereniſſimi Domini Electoris Palatini,
qua Ducis Solisbacenſis.

2. Title page of *Hilkhot Raf Alfas* (or *Alfasi*) written in the eleventh century and published in Sulzbach, Germany, in 1764. Photo by Jeff Hersh.

renowned and honorable Rabbi Aaron (may the memory of the righteous be a blessing)."[6]

Finally, at the very bottom of the title page, came the date: "In the year, 'And I became great and surpassed all who came before me.'" That phrase, of course, isn't a year. It's a *phrase*! The passage is from the Bible—Ecclesiastes 2:9, actually—a lament of how vain our life's labors can be. But in a certain sense, the phrase *is* a year, albeit an encrypted one. Classical Hebrew, you see, has no numerals and instead uses Hebrew letters to represent numbers—*alef* is one, *bet* is two, *gimel* is three, etc. To provide a book's publication date, Jewish printers customarily quote a passage from the Bible, printing a few of its letters larger than the others. To figure out the book's publication date on the Hebrew calendar, all you have to do is total the numerical value of those large letters and add 5,000. Then, to convert that Hebrew date into its corresponding year on our Gregorian calendar, you simply subtract 3760, and—*bingo!*—you have the year the book was published. Simple!

This particular verse had four enlarged Hebrew letters, *dalet*, *peh*, *tav*, and *mem*, representing the numbers 4, 80, 400, and 40 respectively. With pencil and paper, I totaled the value of the letters—524—and added 5,000. The book was printed in the Jewish year 5524. Subtracting 3760, I got its date on the Western calendar—1764! The fact that I'd known this date ever since I first saw the book on eBay diminished the thrill only slightly.

After figuring out the year of publication—refiguring it, actually—I noticed there was a blank page covering the book's frontispiece. Turning it back, I found a decal pasted to the inside-front cover. It was printed in pale blue, and its logo featured two concentric stars of David. The caption read "Jewish Cultural Reconstruction."

"Jewish Cultural Reconstruction"? I'd never heard of it. Puzzled, I did what rabbis have always done when faced with such mysteries. I booted up my computer and went to Google.

3. Bookplate inside the front cover of *Hilkhot Alfasi*. Photo by Shoshana Glickman.

What I discovered while researching the bookplate was an epic story of looting and recovery. Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, I learned, was the organization that processed unidentified Jewish books and other cultural treasures discovered in the American Zone of Germany at the end of World War II. The Nazis had stolen millions of books during their reign. Some they burned in spectacular bonfires, but most they saved, stashing the literary loot in castles, abandoned mine shafts, and

warehouses for future use. It was the largest and most extensive book-looting campaign in history. And if their collection of stolen literature could appropriately be called a library, then at the time it was the largest library of Jewish literature ever amassed.

I try to imagine the last person to study this book before the Nazis took it. In all probability, he died during the Holocaust. Was he single or married? Old or young? What color was his hair? Was this man the victim of a massacre in the woods near his home? Was he herded along with hundreds of others into a gas chamber? Or did he avoid the gas chambers only to die later of disease and starvation? And as he endured his final travails, I wonder whether he carried with him any of the wisdom he learned from this book. Did Alfasi's teachings strengthen him as he faced the horrors? Was he able—even furtively—to perform any of the rituals it prescribed? Might his memories of studying this book together with teachers and friends have brought him at least a fleeting moment of warmth during his final days?

Although we'll never know the answers to these questions, what we do know is that there were millions of books just like this one—books stolen and later redeemed. Some bear traces of the people who once read them—a thumbprint, a doodle, maybe even a handwritten name inside the cover—but most of the books lost their stories in the catastrophic upheavals to which history subjected them.

How is it that the book on my shelf survived those upheavals? How is it that the long trajectory of its path through history led it to my home in Washington State? And what, if anything, is there to be learned from its story?

This, then, is a book about books—millions of books. It is the story of the journey these volumes took from the places they were printed, to the homes and libraries of those who read them, to Nazi castles and warehouses, and back into the hands of Jewish students and institutions around the world. It is a story of great cultural and human loss

and also of how a regime bent on destruction preserved its enemy's literary treasures. It is the story of how a free civilization decides what to do with the remains of a largely destroyed world and of how those remains connect individuals who survived the destruction with their past. It is the story of Jews everywhere struggling to understand the new realities of their post-Holocaust world and of Western society's gradual realization of the magnitude of devastation wrought by World War II. Most of all, it is the story of people—of Nazi leaders, ideologues, and Judaica experts; of Allied soldiers and scholars and scoundrels; of Jewish communities, librarians, and readers around the world. The story of European Jewry's books during World War II is one that runs eerily parallel to the far more tragic story of European Jews themselves. Like the Holocaust's human victims, many books were hidden in attics and cellars; once discovered, few of them survived; sometimes their survival was by design; often it was due to sheer luck.

Most of the people who directly experienced the darkness of the Holocaust are gone now. Among the only remaining physical relics of them and their world are the books that survived the war. One of those volumes was written in Morocco, published in Germany, studied in eastern Europe, and now sits on a bookshelf just a few feet from me as I type these words. This is the story of that book and of millions of others that also survived the calamitous destruction of European Jewry.

Still today, despite the darkness, the light hiding inside these volumes can shine. And maybe—just maybe—knowing the books' stories can help that light shine even brighter.