



MAKOM

A VIRTUAL SHAVUOT INITIATIVE



DAVID DARSHAN, SHIR HAMA'ALOT L'DAVID

[David's Song of Ascents] (Cracow, 1571)

translated by Hayim Goren Perelmuter (Cincinnati, 1984)

A NEW PLACE TO STUDY | PROF. MOSHE ROSMAN

David Darshan's SHIR HAMA'ALOT L'DAVID advertised his talents as a preacher to Jewish communities. Hoping to obtain a permanent position, he began by offering-in addition to preaching and other talents-to set up a new kind of bet midrash (study hall) where independent study of books, rather than teachers, would drive the learning process. David would help people understand books, tutor individuals, offer supplementary lectures, and serve as a liaison between common people and scholars. David's proposal teaches us about the educational levels of sixteenth century Polish Jews, and how the technology of printing democratized Jewish learning.





[FROM THE INTRODUCTION:]

1 ← DAVID PROPOSES ESTABLISHING A NEW KIND OF BET MIDRASH

Blessed be the Lord of the universe, Who has motivated me to establish a Bet Midrash [study hall]¹ in honor of God and of Israel in whatever place the Holy One Praised Be He would provide for me. Furthermore, to honor the glory and the majesty of the God of heaven and earth, I shall bring to it more than four hundred choice books,² and more, all of them beautiful in form and powerful members of David's family,³ collected with much effort for twenty-five years, from the time that I was a lad of nineteen, as is well known to the Gaon Rabbi Mattityahu of Brisk.⁴ I collected them from the four corners of the world, and spent many hundreds of zloty on them.

Foremost among them, I prepared a new Torah scroll with large script in order to be able to pray where we study. These books will be ready and available for all who desire knowledge and understanding of God from them. It is possible, furthermore, that among them there will be found some new kinds of books which have been hidden away for some years. And though modest my worth, I will not leave the place except on Sabbath eves to prepare for the Sabbath, always being on hand for anyone seeking to know or to delve into God's Torah, to the best of the ability of my modest intelligence and limited understanding.

→ **WERE 400 BOOKS A LOT OR A LITTLE FOR ONE INDIVIDUAL OF DAVID'S STATUS TO POSSESS IN THE 16TH CENTURY?**

→ **WHAT WERE THE "NEW KINDS OF BOOKS" (PREVIOUSLY HIDDEN) THAT DAVID'S BET MIDRASH WOULD FEATURE?**

→ **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "ALWAYS BEING ON HAND" AND BEING A TEACHER?**

1 The term David used for his proposed study hall is Midrash, omitting Bet.

2 By way of comparison: in 1638 John Harvard gifted 352 books to serve as the core collection of the new Harvard University Library. As context: between 1540 and 1570 approximately 1850 different editions of Hebrew books were printed. Many titles were printed in more than one edition.

The most popular subjects, by number of editions, were: Torah and commentaries; Liturgy; Halakhah; Mishna, Talmud and commentaries; Kabbalah ---in that order.

The most popular authors, by number of editions, were: Rashi (1040-1105, France: Bible and Talmud Commentaries), David Kimhi (1160-1235, Provence: Bible Commentaries, Grammar), Rambam (1138-1204, Spain-Egypt: Halakhah, Philosophy), Avraham ibn Ezra (1089-1167, Spain: Bible Commentaries, Grammar, Poetry), Eliyahu Levita Bahur (1469-1549, Italy: Hebrew Language, Translation, Poetry, Yiddish Literature), Ya'acov ben Asher (1269-1343, Germany-Spain: Halakhah), Yosef Karo (1488-1575, Spain-Eretz Israel: Halakhah, Kabbalah) ---in that order.

3 See Talmud Bavli 21a: reference to King David's beautiful and powerful 400 sons.

4 R. Matityahu Delacrut, 16th century astrologer and kabbalist, active in Italy and Poland.



2 ← THE NEED FOR THIS BET MIDRASH

This is why Divine Providence saw fit to enable me to come by these books, and establish me in this Bet Midrash, despite my lowly status, in order that attachment to God might be strengthened and the life-line not be ruptured completely, heaven forbid, by the excessive weight of the anxieties of subsistence and taxes and imposts, and the uprooting and the hardships that we endure through our exile because of our many sins. There is no time [for a person] to be engaged in the study of Torah, in order to know the real meaning of the commandments. On some occasions he has the time but no book; on others he has the book, but no understanding. Thus, when he enters the Bet Midrash, his deficiency, whatever it may be, will be supplied. If he understands better than I do, I shall not be ashamed to learn from him. If there be something too difficult, both for the one who asks and for me, I shall take the trouble to consult the great scholars. All this, with the clear understanding that I will not have any interest in any aspect of office or honor whatsoever, either in community affairs or in rabbinical function, except those given on the occasion of a Mitzvah at the time of the sermon,⁵ as it will be required.

- **WHY, AS A PREACHER, DID DAVID SEE HIMSELF AS OF "LOWLY STATUS"?**
- **WHAT NEED DID DAVID THINK HIS BET MIDRASH WOULD FILL?**
- **WHY DID DAVID EMPHASIZE THAT HE WAS NOT AIMING FOR ANY "OFFICE OR HONOR WHATSOEVER?"**

3 ← SPECIAL TUTORIALS

I also commit to be available at all times, every day for at least an hour, to instruct the simple folk about some commentator, or some decisor, or about the Bible, in accordance with their desires and at such time as they choose, which will be of great benefit to the children of the indigent.

In addition, I shall outline the fine points of a book for the teachers of children, and this will be of unusual benefit for schoolchildren who learn from them.

- **WHAT SERVICE WAS DAVID OFFERING TO "SIMPLE FOLK" AND TEACHERS?**

⁵ David would be available to deliver talks at weddings, circumcisions and other celebrations.



4 ← HOW THE COMMUNITY WILL BENEFIT

In general, I shall not be too lazy to undertake whatever my appointed duty may be. From this will flow many advantages for the educated and uneducated alike. The advantages to the totally uneducated have already been made clear. The advantages for those who have a little learning are as follows: When they come tired and worn out from their effort to make a living, each one can take a book home with him and read it, and if he is baffled by the meaning of some text, or by some difficult word, he can jot it down on paper, even in the German [i.e. Yiddish] language, and he may send it to the Bet Midrash, and the messenger need not reveal the name of the person involved. I shall interpret it if I am able, and if not I shall make inquiry about it. The advantage for the learned and the sharp-witted is immeasurable. For when he raises some profound problem, and sends it to the Bet Midrash, I shall transcribe it and send it on to the most learned and brilliant scholars, who will each offer some original interpretations. Then I shall collate them, and bring them to the head of the yeshivah, and there the interpretations will be examined to see which is the keenest and most erudite, and this will provide the highest kind of intellectual and spiritual stimulation.

This is not the case at the present time, for they do not know the difference between the noble and the ignoble. The young man acts insolently toward his elders, and he who has a loud mouth, and is good at disputation, is adjudged the sharpest. Sometimes even a sharp-witted and expert scholar who needs to find a saying or religious law or a verse, or needs to look up some book of wisdom or Kabbalah or the like, may, if he does not happen to be in possession of these books, write it on paper, send it to the Bet Midrash, and I shall take the trouble to look for it and find it. The greatest benefit of all, impossible to measure or value, will accrue to the head of the yeshivah, since he will not need to waste his time on petty problems, for only difficult problems will come before him. For I, with my modest intelligence, will solve the easier and less-complicated problems.

There will be times when someone of my lowly station will feel inhibited about asking questions, because he is too ill at ease to go in person before an exalted one. Therefore the great and awesome God saw fit to provide such a lowly one as I am to spare him the anxiety and terror.

- **WHAT WERE THE TARGET POPULATIONS OF THIS INSTITUTION TO BE?**
- **HOW WOULD THEY EACH BE SERVED?**
- **WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT THE DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF 16TH CENTURY POLISH JEWRY FROM DAVID'S PLAN?**



S ← A PLEA FOR SUPPORT

The end of the core of it all is something that cannot be measured. Whoever supports this project assures himself of a secure footing in both worlds,⁶ and will be granted long life and good fortune. As it is written: "It is a tree of life to them that uphold it."

The text does not say to those who study it, but rather those who support it. Therefore, wherever he goes, his generosity will precede him to clear away obstacles before him, and assure his favorable judgment in the next world. For while he goes about his business and his commerce, others will be occupied in the Bet Midrash with the holiness of the Torah. Because of this, everything he does will prosper, and it will be granted him to live and see the coming of the Messiah. He will profit in his property and his merchandise, and, together with his family, will be spared from famine, pestilence, and war.

But those people who would nullify this project for impious reasons will be cut off forever, and erased from the Book of Life. And those who support the true faith will have a good end. Blessed will they be before God in their coming and their going, and their exit from this world will be as their entrance into it; they, their wives, and their offspring.

Amen, he who speaks truth and righteousness,
David Darshan, from Cracow.

→ **WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT DID DAVID SEEK FOR HIS BET MIDRASH PROJECT?**

→ **WHO MIGHT BE OPPOSED TO DAVID'S PROJECT? WHY?**

[FROM THE EPILOGUE:]

But woe is me, that because of my many sins, I have nothing but daughters, and I must therefore depart from this honored community for a while, until some money will turn up and I can collect enough zlotys and coins for dowries and accoutrements and marry them off to decent men. God will shine his countenance on all who help.

⁶ This world and the world-to-come.



- **WHY DID DAVID CONSIDER HIMSELF UNFORTUNATE BECAUSE HE HAD A NUMBER OF DAUGHTERS?**
- **WHY DID DAVID HAVE TO LEAVE CRACOW?**

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- **WHAT WERE DAVID'S OBJECTIVES IN PROPOSING THIS BET MIDRASH?**
- **WHAT ROLES WAS DAVID TO PLAY IN THE BET MIDRASH?**
- **WHAT WERE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DAVID'S PLANNED BET MIDRASH AND CONVENTIONAL BATEI MIDRASH AND YESHIVOT AT THE TIME?**
- **WHAT WAS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DAVID'S PROPOSED BET MIDRASH AND THE GROWING POPULARITY OF PRINTING IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY?**
- **WHAT DOES DAVID'S PROPOSAL IMPLY ABOUT THE STATE OF TORAH LEARNING IN 16TH CENTURY POLAND?**
- **COULD SHIR HAMA'ALOT L'DAVID HAVE BEEN WRITTEN BEFORE THE SPREAD OF PRINT TECHNOLOGY?**
- **WHAT MODERN INSTITUTION DOES DAVID'S PROPOSAL ANTICIPATE?**

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

DAVID BEN MANASSEH DARSHAN (born ca. 1527) was a student of R. Moshe Isserles (Remuh) and R. Shlomo Luria (Maharshal). He visited Italy, and traveled among the communities there, later returning to Cracow. Besides preaching, he answered halakhic questions, instructed treatment of the sick, wrote amulets, and composed letters. He proposed establishing a bet midrash where he himself would be available to encourage learning, with no hierarchy of intellectual authority. This institution would be centered around a library with over 400 volumes which David had collected. His two published works are Shir HaMa'alot L'David (Cracow, 1571), containing samples of his sermons, letter and amulet-writing, responsa and poetry, as well as references to several of his unpublished works; and Ketav Hitnazzelut le-Darshanim (Apologia for Preachers, Lublin, 1574).