

HARAV YAAKOV EMDEN

*And the
Gateway to
Heaven*

by AKIVA AARONSON

As Rosh Hashanah approaches and we reach for our machzorim, do we appreciate the treasure we hold in our hands, and the importance of each word? Let's explore the life of Harav Yaakov Emden and his classic siddur.

Harav Yaakov Emden, born in 1697 in Altona, North Germany, descended from a distinguished line of Torah sages both on his father's and his mother's side. His father was the Chacham Tzvi (1660-1718), Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam, and one of the greatest Torah authorities of late 17th century Europe. His mother the daughter of Hagaon Harav Meshulam Zalman HaLevi Mirels-Neumark, Rav of AHU, the combined North German *kehillos* of Altona, Hamburg and Wandsbek.

The first son born after three daughters, Rav Yaakov was a weak child, ill with almost everything. Despite his delicate nature and his parents' concerns for him, when the child reached 3 years old, his father hastened to bring him to *cheder*. When he was only 5 years old, he had already completed *Maseches Brachos*.

Rav Yaakov's unique abilities were already apparent at a young age; his education was supervised by his father who trained him not only in Talmud, but later also initiated him in *Kabbalah*. As a boy of only 15, Rav Yaakov wrote a long *teshuvah* to a person who had challenged a ruling of his father — his father was traveling at the time and unable to answer it — and when his father saw it, he kissed his son on the head and said, "*Sefasayim yishak meishiv devarim nechochim* — The lips of one who responds with proper words should be kissed" (*Mishlei* 24:26).

While still in his youth, Rav Yaakov was known for his sharp mind and great *hasmadah*, so that when he was only 20 years old and newly married, upon the *petirah* of his father, he was approached to succeed him as Rav of Lvov. Although the appointment did not transpire, the mere fact of its suggestion — Lvov was then one of the largest and most distinguished of European Jewish *kehillos* — indicates the esteem with which he was held.

In 1728, 10 years later, he indeed took up a position, as Rav of Emden, from where his name derives. However, he remained in Emden for only four years, leaving because of conflict with the *gabbai'm*, whom he regarded as heavy handed. It was also due to health reasons; the climate in that part of Germany was seemingly unhealthy for him and his family, who had fallen ill a number of times.

Leaving Emden, Rav Yaakov returned to Altona, the town of his birth, where the heads of the community welcomed and honored



Harav Yaakov Emden



House of Harav Emden in Altona.



him. The gentile authorities — the king and his ministers — also held him in high regard, and Rav Yaakov was given the right to purchase a house there in perpetuity, a privilege not often afforded Jews. Additionally, he was given permission to set up a printing press in his home, and to establish a house of prayer. From then on, he refused to take up the burden of *rabbanus* again, desiring complete independence and to be able to learn Torah in peace.¹

Master of all areas of Torah, *Nigleh* — revealed Torah — and *Nistar* — *Kabbalah* — combined with a prolific pen, Harav Emden wrote many *sefarim*, almost beyond count, testimony to his remarkable depth and breadth of understanding. Other than his famous *siddur* — it alone would have earned him a place in posterity — and his two-volume responsa, *She'eilas Ya'avetz* (Altona, 1739), his *sefarim* include *Lechem Shamayim*, a commentary on the *Mishnah* (Wandsbek, 1728), *Mor u'Ketziach*, a commentary on Tur, *Orach Chaim* (Altona, 1761), *Luach Eres on Dikduk* (Altona, 1769), and annotations to the *Gemara Bavli* which he intended to publish but which in fact did not appear until the Vilna edition of 1880.²

Like the home from which he came, the hallmark of Rav Yaakov's own life was a determination to maintain the full and undiluted *mesorah* of Torah, and to fight any breach in it. In halachic matters he was equally unyielding and, fearing no one, did not refrain from criticizing those whose opinions he considered wrong. This included even his great-grandfather, Harav Ephraim Kohen of Vilna (*Teshuvos Sha'ar Ephraim*), in regard to *Akdamus* said on Shavous morning.³

Living in the generation after the false messiah Shabbesai Tzvi — a time when some of his adherents were still active — Rav Yaakov's most prominent dispute was with Harav Yonasan Eibeshitz, Rav of AHU. Rav Yonasan had written amulets for protection, circulating in German communities. These came to the attention of Rav Yaakov who considered that they indicated Sabbatian leanings. A dispute arose which threatened to divide European Jewry — it lasted 14 years — with Torah authorities coming to the support of each side.⁴

His Own Printing House

In those days, printing errors were common in *sefarim*, not only due to the difficult work of typesetting — each letter required an individual piece of metal type — but also because printers tended to be overzealous for financial reasons, trying to bring their work to conclusion. Harav Yaakov Emden criticized this conduct — without reservation — laying the blame on the owners of the presses. Despite the great expense involved, for this reason Rav Yaakov established his own press in his house in Altona, where he would be able to watch over every page as it was printed.

The Siddur

Harav Yaakov Emden gave priority to his *siddur* over other *sefarim* he had ready for printing because of the particular importance he attached to it. In his opinion, accuracy was of absolute necessity in *tefillah*, especially in regard to *Shemoneh Esrei* — each and every word carefully weighed and set down by the *Anshei Knesses Hagedolah*. A *siddur* had to meet this requirement. Thus, he cautioned the reader: “It is appropriate for a person to accustom himself to use this *sefer* and not to say anything by heart ... even something which seems minor like the verses said when they raise up the *Sefer Torah*.”

Harav Emden felt the need for his *siddur* even more acutely because of difficulties he saw in *siddurim* available at the time. Some provided too much *halachah*, more than needed for basic *tefillah*, while others provided too little, which led to mistakes. Some stated the *minhag* one way, while others presented it differently. Some had commentaries unnecessary for basic understanding, yet others had too few. A number of them contained corrections put in by the author, but were not based on sound sources. In Rav Yaakov's words: “Until now the holy *siddur* was like a breached city ... many have entered and created havoc within ... leaving their readers without a safe path to follow.”

Preparing to Print

As he prepared to go to print, Rav Yaakov did not hold back in any way, concerned not only with the



Volume I: *Amudei Shamayim*, Altona 1745.



Volume II: *Sha'arei Shamayim*, Altona 1747.



contents of the *sefer* but also with its aesthetic qualities. Sparing neither time nor expense, he purchased new machinery and had letters made for him in Amsterdam — the leading center of printing at the time — with *nekudos* and *trop* marks. He also used the finest quality paper, as he wrote, “I prepared new letters with all my strength and might, pleasant and praiseworthy, and to bring the finest quality paper, so that this work of Hashem should be pleasant, as beautiful as possible.”

Ironically, he, himself, did not entirely escape the fault he found in others — overzealousness to bring the work to completion. This time it was in reverse, his workers pushing him to finish the work, since it was their bread! Accordingly, he asks the reader for forgiveness: “Do not regard me as suspect if what I have written in my introduction is not as clear and well organized as required, for haste forced me ... the worker stands over me like a taskmaster!”

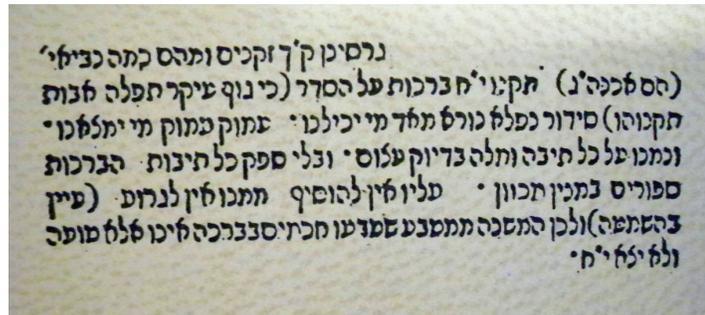
The Siddur Appears

Printed in his house in Altona, the *siddur* appeared in two volumes, the first called *Amudei Shamayim*, in 1745, beginning with his long introduction, followed by *Perek Shirah*. Afterwards, the *siddur* followed the pattern of a usual one, weekday *tefillos* followed by those of Shabbos.

Rav Emden also gave names to each chapter, the first ones according to locations in the *Beis HaMikdash* — following the path of a person entering and progressing from lesser to greater holiness — starting with *Ezras Nashim* (morning blessings), then *Ezras Yisrael* (the *Akeidah*), leading to the *Beis Kodshai HaKodashim* (*Shemoneh Esrei*).

Volume Two of the *siddur*, called *Sha'arei Shamayim*, appeared two years later in 1747, beginning with *Hallel* and *Rosh Chodesh*. Then it followed the months of the year, starting with Nissan and ending with Adar II. Here, too, the chapters were given names, this time

Peirush on Shemonei Esrei



We learn in the Gemara (Megillah 17b): One hundred and twenty elders, and amongst them several Nevi'im (the Anshei Kenesses Hagedolah) established the 18 Brachos (of the Shemonei Esrei) in their order (the very concept of prayer itself established by the Avos). They established a wondrous and awesome order, who can fathom it, deeper than our comprehension. They selected each and every word with great exactitude. Without doubt they fixed the number of words in each brachah to be an exact number. One should neither add nor subtract from it in any way. Therefore, one who changes the 'coin which the Sages minted' is only making a mistake, and does not fulfill his obligation in the Shemonei Esrei.

according to the gates of Jerusalem and the *Beis HaMikdash*, beginning with *Sha'ar HaChodosh* (Rosh Chodesh) and concluding with *Sha'ar Hasosim* (Adar II).

Compendium of Tefillah

Nothing short of a compendium, the *siddur* provided every possible need of a Jew through the day and year, foremost of all a precise text, meticulously checked. It also included instructions for prayer, together with detailed laws in related areas — the laws of *tzitzis*, *tefillin*, *brachos*, and so on. To this Harav Emden added his commentary, which drew on his mastery of all sources, Talmud, *dikduk*, history and *Kabbalah*.

Reaction to the Siddur

Acclaimed as soon as the *siddur* appeared, praise for it was unceasing. It was found on the tables of Torah leaders as well as on those of laymen.⁵ Among those who used it was the Chasam Sofer,⁶ who relied completely on the *halachah* stated in it. His great-grandson, the Da'as Sofer, wrote: “It is known that my holy great-grandfather relied on the *halachah* stated by Harav Yaakov Emden, which was for him like eyes in every matter.”⁷ The Chasam Sofer also quoted the *siddur* in his *chiddushim* and *teshuvos*.

Although originally printed according to *Nusach Ashkenaz*, because



it included *Kabbalah*, the *siddur* was also sought after by Chassidim. Editions were printed according to *Nusach Sephard* as well, with glowing approbations from Chassidic leaders.⁸

Return to Altona

In 1752, after a period of absence from Altona due to tensions resulting from his conflict with Harav Yonasan Eibeshutz, Harav Yaakov Emden returned. He remained there for close to a quarter of a century, writing and learning.

In the last period of his life Rav Yaakov's desire was to settle in *Eretz Yisrael*. However, it seems he was unable to sell his house; a sale was agreed upon but for unknown reasons was prevented from going through. Subsequently, the *gabbai'm* of the town decided to give him a substantial sum to assist him to move, but Rav Yaakov would not accept it, determined as always to remain independent of any person. As a result, the move was delayed and never came to fruition.

Harav Emden's Legacy

From then until now, the words of Harav Yaakov Emden have not lost their glow, whether in *tefillah*, *halachah* or *Kabbalah*. Throughout his life, he went out



Lechem Shamayim, first edition, Wandsbek 1728.



She'eilas Ya'avetz, first edition, Altona 1739.



Mor u'Ketzi'ah, first edition, Altona 1761.

like a mighty warrior, his sword drawn, for the cause of Hashem, not bowing before anyone, rich or poor. Even his enemies admitted that he was a man of truth, and all his dealings were *P'Shem Shamayim*.

Harav Yaakov Emden was *niftar* in Altona, in holiness and purity, at 80 years of age, on *erev Shabbos*, the first day of Rosh Chodesh Iyar, 1776. He was buried close to the beginning of Shabbos. In all places, near and far, they eulogized him, gripped with intense mourning.

He stated in his *siddur* that the *tefillos* of anyone who *davened* from it with *kavanah* would not go unanswered. Thus, the words of the *Chazal* were fulfilled through him: "*Tzaddikim*, even after their passing are called alive" (*Brachos* 18a). ■

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1. How did he become known as *the Ya'avetz*? When he was young, he asked his father why he wrote his name only as צבי, without mentioning his father's name. His father responded that he was indeed mentioning his father's name, צבי being an acronym for Tzvi ben Yaakov — צבי בן יעקב. He told his son that when he himself will become a Torah scholar and write *sefarim*, he should do the same, and sign his name as 'Ya'avetz', an acronym for Yaakov ben Tzvi — יעקב בן צבי!
2. He also wrote an autobiography, *Megillas Sefer*, published after his passing, for reasons he stated: to tell his offspring the kindness of Hashem to him, for he had been a weak and ill child, and Hashem had saved him; to strengthen those who go through difficult times not to give up; and to explain his version in matters since he had been a person of contention.
3. Despite differing with him in this matter — when exactly to say the *Akdamus* — in his concluding words he did not hold back from praise of him: "Who would only give us from the dust of his grave to put on our eyes!"
4. Although in their lifetimes these two Torah giants were in conflict, in death they were united. Harav Yonasan Eibeshitz was *niftar* 12 years before Harav Yaakov Emden, and when Rav Yaakov reached his own deathbed, it is said he declared, "*Shalom Aleichem*, my father and master; *Shalom Aleichem*, Rav Yonasan, my colleague."
5. Only the first edition appeared during the author's lifetime. Subsequent editions include Koretz (1818), Lvov (1859), Budapest (1876), Warsaw (1882), Lvov (1884), and Lemberg (1897, 1901, 1904). With time, the name of the *siddur* also changed; it is known today as the '*Siddur* of Rav Yaakov Emden', or the '*Siddur Bais Yaakov*'.
6. Rav Moshe Sofer (1762-1839).
7. *Rabi Akiva and his Torah. Collected Letters*, No. 31.
8. The Rebbe of Ruzhin wrote in his approbation: "Wonderfully constructed on gold pillars and quarried from holy sources." The Yeshuos Moshe of Vizhnitz wrote: "This prayer book never left the tables of our sacred rabbis and ancestors, who used it at all times."

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