

Harav Dovid Ganz, the New World and the Old World

by Akiva Aaronson

Born at a pivotal point in mid-16th-century Europe, Harav Dovid Ganz gives us an insight into the world of his time through his classic *sefarim* *Nechmad v'Na'im* and *Tzemach Dovid*, the former describing the “New World” then opening up, and the latter, the legacy of the “Old World,” the generations that preceded him.

Born in Westphalia, northwest Germany, in 1541, to one of the oldest Jewish families of the region, Rav Dovid was educated in the famous yeshivah of Frankfurt-am-Main. At a young age, he left his native Germany and traveled eastward to Cracow. There he became a close *talmid* of the Rema,¹ who took a personal interest in him.² Afterward, Rav Ganz returned to Germany and married, living for a period in the home of his father-in-law, as was the custom in those days.

In 1564, when he was 23 years old, Rav Ganz settled in Prague, with which he is chiefly associated, recognized there as a *talmid chacham* and *yerei Shamayim*. As far

as we know, he did not occupy any official position, neither in *rabbanus* nor *dayanus*, and not as one of the *parnasim*, lay leaders of the community. Instead, in a quiet way, he was involved with *tzarhei tzibbur*, the needs of the community.

16th-Century Prague

Strategically located at the crossroads of Europe, by the 10th century, Prague had become a thriving town with a large marketplace. Situated on opposite banks of the river Moldau, the building of the Charles Bridge in the mid-14th century — a stone structure replacing wooden bridges and boats — provided secure passage between the two sides, leading the city to develop even greater in prominence.

In 1583, Emperor Rudolf made Prague the seat of his royal court, thus the capital of

1. Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1530-1572).

2. Rav Ganz himself describes his debt to the Rema: “The *Chassid*, my teacher and my *Rebbi*, who took me as his own and raised me, *Mori v'Rabi*, Moshe Isserles z”l” — *Nechmad v'Na'im*, Introduction.

Bohemia and of the Habsburg dynasty, one of the most important cities in German-speaking lands. As a result, diplomats, bureaucrats and merchants were drawn there, a cosmopolitan place, a meeting place of nations.

A man of letters, Rudolf was interested in art and culture, his court a haven for artists, astronomers, astrologers and alchemists, who enjoyed his patronage. In this way, the city became open to a broader way of thinking and tolerance of others, which for Prague Jewry ushered in an unusual period of peace and prosperity. In its wake, Prague Jewry flourished both in spiritual and material areas, the burden of *galus* temporarily lifted.



15th-century map of Germany.

Early Years of Prague Jewry

Jewish merchants had first been recorded living in the Prague area as early as the 10th century, and in time, the community – which developed on the right bank of the Moldau – became one of the largest and most revered of European Jewish *kehillos*. Life centered around the Altneushul (Old-New Synagogue), completed in 1280, the spiritual center of Prague Jewry, in use until today.



19th century illustration of the Altneushul.

In 1492 – 50 years before the birth of Rav Dovid Ganz – the expulsion from Spain took place, moving the exiles and the center of Jewish life eastward. Prague, too, became home to them, with two distinct communities developing in the ghetto: the Sephardi community of Spanish and Portuguese origin, and the Ashkenazi one, centered around the Altneushul.

Prague Jewry itself had seen no shortage of persecution and difficulties. Considered “Servants of the Royal Chamber,” their residence in Prague was subject to certain conditions: confined to living in a walled ghetto; obligated to wear a yellow badge; and subject to special taxes on them alone. Blood libels – the claim that Jews needed gentile blood for their matzos – were cause for constant fear, especially at Pesach time, the simple townsfolk incited by local clergy.³ Prague Jewry also lived in constant fear of expulsion, although whenever enacted, it was usually rescinded before long, the loss of revenue to the royal treasury keenly felt.

Golden Age of Prague Jewry

Under Emperor Rudolf, Prague Jewry entered its golden era, becoming an *Ir v'Eim* in *Klal Yisrael*. Renowned for its Torah sages, its influence was felt far and wide throughout Europe. Its Torah luminaries include the Maharal,⁴ Rabbi Mordechai Yafeh,⁵ Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz⁶ and the Tosafos Yom Tov.⁷ It was also home at different times to three generations of the Horowitz family, including Harav Yeshayah Horowitz (Shelah HaKadosh).⁸

The period also saw the extension and development of the ghetto under Mordechai

3. This fear was not confined to Prague alone but widespread in the European Jewish *kehillos*. In Prague, one of the most notorious attacks took place in 1389, with the massacre of nearly all the Jews in the ghetto.

4. Rabbi Yehudah Loew (ca.1512-1609).

5. ca. 1535-1612, author of the *Levush*, classic halachic compendium on all sections of *Shulchan Aruch*.

6. d. 1619, author of the *Kli Yakar* Torah commentary.

7. Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller (1579-1654), *Dayan* in Prague.

8. ca.1560-1630.



Maizel – court Jew and financier to the emperor – who was responsible for building additional synagogues, the Jewish town hall, a hospital, an extension to the cemetery and the paving of ghetto roads.



Harav Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz's Amudei Sheish, Prague 1618.

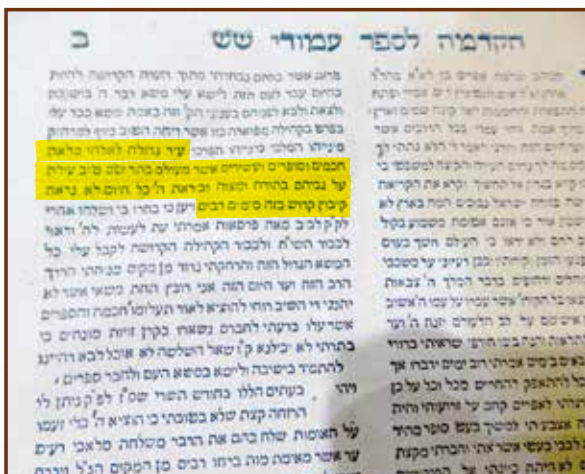
– followed by the discovery of Mexico, Central and South America, and in the far north, Newfoundland. Prior to that time, before Columbus sailed west, the entire world known to Europeans, other than Europe itself, consisted of North Africa and Asia, the latter dominated by China.

Those who sailed west and reached these new shores brought back treasures: gold and silver. They also brought new crops to plant on European soil: the potato and tobacco. Soon, they were followed by traders, anxious to reap profit from the newly discovered territories. In turn, they were followed by the nations themselves, seeking to establish colonies and claim territory for their own. New trade routes developed, departing from the ports of France, England, Spain and Portugal. Europeans were waking up to a new world. Life was changing direction, and people with it.

Eastward, too, from Europe, in the direction of Asia and the Far East, the world was opening up. For centuries there had been land-based trade with China and the Far East, but for the first time, European explorers were finding a sea route there, around Africa and across the Indian Ocean. Trading posts began to develop along these routes, ships laden with great wealth bringing back gold, silver, precious stones, silk and spices.

In understanding this new world, other than his accomplishments as an outstanding Torah scholar, Rav Ganz applied himself to the fields of geography and astronomy. This was a remarkable achievement for a Jew, since he was barred from all places of academia open to gentiles.

In this area, Rav Dovid Ganz left us a number of works – not all published – most notably *Nechmad v'Na'im*, printed after his passing,⁹ and an abridged version of it, *Magen Dovid*, printed during his lifetime.¹⁰ Rav



Amudei Sheish, author's introduction describing contemporary Prague:
 עיר גדולה – A great city to Hashem, full of Torah sages and the wealthy, the crown of a good name always resting on them, in Torah, mitzvos and yiras Hashem. Such a holy gathering has not been seen for a long time.

Representing other Jewish communities scattered around Bohemia, the Jews of Prague also enjoyed a close connection with the emperor and personal contact with his court. The emperor and his wife visited the Jewish ghetto in 1571, the occasion looked upon as a sign of benevolence, and similarly the visit of the Maharal to the emperor in 1592.

Harav Ganz and the New World

Not only did Rav Ganz live at a pivotal time in Jewish history but also in world history. America had been discovered 50 years earlier in 1492 – the “New World”



Nechmad v' Na'im, Yassnitz 1743.

9. Yassnitz 1743.

10. Prague 1612, with approbations from Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz; Rabbi Yitzchak Katz, son-in-law of the Maharal; and the Tosafos Yom Tov.

Ganz explains basic geography of the earth: its climates, longitude and latitude, with the location of the equator and its length. Additionally, he explains the working of the solar system, each of the planets with their own path through space, as well as star formations and their influence. He deals with the cycle of the sun, Earth and moon, with a stress on the calculation of the Jewish calendar.

While among gentile scholars, knowledge in these areas developed only over a long period, the early generations of Israel had always been acquainted with them. This was necessary for the very workings of Jewish life: knowledge of the solar year and lunar cycle in order to maintain them in line through leap years, and knowledge of the lunar month in order to declare Rosh Chodesh.

For example writes Rav Ganz, Avraham Avinu, understood from the star formations, that “Avram” would not bear children, but “Avraham” would do so.¹¹ He also states that the tribe of Yissachar “understood times.”¹² In the time of the *Tanna* Rabban Gamliel, the Sages knew exactly through calculation the time of Rosh Chodesh; however, they required it to be declared through sighting of the new moon by witnesses.¹³ At the end of the period of the *Tanna'im*, Rabi Shmuel Yarchinah said about himself that he knew the paths of the heavens as clearly as the paths of Nehardea.¹⁴

Rav Ganz concludes by explaining the benefit of understanding these matters, to appreciate the wisdom of Israel’s early generations who had complete mastery over these matters before others had even considered them. Moreover, it leads one to appreciate the wondrous work of Creation: the working of the solar system, the planets, Earth and moon, synchronized in harmony, with their respective paths through space.

11. Bereishis 15:5 (Rashi).

12. The tribe of Yissachar knew the wisdom behind times, to declare a leap year and new moon, and according to them Israel worked (Devarim 33:18 [Rashi]); 1 Divrei Hayamim 12:33).

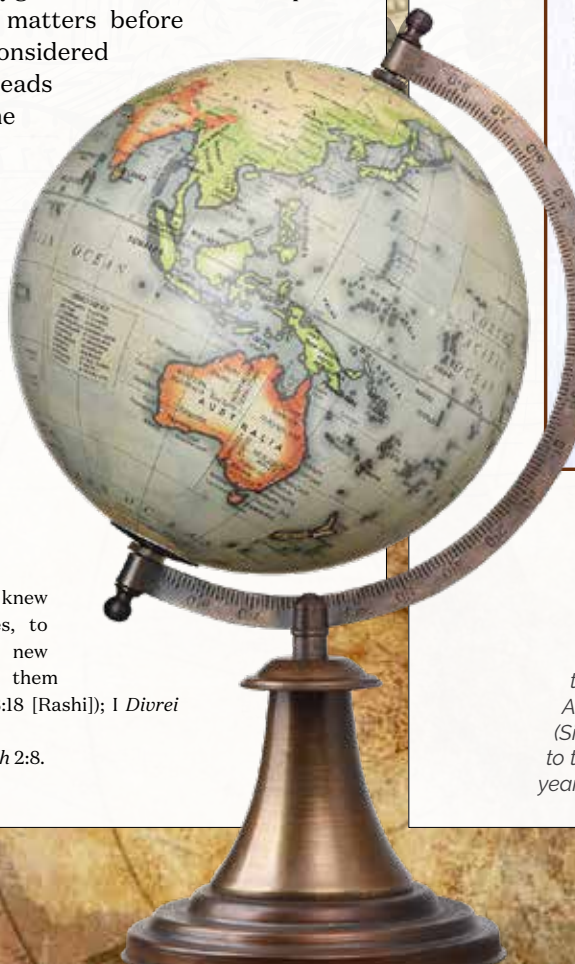
13. Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 2:8.

14. Brachos 58b.

International Date Line

Rav Ganz’s particular contribution in this area was to be the first to point out the need to establish what is now called a date line in the world. By his time, it was accepted that Earth is round – not flat as previously thought – explorers having circled the globe, coming back to the same place.

Rav Ganz perceived that this presented a problem: One circulating the globe in a westward direction – as though “escaping” and delaying the sun – continuously adjusting his clock to an earlier time as he traveled, would, upon reaching his original place of departure, find himself on the same day as he had left, while those who had remained in the same place were one day ahead. Conversely, one circulating the globe in an eastward direction – as though going toward and “hastening” the sun – continuously adjusting his clock forward in time would, upon reaching his original place of departure, find himself one day ahead of those who had remained in the same place.



Nechmad v'Na'im, Chapter 56. MANY PEOPLE CIRCUMNAVIGATE THE GLOBE AND RETURN TO THE PLACE FROM WHICH THEY EMBARKED. Towards the end of the entry Ganz refers to the Elizabethan explorer Sir Francis Drake, the first person to circumnavigate the globe: Ish Echad – A person from Anglittera (England) called Francisci Drako (Sir Francis Drake) in the year 1557 according to the gentile calculation of the years, and the year 5337 according to the Jewish calendar...

Accordingly, it was necessary to establish a location on the globe where everyone agreed the day began. The matter had not even been considered by gentile scholars, but once revealed to them, they agreed that it had to be settled.¹⁵

Harav Ganz and the Old World

Harav Ganz is best known, however, for his *sefer Tzemach Dovid*, a chronicle of world history from Creation to his time, first published in 1592.¹⁶ As he himself explains, it was intended as an accurate account of earlier generations, for working people with limited time on their hands, after a day's work.

Divided into two parts, Jewish history and non-Jewish history, it was necessary to make this division – in Rav Ganz's words "*l'havdil bein kodesh l'chol*" – because one dealt with holy matters, while the other, profane ones. Additionally, Jewish history was rooted in *sifrei kodesh*: Tanach, Talmud and the works of the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, written with *nevuah* and *ruach hakodesh*. In contrast, non-Jewish history was written by academics, without any holiness at all.

Part I, dealing with Jewish history, was divided into sections each of 1,000 years, beginning with Creation, Adam Harishon and the generations until Noach. Subsequent parts include Avraham Avinu, *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, the entry and conquest of the Land of Israel, and the kings of Israel. Later entries include Nevuchadnetzar, King of Bavel; Achashverosh, King of Persia; Ezra Hasofer and the return to Eretz Yisrael, and the generations of *Tanna'im*, *Amora'im*, *Geonim* and *Rishonim*.

One of the last entries – bringing us up to Rav Ganz's own time – is for the Maharal of Prague, described by Rav Ganz as "The great Rabbi, crown of the *chachamin*, wonder of our generation, in whose light we live, and from whose waters drink the entire dispersal of Israel... Hashem should lengthen his days and years."¹⁷

Part II of *Tzemach Dovid* deals with world history, likewise divided into sections of 1,000 years, an early entry dealing with Nimrod, the first king to be mentioned in *Tanach*.¹⁸ Part II, however, essentially deals with history from the year 3000 after Creation, including Alexander the Great,¹⁹ Antiochus Epiphanes,²⁰ Julius Caesar,²¹ Nero,²² Vespasian,²³ Bar Kochba,²⁴ the First Crusade,²⁵ the Black Death,²⁶ and the



Tzemach Dovid, first edition, Prague 1592.

15. For gentiles, the International Date Line was established as the 180th meridian of longitude – the opposite side of the world as Greenwich, London – running through the Pacific Ocean from the North to South Pole, with certain deviations in its path. For Jewry, according to one opinion, the date line runs along the eastern coastline of China, being the end of the Euro-Asian land mass, each new calendar day commencing with sunrise on the Chinese coast. According to a second opinion, it includes Japan, each new calendar day starting with sunrise on the eastern coastline of Japan.

16. First edition, Prague 1592. Later editions include Frankfurt am Main 1692, 1698; Offenbach 1715, 1768; Furth 1785; Sadilkov 1834; Lemberg 1847, 1863; and Warsaw 1859.

17. Entry for the year 1592 C.E.

18. *Bereishis* 10:8.

19. See opposite page.

20. "Who came to Jerusalem in the 6th year of his reign... killed young and old, men, women and children" (Entry for the year 3610).

21. "Called 'Caesar' because he was born by caesarean operation, retained as the title for all subsequent Roman emperors" (Entry for the year 3662).

22. "Sixth Roman Caesar... who killed his closest relatives... put Rome to fire, saw it and was happy" (Entry for the year 3816).

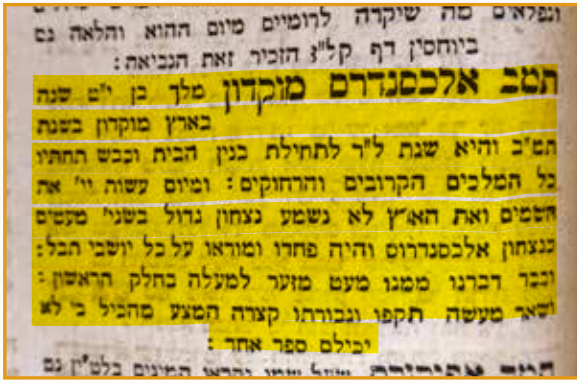
23. "Tenth Roman Emperor... *Churban Bayis Sheini* took place in the second year of his reign" (Entry for the year 72 C.E.).

24. "Called Bar Kosiba... rebelled against Rome" (Entry for the year 120 C.E.).

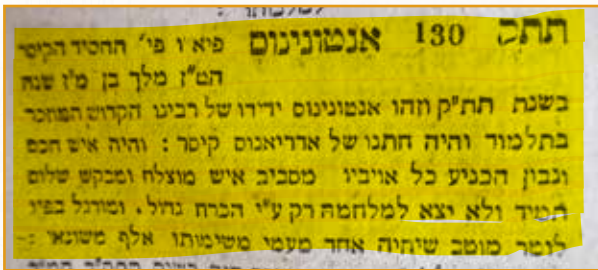
25. "War on Jerusalem... 600,000 men in seven routes to Eretz Yisrael" (Entry for the year 1096 C.E.).

26. See opposite page.

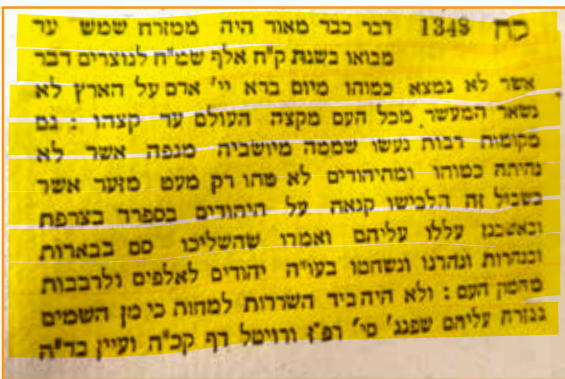




TZEMACH DOVID, ENTRY FOR ALEXANDER MOKDON (ALEXANDER THE GREAT)
King at 19 years of age in Macedonia (Greece), and in the year 342, which was the 34th year of the Second Bais HaMikdash, he conquered all the kings near and far... never a conqueror who conquered so much in so short a time... fear and trembling of him was on everyone...



TZEMACH DOVID, ENTRY FOR ANTONINUS CAESAR
Antoninus, the righteous one, 16th Roman Caesar... a friend of Rabbeinu Hakadosh... a wise and understanding man... always sought peace and only went to war if absolutely necessary. He was accustomed to say, "Better that one of my people should live than the death of 1,000 of my enemies."



TZEMACH DOVID, ENTRY FOR THE BLACK DEATH
An extremely severe plague... nothing ever like it... many places left desolate of inhabitants... among Jews only a small number died... which aroused the envy [of the gentiles] in Spain, France and Germany... They accused Jews of poisoning the wells and rivers... and they slaughtered them in their multitudes...

discovery of America.²⁷ One of the final entries records the birth of the emperor Rudolf II: "Our master, Emperor Rudolf, Duke of Austria, son of Emperor Maximillian, born in Vienna in the year 1552..."

The benefits of the *sefer*, writes Rav Ganz, include to reinforce in a person that Hashem gives a *rasha* his due in his time, as we see from those he mentions, the most powerful rulers, cruel and ruthless, who came to nothing in the end, slain and lost to the world.

One also comes to recognize the Divine Supervision – *hashgachah* – of Hashem over Israel: Great empires had come and gone, while *Klal Yisrael*, without king or kingdom, and distanced from their land, had survived them all.

Passing of Harav Dovid Ganz

Rav Dovid passed away on 5 Elul, 5373/1613, more than 400 years ago, his legacy with us to this day. He was buried in the cemetery of the Prague ghetto. Crowded with tombstones, because Jews were restricted in place for burial, they were even forced to bury one on top of the other, until the Ingathering of the Exiles and the sprouting of the offspring of Dovid, *bimheirah b'yameinu*. ■



Cemetery of the Prague ghetto where Rav Ganz is buried.

27. "By Columbus, a philosopher and wise man" (Entry for the year 1492 C.E.).

Sources: *Sefer Tzemach Dovid*, Dr. Mordechai Breuer, Magnus Press, Jerusalem 5743/1983.
 Photo credits: Bodleian Library, Oxford; Winners Auction House, Jerusalem.

Aviva Aaronson is author of *People of the Book: Five Hundred Years of the Hebrew Book from the Beginning of Printing until the Twentieth Century*, (Feldheim Publishers, 2014).