

Rabbis & History: A Review of the Koreh HaDorot, Ahavat Shalom ed.

by *Eliezer Brodt*

This is the first post in what I hope to be a series on various attitudes towards studying history. The prism through which we will examine this issue is that of the many works written by gedolim discussing history. The subject of this post is a new edition of the classic work *Koreh Hadoros* (KH) by R. Dovid Conforte (printed recently by Ahavat Shalom). After discussing the actual sefer and its author, I will conclude with a few comments about this recently printed edition.

R. Conforte was born in Salonika around 1617 and died sometime after 1678. Throughout his life he traveled to many places (including *Eretz Yisroel*), and in KH he describes his meetings with many great personalities, including R. Menachem Lonzano, author of *Sheti Yadot*, and R. Hayyim Benevisti, author of the *Keneset Hagedolah*. As he enumerates throughout the book, R. Conforte studied with R. Moredcahi Kalai and many others (see, for example, pg. 163, 175, 176, 179; all page references are to the new edition). At times he also emphasizes with whom and when he studied Kabbalah (pg. 172-73), which he started to learn at the young age of seventeen (p. 150). He seemed to have authored a few other works, most of which are lost. Recently, a responsum of his was printed in the journal *Yeshurun* (vol. 7, pg. 55ff). [In that article, the authors write of a plan to collect all R. Conforte's torah as well as to reprint the KH]. In *Sinai* (28:279-295), R. Toledano published a manuscript called *Zikhron Yerushalim* about gravesites in *Eretz Yisroel*, which the author proves was written by R. Conforte.

The KH is one of the most famous historical works written by a talmid chacham and continues to be studied to this day. This sefer was printed a few times (once even under a mistaken name - see R. M. Strashun, *Mivchar Kesavim*, p. 240), and remains very popular amongst gedolim and scholars alike. Most notably, the Chida quotes this work extensively in all his seforim (as an aside, it's rather strange that his entry on R. Conforte in *Shem Hagedolim* is very small and uninformative). Indeed, when, many years ago, R. Meshulam Roth created a curriculum for his yeshiva, he included the *Koreh Hadoros* as an essential sefer for his talmidim to read (among other interesting things in the program; see *Mivasar Ezra*, pg. 176, and *Mivasar Vomer*, pg. 119); R. Meir Shapira even asked R. Roth if he could use the latter's curriculum for Yeshivat Chachemei Lublin (see *Mivasar Ezra*, pg. 172).

Even today scholars use this work extensively; check the index of almost any of the works of Meir Benayhu and one can see how often he quotes the KH.

KH begins with the era of the *Rabbonan Savorei* ("Saboraim"), continues with the geonic period and the rishonim, and ends with R. Conforte's own generation, in total covering a period of a few hundred years. The idea of this work is to list the different gedolim from each period and include basic information about them, such as when they were born and died, with whom they studied, and what they wrote. At times the KH includes a more lengthy entry on a specific person. Much of this information, especially that of R. Conforte's own period, is very important, as we have no other such sources for it. Much of the other material is taken from other classic "history" works, as R. Conforte himself notes (e.g. *Igerres R. Shreiah Goan*, *Sefer Hakablah l'Ha'Ra'avad*, *Sahlshelles Hakablah*, and *Sefer Yuchsin*, all of which will hopefully be subjects of their own posts in the future); yet, though R. Conforte uses these works extensively, he will at times disagree with these works. One work which, for some unknown reason, R. Conforte does not use, and which R. D. Kassel already pointed out, is the *Zemach Dovid*, obvious from the fact that the section on Askenaz achronim is quite weak. Finally, throughout the sefer he quotes many interesting things he heard from purportedly reliable sources, rare seforim, and manuscripts which he saw. In the recent Ahavat Shalom edition, they discuss about fifty such works which R. Conforte mentions. Indeed, *Koreh HaDoros* shows an incredible *bikiyut* in *shas*, *rishonim*, and *achronim* (and all of this in the pre-Bar-Ilan days!).

In 1842, D. Kassel printed an annotated version of KH. Though he included many short notes on various points in the sefer, his additions included nothing extensive. Among the reasons Kassel provides for this is that he was told Leopold Zunz was working on his own edition. However, Zunz never ended up publishing his own edition and, as such, Kassel's edition, which still left room for much work, became the standard edition. More recently, this sefer was reprinted by Ahavat Shalom. One of the benefits of the Ahavat Shalom edition is that it collects all the Chida's comments on the sefer (scattered throughout his writings) and prints it here in the proper places. The truth is that Kassel already references when and where the Chida discusses particular points in KH; still, the Kassel edition only includes citations to the Chida's works without reproducing what the Chida says. The Ahavat Shalom edition, on the other hand, includes the full text of the Chida's relevant comments. To be sure, even a cursory Bar-Ilan project search shows that the Ahavat Shalom edition missed a few of the Chida's comments, and I am sure that this is true of the many other seforim of the Chida not included in the Bar-Ilan database. Another plus of their edition are the indexes, which are very extensive- over a hundred pages (which include every time any sefer or name is mentioned)! Finally, the edition also has a retyped set, making the sefer more readable and clearly marking paragraph and topic breaks. They were also kind enough to reference page numbers of the first edition, a useful tool in tracking down quotes from the original edition.

Another positive aspect of this edition is a very thoroughly researched introduction about the author

and the sefer. The Ahavat Shalom printing includes an entire section devoted to many of the manuscripts and seforim that R. Conforte may have seen (discussing what happened with the seforim if they were printed since then, etc.). Just to point out some additions to their discussion: The KH mentions a sefer from R. Yisroel Nigra which is a collection of his *derashos* called *Mikveh Yisroel*. They write (p. 35) that it exists in many manuscripts and that one *derasha* was printed already in *Yeshurun* (10:134). The truth is that this manuscript was printed partially in the early 1900s, but, more recently, S. Regev printed all the *dershos* (Bar Ilan Press, 2004) in a critical edition (675 pgs.), including an excellent introduction to the work. Interestingly, R. Y. Goldhaber seems not to have been aware of this edition as he only quotes the manuscript (see his *Minhaghei Hakehilos*, 1:287). Another sefer that the KH mentions, also authored by R. Yisroel Nigra, is *Sheris Yisroel*, which is a collection of Nigra's songs. In the Ahavat Sholom introduction they mention that it exists in manuscript. It is interesting to note that the manuscript was in the collection of R. Aryeh Lipshiz, as mentioned in his *Avos Atrah Lebanim* (p. 109).

The main weakness of this new edition are the notes. Aside for putting in all the comments of the Chida taken from *Shem Hagedolim*, there is almost nothing as far as notes go. On the one hand, one could argue that Ahavat Shalom did not feel it is necessary to put in more notes than they did. However, in a recent issue of a journal called *Mikabsel* (# 32) - published by Ahavat Shalom - the editors include the introduction to KH, including the history of the author and a sampling of over fifty notes on various topics in the sefer. Even these notes, too, could have been more comprehensive, they are still very useful. For some odd reason, most of these notes were not included in the published edition of KH. In sum, Ahavat Sholom should be thanked for printing an important sefer which has not been around for some time; nevertheless, a critical edition is definitely still needed and eagerly awaited.

I would just like to give a list of some of the many points and discussions which R. Conforte brings up in the sefer. As previously mentioned, he deals with the *Geonic* period, mostly basing himself on the earlier works available to him such as *Iggerot R. Sherirah Gaon* and *Sefer Hakablah* of the Ra'avad. He records the famous puzzling statement about the death of R. *Sherirah Gaon* that:

תנואגמ ורסוה אלו, הנש האמ נבכ אוהו תחא ודימ ארירש בר הלהנו.

For a recent summary of the discussions of this statement and a new suggestion as to its interpretation, see R. Nosson Dovid Rabonvitz, *Rishumot Teshuvos R. Sherirah Gaon*, pp. 42-45.

Another one of the interesting things R. Conforte brings up, and which is rather famous (and hopefully the subject of its own post shortly), is the dictum:

וואג תבית וינמכ תותכסמ 'ס מש עדוי היהש מש לע וואג וושלב מהמ דהא לכ ארקנ סינאמנה יכ מירמא שיש בותכ יתאצמו (חי' מע).

In a footnote of the Ahavat Sholom edition, the editors note that the Meiri makes the same point in his *Seder Hakablah*. In the introduction, they note (p. 31) that the KH probably saw this in the Meiri's manuscript. However, from R. Conforte's discussion of the Meiri, it appears to me that he never saw the sefer (see p. 83). Furthermore, if he had seen this particular sefer of the Meiri (which, Tradition Seforim Blog: Rabbis & History: A Review of the Koreh Ha...

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parenthetically, could have helped him much in this work), he would have quoted it as he quoted from his other sources. A more likely source where R. Conforte could have seen this phrase is from the *Sefer HaTishbi* (pg. 122), which he did see and from which he often quotes.

He includes a nice amount of information on the Rambam, including the famous legend regarding him being buried in Tevariah (Tiberias) and why the Ra'avad wrote a critical work on the Rambam. One of the things R. Conforte points out (as do many others) is that the Rambam studied under the Ri Migash (though the Chida comments that this is not chronologically possible). What is less well known is what R Avraham Ben Ha-Rambam wrote about this:

וניבר לש ודימלת ונה ובר אוהש ויבאש מושמ יתובר לודגה ורוביחב מהל ארוקו מהילע הנמנ ותויה תורמל ל"צו יראמ אבא 177-178 'מע הנד 'נ תרודהמה משה ידבועל קיפסמה) ל"ז פסוי).

KH mentions the famous legend about the death of R. Yehudah Halevi (already discussed previously [here](#)). He also includes many interesting points about Rashi. Amongst them, he deals with a famous question that many ask: if Rashi died in middle of writing his work on *Baba Basra*, how is it that others say he died while working on *Makos*? R. Conforte's seemingly obvious answer is that Rashi must have been working on both at the same time (p. 56).

He includes an extensive list (almost fifteen pages) of all the various Rishonim quoted by Tosofos, including places where they quote from the Rambam and Ibn Ezra., further portraying the author's tremendous bekiyut in *Shas*. In the new Ahavat Sholom edition, the editors actually provide the exact sources for all these pages.

The KH writes a very interesting possibility about the authorship of the *Kol Bo*:

אלא השא תעדמ וניא אוהה רפסה תמכחש ינפמ, הזל הטונ יתעד ויא לבא, הז רפס הרבח המכה השאש מירמא יתעמשו רפסה וותב ומש מסרפלו ירכזהל הצר אל וב היהש הריתי הונע תמחמו, קהבומ ברו לודג מכה שיא תעדמ

For more on this point, see Y. Levine in her introduction to *Simchat Torah L'yad Rivkah Tikliner*, pg. 17 (as well as my *Ben Keseh Lassur*, pg. 143). Although the possibility is mentioned (and dismissed) by the KH that a woman wrote this work, A. Grossman's excellent book *Chasidos U'morodos* (pp. 282-289) does not mention it at all, though he provides a lengthy list of many of the learned woman

in times of Rishonim (as an aside, I did not see a discussion of this list in the *Sefer Toras Emechah*, which deals with at length with the issur to teach Torah to women).

The KH has a lengthy discussion of the authorship of the *Sefer Tanya*, as it is well known that it appears to be a direct copy of the *Shibbolei Ha-leket* (pg. 76-77). In the latest volume of Yeshurun (20:696-697), R. Yakov Chaim Sofer goes so far as to discuss whether a similar point made by both the *Shibbolei Ha-leket* and the *Sefer Tanya* can "count" as two Rishonim or only as one. He proves at the end that the *Eliyahu Rabah* (in many places) counts them as two Rishonim. R. Conforte concludes that the author was most likely R. Yecheil, the author of the *Malos Hamidos*, and perhaps more famous as the sofer who copied the Yerushalmi Leiden. Throughout the past few centuries, the authorship of this sefer has been constantly argued and discussed. Recently, Professor Feintuch (*Mesoros Venuscos B'talmud*, pp. 65-76) proved conclusively that the KH is certainly correct (see also, I. Ta-Shma, *Creativity and Tradition*, pp. 77-79).

When discussing the place where the *Reshis Chochma* is buried, he mentions, as an aside, that the *Matnes Kehunah* is buried next to him (p. 146). Others disagree on this point, showing that the *Matnes Kehunah* was actually buried in Poland (see Zev Gris, *Safrus V'hanhagos*, pp. 41-42).

When talking about R. Shlomo Halevi, R. Conforte writes (p. 165):

ובורבוקל ידכ נורא ונממ ושעיש, דמול היהשכ מירפסה וילע מישמ היהש לספסהש... ותריטפ תעשב הוצו.

On this topic of burying one using the table on which one studied, see the many sources of R. S. Askenazi in his notes on the *Kav Hayashar*, and his updates in his *Alpha Beta Kadmidta Deshmuel Zeria*, pp. 487-93.

When discussing the Lechem Mishna, R. Conforte brings down an incredible story which he heard (pg. 153):

תא וללחש רמול מירעטצמ וליחתהו, שמשא אבו תושמשה יוב רבקנו הפגמב תבש ברעב רטפנ יכ מינקז יפמ יתעמשו תבשה תא וללח אלש לע וחמשו מיה מהל ריאהו שמהה החרו מהיתבל תורבקה תיבמ ורוזשכו. תבשה.

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As D. Tamar notes (*Areshet*, Vol. 1, p. 474), the KH is the first historical sefer (p. 127) to attribute the *Magid Mesahrim* to R. Yosef Karo (contrary to what R. Y. Greenwald writes in his book *R. Yosef Karo Ve'doro*, pg. 192). Of course today we have much earlier and excellent proof as to the authenticity of this work; see, in particular, the works of R. J.Z. Werblowsky and M. Benayahu (in *Yosef Becherei*).

The KH also brings (p. 128) an incredible tidbit about the Beis Yosef which he heard from the Beis Yosef descendants:

השלש ולכ דומלתה דמלל הכוז ותריטפ תעשב רמא ונקז ברהש ונל רמא ויחבש ללכבו, ל"ו ונקז יחבשמ תצק ונל רפס מימעפ.

In the introduction to the Ahavat Sholom edition, the editors note that this sefer was also used to learn *halacha*, such as in the discussion of teaching torah to Karaties. They reference, for example, how the first source on this topic in the *Sdei Chemed* is the KH (*Sdei Chemed*, Klal Beis, Siman 34:13). While it is true that the *Sdei Chemed* does quote the KH, in reality he is only quoting Shut Mizrachi as brought in the KH. However, a Bar-Ilan search does show a few cases where the *Shut Minchat Yitzcahk* uses this sefer in his works. As far as Halachos of Klalei Ha'pesak, I am certain that KH could play a role.

In the recent ("controversial") book *Reckless Rites* Elliot Horowitz has a excellent extremely comprehensive chapter on local Purims throughout history. One of the Purims he discusses is the Purim of Cairo (pp. 286-89) he mentions that we have various sources showing it was observed over several centuries. Another source, not mentioned by Horowitz, is that a reference to this Purim can be found in the KH where he mentions that in his times it was also celebrated (p. 119).

One last point of great interest about R. Conforte is that although he lived in the time of Shabetai Tzvi, no mention of Shabetai Zvi can be found in the entire sefer. This point was made by B. Deblitski in his article in *Mekabseil* (pg. 606); however, the introduction of the Ahavat Sholom edition omits this very important and interesting point.