

**Putting the Pieces Together:
The "discovery" of Gershon b. Meir Heilprin (Heilbronn)**
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The manuscripts in the collection of the great bibliophile Heiman (Hayyim) Joseph Michael (1792-1846) were purchased in 1848 by the Bodleian Library in Oxford University. One of the manuscripts [1] was described by Adolf Neubauer in his Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library (Oxford 1886), no. 1265 as:
הרומ commentary on the 1st part of the Moreh han'N'bokhim by Gershom. ...He quotes R. Abraham Broda and וילבול'יהמ (f. 8). For the enumeration of the author's books in his preface, see Steinschneider's רצואה התפמ, p. 324.[2]
Steinschneider listed the following works by the author, Gershon[3]: הכלה רבד; on וחלוש ידב; Shulchan Arukh; תשובות רבד; responsa; הרות רבד; on the Torah; רתסא רמאמ; on Megillat Esther; רבד; הדגה on the Haggadah; מירקיע תצילמ on the 13 Principles of Faith and extracts and sermons.

Most of these works are not recorded in any bibliography, and the full name and identity of the author remained a mystery to Steinschneider.

Another manuscript in the Jewish National and University Library, MS Heb. oct. 711[4], contains commentaries on the Torah, Ruth and Eikhah (Lamentations), based on philosophical and scientific perspectives. The anonymous author quotes Moses Mendelssohn and Copernicus, among others. He mentions several other books he composed, including some of those listed in his preface to הרומ, namely רתסא רמאמ and רבד as well as הדרגה תאשמ on the 13 Principles of Faith – perhaps another title for מירקיע תצילמ on the 13 Principles listed above – as well as commentaries or novellae on the Prophets, Moreh Nevukhim and others. One of the works he mentions is a sermon titled דיחי לבא. The author mentions an explanation he heard from Rabbi Avraham Tiktin, the dayyan of his community 'יפ יתעמשו ... 'המ וואגהמ וניתליהק ד"בא ויטקיט מהרבא. Needless to say, none of these other sources are recorded in bibliographies.

We can now establish that our author, Gershon, was a pupil, of R. Avraham Tiktin, or at least a resident of the same city in which R. Tiktin officiated. R. Avraham b. Gedaliah Tiktin (1764-1820), was a Rabbi in his birthplace Schwersenz (Polish: Swarzedz) near Posen (Poznan), then in Lenshits (Leczyca) and from 1803 in Glogau and from 1816 until his death in Breslau. We can assume, then, that Gershon resided in one of these communities. Which one? The answer is supplied by a manuscript in the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, MS 646, a copy of דיחי לבא, the sermon mentioned in the JNUL manuscript. It contains a 24 page eulogy ("hesped") on R. Avraham Tiktin written or composed in Schwersenz on the eve of Rosh Hodesh Shevat 5581=January 3, 1821 by וירפלייה וירפלייה אושרג (Gershon Heilprin or Heilpron).

A search for other works by the author listed in the Oxford and Jerusalem manuscripts revealed a manuscript in the Jewish Theological Seminary - University of Jewish Studies (Országos Rabbiképző Intézet - Zsidó Egyetem) in Budapest titled הדרגה תאשמ. It is a curious work based on the Thirteen Principles of Moses b. Maimon and its 169 folios include a Fourteenth Principle that incorporates all the other principles and contains a critique of Kant's theories on the soul. It also includes some explanations of passages in Moreh Nevukhim, on difficult verses in the Bible and a commentary on the piyyut "Ehad Mi Yodea" in the Passover Haggadah. One section החפשמה תודליתה deals with the practice of assigning family surnames and delves into gynecology quoting physicians from Heraclitus until contemporary experts. He describes the wonders of the microscope and relates how a

physician in Danzig showed him the sperm of a rooster under a microscope (f. 14r). There are a few poems by the author with the acrostic Gershon b. Meir, that establish the name of the author. The title page reads:

מירקיעה רשע השלש לע דסומ תיתימאה תועידהו תנומאל מיניע ריאמ אוה ינשרגה תאשמ רפסמ נושאר קלח
מכחה מע חוכיו אצמא וב ללוכה רקיע ... ארקנו מירקיעה לכ ללוכה רשע עבראה רקיע וילע פסוי, ל"ז מ"במרמה
תודליתה יתפסוהו ... האיפוסליפה רוקמ ארקנ ארון מוקממ הרוקמ יתיארהו ... שפנה תוראשה ינעב טנאק
ל"זה ירמאמו ... וטסיראל תודימה רפסו ל"ז מ"במרהל הרומה רפס ירמאמ המכ לע שריפו מדה תראפתו החפשמה
סרוקיפאל בישתש המ עדו מיאיבנבו הרותב רתויב מישקומה מירבדהמ מג ... מילשמו הזיה קרדב מירמאנה .

Additional information about the author is found in an inscription by his son, Pinchas Heilbronn, on the title page in which he adds the date of his father's death, 9 Heshvan 5629=October 25, 1868 ט"כרת נושה ט רטפינ ונארבליה נושרג ר"מ זב סחניפ רמא

We have now identified the author of these four manuscripts, Gershon b. Meir Heilprin or Heilbronn. We can assume that since he studied under R. Avraham Tiktin or audited his lessons in Schwersenz where Tiktin officiated until ca. 1800 when Gershon was in his late teens or older, that Gershon was born around 1780-1785 and lived well into his eighties, residing for most or all of his life in Schwersenz. On the basis of the cross references to his works in the various manuscripts we can date them approximately. *ירד הרומ* is perhaps the earliest of his works to survive, though by the time he wrote it he had already composed four or five other books or essays. *לבא דיחי* was composed in 1821. *ינשרגה תאשמ* is mentioned in the compilation in the Jerusalem manuscript which is the latest composition of Gershon's extant. If *ינשרגה תאשמ* on the 13 Principles is the same work on the Principles entitled *תצילמ מירקיע תצילמ* in the Oxford manuscript then it should be considered the earliest work by Gershon to survive.

The figure that emerges from his extant writings is one of a talmid chacham, or at least of one fairly well-versed in Bible, Talmud and the writings of the Rambam with leanings towards the *haskalah*. He is familiar with some of the works of Aristotle and the teachings of Kant, though we cannot know if he read Kant in German or if his knowledge is from second-hand sources. He is interested in the sciences and has at least an elementary understanding of biology, astronomy and geography. Yet he remains an enigma. Apart from these four manuscripts no other details about Gershon Heilprin have surfaced. If he was so little known, why should Heiman Michael acquire a manuscript of his? Michael obviously acquired the manuscript before his own death in 1846. Was he offered the manuscript for sale? Did he purchase it because he considered it a worthwhile addition to his collection or did Gershon send it to him hoping to receive a generous donation? Likewise, we do not know how the other manuscripts reached the libraries in Budapest, Cincinnati and Jerusalem that now preserve them. It is ironic that so many unpublished works by better known rabbis and scholars did not survive the ravages of time and the Holocaust while four manuscripts by an otherwise unknown personality remained intact and are kept in libraries on three continents.

This detective work could not have been accomplished without a union catalogue of all the Hebrew manuscripts in the world. While no such tool encompasses 100% of all existing Hebrew manuscripts, there is available on the internet a catalogue that describes over 90% of this corpus, namely the catalogue of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.

For over fifty years the Institute has been collecting microfilms of Hebrew manuscripts and its present holdings of 75,000 manuscripts together with the 8,000 original manuscripts deposited in the Jewish National Library represent an estimated 90-95% of all known Hebrew codices.

In the near future, I hope to write another entry at [the Seforim blog](#) about the Institute of

Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.

Sources:

[1] MS Mich 126, listed as no. 658 in the posthumous catalog of his library םייה תורצוא (Hamburg 1848).

[2] The reference is to Moritz Steinschneider's appendix on manuscripts םייה תורצוא (Hamburg 1848).

[3] Neubauer called him Gershom, but Steinschneider called him Gershon.

[4] There is no record in the Jewish National Library concerning prior provenance or from whom the manuscript was acquired. We can assume that it was acquired in the early 1930's. The catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts in the Library by B.I. Joel, םיירבעה דיה-יבתכ תמישר ... (Jerusalem 1934), describes octavo manuscripts numbered 1-719, but, strangely, omits no. 711, even though the manuscript was in the Library by 1934.