





What's Really *in the* Vatican's Library?

Dispelling
some common
misconceptions
about the
Vatican's
collections
of *Jewish*
manuscripts

*By Lawrence H.
Schiffman*

Lawrence H. Schiffman is the Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and director of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies at New York University.

I cannot tell you how many times I have been asked whether the Vatican has the menorah from the *Beis Hamikdash*. (The answer is no.) But I am never asked about the more than 600 Hebrew manuscripts they *do* have, which have been available to the scholarly community for years.

In 2005, I had the opportunity to be a visiting professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University and Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. A group of upper-level academics from several Israeli universities had come to discuss cooperation with the Vatican universities. A beautiful kosher lunch was served. In the middle of our discussion, one of the Israeli guests got up and asked, "So when will we be able to find a way to open up the hidden manuscript collection in the Vatican?"

I had to inform this ignorant administrator that even as we were enjoying our lunch,

a team of Israeli experts from the National Library of Israel was working in the Vatican Apostolic Library to create an up-to-date catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts to replace the outdated, incomplete earlier version.

Put simply, the "hidden secrets" of the Vatican Library have been accessible for years. In the early 1950s, all of the Hebrew manuscripts in its possession were microfilmed for the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts at the National Library in Jerusalem. When I was a student at Brandeis University studying with the renowned Professor Alexander Altmann, who had served as communal rabbi of Manchester after fleeing Berlin, he sent us to the university's library to look up a Vatican manuscript. Brandeis had microfilms of the entire Vatican Hebrew manuscript collection. In 1999, a team from the Jewish National Library examined the manuscripts on site in order to check the catalogue they had made from the microfilms.

So what was going on in 2005? Israeli cataloguers were working with the Vatican because there were over 100 manuscripts that had not been previously catalogued. A number of handwritten inventories of Hebrew manuscripts had been compiled in Latin beginning in the 17th century. The most famous were those of Giuseppe Assemani (1687-1768), the custodian of the library, who published descriptions of 453 manuscripts in 1756. Later catalogues compiled in the 19th century covered numbers 454 to 531. A partial, revised catalogue was prepared by Umberto Cassuto. By the Vatican's account, some 108 manuscripts had never been catalogued, so it was clearly time for a modern comprehensive revision in 2005.

In the course of five years of one-month missions to the Vatican Library, Malachi Beit-Arie and Nurit Pasternak of the National Library of Israel reexamined these manuscripts in order to determine the type of writing, the region of production, and the approximate date of each one.

This work, facilitated by Raffaele Cardinal Farina, the Vatican's librarian, resulted in a catalogue of 813 manuscripts published in

2008. Cardinal Farina was kind enough to give me and my wife a personal tour of the library's manuscript collection. Looking down the hall between the shelves, you realize the enormous size of its collections. It was also very clear that the highest standards of climate control and administrative supervision are being used to guarantee their safety.

And yet these are not the only Hebrew manuscripts that exist in Rome! A young Roman Jew from the Libyan Jewish community told me he knew that one of the local libraries had a completely unknown collection of Hebrew manuscripts. He took me there and I met the librarian, who informed me that I could come and examine them whenever I wished.

I spent several sessions looking at them and determined quite quickly that they were all part of the collection of microfilmed manuscripts, now available digitally, at the National Library of Israel. They were catalogued in that collection, and there was also a book catalogue. Again, the supposedly hidden manuscripts weren't hidden at all. In fact, of the Vatican Hebraica, 58 manuscripts are available on the Vatican Library's digital website. Numerous others are available on the Ktiv site of the Jewish National Library, which has a computerized catalogue of its entire collection of microfilms and digital images that include Hebrew manuscripts from all over the world.

Almost all the subjects of Jewish literature are represented here—*Tanach* and *mefarshim*, *Talmud Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*, *halachah*, Kabbalah, *tefillah* and *piyut*, philosophy and the sciences, as well as anti-Christian polemical texts. Many of the manuscripts are beautifully illuminated, having been copied in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance (ninth to 16th centuries). The collection includes a manuscript that is probably the earliest Hebrew codex (bound book) in existence, a copy of the *Sifra* (*Midrash Tanna'im on Vayikra*), dating from the end of the ninth century or the first half of the tenth century.

In addition, the Vatican Library houses Midrashic texts written in southern Italy in



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the 11th century, among them another copy of the *Sifra* written in 1072-3 and copies of the *Sifrei*, *Vayikra Rabbah* and *Bereishis Rabbah*. There are well over 50 codices of Bible texts, excluding small fragments, among them a copy of the entire *Tanach* written around 1100 in Italy, and a unique copy of an Eretz Yisrael Targum known as the Targum Neofiti. No other collection includes as many copies of tractates of the Talmud as the Vatican Library.

Before the digitization of manuscripts, the only way for the general public to see those in the Vatican collection was at two memorable exhibits. In 1987, a traveling exhibition entitled "A Visual Testimony: Judaica from the Vatican Library" passed through a number of large cities in the United States. It included 56 manuscripts, most of which were considered to be works of art. In 2005, a much smaller exhibit was organized at the Israel Museum, entitled "Rome to Jerusalem," which included a beautifully illuminated manuscript of the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, the *Arbaah Turim*, a *Chumash* with *Megillos*, *Tehillim* and *Haftaros* copied in Rome in 1293, and a Roman *Tanach* dating back to 1285-86.

"Oh," you will say, "so they let us see the manuscripts that they stole from us in the first place!" That is yet another misconception, but where did they get so many manuscripts? The earliest documents on the existence of Hebrew manuscripts in the Pontifical Library date to the period immediately after the Sack of Rome in 1527, when there were some 61 books.

Over the course of the 16th century, cardinals, bishops and popes occasionally contributed various Hebrew books, which numbered 173 by the 1640s. A few manuscripts were transferred from the estates of converts or sold by Jewish vendors to Christian collectors. The Hebrew manuscripts of the Palatine Library of Hei-



Illustrated pages of Mishneh Torah found in the Vatican Library

delberg arrived in the Vatican Library in 1623 and were added to the Vatican series. To this core were later added the Hebrew volumes of the "old" Palatine collection, as well as later accessions, for a total of 262 items.

Then, in January 1654, the Vatican Library purchased 69 Hebrew books, including five manuscripts. By the mid-17th century, the number of Hebrew manuscripts it possessed was up to 425.

In 1472, the city of Volterra was laid to waste by the forces of Count Federico of Urbino. Among the victims of the indiscriminate pillaging was the wealthy merchant Menahem ben Aharon Volterra, whose Hebrew manuscripts were secured by Federico himself for his personal library. In 1657, the collection of the Dukes of Urbino became part of the Vatican Library. These 57 items included some that contain Menahem Volterra's *ex libris*, records of his purchase of them.

In more recent times, the accessions have continued at a rather modest pace with the acquisition of important private libraries, as well as collections from some Catholic institutions. So while we can never be sure how the previous owners got their manuscripts, the Vatican did not pillage them from Jews.

What we *can* say is that if these manuscripts had been in the hands of Jewish institutions, they would certainly have been

stolen by the Nazis. Just to mention a few examples, the full collections of the YIVO Institute in Vilna and the Jewish Historical Society in Warsaw were never recovered after World War II. Neither was the library of the Gerrer chasidic dynasty, which has never been found. The complex story of the library of the Jewish community of Rome, as well as that of the rabbinical college, cannot be fully related here. Suffice it to say that almost all of the rare items taken from those two collections were never recovered.

The reality is that because many Hebrew manuscripts were held by the Vatican, they were preserved from the Nazi onslaught. The Jewish community's library in Mantua, including manuscripts and rare books, was preserved because the community had donated them to the municipal library.

With the release of the previously secret Vatican archives pertaining to the Holocaust, and especially the conduct of Pius XII, even with the limited research that has been done so far, it is still unclear what role the pope may have played in the efforts of many Catholic priests and nuns to save Jews. But whatever comes out in the end about the Vatican, it is obvious that whoever administered the library sought to preserve it and to save those Jews who worked in it.

During the war years, the Vatican Library

not only continued to promote the work of renowned Jewish scholars, but it also offered them safe haven and protection. In 1939, Umberto Cassuto, a professor at the University of Rome until 1938 who had worked in the library since 1933, left the Vatican to teach at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Semitic language scholar Giorgio Levi Della Vida was expelled from the University of Rome in 1931 as a result of the racial laws and worked in the library until 1939, when he was appointed professor at the University of Pennsylvania. The bibliographer Aaron Freimann secretly immigrated to America, where he remained until the end of his life.

The valuable collections of the Vatican have been utilized by many Jewish scholars to facilitate publication of previously unpublished texts or improved editions, or for historical research. A quick look at the bibliographic entries in the 2008 catalogue reveals how much has already been done based on this material. At the same time, it is easy to see how much more publication and research await us.

So the next time somebody talks about Jewish treasures being held by the Vatican, remind him about this great manuscript collection and the extremely open manner in which it has been made available. ●