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Rabbinic Agency in the Age of Print: Manuscript, Print, and the Epistemology of Crisis

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Abstract This article reconsiders the Ḥatam Sofer's attitude toward print, arguing that it reflects a historically specific response to a crisis of rabbinic authority and transmission. Instead of approaching print as a neutral technological development, the article shows how Sofer employed the contrast between manuscript and print as a symbolic language for expressing substantive views on authority, loss, and an idealized past in which Torah knowledge was guardedly transmitted and evaluated. His nostalgic portrayal of the manuscript age—historically inaccurate yet rhetorically effective—served to imagine an idealized world of learning governed by rabbinic judgment, restraint, and ordered transmission. Drawing on responsa, letters, and biographical contexts, the article demonstrates that Sofer's reflections on print are closely tied to his self-identification as a teacher rather than an "author"—a distinctive model of rabbinic authority inherited from his own teacher, Rabbi Natan Adler. In this paradigm, manuscript culture persists not only as a material practice in the age of print but as a symbolic framework through which Sofer asserted authority, expressed anxiety, and shaped his scholarly persona. Viewed through the prism of rabbinic agency, the article reconceives standard approaches in the history of the book and shows how concepts internal to rabbinic culture—such as Torah study undertaken for its own sake (*lishmah*) and innovative interpretation (*ḥiddush*)—actively shaped modes of knowledge production rather than merely reflecting broader, universal patterns.

Keywords Ḥatam Sofer · History of the book · Manuscript and print culture · Orthodoxy and modernity · Rabbinic authority · Self-fashioning

The present essay proposes to examine a compelling subject—the Ḥatam Sofer's attitude toward the technology of print—not merely as a mechanical instrument but as a cultural world with its own conceptual grammar. As Vered Sakal rightly notes,[1] the Ḥatam Sofer has often (and usually superficially) been discussed through the prism of his stance toward modernity. Broadening the frame to include his relationship to a concrete procedure such as printing may offer a vital and refreshing perspective on this important rabbinic figure, on his place within the intersecting historical currents of his time, and on the history of ideas in Jewish society and its entanglements with

[1] "Of Making Many Books [in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction]: The Ḥatam Sofer on Print, Scholarship, and Knowledge," *Jewish History* 39, no. 3-4 (2025).

the surrounding European world. At a deeper level, such inquiry may also force us to rethink modernity itself—a term that often migrates from denoting a period to functioning as a loose bundle of attitudes associated with one another outside their inner complexities in their various historical contexts.

The Ḥatam Sofer carries the aura of a founding figure in the sociological fabric of modern Judaism, and figures of this type typically buckle under the historiosophical burden placed upon them by succeeding generations. Yet, by their nature, such figures are also generative—they operate both within existing patterns and beyond them—and the Ḥatam Sofer's original position (Frankfurt am Main 1762–Pressburg 1839) toward the printed book offers a striking example of this dynamic.

But an approach that, commendably, seeks to locate the Ḥatam Sofer's work within fields such as the history of the book and migrating knowledge, faces a further challenge. The vibrant scholarly discourse on print culture, from Eisenstein onward, has traditionally been shaped by a Christian-European focus (though recent years have offered notable exceptions). This focus often functions "transparently" in such scholarship—implicit and unmarked—so that categories like "author" and "text" are treated as culturally neutral and universally applicable. The human mind in its historical manifestations, however, tells a very different story. "Authors" and "works" are not uniform commodities; within any given culture they may reflect distinctions of status or origin, and they certainly cannot be assumed to be identical across cultures with different institutional structures, metaphysical horizons, or cultural priorities—even when these cultures function (as in our case) within the same geographic space of Central and Eastern Europe. Important elements of this particularistic richness risk slipping through the interpretive lens shaped by that dominant scholarly narrative.

I illustrate this point briefly by returning to the Ḥatam Sofer's own reflections on print. My analysis relies primarily on the sources already discussed by Prof. Sakal with the addition of several further passages whose contribution may prove crucial. But first, a further paradigmatic remark. By the time the Ḥatam Sofer was writing, print culture had already existed for three centuries. That distance enabled intellectuals of the period not only to form concrete judgments about the advantages and disadvantages of printing or to consider its implications for their intellectual aims and for the dissemination of their work. Simultaneously, they could also employ print culture symbolically as a vehicle for longing, hope, or lamentation, all drawn from the internal thematics of their inner lives and their cultural self-presentation within their society rather than from the technological phenomenon of print itself.[2] Print, in other words, could become a new strand in the weaving of

[2] A significant discussion of the Jewish attitude toward print culture in its early decades appears in Y. Z. Kahana, *Studies in Responsa Literature* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem 1973).

a new myth, and this retrospective dimension may be essential for understanding the Ḥatam Sofer's desires for printing and for what he depicts as its nemesis: the older world of manuscript culture.

A Tempest

Prof. Sakal examines three central texts—though a few additional ones, to be noted later, may be added to them. The fundamental experience expressed repeatedly across these writings is one of profound destabilization: a loss of confidence in tradition and, in parallel, a loss of security in the rabbinic world of knowledge and in its mechanisms of governance and control. The very thought of an "orthodox" rabbi (the term, of course, retrojects a later historical category) whose basic religious experience is one of eroded trust in tradition is itself unsettling. Yet this is precisely the experience documented in the first text under discussion—a seemingly ordinary letter the Ḥatam Sofer wrote to a devoted student, whose desire to print his teacher's writings was entirely innocent. The Ḥatam Sofer's response portrays the invention of print as a paradigmatic rupture. But at the center of this paradigm stands not printing per se but, rather, a nostalgic—perhaps, more precisely, a romantic—longing for a vanished world, the world of manuscripts.

History occupied a central place in the Ḥatam Sofer's intellectual imagination. *Tsemaḥ David*, for example—the universal chronicle compiled by David Gans in the sixteenth century, narrating world history from Creation to the year 1592—was a familiar companion to him, and he frequently transplanted items from it, in reshaped form, into his legal and homiletical writings.[3] Gutenberg's invention of print, to take the relevant example, is celebrated in *Tsemaḥ David* with unrestrained admiration.[4] Gans even embellishes his account by placing a crown above the description of printing—a visual honorific he normally reserves for Roman emperors and their successors. In his eyes, print represents an unprecedented global transformation.

The Ḥatam Sofer, by contrast, offers a far more dialectical account, one marked by hesitation and even deep suspicion. Yet the essential difference between the two portrayals is not one of pro-print enthusiasm (Gans) versus post-Eisenstein skepticism (Ḥatam Sofer). It is an entirely different distinction: Gans's description is factual and immediate. He recounts the invention of mechanical reproduction and its direct cultural consequences as he himself witnessed them: the dissemination of all forms of knowledge, including

[3] See, for example, *Ḥiddushei Ḥatam Sofer*, Gittin 80a; *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, Vol. 6 (Addenda), § 293; and idem, Supplements, § 191.

[4] David Gans, *Tsemaḥ David* (Jerusalem, 1963), 369.

Torah and the natural sciences. The Ḥatam Sofer, by contrast, is not interested in the historical fact or its observable cultural impact. He uses the fifteenth-century shift from manuscript to print as a vehicle to articulate the cosmic disarray he himself experienced in the late eighteenth century—an upheaval generated, in his view, by the Jewish Enlightenment and its challenge to rabbinic authority.

His stance is therefore retrospective: a sharp problematization drawn from the present and projected backward onto an earlier historical event. This past moment grants the contemporary crisis a resonant depth, becoming a kind of echo chamber that lends the present a cosmic register. One may compare this tremor—framed in terms of the age of print—to the cosmic storm described in John Donne's celebrated poem *An Anatomy of the World* (1611) or to the similar turbulence depicted by R. Naḥman of Bratslav (1772–1811) in *The Tale of the Prayer Leader* and elsewhere.[5] Donne ties the catastrophe to the emergence of the new science; R. Naḥman to the culture of Enlightenment. The Ḥatam Sofer, as a gifted writer, situates the formative moment of catastrophe in the rise of print.

The creative dimension in Ḥatam Sofer's depiction of print may remind readers of the longstanding Jewish hermeneutical practice of midrash, especially aggadic midrash. Indeed, the hermeneutic resemblance is clear. What is striking in his formulation is the harnessing of a modern historical phenomenon—the invention of print—as the "text" upon which this generative midrashic imagination is exercised.

Manuscript and Print

As noted, the Ḥatam Sofer's description is neither historical nor factual. He writes, for example, that "since the advent of print, copying has ceased entirely": the transition from a world of manuscripts to a world of print is depicted as abrupt and total. The reality, however—fully familiar to the Ḥatam Sofer—was far more complex. In the sixteenth century, two enormously significant corpora emerged within the Jewish world: the halakhic corpus shaped by R. Yosef Karo and the kabbalistic corpus associated with R. Isaac Luria (the Ari). The former was printed repeatedly, while the latter formed a vast manuscript universe, copied repeatedly for centuries, until the first printed edition of *Shemonah She'arim* appeared only at the end of the eighteenth century. Lurianic texts continued to be copied for generations thereafter. Many

[5] On the historical meaning of the crisis expressed in these texts, see Maoz Kahana, *A Heartless Chicken and Other Wonders: Religion and Science in Early Modern Rabbinic Culture* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2021), 151–57.

other rabbinic works likewise circulated in manuscript throughout the very centuries in which the Ḥatam Sofer lived. He himself owned, alongside a substantial printed rabbinic library, a considerable number of manuscripts—some kabbalistic, others even more surprising.[6] Among them, for example, was *Toledot Yeshu*—a work never printed by Jews because of its hostile stance toward Christianity. He also possessed the printed Latin–Hebrew edition of that text and composed his own commentary on it, which remained in manuscript and was nearly lost altogether.[7]

Thus. the transition from manuscript to print was not nearly as sharp as the Ḥatam Sofer portrays it—neither historically nor within his own lived reality. Yet it is precisely this binary depiction, which he reiterates persistently, that enables the construction of the sense of crisis—a crisis of authority rooted, in his midrashic template, in a single symbolic moment. For him, the invention of print becomes the founding moment of historical rupture.

Other components of this thematic constellation likewise reveal their ahistoricity. The most striking instance, once again, the world of manuscripts, which the Ḥatam Sofer invests with an entirely utopian authority:

> Formerly in Israel, the great sages would write their teachings in a book, and if they were accepted by the sages of the generation, most of them or all of them, the sages would then command that they be copied, and they would be copied in every city and family. But if a work were not accepted, then no one dared copy it, for a person does not throw away his money for nothing. And likewise, no one would presume to compose a work unless he knew himself to be a great man whose writings many would rush to copy. And so, most of the books found in the world were good and sound.[8]

The fantasy depicted here is one of absolute centralized control. According to this account, manuscript culture operated under clear and continuous directives issued by a rabbinic consensus—an imagined, centralized body conferring legitimacy on an author's work. Only after that "decision" was rendered would professional scribes undertake the copying, confident that an obedient and devout Jewish reading public would not purchase a text lacking such rabbinic certification.

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[6] Some of these items are mentioned in the biography written by his grandson, Shlomo Sofer, *Ḥut ha-Meshulash* (Drohobych, 1908).

[7] Princeton University Library, Hebrew MS 28; film number F 8775 in the Ktiv database, https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/manuscripts/hebrew-manuscripts. See also Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin, 1902). On the Ḥatam Sofer's commentary to this work and the single surviving leaf, see Moshe Sofer, "Notes on the Treatise 'Toledot Yeshu ha-Notzri"' [Hebrew] *Yerushateinu* 2 (2008): 72–77.

[8] *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, vol. 6, § 61.

Medieval scribal culture can be reconstructed in far more complex ways. For the present purposes, a single illustrative example will suffice: the *Maḥbarot Immanuel* of Immanuel of Rome (fourteenth century). This work was condemned by the rabbinic elite from the moment it emerged; its reading was criticized and even banned on weekdays and Sabbaths alike.[9] Yet the Ktiv database, which records the extant Hebrew manuscripts worldwide, lists many dozens of surviving copies. These were produced from the time of the work's composition through the sixteenth century and well beyond—even after it was printed by the Soncinos in 1491. The harsh rabbinic censure merely reflected the deep popular attraction to the work and its seductive charm. Manuscript culture—and similarly the print culture that followed—responded primarily to economic interest, which in this case favored erotic literature over rabbinic disapproval.

In the imagined world the Ḥatam Sofer situates beyond the threshold of print, manuscript culture and mechanisms of scholarly selection and authority are tightly woven together. In such an ideal universe, unauthorized knowledge never crosses the threshold of reproduction and is destined to be forgotten. It bears emphasizing that his position does not express any opposition to the democratization or dissemination of knowledge—the very democratization often associated with the rise of mass print. The Ḥatam Sofer offers no hint of resisting this process of diffusion; indeed, this seems to be the objective of the single positive line in which he praises print ("We must give thanks to God for the invention of printing in the world; its benefit is great").[10] From this standpoint, dissemination of Torah and knowledge was a positive and even necessary interest of the rabbinic elite. The era of manuscripts served not to limit knowledge but to sustain a mechanism of discernment and evaluation: the distinction between elevated, sanctified knowledge and mistaken, even harmful knowledge. This imagined distinction is the very function he attributes to the mechanism of authority he attaches to the lost age of manuscripts.

Another dimension of this thesis emerges when comparing the Ḥatam Sofer with a twentieth-century sage, R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (1878–1953), the author of *Ḥazon Ish*. The Ḥazon Ish elaborated several of the Ḥatam Sofer's scholarly and mystical inclinations within halakhic discourse, often with striking originality. On our topic—manuscripts and print—he became known for his surprising opposition to the use of manuscripts for establishing texts of the Talmud and rabbinic literature. His argument

[9] Rabbi Joseph Caro, *Beit Yosef*, Oraḥ Ḥayyim § 317; similar critiques—predating the composition of Immanuel's work—are assembled there from Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona and from the *Rosh*.

[10] *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, vol. 6, § 61.

is almost verbatim the Ḥatam Sofer's: the sages of each generation, he claimed, "stand guard over the books" and do not permit the transmission of manuscripts that lack proper authorization. Consequently, the sages themselves selected the correct manuscript and consigned the others to oblivion.[11] The Ḥazon Ish, in other words, deploys the same nostalgic–hierarchical argument developed by the Ḥatam Sofer concerning the safeguarding elite—and does so openly for the same reasons: discomfort with the nontraditional implications of textual plurality and the new, unwelcome possibilities it introduces. But he locates his utopian point of reference not in the pre-print manuscript age, as the Ḥatam Sofer had done, but in the act of print itself, which—implicitly, as in earlier eras—reinstated the controlling practices of the sages by ensuring that only the "correct" manuscript would enter the printed corpus, while the rest would sink into the oblivion of manuscript culture. Thus, the Ḥazon Ish rejects manuscripts and champions print—using the very same argument the Ḥatam Sofer had formulated *against* manuscripts and print.

The Ḥazon Ish's framework demonstrates once again the retrospective dimension: the romantic argument crafted by the Ḥatam Sofer can be mobilized equally against print (as he did) or in its favor (as the Ḥazon Ish did). At the heart of the Ḥatam Sofer's argument lies not the technology of print but the construction of an imagined, idyllic past—untouched by contemporary errors and deviations.

Situating an idyllic past (the age of manuscripts) against an ongoing present (the age of print) raises many questions. One concerns the futility of such a mechanism. While the Ḥazon Ish's mechanism serves to disqualify a specific practical method (the use of manuscripts to correct the printed Talmud), the Ḥatam Sofer's nostalgic mechanism does not offer such operational claims. He never proposes abolishing print or invalidating the reliance on printed books. His epistemological lament, articulated through the binary of manuscript–print, is precisely that—a lament. The writing bears the tone of grief: a reflection composed under the shadow of loss. Traditional society, in his eyes, is in crisis; the hierarchical paradise he describes cannot be restored, and he offers no program that would revive it. His interest is largely mythic-poetic rather than practical.[12] This is why his participation—despite his reservations—in the publication of *Eleh Divrei ha-Berit* becomes comprehensible. The printed articulation of his critique of print, with all its

[11] *Ḥazon Ish* on Oraḥ Ḥayyim § 67:12; idem, *Zera'im*, Hilkhot Kil'ayim § 1:1; *Letters of the Ḥazon Ish*, vol. I, § 32.

[12] On the romantic dimension in the Ḥatam Sofer's writing, see Maoz Kahana, "How Did the Hatam-Sofer Wish to Trump Spinoza? Text, Hermeneutics, and Romanticism in the Writings of R. Moses Sofer" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 79, no. 3 (2011): 557–85.

inherent paradox, coheres with the function of lament and the formation of utopia. It shapes this longing into conceptual form.

Jacob Katz famously defined Orthodoxy as a phenomenon shaped by the consciousness of minority.[13] The Ḥatam Sofer's "manuscript era" thesis indeed reads in this key: writing under the shadow of loss. The longing for a vanished world seeks not a present remedy—which is deemed impossible—but the articulation of a restorative worldview. This longing is indeed one of the roots of the Orthodox world that would emerge in the decades to come, and the imagined landscape of the lost manuscript age becomes its fitting backdrop.

Hidden Books

Within the nostalgic lament we have identified, another element briefly emerges—one that both resonates within the lament itself and simultaneously extends far beyond it. Since the rise of print, the Ḥatam Sofer argues, "many righteous men and great sages" have refrained from publishing their writings. Instead of printing, he claims, these sages turn to their circle of students and announce: "Whoever wishes to copy is welcome to do so." This portrayal of an "apocryphal," concealed circle of sages transmitting writings privately in the age of print appears to be yet another component within the poetic-mythic fabric he constructs. Its presence recalls contemporary variations on the motif of the "hidden righteous" (*tzadikim nistarim*)—for example, Adam Baal Shem, to whom was attributed access to ancient kabbalistic or magical writings that he transmitted to the Baal Shem Tov and ultimately sealed within a cave that later generations could not identify.

In one of his well-known writings, R. Yonatan Eybeschütz (1690/95–1764), who lived a generation earlier, likewise elevated the manuscripts "hidden in the chamber of individuals," and even more so the books that were never written at all: the insights and thoughts of great sages that arose in their minds but were never committed to writing.[14] R. Naḥman of Bratslav—the Ḥatam Sofer's contemporary, who shared with him several fundamental concerns vis-à-vis the Enlightenment—also explored, in his virtuoso fashion,

[13] On the conceptual scope of the term "Orthodoxy" and its various uses, see, for example, Maoz Kahana, "How Orthodox is 'Orthodoxy'?" in *Jacob Katz on the Origins of Orthodoxy*, ed. Gitti Bendheim et al. (Cambridge, MA, 2022), 101–09; and the scholarship referenced therein.

[14] On this, see Maoz Kahana, "Divine Author, Flawed Author: Philology and Theology in the Eighteenth-Century Constructions of R. Joseph Karo" (forthcoming).

this same liminal space between composition and concealment.[15] All these varied expressions belong to a broader cultural longing traceable to the second half of the eighteenth century—a longing whose contours warrant closer examination. The Ḥatam Sofer is only one of its bearers.

Yet the specific language he uses to describe this "concealed" group of sages resonates first and foremost within his own biography. It was he himself who would write, some twenty-five years later, of his own avoidance of print: "I stand ready to teach all who are prepared to listen," he wrote, "and I write in ink, directly onto the book itself." These systematic writings, he claimed, are not hidden. They are "placed as ownerless property," and "whoever wishes to copy them may come and copy them. Thus did our ancestors act before the era of print."[16] The Ḥatam Sofer therefore presents himself as one of these "hidden" sages—righteous men who offer their innovations for copying while refraining from committing their works to print. This personal avoidance, as he formulates it here, carries an unmistakably biographical weight. The Ḥatam Sofer repeatedly characterizes himself, in this and in other contexts, primarily as a teacher—one whose central purpose lies in the instruction of students. Contrary to the seemingly clear hierarchy that elevates "authors" or "creators" above "teachers," the Ḥatam Sofer regards the pedagogical vocation as the highest of all.

Thus, in 1832, responding to someone who had noted inaccurate biblical citations in one of his responsa, he wrote:

> I have grown old . . . and I have no leisure to compose works or to expose the errors of others. From the year 1785–86 onward I have taught children and young men until they reach the point where they understand that there is nothing of substance in me; then they will go and serve others in my stead. And this, he wrote, is the share of my labor that will endure. All else I do in haste, like one walking upon burning coals.[17]

The Ḥatam Sofer thus entwines the figure of the "author" with the rhetoric of polemic and disputation—forms of engagement that, in his view, do not pursue truth. His own path privileges truth in its most primary embodiment: the oral teaching of Torah to students. This, he believes, grants him an enduring legacy—words that deliberately echo Ecclesiastes: "and this is my

[15] See Zvi Mark, *Secrets of Heaven and Secrets of Man: Visionary and Literary Layers in Likkutei Moharan by R. Naḥman of Bratslav as Connected to Redemption and to the Land of Israel* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan, 2024).

[16] These paragraphs were printed in *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, Yoreh De'ah, editor's introduction, 3.

[17] *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer Ḥadashot*, § 33. See also *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, Even ha-Ezer II, § 90; Ḥoshen Mishpat, § 76; vol. 7, § 8.

portion from all my labor." It is difficult to separate this self-evaluation from the culturally distinctive character of the commandment of Torah study.[18] The Ḥatam Sofer sees the interpersonal transmission of Torah—from teacher to student—as the shaping force of his life's work. Writing innovations "in ink upon the book" is, for him, an extension of oral study, in contrast to print, which he associates with a different, more contentious mode of discourse. The mode of agency expressed here produces a type of authorship fundamentally distinct from the abstract, modern notion of the "author." This culturally internal conception also has concrete implications. His decision not to print is not meant to retain control over knowledge, for "knowledge" and its proprietary relation to the author are not the central elements of his self-presentation. On the contrary, he explicitly states that his written teachings are "ownerless," making his intention unmistakable—he has no desire to restrict or regulate the circulation of copies, which for him are embodiments of divine Torah and, as such, belong to the community as a whole.

The Name of the Father

We have noted the strong echo between the Ḥatam Sofer's statement in 1803 about "righteous and great sages" who refrain from printing and the way he described his own conduct in 1829. R. Moshe Sofer possessed, to be sure, an extraordinary sense of self, and not infrequently portrayed himself as bound to God by a direct and singular bond of inspiration.[19] But did the Ḥatam Sofer, in that generalized description, truly have only himself in mind?

Peeling back another layer reveals a further figure standing behind the ostensibly abstract historical image of the "righteous and great sage" who systematically avoids printing his words: R. Natan Adler (1741–1800). R. Adler was an exceptional scholar—a kabbalist, a magical writer of amulets, and a halakhist—who, together with his circle of students in Frankfurt, cultivated an Ashkenazic pietist group marked by kabbalistic practices, visions and dreams, and a long list of unconventional halakhic behaviors.[20] The life

[18] For an initial historical phenomenology of the commandment of Torah study as understood in the second millennium, see Maoz Kahana, "Piety and Knowledge: Major Trends in Jewish Scholarship in the Second Millennium," in *The Princeton Companion to Jewish Studies*, ed. Leora Batnitzky, Eve Krakowski, and Steven Weitzman (Princeton, NJ, 2025), 162–83.

[19] See Maoz Kahana, "The Hatam Sofer: A Decisor in His Own Eyes" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 76, no. 3-4 (2007): 519–56.

[20] See Rachel Elior, "Rabbi Nathan Adler of Frankfurt and the Controversy Surrounding Him," in *Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism: International Symposium Held in Frankfurt A.M. 1991*, ed. Karl Erich Grözinger and Joseph Dan (Berlin, 1995), 223–42. The best study of the Ḥatam Sofer's childhood and formative years remains the classic work by Ja-

of the young Moshe Sofer was woven intimately into that of his teacher and the circle surrounding him. The Ḥatam Sofer left his parents' home at around age ten to live and study with R. Adler. When R. Adler was excommunicated by the community for disrupting communal order and for fears of Sabbatean leanings, his nineteen-year-old student Moshe Sofer accompanied him into exile, favoring him above his own familial bonds. Even decades after his teacher's death, the Ḥatam Sofer continued to transmit Adler's halakhic and homiletical traditions and to revere his image. In a passage preserved by his own students, he described his revered teacher and explicitly tied him to the question of writing books:

> The great holy sage R. Natan Adler, of blessed memory, said that from the moment he grasped the talmudic principle that committing the Oral Torah to writing is permitted solely on the grounds of "a time to act for the Lord"—for the Torah is being forgotten, owing to our many sins—he himself was not subject to this concern. Since he did not forget what he had learned, he therefore did not commit his Torah innovations to writing.[21]

Here R. Natan Adler is presented as giving a distinctly personal—and indeed anarchic—interpretation of the talmudic discussion (BT Gittin 60b; Temurah 14a) that offered the historical justification for committing the Oral Torah to writing, despite the fundamental prohibition against doing so. In the Talmud, this justification—"a time to act for the Lord" (based on Ps 119:126)—is framed as a human compromise in the face of the danger of forgetfulness and concerns, explicitly at least, regarding only the Mishnah or the Talmud. Nor is the dispensation presented there as anchored in any particular historical moment. R. Adler, however, is depicted here as regarding himself as an exalted figure exempt from this human compromise—and, therefore, for him and for him alone the prohibition against writing remained fully binding.

Seen in this light, R. Adler clearly stands behind the seemingly abstract, typological description of the "righteous and great sage" who refrains from committing his teachings to writing. His figure thus becomes—here as in other cases[22]—the foundational model, the generative archetype, through which the Ḥatam Sofer constructs this ideal type. The Ḥatam Sofer himself

cob Katz: "Towards a Biography of Hatam Sofer," in *Profiles in Diversity: Jews in a Changing Europe, 1750–1870*, ed. Frances Malino and David Jan Sorkin (Detroit, 1998), 223–66.

[21] *Ḥut ha-Meshulash*, 16; and see also R. Ḥizkiyah Medini, *Sedei Ḥemed*, Ma'arekhet dalet, klal 22.

[22] See, for example, *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, Oraḥ Ḥayyim § 197. There, too, the father-figure of R. Adler (who likewise is not mentioned explicitly in the responsum) undergoes a process of recasting, out of which emerges a radical proposal for a new, individualistic type of Hasidic-

would continue to elaborate this mythic image of the father-teacher in later writings on print, reworking the figure of R. Adler into a guiding paradigm within his broader reflections on the culture of the book, such as those from 1829 and 1837—refashioning his teacher's halakhic formulation once again. He employed the same talmudic passage and the same wording ("a time to act for the Lord"),[23] introducing only a small shift so as to transform it into a sweeping halakhic claim: writing books, he argued, is permissible only *for the sake of Heaven*. Consequently, anyone who does not write with absolute and unequivocal purity of intention is, in effect, prohibited from writing altogether. This halakhic model far exceeds the concrete issue raised in the print-manuscript discussion. Not only the publication of books is restricted here; rather, their very writing—in any form—is rendered forbidden.[24]

As becomes evident, the true focal point of the Ḥatam Sofer's discourse is not print culture itself but the distinctive ethic he derives from the venerated image of his teacher and the way he interprets that ethic within the unsettling circumstances of his own time—not as an isolated pietist (as his teacher had been), but as a supra-communal leader confronting cultural crisis. On one level, concrete and practical, he mimetically transforms his teacher's practice—his avoidance of print—into his own. But on a parallel level he repeatedly refashions it into an abstract, generative myth about an ideal world untouched by the present—above all, untouched by print. The resulting myth merges, as we have seen, with the Ḥatam Sofer's broader struggle against the Enlightenment. Contemporary phenomena such as printing houses and coffeehouses coalesce in his imagination with what he perceives as the deeper dangers of Enlightenment culture, crystallized into a series of binary oppositions: a world of sacred wisdom versus a world of coffeehouses;[25] a world drained of enchantment versus one still animated by it; a supervised culture of sages versus a fragmented and incoherent one; manuscript versus print; and, ultimately, the collapse of distinctions between good and evil, faith and

pietist ideal. Elsewhere (ibid., § 191), the figure of R. Adler—this time explicitly—stands at the center of the halakhic framing of a local Frankfurt Purim celebration, one maintained even when its celebrants (such as R. Adler and the Hatam Sofer himself) were exiled from the city.

[23]The halakhic structure the Ḥatam Sofer constructs here is verbally identical to that ostensibly ascribed (perhaps by his own hand) to his teacher, though it highlights a different conceptual vector: not the danger of Torah being forgotten (which is regarded as the meaning of "they have broken Your Torah") permits writing, but pure intention ("for the sake of God"). See the next note.

[24]*Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, Oraḥ Ḥayyim § 208 (1837). In the 1829 letter (Yoreh De'ah, introduction, p. 3), the Ḥatam Sofer alludes briefly to the same line of thought: "I fear the curse of the Sages," he wrote, "directed at one who magnifies his own name, whose name shall be forgotten." Here, too, writing a book not "*lishmah"* is presented as illegitimate. On the centrality of the *lishmah* motif in the Ḥatam Sofer's writing, see Kahana, "A Decisor in His Own Eyes."

[25]On coffeehouses, see *Resp. Ḥatam Sofer*, vol. 6, § 85.

heresy, pure intention and the pursuit of self-glorification. None of these oppositions align perfectly with the others, yet in the Ḥatam Sofer's nostalgic writing they intertwine into a single mythic fabric—a utopian construction endowed with considerable generative force.

Manuscript After Print

A brief interpretive sketch such as the one offered here does not seek to dismiss the productive use of history-of-the-book methodologies for illuminating figures in the rabbinic world but rather to complicate it. As the case of the Ḥatam Sofer demonstrates, any inquiry into such a figure demands a finely tuned articulation of the biographical dimension, of the writer's distinct agency, and of the self-narrative he fashions—an interpretive space through which the conceptual texture of authorship emerges and in which he shapes a particular stance of rabbinic agency. Concepts that appear culturally particular—*Talmud Torah*, messianism, *ḥiddush Torah*, "a time to act for the Lord"— are not merely internal illustrations of universal human categories. They function as generative epistemic forces that determine the horizons toward which intellectual formations strive. In this sense, the most particular forms the essence of the most universal.

A closer examination of the Ḥatam Sofer's reflections on print reveals that they belong not at the threshold between manuscript culture and print culture, but rather within the persistence of manuscript in the age of print. Manuscripts continued to be produced in the print era—whether as fresh copies of older literature marked as distinct or esoteric or as vessels for new and even openly innovative compositions. They also continued to be *thought* in the age of print: as symbolic resources for differentiation, polemic, self-fashioning, lament, and longing. What emerges, therefore, is less a theory about technology than an epistemology of crisis—a normative model of how knowledge should circulate, who may authorize it, and how purity of intention distinguishes sanctified writing from writing that courts self-glorification. In this light, the Ḥatam Sofer's nostalgic construction of the manuscript world is not a reaction to print but a cultural strategy of self-formation: an attempt to reinscribe authority and sacred intentionality within a world unsettled by new forms of knowledge, new modes of publicity, and new anxieties of fragmentation.

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Declarations

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