

The archive of Hebrew books

I was approaching Rosie's cottage, tucked away along a hidden lane in Marlesford, mid Suffolk, on a grey overcast dreary Thursday afternoon in February, the month before Lockdown. The cottage garden was full of garden gnomes, who even had their own little stream. This was not out of my way as I had taught yoga that morning, in Kesgrave and drove to Marlesford after eating lunch in my car, to hunt down the elusive address. Rosie had contacted me about two weeks previously telling me, and Noah, that she had a collection of old Jewish books that she wanted to find a suitable home for.

The books were all packed away into two supermarket fruit and vegetable cardboard trays ready for me to load into my car and take home. Of these books, eleven of them are entirely in Hebrew, and clearly quite old. They are large texts, and unfamiliar to me. The rest of the books were a collection about Jewish history and religion, some of them suitable for people interested in Judaism, maybe coming from a Christian background. There is a book about the writings of Flavius Josephus, who was a first century Roman Jewish historian, that opens in the Roman style, i.e. from right to left, written in English. I cannot tell how old this book is, there is nothing there about when it was published. There is a book about Modern Jewish History, published 1958. Another on the History and Religion of Israel, published 1966. There is a book about The Holy Scriptures, also totally in English, reading from right to left, first published in 1957.

Then there is the collection of books entirely in Hebrew, beautifully bound, with no hint as to date of publication, large and larger, eleven in total.

Rosie moved to Suffolk from Kent, with her husband, about four years ago and very much wanted to find a new home for the books, in the spirit of decluttering that seems ever more urgent as one gets older. She told me that she had stored these books for the last 25 years, not knowing what to do with them, but not wanting to throw them out. She sensed that they had something precious about them. Rosie told me that her grandmother on her father's side had been Jewish, and her husband, Rosie's grandfather, was not Jewish. Rosie's father, who gave the books to Rosie, was not knowledgeable about Judaism (or did not mention it to Rosie) and the Judaism had been lost in her own family. Other than these books. Rosie knew nothing of her grandmother's story, apart from where she lived, in South London, when she, Rosie, knew her.

I took the books home, and had to find somewhere to store this collection of historically interesting books, but otherwise were they relevant to today? My first line of enquiry was the Leo Baeck Library, and their librarian, Cassy Sachar. Initially I sent Cassy photos of the spine and front pages of the books, and she promised to enquire about whether the library would be interested in them. Then Lockdown occurred and communication broke down, until the end of July when I recontacted Cassy.

Cassy was able to give translations for the titles of the books, which turned out to be versions of the Talmud, and commentaries on the Talmud; for example two Babylonian Talmuds, one Tractate Ketubot and the other Tractate Rosh Hashanah; a commentary by Nachmanides (Sephardic Rabbi, scholar, born 1194 Girona, Spain, died 1270, Israel), commentaries by other famous Rabbis, Asher Ben Yechiel (born 1250 Cologne, died 1327 Toledo), Yom Tov Asevilli (born 1260 Seville, died Zaragoza, Spain 1330). A horde for the learned Jew, maybe Sephardi? Other names are Aryeh Leib Heller (born 1745 Ukraine, died 1813) and Rabeinu Yonah (Rabbi, born 1200 Girona, died 1263 Toledo).

Unfortunately, Leo Baeck were unable to take this collection of books, as they already have copies of these texts, and have no room for anymore. Cassy suggested that I

contact the London School of Jewish Studies, and that in particular their Beit Midrash school may be interested in these books. The Beit Midrash is run like a yeshiva school, only for men interested in serious study of Judaism, led by Rabbi Eliezer Zobin.

Rabbi Eliezer Zobin seemed delighted to hear about the books and following this through I contacted the Dean of the London School of Jewish Studies, Rabbi Raphael Zarum, who told me that they would be happy to take the books. They congratulated me on my commitment to finding the correct home for these Hebrew treasures, telling me that Jewish people are the people of books. I cannot disagree, I seem to live in a house full of books, and now want to off load lots of them. I found the whole process of tracking down the correct home for these books quite an emotional journey, as though the books had souls which were looking for their final resting place. To be used by serious students of Judaism. I did find these presumably ultra-orthodox Rabbis quite easy to communicate with, and when I told Rabbi Raphael the story of Rosie and her books, his response was:

*'..... nothing is lost forever ...
Things, people, and souls have a way of finding their way back '.*

I was charmed! It is a comforting thought, particularly when you have just lost an item of clothing. Now where did I put that ...? From the sacred, to the profane!

I contacted Rosie to tell her about the solution I had found for the books. She was thrilled and said that this news had made her day. I suggested to her that her family tree may contain some rabbinic personages, and that it would be interesting to try to explore this.

The books were delivered to Rabbi Raphael on 23rd August, for the London School of Jewish Studies. They will be finally home. Like lost souls finally finding their correct place in the world, they have arrived.

Shabbat shalom,

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