

How to be a scribe: An(other) introduction

The phenomenon of 19th-century halakhic scribal guides

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This presentation will outline the developments that led to a new interest in Jewish scribal law and a proliferation of scribal guides in the 19th century. These developments are located between the fields of halakha and minhag, between halakhic theory and scribal practice, textual and mimetic tradition. Drawing from findings from the broader field of Halakhic History as well as a comparative analysis of 19th century scribal literature and earlier rabbinic literature, I want to elucidate the spread of scribal, halakhic literature in the 19th century.

Throughout the ages, rabbis have been complaining about the state of Jewish scribal practice: Laws pertaining to the manufacture and writing of Torah scrolls, Tefilin, Mezuzot and Megilot Esther (Hilkhot Safrut) are scattered across the Talmud and later halakhic works. Scribal education is not systematic, and scribes are not careful enough.

Already in the Middle Ages, rabbinic scholars attempted to improve this situation by writing halakhic guides on Jewish scribal laws. However, until the 19th century, no standard work for Hilkhot Safrut was widely available (and accepted). Not until the 19th century did one halakhic scribal guide become the standard companion for both budding and experienced scribes. In its wake, similar books were written across Ashkenaz as well, but *Keset HaSofer*, written by R. Shlomo Ganzfried (1804-1886, Ungvár), was the most influential. He first published his guide in 1834, and then again as an expanded version in 1871. *Keset HaSofer* has seen many new editions since then – even in the 21st century.

The publication of *Keset HaSofer* as well as the waning state of Jewish scribal education in the 19th century encouraged others to write their own scribal guides. By looking at the development of scribal literature, I want to explore the genre of scribal guides in the 19th century. Investigating the authors' pedagogical and structural intentions, I will outline and discuss the considerations and motivations that led them in writing these handbooks.