

A Roman Rite Mahzor in Print: Preserving a Distinctive Jewish Voice (1485–1486)

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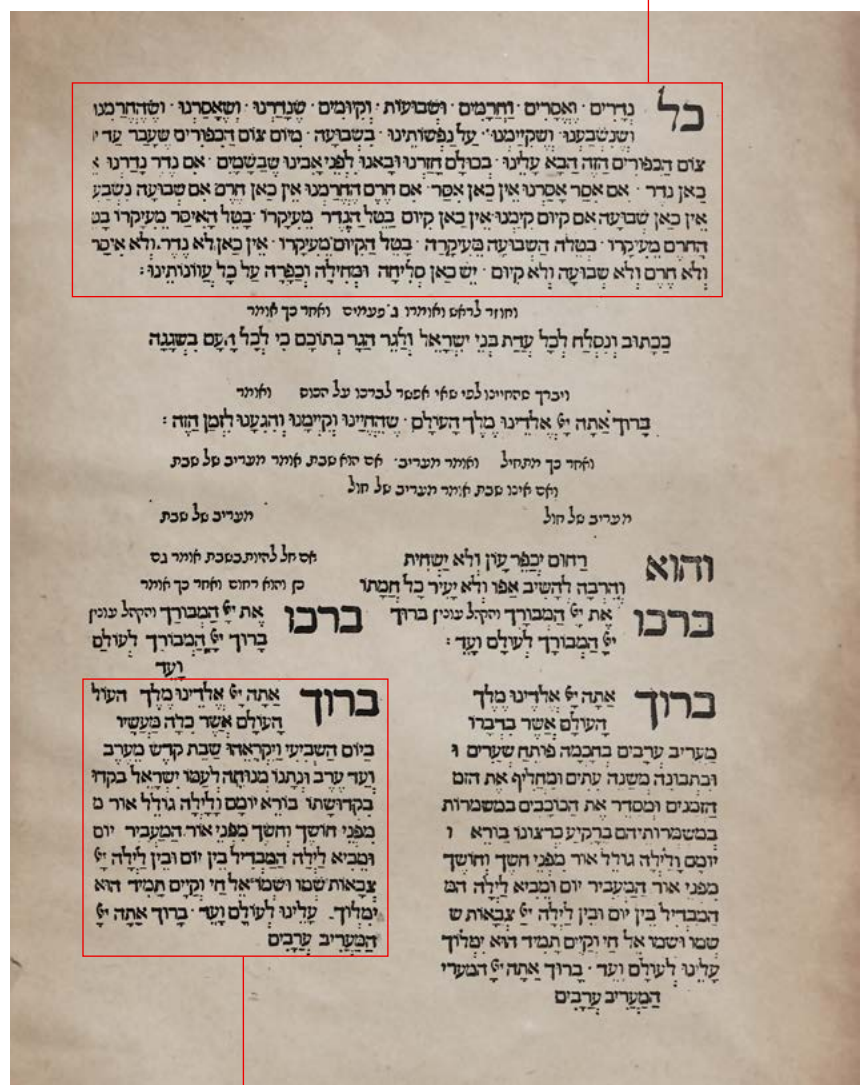


This *mahzor* was printed in the northern Italian towns of Soncino and Casalmaggiore between September 1485 and August 1486. It belongs to the earliest generation of printed books, known as “incunables,” from the Latin word *cunabula* (cradle), because they represent printing in its infancy. While all 15th-century printed books are uncommon, Hebrew incunables are extraordinarily rare. Fewer than 200 Hebrew editions are known to have been printed before 1501—less than one-half of one percent of all surviving incunable editions. Many survive today in only a single copy.

The printers of this *mahzor* were members of the famous Soncino family, pioneers of Hebrew printing. Although the Soncinos themselves were of Ashkenazic background, they produced books for many Jewish communities. This *mahzor* follows the Roman rite, the ancient liturgical tradition of the Jews of Italy, preserving customs that differed from both the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic prayer traditions.

The page shown here preserves two striking examples of those distinctive customs. At the top appears *Kol hanedarim* (All the Vows), the Hebrew

Kol hanedarim



hama'ariv aravim

version of the legal declaration recited before Yom Kippur. Most Jewish communities know this text by its Aramaic opening words, *Kol Nidrei* (All Vows), but the Jews of Italy and Greece continued to recite the formula in Hebrew. At the lower left is another unique feature: the Sabbath version of the evening blessing praising God as the One “who brings on the evening” (*hama’ariv aravim*). Instead of the familiar wording used by Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, the Roman rite preserves an older text beginning, “Who completed His work on the seventh day.” This version is already found in the 9th-century prayer book of Rav Saadia Gaon. Although later authorities argued that the blessing should remain the same on weekdays and Sabbaths alike, the Italian rite faithfully preserved this ancient form.

The page also reminds us that printing did not erase local traditions. Quite the opposite: the printing press became a powerful tool for preserving them. Communities that had depended upon handwritten manuscripts could now reproduce their own customs with remarkable accuracy, ensuring that distinctive liturgical traditions would endure.

This image speaks powerfully to the themes of fear and love. The fear is easy to recognize. The Jewish communities of Italy were minorities within Christian Europe, and the Jews who followed the Roman rite were themselves a minority within the Jewish world. Their traditions could easily have disappeared beneath the weight of larger and more influential communities. The Soncino family knew that insecurity firsthand. Only a generation after printing this *mahzor*, increasing censorship and restrictions on Hebrew books forced Gershom Soncino to move his press repeatedly throughout Italy before finally establishing new Hebrew presses under Ottoman rule in Thessaloniki and Constantinople.

Yet this page is ultimately a testament to love. The Roman Jews cherished the particular language, melodies, and forms of worship they had inherited over many centuries. The Soncino printers, though Ashkenazic themselves, recognized the value of preserving that inheritance in print. This *mahzor* reminds us that Jewish unity has never depended upon uniformity. It has rested instead upon a shared devotion to God expressed through many local voices. The new technology of print became not an instrument of sameness, but a means of ensuring that even the smallest and most distinctive communities could pass their traditions on to the generations that followed.

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