

Gary A. Rendsburg

Upcoming Programs in May

(1)

"Tracing Jewish History: From Yemen to Yorkshire"

Smithsonian Associates (via Zoom)

(2)

"The World's Oldest Hebrew Book"

Jewish Historical Seminars (via Zoom)

Thursday, May 8, 2025

Dear Friends,

We trust this finds you well, as we announce two upcoming events, an all-day program from Smithsonian Associates, and a single lecture sponsored by Jewish Historical Seminars.

We also take the opportunity to wish everyone an enjoyable summer. We'll be in touch in the fall with announcements about future events.

As to our own summer plans, we will be in Oxford in June, and then we will spend some time in Sweden, for a conference in Uppsala and some touring in Stockholm.

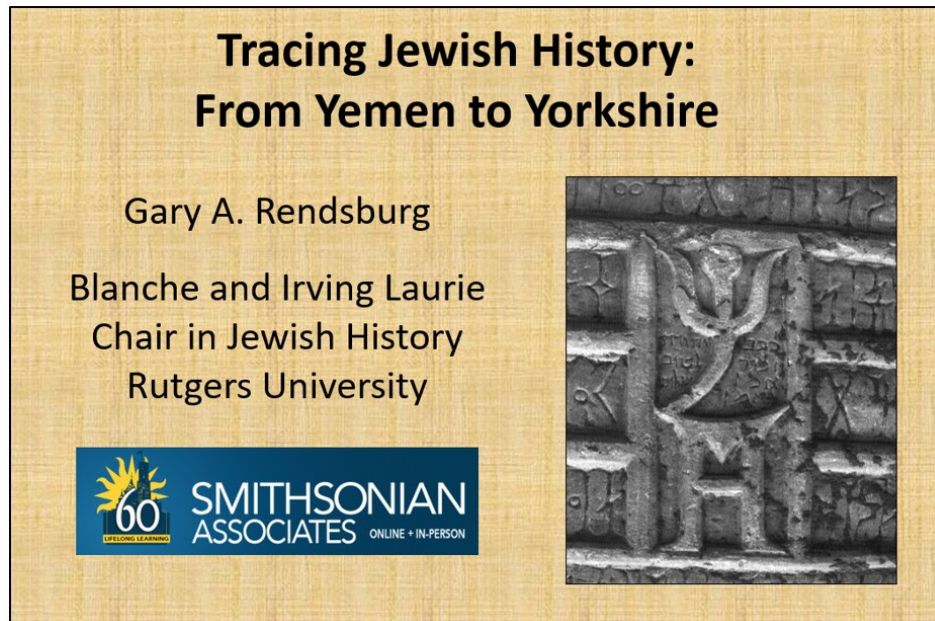
We trust that you will have an enjoyable summer as well, perhaps with travel to a new destination, hopefully with a good book in hand, and most importantly in health and in prosperity.



Aerial Panorama of Oxford, England

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford#/media/File:1_oxford_aerial_panorama_2016.jpg

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(1)

"Tracing Jewish History: From Yemen to Yorkshire"

Smithsonian Associates (via Zoom)

Saturday, May 17, 2025

10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (EDT)

via Zoom

Registration here:

<https://smithsonianassociates.org/ticketing/programs/tracing-jewish-history>

Description:

The known trajectory of Jewish history begins in ancient Israel, continues through 2,000 years of Diaspora, and then reaches the two

major events of the 20th century: the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel.

Within those years of Diaspora are little-known stories of Jewish communities that are well worth attention. Biblical scholar and historian Gary Rendsburg leads a fascinating virtual tour across time and place to explore several of these surprising outposts from Yemen to Yorkshire. He serves as the Blanche and Irving Laurie professor of Jewish history at Rutgers University.

The four lectures:

- The Jews of Hellenistic Egypt
- The Jews of Arabia
- Jews in the German Lands: Roman and Holy Roman Empires
- The Jews of Medieval England

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**The World's Oldest
Hebrew Book**

Gary A. Rendsburg
Blanche and Irving Laurie
Chair in Jewish History
Rutgers University
May 20, 2025
Jewish Historical Seminars





(2)

“The World's Oldest Hebrew Book”

Jewish Historical Seminars (via Zoom)

Tuesday, May 20, 2025

12:00 noon (EDT)

via Zoom

Registration here:

<https://www.jewishhistoricalseminars.com/lectures>

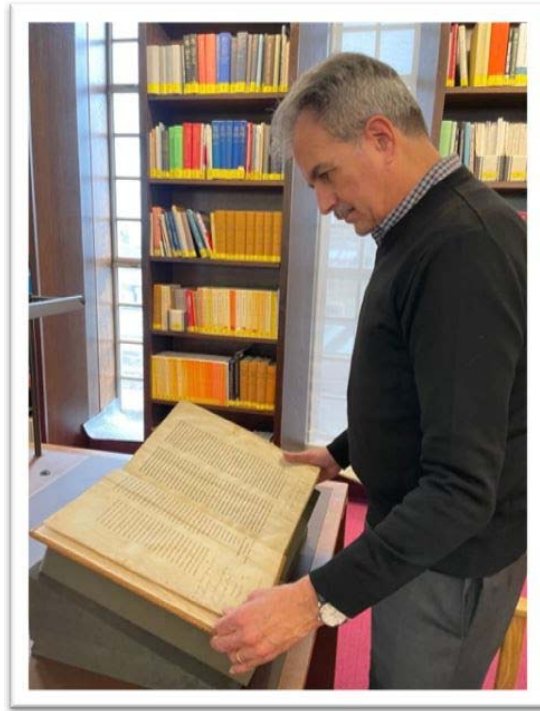
Description:

A small siddur, so small that it can be held in the palm of one's hand, was discovered in Afghanistan c. 2000. Eventually it came to the attention of scholars and was purchased by the Museum of the Bible (Washington, D.C.), where it now resides on permanent display. Though at present this precious manuscript is on loan to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

The Afghan siddur, which includes both prayers and an early version of the Passover Haggadah, consists of only 25 folios, and has been C-14 dated to c. 700 C.E., thereby earning it the title of “The World's Oldest Hebrew Book” (that is, book or codex, not scroll). Prior to the discovery of this small manuscript, the oldest Hebrew codex was dated to c. 900 C.E., so that this modest little volume pushes our book knowledge back by two centuries.

Join us as Professor Gary Rendsburg narrates the remarkable journey of this manuscript from Afghanistan to Washington, though naturally he also will focus on its contents, the prayers within the siddur and elements of the Passover Haggadah text.

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GARY'S CORNER



Another academic year comes to a close, with so many brilliant accomplishments by my students, including the following.

First, as part of the Rutgers University Aresty Research Program (which matches undergraduate students and faculty researchers), Joe Gindi, Samuel Kornecki, and I spent the entire academic year analyzing a medieval Torah scroll housed at the Vatican Library (Vat.ebr.1), via

We paid attention to all the paratextual items, including paragraph breaks, layout of the poems (Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32), dotted letters, large and small letters, variant spellings, etc. See the poster below, which Joe and Samuel presented at the end-of-the-year Aresty Program symposium.

RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK
Artesy Research Center
for Undergraduates

The Textual Features of the Vatican Library 14/15th-Century Torah Scroll

Joe Gindi and Samuel Kornecki
 Department of Jewish Studies, Rutgers University

Abstract

There are many different traditions when it comes to Torah scrolls, and a comprehensive analysis of a scroll tells us a significant amount about its origins. This research examines the paragraphing system and minute scroll details employed in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Vat.heb.1) manuscript, a Near Eastern Torah scroll held by the Vatican library originally estimated to be from the 13th century C.E., but more recent scholarship suggests a century or two later.

By analyzing these structural and textual elements, this research provides insight into the traditions of Torah scroll practices and their alignment with established halakhot (Jewish legal) models. Using a methodology based on the original manuscript of Moses Maimonides (the great medieval Jewish scholar), a structural system of analysis was developed to record paragraph breaks and scroll variations in a comparative spreadsheet. The findings reveal that the Vatican scroll largely adheres to the system Maimonides lay out, with only a single deviation across almost the hundreds of paragraph breaks spanning the entire text. Additionally, several scroll errors were identified, including missing words, omitted letters, and “spill-over” words.

These results demonstrate the widespread influence of Maimonides’ paragraphing system on at least this Torah scroll, while also highlighting areas where variations and errors occur. The broader significance of this research lies in its potential to serve as a model for further studies on Torah scrolls, contributing to a deeper understanding of historical scribal traditions and textual transmission.

Background

- Torah scrolls employ a system of paragraph breaks within the text, with several different traditions existing.
- The Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Jewish communities largely adhered to the system formalized by Maimonides in the 12th century, based on the Aleppo Codex.
- We have an authoritative copy of Maimonides’ system, outlined in his Mishneh Torah (Code of Jewish Law), bearing his own signature (see image).
- The scroll’s initial date was estimated to be from the 13th century, but upon further analysis certain details push this date forward a century or two.
- Note the rugin (crowns) on selected letters and occasional other odd shapes (see image).
- The Vatican does not allow C-14 testing which would provide us with a much more accurate date.

The Vatican scroll was accessed digitally through the Vatican library website (<https://www.vatican.va/istoria/1415th-century-torah-scroll>). The authoritative reference used for the paragraph breaks was Bodelian MS Huntington 80, the oldest manuscript of the Mishneh Torah, also containing the signature of Maimonides (Illuminated). The first goal was to establish a database of every paragraph break in a Torah scroll that Maimonides lists in the Mishneh Torah. This was achieved by creating an Excel Sheet which lists every verse in the Torah containing a break, both open and closed. The Excel Sheet was then checked against each paragraph break in the Vatican scroll, with our findings recorded in an additional column, as seen here:

Settings					
Column(s)	Paragraph	Reference	Open	Closed	Notes
1:9	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	P	P	1: Maimonides
1:14	וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה	וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה	P	P	1: Maimonides

A page from the Vatican Torah scroll containing the Biblical Song of the Sea.

- A) An example of a setuma (closed) paragraph break.
- B) An example of a petucha (open) paragraph break.
- C) An example of dilated letters to “even out” a column.

Results

Only one paragraph break difference was found, at Deuteronomy 30:1, where a petucha break is present in the scroll contrasted to a setuma break in the Mishneh Torah, Aleppo Codex, and Leningrad Codex.

27:21	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
27:22	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
27:23	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
27:24	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
27:25	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
27:26	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
28:1	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	P	P	P	P
28:15	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	P	P	P	P
28:16	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
28:17	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	P	P	P	P
28:18	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	P	P	P	P
28:19	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
28:20	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
28:21	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
28:22	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S
28:23	וְיָצֵא יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה מִן הַיַּד	S	S	S	S

Conclusion

- Results show that the scribe of the Vatican Torah scroll (Vat.heb.1) was clearly adhering to Maimonides’ system, with only a single variation in the entire paragraphing system.
- It could be hypothesized that this variation was possibly an error on his part, as we also noticed occasional wording/spelling mistakes.

Future Direction

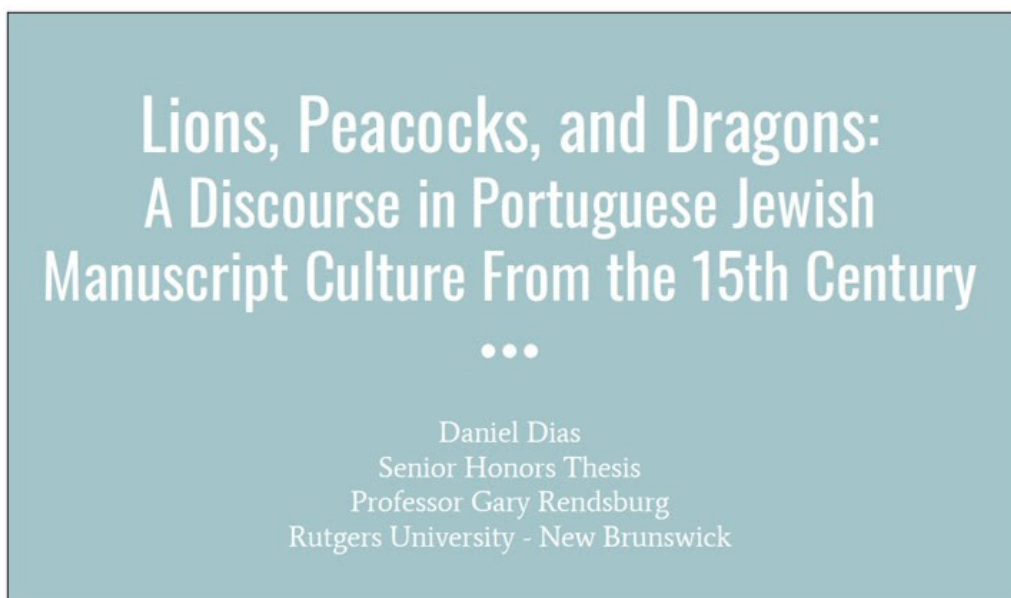
- A paper will be published documenting these findings, in addition to the research method that we developed.
- The method for analyzing the scroll could now be applied to future research on other Torah scrolls, helping researchers analyze the paragraphing systems employed by other scribes across Jewish communities.

Acknowledgments

- We would like to acknowledge the important and insightful contribution to our research from Dr. Marc Michaels (London/Cambridge).
- This project was the brainchild of Professor Gary Hendings who had the wisdom to lead the development of this novel research method.
- We thank the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana for publishing high quality images of the Vat.heb.1 Torah scroll, without which our work would not be possible.

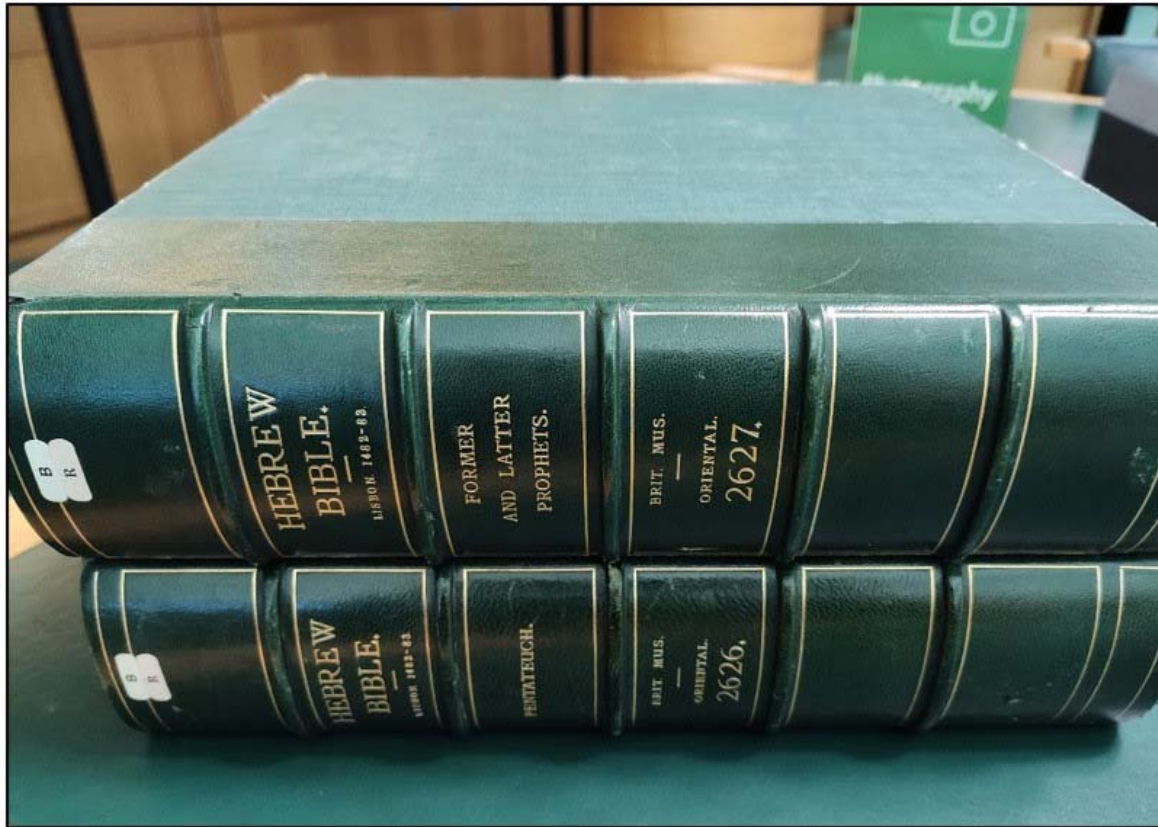
Second, I had the distinct pleasure of serving as the mentor to Daniel Dias, for his History Department senior honors thesis, entitled, “Lions, Peacocks, and Dragons: A Discourse in Portuguese Jewish Manuscript Culture From the 15th Century.” During the academic year, Daniel researched the Lisbon school of Hebrew manuscript illumination, with attention to four major codices created in Lisbon during the years c. 1460 – 1497 (though one of them was completed in Florence after the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal).

Three of these manuscripts are housed at the British Library, while one is housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Daniel was able to visit the two libraries and inspect these manuscripts during winter break, though naturally he also used the digital record available online.



Through the stimulus of working with Daniel on this project, I became so interested in these manuscripts that I actually flew to London in February to spend several pleasant days on my own at the British Library.

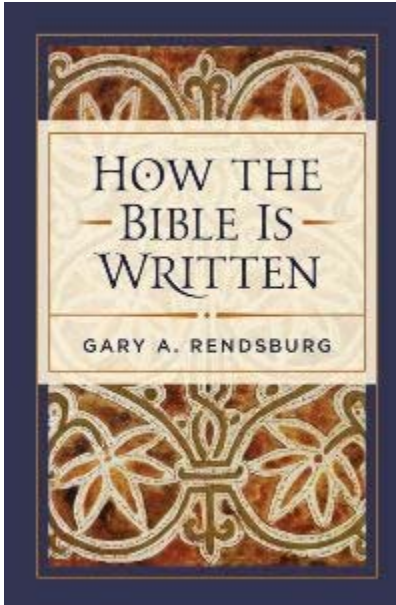
Herewith a photo of two of the three volumes of the famous Lisbon Bible (written in Lisbon in 1482 by the scribe Samuel ben Samuel ibn Musa), sitting at my desk in the British Library reading room.



Of all the roles that I perform as a faculty member (teaching, advising, lecturing, committee service, etc.), mentoring gifted students in such one-on-one fashion remains the most satisfying part of the profession.

[Click here to contact Gary A. Rendsburg](#)

[Click here to contact Melissa A. Rendsburg, Managing Director](#)



[How the Bible Is Written](#)

(April 2019)

(Hendrickson)

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