

Unveiling Ancient texts

An interview with Shaul
Seidler-Feller, the Judaica
expert at the Sotheby's
auction house

By Malkie Schulman



rowing up surrounded by books with a father who was an avid collector of old *sefarim*, Shaul Seidler-Feller maintains that it wasn't a big leap for him to end up as a Judaica specialist at Sotheby's auction house in New York as well as a private Judaica consultant. However, back when he was pursuing his master's in Jewish history, he wasn't quite sure what he would do with his degree. "I received my *smichah* and master's from Yeshiva University," he says, "but I didn't have any concrete plans to enter the antiquarian book market. Up until then I had been doing translation work." But thanks to *hashgachah pratis* and a coalescence of various connections he'd formed over the years, when one of the previous Sotheby's Judaica specialists was leaving in 2017, "I was fortunate enough to be offered the job."



For anyone passionate about Jewish history, this was an unparalleled opportunity. Shaul typically spends his days at the auction house answering client queries, estimating values for items accepted for consignment and cataloging (researching and describing) the items being sold. Other not-as-typical days can involve helping to design a catalog for an upcoming auction, setting up an exhibition ahead of a sale and then giving tours of it to visitors, or traveling to see a collection and assess its suitability for auction.

Shaul provides some background on the antique Judaica market, which he says is growing, and its key players. There are several Judaica auction houses in the United States. Sotheby's, however, is the only international auction house with a dedicated Judaica sale. "Christie's, for example, might include a few Judaica items as part of a larger collection," he notes, "but Sotheby's is unique in hosting dedicated Judaica sales on an annual basis."

When it comes to Judaica auctions, Israel has the highest number of auction houses, selling a wide range of items from ancient manuscripts to early State of Israel posters and memorabilia, although America probably has a larger base of collectors. Europe is also home to many collectors of Judaica.

"There are many more printed books that come through our doors than manuscripts," Shaul explains. "Once in a while, we'll get a large manuscript collection, but not often. Printed books can be produced on either parchment or paper. If they're on parchment, it usually means they were meant to be a deluxe copy for a *gvir*."

A Diverse Collector Base

Surprisingly, collectors of Judaica aren't exclusively Jewish. "Non-Jews have been collecting for a long time," says Shaul. He points to notable examples like the Valmadonna copy of the Bomberg Shas or an early Ashkenazic *siddur* that was found in a monastery. "Some non-Jewish collectors are drawn by an interest in the Hebrew Bible. Protestants, especially during the early days of Protestantism, devoted significant study to it."

The Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., which is financed by an evangelical Christian family, probably has the largest collection of *sifrei Torah* in the world, reflecting their dedication to the Hebrew Bible as an authentic witness to G-d's words. Others are fascinated by the way knowledge was transmitted in the Middle Ages, with Jews playing a significant role in studying and translating Arabic medical and scientific manuscripts. "Some non-Jews collect them for investment purposes," he adds.



A Chumash with the peirush of the Baal HaTurim produced in Yemen at the end of the 17th century. It was sold by Sotheby's last year for \$36,000.

Telltale signs of forgery include items that are excessively ornate, profusely adorned with gold or decorated with an abundance of Magen Davids.

Of course, *frum* Jews are also highly active in the Judaica market. “Collectors range from those passionate about old *sefarim*, appreciating the connection to Jewish history and the stories these books tell, to those who see certain artifacts as true works of art.”

This diversity of interest provides multiple entry points into the Judaica market. Institutions, libraries and museums also play a role, but dealers and private collectors are more prominent because museums and libraries often require donors to make purchases. “Some auction houses even host Chabad-specific sales,” Shaul notes, “offering items such as a first-edition *Tanya*, a dollar bill distributed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and artifacts connected to chasidic history.” The market also spans various communities and includes Sephardic, *yeshivish* and Modern Orthodox collectors.

“My purview consists of written material, specifically printed books, manuscripts and ephemera like broadsides. Some manuscripts are written in scroll form, others in codex form. The term ‘codex,’” he explains, “refers to a type of book-making technology whereby folded leaves (pages) are grouped together in quires (collections of sheets of paper) that are then

assembled in order and sewn or glued into a binding. Almost all of the books most people keep on their bookshelves nowadays are technically codices.

“Ephemera are objects created with a time-limited purpose, such as a wall calendar that isn’t meant to be used beyond a specific period. Another example of ephemera would be a postcard or wedding invitation. An example of a broadside would be the *pashkevilin* you find plastered on walls in Israel announcing deaths or other important events. There is written text only on one side, and it’s specifically meant for public display.”

Occasionally, Shaul will be called upon for consultation by Sotheby’s silver department if there’s an inscription on a silver Judaica object, but most of the items he works on are text heavy.

Sometimes, people from Arab or other countries may claim that they found an ancient Jewish manuscript. “But when we begin to read the text, it often turns out to be gibberish. Other telltale signs of forgery include items that are excessively ornate, profusely adorned with gold or decorated with an abundance of Magen Davids. Occasionally, a crook will attempt to reproduce an image from a real Hebrew manuscript he found online. But those who have been in the field long enough can see that the design was simply copied from something like the well-known Barcelona *Haggadah*.”

Shaul admits he feels privileged to have worked with many incredible collections. One prominent example is the Sassoon Collection, owned by the wealthy Rabbi Solomon Sassoon of England who traces his lineage to Baghdad. “Rabbi Sassoon moved to Israel in 1970, which coincided more or less with his decision to start selling off part of his collection,” he shares. “He was involved in many philanthropic endeavors, one of them being a network of Sephardic Jewish schools that he supported. He sold off some of his collection to raise money to support his causes.”

Other major collections Shaul has been involved with include the Valmadonna



The illuminated Luzzatto High Holiday Machzor produced in southern Germany 700 years ago. It was sold by Sotheby's in 2021 for \$8.3 million.

Trust Library. This collection was assembled by Jack Lunzer in London and is named for a town in Italy to which his wife's family, originally from Poland, had ties.

"While the Sassoon Collection is known for its manuscripts, this library is known for its amazing, extremely rare collection of about 13,000 printed *sefarim*. Mr. Lunzer managed to gather rare volumes from all corners of the Jewish world, including Bombay, Calcutta, Baghdad, Constantinople, Lisbon and Prague, as well as big and small towns in Italy and Germany. The collection was put up for auction in 2009 with an original asking price of \$40 million, but it didn't find a buyer. Eventually, the trustees decided that selling it off in parts would make more sense. Twelve items from the collection were sold by Sotheby's, and most of the rest of the collection is in the National Library of Israel."

One of the crown jewels of the Valmadonna Library was a *Bavli Shas* printed

in Venice by Daniel Bomberg in the early 1500s. Shaul was asked to review each page to note any interesting features and ensure that the set was complete. When reviewing the *Shas*, Shaul discovered a few of duplicate pages. Overall, he maintains, this set of *Shas* bound in nine volumes was in extremely good condition.

In terms of public collections, the Conservative-affiliated Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and the National Library of Israel house the most important and largest ones, although there are sizable collections in Europe and elsewhere in the US and Israel. "While JTS also collects Jewish art and Judaica objects, the National Library mostly focuses on written material, whereas Judaica objects would be more likely to go to the Israel Museum. Nonetheless, the National Library does house some objects. For example, they own bowls with Aramaic inscriptions on the inside that were meant to protect the homes of Jews in Iraq."

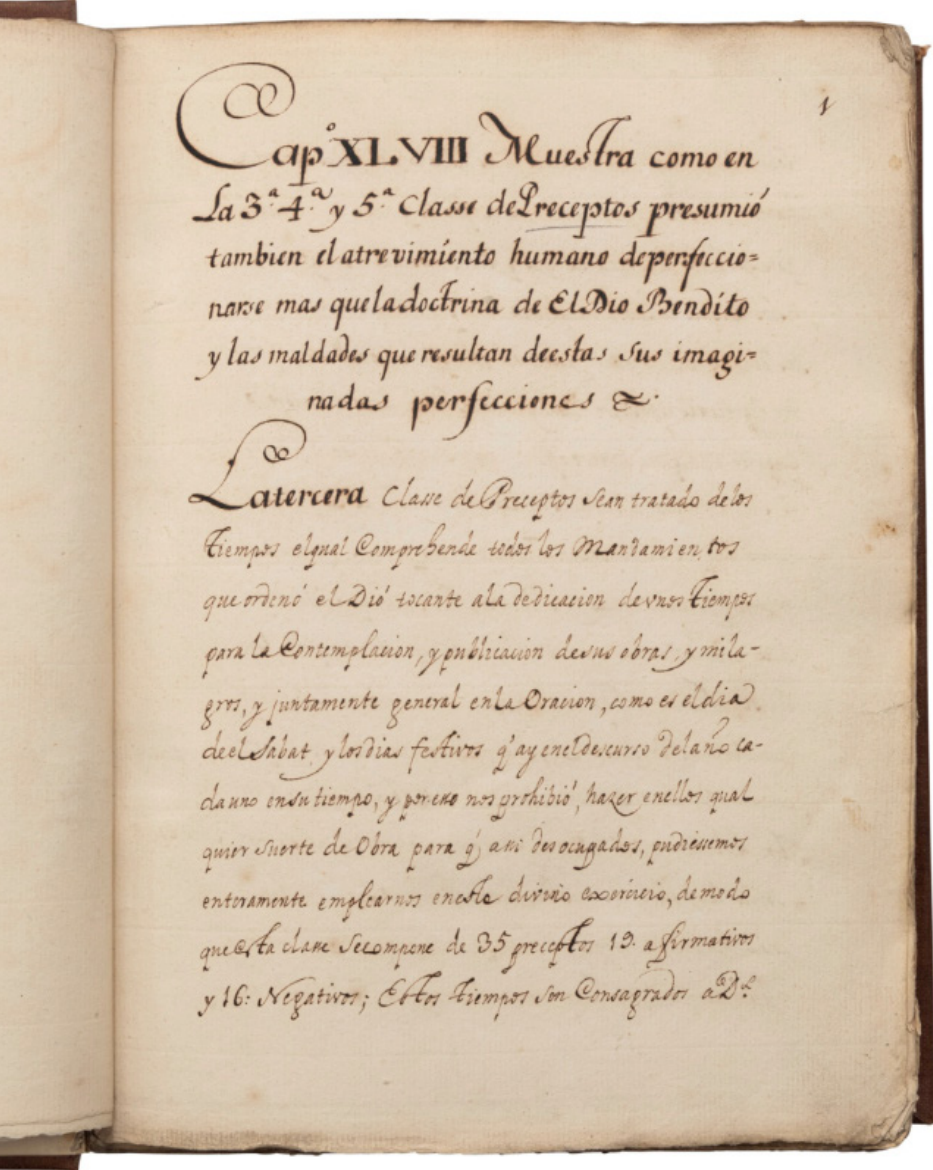
Unearthing Stories Through Artifacts

From ancient manuscripts with extraordinary historical connections to artifacts with unexpected personal stories, each piece reveals a unique narrative. Over the years, Shaul has encountered many such treasures, some with surprising journeys and others that have set remarkable records in the auction world.

One such artifact with an exceptional journey is the *Luzzatto High Holiday Machzor*, a manuscript created in the late 13th or early 14th century. "Based on various features, such as the script, the illustrations and the text itself, I believe it was written in southern Germany," Shaul explains.

The *machzor's* journey can be traced through its inscriptions. From Germany, it traveled to the region of Lake Constance, which is now on the border of Switzerland. "We know this because there are inscriptions detailing the *Selichos* re-

An influential work written by Rabbi Shaul Levi Morteira in Amsterdam in the mid-1600s and copied some time later



cited by the community there, which differ from those in its original location,” he explains. One of these inscriptions even explicitly references “the *minhag* here in Constance.” These recorded customs reflect the differences in the two *nuschaos*. The *machzor* then later made its way to Italy, as evidenced by text written in Italian-style Hebrew handwriting.

In the 16th century, during a period of intensive censorship of Hebrew books by the Catholic Church, the *machzor* was subjected to scrutiny. “Passages deemed problematic were either blotted out with ink or scratched out with a sharp edge,

which provides further evidence that the manuscript had moved to Italy during that era.”

In 2021, the *Luzzatto Machzor* sold at Sotheby’s for \$8.3 million to a private collector.

“I encountered another amazing example of an artifact’s travels in my first year at Sotheby’s,” Shaul shares. “A private owner came in with a manuscript that turned out to be a *Tanach* from around the year 1275. Although not complete, it was largely intact. It contained initial word panels that were decorated with red and blue pigment, and the first letter of each *pasuk* was

often written in red. Obviously, great care and effort had been put into making this a beautiful piece of art. We determined that it had probably been created in Germany or northern France. What made it particularly interesting was that the *Tanach* had clearly made its way to a far-flung Jewish community in Mardin, Turkey, a city I had never heard of before. After doing some research, I discovered that Mardin did undoubtedly have a Jewish community and even a *shul* named for Eliyahu Hanavi. The *Tanach* itself contained inscriptions from people who wrote their names and the year they visited the *shul*. Today, the *Tanach* is in its new home in the Braginsky Collection in Switzerland.”

Occasionally, a manuscript or printed *sefer* will find its way back to the original owner’s family. “Sometimes we’ll find an inscription from an owner that indicates how it was passed down. You can see the chain of transmission, and sometimes the circle is closed when the book comes back. For example, we recently sold a manuscript copy of the Rambam’s *Moreh Nevuchim* that had at one point been in the possession of David Solomon Sassoon’s great-grandfather, Faraj Chaim ben Abdallah Yosef, who also owned an important library. A little less than a century after he passed away in 1844, the book was brought back into the family by David Solomon.”

Items often become more desirable because of their owners. *Frum* collectors, in particular, place a premium on association value—and the item doesn’t have to be old or beautiful. A *sefer*, manuscript or even a letter owned by a *rebbe*, prominent *rosh yeshivah* or something that features the signature of one of the *Acharonim* holds cultural significance and appeals to a certain type of collector.

One manuscript whose value rose because of its ownership was an Ashkenazic *ksav yad* of the *sefer Eitz Chaim*, an important collection of Kabbalistic teachings of the Arizal. Experts were able to identify the handwriting of the marginal notes as that of Rav Yonasan Eybeshutz,



The Codex Sassoon, which sold in 2023 for over \$38 million

the great *rosh yeshivah* and *darshan* who lived in the 18th century. Rav Eybeshutz was also a great Kabbalist, but no known Kabbalistic *kisvei yad* of his had ever been discovered.

Another *sefer* whose value derives from the person it belonged to is a *siddur* that, according to family tradition, was used by Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, whose last name was Derbaremdiker (meaning “the merciful one”). There are signatures of his descendants testifying to its transmission in the family. “It’s not a complete *siddur*,” notes Shaul, “but it’s a revered little piece of history from this great figure.” The last owner with the same surname was Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Derbaremdiker, who passed away in 1996. After his passing, it went to the family of one of Rabbi Derbaremdiker’s two sisters.

A fascinating example can be seen in the 2017 Sotheby’s sale of a small *Nusach Ashkenaz siddur* that was printed in Venice in 1519. It is remarkable for being the only known copy of its kind to have survived. It is quite an early piece, as it was printed within the first 50 years or so of Hebrew printing.

Its survival is attributed to the fact that it ended up in a monastery library.

Unexpected Christian acquisitions often played a role in preserving Jewish texts. The *siddur* was obviously not used for *davening*, allowing it to remain intact for future generations. This contrasts with most *siddurim* and *Chumashim*, which typically show damage from extensive use.

The Valmadonna *Shas* (discussed above) is another example of an artifact that was discovered in excellent condition due to its having sat in the library of Westminster Abbey for several centuries. In 1980, Jack Lunzer traded a 900-year-old copy of the abbey’s charter to Westminster Abbey in exchange for the *Shas*. In December 2015, Sotheby’s New York sold it to a New York businessman, Leon Black, for \$9.3 million.

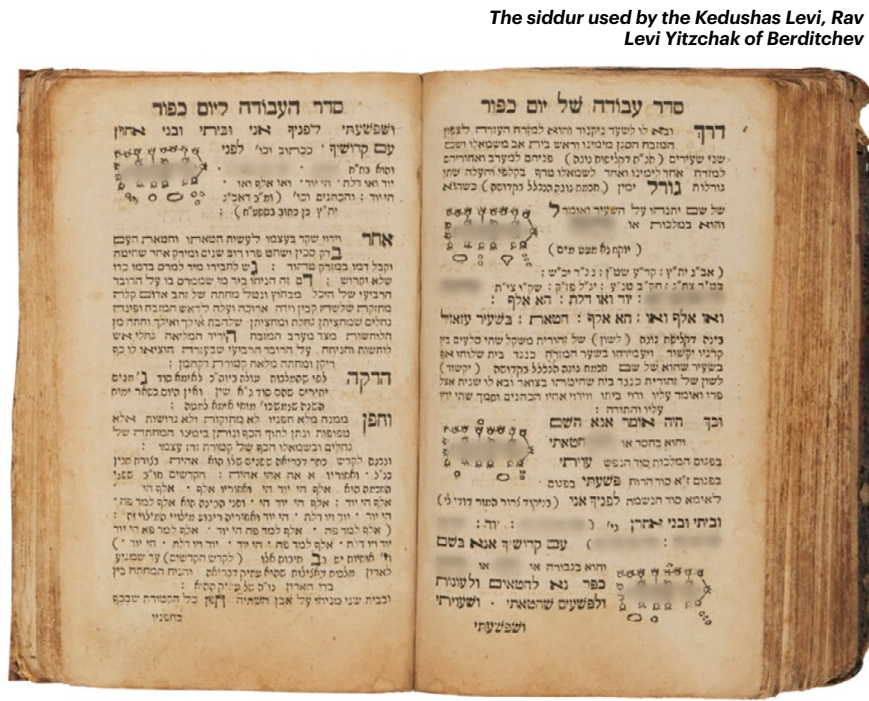
Jewish Artifacts in the Digital Age

Shaul maintains that technology has been a major help for everyone in the Judaica ecosystem. “The digitization of

manuscripts from collections around the world has made it much easier to do comparative work, discover previously unknown connections, and determine what makes a particular piece unique or interesting for a potential buyer.”

Sometimes Shaul will receive a manuscript with no accompanying information. The first thing he tries to do is identify its author. “If I can find other examples of this work on the Internet, it accelerates the process of determining who created it. Similarly, if it’s not clear where a manuscript originated, I can use its script or artwork to try to narrow down the location. Having online samples of many different types of manuscripts, ranging widely across both time and space, is a major boon.”

In addition, the Internet helps with crowd sourcing and identifying fakes. It also provides an easy way to network with other specialists in the field. “Getting to interact with experts about topics I’ve never previously studied greatly benefits me as a researcher,” notes Shaul. In the most recent sale of part of the Sassoon Collection, there was a manuscript



The siddur used by the Kedushas Levi, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

written entirely in Spanish. “There was no information about the author, and I don’t speak Spanish well. I started poking around online, put some of the text in my web browser and found that it was an 18th-century copy of a book written by a prominent *rav* in Amsterdam by the

“You can feel his commitment to making sure that this was transmitted 100% accurately and see the hiddur mitzvah he was intent on incorporating.”

name of Rabbi Shaul Levi Morteira.” Rabbi Morteira lived in the 17th century and was actively involved in trying to bring his community back to traditional Judaism. Many of them were former conversos from Spain who had lived many years as Catholics. His book was a defense of Judaism and a critique of Christianity. He was also well known for his role in the ex-communication of Baruch Spinoza, an infamous Jewish heretic.

Shaul explains that he didn’t confirm the identity of the book’s author until he established contact with a researcher from the University of Tennessee who had written several scholarly articles about Rabbi Morteira. “If I hadn’t had access to the Internet, I would have probably never known any of these details.”

With regard to fluctuations in the Judaica market today, Shaul says, “Mid-level and lower-level items tend to remain relatively stable from one sale to the next. But significant and rare items, including illuminated manuscripts, often go up in value over time. A prime example is the Codex Sassoon, whose value went from \$320,000 to over \$38 million.”

The backstory of the Codex Sassoon

is fascinating. “The Codex Sassoon is an almost complete *Tanach* written in a single volume by one *sofer*,” he explains. “It is missing only 8% to 10% of the text, which is impressive for something so old. The exact date it was written isn’t known, as it might not have been recorded or didn’t survive the passage of time. However, small pieces of the manuscript’s parchment were submitted to a lab for carbon-14 testing, which indicated that it dated from the early tenth century.”

The Codex was put up for auction by the Sassoon family for the first time in 1978 and was purchased by the British Rail Pension Fund, which had an art investment portfolio as part of its pension fund for workers. When they sold it in 1989 to Jaqui E. Safra, a member of the prominent Safra family based in Geneva, its value had increased more than tenfold to approximately \$3.18 million. It ultimately arrived at Sotheby’s through Shaul’s senior colleague, Sharon Liberman Mintz, who had a professional relationship with Jaqui Safra. The story goes that at the auction in 1989, the successful bidder was a dealer named Yechezkel Toporowitch, who bought it on behalf of Safra. Jaqui approached him afterward and paid him an extra \$1 million for its purchase. Thus in total, Jaqui spent about \$4.18 million on the Codex.

In May 2023, Jaqui put the Codex up for auction at Sotheby’s, and it sold for \$38.1 million, the highest price ever for a Judaica item. Alfred H. Moses, a lawyer and former US ambassador to Romania, made the donation that allowed it to be purchased by the American Friends of ANU, which transferred it to the ANU Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv, where it currently resides.

Inspired by Sacred Texts

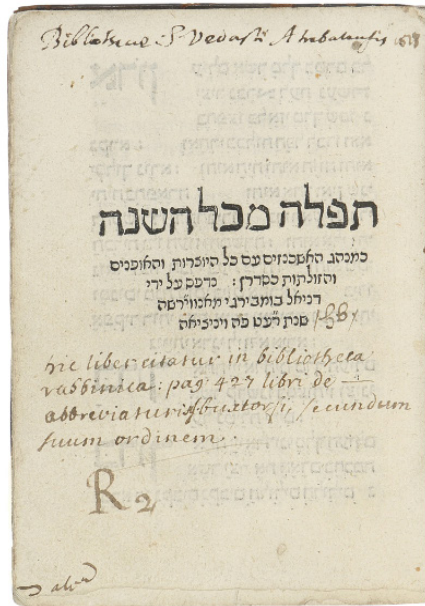
Shaul admits that he is often inspired by his work. One such moment came while examining the Shem Tov Codex. “It’s incredible to hold a piece of history

like that in your hands,” he shares.

This particular codex, a *Tanach* written by Rabbi Shem Tov Ibn Gaon in the northern Spanish city of Soria in 1312, left a strong impression on him. “Rabbi Shem Tov included a count of every single letter in the Torah and noted how many crowns appear on certain letters. You can feel his commitment to making sure that this was transmitted 100% accurately and see the *hiddur mitzvah* he was intent on incorporating.”

The Jewish people’s dedication to passing down our heritage is also seen in the importance placed on taking their *sefarim* with them even when they were expelled. Last month, a set of *Chumashim* from the Sassoon Collection was sold at auction. The set was written in Ye-

The earliest extant complete Ashkenazi siddur with Haggadah, printed in 1519 by Daniel Bomberg. It was sold by Sotheby’s for \$312,500.



beit kneset of Sana’a (the capital of Yemen) was destroyed and Israel was sent into exile.”

The scribe’s note references a little-known chapter of Yemenite Jewish history. In 1679, the Jewish community of Sana’a was expelled and forced to relocate to Mawza, a barren wasteland in southern Yemen. The harsh conditions led to many deaths, but a year later the community was invited to return to Sana’a. When they got back, they had to rebuild their lives from scratch.

“It’s such a powerful moment,” Shaul reflects. “You can see their dedication even in the middle of upheaval. They were running for their lives yet still creating these sacred texts for future generations. It’s a reminder of why we are truly *Am Hasefer*, the People of the Book.” ●