The
BOMBERG TALMUD

DANIEL BOMBERG IS RESPONSIBLE FOR PRINTING THE FIRST COMPLETE EDITION OF THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD (1519/20-1523), UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZED NOT SIMPLY AS ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BOOKS IN THE HISTORY OF HEBREW PRINTING, BUT AS ONE OF THE GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD.

A native of Antwerp, Bomberg established his own printing shop in Venice in 1516. The first Christian printer of Hebraica, Bomberg produced a corpus of nearly two hundred basic texts of Judaism, many of which had never before been printed. Like the other great scholar-printers of the sixteenth-century, notably the family Estienne, Bomberg became known for texts that were scrupulously accurate and beautifully produced. To ensure precision, Bomberg hired Jewish typesetters and proofreaders. He also went to great expense in casting several sizes of Hebrew type, and Bomberg's fonts were so esteemed that they continued to be used by other printers (typically identified as "Bomberg type") long after his own printing career ceased in 1549. Indeed, it is principally due to the enduring legacy of Daniel Bomberg that Venice remained the center of Hebrew printing until well into the eighteenth century.

While the Hebrew Bible is undoubtedly the foundation upon which Judaism is built, it is the Talmud that serves as the framework that has given form to Jewish life and ritual observance across the centuries.

While the books of the Hebrew Bible are referred to as the "Written Law," signifying their fixed position within the canon, the Talmud is an integral part of the "Oral Law," a body of knowledge whose basic tenets are believed to have been transmitted to Moses at Sinai as a necessary and complementary corollary to the "Written Law" of the Hebrew Bible.

Compiled by Jewish scholars in the fifth century CE, the Talmud was transmitted orally, with written manuscripts first appearing during the Middle Ages. The dissemination of these manuscripts continued until the rise of printing in the fifteenth century. Beginning with the Soncino press in 1483, Hebrew printers interwove the ancient ra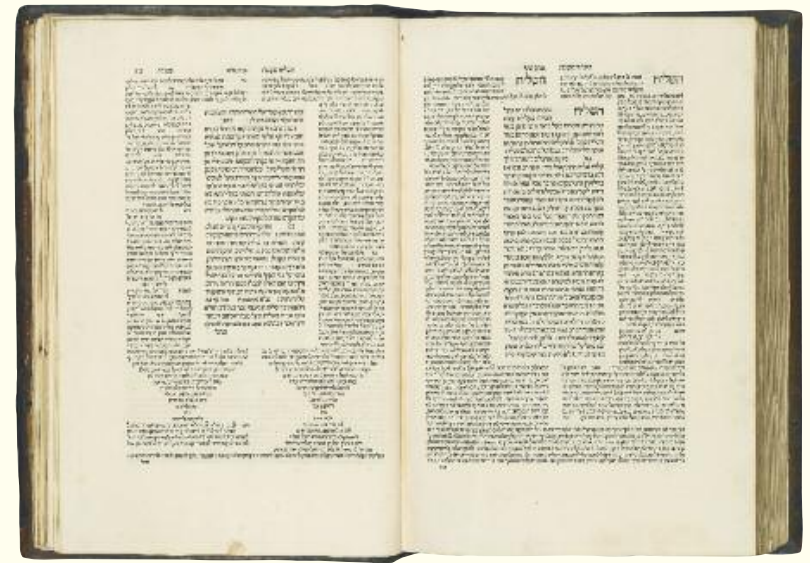bbinic texts with the words of later commentators, and the Talmud page began to take on the complex, layered format that is now familiar to modern readers.

A few individual tractates of the Talmud had been printed previously, but Bomberg was the first printer to take on the daunting task of issuing all sixty-three

standard tractates. The format of Bomberg's first complete edition of the Talmud remains the model for all subsequent editions to the present day. Bomberg's pagination is still followed, as is his arrangement of the commentary: that of the eleventh-century French scholar Solomon ben Isaac (also known by his acronym, Rashi) appearing in the inner margin, and the collected and distilled discussion of Rashi's students, the *Tosafot*, in the outer margins. Bomberg also printed, 1523–1524, the first complete Jerusalem Talmud, two copies of which are in the Valmadonna library. Both the Babylonian and Jerusalem editions of the Talmud were undertaken with the approbation of the Venetian Senate and Pope Leo X.

In 1956, the Custodian of the Valmadonna Trust attended an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum celebrating 300 years of Jewish resettlement in England. There, he first became aware of Westminster Abbey's magnificent complete copy of the Talmud and spent close to 25 years courting the Westminster Abbey in an attempt to acquire it. Eventually, he purchased a 900-year old copy of the Abbey's original Charter and presented it, along with supporting endowments, to the Abbey in exchange for its copy of the Bomberg Talmud.

The amazingly fresh condition of the nine-volume Valmadonna Talmud is complemented by its distinguished provenance and magnificent contemporary binding. The Valmadonna copy is bound in blind-panelled calf incorporating the central cipher of Richard Bruarne, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford from 1546 to 1556. After Bruarne's death, the Talmud eventually passed to Westminster Abbey, in whose library it resided practically undisturbed for four centuries. In terms of importance, rarity, and condition, the Valmadonna copy of Daniel Bomberg's Babylonian Talmud is virtually without peer. If the first half of the sixteenth century is the "Golden Age" of Hebrew printing, then the Bomberg Talmud is undoubtedly the pinnacle achievement of the period.