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## The 12 Covenants of Pinchas Hurwitz: How an 18th-Century Eastern European Kabbalist Jew Produced One of the First Hebrew Bestsellers

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## The 12 Covenants of Pinchas Hurwitz: How an 18th-Century Eastern European Kabbalist Jew Produced One of the First Hebrew Bestsellers

### Abstract

*The Book of the Covenant* (Sefer ha-Brit) was one of the most popular Hebrew books read by modern Jews, as reflected in 40 editions spanning two centuries, including three Yiddish and six Latino translations. Part scientific encyclopedia, part manual of mystical ascent, and part plea to Jews to embrace a universal ethics, the work was widely influential in an era of radical change and internal debate for Jews as well as for others. The amazing popularity of the author, the Eastern European Jew Pinchas Hurwitz (1765-1821), stemmed from his kabbalistic pedigree. He offered his readers an exciting compendium of scientific knowledge they could read in their holy language under the pretext that its acquisition fulfilled their highest spiritual goals.

### Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion | Yiddish Language and Literature

## The 12 Covenants of Pinchas Hurwitz

How an 18th-century Eastern European kabbalist Jew produced one of the first Hebrew bestsellers

By [David B. Ruderman](#) | October 13, 2016 12:00 AM

*The Book of the Covenant* (Sefer ha-Brit) was one of the most popular Hebrew books read by modern Jews, as reflected in 40 editions spanning two centuries, including three Yiddish and six Ladino translations. Part scientific encyclopedia, part manual of mystical ascent, and part plea to Jews to embrace a universal ethics, the work was widely influential in an era of radical change and internal debate for Jews as well as for others. The amazing popularity of the author, the Eastern European Jew Pinchas Hurwitz (1765–1821), stemmed from his kabbalistic pedigree. He offered his readers an exciting compendium of scientific knowledge they could read in their holy language under the pretext that its acquisition fulfilled their highest spiritual goals.

The book was also successful because of the marketing skills of its author. Hurwitz worked on it assiduously for many years, at one point temporarily losing his eyesight, so he claimed, because of his intense reading. When he finally published his large tome, he invested considerable energy in familiarizing himself with the technology of print as well as the intricacies of the market in Hebrew books. In this brief essay, I would like to focus especially on these two aspects of Hurwitz's project: his unique instructions to the printers and readers of his publication and his remarkable salesmanship.

Hurwitz first published his book in Brno, 1797, at the printing house of Joseph Karl Neumanns and Joseph Rossmann. Because of a vow he made to himself in trying to recover from illness, he chose not to fully disclose his identity as the author, although there are several hints in the text to reveal his name to the discerning reader. Why Hurwitz published the book in Brno, a seedbed for heretical groups, especially the Frankists, is not known; nor is the identity of the two publishers. The work was published in two parts: the first primarily but not exclusively focuses on natural philosophy while the second deals with spiritual and moral issues. More confusing are two pages enthusiastically approving the work published in German and Yiddish by the well-known Prague censor Karl Fischer, dated 21 January 1799. Were these pages appended and then printed after the book had circulated for almost two years without the permission of a censor? Seven *haskamot* (approbations) of rabbis from Eastern Europe and the Low Countries that Hurwitz had solicited follow.

Karl Fischer maintained cordial and professional relations with the rabbis of Prague and was well known as a promoter of the Hebrew book in his city. His role in the dissemination of Jewish culture in Prague stemmed from a deep commitment to humanity as a whole. In this vein, he wrote a Hebrew letter to Rabbi Elazar Fleckeles, one of Prague's major rabbis, in 1812: "I said: 'Anyone who speaks the truth likes justice and follows the path of the sincere, whether he be Jew, Christian, Greek, or Muslim, is eminent and worthy of love [*hu hashuv ve-ra'ui le-ahavah*].'" He undoubtedly appreciated Hurwitz's similar sentiments, articulated in a long section of his work.

It is unclear how Hurwitz went about securing Fischer's glowing endorsement. Whether he actually met him before the publication of the book is unknown, but less than two months after Fischer had written his approbation, Hurwitz addressed a letter to him, on 4 March 1799. The letter is fascinating for several reasons but most significantly because it was penned in German, a language Hurwitz had claimed he had never learned so that he had been obliged to work with a translator in gathering materials for his book. The letter found in the Karl Fischer archives in Prague may have been a German translation of a Hebrew original (Fischer both read and wrote in Hebrew), or alternatively, it could have been translated into German on behalf of Hurwitz by an associate. There also remains the possibility that Hurwitz wrote in German in the first place.

Hurwitz opens the letter by thanking Fischer for his recent authorization of the publication of *Sefer ha-Brit* and promising him a personal copy of the book to be delivered to him by his associate, a Polish Jew. He mentions that he previously spoke to him in person, indicating that he had visited Prague. He writes now from Brno, explaining that he crossed the border into Moravia, leaving five copies of his book with a good friend from Fuerth to be sold on commission. The friend sold the lot in Pilsen (90 kilometers west of Prague) and in Prague for a relatively cheap price. Hurwitz had learned from his agent in Prague that all copies had been sold there, and he needed to ask his publisher in Brno to print more copies. He asks Fischer to inquire about the availability of the book in the Prague area so that he can properly supply more books as needed. Despite the humble manner in which Hurwitz addressed Fischer, it seems rather presumptuous on his part to be asking the censor of his book to assist him in marketing it. But that appears to be what Hurwitz was requesting.

The letter reveals an actual network of agents working for Hurwitz to sell his book—a Polish Jew, a friend from Fuerth, and even potentially the vaunted Hebrew censor of Prague! This is substantiated even further by a notice at the end of the first edition of the book, printed on the very last page:

This book is made available for purchase in the city of Brno through R. Asher Garkach[?]; in Vienna through the noble R. David Leib Fered; in Pressburg through R. Beer Oppenheim; in Oven through the head of the rabbinical court; in Cracow through the author; in Prague through the noble R. Zelig Meliz; in Breslavia through the sons of the late R. Michael Mas; in Lemberg, through R. Nahman Reise; in Lublin through R. Fischel and R. Ziskindish; and in Nicolsburg through the noble rabbi Beer Herzilish.

Most of the names of Hurwitz's agents are unknown to me, but Hurwitz mentions Nahman Reise and Beer Oppenheim in the introductions of his work as friends and material supporters of him and his project. The others were obviously close associates as well, some rabbis, and all willing to facilitate the selling of the book. At the time, Hurwitz indicates that he is in Cracow and can handle the sales of his book in this city. This would indicate his whereabouts around and after 1797; he perhaps had taken up residence in Cracow and left only when marketing his book. Taken together with the letter to Karl Fischer, this paragraph gives the impression that from the very beginning, Hurwitz did everything in his power to sell his book and worked with a wide range of agents from Prague to Cracow and Lublin, from Brno to Nicolsburg and Breslavia.

To this evidence, we might add the interesting remark presented in a lengthy review of *Sefer ha-Brit* in the Hebrew journal *Ha-Me'asef*, published in 1809 but written much earlier, soon after the first edition of the book appeared. The reviewer first describes Hurwitz as someone he has met and then adds that "this man ... traveled for the last 10 years by way of our city and other cities in Germany and in other countries selling the fruit of his vision [his book]." If the review was written soon after 1797, then this might refer to

Hurwitz's wanderings long before the book was actually published. The reviewer then adds in a footnote a less complimentary observation:

For this our heart grieves, over the abasement of the sages and writers of our faith because of our many sins. For the wealthy donors who also love and buy new books do not request them from booksellers but seek them directly from the authors themselves so that the latter go begging from door to door like peddlers bringing the first fruits of their thoughts to everyone's house. Subsequently, the number of book dealers has decreased and the dishonor of the Torah and learning has increased. It is also an embarrassment for us in the eyes of other nations who very much honor their own scholars.

Was the reviewer referring to Hurwitz himself, his intimate contacts with the rich and powerful, and the way he had aggressively marketed his book?

Hurwitz's amazing success, despite the sniping comment of this reviewer, was for the author a source of enormous pride: He had not only written a good book, so he understood—he had learned how to conquer the market! Thus he wrote in a tone of enormous satisfaction at the opening of his second introduction to the newly revised version of his book, first published in 1806–7 in Zolkiew:

Blessed O Lord, God of Israel, from this world until the next, who has supported my soul to compose this composition and to publish it for the first time in Brno in the state of Moravia in 1797. God allowed the beauty of the work to be seen by the eyes of all the dispersed of Judah and it quickly spread throughout the entire world and was accepted with great honor in all places. Through God's desire, it appeared as far away as Mount Paran [see Deut. 33:2; this name was often used interchangeably with Mount Sinai] in Moslem lands while its light [spread] on the wings of the Earth and the islands of the sea so that it acquired fame in all countries. I then published 2,000 copies that circulated around the world. Besides Poland, Hungary, Germany, Holland, and England, it reached as far as France, Italy, the land of Uz [see Job 1:1; an unidentifiable biblical land perhaps in southwest Jordan or southern Arabia], Damascus, and Aram [a biblical designation for the present region of central Syria], Algeria and Barbary, and Jerusalem....

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Hurwitz soon decided to republish *Sefer Ha-Brit* in a highly enlarged edition, because the first edition had already become scarce. But in the interim, he learned the shocking news that the book had already been published by Joseph Rossmann in Brno, one of his original publishers, without his permission and with the seven rabbinic approbations omitted. His response was detailed and wrathful:

You the truthful ones should judge these people and not show favor in judgment: The gentile from the city of Brno with whom I originally published my *Sefer ha-Brit* in 1797 and his two Jewish advisers who worked with him in his craft. It is obvious that the gentile can do nothing and can certainly not publish a Hebrew book without the advice of these two Jews. Since he cannot read or understand the holy language and is ill-equipped to decide on this matter, he naturally would ask them regarding [the propriety] of publishing any book. He would ask them their advice whether to publish this book or not and their advice would be heeded. These three people thus sinned in publishing the first part of the book without my knowledge soon after I had left to sell my book. I was impoverished, overcome with fear on my way while they defied all the prohibitions of the

seven supervisors of the community, the great rabbis who had written and signed their names on *Sefer ha-Brit* in the city of Brno ordering that the book not be published for a period of 15 years from the time the book had first been published. ... More than the damage they inflicted on me, they inflicted on the entire Jewish community since they stole the heart of every Jew in writing at the end: “This ends the words of the book.” When in reality they had only published half the book, that is the first part alone ... but even in this part they made omissions in several places ... and in one place I counted 15 consecutive lines that they had left out.

Hurwitz complains as well about the quality of the paper, the small print, the missing *haskamot*, and the dishonesty in claiming to produce a complete book that is incomplete. He blames not only the publisher but also the Jewish proofreader, who should have refused to allow the “gentile” to publish and sell to Jews so damaged and so illicit a book.

In the light of this bitter experience, Hurwitz pledges to produce a new edition of his book, this time with his name proudly displayed in Hebrew and in the vernacular. He warns future book publishers and readers not to consider his book worthy unless it is complete, without any page omitted. He thus turns to issuing a set of “covenants” specifically demanding how his book should be published, formatted, printed, and read. The text is a precious document in the history of Hebrew printing: It demonstrates the extent to which Hurwitz had not only acquired the business instinct to sell his book but also mastered the intricacies of publishing, proofreading, printing—that is, the basic knowledge available to one who actually spent time in printing books.

Hurwitz’s twelve covenants, which he expects his future readers and publishers to follow conscientiously, offer a remarkable glimpse into the workings of an early modern print-shop. In the absence of an actual portrait, Hurwitz impresses the reader with a mental image of the book industry of his day and what ultimately is required to produce a well-crafted book by a professional printer. He also reveals a deeper insight into what the author expected of his readers, that is, how he hoped they would read his book from cover to cover. In the end, Hurwitz was as demanding of the publisher, printer, proofreader, and reader as he was of himself.

Hurwitz begins this section by rescinding a previous ban he had declared on the printing of the book in his first edition, announcing that from 1809 and subsequently, the book may be published by anyone without restriction. This permission is offered with the proviso that any new edition will be based on the new revised version. By this, he apparently means the one recently published in Zolkiew, 1806–7, edited by Abraham Judah Meir Hapfer. He also insists that the letters be attractive and readable, that the paper be of durable quality, that the letters be large or midsize but not too small, and that the book be published in its entirety.

He then makes the following request:

The end of the first part [of the book] should be published on the same page with the beginning of the second part. The end of part one should conclude in the first column and the second part should begin on the second column of the same page so that they will be united and not separated. One part should not be separated from the other nor should the first part from either the second or the second from the first. There is no part that can stand on its own as in the case of the parts of other books. Each part of this book is not like the others since I carefully preserved the order of God’s redemption in it and it is connected from the beginning of the first part until the end of the second; every discourse is fastened to the preceding one and to the one next to it, and similarly

each chapter. And thus all the words of the second part are dependent and rest on the words of the first part and without part one, enlightened wise men will not comprehend anything. The first part is only an introduction to the second part and it alone represents a gate to the house. A person who possesses only the first part is a gatekeeper, not a house owner. So in what way is it possible to divide this book? Therefore [the two parts] will be attached together on one page and the connection will be strong so that they will be stitched together as a permanent possession in order that the people will stand in a perfect covenant.

To this unusual request he adds that the publisher should not allow an index to be published in the book. He justifies this request on two grounds: first, because the different topics in the book are scattered throughout and not concentrated in any one place. The assumption that the first part deals exclusively with human wisdom while the second with the divine is also misconstrued: “Words of Torah and fear of heaven” can also be found in the first part, while “human wisdom” is also in the second. His point is that the reader cannot read his book partially or haphazardly; it must be read from cover to cover without skipping anything. The subjects of the book are literally bound together as a unified whole that cannot be appreciated without this comprehensive examination of the entire work. While Hurwitz has a second reason for insisting on this kind of reading, he claims it is a secret and will not divulge it.

Hurwitz’s unusual request seems to belie his earlier claim, at the beginning of this same introduction to *Sefer ha-Brit*, “that all the wise men of Ashkenaz and the scholars of Berlin called this book an encyclopedia, that is, a book that gathers together all disciplines and all natural, mathematical, and divine wisdom and anything that comes to the mind of a human being that he wishes to know. ... Almost everything is to be found in this book.” But an encyclopedia, at least as one understands the term in a modern sense, implies by its very nature a casual, sporadic, or partial reading to quickly gain information on a specific topic isolated conveniently from all the rest. Clearly, this is not what Hurwitz meant by an encyclopedia. His claim that one column cannot be separated from another, that both parts of his book constitute an uninterrupted whole, and that an index would defeat the purpose of this continuous reading suggests that he did not mean to describe this modern form of encyclopedia but something entirely different.

In contrast to what the “scholars of Berlin” might have conceived in the tradition of Diderot and Voltaire and the encyclopedia project of the Enlightenment, Hurwitz had in mind a composition more reminiscent of the medieval or early modern encyclopedia, a kind of spiritual journey or ascent where the reader would be carried to a higher state of religious consciousness by the continuous reading the composition required of him. This seems to be the meaning of his words “since I carefully preserved the order of God’s redemption in it,” implying that his alleged commentary on the prophetic handbook of Hayyim Vital was also messianic at its core. By mysteriously concealing his second reason for justifying the continuous reading of his book, Hurwitz also betrays the esoteric nature of the composition and the reason behind his specific instructions on how anyone should approach the work. It should be perused neither casually nor sporadically but with only the aspiration to be illumined and transformed by it.

Hurwitz’s remaining six covenants deal with specifics of book production, known only by someone who had worked in or at least frequented the printing shop. He requests that the book be printed in quarto, but he is willing to consider octavo as well. He will not accept the printing of abbreviations in his book under any circumstances, and he even presents his demand in the form of a religious injunction: “Any member of the Jewish community who ... will remove any abbreviations that are already in this book and

will sacrifice perfect ‘burnt offerings’ by making all the words complete in the book of the covenant, will certainly know that God will pay his reward and the work of his hands will be desired.”

He is equally insistent that the final letters of words not be dropped off at the end of a line: “One is forbidden in this book to draw a meaningless horizontal line [*kav tohu*] above the word indicating that the last letter is missing as is the custom in other books.” He singles out the “*setzer* [compositor, typesetter] who attaches all the letters to the words so that all of them will be perfect. It is occasionally his custom to remove at will the last letter of the last word to make the work easier so as not to spoil the line but to align it a second time in an appropriate manner.” But Hurwitz will have none of this practice because it “destroys and soils the holy books, the divine words of eternal life, because in the heart of every Jew is the love of perfection.” The *setzer* should also make the ends of lines perfectly straight, since “it is often the custom of the typesetter who does as he pleases to fill out an empty space at the end of a line with an additional letter to straighten the line, filling the empty space with a letter that will begin the next line below it.” Playing on the Hebrew word *davek* (meaning both “to cling” and “to typeset”), Hurwitz dramatically writes:

And you who cling to the Lord your God, I swear to you if your hearts are aroused to add even one abbreviation or to leave off the last letter of a word in this book and to put in its place a line above to indicate the missing letter or to fill the empty space at the end of a line with a letter that begins the next line, please be careful with such things in this book.

Hurwitz next addresses the matter of pulling the lever to press the type on the paper, a craft called *pressen zieher*. Having witnessed the process, he laments the “pressers and pushers, most of whom are slothful and will not press with full human strength [so as to make a good, solid impression on the paper with ink equally uniform across the sheet]. Subsequently, the letters are not properly absorbed with ink on the book, especially if the paper is fit for writing called *schreibpapier*.” Thus the letters are not easily recognizable because they are filled with bright white spots. What results are what Hurwitz calls *refa'im* (literally, “ghosts”) or weak impressions on the paper. Consequently, the printer should carefully supervise his pressers, and he should order them to press hard with a strong hand so that the paper can fully absorb the letters on the wooden board of the press.

Hurwitz concludes his 12 covenants with a plea to the proofreaders to concentrate when reading their texts so as to avoid wandering thoughts and to refrain from speaking to others while performing their important work. He closes with a final admonition:

As long as I am living on this Earth, no one should make a shortened version of this book or a section of it. He should never produce a single discourse or part of it to stand alone. One who shortens it will shorten his life and one who divides it will divide his years [of life]. The most important point is that it should be proofread very well.

It would appear that by the time Hurwitz wrote these lines, which were included in the new introduction to his expanded edition of *Sefer ha-Brit*, he had returned to Cracow for the remainder of his life. In the edition of the book published in Zolkiew in 1806–7, a notice appears at the end that the book can be acquired from the author, who currently resides in Cracow. His gravestone records that he died in that city in 1821.

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There remains one more postscript to add to the details regarding the publication of *Sefer ha-Brit*. In 1889, Joseph Fischer, a well-known printer of Hebrew books, published a new edition of Emanuel Hai Riki's introduction to Lurianic kabbalah called *Mishnat Hasidim*, together with a commentary by Pinchas Hurwitz called *Ta'am Ezo*. That Hurwitz had always been interested in Lurianic kabbalah and especially its Italian commentators is evident from perusing the pages of *Sefer ha-Brit*. There Hurwitz mentioned several other books he had written, including this particular composition. Now, 68 years after his death, he was honored with another publication produced in the city in which he had spent most of his life.

Fischer announced at the opening of the book that he bought this manuscript together with another Hurwitz composition called *Mizvot Tovim* from a woman named Shifra Eichhorn. The next page contains three rabbinic *haskamot* written by David Halberstamm, Solomon Halberstamm, and Akiva Karnitser. Karnitser appears to have been the moving force behind these approbations, along with another rabbi, Abraham Linzig, who prepared the manuscript for publication.

The text then offers a short introduction penned by Hurwitz himself. Here he returns to the conditions he expects any publisher to follow when printing his book. He insists on large letters in Rashi script and not small ones. He recalls that one printer printed the *Sefer ha-Brit* in small letters, with which he expresses his strong displeasure. To the reader of his second introduction to *Sefer ha-Brit*, his insistence that the book be published on good paper with no abbreviations is quite familiar. In addition, he requests that his commentary appear alongside the Riki text and that there be published a list of errors at the end of the book. He concludes with his justification for writing a commentary on Riki's work in a statement reminiscent of his earlier justification for *Sefer ha-Brit* as a mere commentary to Hayyim Vital's *Sha'arei Kedushah*. Given the enormous interest in Luria in the author's day, and the importance of Riki's work as a summary of this kabbalist's approach, there is a need, he argues, for a simple commentary to unpack this dense work and to make it accessible to a larger audience. But unlike Hurwitz's more popular work, which simply used Vital's work as a pretext for exploring the natural world and more, this later work does not stray far from explicating Riki's handbook. It is exclusively a kabbalistic commentary, no more.

In a manner Hurwitz might have praised had he been alive, Fischer closes this section with his sense of satisfaction that he has succeeded in publishing a useful work for beginners that the author had so wanted to see in print. He turns to the potential readers of the book, especially in Cracow, where Hurwitz had lived, asking them to purchase the book, to allow the publisher to recover his initial investment and then to be in a position to publish the other Hurwitz manuscript in his possession. Unfortunately, Fischer's hopes were not realized; this was the only time another book of Hurwitz would be published. Despite the continual editions and sales of *Sefer ha-Brit*, no other book by Hurwitz could command a large reading audience. In the end, his fame rested solely and exclusively on the uniquely constructed encyclopedia that he called The Book of the Covenant.

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*Adapted from* On the Production and Dissemination of a Hebrew Best Seller: Pinchas Hurwitz and His Mystical-Scientific Encyclopedia, *Sefer Ha-Brit*, a *festschrift* in honor of Prof. Anthony Grafton, with permission from the author.

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