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## Behind the Best Sellers: A Scholar Revisits an 18th-Century Popular Tone—Reprinted for Centuries—That Mixes Science, Kabbalah and Ethics

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## Behind the Best Sellers: A Scholar Revisits an 18th-Century Popular Tone—Reprinted for Centuries—That Mixes Science, Kabbalah and Ethics

### Abstract

"The Book of the Covenant" (Sefer ha-Brit) was one of the most popular Hebrew books read by Jews in the Modern Era, reflected in its 36 editions, including three Yiddish and two Latino translations. It was first published by a relatively unknown Eastern European Jew named Phinehas Elijah Hurwitz. in Brünn, Moravia in 1797 and then in a much expanded edition in Zolkiev, Galicia, in 1807. The work purports to be an extended commentary on a popular Jewish mystical work called "Gates of Holiness" (Sha'arei Kedushah) written by Hayyim Vital (1542-1620), the well-known mystic and prominent figure of 16th-century Lurianic kabbalah. In this accessible work, Vital presented his readership a strategy on how to become a prophet even if one lives outside the land of Israel and in present times. The book was widely read and reprinted for centuries and was especially popular in Eastern Europe among traditional Jews including in chasidic circles.

### Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Religion

## TEXT CONTEXT FEBRUARY 2011

# Behind The Best Sellers

A scholar revisits an 18th-century popular tome—reprinted for centuries—that mixes science, kabbalah and ethics.

BY DAVID RUDERMAN | February 22, 2011, 12:00 am |

**T**he Book of Covenant” (Sefer ha-Brit) was one of the most popular Hebrew books read by Jews in the Modern Era, reflected in its 36 editions, including three Yiddish and two Ladino translations. It was first published by a relatively unknown Eastern European Jew named Phinehas Elijah Hurwitz, in Brünn, Moravia in 1797 and then in a much expanded edition in Zolkiev, Galicia, in 1807. The work purports to be an extended commentary on a popular Jewish mystical work called “Gates of Holiness” (Sha’arei Kedushah) written by Hayyim Vital (1542-1620), the well-known mystic and prominent figure of 16th-century Lurianic kabbalah. In this accessible work, Vital presented his readership a strategy on how to become a prophet even if one lives outside the land of Israel and in present times. The book was widely read and reprinted for centuries and was especially popular in Eastern Europe among traditional Jews including in chasidic circles.

For Hurwitz, Vital’s modest volume offered him a pretext “to fill in the blanks,” so to speak, by presenting an exhaustive exposition on the sciences of his day — cosmology, astronomy, geography, botany, zoology and medicine. In almost two thirds of his massive tome, he offers an up-to-date accounting of the physical world, which he claims is critical in understanding Vital’s work and is a prerequisite for attaining the status of a prophet, one still available to all Jews in his own day. The rest of the volume, that is the last third of the book, focuses on more spiritual matters, on proper ethical behavior and pious meditation, all critical for Hurwitz in the preparation of one’s soul for imbibing the divine spirit.

The most remarkable discourse of the book is found in its second part. Arguing that one of the essential conditions in becoming a prophet is proper moral conduct, Hurwitz offers a highly detailed discussion of the famous Levitical injunction “To love thy neighbor as thyself” [Lev. 19:18]. Hurwitz addresses here the complex issue of what is meant by “neighbor”: Does the text refer to all human beings or only Jews? And unhesitatingly, Hurwitz insists that the commandment requires every Jew to love all human beings, not only his own co-religionists, and not merely as a political concession but as an inherent value of Judaism itself. Furthermore, only by loving one’s non-Jewish neighbor can a Jew attain the status of prophecy and this constituted, according to Hurwitz, the essential understanding of Hayyim Vital himself.

Hurwitz’s strong position, what I would call an articulation of moral cosmopolitanism, is unusual, to say the least. Jews, throughout their long history, had been sensitive to the charges of a

double moral standard applying differently to Jews and non-Jews. In the Middle Ages, several rabbis attempted to differentiate the ancient pagan “Other” in Jewish sources from the Christian and Muslim “Other,” arguing that the latter were monotheists and therefore entitled to a higher status as “the righteous of the nations.” They were motivated by a genuine appreciation of the other religions but also out of political self-interest. Jews needed to treat non-Jews respectfully and fairly because their own welfare as a minority community depended on it. In the Enlightenment period, several Jewish thinkers, such as Moses Mendelssohn, went even further, arguing for a toleration of the non-Jew because of a common rational agenda shared by all enlightened human beings. But Hurwitz’s position is more radical than all his contemporaries. Loving the non-Jew is the most Jewish thing one can do! And if one’s ultimate goal is the felicity of prophetic insight, it can only be achieved by this universal love of humankind.

It is this complex mixture of science, kabbalistic piety and universal ethics that mark the special quality of this work and underscore its uniqueness in an era of cultural debate and polarization that characterized the Enlightenment for Jews as well as others. Hurwitz’s amazing popularity as an author 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. He lashed out at radical philosophers such as Spinoza and Voltaire and their Jewish counterparts and argued for a full embrace of the Jewish mystical tradition.

But Hurwitz was hardly a mere traditionalist. He read philosophy as well as science; he embraced Immanuel Kant’s critique of pure reason and used it paradoxically to elevate the status of kabbalistic metaphysics in Judaism; and most of all he insisted on a radical rethinking of how Jews and non-Jews should relate to one another. Hurwitz’s positions defy the facile classifications of historians who wish to characterize modern Jewish thought as a rational break from a religious, mystical past. Hurwitz presents a different strategy of modernization under the guise of a pious science, legitimating and embracing a new natural and moral world under the aegis of traditional values and beliefs.

Despite the density of his long book and despite his relative obscurity as a Jewish scholar, Hurwitz became a best-selling author for almost two centuries. He became especially popular in Eastern Europe, but Jews in the Ottoman Empire and in Western Europe were also familiar with his pious encyclopedia.

How did this unknown writer capture the hearts and minds of his readers? What did they find especially appealing about his book? Did they notice and were they affected by his clarion call for loving Christians and other non-Jews? Did they really enjoy his depictions of recent scientific discovery, which soon became outdated as the book was reproduced many times without emendations? Did they actually take seriously his detailed instructions on becoming prophets? The reception of *The Book of the Covenant* among modern Jewish readers might allow us to understand more profoundly the ways in which a traditional society absorbed and creatively adopted aspects of modern science and cosmopolitanism. From the vantage point of Jewish culture, the book and its author open a wonderful window in studying the complex interplay of tradition, science and inter-group relations in the Modern Era.

*David B. Ruderman, the Joseph Meyerhof Professor of Modern Jewish History and the Ella Darivoff Director of the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, is the author of many books, most recently “Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History” (Princeton). He is presently the German Transatlantic Program Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, working on the text and context of “The Book of the Covenant.”*

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