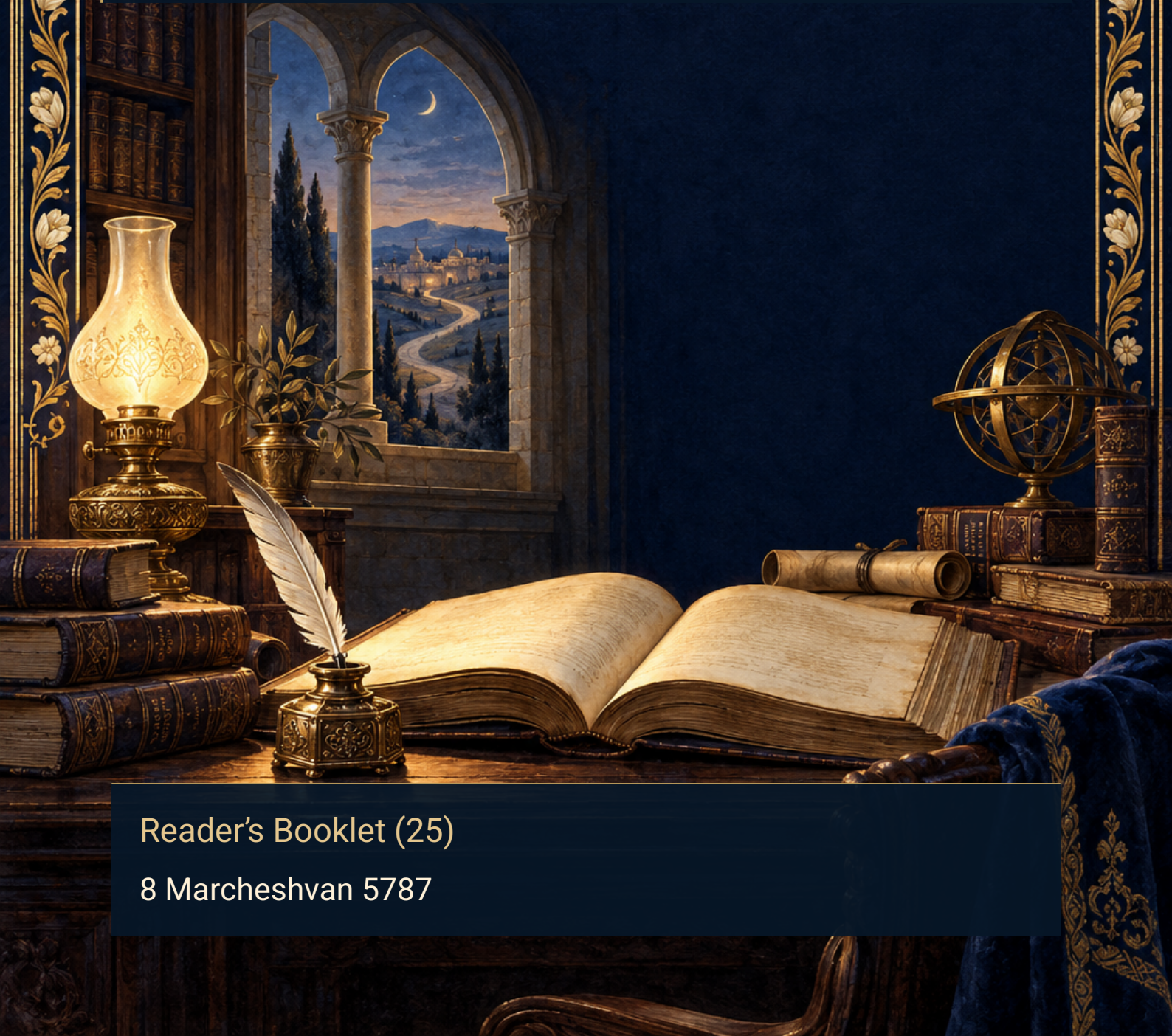


YeshivahAl Beis Midrash

“Katol” at the Petersburg Assembly

The Story, Its Difficulties,
and What Was Established



Reader's Booklet (25)

8 Marcheshvan 5787

The Story We Begin With

What happens when a familiar miracle story raises difficult questions about the very details on which its solution depends? The account of the Tzemach Tzedek and Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin, concerning "טוב שבגויים הרוג", is such a case.

Here is the version supplied in the description of the lecture, edited into a continuous account. The recording itself was not available to us; book titles and printing details not clearly identified are not supplied by conjecture.

At the rabbinical assembly in Petersburg in 5603–1843, the Tzemach Tzedek and Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin faced opponents of traditional Jewish education. The opponents presented "טוב שבגויים הרוג"—"Kill the best of the gentiles"—and asked how it could be justified. The Tzemach Tzedek turned to Rabbi Yitzchak, son of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, and suggested that he answer.

Rabbi Yitzchak replied that the original wording had not been "טוב שבגויים קטול" but "קטול הרוג". "קטול" was supposed to denote Catholics. The sentence therefore did not command killing, but said that Catholics were the best of the gentiles. A copyist who did not understand the designation read it as an Aramaic imperative meaning "kill" and replaced it with the Hebrew "הרוג". A statement of praise thus became a threatening formulation.

To check the answer, an old book was brought from the imperial library and apparently contained the confirming reading. The narrator also attributed the answer's appearance in Rabbi Yitzchak's mind to the Tzemach Tzedek: beyond

directing who should answer, he miraculously imparted the idea itself.

When the same copy was consulted again later, it once more read הרוג. The miracle thus includes a change in the text seen in the book, beyond finding an unusual copy or receiving an idea.

The Tzemach Tzedek's role in the story needs explanation. In one transmission, Rabbi Yitzchak explains that the Tzemach Tzedek imparted the answer but did not say it himself, to avoid "מגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה", interpreting Torah contrary to its proper meaning. Another transmission describes his avoidance of praising idolatry. On this explanation, "Catholic" is not the rabbinic saying's true interpretation, but a defensive reply meant to calm the accusers. We must still ask why something he did not wish to say himself should be said through another rabbi. These are reasons found in different versions, not one detail shared by all.

This is the story to be examined, not a fact the booklet assumes has already been proved. The difficulty is not whether a miracle is possible, but what was transmitted, in which source, and how the solution fits the texts and historical framework. Those questions can and should be discussed.

This booklet gives the argument briefly, with the distinctions needed to understand it. The companion Research Booklet provides source texts, images, full references, and detailed discussion of alternatives.

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1. Why Investigate a Puzzling Story?

The story sounds strange: a word meaning killing becomes a Christian denomination's name, one copyist is supposed to corrupt an entire transmission, and an unidentified book confirms the answer at just the right moment. There is no point pretending these questions are easy. Had it been an anonymous story without an identifiable source, it would have been hard to grant it the standing of historical information in the first place.

The reason to examine it seriously is its connection with Chassidic traditions and important names. Rabbi Shmuel Levitin is mentioned in sources that were read; there are also references to books by Rabbi Yehudah Chitrik and Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Perlov. A respected name, however, does not establish every detail. We must know what that person transmitted, what he heard from others, and what was added later.

This approach reflects the accountability associated with Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine, who studied stories' transformations and compared their details with checkable sources. We have no verdict of his on Katol here. The test itself is clear: do not

silence a question out of respect for the narrator, or call a story fiction before checking it. Research Booklet, p. 6

We therefore separate five questions: the story's source; how its versions change; what the rabbinic texts read; what is known about the assembly; and what קטול could mean.

Answering one does not settle the others. The assembly's existence, for example, does not verify every story attached to it.

2. What Do the Sources Report?

The earliest narrative source actually read is the Okunov teshurah of 5769, p. 44, entry 121. It publishes Avraham Weingarten's notes, dated by the editors' introduction to Kislev–Tevet 5706. The entry is transmitted in Rabbi Shmuel Levitin's name. There are therefore three different dates: the event is assigned to 1843; the notes to 5706; and the printing read to 5769. The notes' manuscript was not examined.

In the main entry, the Tzemach Tzedek indeed directs Rabbi Yitzchak to answer, and the Katol reply comes to his mind. Yet the government is said not to have accepted it, and even that is qualified recollection. An old book appears later in another question, concerning Yosef and his brothers; in the main entry it is not attached to proving קטול. Separate note 58 gives Shalom Chaskind's recollection that perhaps a midrash was brought reading קתול, with a tav. The note and main entry must not be turned into one continuous narrative.

Another version, printed in Didan Netzach—Thirty Years, 5777, p. 16, describes a book brought which confirmed the answer. Other printings were then searched without finding קטול. That still does not say the letters changed in the same book: failing to find a reading in other copies and rechecking the same copy are two different claims.

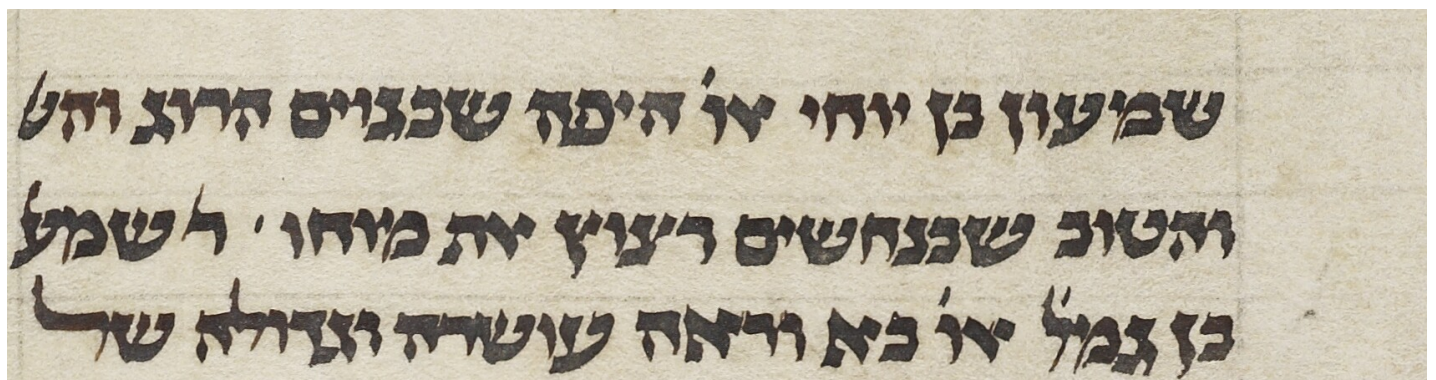
The work's name also differs: Mekhilta, midrash, Gemara, or Tractate Soferim. Some names might reflect how books were bound or the narrators' usage. That does not resolve the essential difference between an answer rejected and an answer confirmed by a book. Each version must be read on its own.

What about Chitrik and Perlov? The cited passages in their books were not read here in their originals. We therefore have neither a verified page nor a full chain from them. Hidabroot's reference to Be-Chatzrot Ha-Chayim, p. 98, also belongs to the preceding Megillat Esther story, not Katol. Many names and online appearances do not necessarily mean many independent testimonies.¹

3. What Does the Saying Itself Read?

The kind of examination now changes: the stories are compared with the texts they discuss. In the Mekhilta on Beshalach, the verse about Pharaoh's chariots is expounded. The midrash asks where the animals came from after the plagues and connects them with the Egyptians who feared G-d's word and saved their livestock. Those animals were now used to pursue Israel. That is the context of the harsh saying.

Mekhilta, Oxford manuscript, fol. 93v: detail of the line



The saying reads "היפה שבגויים הרוע". This manuscript predates printing.

1. Okunov teshurah, 5769, p. 44, entry 121 and note 58; Didan Netzach—Thirty Years, 5777, p. 16. Comparison of versions and unverified references: Research Booklet, Chapters 2–4. Research Booklet, p. 8.

Two Mekhilta manuscripts, Oxford from 1291 and Munich from 1433, were read as הרוג. Both have "היפה שבגויים הרוג". The Venice printing of 1545 reads "טוב שבגויים הרוג". There is a real difference between היפה and טוב, but the word relevant to the story's solution is הרוג in all three. This is not merely a modern printed tradition.

This weighs heavily against a printer-error explanation. If הרוג is documented before printing, it cannot all have originated in a later printing worker's mistake. An earlier copyist's corruption could be proposed, but when and where it occurred must then be shown, with a basis for the earlier reading. The story does not supply this.

No documented variant to קטול at this passage was found in the critical editions examined. A critical edition compares texts and records differences among the sources it used. This strengthens the examination, but is not a survey of every manuscript in the world. The precise conclusion is that קטול was not located in the witnesses examined, not that its absence from every possible copy has been proved.²

“In wartime” and “Egyptians”: two different explanations

The saying also has an explanation independent of Catholics: it concerns wartime. This qualification occurs in the transmission of Tractate Soferim, and Tosafot on Avodah Zarah 26b brings it as an explanation attributed to the Yerushalmi. It therefore predates the Petersburg assembly and was not an answer invented there.

Precision matters here too. The main text of the Leiden Yerushalmi manuscript has no wartime qualification. It

2. Mekhilta: Oxford Marshall Or. 24, fol. 93v; Munich Cod. hebr. 117, fol. 29v; Venice 5305, fol. 11a. Images, library descriptions, and editions are discussed in Research Chapter 5. Research Booklet, p. 18.

appears in a marginal annotation expressly referring to Tractate Soferim. The main wording, a marginal addition, and an interpretation quoted by medieval commentators are not one thing. Müller also prints a difficult sequence containing אסורים; this must not be deleted to obtain a convenient sentence.

The Rashi transcription examined, Exodus 14:7, reads כָּשָׁר "שבמצרים הרוג", referring to Egyptians. "Egyptians" restricts the group; "in wartime" restricts the situation. Both can contextualize the saying, but they must not be confused, and neither is evidence for קטול meaning Catholic.³

4. What Do the Word and Book Establish?

קטול can be read as an Aramaic imperative to kill. This is an ordinary meaning of קטל, supported by the dictionaries examined. Someone reading it that way is not necessarily making a strange mistake. Jastrow also has a similar noun meaning a killer or murderer; an unpointed word requires context.

The Christian term "Catholic" is ancient, so the story should not be dismissed on the ground that the name itself was recently invented. The narrower and harder question is whether this particular spelling, קטול, designated a Catholic in the appropriate period. Such usage was not verified here. Rabbinic קתוליקוס, explained as an official, is not automatic evidence for the church's name either. Sound resemblance and a pun are not historical reconstruction of a text.

What if an old book with קטול were found? We would have that reading in that copy. We would still need to establish whether it

3. Tractate Soferim, Higger, pp. 281–282; Müller, Hebrew section p. XXVIII and commentary pp. 211–212; Leiden Yerushalmi, fol. 173v. Texts and marginal annotation: Research Chapter 5. Research Booklet, p. 22.

was original or corrupt, what it meant, and why it should be preferred to manuscripts and parallels. A single witness sometimes preserves a correct reading; its uniqueness alone does not justify preferring it. The story's book has not been identified by title, printing, and shelfmark at all.

Adding a miracle changes the claim. If letters appeared miraculously for a time and later reverted to הרוג, this is no longer ordinary evidence of how the original text was written. It is a tradition about what appeared at that moment, requiring observers' testimony and documentation of the rechecking. This detail was not found in a verified written source. Failure to find קטול in other books cannot be turned into evidence that the text changed in the same book.⁴

Another possibility is that the book did not change, but observers were influenced to read קטול although הרוג was written. Suggestion and hypnosis—effects on perception—are related terms for the analogy. On this hypothesis, no copy with קטול should be expected later, so its absence does not refute it. But neither is this evidence that it happened: no explicit statement of this mechanism was found in the transmissions read. The explanation replaces an early textual witness with a new hypothesis about the observers' experience, needing its own testimony. The research distinguishes the general possibility from its strained application to this particular account.

Praising another religion raises a halachic difficulty too

The difficulty is more than linguistic. Rambam connects the prohibition of praising idolaters with "לא תהנם", lo techonnem, and classifies Christians as idolaters. Saying that a Catholic is

4. Lexical examination: Research Chapter 6; the single-copy test and the distinction between early wording and miraculous appearance: Chapter 8. Research Booklet, p. 24.

the best of the gentiles because of his religion is therefore a serious claim even when told as a jest; its usefulness within a story does not make it a plausible interpretation. This helps explain the attributed reason why the Tzemach Tzedek would not say it. Yet intention and circumstances of coercion or rescue require examination; this is no ruling on every compliment or on an undocumented event. The research details the sources and limits of the argument.⁵

5. What Is Known about the Assembly?

The assembly of 5603 and the participation of the Tzemach Tzedek and Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin are supported by the sources read. The Research Booklet details the reading of Beit Rebbe, the Rebbe Rayatz's notes on the Tzemach Tzedek and the Haskalah movement, and the biography and memoir passages concerning Max Lilienthal. The Katol exchange was not found in those passages.

Its absence alone does not prove it never occurred: Beit Rebbe expressly says the questions' contents were not fully known to its author. But the same sources do not confirm the scene either. A historical framework can be verified while a particular incident remains unverified.

One later version identifies the scholar who heard the account as Rabbi Avraham Abele, who died in 1836. That identification does not fit a report after the assembly of 1843. It is a real failure in the added identification; an anonymous scholar creates no such contradiction, but also supplies no complete named chain.

5. Rambam, Hilchot Avodah Zarah 9:4, 10:4; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 151:14. Praise, a defensive reply, and coercive circumstances: Research Chapter 6. Research Booklet, p. 26.

Why praise of Catholics is no obvious solution in Russia

Emperor Nicholas I was Orthodox, and the state's religion was defined accordingly in the Fundamental Laws of 1832.

Catholics and Orthodox Christians are not the same church. Just as “Muslims” does not erase the Sunni–Shiite distinction, “Christians” does not remove the gap between denominations. Praise of Catholics was therefore not a natural compliment to the officials' religious identity.

This is a difficulty, but insufficient by itself to refute the account. A listener might have been satisfied with an explanation that the saying did not command killing, without regarding it as praise of his own religion. Even so, the wording, meaning, and unidentified book remain problematic. This possibility narrows the political objection; it supplies no evidence that the incident occurred.⁶

6. What Can Be Accepted, and What Was Established?

The examination leaves more than a list of questions. It established that the story is transmitted in later print, but in differing versions; that the source read does not combine all the opening account's details; that הרוג is documented before printing; and that קטול meaning Catholic was not verified in an early witness examined. It also established that the wartime explanation predates the assembly, and searching other copies is not a subsequent change in the same copy.

The difficulties reach the solution's core. The simple printer-error version does not fit manuscripts predating printing. The

6. Beit Rebbe, 5662, part 3, chapter 3, fols. 113a–117b; the Research Booklet details the other passages read. Orthodox framework: Russian Fundamental Laws, 1832, vol. 1, part 1, §§40–42; see also Research Chapter 6. Research Booklet, p. 28.

scholar's later identification fails chronologically. The decisive book has not been identified, and the letters' reversion remains without a verified written source. The full account should not be presented as established historical fact or as rabbinic wording already confirmed.

The investigation nevertheless does not prove that every possible core of the account was invented or accuse a particular transmitter of deliberate falsehood. A more precise tradition might be found in Chitrik, Perlov, or another missing source. That requires the page itself, not another repetition of its name.

This is the place for "אם קבלה היא — נקבל" — "If it is a received tradition, we accept it." Someone accepting a tradition out of trust in its transmitters should know that this is acceptance of a tradition, rather than a conclusion already proved by research. Respect for narrators also requires precision about their words, distinguishing versions and not attributing additions absent from their accounts. That allows respect for tradition and serious criticism to coexist.

What could change the picture? Identified pages from the narrative collections, a genuine early קטול witness with appropriate linguistic evidence, a document close to the assembly, or documentation of that book and its rechecking. Until then, a tradition worthy of investigation remains, with substantial difficulties preventing its complete details being presented as verified.⁷

7. Tests of refutation, counterarguments in the story's favor, and limits of the conclusion: Research Chapter 8. Research Booklet, p. 30.

Map of Conclusions

Question	Result
Did the assembly take place?	Yes, according to the sources read; the particular scene is not verified in them.
Is there a source for the story?	There are conflicting printed traditions; references to Chitrik and Perlov remain unchecked in the books.
What do the textual witnesses read?	הרוג, including manuscripts before printing. קטול was not located in this examination.
Does קטול mean Catholic?	So the pun is told; early usage was not verified.
What of wartime and Egyptians?	Different restrictions documented in the sources' transmission; neither proves a reference to Catholics.
Did the same copy change?	So the opening version reports; no corroborating written source was found.
What can be said now?	The complete story encounters serious difficulties and is not established as verified fact.
Must the letters themselves have changed?	An effect on perception can be proposed; the sources read do not explicitly attest it.

For Further Study in the Sources

Selected sources for direct study. Full references, images of witnesses, and reading limitations appear in the Research Booklet.

- 1. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, Massekhta de-Vayehi, parashah 1;** Horovitz–Rabin, p. 89. Examine the animals' context and the transition to the saying.
- 2. Yerushalmi Kiddushin, end of chapter 4; Tractate Soferim 15:10;** Higger, pp. 281–282. Compare the wartime qualification's position without confusing body text and annotation.
- 3. Rashi on Exodus 14:7; Tosafot, Avodah Zarah 26b, s.v. ולא מורידין.** Two restrictions: the group and the circumstances.
- 4. Rambam, Hilchot Avodah Zarah 9:4, 10:4; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 151:14.** Why does praising another religion require examination, and why do intention and circumstances matter?
- 5. Beit Rebbe, 5662, part 3, chapter 3, fols. 113a–117b.** What did the author know about the assembly, and what did he say he did not know?
- 6. Okunov teshurah, 5769, p. 44, entry 121 and note 58.** Read the body and note separately; check which question is attached to the old book.
- 7. Didan Netzach—Thirty Years, 5777, p. 16.** Compare a confirming book with a search that failed to find a reading in other printings.
- 8. Companion Research Booklet, Katol at the Petersburg Assembly, V4.** Sources, versions, images, and the full discussion.