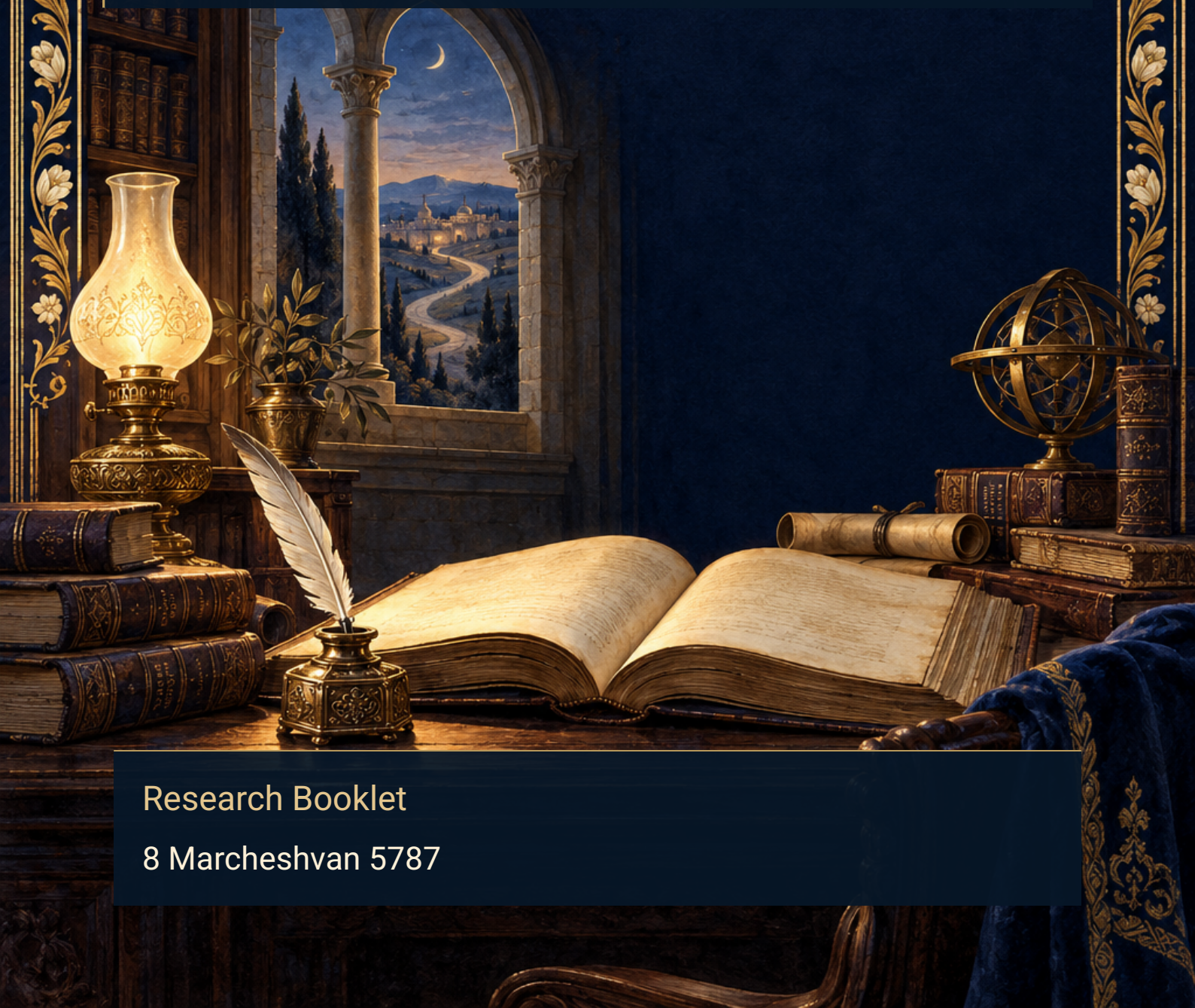


YeshivaAl Beis Midrash

“Katol” at the Petersburg Assembly

Versions of a Story
Rabbinic Texts, Language
and Historical Evidence



Research Booklet

8 Marcheshvan 5787

Introduction to the Research

The story about "טוב שבגויים קטול" is puzzling on a first reading. A harsh imperative suddenly becomes praise of Catholics; a copyist's mistake is supposed to explain a reading found in many sources; and an unidentified old book apparently supplies decisive confirmation. The lecture version adds a subsequent change of letters in that very copy. These accumulated difficulties call for rigorous criticism, beyond a search for ways to reconcile the story.

Had the account not been associated with respected names and collections of Chassidic traditions, it is hard to see why it would have acquired the standing of historical information in the first place. Rabbi Shmuel Levitin is indeed named in the narrative sources that were read. References to Chitrik and Perlov still require checking in their actual books. The connection with these figures warrants serious investigation. It does not establish that every detail told later came from them, or exempt the tradition from scrutiny.

Later versions also explain why the Tzemach Tzedek did not give the answer himself: to avoid interpreting Torah improperly, or praising idolatry. On their logic, this is not the saying's true interpretation, but a defensive reply to the accusers. The prohibition of *lo techonnem* and the meaning of praising another religion therefore require examination alongside the

pun. A further possibility is influence on the observers' perception without changing the letters; that changes the claim and does not produce an early textual witness.

Our guiding approach is to test whether the explanation can withstand attempts to disprove it. Does the early textual evidence fit it? Are the sources independent? Can the words bear the proposed meaning? What remains once additions without an identified source are removed? This approach is close to Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine's criticism of stories. Chapter 1 examines his actual work, without attributing to him a verdict he did not write about this account.

The investigation found conflicting printed traditions, but no corroborating documentation of the particular exchange at the assembly of 5603. הָרוּג was read in manuscripts predating printing as well; קָטוּל meaning “Catholic” was not verified in an early witness examined. These are substantial difficulties, not merely technical details. At each stage we distinguish the evidence, its interpretation, and the possibility that remains open, stating clearly what is strengthened and what is weakened.

The companion Reader's Booklet presents the lecture version and an accessible account of the argument. Here the sources, alternatives, and limits of our conclusions are developed in full.

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1. The Story and the Questions It Raises

The lecture version that prompted the investigation

The following account includes all the details supplied in the description of the lecture. It is a continuous rendering of that description, rather than a word-for-word transcript of a recording available to us. Book titles, places of printing, and dates that were reportedly unclear are not supplied by conjecture.

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

Rabbi Yitzchak replied, according to the lecture, that the original wording had not been "טוב שבגויים קטול" but "טוב שבגויים קטול" but קטול was supposed to denote Catholics. The sentence therefore did not command killing, but stated that Catholics were the best of the

gentiles. A copyist who did not understand this designation read the word as an Aramaic imperative meaning “kill,” and replaced it with the Hebrew הרוג. On the story's explanation, a statement of praise thus became a threatening formulation.

To check the answer, an old book was brought from the imperial library, and it apparently contained the reading that confirmed the reply. The work's title and printing details were reportedly unclear in the recording; they are therefore not established here. The narrator also attributed the appearance of the answer in Rabbi Yitzchak's mind to the Tzemach Tzedek: beyond directing who should answer, he miraculously imparted the idea itself.

The lecture ended with an additional detail: when that same copy was consulted again later, it once more read הרוג. In this version, then, the miracle includes a change in the text seen in the book, beyond finding an unusual copy or receiving an idea.

This is the version to be examined. We shall see that some of its details do not occur together in the printed sources that were read. Presenting it here does not attribute every detail to every transmitter of the tradition.

Two leading Torah figures stand at the center of the account: Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, the Tzemach Tzedek, and Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin, son of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. Both participated in the assembly convened by the Russian government in 5603. Education, the prayer text, and communal administration were discussed amid the struggle over the future of Jewish life. The story of an attempt to challenge them with a harsh saying attributed to the Sages is set within this historical framework.

The solution in the story depends on replacing a word. Read as הרוג, the sentence sounds like a command to kill. Read as קטול and interpreted as a designation for a Catholic, it becomes praise of a Christian denomination. According to the account, Rabbi Yitzchak

offered this explanation after the Tzemach Tzedek addressed him. The versions then diverge: some say that the government rejected the answer; others say that a book was brought which proved it.

Five separate questions

1. **The story's source:** Can we trace the lecture back to an identified book and a written chain of transmission? (Chapters 2, 4)
2. **Its versions:** Do all the narrators describe the same answer and the same book? (Chapter 3)
3. **The rabbinic text:** Is קטול actually found in an early witness to the saying? (Chapter 5)
4. **The history:** Does a document close to the assembly describe the exchange? (Chapter 7)
5. **The language:** Could the word mean “Catholic” in the relevant period and language? (Chapter 6)

These five questions are separate because each calls for a different kind of evidence. A printed story shows how an event was narrated; documentation of the assembly shows that it took place; a textual witness shows which words were transmitted in a particular work. Even if an earlier transmission of the story is found, the reading קטול and its meaning will still require examination. We consider each question on its own merits, without treating an answer to one as an automatic decision on the others.

Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine: accountability to the source

Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine was a leading Chassidic researcher and bibliographer whose studies addressed Chabad history, literature, and traditions. For our purposes, we need not rely on his reputation for debunking stories: we can read his series

Sippurim Ve-Gilguleihem, “Stories and Their Transformations,” and see how he worked. Yair Borochoy, who edited the Shturem website and worked with him for years, described his painstaking verification of the source behind every detail, and his insistence on identifying who stood behind even an apparently official figure.¹

In chapter 1 of the series, Mondshine focuses on the changes narrators introduce into a story and on “החלפת גברא בגברא”, substituting one person for another. He compares a similar incident attributed sometimes to the Tzemach Tzedek as a child and sometimes to the Rebbe as a child, checking where an attributed transmission becomes purported direct testimony. The lesson is not that every attractive story is fiction. Rather, a familiar name, a fine lesson, and an emotionally moving transmission do not dispense with identifying a source and examining the text's transformations.²

Chapter 7 illustrates a sharper difficulty: an emotional recollection of weeping while reciting haftarah verses is tested against which verses were actually read. A report of an experience cannot settle a question that can be checked against the calendar and the haftarah text. This kind of test is pertinent here too: does the explanation of a printer's mistake fit a manuscript predating printing? Is the identification of a listener possible in light of his year of death?³

It is easy to conjecture that a story burdened with so many difficulties would not have survived his criticism intact. The articles read, however, do not give us his ruling on the Katol story.

1. Yair Borochoy, “המאמר שר' יהושע לא היה מאשר לפרסם”, COL, 4 Tevet 5775, December 26, 2014. His account of their work together and of the police figures checked in “The Mystery of the Wondrous Cave” was read. This is a colleague's testimony about his method, not a discussion of the Katol story.

2. Yehoshua Mondshine, “סיפורים וגלגולים”, chapter 1, “המסתכל למעלה...”, online text in the Kramim archive; the introduction and comparison of versions were read. The archive upload date is not established here as the original publication date.

3. Mondshine, “סיפורים וגלגולים”, chapter 7, “זכרונות בדויים”, in the Kramim archive; the discussion of recollections concerning the haftarot was read. His investigation is described here; no fresh investigation of every illustrative story was conducted.

We therefore use the standard of scrutiny, rather than an imagined authority: break the account into claims, test each against the appropriate witness, and do not fill documentary gaps from belief. If the construction fails these tests, that must be stated plainly.

Why investigate the account at all?

The tradition has been presented in the names of respected Chassidic mentors and collectors of traditions. That is a reason to examine it thoroughly instead of dismissing it with a wave of the hand. Yet a fundamental distinction remains: a trustworthy person may transmit in good faith what he heard. It does not follow that he checked the old book, attended the assembly, or heard all the details in the same version. Examining the transmission may reveal that the most unusual version was not the one that person transmitted.

For this reason, the booklet does not stop at the weak formulation “there are sources on both sides.” We ask what each source establishes, whether a difficulty affects a decorative detail or the mechanism on which the answer depends, and what would have to be found to sustain it. The distinction between respect for a transmitter and the accuracy of a particular version runs through the discussion.

2. The Printed Account and Its Transmission

We begin with the source of the story: where a printed version was found, and what can be known about its transmission before publication.

The Okunov teshurah: what was actually found

The earliest narrative source actually read in this investigation is the Okunov wedding teshurah of 5769.⁴ A teshurah is a

4. Teshurah for the wedding of Dovid and Yocheved Okunov, night leading into 5 Tevet 5769; introduction to “ניצוצי אור”, pp. 31-32; the account, p. 44, entry 121 and note 58. The foreword on p. 2 identifies Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Keller as editor of the notes.

commemorative publication distributed at a celebration; here it includes collected notes and archival material. It publishes Rabbi Avraham Weingarten's notes under the title *Nitzotzei Or*, and the account appears on p. 44, entry 121. Three dates must be distinguished: 5603–1843 is the year of the assembly being narrated; Kislev–Tevet 5706 is the date of recording assigned to the notes in the editors' introduction; and 5769 is the publication year of the text we read. The printing date is not the date when the story originated, and the attributed recording date does not make the entry contemporaneous with the assembly. The manuscript was not examined: we know the claimed recording date from the introduction and the entry's wording from the publication.

The entry is transmitted in the name of Rashal, Rabbi Shmuel Levitin. In the main narrative, the Tzemach Tzedek directed the question to Rabbi Yitzchak, who at that moment thought of the answer concerning קטול and Catholics. The entry says the government did not accept the answer, adding the qualification "כך כמדומה סיפר רש"ל"—"That, I think, is how Rashal told it." This is qualified recollection, not a categorical account of the outcome.

A different question, concerning Yosef and his brothers, is discussed later. There an old book is said to have been brought to confirm an explanation. This proximity matters: in the body of entry 121, the confirming book is not attached to the Katol answer. Transferring the book from the second question to the first would create a combined version that is not printed that way in the main source.

The entry also includes Rabbi Yitzchak's belief that the idea came through the Tzemach Tzedek's power. Near this attribution is a statement by the Tzemach Tzedek that he does not want to tell a lie. These are details of the printed tradition. Their proximity does not license a new explanation of the speakers' motives, nor should they be removed to fit the account to a more familiar

version. They also provide neither a photograph of the alleged early book nor contemporaneous documentation of the answer.

The main entry and note 58: two transmissions

Note 58 gives another recollection, in the name of Shalom Chaskind: perhaps a midrash was brought in which קתול, with a tav, was written. The note expressly emphasizes the difference from the spelling with a tet in the main narrative. It is qualified and attributed to another transmitter. It should therefore be presented alongside the main entry, rather than turned into a continuous extension of its chain of transmission.

Who wrote the note's wording also remains an open question. Its words “that is how I heard it” could belong to the original recorder or to the editorial stage; without the manuscript and documentation of the editors' work there is no basis for deciding. Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Keller is identified as the publication's editor, but editing a book is not in itself a link of oral transmission.

The chain that can be described

Weingarten's notes report Rabbi Shmuel Levitin's words. Within the account, an unnamed learned Misnaged is described as having heard from Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin. The connection between that scholar and Levitin is not explicit. We therefore do not have a complete named chain reaching Rabbi Yitzchak. Nor is this the chain claimed for Chitrik's book, whose relevant passage has not yet been read.

From	To	What the source states
Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin	An unnamed Misnagdic scholar	The scholar is described as having heard from him.
The unnamed scholar	Rabbi Shmuel Levitin	The connection between them is not explicit.

From	To	What the source states
Rabbi Shmuel Levitin's words	Weingarten's notes	The entry is transmitted in his name.

This is the source's precise importance: it establishes that this version of the tradition was printed and lets us see what it says. It does not establish that every detail occurred as transmitted, or allow familiar names to be inserted into the missing links.

What changes when the source itself is read

The difference between the lecture and the main entry is not stylistic. In the lecture, a book confirms the answer; here the government does not accept it, and even the recollection of the outcome is qualified. In the lecture, the old book is central to the confirmation of קטול; in the main entry it belongs to another question. Saying that the story “appears in Levitin's name” is insufficient: we must ask which story appears and exactly what is said in his name.

One may suggest several transmissions of the same incident, or a later transmitter's combination of two discussions. That is a hypothesis to explain the discrepancy, not an established fact. The immediate critical finding is strong enough: the source read does not confirm the lecture's entire set of details. The gap cannot be closed by transferring the narrator's reputation to every version that developed around him.

3. How the Details Change

Having examined one source, we now compare it with other versions. Which details recur, and which answers, books, and outcomes are transmitted differently?

Another narrative source: Didan Netzach—Thirty Years

The account appears on p. 16 of Didan Netzach—Thirty Years, a teshurah issued by Igud Avreichim in Crown Heights in 5777.⁵ Here too the words are transmitted in Rabbi Shmuel Levitin's name. This time, however, an old Gemara is said to have been brought and to have confirmed Rabbi Yitzchak's answer. The passage ends by describing a search in other printed editions which did not find קטול. It does not describe the same copy reverting to הרוג.

The passage refers to Likkutei Sippurim, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Perlov's book, p. 104, without an edition year. The cited book was not opened, so this pagination cannot be assigned to a particular edition. Nor should the teshurah automatically be counted as an additional independent tradition: it presents itself as a collection from the Beis Moshiah archive, and the source from which this passage was copied requires investigation.

What distinguishes the online accounts

In the Hidabroot version, the work is a midrash, and the library is identified as the royal collection in Petersburg. Rabbi Yitzchak gives the answer, but the Tzemach Tzedek shows the reading in the book. The passage explains the mistake of the typesetter, a printing worker. It does not expressly describe an idea being imparted to someone's mind or a subsequent change in that same copy.⁶

David Halevi's comment on the Din website identifies the work as the Mekhilta, Beshalach, parashah 1, and adds the imparting of the thought. This comment was published on January 17, 2018.

5. "ניסים באסיפת הרבנים", Igud Avreichim—Crown Heights, 5777, p. 16, "ליקוטי סיפורים עמ' קד". The printed reference is "ליקוטי סיפורים עמ' קד", without an edition year. The publication presents itself as a selection from the Beis Moshiah archive; the date of the passage's publication in that periodical was not established.

6. Hidabroot, "מסופר שלאחר גמר האסיפה", the passage beginning "תולדות ה'צמח צדק" מליובאוויטש זצ"ל. It ends with the reference "עלם לתרופה, צו תשנ"ו, עמ' ג". That issue itself was not read.

July 2015, the date at the head of the website's question, is not the date of the comment narrating the account.⁷

Rabbi Tuvia Bolton's English publication mentions Tractate Soferim, chapter 15, within a broader description of the Talmud. The narrator describes an unusual volume found in the royal archive and attributes the appearance of the answer in Rabbi Yitzchak's mind to the Tzemach Tzedek. The opponent's name, Stephen, is expressly supplied for the telling, rather than as a historical identification. A firm publication date for the page was not established in the investigation.⁸

A defensive reply is different from a true interpretation

Didan Netzach, 5777, p. 16, attributes to Rabbi Yitzchak an explanation of the Tzemach Tzedek's silence: he imparted the answer to his mind but did not wish to say it himself, to avoid being one who "מגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה", interprets Torah contrary to its proper meaning. On this tradition's logic, this is not discovery of the Sages' genuine meaning, but a defensive reply intended to remove the accusation at that moment. The story itself denies that this is ordinary interpretive truth; the account cannot subsequently be cited as research confirmation that קטול actually means Catholic.

Bolton gives a different reason: the Tzemach Tzedek does not wish to say that any idolatry is good. The Okunov teshurah mentions his statement that he does not wish to tell a lie. The three reasons are related in their tendency, but they are not one quotation and do not occur in the same setting in every source. Both distinctions must be preserved: the reply addressed to the

7. Din website, "מה הכוונה טוב שבגויים הרוע": David Halevi's comment, January 17, 2018. It must be distinguished from the date of the question and from later comments.

8. Tuvia Bolton, "Chaye Sara: Yitzchak Got Everything," ChabadInfo. No printing details identifying the alleged volume are provided.

authorities versus what the narrator regards as true, and the differences between the transmissions themselves.

A question remains even within this explanation: if the interpretation should not be spoken, why impart it to another rabbi so that he will say it? The narrator may intend to distinguish the Tzemach Tzedek's spiritual standard from an answer needed to save the community. These sources, however, do not supply a halachic analysis resolving that distinction. Transferring the statement to Rabbi Yitzchak is a detail requiring explanation, not an automatic solution.

Three versions, detail by detail

The table compares three of the passages discussed. Presenting evidence from a book and expressly stating that the government accepted an answer are not the same datum. Each cell describes what the particular passage says, without supplying an outcome from another version.

Detail	Okunov teshurah (5769)	Didan Netzach (5777)	Hidabroot
Work mentioned	Midrash	Old Gemara	Midrash
Was a book confirming קטול brought?	Not in the main entry; a separate recollection in note 58	So the passage reports	So the passage reports
Outcome described	Government rejection is reported, with a qualification	The book brought is said to have confirmed the answer	Evidence from the book is said to have been shown
A thought imparted	Reported	Reported	Not described in this passage
The same copy reverts to הרוג	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported

The same copy's reversion to הרוג was reported in the description of the lecture that prompted the investigation. None of the three passages compared here reports it.

A story about a different substitution

An article by Avraham Goldschmid in Ha'arot U-Vi'urim discusses several versions of the account.⁹ One quotation, from Eleh Toldot Peretz, describes a substitution between עכו"ם and גויים, an abbreviation of עובדי כוכבים ומזלות, worshippers of stars and constellations. This changes the designation of the group under discussion, not הרוג to קטול. The roles also differ: the Tzemach Tzedek answers, and Rabbi Yitzchak reads from the book. The three books cited in the article were not examined in their original texts here; the source read was the article quoting them. These differences do not reveal by themselves who copied whom. Some publications may have relied on a shared transmission, and different adaptations may have occurred. Dated texts and editions are needed to establish copying relationships. For now, we can establish that the versions are not identical. Their details cannot all be combined into one account and attributed to every source.

Counting appearances cannot replace gathering evidence

Repeated online appearances can create an impression of a firm tradition supported by many witnesses. Ten adaptations of one passage, however, are not ten testimonies to an event. Even two publications naming Rabbi Shmuel Levitin do not become independent simply because their titles differ. Separate transmission routes or other evidence of independence are required.

The differences are also unequal in significance. The discrepancy between “midrash” and “Gemara” may sometimes be explained by the way books were bound or by colloquial usage. By contrast,

9. Avraham Goldschmid, “תיקונים בספר 'אוצר החסידים' ניו-יורק”, Ha'arot U-Vi'urim, issue 1088, Lag BaOmer-Shabbat Emor 5775, pp. 81-82, note 1. It quotes Otzar Ha-Chassidim New York, pp. 253-254; Eleh Toldot Peretz, p. 640; and Likkutei Sippurei Ha-Hitva'aduyot, p. 292.

the difference between an answer rejected and a book proving it changes the outcome of the story. A search that failed to find a reading in other copies and a change of letters in the same copy are entirely different claims. Essential differences must not be obscured because a peripheral detail might be reconciled.

4. Chitrik, Perlov, and the References

We now turn to references to earlier books. A citation appearing in a later publication must be distinguished from reading the page to which it points.

What we have concerning Reshimot Devarim

The National Library catalogue lists Rabbi Yehudah Chitrik's Reshimot Devarim in three volumes printed in Brooklyn in 5741–5749. A January 26, 2025 comment on Din says that the account appears in the book, with named transmitters from Rabbi Yitzchak to the author.¹⁰ The comment, however, supplies neither volume, page, entry number, nor the names themselves.

The result is therefore a reference still requiring verification. A catalogue record establishes that a book exists; it does not establish that a particular story was printed in it. Familiarity with the names of students and Chassidim of the period does not permit a chain to be assembled from them. The requested chain must be copied from the page itself, with the edition identified.

How misleading attributions arise

A reference adjacent to an account can be mistaken for its source. We must therefore check which story it belongs to. Several stories follow one another on the Hidabroot page. The reference to Rabbi Aryeh Leibush Shemerler, Be-Chatzrot Ha-Chayim, p. 98, closes the preceding account, about Megillat Esther. The Katol account is followed instead by the reference to Alim Li-Terufah. Later

10. תשמ"א-תשמ"ט, Yehudah Chitrik, Brooklyn, רשימות דברים: מה ששמעתי וראיתי מכ"ק רבותינו. The story is attributed to it in commenter "33"'s response on Din, January 26, 2025. The relevant passage in the book itself was not read.

comes a story about an elderly man from Polotsk, ending with a reference to Chitrik, vol. 1, p. 128. All three references are visible on the same webpage, but they do not belong to the same story.

A similar phenomenon was found in Ha-Tamim. A note on a different story refers to Reshimot Devarim, 5769 edition, p. 131. The note attached to the Katol story, by contrast, refers to Perlov's book. Reading the page in sequence, rather than merely searching for a book title, prevents the mistake.¹¹

This does not prove that the account appears nowhere else in Chitrik or Shemerler. The conclusion is that these references, in the places where we saw them, do not verify the attribution being sought.

Three references to Perlov are not three readings of the book

Three publications mentioned here refer to Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Perlov's book: Ha-Tamim gives p. 159 in the 5762 edition; the Didan Netzach teshurah gives p. 104 without an edition year; and a later article in Derher points to story 12 in the Tzemach Tzedek section. The references were read in the citing publications, but the corresponding passages in Perlov's book were not examined.¹²

Even if the book first appeared in 5726, its date alone cannot establish that this story was already in the first edition. It might occur at the same place, elsewhere, or in an expanded edition; without the pages we cannot decide. For the same reason, Alim Li-Terufah, Tzav 5756, p. 3, is a candidate for a narrative source earlier than 5769, but still not a source read in its original publication.

11. Ha-Tamim, issue 40, Nisan 5776, pp. 50–51: note 7 refers to Chitrik in another context; note 16 refers to Likkutei Sippurim, 5762 edition, p. 159.

12. A Chassidisher Derher, “The True Rulers,” Cheshvan 5786, pp. 18–30, note 14 on p. 30. This is a reference to the Tzemach Tzedek section, story 12, not an image of the account in the first edition.

Respect for authors and the limits of attribution

The value of Chitrik's and Perlov's books is not being denied. On the contrary: anyone wishing to rely on them must reach the attributed passage and read its wording. Until then, the two names cannot be used to present a complete chain or an early source as already found. Nor can we rule out finding the story in them. Both stronger claims require the page that is still missing.

5. The Saying in Books and Textual Witnesses

So far we have examined how the event was narrated, who transmitted it, and how its versions differ. We now turn to the saying on which the answer depends. A “textual witness” is an identified manuscript, printed edition, or quotation showing how words were transmitted at a particular place. We examine both the reading **הרוג** or **קטול** and the position of the wartime qualification: in the sentence itself, in an annotation, or in an interpretation. This distinguishes a change in the words from a change in how their scope is understood.

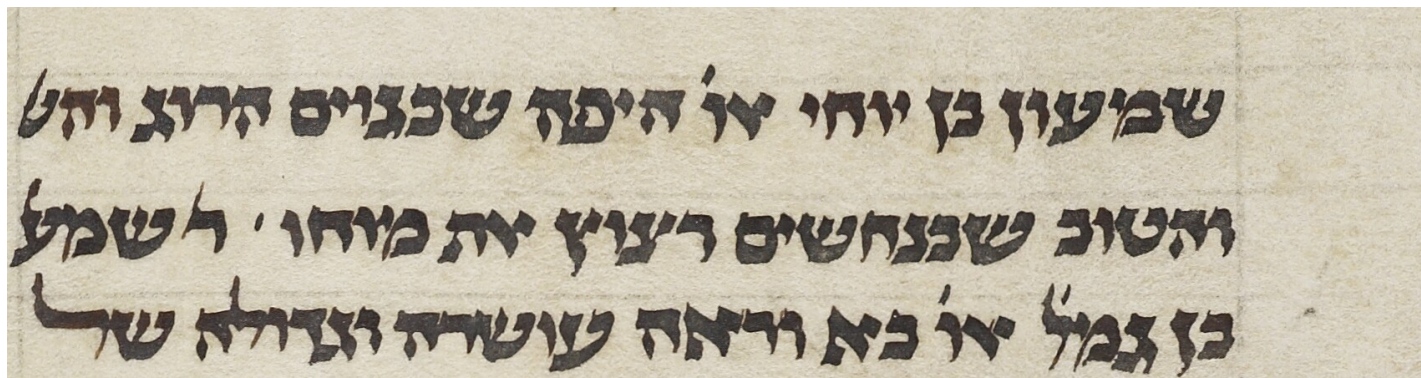
The Mekhilta: context and wording

The Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, Massekhta de-Vayehi, parashah 1, expounds the verse **”וַיִּקַּח שֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב בַּחֹר”** —“He took six hundred choice chariots.” The midrash asks where the animals for Pharaoh's chariots came from after the plagues. It connects them with the Egyptians who feared God's word and brought their livestock indoors. The animals that survived were now used to pursue Israel. The midrash describes them as a **”תקלה לישראל”**, a source of calamity for Israel, as the Venice detail below shows; Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai's saying about the best of the gentiles follows.

The word **הרוג** was read directly from images of two Mekhilta manuscripts: the Oxford manuscript, dated in its library catalogue to 1291, and the Munich manuscript, dated in its

library description to 1433. In both, the word before **היפה** שבגוים is **היפה**. This is a real variant that must be preserved: the witnesses are not identical letter for letter, yet both read **הרוג**. The words **בשעת מלחמה**, “in wartime,” do not appear within their sentence.¹³ (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Mekhilta, Oxford manuscript, fol. 93v: **היפה שבגויים הרוג**



Transcription of the saying's words: “**היפה שבגויים הרוג**”. **היפה** differs from the familiar **טוב**, “best”; **הרוג**, “kill,” is retained in the early witness.

The Venice edition of 5305–1545, fol. 11a, reads “**טוב שבגוים הרוג**”, followed by the saying about the best of snakes.¹⁴ This line has no express “in wartime” qualification. It predates the Petersburg assembly by roughly three centuries. It establishes that **הרוג** was not a reading created only after the assembly; it does not establish that every other copy and edition is identical. (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Mekhilta, Venice 5305, fol. 11a: **הרוג** in print before the assembly

**הירא את דבר יי' הם היו תקלה לישראל מכאן היה ר' שמעון
אומ' טוב שבגוי' הרוג טוב שבנחשי' רצץ את מוחו רשב' אמ'**

With abbreviations expanded: “**טוב שבגוים הרוג טוב שבנחשים רצץ את מוחו**”—“Kill the best of the gentiles; crush the head of the best of snakes.” In this printing, the named transmitter is Rabbi Shimon, without “ben Yochai.”

13. Mekhilta: Oxford, Bodleian MS. Marshall Or. 24, fol. 93v, beginning of the right column; Munich, BSB Cod. hebr. 117, fol. 29v. The images were read, and the dates checked in the libraries' descriptions.

14. Midrash Ha-Mekhilta, Venice, Daniel Bomberg press, ש"ה, fol. 11a, right column. The colophon gives Av 5305. The detail below enables the word itself to be read.

The same reading appears in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael with Me'ir Ayin, edited by Meir Ish Shalom, also known as Meir Friedmann, Vienna, Holzwarth press, 5630–1870, fol. 27a. The title page and the passage were read. The mahadir is the edition's editor; identifying him matters in distinguishing this edition from Weiss's.

What a critical edition adds

A critical edition is more than a well-arranged printing of a text. Alongside the wording chosen by its editors, it provides an apparatus: notes documenting differences between the witnesses they used. This lets us see which readings vary and which words remain shared. Reading these notes tells us what the editors report; it is not the same as directly reading every manuscript on which they relied.

The Horovitz–Rabin edition, Frankfurt, 5691–1931, p. 89, reads הרוג. Its apparatus records differences in the transmitter's name, the order of the sayings, and הטוב versus טוב; it does not record קטול in place of הרוג here. The page, key to the sigla, and afterword were read. Direct reading of the two manuscript images described above was added to this. The edition's other witnesses were not examined in images here; consulting its apparatus must not be described as personally reading them all.¹⁵

Tractate Soferim: “in wartime” and a difficult reading

In Tractate Soferim, the parallel appears within a sequence of sayings.¹⁶ Michael Higger's edition, New York, 5697–1937, chapter 15, halachah 10, pp. 281–282, reads הכשר שבגוים בשעת “מלחמה הרוג” —“Kill the most upright of the gentiles in wartime.” The variants state that in Machzor Vitry the qualification follows

15. H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Frankfurt am Main, J. Kauffmann, תרצ”א, p. 89, lines 8–10 and their variants. The afterword describes, among others, the Oxford, Munich, and Midrash Chachamim witnesses.

16. Michael Higger, Massekhet Soferim, New York, Debe Rabbanan, תרצ”ז, pp. 281–282; apparatus to line 54 on p. 282. According to the sigla key on p. 94, יב is Machzor Vitry and יג is the Gra recension. The key and apparatus were read in images; the manuscripts themselves were not read.

הרוג, while the Gra recension, Shklov 5564, omits it. Thus “in wartime” is documented in the text's transmission, but there is no justification for inserting it into every version of the saying.

Joel Müller's edition, Leipzig 1878, Hebrew section p. XXVIII, contains a more difficult sequence.¹⁷ Alongside the wartime qualification it prints אסורים. Note 27 on p. 211 attributes the sequence “בשעת מלחמה אסורים” to witness C, the Halberstam manuscript. Müller bases his main text—the wording he chose to print—on that witness, and puts another printed reading in parentheses. אסורים must not be omitted to produce a more convenient sentence.

Reading the page must be distinguished from interpreting its sentence. Müller prints אסורים and presents another reading in parentheses alongside the main text; the two should not be combined into a new, easier sentence. His commentary understands the sequence in relation to prisoners taken in war. This is his interpretation of the difficult wording, not the words “prisoners of war” written in the text itself. Even without settling every syntactic difficulty, one definite finding remains: the passage examined prints הרוג, not קטול. That finding stands while its interpretation remains debatable. (Figure 3)

Figure 3. Soferim, Müller, p. XXVIII: אסורים retained in the transcription

אבות ביישנין רוב בנים דומין לאחי אביהם⁽²⁵⁾ (האם דתני)⁽²⁶⁾ תאני
ר' שמעון בן יוחאי אומר⁽²⁷⁾ הכשר שבגויים בשעת מלחמה אסורים
(טוב שבעכו"ם בשעת מלחמה) הרוג הטוב שבנחשים רצוץ את מוחו

The central part of the line reads: “הכשר שבגויים בשעת מלחמה אסורים (טוב שבעכו"ם בשעת מלחמה) הרוג”. Müller's parentheses present a printed reading; the readings must not be combined into a newly constructed text.

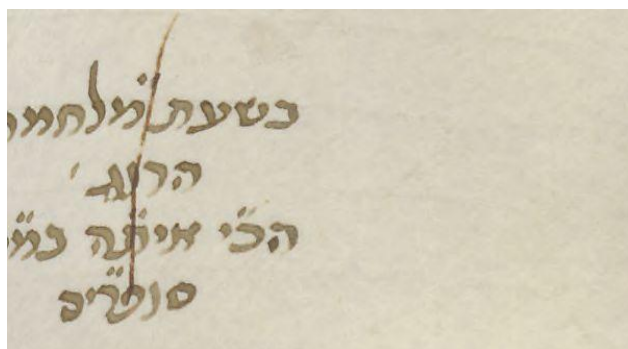
17. Joel Müller, *Masechet Soferim*, Leipzig, J. C. Hinrichs, 1878, Hebrew section p. XXVIII; commentary pp. 211–212, note 27. The introduction, pp. 33–36, especially note 97, identifies C as Halberstam, CM as Munich, and CP as Paris. The manuscripts themselves were not read here.

Yerushalmi, Tosafot, and Rashi: keep the sources distinct

Tosafot on Avodah Zarah 26b, beginning "ולא מורידין", states that the saying concerns wartime and attributes the explanation to Yerushalmi Kiddushin.¹⁸ It then connects this with the animals of Pharaoh's chariots. This explanation thus belongs to the medieval commentators' tradition; it must not be described as an answer first devised at the assembly of 1843.

The main text of the Leiden Yerushalmi manuscript reads "הכשר שבגוים הרוג".¹⁹ A marginal annotation—an addition written alongside the main text—includes בשעת מלחמה and expressly refers to Tractate Soferim. Two layers were therefore seen in examining the manuscript: the main sentence and the marginal annotation. They must not be turned into a single undifferentiated text. The detail below enlarges the annotation itself; it does not include the main sentence. The annotation's date was not established in this investigation. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Yerushalmi, Leiden manuscript, fol. 173v: enlarged marginal annotation



As described above, the manuscript's main text reads "הכשר שבגוים הרוג". This detail shows only the marginal annotation.

The photographed annotation reads "בשעת מלחמה הרוג הכי איתא במס' סופרים".

"הכי איתא במס' סופרים" means "Thus it is stated in Tractate Soferim." The annotation's date has not been established.

18. Tosafot, Avodah Zarah 26b, s.v. ולא מורידין. The transcription read quotes "כשר שבכנענים הרוג", "Kill the most upright of the Canaanites"; "Canaanites" must not be silently replaced by "gentiles."

19. Yerushalmi, Leiden MS. Or. 4720, end of Kiddushin, fol. 173v, in the spread with the tractate's conclusion on fol. 174r. The body reads הרוג; the margin adds wording referring to Tractate Soferim.

The Wikisource transcription of Yerushalmi Kiddushin 4:11 has no wartime qualification. Menachem Katz's collection *Parallels from the Rishonim*, p. 621, gathers quotations of this passage by the Rishonim, the medieval commentators, both with and without the qualification. The transcription labels the same passage halachah 11 and Katz's collection labels it halachah 14; the numbering differs. The collection shows how the Yerushalmi was quoted; it is not its full critical apparatus. The first printed Yerushalmi has still not been read from an image at this passage here.²⁰

The Leiden marginal note does not erase the difference between Tosafot and the manuscript's body. Tosafot attests a transmission or explanation attributed to the Yerushalmi; the annotator refers to Tractate Soferim. The traditions may be connected, but this page alone cannot establish which preceded the other, or that all the Rishonim saw the same text.

The transcription examined of Rashi on Exodus 14:7 reads כָּשָׁר —“Kill the most upright of the Egyptians.”

“Egyptians” fits the verse's context, Pharaoh's pursuit and the Egyptians' animals. Rashi manuscripts and first printings were not read here, however, so we cannot establish the history of this reading in every witness or explain all the differences through censorship.²¹

Two different restrictions thus emerge: “Egyptians” restricts the group concerned; “in wartime” restricts the circumstances in which the saying applies. They may be combined in an interpretation, but they are not the same word or necessarily the same stage in the text's history. Neither supplies evidence for קטול meaning “Catholic.”

20. Yerushalmi Kiddushin 4:11; Menachem Katz, *Parallels from the Rishonim to Kiddushin*, chapter 4, halachah 14, p. 621, “המלמד את בנו אומנות — סוגיא 2”, headed 66b.

21. Rashi on Exodus 14:7, s.v. וכל רכב מצרים. The finding is limited to this transcription.

6. קט"ל, קטול, and “Catholic”

The textual inquiry asked which letters appear in the witnesses. The linguistic inquiry asks what the word can denote. Even finding קטול in a copy would not in itself decide whether it means killing, a noun, or a designation for a Catholic.

An unpointed word requires context

The Aramaic root קטל is well attested in the sense of killing.²² When קטול functions as the imperative קטול, “kill,” reading it as “kill” is not a strange mistake requiring an invented explanation: it is an ordinary linguistic possibility. Yet the four letters must not be pointed identically in every occurrence. Jastrow also has קטול as a noun meaning a killer or murderer. The spelling alone does not decide whether we have an imperative or a noun.

The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, CAL, likewise defines the verb from this root as “kill” and supplies usages.²³ Writing the letters with gershayim, קט"ל, does not make them a Christian designation. Depending on context, gershayim can mark a root or an abbreviation; a particular proposed abbreviation requires documented usage.

The Christian term's antiquity does not settle the question

There is no basis for a sweeping claim that “Catholic” is a recent invention. The term already occurs in an early Christian source, Ignatius's letter to the Smyrnaeans.²⁴ That, however, is not the decisive question. We need evidence that the particular spelling קטול designated a Catholic in the language and period of the

22. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London, Luzac, 1903: entries קטל and קטול, in the online transcriptions read. No page in the printed edition was established here.

23. Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, Hebrew Union College, entry qṭl (a/u), verb, read directly.

24. Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, chapter 8, in the translation read in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Roberts–Donaldson–Coxe, Buffalo, 1885. This was a reading of a translation, not of a Greek manuscript.

saying's author or of the witness under discussion. The antiquity of the Greek word does not establish this specific usage.

A similar-sounding term, קתוליקוס, also exists. Jastrow explains it as a financial official or treasury administrator and supplies examples from rabbinic literature. Not every word in this family of sounds is therefore evidence for the Catholic Church. Meaning is determined by usage, not by resemblance to the ear alone.²⁵

A pun is not a reconstruction of the text

The sound resemblance between קטול and קתולי is likewise insufficient. To turn a denomination's name into “the best of the gentiles is a Catholic,” one must explain the word's form, the use of a singular designation, and the period when it was understood that way. An unpointed spelling can furnish an amusing pun, but lexical evidence and a dated witness are the tests of a historical interpretation. The possibility of devising a successful joke is not evidence that this was the saying's intended meaning.

Moreover, within “טוב שבגוים קטול”, the Aramaic reading about killing corresponds directly to the parallel הרוג. A copyist who understood it that way is therefore not necessarily someone making a puzzling mistake. Someone proposing another meaning must demonstrate actual usage of the designation, rather than merely announce that the ordinary reading arose from misunderstanding. This is the linguistic weakness in the story's mechanism.

A nineteenth-century speaker might have used a pun on a name for Catholics. That possibility explains how such an answer could have sounded. It does not establish that it was given at the assembly, that it was correct in the language and textual history, or that the word stood that way in an early text. Those are three claims requiring three different kinds of evidence.

25. Jastrow, entry קתוליקוס, in the online transcription read. The official's function is distinct from the denominational meaning proposed in the story.

The halachic difficulty: praising Catholics is more than wordplay

A further internal difficulty arises here. Rambam prohibits praising idolaters under the exposition of "לֹא תַחֲנֶנֶם", lo techonnem—not granting them favor; he also classifies Christians as idolaters. Against that background, presenting membership in the Catholic religion itself as what makes someone the best of the gentiles is not an innocent compliment. The difficulty is particularly sharp when this is presented as an interpretation in which the Sages praise another religion. Bolton's explanation of the Tzemach Tzedek's silence therefore carries substantive meaning, beyond a witty ending.²⁶

Calling it a jest does not remove the question: was the statement presented as sincere praise, a true Torah interpretation, or a defensive reply to opponents? If the narrator denies the interpretation's truth, it cannot later serve as evidence of the original wording. If he adopts it as a true interpretation, its halachic content must also be addressed. Either way, the pun alone does not reconcile the account.

The difficulty should not, however, become a blanket ruling that all praise is forbidden in every context, or that no defensive answer to save lives could be possible. Shulchan Aruch itself distinguishes praise intended to thank G-d for a beautiful creature; coercion and danger require their own analysis. Words of praise must not be equated without discussion with an actual act of idolatry, and we lack the circumstances needed to rule on what was permissible at this event. The precise criticism is that the tradition needs an explanation on this level too; saying that it saved the Jews does not supply one by itself.²⁷

26. Rambam, Hilchot Avodah Zarah 9:4; 10:4 in the usual numbering—the praise paragraph is numbered 10:6 in Mechon Mamre's detailed division. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 151:14. Transcriptions of the provisions were read; printed editions were not collated.

27. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 151:14, end; Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 5:1–4. These references clarify the need to distinguish kinds of prohibition, intention, and coercive circumstances; no practical ruling on the alleged event is issued here.

What about the Orthodox emperor?

Nicholas I ruled Russia in the year of the assembly. Catholics and Orthodox Christians both belong to Christianity, but not to the same church. Praise of Catholics cannot simply be treated as a natural compliment to the Russian state's religious identity. The Fundamental Laws of 1832 establish the primacy of the Orthodox faith in the empire, require the emperor to belong to it, and define his role as its defender.²⁸

If the answer was meant to please government officials by declaring Catholics the best of the gentiles, it needs explaining why members of the other church were chosen for praise before them. The more the story presents a brilliant answer instantly rescuing the rabbis, the more its fit with this particular audience needs explaining, beyond the wordplay.

A familiar conceptual analogy is the distinction between Sunnis and Shiites: the shared description “Muslims” does not erase deep religious differences between the currents. Similarly, “Christians” does not erase the distinction between East and West and between churches. The analogy shows why praise of one current cannot be assumed automatically to flatter the other. It does not claim that the two historical relationships are identical, or that every individual necessarily hates members of the other current.

The strongest possible answer in the story's favor must also be considered. If the question was simply whether the saying commands killing, an answer turning it into praise could remove the charge without flattering the listeners' religion. They might have cared more about the absence of a violent command than about who was praised. This distinction prevents an overly easy

28. Свод законов Российской империи, St. Petersburg, 1832, vol. 1, part 1, “ОСНОВНЫЕ государственные законы,” chapter 7, “О Веце,” §§40–42; compare §§43–45. The online transcription was read; the accompanying small page scans were also viewed, without a full collation from the images. These provisions attest the standing of the faith and emperor, not the committee members' response.

refutation: the political difficulty is real, but alone it does not prove that no official could have accepted the answer.

This alternative explanation does not rescue the textual claim. Even if the listeners were willing to hear a pun, it remains necessary to show that the word was found, what it meant, and why one witness outweighs the transmission of הרוג. We have no protocol, translation, or governmental response allowing us to establish how the answer was actually understood. This is therefore an additional difficulty for the account, not a substitute for its missing documentation.

Linguistically, the dictionaries read support the sense of killing from קטל. This examination found no confirmation in them of קטול specifically as an abbreviation of קתולי. The distinction between קטול with a tet and קתול with a tav is also preserved in note 58 of the Okunov teshurah (Chapter 2). It must therefore be retained in the comparison rather than discarded as insignificant.

7. What Is Documented about the Petersburg Assembly?

From the wording and its meaning we turn to the event. What is documented about the assembly itself, and which details of the exchange were found in the sources read?

Beit Rebbe: historical framework and limited knowledge

Rabbi Chaim Meir Heilman's Beit Rebbe, printed in Berdichev in 5662–1902, describes the assembly in its third part. The opening of chapter 3 lists Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin, the Tzemach Tzedek, Rabbi Yisrael Alperin, and Betzalel Stern.²⁹ It goes on to discuss education and prayer and reproduces a letter referring to

29. Chaim Meir Heilman, Beit Rebbe, Berdichev, תרס"ב, part 3, chapter 3, fols. 113a–117b, in the continuous pagination of the copy read. The manuscript of the printed letter was not examined.

the committee in the first person. The chapter was read from the scan, fols. 113a–117b.

The Katol scene was not found in this chapter. The author himself, however, says that the entire matter of the questions raised there remained closed and concealed from him. His silence is therefore not decisive evidence that the question was never asked. The book can support the assembly's existence and membership while its stated limit on knowledge of the discussions is recognized.

The account of the Rebbe Rayatz

The title page and chapter 6 of *Admur Ha-Tzemach Tzedek U-Tenu'at Ha-Haskalah*, from the notes of the Rebbe Rayatz, were read in the new 5778 edition, pp. 22–29.³⁰ The chapter describes the assembly's members and disputes over education and prayer. The scene investigated was not found there either. Its note 55 refers to Education Ministry documents from years close to the assembly, but the archival documents themselves were not read. Finding a reference to an archival file is different from reading that file. The reference identifies a place to continue searching; it does not give us knowledge of every document it contains. Similarly, reading one chapter is not an examination of all the Rebbe Rayatz's talks and writings.

Lilienthal and Philipson: two kinds of text

In David Philipson's volume on Max Lilienthal, published in New York in 1915, pp. 36–38 of Philipson's biography were read, together with pp. 324–329 of Lilienthal's first-person memoir, “My Travels in Russia.” These pages document the framework of the

30. אדמו"ר הצמח צדק ותנועת ההשכלה, from the notes of the Rebbe Rayatz, *Otzar Ha-Chassidim*, Brooklyn, new edition תשע"ח, booklet 48, chapter 6, pp. 22–29; archival reference in note 55 on p. 24.

gathering and the selection of representatives. They do not contain the Katol story.³¹

A later biography and the recollections of someone from the period are not the same kind of source. Even a memoir is not a daily protocol of committee discussions. This distinction does not deny their value; it defines what they can be used for. Here they strengthen the historical framework without verifying the particular exchange.

The problem of identifying the scholar

The version in Ha-Tamim of 5776 identifies the scholar who heard the account as Rabbi Avraham Abele of Posvol, head of the Vilna rabbinical court. The biographical sources checked, however, give his death as 1836, before the assembly of 1843. Someone who died then could not have heard a report after the assembly of what had happened there. This is a real difficulty with that particular identification.

Source: Ha-Tamim, Nisan 5776, pp. 50–51, especially note 12; compare Jewish Encyclopedia, “Abraham Abele ben Abraham Solomon,” giving a death in 1836. The scholar is anonymous in the 5769 teshurah.

The difficulty must not be transferred to every version. The Okunov teshurah leaves the scholar unnamed. The chronological contradiction thus affects the later identification; it does not by itself establish that no core event occurred. Equally, removing the name does not complete the missing chain of transmission.

8. Testing the Explanations and Drawing Conclusions

We now test how the story's explanations fit the findings and return to the questions with which we began.

31. David Philipson, Max Lilienthal, *American Rabbi: Life and Writings*, New York, Bloch Publishing Co., 1915: biography, pp. 36–38; “My Travels in Russia,” pp. 324–329. These are the passages read, not the entire memoir continuously.

Can a printer's mistake explain הרוג?

The story proposes a particular explanation for הרוג: a printer interpreted קטול as a word for killing and replaced it. Chapter 5, however, showed הרוג not only in a Venice printing before the assembly, but also in two manuscripts dated 1291 and 1433. We are therefore not dealing merely with a word that spread through later printings: הרוג is documented in earlier manuscripts.

To explain the reading by a printer's substitution, one must show how the claim fits the manuscripts and identify the witness in which the alleged change occurred. The findings do not rule out another reading in a particular copy, but the specific substitution in the story has not been established. Even if a printing with קטול is found, the word's meaning and the witness's relationship to others would require examination: finding the letters alone would not prove “Catholic.”

This is a substantive counter-test. If the claim is that הרוג first arose through a printing worker's mistake, manuscripts predating printing do not fit it. If the claim is changed to an error by an early copyist, the simple chronological contradiction disappears. But an earlier tradition must now be identified and the change explained. That is a new, more demanding claim, not a solution already furnished by the story.

Why one copy cannot decide the entire transmission

Suppose, for the sake of argument, an old book containing קטול were found. What would we know? That this reading occurs in that copy. We would not yet know that it is more original, that every other copy is corrupt, or that the word means “Catholic.” The copy's age, the source from which it was copied, corrections made in it, and its relationship to manuscripts and parallels would need examination.

Counting copies alone does not decide the matter: a single witness sometimes preserves a better reading than many

witnesses dependent on one source. Yet an unusual copy is not correct just because it is singular and surprising. A textual argument is required. Here even that copy has not been presented for identification. Using it as evidence that overturns הרוג everywhere else thus depends on several unsubstantiated assumptions at once.

The claim would also be difficult to put before examiners familiar with הרוג in other books. They might ask whether the unusual witness establishes the original text or merely a local corruption. They need not have known Aramaic well or researched manuscripts to understand this simple question. Without the book's details and a reason to prefer it, the dramatic arrival of the volume remains an element of the narrative, rather than reproducible proof.

Does adding a miracle solve the difficulty?

If קטול is said to have appeared miraculously for that occasion, the nature of the claim changes. It is no longer proof that the original text was written that way, but a tradition about a miracle that showed the listeners something useful. If the same copy later reverted to הרוג, the story's temporary reading cannot now function as an ordinary textual witness. We must first establish who saw it, who checked it again, and when the account was recorded.

The two forms of argument cannot be used interchangeably: presenting the book as historical evidence of an early text, while explaining its absence by a miraculous change that leaves no witness to examine. Belief in a miracle is compatible with documentary inquiry. It does not supply the book's identity and the observer's testimony in place of documentation. In the lecture version, the most extraordinary miraculous detail is precisely the one for which no corroborating written source was found here.

Might perception have changed rather than the letters?

A third explanation of the miracle can be proposed: the book's letters never changed, but the observers were influenced to see or read קטול instead of הרוג. Suggestion or hypnosis is a modern analogy in this direction. Stage mentalist is a performance label, not in itself an explanation of a particular effect. The proposal concerns the observers' experience, not discovery of an early reading or a change in the ink.

The idea is conceptually meaningful: a study of eight selected highly hypnotizable participants found that suggestion changed color experience and related brain responses. That is a specific finding about perception, not evidence that an entire committee can be made to read unwritten text together.

Source: S. M. Kosslyn et al., "Hypnotic Visual Illusion Alters Color Processing in the Brain," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 157(8), 2000, pp. 1279–1284. The original abstract was read through NCBI's PubMed service; the full article was not read.

If the proposal is accepted for argument's sake, the copy's later lack of קטול does not refute it: on this hypothesis, הרוג was there throughout. Yet finding הרוג in every printing does not prove such influence occurred either. Attributing it to the assembly requires testimony about what those present read, who was affected, and the checking of that book. No explicit account of this mechanism was found in the sources read. It is a later hypothesis to sustain the story, replacing a textual claim with a new psychological or miraculous one.

The stage analogy is limited too: it neither identifies the Tzemach Tzedek's act with a performer's trick nor verifies accounts of blank paper being read as a check. No such demonstration need be accepted as fact to understand the distinction. The central difficulty remains documentary: who transmitted that the change occurred in the observers' perception rather than in the book?

Until that link is supplied, this strained explanation cannot be presented as a demonstrated solution.

What does an unsuccessful search establish?

The requested witness was not found in the printings, critical editions, and transcriptions read. This prevents קטול from being presented as a verified reading, but it is not a survey of every manuscript and edition. The search reported in one version—other printings were searched and no קטול found—is itself part of the transmitted story. We have no search log, list of books, or photographs of pages. It must not be turned into a search we performed ourselves, or into evidence that letters changed in that same copy.

Can the library and edition be identified?

The sources use descriptions such as an old midrash, an old Gemara, a certain printing, or the royal library. They do not provide enough to identify a volume: an agreed work title, city, year, and shelfmark. Tractate Soferim can be bound with Talmud volumes, so the colloquial name “Gemara” is understandable. That general possibility, however, does not identify the book in this account.

“The royal library” is also insufficiently precise to establish the institution and collection in which to search. No documentary connection was found between the story and a specific copy. The book title and printing details reportedly unclear in the lecture cannot be supplied by guessing.

How should the miraculous dimension be treated?

Some versions attribute to the Tzemach Tzedek the power to impart the answer to Rabbi Yitzchak's mind; some describe finding the book as a miracle. This matters in documenting the tradition: it is part of the meaning its transmitters wished to

convey. We must preserve the distinction between the miracle as narrated and what can be checked in documents and books.

This investigation does not decide whether miracles are possible. It asks which tradition is before us and what factual basis supports each detail. Belief in a tzaddik's power does not require attaching every detail of every version to a later account.

Conversely, difficulty identifying a book or a person does not require accusing a transmitter of deliberate invention.

What can now be said?

We can return to the five questions. As to the story's source, a printed tradition was found, but its chain is incomplete and references to earlier publications have not yet been verified in their originals. As to its versions, it has been established that central details were transmitted differently and cannot be combined into one uniform account. These differences are a positive finding of the comparison, not merely a reason to qualify the conclusion.

On the rabbinic wording, הרוג is documented in the manuscripts and printings read; no early קטול witness was found in them. Historically, the assembly and both rabbis' participation are supported by the sources, but the particular exchange was not verified in them. Linguistically, the sense of killing is supported by the dictionaries, while early קטול meaning “Catholic” was not verified. The wartime qualification is documented in the transmission of sources predating the assembly; the same copy's reversion to הרוג remains without a verified written source.

Suggested wording when presenting the tradition

A late Chassidic tradition tells of a Katol answer at the Petersburg assembly. Examination revealed substantial differences between its versions and serious difficulties with the explanation of a copyist's error, the word's meaning, and the alleged book's ability to settle the transmission. The particular incident and the copy were not verified. The lecture version should therefore not be presented as established historical fact or as rabbinic wording confirmed by research.

This preserves the tradition that was found without assigning it confirmation we do not yet possess.

“If it is a received tradition, we accept it”: what remains open

The story's components do not all stand in the same position. The simple claim of an error originating with a printer encounters documentation before printing. The later identification of the scholar encounters a chronological contradiction. קטול meaning “Catholic,” the book's identity, and its letters' reversion remain without verified primary evidence. We face more than a technical lack of a page or two: the story's central mechanism has not been demonstrated, and some versions contain details that fail the tests applied to them.

Someone who accepts the tradition out of trust in its transmitters may distinguish that acceptance from the conclusion of historical inquiry. In this sense one can say “אם קבלה היא — נקבל” — “If it is a received tradition, we accept it”: respect for the tradition and the possibility of further clarification are preserved. This does not mean the difficulties have been resolved, that all versions are simultaneously correct, or that קטול has been confirmed in an early source. The present conclusion is that the lecture's full version is insufficiently supported to be presented as verified fact. It does not convict any particular transmitter of deliberate fabrication.

Which sources could advance the inquiry?

First are the passage in Chitrik, with its edition's title page and chain of transmission; the editions of Perlov actually cited; and Alim Li-Terufah, Tzav 5756, p. 3. These could establish a narrative source earlier than the one read and clarify how the story's wording developed. The issue of Beis Moshiah from which the Didan Netzach passage was taken is also needed.

The textual claim requires further manuscripts and first printings beyond the witnesses already read, including an image of the first printed Yerushalmi at this passage and dating the Leiden annotation. The event requires committee documents and, if found, book-loan records. Checking the account that prompted the inquiry requires the original recording. The linguistic question requires dated evidence of קטול meaning “Catholic.” Each source could address a different question. We need not pretend that these questions are already settled to understand what the research has established.

9. The Research Process and the Participants' Contributions

From the lecture to testable questions

The investigation began with a description of a lecture and three starting addresses: Bolton, the discussion on Din, and the Hidabroot article. The questioner asked that the account be assumed neither true nor invented, and that the book title and printing details reportedly unclear in the recording not be supplied by conjecture. He also required a distinction between finding the book, imparting the idea, and the same copy reverting to הרוג. This determined the investigation's structure: each detail was tested separately, and agreement among narrators was not treated as confirmation of a detail absent from a source.

The editor first prepared an initial research report. Publications of the story, printings and editions of the saying, sources for the assembly's framework, and dictionaries were opened. Already at this stage, the body of entry 121 was separated from note 58, the assembly's existence from verification of the scene, and references to Perlov and Chitrik from reading their books. The report was supplied with source documentation and images so that reviewers could examine definite claims rather than merely judge its conclusion.

Report source: The editor's report, "טוב שבגויים קטול באספת פטרבורג: בירור מקורות — סבב ראשון", October 18, 2026, particularly the sections on transmission, comparison of versions, and limits of the examination. Original reports were preserved separately from the revised booklet.

Rereading the Okunov teshurah

The first report supplied for the renewed review focused on the Okunov teshurah. The delivery message did not name the participant, so it must not retrospectively be assigned to a particular model. The report reconfirmed the entry's principal contents and its separation from the note, but supplied no page from Chitrik, Perlov, or Alim Li-Terufah. Its contribution was renewed verification of a source already read, not discovery of another independent tradition.

Its incorporation also clarified the limits of quotation. A small linguistic change within a bracketed translation is not a diplomatic transcription, and assigning 5706 to the notes' recording date rests on the editors' introduction, not examination of the manuscript. The booklet mainly chose indirect description of the account, conveying the conclusion without presenting normalized spelling as a letter-for-letter quotation. The renewed examination strengthened accuracy without changing the answer to the historical question.

Grok 4.7: another printed account and a more precise comparison

Grok 4.7's report included a detailed coverage declaration: what was read in an image, what was opened as a transcription, and what was inaccessible. Its principal new contribution was Didan Netzach—Thirty Years, p. 16. The editor checked the page and publication's framework. A version in which a confirming book was brought was consequently added, alongside a search in other printings that found no קטול. This made it possible to explain why those two details do not amount to the same copy reverting to הרוג.

Report source: Grok 4.7 report, October 18, 2026, new findings 4–5, 7, and 14; version table and correction table. The editor's decisions on incorporating the report were preserved separately.

The report also emphasized אסורים in Müller and the fact that Hidabroot's reference to Chitrik p. 128 belongs to another story. Both points were verified and retained. Yet not every link or transcription mentioned in the report received fresh confirmation afterward. Sources already read by the editor did not become unchecked because the reviewer encountered an access block. The distinction between each participant's coverage and the state of the overall file was preserved.

Claude: from editions to manuscripts

Claude's report added image details from Oxford, Munich, and Leiden, together with comparisons of editions and apparatuses. The editor read the relevant images and checked the identification and dates of the two Mekhilta manuscripts in their libraries' descriptions. The reading הרוג was thereby supported by direct manuscript evidence beyond the editions' reports. In Leiden, the marginal annotation referring to Tractate Soferim was seen separately. The identification of Müller's and Higger's sigla was completed from images where the report had relied partly on optical character recognition.

Report source: Claude's report on textual witnesses, October 18, 2026, collation table, sections 3–6, and search limitations. The editor's reading coverage is stated there separately from the reviewer's declaration.

Corrections were needed alongside this important addition. The cropped Oxford link supplied showed empty margins when checked by the editor; the full page was opened and the correct region located. The year 1508 is not in the fifteenth century. A list of seventeen items containing manuscripts, editions, and transcriptions is not necessarily seventeen independent witnesses. The claim that every variation in the group's designation resulted from censorship also exceeded the evidence presented. The booklet adopted the checked additions without adopting those generalizations.

This correction has a methodological consequence: locating important evidence and being accurate in every conclusion of a report are different measures. A reviewer-supplied image detail can be used and its reading accepted after examination, while the inference built on it is narrowed. This preserves the contribution without turning every sentence of the report into part of the conclusion.

From research to review of the booklet

After the material was incorporated, a nineteen-page V1 booklet with twenty-six notes was produced. Four separate prompts were supplied to Grok, Claude, Grok Bot, and ChatGPT Dot. At the questioner's instruction, this round was limited to improving explanation, structure, and design; Grok 4.7 was not invited. This does not diminish its earlier research report, and preparing a prompt must not itself be presented as a completed examination. ChatGPT Dot reported reading the entire text and viewing every page. The editor read all three report files in full. Two principal suggestions corrected the presentation of evidence: the table separated showing a book from acceptance of the answer; and the Leiden caption clarified that the displayed detail contains only the

annotation. Other additions anchored the three dates, defined “textual witness” earlier, and explicitly connected the early manuscripts to the printer-error test. These improvements used material already present in the booklet.

Report source: ChatGPT Dot, V1 improvement report, October 18, 2026: suggestions 1–10, especially 1–4 and 6–7. This was review of the booklet, without fresh source checking.

Grok initially reported that the reading links did not open. This message was kept as an access-block record and not counted as a review. After the complete text was supplied in one file, a report with five suggestions arrived. It led to introducing the figures in the opening, marking the transition to rabbinic textual examination, and connecting the conclusions to the five questions. The proposed explanation after the questions substantially overlapped an existing paragraph, so it was incorporated by replacement rather than repetition. The suggestion concerning the reading map did not require relocating it.

Report source: Grok, improvement report submitted after receiving the full text, October 18, 2026, suggestions 1–5 and replacement paragraphs. The reviewer states that the text was read to its end marker and that the PDF pages were not viewed. The initial access-block message is preserved separately and is not a content review.

Grok Bot supplied thirty-four suggestions after reading the text and, according to its declaration, viewing every V1 page. Incorporated improvements included the bookmark hierarchy, directional isolation of foreign-language titles in notes, clear identification of figures, corrected headings, and links back from sources to the discussion. The suggestions were checked against the editing files, which had not been available to the reviewer.

Report source: Grok Bot, V1 improvement report, October 18, 2026, especially suggestions 3, 6–10, 13, 15–19, 28–30, and 34. This was review of design and explanation, without new source checking.

Some recommendations were not accepted. The fixed brand name is permitted under the series rules and is not a production-credit paragraph; it was therefore retained on the cover. Page numbers remained at the lower left, and large type and compact margins

were retained. The assumption that certain chapters began on new pages because of forced breaks did not match the editing file. Language tagging and image alternative text already existed in the source; structural tagging was added to the digital output without claiming full accessibility certification.

Claude's improvement report later arrived with forty-eight suggestions. All three files were read in full. It led to explanations of terms where they occur, a linguistic distinction between a narrative source and a textual witness, clarification of Müller's parentheses, explanation of the differing numbering of the Yerushalmi passage, and chapter transitions. Suggestions already implemented following other reviewers were merged rather than counted as additional independent innovations.

Report source: Claude, V1 improvement report, October 18, 2026, suggestions 1–48 and detailed replacements. These are improvements based on V1, not a new source-research round.

This report was also examined critically. A beginners' glossary at the beginning of the Research Booklet does not match the series rules, so definitions were supplied within the explanations. The claim that the Leiden annotator was necessarily someone other than the scribe was not adopted, because the annotator's identity had not been established. The estimate of approximately 8-point notes did not match the V1 file, which specified 11.5 points. The general recommendation to improve readability was accepted without adopting that measurement. The proposed Müller transcription was restricted to the passage clearly readable in the detail already included in the booklet.

All four improvement reports were thus incorporated at the synthesis stage. V1 was preserved as their original input; the new edition combines editorial decisions with documentation of the research. Reviewers must not be credited with advance approval of expansions absent from the material they read. Checking the produced edition remains the editor's responsibility.

Comparing quality: what exactly is being rated?

The scores below are editorial judgments of the available reports and outputs, not an experiment measuring a model's general capability. A 9 indicates strong work needing few corrections; an 8 indicates useful work with remaining weaknesses. The editor also rates his own work as a self-assessment open to criticism. All participants are assessed using the same ten criteria and fixed weights. A dash means insufficient basis or a criterion outside the assignment; it is not zero.

Criterion and weight	Editor	Claude: research	Grok 4.7: research
Content accuracy — 15%	8	8	9
Attribution and context — 15%	9	9	9
Evidence vs. conjecture — 15%	9	8	9
New evidence — 10%	9	9	8
Verification and transparency — 10%	9	9	9
Logic and depth — 10%	8	8	9
Consistent correction — 10%	9	—	—
Peer review — 5%	8	9	9
Clarity and usefulness — 5%	8	8	9
Conclusion and its limits — 5%	9	8	9

For the editor, the accuracy and logic scores reflect the need to correct the table heading and develop the manuscripts' weight in the argument, although the data were already in the booklet. Attribution and transparency scores rest on separating reference from reading and preserving the precise units examined. The correction score rests on incorporation decisions and their application to the text; clarity still needed explicit transitions. For Claude, reading images of the three manuscripts and distinguishing images from optical character recognition support the evidence, attribution, and transparency scores. The wrong link, assigning 1508 to the wrong century, and the censorship

generalization limit accuracy, separation of conjecture, logic, and conclusion. Detailed suggestions and focused references support the peer-review score. No later corrective response was supplied in this file, so the correction criterion remains unscored.

For Grok 4.7, detailed coverage and the distinctions between the main entry and note, and between the same copy and other copies, support accuracy, attribution, logic, and limits of conclusion. The 5777 account and the completion of אסורים are useful additions; much other material verifies an existing foundation. The tables and separate versions are actionable, hence the clarity and review scores. No sequence of responses permits assessment of consistent correction.

Criterion and weight	ChatGPT Dot: improvement	Grok: improvement	Grok Bot: improvement	Claude: improvement
Content accuracy — 15%	9	8	8	8
Attribution and context — 15%	9	8	8	8
Evidence vs. conjecture — 15%	9	9	9	8
New evidence — 10%	—	—	—	—
Verification and transparency — 10%	9	9	9	9
Logic and depth — 10%	9	8	8	8
Consistent correction — 10%	—	—	—	—
Peer review — 5%	9	8	9	9
Clarity and usefulness — 5%	9	8	9	9
Conclusion and its limits — 5%	9	8	8	8

For Dot, accuracy, attribution, and separation of evidence rest on the two distinctions the booklet had failed to convey visually.

Connecting manuscripts with the printer's error deepens the argument using existing data. The coverage statement is detailed, and the proposed wording is complete and limited to improvement. Source discovery was not requested, and there is no sequence of corrections to the report itself; both criteria remain unscored.

For Grok, transparency rests on admitting the access block and later declaring text-only reading. Levels of certainty remained distinct. Yet the claim that an explanation was missing after the five questions gave insufficient weight to the existing paragraph, and the proposed opening did not actually identify the figures as recommended. Its mapping of the five questions also replaced some with the copy's reversion. The editing retained the need behind the suggestions but rewrote the response. Most content and implementation scores are therefore 8.

For Grok Bot, measurements of type, directionality, and bookmarks, and detailed design instructions support transparency, clarity, and review scores. Misidentifying the brand as a forbidden credit and assumptions about the editing file limit accuracy, attribution, and inference. These are booklet-based improvement proposals; source discovery and consistent correction across further rounds are not measured here.

Claude's improvement report is precisely mapped to pages and complete replacement passages, supporting clarity, transparency, and peer-review scores. Identifying unexplained terms and ambiguous references improves continuity. The generalization about the annotator's identity, type-size estimate, and a glossary incompatible with the rules limit accuracy and inference. The technical and attribution criteria therefore score 8. Source discovery and correction of a response in a later round are not measured.

After excluding unscored criteria and dividing by the remaining weight, the weighted averages are: editor, 8.7 over the full weight; Claude, 8.4 over 90%; Grok 4.7, 8.9 over 90%; Dot, 9.0 over 80%; Grok, 8.3 over 80%; Grok Bot, 8.4 over 80%; and Claude's

improvement review, 8.3 over 80%. Coverage and assignments differ, so this is not a common winners' table. The anonymous report and anyone from whom no report was incorporated receive no separate numerical rating; the documentation is insufficient to assess their entire process.

What would have been missing without each contribution?

This test concerns the existing file only: remove a contribution and ask what evidence, distinction, or explanation would have been missing at the time of editing. It does not claim that the same result could not have been reached another way. Removing a report must also be distinguished from removing the evidence it led us to examine.

Participant	What the file would lack	What would still stand
Questioner	The demand to examine the same copy's reversion and the chain attributed to Chitrik would not have been explicit.	No basis exists for assigning the research an alternative path that was never followed.
Editor	The readings would not be integrated into one conclusion, and link, chronological, and inferential corrections would not be applied in this way.	The original reports and the evidence they propose would remain available for examination.
Anonymous report	Renewed verification of the Okunov teshurah and clarification of the limits of quotation.	The entry's main contents were already in the editor's report.
Grok 4.7	The Didan Netzach account and its precise connection with the search in other printings would be absent at that stage.	The main distinction between a late tradition and verification of the event would remain.

Participant	What the file would lack	What would still stand
Claude	Direct reading of the two Mekhilta manuscripts and Leiden's margin would not have entered by the documented route. At the improvement stage, some term explanations and the narrative-source/textual-witness distinction would be absent.	The printings and apparatuses already read would still support הרויג. Some structural clarifications were also suggested by peers.
ChatGPT Dot	Two ambiguities in presenting the table and image might remain; the connection with the printer's error would be less developed.	Source findings and the limits of the conclusion would not change.
Grok	An additional continuous-reading test emphasizing the opening and transitions.	Dot also clarified part of the need for a transition; exclusivity cannot be claimed.
Grok Bot	Checking note directionality, correcting bookmarks, and detailed navigation proposals.	The main findings would remain; some note improvements were also requested by Dot.

The result shows complementary roles. Rereading can strengthen an existing finding; a new source can add a layer without changing the conclusion; editorial review can prevent a reader inferring more than an image or table shows. None establishes truth by the number of participants. The conclusion rests on sources and reasoning that can be presented to the reader.

The critical revision after V2

After V2 was delivered, the questioner asked for the difficulties to be made more explicit, the explanation expanded, the complete lecture version presented, and a Reader's Booklet developed from it. This changed the argument's presentation; it did not itself supply new evidence for refutation. The strongest counterarguments in favor of the story were therefore also examined: an official might have cared about removing a violent command without identifying

with Catholics, and a single witness could in principle preserve a good reading. These distinctions were retained alongside the criticism.

A further focused examination of Mondshine's articles and Russia's Fundamental Laws of 1832 grounded the account of the critical method and the Orthodox framework. It did not reveal a verdict by Mondshine on Katol or a new protocol of the assembly. Chitrik's and Perlov's pages, the old book, and the recording did not become available through revision. The tables above rate reports incorporated at the stages described, not reviewers' approval of this edition.

The Reader's Booklet was written after the research was expanded. It preserves the argument's sequence and the reasoning needed to understand it while reducing bibliographical detail and documentation of the rounds. Four improvement prompts are intended for Grok, Claude, Grok Bot, and ChatGPT Dot; under the current instruction, Grok 4.7 does not participate in this improvement round. No reviewer should be credited with reading or approval before an actual report arrives.

After translation began, the questioner assigned series number 25 and asked for clarification of the Tzemach Tzedek's silence, the halachic difficulty, and possible influence on the observers' perception. The passages in the 5777 teshurah and Bolton were reread, and provisions of Rambam and Shulchan Aruch and an original abstract on hypnotic perception were read. These additions are not attributed to the earlier model reviews; they are incorporated in Research V4 and Reader V2 in both languages.

Claims and Degrees of Verification

Claim examined	What can be established	Discussion
Both rabbis participated in the assembly of 5603	Supported by the sources read.	Ch. 7 · 28
A complete transmission from Rabbi Yitzchak	A printed transmission was located; the chain is incomplete.	Ch. 2 · 8
The account is in Chitrik	Still a reference not verified in the book itself.	Ch. 4 · 16
קטול is an early reading	No identified witness was found in the defined examination.	Ch. 5 · 18
קטול means “Catholic”	The pun is narrated; early usage in this sense was not verified.	Ch. 6 · 24
“In wartime” was a new answer in 5603	The qualification is known from sources predating the assembly.	Ch. 5 · 18
The same copy reverted to הרוג	Reported in the lecture description; no corroborating written source was found. Searching other copies is a different detail.	1 · 4; 3 · 11; 8 · 30
Was the particular exchange at the assembly verified?	A printed tradition in differing versions was found; the specific occurrence was not verified in the sources examined.	Chs. 7–8 · 28
Why the Tzemach Tzedek remained silent	Different reasons occur in late versions; the reply is not a verified interpretation.	Ch. 3 · 13
Influence on the observers' perception	A proposed possibility; no explicit account was found in the sources read.	Ch. 8 · 33

For Further Study in the Sources

The following sources are selected for direct study, moving from early texts and their commentators to later documentation. Full references and reading limitations appear in the discussion. Internal references return to that discussion; source addresses are preserved in the accompanying link index.

1. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, Massekhta de-Vayehi, parashah 1. Horovitz–Rabin, p. 89; compare Venice 5305, fol. 11a. Examine the transition from the surviving animals to the saying. Discussion · 18

2. Yerushalmi Kiddushin, end of chapter 4. The transcription read numbers it 4:11; compare the collection of medieval quotations in Katz's edition, p. 621. Distinguish a text's wording from the way it was quoted. Discussion · 18

3. Tractate Soferim 15:10. Higger, pp. 281–282; Müller, Hebrew section p. XXVIII and commentary pp. 211–212. Examine the wartime qualification's position and Müller's אסורים. Discussion · 18

4. Rashi on Exodus 14:7; Tosafot, Avodah Zarah 26b, s.v. ולא מורידין. Compare “Egyptians,” restricting who is concerned, with “in wartime,” restricting the circumstances. Discussion · 18

5. Rambam, Hilchot Avodah Zarah 9:4, 10:4; Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 5:1–4; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 151:14. Distinguish praise, religious meaning, intention, and coercive circumstances.

Discussion · 26

6. Fundamental Laws of the Russian Empire, 1832, vol. 1, part 1, chapter 7, §§40–45. Examine Orthodoxy's standing and the emperor's religion; distinguish these from an official's response to a particular answer. Discussion

7. Beit Rebbe, 5662, part 3, chapter 3, fols. 113a–117b. The assembly's description, what the author knew of the discussions, and the limit of his knowledge. Discussion · 28

8. Jastrow, Dictionary, 1903, entries קטל, קטול, and קתוליקוס. Compare verb, noun, and an official's title. Discussion · 24

9. Max Lilienthal: Life and Writings, edited by David Philipson, 1915. Biography pp. 36–38 and memoir pp. 324–329: two kinds of source describing the gathering's framework. Discussion · 28

10. Kosslyn et al., “Hypnotic Visual Illusion Alters Color Processing in the Brain,” 2000, pp. 1279–1284. This experimental example concerns perception, not evidence of the Petersburg assembly. Discussion · 33

11. Okunov teshurah, 5769, p. 44, entry 121 and note 58. Read the main entry and the note's recollection separately; check which question is attached to the old book. Discussion · 8

12. Mondshine, Sippurim Ve-Gilguleihem, chapters 1 and 7. Two examples of checking textual transformations and recollections; neither article decides the Katol story. Discussion

13. Borochoy, "המאמר שר' יהושע לא היה מאשר לפרסם", 2014. An editor's testimony about identifying a datum's source even when presented as official. Discussion

14. Ha'arot U-Vi'urim, 5775, pp. 81–82, note 1. Avraham Goldschmid's article shows differences between versions and why not every substitution is קטול versus הרוג. Discussion · 11

15. Didan Netzach—Thirty Years, 5777, p. 16. Compare with the Okunov teshurah: here a book is said to have been found, followed by a search in other printings. Discussion · 11