The medieval Hebrew book, as refracted through the prism of the many diverse manuscripts now available for our inspection, often seems perplexingly left in mediis rebus and intrinsically incomplete, with the author confusingly hesitant, undecided, sometimes even self-contradictory, with regard to central issues in his work. As is well understood now, many of these textual difficulties arise from the objective technical limitations of the medieval hand-written book and its trade. They do not originate with the author, and are mostly extraneous and incidental. Although we are by no means in a position to provide a comprehensive list of the obstacles and hindrances encountered in the writing and dissemination of medieval, hand-written books, we shall mention in passing a few simple examples of these phenomena. However, we shall concentrate our attention more on subjective factors, and on deeper, internal problems involved in authoring a medieval Hebrew book. These problems, although strongly connected with the realities of the medieval book trade, nevertheless originated with the author himself, and were entirely independent of later, external, events.

A long and intensive review of the medieval Hebrew book indicates that quite often books were not meant by their authors to serve as final statements, but rather as presentations of an interim state of knowledge or opinion, somewhat like our computerized databases, which are constantly updated and which give the user a summary of the data known at the time of the latest updating. In a similar way, the medieval book was sometimes conceived of as no more than a solid basis for possible future alterations by the author himself. There were many reasons – some philosophical and psychological, others purely technical – for this profound phenomenon, which can give rise to serious problems as to finality, authorship and authority of a given text of a work.

There was, of course, constant concern over simple errors of copying, which were frequent and widespread, because scribes, especially in medieval Jewish Europe, were usually recruited from the lower, less educated, echelons of society. Scribal errata vary
from one manuscript to another, occur at the most unexpected—and unsuspected—places, tend to proliferate, and there is no known way of totally avoiding them. When the exact original wording—sometimes even spelling—was of great importance to the author, a single master-codex (or sometimes two) was carefully made and deposited at a central locale, to which all future copies could be referred for verification. Classical examples of this strategy are the Aleppo Bible codex, Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, whose *Masterscodex* (if not actually its master-codex) was kept by Maimonides himself and by his descendants for many generations, and Rabbi Meir Abulafia’s *Masoret seyag la-Torah*, on the biblical Masora, whose master-copy, plus two *Masterscodices* of actual Torah scrolls written in accordance with it, were placed in Burgos. But the problem of miscopying is wholly external and outside the author’s responsibility, and need not trouble us here.

Another type of problem which will not be dealt with here, is the problem of the book which appears *prima facie* to be ‘open’, but which was not meant originally to be so: it has actually been ‘opened up’ by its readers, not by the author himself. The books of ‘She’ilot’ by Rabbi Aḥa of Shabḥa, and the ‘Halakhot gedolot’ of Rabbi Simeon Qayara, are excellent examples of this phenomenon, being prone, by their very nature, to the assimilation of additional halakhic material of a similar kind, and to an ongoing process of editing. The Seder Rav Amram Gaon, the classical Jewish prayerbook, was so much reworked and even rewritten in the Middle Ages, in accordance with the different local rites and customs, that it is almost impossible for us now to discover its original wording. This type of textual variation is completely independent of the author, and is, therefore outside the scope of our present interest.

Publication of original books in the Middle Ages, as in earlier periods, was achieved by releasing the manuscript to be copied by a professional copyist, or by a private individual for his own use. Further changes, corrections and additions, not to mention point-blank retractions were, in most cases, out of the question, as the author had no effective way of contacting his audience, and informing them of the changes. The decision that a book was indeed ripe for publication was, therefore, of paramount importance: it was, perhaps, the most important decision the author had to take. On the other hand one must remember that in most

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places, and certainly in the Franco-German sphere, the Jewish communities were rather small, mainly sedentary and very decentralized. Distribution of further copies of a work was not the author's duty, nor had he the means to undertake it. The book was disseminated by the readers themselves, who had an interest in acquiring a copy, and who actually paid the high prices for the parchment and the reproduction. From the psychological point of view, the author generally had in mind a small and quite restricted community of potential readers, with whom he could hope to keep in contact with relative ease for as long as he lived. One should also keep in mind that in the Middle Ages a book, every book, within its frame of reference, was meant to serve a practical purpose as an essential aid to the student, and the author was always under a moral obligation to improve and update his work as best he could.

Let us take as an example the commentary of Rashi to the Pentateuch. Over one hundred complete manuscripts of this work exist today, and many more are extant in fragmentary form. It is astonishing to see how diverse all these texts are. They differ, for the most part, in richness of style and verbosity, while remaining faithful to the actual exegetical content and context. But comparison of the manuscripts also shows that they have many additional, and/or missing, paragraphs. Professor Elazar Touitou recently proposed the revolutionary thesis that whatever is not found in all Rashi manuscripts should be considered unoriginal and a later addition. He argued that no one would dare omit anything from the original, though some scribes would have been ready to make additions (presumably with a graphic note, or sign, that could have fallen out with time). This thesis was refuted by Professor Avraham Grossman, who proved that many original paragraphs, whose authenticity is testified by Rabbi Shemaya, Rashi's devoted pupil, in his handwritten copy of Rashi's commentary (MS Leipzig 1), and in his own commentary, are missing in many manuscripts. Indeed, Touitou's position was untenable even without Grossman's manuscript proof, because the many purely stylistic variants mentioned above make the possibility of scribal intervention implausible, and point clearly to Rashi himself as their author. Contrary to common opinion, Rashi did not aim his commentary at simple folk, who would probably not have been able even to understand his Hebrew, but to a limited elite group of French and German scholars, for whom he produced a constantly improved

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3 E. Touitou, 'Concerning the presumed original version of Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch' (Heb.), Tarbiq, 56 (1987), 211-42.

4 A. Grossman, 'Marginal notes and addenda of R. Shemaia and the text of Rashi's Biblical Commentary' (Heb.), Tarbiq, 60 (1990), 67-98. See now Touitou's repl. 'Does Ms. Leipzig 1 really reflect an authentic version of Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch?' (Heb.), Tarbiq, 61 (1991), 61-84.
version of his commentary, done either by himself or by intimate pupils such as Rabbi Shemaya, Rabbi Simhah and the great Rashbam, who studied 'before him', and acted upon his orders and wishes, very much like literary secretaries of modern times.

Another possibility must be taken into account here, namely that Rashi read out his commentary to students of his inner circle and they 'copied', or rather, 'recorded' his words in their copybooks, with slight stylistic variations, caused by individual differences of inner, mental, listening. Substantial evidence for a scriptorium origin of our medieval Hebrew literature does not exist, but personal copy-books of the type described here might well have been in use in eleventh-twelfth centuries Franco-German communities. I must add here that recently I have found proof that Rashi wrote an earlier version of his commentary to the Pentateuch, and that the current version, with all its variants, is a shortened version of the original, much longer, commentary, which was heavily abridged by the author himself.

Rashi was not the inventor of this type of open book. His great German teachers, Rabbi Isaac b. R. Judah and Rabbi Isaac Ha-Levi, and their teachers, the great German rabbis of the first half of the eleventh century, heads of the Mayence Yeshivah (starting with the famous Rabbenu Gershom Me’or Ha-Golah), did very much the same, as can easily be seen from the well-known *Perush Rabbenu Gershom Me’or Ha-Gola* on a number of Talmudic tractates. This commentary, the first of its kind to be written in Europe, originally covered most of the Talmud, but it was soon surpassed and superseded by the classic Talmud commentary of Rashi, and fell into total disuse, with the exception of a few tractates that were not dealt with by Rashi. This work carries the name of Rabbenu Gershon Me’or Ha-Gola though he did not actually write it, because he conceived and initiated it in his role as the founder and first principal of the Yeshivah in Mayence. During almost a century of activity, the academy in Mayence labourd through the Talmud many times over, its heads supervising the ongoing process of rewriting and re-editing the 'official' commentary, adding to and subtracting substantively from it from generation to generation, as can be deduced from the differences between the few manuscripts still in existence. I cannot discuss here in depth the many aspects of this type of open book, but I must add that this work was not the only example of this kind. The same sages who endeavoured to create this Talmud commentary, took pains to do the same for the Midrash, for the ancient *piyyutim* and probably also for all other literary works that were studied at the time as part of the official curriculum of the academy. Eleventh

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5 See I. Ta-Shma, 'Al perushei Rabbenu Gershon Me’or Ha-Golah la-Talmud', *Qiryat Sefer*, 53 (1978), 557-77.
century German commentaries on the *piyyutim* and on some Midrashim are still extant in manuscript and they reflect the same literary phenomenon.

This type of open book was common to both Franco-Germany and to Spain, Moslem and Christian alike, as we shall see soon, but the Franco-German scholars brought the technique to its extreme point of development, by applying the principle with equal energy to other classical and semi-classical books, which they had not themselves authored, including the authoritative Talmud itself, which was actually 'opened' by them. Correcting versions of the Talmud in response to various kinds of logical and philological considerations was widespread in France and Germany, and the same approach was applied with no less ease to all other books of lesser standing, accepted there as worthy of study. And if this attitude was tolerated with regard to other people's books, how much more was it considered necessary with regard to one's own original compositions.

Two main types of revision were current in medieval Hebrew literature, one arising from personal, internal, progress and development, the other from external coercion. The first type is found mostly in early works, which were re-thought by their authors at a more advanced stage of their lives. Changes of this type affected, in most cases, specific sentences, or paragraphs, of the original, leaving the main body of text intact. A classic example would be Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishnah*, finished - and made public - at the early age of thirty, and emended regularly throughout the rest of his life, three more-or-less distinct versions actually being published and still in existence. In these revisions Maimonides was probably able to achieve control of the text in his immediate vicinity, but not farther afield. When the reliability of the text seemed especially important to him, as in his *Mishneh Torah* - which, as a major code of law, could hardly tolerate inaccuracies - Maimonides went to the trouble of marking his personal endorsement on the parchment, or authorizing a member of his household to check the manuscript and mark his endorsement. A somewhat different example is the *Halakhot rabbati* by Rabbi Isaac Alfasi. This classic was composed in North Africa during the

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second third of the eleventh century, and disseminated by releasing copies of it to a select group of disciples, who served as rabbis in the cities of North Africa and Muslim Spain. Alfasi kept revising his opinions for the remaining forty years of his life, but by up-dating this inner group of disciples, who had received the original copies, he could be sure that his corrections would be inserted in most of the existing copies, each disciple probably keeping track of all further copies commissioned by himself. Needless to say, the technique was probably effective only as long as Rabbi Alfasi was alive and active, but as time passed by, the proliferation and diffusion of copies got out of control, and many different variants appeared in the academies, many of which are still extant.

Other examples belonging to this category are the large collections of novellae to the Talmud written by the Spanish rabbis Solomon ben Aderet (Rashba) and Yom-Tov Ashbili (Ritva) towards the end of the thirteenth century. These two great scholars stood at the head of two large Yeshivot, and wrote down their novellae year in year out, as they were teaching the various tractates in an annual cycle. When the academy studied the same tractate again, these authorities added to, or sometimes retracted from, their earlier novellae. In this case the new 'edition' was not really meant to replace the old one, but rather to improve it and to serve side by side with it. Today we find many examples of such 'identical' novellae in the surviving manuscripts.

Changes could also be caused by criticism, as when a literary opponent claimed that a work was, to a greater or lesser degree, in error. Such criticism, once it was made public by copying, provoked a literary response, in which the author either admitted the correction, rejected it, polemicized against his opponent, or apologized for a misunderstanding or a scribal error. Errata could, of course, be discovered by the author himself, who would certainly wish to clear them up as soon as possible. In both cases, whether as the result of external criticism or his own decision, the author would take steps to improve his original work, by rewriting it and releasing it to the public as a new edition, or by writing a short summary of the main points requiring discussion or correction. Both techniques have their limitations: the first is very lengthy, slow and costly, the other is cryptic and puzzling to most readers.

An unusual and noteworthy method of revision was used by the Provençal Rabbi Avraham ben David, the famous Rabad of Posquières. This great man was engaged in a life-long altercation with his colleague Rabbi Zerayyah of Lunel, both criticising each other's work throughout their long lives. Rabad of Posquières, who was prone by nature to a constant revision of his earlier opinions, adopted a singular method of emending and re-editing his books to take account of his own changes of opinion and/or his acceptance of outside criticism. He formulated alternative sentences, sometimes
extending to full paragraphs, to be inserted by the reader (or by the professional copyist) in place of the retracted sentence (or paragraph). The new sentences had the same opening and closing words as the original, and were carefully formulated so as to thread easily and naturally into the original texture. By exchanging the new material for the older the owner of a manuscript could easily and cheaply upgrade his book. This may seem to us to be the most practical solution to the problem, but as a matter of fact it was not very much in vogue, because it created an embarrassing problem, as evidenced by Rabad himself. The new text which read so fluently as a natural replacement of the original, entirely hid the fact that it had come about as a response to Rabbi Zerahyah’s criticism, his name not being mentioned, of course, in the replacement paragraph. By admitting (to himself) Rabbi Zerahyah’s criticism and correcting his original text accordingly, Rabad made Rabbi Zerahyah’s critical treatise look absurd to anyone having before his eyes only the revised ‘original’, and not knowing that it was really not ‘original’ at all. Rabbi Zerahyah penned some very sharp comments on this practice, when he found out what had happened. As is well known, Rabad rewrote some of his books as many as three times, changing his halakhic views time and again and concealing, as it seems, behind the revisions many covert and tacit answers to open criticisms aimed at him by colleagues and opponents.

Rabbi Zerahyah himself stood at the opposite end of the spectrum, and his major work, a critique of the halakhic code of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi, was in process of being written for almost fifty years, being kept in the meantime in its author’s desk, in semi-privacy, before it was allowed to be copied and made public. This large and most extensive magnum opus is entirely homogeneous, with almost no internal contradictions, and hardly any changes of mind. We know that Rabbi Zerahyah did show his book to an inner circle of pupils and intimate friends, with whom he held discussions and who quote him here and there in their books, which appeared long before his own work was published. These are mostly oral quotations, which can easily be located in the subsequently published volumes. Zerahyah himself quotes, again orally, the views of this group, and these quotations can now, in certain instances, be located in their books, some of which were made available to the world at large only after Rabbi Zerahyah’s death.9

The second major type of rewriting current in medieval manuscripts is externally coerced. Sometimes a book was so much in demand that the author was persuaded to let it out of his hands

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9 These antithetic behaviours, and their historical implications, are explained at some length in my book Rabbinic literature in 12th century Provence (Heb.), (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1993), 129–35.
prematurely, pending the publication of the full, mature text, at some time in the future. This happened, for example, to Rabbi Yeruḥam ben Meshulam of Provence, who wrote his well-known book *Meisharim*, on monetary laws, in Spain, c. 1340. In his introduction he tells us that the book, which greatly facilitated the work of the judges, and was the first of its kind on the market, was so much in demand that it was literally snatched out of his hands, and he therefore apologizes to the readers who may find later, to their surprise, that other, much improved versions, are extant. Another interesting example of this phenomenon is found in some of Avraham ibn Ezra's commentaries to certain books of the Bible, and in many of his *opuscula minora*, which were re-written time and time again, with interesting variations, because the author was a wandering scholar, and constantly on the move. Wherever he visited, he was asked for one or more of his books. Sometimes he left behind his one and only copy, or, because he wanted to conceal or, rather, censor his own views, he wrote a special version for the occasion.