A publisher in service of his readers: prefaces to Amsterdam 1711 edition of the Tsene Rene

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ABSTRACT: The Amsterdam 1711 edition of the Tsene Rene is a particularly interesting because it contains prefaces that include allusions to and discussions of Yiddish texts and book production, the roles of publishers and the envisaged demands of readers. It enables us to determine and evaluate the status of books with the early modern Ashkenazi culture.

This presentation is for the following text(s):

- Tsene Rene

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The *Tsene Rene* is the ultimate bestseller of Yiddish literature up to date. It was composed just before or after the turn of the seventeenth century by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Janovo, and the first known edition of the book is the fourth edition published in 1622. Thereafter, numerous Yiddish editions were published as well as translations in many languages. It became popular throughout the Ashkenazi diaspora: from Amsterdam on the shores of the North Sea in Western Europe to the towns and shtetls of Eastern Europe. Although it is not a translation of the Torah but rather a commentary of the weekly lessons including *haftorot* and *megilot* and it was intended to be read by men and women alike, during the nineteenth and twentieth century Eastern European Jews dubbed the book as “female’s Torah”.

The publishing history of this popular book is as interesting as the book’s text. Because it has been such a popular book and regularly on demand, publishers were keen to release new editions of the book every couple of years. In particular cases publishers also decided to prepare an edition that would be considered better than the available editions. Attempting to produce an exemplary edition question concerning contents and format were tackled, language issues were addressed, and publishing decision processes on the one hand and needs and requirements of the reading public on the other hand were considered.

Hayyim Druker’s edition of the *Tsene Rene* published in Amsterdam in 1711 is one such edition. Moreover, Druker added information on the above mentioned issues on the book’s title page as well as including two prefaces that expounded on book production processes. Indeed, it can be argued the Druker himself composed both prefaces (the proofreader’s and the publisher’s) aspiring to get his message through to different audiences: buyers, readers (who may not buy a copy of the edition), colleagues within the local Jewish book industry guild, and rabbis and intellectuals who may encourage Ashkenazim to purchase a copy of this edition. Thus, studying these texts may open a window to Ashkenazi culture in the early modern period: the role of Yiddish, of books,
publishers and readers, high and low culture, modernization process through the employment of the vernacular by the masses.

**Bibliography**

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The corrector’s preface

It is known that the book Tsene Rene is very practical for everyone who wants to understand Moses’ Torah and the prophets, and especially simple men and women who do not understand the Holy tongue. These people should read this book where everything is clear and honest and prepared in good Yiddish from the best commentators who have written on the five books of the Torah. Subsequently everyone is obliged to read there <in the book> every day and at least each Shabbat. And the one who really studies the book may be considered a learned man precisely as the one who understands Hebrew books. And he fulfils the duty before God exactly as someone who reads many books. However, editions of the Tsene Rene which were printed up to now are difficult to understand: firstly, because of the confused language which cannot be compared with <good> Yiddish, and not correctly set up. Consequently, it does not agree with the meaning of the verse; secondly, many matters and even complete verses are missing, and above all the old editions are inundated with mistakes. And when a person with good sense and willingness will read the book (these editions), he will find out that it is impossible to follow the text because of the many mistakes there. Therefore, many persons were angry after reading the book (these editions) and could not easily understand what is written in our holy Torah. Therefore we did our best and did not rest day and night until we removed all the existing obstacles. And we paved the path and purified it from all the obstructions and mistakes. And we created a path of life as is written in the Torah: it is the tree of life to all those who hold unto it. And undoubtedly, the one who will read <our edition> with intention and for heaven’s glory, will go through the path of life. Besides, you can be assured that in the book as a whole you’ll find fewer mistakes than in one page in the previous editions. Subsequently, in order
that nobody will miss a verse, we vocalized them and they are corrected according to the manner they appear in the Torah. Further, we added a plan where one may find the verses as they appear in Torah, Prophets and Chronicles. And we also added the Aramaic (Targum Sheni) text of the Book of Esther and the Aramaic text of Song of Songs. Also we placed each haftora after the customs of each weekly lesson and, consequently, you’ll be able to read <the book> with eagerness and without difficulties. Subsequently, each reader will recognize that such a Tsene Rene was never printed. Therefore, dear people do not be distressed because of money, since when you’ll read the book your hearts will be happy. And spare no money because with it we’ll buy our place in this and the other world. And we shall fulfil the words of the prophet: Here I send you the prophet Elijah in our days. Amen.

The publisher’s apology and preface

King David said to his son Shlomo when he gave him the inheritance, as is written in 1 Chronicles, chapter 28: “And you, Solomon my son, obey the God of your father and serve him with a submissive attitude and a willing spirit, for the Lord examines all minds and understands every motive of one’s thoughts.” And this is in Yiddish: You Shlomo my son, you should know that you should serve the God of your father with all your heart and you should be dedicated to God and correctly know him. And in order to correctly know God <one should know> that there are many secrets about it. Therefore, we must do our best and learn as much as possible. And this is achievable with the help of God’s glory as is to be found in many books, be it in Hebrew or in books printed in other languages: in Spanish and in Yiddish as our sages have done, fulfilling the words written in a verse from our holy Torah <Deuteronomy> chapter 27: “You must erect great stones and cover them with plaster. Then you must inscribe on them all the words of this law.” Rashi interprets: “in seventy languages”. Because God knew very well that Israel are spread among the nations and the majority does not understand the holy tongue in the simple way as taught to children of our generations. Therefore, our sages published Yiddish books or in the language of the location where Israel are living. Now because people are aware that many books are published in the language of the land of their dwelling, there are also many Yiddish books full of Torah and fear of God, as The Book of Good Heart, or The Burning Mirror and many more other books. And also the Tsene Rene which is fitting householders who are no intellectuals or women and young people and girls; these also can see (=study) the Torah with commentary. And now I would like to explain my own position, the reasons that drove me to publish such books
as The Book of Good Heart and now the Tsene Rene. <The reason> is that many people told me once and again that these books are quite practical for the simple man. But <the exiting editions> are printed in bad language and are full of mistakes. So, I thought that I would like to fulfil a duty and be of service to the multitude. But I do not have the capacity to launch such a project, because I am unable to produce a printing sheet on my own expenses. So, some two hundred people (men, women, lads and virgins) assembled <the needed money>. God bless them with longevity of life. They helped me very much to produce these books and paid a good price for printing sheets, and with this capital I could complete my work. Let God bless them seeing their offspring grow to study Torah, marry and performing good deeds.

But I have seen that the Tsene Rene was printed several times and copies of which are still extant (=on sale), nevertheless I decided to launch the project because on many occasions I read the book and I did not like the Yiddish (style). And the following occurred to me. When a Frenchman or a Spaniard wants to speak Yiddish (German?), he speaks Yiddish (German?) in the way he is speaking his own language. He does not know that each language possesses its own ornamentation. In this manner our Yiddish books were printed. But if one would read the Book of Good Heart or Ma'aseh HaShem (or, God’s Deeds) which were printed in Amsterdam, and now this Tsene Rene on the top of it, you shall admit that I am correct (=my complaints are justified). These books were fully reread (=studied, checked) and well rewritten (=re-stylized), and well checked before I have brought them to print. And therefore the rabbis lent their approbation to me, because they had seen what a work had been invested in this book. If I mention the <question> of mistakes only, one has done the best he could do and as is required. It is impossible to erase all mistakes despite everything (=the work invested). But one does his best and protects himself. Not as other printers who print badly and later do not ask (=do not care) when they see the black (ink) on the white (paper) and are able to increase their capital (=get richer). Not only they are writing (=printing) in bad language but also with many mistakes. But I must confess that I have seen one edition of Tsene Rene which was printed with illustrations. I did not find a mistake in any of the illustrations, but above, under and on the illustrations’ sides there are some <mistakes>. I must admit that the printer did a good job in placing correctly the illustrations, and the children have a nice shpil (=game, diversion) with them. But, thank God, here in Amsterdam this is not our practice. A good proofreading and a good language are our illustrations. One can look through the book. I trust God that one will not find in the book so many <mistakes, faults> as in four or five printing sheets of other editions, as I have found when <for instance> two, three lines <of the text> are missing.. It is possible that in my edition one word will be missing <at most>. <Indeed> there are things that are impossible to find <and they remain in the text>, but not as many as one finds in foreign Yiddish prints. If one would prepare an index <of such mistakes, faults> one would need four printing sheets. Therefore I thank God who helped me and <gave> me
the knowledge to complete this book as each person can see for himself. And confess the truth.

And let God help me bring forth more projects and print more books which I plan. I hope that my supporters will not forsake me, and thus my standing will be greater as I am not letting myself into folly with which one cannot buy his place in eternity. And all those who helped with the book, God will double and redouble their remuneration and they will see (=experience) consolation and be present at the building of Jerusalem.......
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Tsene Rene

1711

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 sayı ha רעניא

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ReadOnly
גנסון, כדי ורnoticed רבות ואחרים עתים מנהל מצה שאריעי (מכתב)

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