

Heller, Yom Tov Lipmann

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(1578–1654), Talmudic scholar. Born in Wallerstein, North Swabia, Yom Tov Lipmann Heller was a disciple of [Maharal](#) of Prague. A member of the rabbinic court of that city from about 1598 to 1624, Heller held the posts of rabbi of Nikolsburg (1624–1625), Vienna (1625–1627), Prague (1627–1629), [Niemirów](#) (1631–1634), Włodzimirz (mod. Ukr., [Volodymyr Volyns'kyi](#); 1634–1643), and [Kraków](#) (1643–1654).

Heller is best known as the author of the commentary on the *Mishnah* titled *Tosafot Yom Tov* (1614–1617). He wrote this text as a member of the Prague Society for the Study of Mishnah, which had been established by Maharal. *Tosafot Yom Tov* summarizes medieval Talmudic interpretations of the plain meaning of the Mishnah, and has remained a staple of traditional study to the present day.

Like Maharal, Heller was a proponent of an expanded curriculum of *Torah* study. In addition to the traditional study of *Talmud* and *halakhah*, he favored instruction in Bible and Hebrew grammar, Mishnah, *agadah*, and the Jerusalem Talmud. Medieval Jewish philosophy, geometry, natural science, and astronomy would also be included in the Torah curriculum. In *Tosafot Yom Tov* Heller quotes Euclid and refers obliquely to Aristotle. Heller was aware of the new astronomy of Tycho Brahe and endorsed aspects of it. He expressed opposition to the popularization of *Kabbalah* but later moderated that view.

Heller's second major work was *Ma'adane Yom Tov* (1619, 1628), a commentary to sections of the fourteenth-century Talmudic commentary of Asher ben Yehi'el, mainly on the laws of kashrut and prayer. The text reflects Heller's adherence to the school of Maharal, [Shelomoh Luria](#), and [Yo'el Sirkes](#) in opposing the authority of the *Shulḥan 'arukh*. His introduction to *Ma'adane Yom Tov* includes a powerful affirmation of fidelity to the plain sense of the Talmud as the fundamental source of Jewish law. The work contributed to the development of local halakhic traditions in Prague. In [Poland](#) during the 1640s, however, Heller seems to have changed his views concerning the *Shulḥan 'arukh*.

In 1626, Heller translated the medieval ethical work *Orḥot hayim* into Yiddish, and published it with a sermon on the topic of the 1625 plague in Vienna. In the sermon, he introduced an innovation, the daily recital of sections of *Orḥot hayim*, into the *liturgy* of the Jews of Vienna.

In 1629, Heller, then rabbi of Prague, was denounced to the Habsburg authorities and charged with having blasphemed Christianity, for arguing that Talmudic laws regarding idolatry applied to Christianity. Strife within the Prague Jewish community over issues of communal governance and taxation had escalated, and Heller was associated with the party of [Ya'akov Bassevi](#) and was apparently denounced by the latter's opponents. Heller's arrest also coincided with Habsburg efforts to enforce Counter-Reformation restrictions on Jewish life, and with political turns of events that would lead to Bassevi's own downfall two years later. Heller was imprisoned in Vienna for 40 days. After recanting his view, he was released, but was required to pay a heavy fine and was removed from his position as rabbi of Prague.

In thanksgiving for what he perceived as providential deliverance, Heller established an annual fast day and feast day to be observed by his family. He had at least 10 children and a multitude of descendants, many of whom have maintained these celebrations.

After moving to [Ukraine](#) in 1631, Heller took part in the affairs of the [Council of Four Lands](#). In 1640 he led a successful effort to reenact a sixteenth-century ban against the purchase of rabbinical offices in Poland. In about 1645, Heller wrote a memoir, *Megilat evah* (extant in both Hebrew and Yiddish versions), perhaps intending it to be read at his annual family observances. The work focuses on the events of 1629; a second section describes Heller's brush with the authorities in Włodzimirz in 1641. The work closes with the story of Heller's installation as rabbi in Kraków. (A third section, a nineteenth-century forgery, is attributed to Heller's son.)

Heller played a major role in the responses of Polish Jewish communities to the 1648–1649 massacres—for instance, the effort to free *'agunot* (wives of missing or disappeared husbands). He was also instrumental in creating the annual fast day of the twentieth of Sivan. Reluctantly, he wrote two liturgical poems (*seliḥot*) for that day. The first responds to messianic expectations for the year 1648 by emphasizing that the date of the Messiah's coming is not predestined. The second focuses on the horrors of the massacres themselves. The details (such as images of cats sewn into women's bellies) are mostly taken from Gavriel Schossburg's chronicle, *Petaḥ teshuvah*. The character Benish Ashkenazi in [Isaac Bashevis Singer's](#) novel *Satan in Goray* is based partly on Heller.

Heller is buried in the old Jewish cemetery of Kraków. There are various folk traditions about his gravesite.

Suggested Reading

Joseph M. Davis, *Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller: Portrait of a Seventeenth Century Rabbi* (Oxford, 2003); Judah Leib Maimon (J. L. Fishman-Maimon), ed., *Li-Khevod Yom Tov* (Jerusalem, 1955/56).

Author

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