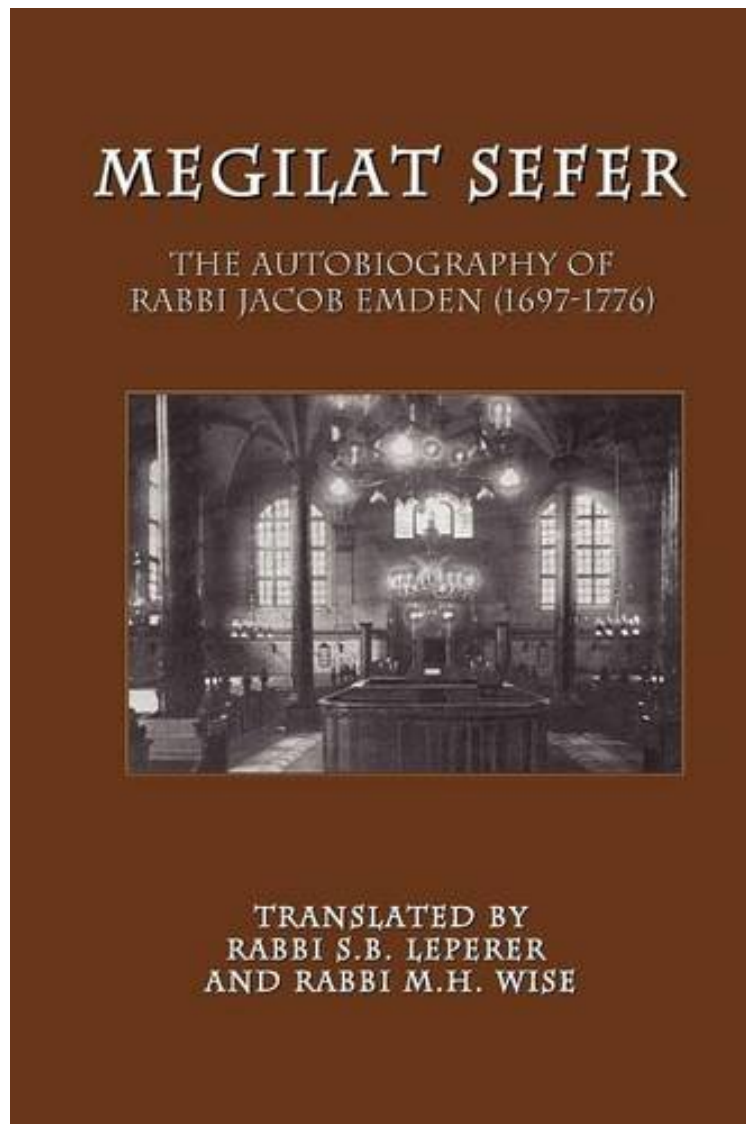


(Mobile pdf) Megilat Sefer: The Autobiography of Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776)

## Megilat Sefer: The Autobiography of Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776)

*Jacob Emden*

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**Jacob Emden : Megilat Sefer: The Autobiography of Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Megilat Sefer: The Autobiography of Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776):

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Gripping bookBy anglo avreichOnly two rabbis in history wrote biographies and Rabbi Jacob Emden was the first. The book is absolutely fascinating. The unique , original manuscript

is in the Bodlian library and this is the first time it has appeared in English. The Hebrew edition has been unavailable for over 20 years! This book, despite the reviews, became a best seller in 2011, and is rapidly running out. Anyone interested in Jewish history and life should buy one quickly. 8 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

depressing but educational  
By Michael Lewyn  
This autobiography appears to have been written in an alternate halachic universe, one in which negative speech was encouraged instead of discouraged. In it, 18th-c. German rabbi Jacob Emden dishes out both compliments and complaints (mostly the latter) about nearly everyone he ever met, including his wives and brothers. (Only his parents and children seem to have been exempt from his withering pen). For example, he described a publication by a rabbi he disliked as follows: "It as if an old and foolish man who, having left prison in order to rule over a box of reptiles, says `I am, and there is none other besides me.'" As depressing as Emden's litany of woe was, I did learn a little something here and there from this book. For example: \*A real sense of the precariousness of 18th-century life, even in times without significant religious persecution. Emden constantly mentions the premature death not only of his children and wives but of many others; in the absence of modern medicine, even mild problems such as a broken leg could lead to death. Life was as precarious financially as it was physically; most Jews were merchants whose prosperity was dependent on others paying their debts. So one tradesman's misfortune could create losses to that person's creditors. Were people happier? Emden sure wasn't; he wrote of his attacks of "melancholia" (which I assume means something roughly akin to depression today). \*The ability of premodern people to believe things that would strike most people today as superstitious or irrational. For example, Emden wrote that his great-grandfather could create a Golem (a kind of cross between a robot, a human, and a monster) and "sat all his days fasting, except for Sabbaths and Festivals." He also wrote that "no one could make disrespectful remarks to my father without avoiding punishment. For the Holy One, Blessed be He, demanded a heavy price (for such conduct)." Evidently, Emden lived in a mental world where vice was instantly punished. Of course, in a world where most people suffered devastating personal losses quite frequently, it was easier to believe this: everyone (not just the wicked) suffered more visible losses than today. \*The level of petty cruelty in close-knit communities. Jews were essentially self-governing, and were governed by communal councils that had the ability to do all kinds of things as long as gentiles weren't hurt. Emden supplies numerous examples of abuse of such authority- for example, censorship of books based on personal rivalries, excommunications for the most trivial of reasons, and decisions based on bribery rather than Jewish law. And when no faction gained a permanent majority, things were also bad: in one situation where rival factions fought for control of a synagogue, people "threw or pushed lecterns at one another." \*The weakness of extended families in an age without much travel or communication. For example, Emden could not attend his own daughters' weddings in Poland, and writes about his nephews, nieces, and in-laws: "since I am not acquainted with them or their names, I won't say anything more about them." Lesson: the good old days weren't so good.

The autobiography of Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776), now available for the first time in English translation. Translated directly from the original manuscript with notes.