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Curating Judaica in a Digital Age

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Curating Judaica in a Digital Age

Abstract
The changes the Library at the Katz Center has undergone over the last twenty years offer a vivid case study for exploring the impact of new technologies on the practices of Judaica librarianship and Judaic scholarship.

Disciplines
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Historically, the Library at the Katz Center may be traced to the chartering of the Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning in Philadelphia in 1907. Dropsie College self-consciously advanced the professionalization of traditional Jewish learning. It was the first institution ever accredited by a secular government authority, namely the State of Pennsylvania, to grant doctorates in Judaic studies. This rationalization of higher Jewish education through systematic training, testing, and accreditation represented the culmination of a previous century’s efforts to mainstream Jewish learning. This was to be done by wedding Jewish sacred subject matter—religious texts and the history of their interpretation—with a new authority vested not in chains of received wisdom but in scientific methods and academic institutions.

Dropsie College was progressive in conception, open to men and women of all races and beliefs. But the College also was emblematic of its time: it was a late Victorian bastion of scientism and male authority in which Jewish learning happened under the governance of professional men rather than rabbis. In 1986, Dropsie was transformed into a post-graduate research center renamed the Annenberg Research Institute (ARI). Included in this transformation, which occurred at the dawn of the digital age, was a program to modernize the library led by David M. Goldenberg, the last president of Dropsie and the first associate director of the ARI. In the late 1980s, Goldenberg hired Aviva Astrinsky from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who implemented the automation of the entire library collection, adopting the Library of Congress cataloging standards in place of the antiquated Freidus system developed at the New York Public Library, and introduced an operating system developed in Israel called Aleph, which made it possible to catalog and search in Hebrew characters. In addition, through the uploading of these records into a general, online bibliographical utility called RLIN (the Research Libraries Information Network), the Dropsie College library holdings as a whole were made known to the world for the first time.

On August 7, 1996, three years after the Annenberg Research Institute merged with the University of Pennsylvania and was renamed the Center for Judaic Studies (CJS), the CJS library celebrated a cataloging milestone: the creation of its 100,000th machine-readable record in its online catalog. This milestone, however, was not reached under the administration of the Katz Center. In 1994, CJS transferred the annual cost of staffing, operating, and building the Center’s library to Penn’s Library (separating the academic research and library programs for the first time in the institution’s history). Nonetheless, thanks to the vision and leadership of the Center’s director, David Ruderman, a new kind of scholar-librarian was proposed: a curator of Judaica collections. The curator, while working closely with the fellowship program, would integrate the building and management of the Center’s historic collections with Penn’s deep holdings in Judaica, which predated the merger of the two institutions.
FROM ACCESS TO INTEGRATION
A Neo-Genizah Model of Digital Judaica Librarianship

Until recently, scholar-librarians too often functioned as omnipotent gatekeepers who carefully guarded entrance to their palaces of learning, doling out access to those whom they judged qualified or otherwise favored. Some, pursuing their own scholarship based on collections under their control, simply refused to grant access to their unique holdings. The emergence of modern librarianship has directly challenged this traditional ethos and its exclusive practices by advancing a new standard: open access and public service. The older scholarly tools of Judaica cataloging and bibliography were as foreboding as they were inaccessible to the general public (consider Steinschneider’s massive two-volume Catalogus Librorum Hebraerum Bibliotheca Bodleiana [Catalogue of Hebrew Book in the Oxford Bodleian Library], which was written in a dense academic argot of Latin, German, and Hebrew). Automation and online cataloging, by contrast, offer free and open access to the same information in more user-friendly ways.

Access quickly became the buzzword during the early stages of the information age. Such access would serve to democratize knowledge and contribute to a vision of a new, open society that would subvert repressive regimes. Despite such grand expectations, the ideal brought daunting technological challenges. Intensive efforts went into the uniform cataloging of individual books, new techniques were developed for cross-referencing books by grouping their content according to agreed-upon subject headings, and new digital indexing tools emerged to expedite the location of articles in serials. But structural uniformity and siloed searching hindered the ability to find information in an integrated way across platforms. Integrated searching, also called federated searching, was still in its infancy.

To better illustrate this transformation and the new kinds of partnerships that have developed, consider the following three examples, which would have been unimaginable in the predigital age: integrated online searching, digital collections development, and web exhibitions.

NEW FORMS OF COLLECTING

By way of background, it is worth noting that a major post-war market of Jewish rare books and manuscripts, fueled in part by traditional Jewish bibliomania, but also, importantly, by post-Holocaust sensitivities and by sheer investment opportunities, dramatically increased the price of rare and unique works of Judaica. Market forces reduced the ability of even major research libraries to acquire the kinds of specialized materials that constitute the core holdings of a world-class library. These increased costs came at a time when the explosion of new formats of information technology—e.g., CD-ROMS, DVDs, and the persistent costs of licensed e-resources such as databases, e-books, and e-journals—posed (and continue to pose) additional financial pressures for all major university research libraries. These costs represent real and growing budgetary burdens that, significantly, have never been consistently factored into traditional Judaica library acquisitions needs.

Among the most important digital resources acquired during the last twenty years are Ma’agarim, The Online Database of the Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language, consisting of “a nine million word corpus drawing upon some 4,300 Hebrew sources from the classic rabbinic period (from ca. 2nd century BCE) through the geonic period (to ca. 11th century CE)”; the Bar Ilan Responsa Project, the “world’s largest full-text electronic database of Torah literature, including the Bible and its principal commentaries, the Talmud Bavli and Talmud Yerushalmi with commentaries, Midrash, Zohar, Halachic Law (Rambam, Shulchan Aruch with commentaries), a large Responsa collection of questions and answers, [and] the Talmudic Encyclopedia”; and the Encyclopaedia Judaica, second online edition, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik; the Hebrew publications of Ephraim Deinard (1846–1930), “one of the most important Judaica bibliographers of the early 20th century who helped to create the Hebraica collection at the Library of Congress.”

Notably, another kind of shift in Judaica collections development was triggered in part by the 2000–2001 fellowship year on “Modern Jewry and the Arts” at the Katz Center. That topic and the presentations that ensued made clear that Judaica collecting must go beyond printed texts and handwritten documents to incorporate the visual and performing arts. Consequently, entire collections of modern Jewish art and exhibition catalogs, commercial and documentary films, photography, music, dance, and theater in modern times all became ripe areas for acquisitions. In short, one enormous change that has taken place over the last twenty years is the recognition that developing Judaica research collections today involves actively collecting non-textual forms of Jewish creative expression in addition to traditional areas of print purchases.
INTEGRATED SEARCH AND DISCOVERY

For Penn’s Judaica collections, the impetus to integrate searching originated in a practical problem. When the Center’s library became part of the university’s library system, Penn’s Judaica collections spread across multiple locations on and off campus. The challenge of physical dispersion came into sharp focus when the library received a gift from Jeffrey Keil—Penn alumnus and member of the Penn Libraries’ Board of Overseers—to scan, catalog, and place Penn’s Genizah fragments online in partnership with Cambridge University. Penn’s Cairo Genizah fragment collections, like Penn’s Judaica collections, were dispersed throughout the library system, each group under separate curatorial control. The question was how to provide integrated access to all holdings while respecting the autonomy of the individual departments within the university (both within and outside the library, since the University Museum collection was not under the library’s jurisdiction). We needed a new kind of Judaic digital ecology, an integrated network for searching and discovering meaningful relationships among physically dispersed collections.

The potentialities underlying this idea were born at the turn of the millennium when the Penn Libraries and the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit of the Cambridge University Library pioneer-tested a system, first proposed by Professor Stefan Reif, Director of the T-S Geniza Research Unit at Cambridge, and Michael Ryan, Director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Penn, to virtually reunitethe dispersed manuscript fragments from the Cairo Genizah. Written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic, these fragmentary remains document the social, cultural, and religious lives of Jews around the Mediterranean basin, mainly from the ninth through the fifteenth centuries. The fragments were removed in the late nineteenth century from the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, a neighborhood in Old Cairo. Hundreds of thousands wound up scattered around the world. This collaborative effort led to the creation of a website that displays selected holdings of three distinct institutions: Penn, Cambridge, and the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. More than sixty fragments were digitally matched to their mates in other libraries.

In the course of this project it became clear that our Cairo Genizah project partnership offered a useful model for explaining and demonstrating digital integration: physically dispersed, yet intellectually related primary sources that, through uniform cataloging, scanning, and public interfaces, can be searched, connections discovered, specific items visually displayed and juxtaposed, compared and interpreted. From Penn’s first Genizah project, we learned that successful projects require active, consciously planned efforts by multiple institutions and private collectors working together as cooperative communities of locally driven Judaica projects.

The first direct application of the digital Genizah model of integrated access was the formation of the Jesselson-Kaplan American Genizah Project, an international initiative to integrate digital technologies into the way we study early American Jewry. Its primary goal, like that of its predecessor, was to create an open access digital “genizah,” or online repository, of physically dispersed primary sources. The “American Genizah” would be devoted to documenting Jewish life in the Western Hemisphere from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries.

Beginning in January of 2006, a small group of scholars, library professionals, and private collectors convened to form a National Advisory Committee for the digitization of rare Judaica Americana. The impetus for this project originated in discussions in the fall of 2005 between Arnold Kaplan and Arthur Kiron about how to provide open access to the Kaplans’ exceptionally important yet inaccessible private collection. The goal of the initial project was to locate, scan, catalog, and transcribe the dispersed correspondence of Isaac Leeser (1806–1868), widely regarded as the most important antebellum American Jewish leader, and an architect of organized Jewish life. Leeser’s personal library had been transferred to Dropsie College in 1912, but hundreds of documents had disappeared over time. During the 1990s, individual letters began appearing, one by one, through online sale and auction. The Leeser project gained a sense of urgency in order to redress the ongoing dispersal.

In 2006, shortly after the American Genizah project advisory committee formed, the Penn Libraries received a start-up grant from the Gershwind and Bennett families to begin developing the project. In the course of the Leeser initiative, new partnerships formed with the National Library of Israel, Tel Aviv University, the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and many other institutions and private collectors. All worked together to locate, scan, transcribe, and provide unrestricted online access to significant documents of early American Jewish history.

In the spring of 2013, the Penn Libraries launched a new website, the Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digitization Project, featuring access to the personal papers and publications of Isaac Leeser. The Leeser site is the first of what we hope will be a continuing number of digital initiatives as part of our Jesselson-Kaplan American Genizah Project.
THE HOLY LAND PROJECT

Building on the advances and possibilities first imagined through the Cairo and American Genizah Digital Projects, the Penn Libraries, the National Library of Israel (NLI), and other potential partners around the world have digitized and cataloged photographic and textual content about the Land of Israel. In August of 2012, Penn’s entire Lenkin collection of early Holy Land photographs, numbering over 6,000, was digitally photographed. The Penn Libraries and the NLI are embarking on a project to link the images and metadata dynamically, and to partner internationally with related collections to produce a comprehensive digital repository of texts, maps, and images of the Land of Israel.

WEB EXHIBITS

A Katz Center–Libraries Partnership

In the year 2000, during the year on Christian Hebraism at the Katz Center, a new form of partnership emerged between the Center and the Penn Libraries. One of that year’s fellows, Stephen Burnett, a professor of early modern print culture and a trained librarian, proposed that the library host an exhibition of our rare holdings. As in the case of our Genizah project, a practical obstacle led to a creative innovation. The Katz Center lacked the physical space and layout for a physical exhibit. However, with the establishment in 1996 of the Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image, an early laboratory for digital humanities, the Penn Libraries had the ability to produce web exhibits. A new model quickly emerged. In place of the single curator model, a distributed model of curatorship emerged. Each of our fellows would be enlisted to write captions explaining the significance of their research and draw upon original primary sources in Penn’s rare collections to illustrate his or her work. Not only did the web exhibition turn out to be a fascinating undertaking, whose unforeseen final product surprised everyone, it also offered a means of documenting each year’s research theme in a concrete way and sharing it in an encapsulated form with a global audience. The web exhibit partnership between the fellowship program and the Libraries now bears annual witness to how digital technologies, primary sources, and scholars can be brought together in new and creative ways.

CONCLUSION

By transcending traditional barriers, by discovering new relationships, and by sharing these opportunities for learning, the Penn Libraries and Penn’s Judaica collection are working to revolutionize the classical delivery system of human knowledge—the library itself. This revolution has not only been technological, it also has been social. What was once the dominion of privileged elites is now open for all to see and discover. Such new approaches illuminate what has always been the quiet virtue of libraries: the freedom they confer on individuals to pursue learning wherever it may take them, without obstacles, across time and space.