Jewish Libraries and Archives in America

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Essays and Research

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PEARL BERGER

ABSTRACT

In celebration of the occasion of the 350th anniversary of Jewish immigration to America, this paper takes a look back and then looks forward, highlighting both achievements and challenges in the realms of Jewish libraries and archives as well as their associated professions. The paper scans the past fifty years, since the tercentenary in 1954, pointing to evidence of much growth and expansion. It then proceeds to discuss areas of development for the future, taking into account opportunities presented by the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

American Jews are celebrating their 350th anniversary as a community, and indeed with respect to American Jewish libraries and archives there is definite cause for celebration. There is also much to anticipate and a great deal to accomplish as our digital age matures. This paper takes a look both backward and forward, highlighting both achievements and challenges. First, as befits the occasion, the good news.

By American Jewish libraries and archives, we mean libraries and archives in America with a focus on collecting materials of Jewish interest, be they under Jewish or non-Jewish auspices. The November 2004 colloquium, “The State of Jewish Learning in America,” was a fine example of both, being a collaboration between the Baltimore Hebrew University and the Library of Congress.

Maxwell Whiteman, archivist and historian, has written:

Nothing had a greater impact on elevating interest in the American Jewish past than the 1954 Tercentenary of Jews on American soil . . . It became apparent that most Jewish sponsored libraries had amassed a wealth of Jewish books and manuscripts . . . The new awareness of

*Based on a paper presented at “The State of Jewish Learning in America,” a colloquium co-sponsored by Baltimore Hebrew University and the Library of Congress, in celebration of the 350th anniversary of American Jewish community. The colloquium was held on November 9, 2004, at the Library of Congress.
available resources, and increasing sensitivity to Jewish librarianship, combined with the excitement generated by the Tercentenary to inspire the founding of local Jewish historical societies and independent archives.


In fact, these past fifty years, from 1954 to 2004, are a period of incredible growth—growth in the number of institutions and repositories with collecting interest in Jewish Studies, growth in the richness of collections housed in American institutions, and growth in the professionalism and sophistication of Judaica librarians.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

The Association of Jewish Libraries, founded in 1965 in a merger of two organizations, now boasts an annual membership in excess of 1,100 individuals and institutions. With two divisions, for Research and Special libraries, and for School, Synagogue and Center libraries, the Association addresses issues across the entire field. Member librarians represent institutions as diverse as Princeton, University of Judaism, Ramaz lower and upper schools, Jewish community centers, temples, and synagogues.

The Association presents annual book awards for reference works and children’s literature. It runs an annual conference, and maintains a website and a very active listserv. It publishes a quarterly newsletter, a journal, and proceedings, and it sponsors a host of other activities supporting American Jewish libraries and librarians. The quality and quantity of American Jewish literature for children is an important focus of the Association. Conferences devoted to Jewish children’s literature are held almost every year; book reviews appear in the AJL Newsletter; and a recently established, freely accessible website, The New Jewish Values Finder, offers “A Guide to Values in Jewish Children’s Books.”

Another organization, the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies (CARLJS), an association of institutions hosted under the auspices of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, provides a forum for institutional cooperation, and offers grants for preservation of library and archival collections under the Fund for Jewish Cultural Preservation.

YEARS OF EXPANSION

Looking back upon the twenty-five years from 1964 to 1989, the bibliographer Robert Singerman notes:

The long-established and deservedly renowned research collections at Harvard, the Library of Congress, and the New York Public Library, as well as the seminary libraries at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
New Judaica research libraries were established during that period, primarily in support of Jewish Studies programs at American universities created in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these libraries established significant research collections. Among them are Brandeis University, Indiana University, Ohio State University, Stanford University, the State University of New York (Binghamton), the Universities of California (Los Angeles), Denver, Florida, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Texas (Austin), Wisconsin, and others.

The Harvard College Library’s Judaica Division was established in 1962. The Division is built on the foundation of collections acquired in the early part of the twentieth century and before, most significantly with Harry Austryn Wolfson’s 1930 acquisition (through a gift from Lucius N. Littauer), of the 12,000-volume Deinard Hebraica collection. It was in 1925 that Littauer endowed at Harvard the first chair in Jewish (not Semitic) Studies at an American university (Berlin, 2004, pp. 11–15). The collection goals articulated in the division’s mission statement express what we would all wish to see covered by American Jewish research collections: “The Judaica Collection of the Harvard College Library has as its mission the documentation of the Jewish people throughout history . . . The division collects in great depth materials covering all aspects of Jewish life and culture in every place and period, particularly . . . Israel” (Berlin, 2004, p. 1).

A pivotal event in the history of American Jewish libraries—one that shook up the library community, the Jewish community, and certainly the Jewish library community—occurred when the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America survived the tragic fire of 1966. It raised the public’s consciousness regarding the vulnerability of library collections and the importance of appropriate preservation measures. Despite significant losses and with support and generosity from many segments of the community, collections were restored and re-cataloged. Appropriately, on Hanukkah in 1983, formal ceremonies were held to dedicate the Seminary’s new library building (Degani, 1988, p. 87).

With regard to archival collections, Nathan Kaganoff, librarian of the American Jewish Historical Society, wrote about the 1980s: “It can be stated without exaggeration that the last decade has witnessed more developments and greater advances in Jewish archives in America than in the previous two hundred years of Jewish life in the United States.” Kaganoff speaks of both the establishment of new organizations—historical societies, local and national archival agencies, and of documentation about the collections (Kaganoff, 1991–1992, p. 50). In addition to such organizations of a general nature, the past half-century has been witness to the establishment of a host of specialized agencies—Holocaust collections and genealogical societies are two prime examples dedicated to a specific field. The National Center for Jewish Film, a motion picture archive at Brandeis, and the Milken Archive of American Jewish Music are two instances of collections dedicated to particular formats.
The last quarter century was witness to new and creative undertakings, some of which have met with stunning success. Aaron Lansky’s National Yiddish Book Center, founded in 1980, has rescued more than 1.5 million Yiddish volumes, and now offers Yiddish books on demand under the auspices of the Stephen Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library. The Jewish Women’s Archive, founded by Gail Twersky Reimer in 1995, has as its mission “to uncover, chronicle and transmit the rich legacy of Jewish women and their contributions to our families and communities, to our people and our world.” Jonathan Sarna pointed out in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* how this, along with current research and publications about Jewish women, stands in stark contrast to the theme of the 1954 Tercentenary, “Man’s Opportunities and Responsibilities under Freedom,” where “the role of women scarcely figured in that commemoration” (Sarna, 2004).

The simultaneous expansion and consolidation of several Jewish libraries and archives occurred just a few years ago, when Eastern and Western Europe—and the Sephardic realm—were brought together with the formation of the Center for Jewish History in New York City. The Center gathers under one roof the rich and diverse cultural collections of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Leo Baeck Institute, the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, and the Yeshiva University Museum. To quote its website:

> The Center will serve the worldwide academic and general communities with combined holdings of approximately 100 million archival documents, a half million books, and thousands of photographs, artifacts, paintings and textiles—the largest repository documenting the Jewish experience outside of Israel.

The size and quality of American Jewish library and archival collections have been greatly enhanced during the period of which we speak. A 1989 survey cited by Michael Grunberger measures the growth of Judaic library collections from two million volumes to three-and-one-half million volumes in a fifteen-year period. I am not aware of any such current survey but given the flourishing Jewish Studies publishing industry, in all likelihood the growth since then would be equally impressive.

Rare items, books and manuscripts, made their way into libraries and archives via gifts, bequests, and auction purchases enriching the holdings of American collections. So much was lost during the Holocaust, yet much found its way from Europe to America. The core of Yeshiva University’s rare book collection, for example, is the Baruch Strauss collection, which was acquired from London in the 1960s. The recent auction of the 450 manuscripts in the Montefiore collection, at Sotheby’s in New York, is a very current example of the movement of rare items—hopefully, many have found, or will find homes in library collections and will be available to scholars.

The Judaica Conservancy Foundation was established in the mid-1980s to deal with the contested Sotheby’s auction of items from the library of the
Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums in Berlin. The materials were divided among Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Yeshiva University, Jewish National and University Library, Leo Baeck Institute, and Leo Baeck College in London—four of these being American libraries (Zafren, 1989).

**CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE**

It would be a mistake to assume, based upon all this good news, that *kosenu revayah*, that our cup runneth over. In fact our cup is not more than half full. Old problems continue to plague American Jewish libraries and archives, as they are joined by the new challenges of the digital age:

◊ Many of our libraries have significant backlogs or arrearages, that is, books not yet cataloged.
◊ Despite a major effort some years ago under the auspices of CARLJS, we do not have a current directory of archival repositories of Jewish interest.
◊ We have not developed any sort of cooperative program for collection development to divide responsibility and ensure the acquisition of unusual or high-cost materials.
◊ We are still faced with the need to preserve many volumes that are deteriorating.
◊ Primary-source materials are dispersed, and many are lost to research when they are either discarded or sold to private collectors. A collection is always equal to more than the sum of its parts, since at the very least it reflects the intellectual input of the collector. Yet many such collections are sold to dealers or at auction every year, with documents being separated and often lost to the research community.
◊ We can expect a significant number of retirements in the field in the next five to ten years, yet we see few young people entering the profession. The American Library Association recently mounted an energetic campaign to raise the profile and compensation of librarians. Why should bright young men and women opt for a career in libraries, when a whole world of more lucrative opportunities is open to them?
◊ While some of our Jewish academic and educational institutions take great pride in their libraries and in their research collections, others keep them on the back burner for budgeting and fundraising. Preserving our cultural heritage is a costly proposition, and libraries need care and feeding in order to flourish.
◊ Along with all libraries, Jewish libraries face the notion held by some, that libraries as a whole are irrelevant in the electronic age.
This should not come as a surprise when the profession gets the kind of press that appeared in a recent *New York Times Book Review*: “Poor librarians. Soon, no doubt, to go the way of blacksmiths and town criers, their chosen profession made obsolete by Internet search engines and self perpetuating electronic databases” (Genzlinger, 2004, p. 12). The role of the library and the librarian may be undergoing change, but we are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future.

And so we embrace the digital era, which brings great bounty to the work of libraries and archives, and helps address some of the long-standing, seemingly insurmountable problems. How do American Jewish libraries and archives measure up in this new environment? Can we point to significant successes? How shall we meet our challenges? Let us proceed to address some of these questions with a look at the digital impact upon Judaica library catalogs, journal collections in Jewish Studies, archives, and some issues of global dimensions faced by digital projects.

**Library Catalogs**

It is a commonplace today to find library catalogs on the Web. The card catalog is considered a relic of the past, although you may still find one in some of our libraries because some percentage of the information it holds has yet to be converted to digital format. Digitization of catalog information facilitates sharing and with implementation of the Z39.50 protocol, catalog data may be downloaded over the Web free of charge from one institution to another. At Yeshiva University, we often hear from colleagues that they download from our YULIS catalog. And of course, we all depend upon the cataloging done at the Library of Congress. While our libraries do still have backlogs of uncataloged collections, electronic processing enables us to deal with these far more efficiently.

In his 2003 Feinstein Lecture, “The Digital Library and the Jews,” Elhanan Adler asks, “What is unique about Judaica?” The first factor that he cites, that contributes to this uniqueness, is “multiple primary languages and scripts. The Jewish creativity has been recorded in dozens of languages, some of them uniquely Jewish ones” (Adler, 2003). Multiple scripts posed a challenge in the paper environment when we were producing catalog cards. Whether for reasons of cataloging policy or economics, libraries purchased the classic bilingual (Hebrew or Yiddish, and English) LC catalog cards, and supplemented them with hand-typed cards in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish. A card for a Hebrew book described that book in the Hebrew alphabet, usually as rendered on the title page.

Early electronic catalogs could not handle both the full Roman (English) and Hebrew alphabets combined, let alone deal with issues of bi-directionality, at least not without special set-ups. Libraries eager to computerize their catalogs in the 1970s and 1980s, while taking advantage of shared data over networks, moved to romanized catalogs—where Hebrew is expressed in Latin
characters. Thus, the *tsurat alef* (the form or appearance of the Hebrew letter) disappeared from everywhere in the library but the Hebrew item itself. In some of our institutions, librarians fought this trend and met with varying degrees of success. The major research libraries under Jewish auspices, at Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Yeshiva University, did not computerize until it was possible to do so using Hebrew script.

The early 1990s brought shared Hebrew data to America’s research libraries under the auspices of the Research Libraries Group, and now, with the adoption of the Unicode standard, the technical problems are more or less solved (Lerner, 2004a). Well before the turn of the century, the three libraries mentioned were able to offer bilingual catalogs accessible over the Web—as do others, such as the University of Judaism, the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, and Hebrew College (Boston). The Center for Jewish History, in New York City, will open its Web catalog some time soon, as well.

These catalogs display Hebrew and Latin characters, and may be searched in either alphabet. Bear in mind, however, that what one sees when looking at a catalog depends not only upon what is displayed, but also upon the capabilities and settings on the equipment being used. Academic and research institutions where Jewish Studies is not a primary focus are generally not offering Hebrew script in their library catalogs, as of yet. Smaller Jewish Studies collections in colleges, schools, centers, and houses of worship also have catalogs and they too are computerized. The software products that accommodate these libraries, however—which are far less powerful and far less costly than those used for the research collections—are only now beginning to offer Hebrew or at least considering doing so.

Underlying all this about Web catalogs, of course, is the assumption that Hebrew matters.

**Jewish Studies Journals**

I recently had a gratifying conversation with one of our newer faculty at Yeshiva University. While inquiring about a procedure for submitting book purchase requests to the library, a professor told me how wonderful it is that she can now access almost all of the journal articles she needs through the library’s electronic subscriptions. She especially appreciates that she can do this from her home. As you may have surmised, of course, the professor in question does not teach Jewish Studies. Her field is English.

Research and scholarship simply cannot take place without access to the journal literature. It is this literature, probably more than any other, that is being transformed by digital access. We are not there yet in Jewish Studies, but we have begun (Lerner, 2003). Providing electronic access to the journal literature in Jewish Studies is, to my mind, one of the more significant tasks facing American Jewish libraries if they are to meet the service requirements of the library patrons of today and tomorrow.
Let us review several points as background:

◊ In the fields of Jewish Studies, unlike the sciences, medicine, or business, it is not only the current research that is of primary interest. Much of the digitization of journal literature covers publications of the past decade or less, that is, issues that were produced using some form of digital technology. For Jewish Studies we need the current research, but as in other humanities fields, retrospective research is also of prime importance.

◊ It is well known that in every field there are core journals that are basic to the field and that, in addition, articles of interest and importance will be found in a wide assortment of journals outside of this core. Major Jewish Studies research libraries maintain relatively comprehensive paper collections of the core journals, thus providing their patrons with good coverage of the journal literature. (There are usually gaps in coverage, and newspapers present a separate set of issues. The American Jewish Periodicals Center, at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, must be noted as an important resource.) General academic libraries, however, with smaller or newer Judaic collections, may have less comprehensive coverage. With respect to the research published in journals outside of the Jewish Studies core, libraries that are part of a larger institution with a broad scope may well provide better access than a Jewish college or seminary library, because their collections span a wide range of disciplines and they have reason to collect these journals.

◊ Marketing models for journals that are available in electronic format often offer assorted titles together as packages rather than making them available on an individual basis, and the packages are expensive. Because of these marketing models and the associated costs, the Jewish Studies library may be less likely to have access to some electronic Jewish Studies journals, even core journals, than the general academic library that has the funds and the mandate to subscribe to major, cross-disciplinary electronic collections.

◊ The student of today and scholar of tomorrow, as we know, is not interested in paging laboriously through runs of journals or indexes to find information. The expectation is that the information will be available at the person’s desktop, wherever he or she may be located.

A significant source for Jewish Studies journals in electronic format is Project MUSE, hosted at Johns Hopkins University Press and providing electronic access to scholarly journals from academic publishers. As of August 2005, MUSE listed ten Judaic Studies titles as part of its collections. (These journals
may be accessed through individual title subscriptions either through MUSE, or
directly with the publisher.) The Muse titles are:

- *American Jewish History* (1996–)
- *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (2003–)
- *Israel Studies* (1996–)
- *Jewish Quarterly Review* (2005–)
- *Jewish Social Studies* (Spring/Summer 1999–)
- *Modern Judaism* (1996–)
- *Prooftexts* (2000–)
- *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* (Spring 2001–)

For retrospective coverage, there is the JSTOR database (the name derives
from *Journal STORage.*) JSTOR is a nonprofit endeavor whose mission it is to
build a reliable and comprehensive archive of important scholarly journal liter-
ature. To this end, JSTOR digitizes full runs of core journals in various disci-
plines, going back to the very first issue of the journal. It generally does not
include the most recent three to five years. What we need for Jewish Studies
journals is a Jewish JSTOR collection, and until very recently not one Jewish
Studies journal has been included in JSTOR. I raised this issue with several col-
leagues a couple of years ago and followed up with JSTOR staff, who asked me
to submit a list of titles. We have achieved a measure of success.

“Jewish Studies” is now listed among planned “future collections” on the
JSTOR website. In the spring of 2005, back issues of *Modern Judaism*
(1981–1999) became available in JSTOR, and *Jewish Quarterly Review* was
scheduled to be ready by the end of that year. Other titles whose publishers, I
am told, were contacted are:

- *AJS Review*
- *American Jewish History*
- *Hebrew Union College Annual*
- *Journal of Jewish Studies*
- *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*
- *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*
- *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*
- *Revue des études juives*

And I was recently asked by JSTOR about including the journal *Jewish Art*, for-
merly the *Journal of Jewish Art*, in one of its collections.

When these Jewish Studies journals become available in JSTOR it will likely
be as part of one of the existing large multidisciplinary collections. Many Jewish
libraries that will want the Jewish Studies titles have neither the need for the
large collections nor the funds to acquire them. At that time we will have to convince JSTOR to provide a separate Jewish Studies package. Such a development, I believe, would be a service to Jewish libraries and Jewish scholarship worldwide.

Before discussing archives, I should mention that there are a number of Jewish Studies journal digitization projects ongoing, most of them offering the texts free on the Web. These include the most recent issues of *American Jewish Archives*; the *American Jewess* (1895–1899, scheduled to be available from the University of Michigan); *American Jewish History* (for the years 1893–1979, previously known under the titles *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* and *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*); German journals from Compact Memory; several very important and extensive runs in the Jewish National and University Library’s Early Hebrew Press archive; and others. With respect to these freely available texts, it is the responsibility of the library to identify them, and to provide links to them for library patrons.

**Archives**

“Where are the archives of the Hebrew Technical School for Girls located?” With this question my colleague Zachary Baker, currently at Stanford, began an article published just a bit more than a decade ago, entitled “Jewish Archives and Their Whereabouts” (Baker, 1992–1993, pp. 131–134). In a piece running several pages, Mr. Baker, a highly skilled professional, proceeded to describe his methodology, the sources and the people he consulted in what was quite a lengthy process, and how he finally found the answer when he was referred to Prof. Jenna Weissman Joselit. And I quote: “Dr. Joselit did not find the school’s archives; they found her,” when she was invited to write a history of the institution. That was just over ten years ago. Today a simple Web search using Google will retrieve the information that the archives of HTSG, or a significant number of the papers that survive, are held by the New York Public Library (Jewish Foundation for Education of Women collection), and following the link will lead to the Library’s description and detailed online finding aid to the collection. The search is a process measured in seconds, requires little expertise, and its duration depends largely upon the speed of the network connection.

The primary point of telling this story, of course, is to underscore the transformational impact of today’s technology. The dispersal of collections is among the problems mentioned earlier that still face American Jewish libraries and archives. Electronic access goes far towards a solution to this problem. And the absence of a directory of Jewish archival repositories becomes far less serious, when the content and location of a collection can be identified by a search on the Web. One can only retrieve what is there, and we have a long road ahead before we reach the point when the contents of our archives are adequately described and accessible.

The central source of information about archival collections is the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, NUC-MC, as it is known, a free-of-
charge cooperative cataloging program operated by the Library of Congress. Printed volumes started in 1959, and the electronic version begins with 1986. So, if the materials you search for were described or entered (cataloged) after 1986, you should find them here through a Web search. This is a resource with tremendous potential for Jewish Studies. Indeed a current search of NUC-MC for the subject “Jews” or “Jewish” yielded a result of 8,658 collections.

So, the news is good regarding access to Jewish archives, because we now have the technical tools. The news is less than satisfactory, however, because of the overwhelming amount of work that needs to be done and the resources that will be required to accomplish all this.

Digital projects

A project announced by the YIVO Institute, to establish a digital archive on Jewish life in Poland (Gruss-Lipper, 2004) brings us to the next level, beyond access to information about collections and their location to access to the documents themselves. Publishing digital collections, is of course, the new wave. The Library of Congress’s American Memory site stands as a shining example to be studied and emulated. All who are not fortunate enough to visit Washington, D.C., in person may enjoy From Haven to Home, the exhibit celebrating the 350th anniversary, on the Web. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America website boasts several digitized collections, News about Jews, Ketubbot, and online exhibits. The New York Public Library’s Dorot Jewish Division, in cooperation with the National Yiddish Book Center, has digitized over 600 yizker bikher, memorial books to European Jewish communities, and made them freely accessible over the Web.

Libraries and archives across the country, large and small, are publishing digital collections and all of these will have to be brought together or tracked somehow. There are a number of projects to digitize the traditional literature, some undertaken by individuals such as Hebrewbooks.org, which concentrates primarily on Hebrew books published in the United States that are out of copyright. Otzar Ha-Hochma, a library of over 17,000 Hebrew books, became available as a Web product in Spring/Summer 2005. The Jewish National and University Library sponsors several excellent and extremely important digital projects, some in cooperation with other libraries. Other Israeli websites present full texts of traditional and classic Hebrew works.

Electronic books in Jewish Studies are also available from a variety of general collections such as Netlibrary, Ebrary, and the History E-book Project of the American Council of Learned Societies (Lerner, 2004b). (See the Appendix for a few examples of e-books in Jewish Studies.)

The possibilities are as vast as the collections, and among the primary challenges is what to select for digitization. If indeed our American Jewish libraries and archives can find the resources to mount digital collections, what takes precedence? Should we concentrate on manuscripts and archives, unique materials that need to be preserved? I envision, for example, a website
that brings together the corpus of Hebrew manuscripts fully digitized, appropriately annotated, and available to scholars wherever they may be. How may we take advantage of digital opportunities to launch cooperative or reciprocal projects such as the Penn/Cambridge Genizah Fragment Project, a collaborative effort to reunite virtually the dispersed fragments from the Cairo Genizah? Shall we direct our efforts, perhaps, at digitizing materials that will have a popular rather than scholarly appeal? Who is the primary audience and what do we wish to accomplish? How will we ensure that the digital collections themselves are preserved? All of these questions will be answered in different ways by the many American Jewish libraries and archives, under Jewish and non-Jewish auspices, that are entrusted with the records and artifacts of our cultural heritage.

I recently learned a new word, “Quatercentennial,” a 400-year celebration. It is intriguing, isn’t it, to wonder what will be said 50 years from now in 2054.

**SOURCES**

**PRINT:**


WEBSITES:


Penn/Cambridge Genizah Fragment Project (SCETI), http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/genizah/.

APPENDIX: SELECTED E-BOOKS IN JEWISH STUDIES

Ebrary:

Aschheim, Steven E. In Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans & Jews (publication date: 2000).


History e-books:


Synan, Edward A. *The Popes and the Jews in the Middle Ages* (publication date: 1965).

**Netlibrary:**


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