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Appraising Judaica and Hebraica Books: The Treasures on Your Shelves*

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Abstract: The four purposes for which one may need a book appraisal are: income tax and charitable presentation to institutions, insurance, buying and selling, and estate requirements. Some of the criteria used to determine whether it is worthwhile to obtain an appraisal of a book collection are: age, content, illustrations, place of publication, publisher, condition of the items, marginal notes, and previous owners. The evaluation of various items that may be donated to a synagogue or center library—English-language Judaica, Hebrew and Yiddish books, archival and primary source material—is also discussed.

Introduction

In the late 1950s there appeared in the *Chicago Daily News* a series of articles by Van Allen Bradley on old and rare books, entitled "Gold in Your Attic." The mere title brought readers to the edge of their seats; it was evocative and brought hope to all. It was as if people who had old books now had the prospect of finding gold. The articles were subsequently collected and published in book form.

Bradley began as follows:

"What about those old books in your attic? The chances are that most of them are worthless. On the other hand, they could be worth a small fortune" (1958, p. 5).

With all the fanfare that newspapers and magazines generate about auction sales, it certainly is worth checking out these old books.

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Definition and Purposes of Appraisal

What does appraisal mean and how does one go about it? Appraising means estimating the price that a particular book or set of books is worth, based on a whole range of factors. This estimate comes from: (a) checking auction prices, (b) checking catalogs of used and rare book stores and dealers, and (c) having a knowledge of books, the book trade and, in particular, the used and rare book market.

Why does one need an appraisal? There are four reasons:

1. For income tax and charitable presentation to institutions, in accordance with U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) regulations.
2. For insurance purposes.
3. For buying and selling—in other words, to have an idea of the price one should receive for a book or the price at which to sell it.
4. For estate purposes, in relation to Probate Court laws.

As is evident from the preceding list, some of the purposes are for legal reasons, while others are for personal knowledge and interest. The next section briefly summarizes the IRS rulings that relate to appraisals by librarians.

Internal Revenue Service Rulings on Appraisal

As the librarian, one may not appraise or assign a value to books donated to one's library, as the IRS has ruled that it is self-serving. If the collection is extensive or seems to have value, one must ask an appraiser to evaluate the collection. The rules of the IRS are as follows:

On collections whose value is up to \$500, the donor does not need to file Form 8283, *Noncash Charitable Contributions*.

For a collection valued between \$500 and \$5,000, the donor must file Form 8283.

For a collection worth over \$5,000, the donor is required to have the collection professionally appraised (Internal Revenue Service, *Instructions for Form 8283*, revised, March 1990).

Rare and Valuable Books

Books are often buried in half-forgotten hiding places. Some of them may be valuable. What determines these prices?—the same principle that underlies the entire economic marketplace—that is, the law of supply and demand. Depending upon condition, scarcity, and demand, certain books are worth hundreds of dollars.

The phrase "rare and valuable" has often been used in connection with these books. The words *rare* and *valuable* are not interchangeable. A book can be rare, but if no one wants it, then it is not financially valuable. For example, in May 1993, I was appraising a book dated 1554. It was rare, but there were not many people interested in purchasing this book. Therefore, the assessed value of the book was much less than that of many other books published in the 16th century.

How does one know if a book is valuable? And if it is, how much is it worth? First, it is important to note that any book, or for that matter, any printed material, is potentially valuable.

Most people have heard about the value of comic books. We read them when we were seven, eight, and nine years old and then left them in our basements. Our parents threw them out, and now we hear that there are collectors buying them at substantial prices. Suddenly, these comic books, which we may have hidden under the pillow to read, have sociological value. Who could have predicted the rise in value of comic books?

Factors in a Book's Value

There are many factors that influence a book's value. In this section, I enumerate the factors and illustrate the points with Judaica and Hebraica titles.

1. *Importance* of the book or item, e.g., the last edition of the Talmud published before 1553, the year that Pope Julius III prohibited its publication, which led to the burning of the Talmud. Another example is the beautiful edition of *Or la-yesharim*, by Zerah Eidlitz, printed by Katzburg Press in Budapest at the end of 1942, during the Holocaust. These works stand as monuments to Jewish learning and scholarship in times of great duress.

2. *Supply*, as when only 500 copies of a particular edition of a Haggadah were printed.

3. *Demand*. There are, for example, many collectors of 18th- and 19th-century travel books to Palestine and the Middle East. These books have increased in value because so many collectors are looking for them.

4. *Age*. What is old? Is 1943 old? Is 1850 old? Is 1790 old? Is 1485 old?

All of these dates can be considered old, depending on certain characteristics.

Let us take 1943. This is not so very long ago. Several years ago I was asked to appraise a book that had been printed many times in the 19th and 20th centuries. The book, *Tikun ha-Kelali* by Nahman of Bratslav, with *Tsetil katan* by Elimelech of Lyzhansk appended to it, was published through offset printing; it was in ragged condition; the pages were cut unevenly; and the binding was extremely unattractive. What then made this book special? It was published in Shanghai, China (see point 8 below).

There were very few books of Jewish interest published there and, as 1943 was during World War II, this was one of the first books published by Eastern European Jews who had fled to Shanghai. It was historically important, as it marked a special development in Jewish history and publication.

Many Hebrew books were published before 1850. What makes the year 1850 special is that the first books published in Jerusalem appeared from 1840 to 1850. Books published there during this ten-year period are rare and especially desired by certain collectors. [*Editor's*

note: For illustrations of Jerusalem imprints from this decade, see Brad Sabin Hill, "A Bibliographic Pilgrimage to Jerusalem," Judaica Librarianship vol. 6 (1992), pp. 53-58.]

In the same vein, when we consider books from the year 1790, while this is long ago, these works are far from the oldest published Judaic books. In the context of the Hasidic movement, which began in the mid-1700s and did not publish much for the first 40 to 50 years, however, a work published between 1790 and 1800 is extremely rare and very desirable.

Finally, we consider 1485. Books published in the 15th century (incunabula) are the very first printed books. Hebrew books printed during this period are scarce, command high prices, and are greatly desired by certain book collectors.

A note on the dating of Hebrew books: One of the most interesting and exasperating aspects of checking an older Hebrew volume is its date of publication. Not only is the date given in Hebrew, but it is often disguised in a word or phrase called a *chronogram*. One must know the numerical value of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and understand certain typographic conventions, e.g., count only the letters in red, or count only certain letters with marks over them, or count all the letters in the phrase, etc., in order to convert the date to the common era.

5. *Beauty*. The first volumes of Judaica that were collected were art books and Haggadahs. Many collectors seek Haggadahs because of the beauty of the illustrations. The illustrations of the Moss Haggadah, for example, are particularly outstanding.

Some of the other aesthetic characteristics that are considered, besides illustrations, are:

a. The renown of the artists who created the illustrations—the Bezalel School, Arthur Szyk, Ben Shahn, Saul Raskin, or Marc Chagall?

b. *Beauty of the binding*: Is it tooled leather, that is, does the binding have a design on it? Is it made of heavy calfskin, or of vellum (a fine parchment)? Does it have a raised spine, or is the spine flat?

c. *Title page design*: Does the title page contain more than words? Some of the finer title pages display coats of arms or emblems identifying the publisher.

d. *Marbled endpapers*: Do the endpapers have decorative designs?

e. *Gilt-edged pages*: Are the leaves gold-tinted on the outer edge?

6. *First editions*. Many people ask whether a particular book is the first edition of that work. What is so important about a first edition? There are several factors that make this desirable:

a. Historically, a first edition is important because it represents the first time a monumental work appeared in print.

b. A first edition may be limited in the size of its printing.

c. A first edition, especially of a religious work, may present pristine or pure thought, unencumbered by later commentaries.

d. If there are later editions issued during an author's lifetime, a researcher can trace changes in the author's thoughts by comparing the first edition with later ones.

First editions of works may not have been published in book form. The first writings of such Hebrew authors as Yosef Hayim Brenner and Naḥum Sokolow appeared in magazines and newspapers. In the case of Brenner, his works had a tremendous influence on the development of Hebrew literature in the 20th century (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 4, col. 1347). Sokolow had an important influence on the development of Zionist thought, history, and ideology. Sometimes, the work of Hebrew authors was serialized, i.e., it came out over a period of time (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15, cols. 85-86).

These first editions have particular importance in showing the manner in which Jewish culture in the broadest sense came into being.

7. *Publisher*. Some publishers are noted because of the beauty of their work, or the fine quality of their printing or paper. Some are noted because of the works that they published or the editors and proofreaders who worked with them. Examples of desirable publishers include:

- Soncino in Italy, in the 1400s;
- Bombert in Venice, in the 1500s;
- Proops in Amsterdam, in the late 1600s;
- Anton Schmidt in Vienna, in the early 1800s;
- Romm in Vilna, in the late 1800s;
- Schocken in Berlin, before the Second World War.

All of them produced works that are examples of fine publishing.

8. *Place of publication.* Since Jews have migrated to remote corners of the world, their works have had unusual places of publication. Above, Jewish publications in Shanghai were mentioned, but there are many other interesting places where Judaic books were published. These include: the Isle of Djerba (off the coast of Tunisia), Calcutta, Baghdad, and Cairo.

In Europe, while the cities were not obscure, owing to the few works published there, books with imprints from the following communities assumed greater value: Bucharest, Dubno, Homburg, Riva di Trento, and Sabbioneta.

9. *Material added to the text.* There are many cases of significant additions to the original work, which increase a book's value.

a. The editor may have made significant changes to the text.

b. The preface. The work may be only marginally important, but the preface may have been written by a famous scholar.

c. There are many books in Hebrew that include words of praise of the work and the author. This preliminary section is called an approbation (*haskamah*). In some cases, the person who wrote the approbation is far more important than the author; therefore one must examine this section of Hebrew books closely. By the way, these words of praise are still being written today, sometimes even in the florid style of earlier centuries.

10. *Material added to the title page or colophon.* Sometimes the title page gives not only the title and imprint of the book, but also the genealogy of the author or a history of the publication of the work. This can be interesting as well as informative.

A colophon is the equivalent of a title page at the end of a work. In books from the 1400s and the early 1500s (and occasionally later), there were no title pages, and all information concerning the publication of a book is at the back of the work.

If you are fortunate enough to be looking at such a book, you may think that it is missing its title page. It is not and, after considering a variety of factors, there is a good chance that the book is quite valuable.

11. *Marginal notes.* There are many works in which one of the owners of the book

wrote notes on the text in the margins or on the endpapers. These marginal notes can be extremely interesting and even valuable, depending on who wrote them.

If they were indeed written by a scholar, the notes may clarify portions of the text.

Sometimes, there may be other important information in the notes. I have found long genealogical descriptions written in some books and, in one case, the genealogy went back some 500 years. These marginal and other notes amount to having a manuscript included in the work.

12. *Inscriptions.* The author may have written an interesting inscription to the person to whom he presented the book. Moritz Steinschneider, the famous 19th-century German Jewish bibliographer, reportedly wrote over a personal dedication, "To my dear friend, M. St.," the words "Only up to 1856!" when he had a falling out with his former friend (Marx, 1947, p. 173).

At the Hebrew College Library, we have works inscribed by Chaim Weizmann, S. Y. Agnon, and Max Nordau. Each of these inscriptions adds value to the book.

13. *Ownership stamps.* Sometimes books contain stamps of libraries (both private and institutional), where they were originally housed but which no longer exist. Other books contain stamps of the dealers from whom they were purchased. Each of these stamps tells something about the history of the book and may add to its value.

14. *Censorship.* Some books and sets of books contain a censor's stamp. Books published in 16th- and 17th-century Italy or in the mid- to late 1800s in Russia and Poland have a statement that the publication of the book was approved by the censor.

In certain volumes of the Talmud, one can actually see that passages of the text have been crossed out. This was done by the censor, who did not approve certain sections of the Talmud. The Tractate 'Avodah Zarah, which deals with pagan rites and idolatry, was heavily censored and was omitted from the Basel, 1580 edition of the Talmud.

In some communities, there were self-imposed Jewish censors who examined the books before they went to the official government censor. The role of converts from Judaism was particularly important in this process, because they often reported that a Hebrew volume was critical of the

established religious community, or they acted as censors in order to seek revenge on Judaism or curry favor with the local authorities.

15. The *typefaces* of books were alluded to above under point 7. Certain books have especially beautiful type. A town particularly noted for its fine printing was Krotoszyn. Books published there—especially from the press of Dov Baer Monash—are valued.

Another aspect of typeface is color: Some books were printed in red type. This unusual feature makes these editions more desirable than volumes printed in normal black type.

16. The *condition* of the book is an extremely important factor in its value. One must ask such questions as:

a. Is the book sturdy, or is it falling apart?

b. Are all the pages present; if a multivolume work, is it a complete set, or are there missing volumes?

17. There are also *individual characteristics* that can add to the value of the book.

a. Does it contain maps? There are some history books and Haggadot that contain separate maps in a pocket at the end of the book. Without these maps, the volumes lose much of their value.

b. Sometimes, books contain blank pages; in early books, this may have been for typographical reasons, but a practical benefit of blank pages is that notes can be added. As in the case of maps, without these blank pages, the value of a book that originally contained them is much lower.

Examination of Donated Collections

Books in English, Hebrew, or Yiddish are often presented to synagogue, school, and center (SSC) libraries. Archival and source material, e.g., minutes of meetings of a Jewish lodge or the treasurer's report from a synagogue, may turn up in a donated collection or in an attic. One must carefully examine the items that are donated to the library. Some may be appropriate for SSC collections, while others may be more appropriate for research libraries.

Conclusion

Donated collections and individual works can be important resources for enhancing
(Continued on p. 161, col. 3)

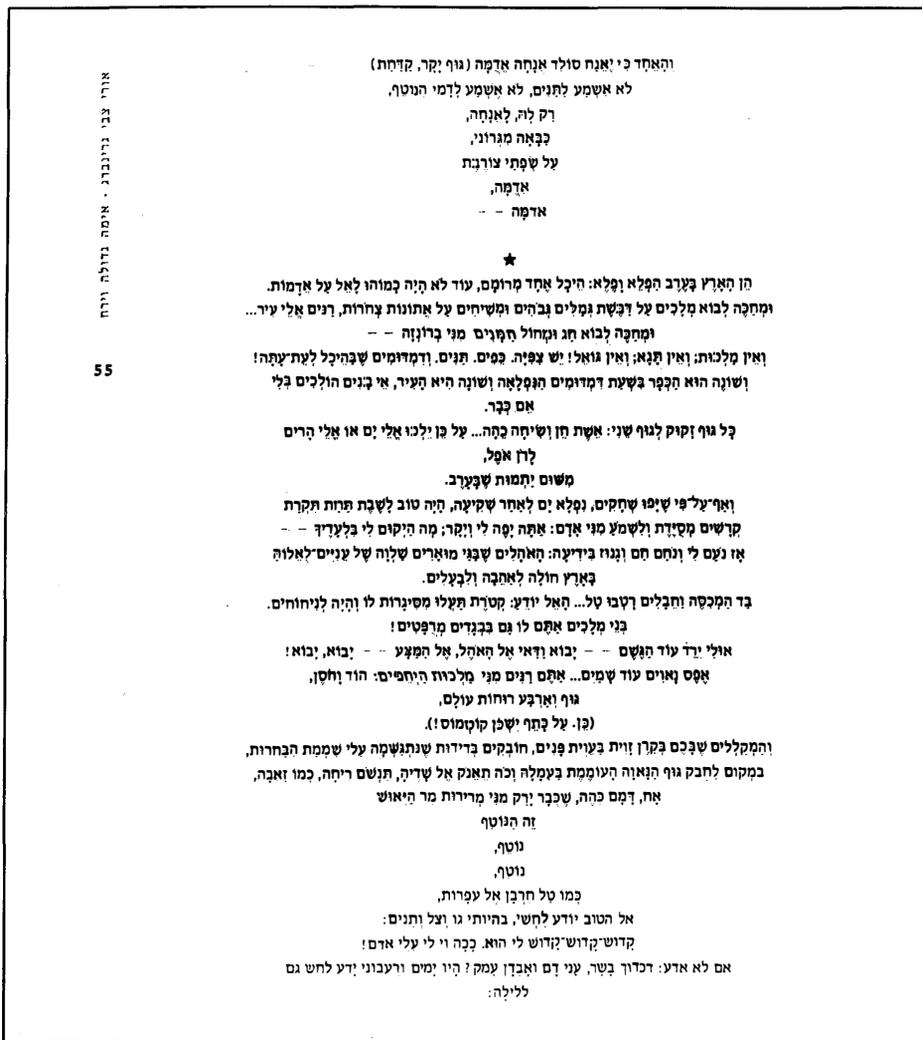


Figure 6. *The Complete Works of Uri Zvi Greenberg* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990-), vol. 1, Zvi Narkiss, typographer and book designer. Because the poet's works are so varied, each page had to be designed individually. The author's name, title of work, and pagination run vertically in the outer margins so they do not interfere visually with the text. The series is deserving of a fine book award.

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a library, be it an SSC or a research library. The librarian must examine the donated item(s) carefully. If it is decided that the donation meets the criteria of the library (as specified in its materials selection policy) and the items may be rare or the donated collection large, the librarian should advise the donor that an appraisal is needed.

A close examination of the donated items is equally important if the collection contains archival and source material. These items could relate to the history and development of the synagogue or the history of the local Jewish community. In any event, if the librarian is not sure of the monetary value of the material or its research value, it is essential that an expert be asked to evaluate it.

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Editor's note: See also a related paper in an early volume of the journal: "What Makes a Hebrew Book Rare?" Excerpts from an Essay by Israel Mehlman, translated by Yael Penkower, with notes by Menahem Schmelzer, Judaica Librarianship vol. 3, no. 1-2 (1986-1987), pp. 102-104, 107.

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