

5-1-2000

Virtual Libraries vs. Physical Libraries in Jewish Studies

Bella Hass Weinberg

St. John's University - New York, prof_wberg@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ajlpublishing.org/jl>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Weinberg, Bella Hass. 2000. "Virtual Libraries vs. Physical Libraries in Jewish Studies." *Judaica Librarianship* 10: 3-4. doi:10.14263/2330-2976.1139.

IN THE BEGINNING

Virtual Libraries vs. Physical Libraries in Jewish Studies

Bella Hass Weinberg, Editor

Predictions of a Digital Future

In the current literature of library-information science, one encounters numerous predictions that the majority of the world's published literature will be digitized in the foreseeable future and that readers will be able to sit in front of their computer screens, browsing the virtual library, thus saving the time, energy, and money that are generally expended in making trips to libraries as we have known them—built with bricks and filled with stacks, books, journals, and desks. As Peter Lyman (1996, p. 12) put it, "The digitized library can organize printed works into a universal library and provide access to it from anywhere in the world. . . ." Saunders and Mitchell (1996, pp. 4-5) have surveyed large-scale projects that are contributing to the realization of such visions.

My prior editorial (Weinberg, 1995) noted that Judaica libraries usually adopt the technologies employed in the general world: CD-ROMs in Jewish Studies, Judaica Web sites [see ALEF-BIT in this issue], and Judaica library OPACs on the Internet are now common. Major Judaica libraries also embraced imaging technology early on. The first demonstrations of Judaica documents reproduced with such technology brought to mind Dr. Philip Miller's observation at an AJL (Association of Jewish Libraries) Convention several years ago: In describing the selection of Hebraica from the Vatican for an exhibition, he noted that the primary criteria were ooh and ah—beautifully printed books and/or illuminated manuscripts that would appeal to the general public, regardless of the significance of their content, were selected. The first documents scanned (digitized) by Judaica libraries were also of this nature. Such images placed on Web sites serve as publicity for the rare or unique holdings of a library or archive.

In a more recent AJL-NYMA (New York Metropolitan Area Chapter) workshop, after Naomi Steinberger demonstrated a Web site with images from an exhibition held at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), I asked her whether this had an impact on the sales of JTS exhibition catalogues. She

responded that the complete catalogues are not reproduced electronically, only selected illustrations. This suggests that the images on the computer screen are serving largely as advertisements for the print publications sold by the institution, not as documents for research. This editorial considers virtual Judaica libraries from a researcher's perspective.

My research and writings generally focus on modern techniques for the organization of information, but recently I published a historical study of Hebrew citation indexes (Weinberg, 1997).

Comprehensiveness of Collections

For historical research, comprehensiveness of a collection is an extremely important factor. A scholar may want to determine whether an idea has ever been expressed in the literature, or find the oldest example of a certain type of publication. I did much of my research on the earliest Hebrew citation indexes in the rare book room of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Then Administrative Librarian Edith Degani suggested that Dr. Seth Jerchow take me on a tour of the inner sanctum. When he told me that of 130 known Hebrew incunabula (books printed before 1500),* JTS owns 128, I was in awe. I felt confident that in seeking the earliest examples of a certain feature in Hebraica, nearly everything I needed was in that one room.

Let us consider the case of a researcher who is looking for a feature of Hebrew incunabula that is found in one of the books that the Seminary does not own. If JTS were to undertake imaging of the entire contents of its rare book room, would another library lend the Seminary those incunabula to complete its digitized collection? Libraries have previously been involved in imaging projects—using

*In a subsequent paper (Weinberg, 1999) I cited higher estimates of the total number of Hebrew incunabula: Offenberg (1990, p. xiii) gives the number 139; Sheehan (1990, p. 365) provides the statistic 175.

microfilming technology. Each library has tended to preserve its own brittle books and serials; if the original copies or holdings were incomplete, so were the microfilms. There are few examples in our discipline of cooperative microfilming projects, i.e., in which separate libraries pooled their resources. There have been loans of rare Judaica materials for exhibitions; the security procedures—and costs—entailed by such loans are astounding.

The agencies currently funding digitization and imaging projects, notably the (national) Institute of Museum and Library Services, are emphasizing cooperative projects. These would be welcome in Jewish Studies; we have many good research libraries, but all of them are incomplete, despite their best efforts at comprehensive collecting. Exon and Punch (1997) maintain "that the concept of the self-sufficient library collection is now dead" (p. 15).

The Need for Physical Access

If we had machine-readable images of all Judaica, organized for easy access in a virtual library, would the need for traditional libraries disappear? The identification of manuscripts and rare books containing early Hebrew citation indexes often depended on the analysis of physical features of these works. This got me thinking about whether such research could be done in a virtual library; hence the title of this piece.

Dates are often missing in manuscripts and early printed books; the paper and its watermark are crucial to the establishment of the approximate date of such documents. These features do not come through in electronic images of texts, however. (The term watermark is used in the electronic environment as well, but with a different meaning: an electronic watermark identifies the copyright holder and thus prevents unauthorized use of an image [Berinstein, 1996, p. 247].)

An early citation index embedded in the Talmud that I analyzed [at the suggestion of Avram Shuchatowitz of Yeshiva University Libraries] is 'En Mishpat. One of the first

printed editions of the Talmud that I examined in the JTS rare book room includes this index, written in ink in the margins, in a "font" that matches the printed text. I doubt that the difference in inks would come through on an electronic image; this could lead to an erroneous inference by a researcher, i.e., that the index was printed earlier than it actually was.

Another physical feature of books is their binding. One of the citation indexes that I analyzed, Moreh Tsedek, was identified in the catalog of the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL), i.e., the CD-ROM Bibliography of the Hebrew Book, as part two of another work, no doubt because the JNUL copy is bound with that other work. After examining the copy in YIVO's Rabbinics Collection, which is bound separately, as well as the JNUL copy in Jerusalem, I was able to establish the "independence" of this citation index (Weinberg, 1998). A virtual library of Judaica is likely to reproduce the title page-to-colophon of each work and omit images of bindings, as the latter were rarely supplied by the original printers of Hebraica.

Franklin (1993) has demonstrated that the examination of paper and binding is important for the study of modern language and literature; a fortiori, these features are relevant to the study of medieval texts, including Hebraica. Therefore, I am pleased that David Kerschen of the Yeshurun Library in Jerusalem accepted my invitation to write an introduction to Hebrew codicology, the study of the physical features of handwritten books, for Judaica Librarianship. I hope that you will enjoy and profit from his article in this issue.

Economic and Technological Issues

Since Jewish Studies fall into the category of humanities disciplines, large-scale electronic

libraries in this field will probably follow those of the sciences and social sciences, as did machine-readable indexes and CD-ROMs. Judaica librarians are now purchasing licenses for electronic journals, and have to deal with issues of copyright and charging for access, as do our colleagues in the general library world. Users of libraries understand that they have to pay for photocopying and for personal copies of books, but they generally expect electronic resources to be free. The rising expectations of Internet users constitute a major challenge to librarians.

For older Judaica and Hebraica, copyright is not an issue, but the cost of imaging and maintaining large Web sites is. Optical character recognition technology will probably not be able automatically to convert the characters on pages of older Hebraica—especially those that have a mixture of type sizes and fonts (square script, Rashi script) and complex layouts—to machine-readable form, but imaging technology is currently available to reproduce the pages of text and illustrations, even in color, at high resolution. Much can be gleaned from such images, but I submit that for many types of research, the physical Judaica library will still be necessary.

As Crawford and Gorman (1995, p. 90) put it, "to ignore the need for the primary record is to deny a substantial aspect of scholarship" I hope that Judaica librarians will be active in the preservation of original documents, while participating in imaging and digitization projects to enhance access to the content of rare texts.

References

Berinstein, Paula. Findings Images Online: Online User's Guide to Image Searching in Cyberspace. Ed. by Susan E. Feldman. Wilton, CT: Pemberton Press, 1996.

- Crawford, Walt; Gorman, Michael. Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness & Reality. Chicago: American Library Association, 1995.
- Exon, F.C.A.; Punch, Keith F. "The Self-Sufficient Library Collection: A Test of Assumptions." Journal of the American Society for Information Science vol. 48 no. 1 (Jan. 1997), pp. 11–16.
- Franklin, Phyllis. "Scholars, Librarians, and the Future of Primary Records." College & Research Libraries vol. 54 no. 5 (Sept. 1993), pp. 397–406.
- Lyman, Peter. "What is a Digital Library? Technology, Intellectual Property, and the Public Interest." In Books, Bricks, and Bytes. Special issue of Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Fall 1996; Vol. 125 no. 4 of the Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, pp. 1–33.
- Offenberg, A.K. Hebrew Incunabula in Public Collections: A First International Census. Nieuwkoop: DeGraaf, 1990.
- Saunders, Laverna M.; Mitchell, Maurice. "The Evolving Virtual Library: An Overview" In: The Evolving Virtual Library: Visions and Case Studies, ed. by Laverna M. Saunders. Medford, NJ: Information Today, 1996, pp. 1–16.
- Sheehan, William. "Hebrew Incunabula in the Collections of the Vatican Library." Miscellanea Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae IV (1990), pp. [365]–383. (Studi e Testi, no. 338).
- Weinberg, Bella Hass [1995]. "Judaica Librarianship in the Age of the Internet," vol. 9, no. 1–2 (Spring 1994–Winter 1995), pp. 3–5.
- Weinberg, Bella Hass [1997]. "The Earliest Hebrew Citation Indexes." Journal of the American Society for Information Science vol. 48, no. 4 (April 1997), pp. 318–330.
- Weinberg, Bella Hass [1998]. "How Accurate are Hebraica Catalogs and Bibliographies?: Tracing the Case of Moreh Tsedek." Proceedings of the 33rd Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, Philadelphia, PA, June 1998. New York: Association of Jewish Libraries, 1999, pp. 66–71.
- Weinberg, Bella Hass [1999]. "Indexes and Religion: Reflections on Research in the History of Indexes." The Indexer vol. 21 no. 3 (April 1999), pp. 111–118.

We gratefully
acknowledge the
continuing support of the
I. Edward Kiev Foundation
for the publication of
Judaica Librarianship.