

ARCHIVES

Recovering from Disaster: The Agudath Israel Archive Rebuilds

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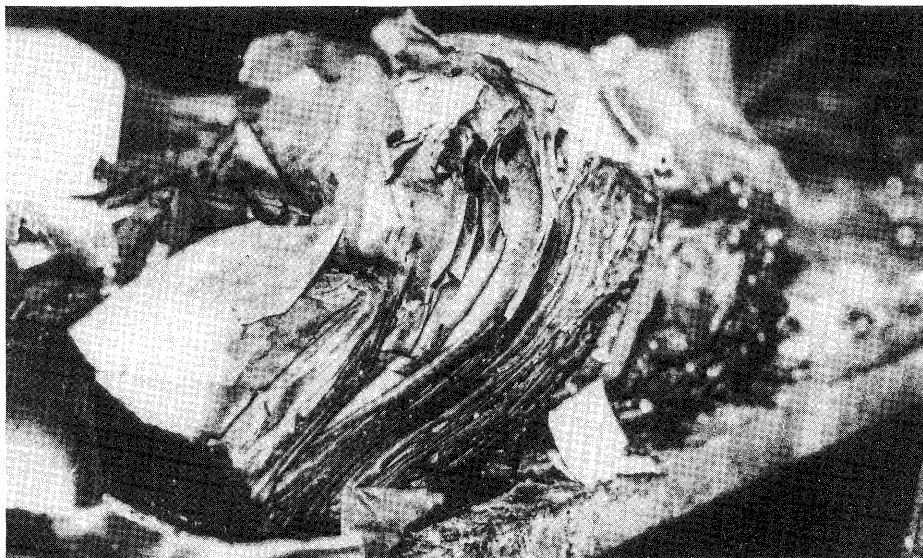
The Disaster

On the evening of May 6, 1988, a fire swept through the National Orthodox Jewish Archives of the Agudath Israel of America, in New York City. About two hundred firemen fought the swiftly spreading blaze, which reportedly occurred as a result of the malfunction of an electrical circuit. There were no injuries, but the archive and the treasures housed in its seven hundred linear feet of acid-free boxes were severely damaged. An adequate fire prevention plan had not been put into effect, and the repository lacked an automatic sprinkler system.

Founded in 1978, the archive chronicled the history of Orthodox Judaism throughout the world, and was widely used by scholars and students. It had a particularly strong focus on the Holocaust, and on efforts of Orthodox Jews in the United States to rescue European Jewry. Among other topics covered by the collection's thousands of documents, photographs, and negatives—as well as its small library of one hundred books—were: European religious life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigration to the United States, the rise of American yeshivot, and the social service programs of Orthodox Jews.

Salvage Efforts

After an inventory was taken, it appeared that the library had been completely devastated, and that smoke, flames, or water had destroyed 90% of the papers and photographic items (see photo). Rabbi Moshe Kolodny, the energetic Agudath Israel archivist, recommended modern restoration techniques for salvage of damaged non-book materials. A private consulting firm was hired, and a decision was made to freeze the waterlogged holdings in vacuum chambers, for the purpose of drying them while simultaneously preventing mold formation. The consulting firm was not admitted to the building immediately after the fire. About a week elapsed before salvage activities commenced, but the materials



Destroyed mass of documents in the National Orthodox Jewish Archives. Photo taken shortly after the fire.

were still damp. All the material was stored for three to four weeks at 20° Fahrenheit.

These salvage efforts were largely unsuccessful. While the procedure worked well for regular paper and newsprint, it worsened the condition of writing on coated paper. Unfortunately, it also fused negatives and photographs to the envelopes in which they were placed. As a result of the conflagration and subsequent failed restoration attempts, Rabbi Kolodny has placed Agudath Israel's losses at: 100% for books, 99% for photographs, and 45% for documents.

Among the materials that survived were: a British-Jewish weekly published during the 1930s and '40s; documents on anti-*shehitah* (ritual slaughter) laws in Europe collected by Rabbi Ezra Munk of Berlin in the late nineteenth century, and donated to the archive by his son Michael Munk, who immigrated to the U.S. during the Holocaust; and documents on public prayers for the State of Austria, dated 1777–1803.

Rebuilding

Despite the great loss, there is reason for optimism regarding the future. After reading newspaper accounts of the disaster, Glen Saraduke, of the Smithsonian Institution, contacted Rabbi Kolodny and offered help without charge. A Smithsonian fire safety expert, Lydia Butterworth, studied the archive and made recommendations, which have already been implemented. The National Orthodox Jewish Archives now has fire-resistant walls and an automatic wet sprinkler system that is activated by intense heat, and shuts off when the milieu cools down.

Although the archive has been oriented toward documenting the history and culture of Orthodox Jewry, the tragedy has had a unifying effect on Jews of varying backgrounds. The staff of the secular newspaper *Jewish Forward* is making its comprehensive pictorial files available for reproduction by the Agudah's photographers, for example. A number of rare Judaica photographs have also been donated

to Agudath Israel by Dr. Stanley B. Burns, a New York ophthalmologist and director of the Burns Archive. (The Burns Archive is primarily known for its more than 15,000 vintage medical photographs, but it also includes many pictures relating to Jews and Judaism, African-American history, and folk art.)

In the summer of 1988, the personal papers of Rabbi Eliezer Silver, a renowned American Torah leader during the first half of this century, were donated to the archive by his son, Rabbi David Silver of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The donation includes Rabbi Silver's voluminous correspondence with Orthodox scholars in Israel, Europe, and even in small U.S. towns, such as Sheboygan, Wisconsin. One letter in the Silver collection illuminates many of the others, since it contains a code for the transfer of money that was used by Jews to rescue their brethren from the Nazis.

Among the newest additions to the archive are original copies of *ha-Levanon*, a Hebrew scholarly periodical that first began publication in 1863 and which was read by Orthodox Jews in Czarist Russia. Other new acquisitions are microfilmed issues of *Der Yud*, a Yiddish newspaper published in Warsaw between 1921 and 1929, and microfilms of *Mahazike ha-Dat*, "Organ des Vereines 'Machsike Hadas'," a nineteenth-century Yiddish and Hebrew periodical published in Cracow and Lemberg by Rabbi Shimon Sofer. The publication was undertaken with the specific goal of encouraging Jews to resist assimilation. Articles in it varied from current events to Torah discussions.

Just a little over a year after the fire, the National Orthodox Jewish Archives began receiving visitors. Rabbi Kolodny noted that one recent patron was "a professor from the University of Bern, researching the reaction of the Swiss Jewish Community to the children who escaped to Switzerland during World War II. He really was amazed at how much material he was able to find here on the subject."

Readers may contact Rabbi Moshe Kolodny at the National Orthodox Jewish Archives, c/o Agudath Israel of America, 84 William Street, New York, NY 10038.

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The Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook Manuscripts Collection in Jerusalem: Survey of a Private Archival Collection

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Introduction

Institutional records and personal papers are often stored in basements with inadequate flood protection, or in overheated attics. Everyday, collections either end up in the garbage, are terminally water-damaged by broken pipes, or are reduced to dust while baking under a hot roof. Employees with knowledge of the collections' existence and their contents eventually retire, and when the apartments and offices that house the materials are sold, valuable documents are destroyed as a result.

The work of the archivist is, first, to be aware of an endangered collection and to transfer it to a safe place. Then, once the collection is out of physical danger, the archivist can arrange it and make it available to researchers.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how an archivist evaluates a collection, establishes its importance, assesses its current status, and suggests long-term solutions for its preservation.

The papers of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, are not in immediate danger of disappearance, but they do require the professional attention of an archivist.

Biographical Data

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) was born in Greiva (Griva), Latvia, and was educated there and in Dvinsk. At age 15, he went to Luchi to study with R. Eliezer Dov Yehyeh, and then to Volozhin, to study with R. Hirsch Leib Berlin (the "Natsiv"). Rav Kook was appointed rabbi of Zimmel (Kovno region) in 1888, and moved to Bausk (Bauska, Courland, southern Latvia) in 1895. In 1904, he accepted the position of Rabbi in Jaffa. He traveled to Europe before World War I and spent the war in London. He served as Chief Rabbi (Ashkenazi) of the Yishuv from 1921 to his death.

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982) was born in Zimmel, the only son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. He studied in Yeshivat Ets Hayim in Jerusalem, and helped

his father with the administration of the Central Yeshiva. He succeeded his father upon the latter's death in 1935, and directed the Yeshiva until his own death.

Rabbi A.I. Kook was a prominent thinker of modern Judaism. His influence on halakhic development, Jewish mysticism, and religious Zionism is felt to this day; indeed, it seems to be growing with time.

Both religious and secular Israelis interested in modern Jewish thought study the writings of the late Chief Rabbi with much fervor.

After the birth of the State of Israel, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook served as the major mentor of Religious Zionism, through the generations of students trained by him at the "Merkaz Harav" Yeshiva. Among his disciples were leaders of the settlers in the territories conquered in 1967, especially in Judea and Samaria.

Importance of the Collection

The writings of the first Chief Rabbi are, according to Rabbi Meir Berlin,

a trove of novellae in all shades and specialties of Biblical and Midrashic studies, with a depth of analysis and scholarship in so many fields: mysticism and esoterism, philosophy and poetry, religious guidance and clarification of opinions and concepts.

(quoted in Be'ery, 1968, p. 1)

The manuscripts of the late Chief Rabbi are significant. They include, in Rabbi Berlin's words,

some thirty volumes in rabbinical law and Midrashic study, in ethics and logic, scholarship and mysticism, lyric poetry and deep philosophy, which educate the public at large and address individual quests.

(Be'ery, 1968, p. 1)

The cited size of the collection was repeated in many later works, such as the biography of Rabbi A.I. Kook by Jacob B. Agus: