

# EPISTLE FROM ISRAEL

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## The Hebrew University's Jewish National and University Library: Exhibitions and Acquisitions

### Exhibitions

In 1988, an unusually large number of exhibitions were mounted at the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL), displaying recent acquisitions from all over the world and from the entire course of Jewish printed history. The first of the exhibitions featured some 50 extremely rare Jewish books printed in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries exhibited in conjunction with the International Conference on Polish Jewry, which was held at The Hebrew University during the first week of February. Most of the books were printed in Krakow or Lublin by printers who came to Poland from Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Italy. The books are in Hebrew and Yiddish. The highlight of the exhibition was a book on Kabbalah, *Magid Mesharim*, written in Safed by Rabbi Joseph Caro, author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, and printed, of course, in Poland (Lublin: Tsevi Yafeh, 1646).

In June, the JNUL opened an exhibition of unknown manuscripts and documents by writer S.Y. Agnon, in honor of the 100th anniversary of his birth. This exhibition was also connected with a conference, organized for the occasion by the Department of Hebrew Literature of The Hebrew University, and entitled, "The Heritage of Agnon—One Hundred Years Since His Birth."

Another anniversary—500 years since the publication of the first Hebrew textbook in 1488—occasioned a special exhibition at the National Library of 101 Jewish textbooks dating from the 15th century. Opening in September, the exhibition was organized by the Jewish Education Library of the Rav Kook Institute in Jerusalem, and featured *Makrei Dardekei*, a textbook for the study of Hebrew, printed in Naples, Italy in 1488 (of which there are only five known extant copies in the world). The exhibition included, in addition, books on Judaism, mathematics, science, and a textbook on the Arabic language written for soldiers in the Jewish Legion during the First World War. Other books of particular interest from the exhibition were a textbook

on Esperanto written by the language's creator, Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof, and a textbook for the study of Hebrew printed in Bombay, India, in 1882. [See entry no. 24 in Libby Kahane's article in the Reference Dept. of this issue for a description of the published catalog of the exhibition.—Ed.]

The final exhibition of the year, marking the official visit to Israel of Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko in December, was a display in the JNUL of a manuscript of Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar." Yevtushenko penned a copy of his famous poem from memory while on a visit to the West in 1960. In 1969, the signed manuscript was sold by Sotheby's to Leo Graham of London, who gave it to the JNUL. According to Rafi Weizer, of the JNUL Manuscript Department, Yevtushenko's hand-written text differs somewhat from the published version of the poem. The manuscript makes a direct appeal for an end to the antisemitism that was rife in the Soviet Union at the time he composed the poem, whereas the published version refers to antisemitism as a phenomenon of the Russian past.

### Acquisitions

Two significant acquisitions were publicized by the JNUL during the latter part of 1988, although not put on exhibition. Both of these were collections rather than a single item—one of manuscripts, and the second of books. The first collection, a group of rare letters of famous Jewish composers, which belonged to Dr. Otto Loewenberg, were donated to the Manuscript Department of the JNUL by his widow. It includes letters by Felix Mendelssohn, Gustav Mahler, Ernest Bloch, and Arnold Schoenberg. The JNUL reported that the 46 letters of Mahler were of particular significance for the understanding of his personality, and that musicologists and Mahler scholars from all over the world have already begun requesting information on the letters, some of which were unknown until now.

The second collection recently acquired by the JNUL comprises 200 rare items of Judeo-Americana from the 18th and 19th centuries, among which are the very earliest books of Jewish interest printed in America. These include the first Hebrew

grammar (Monis, Judah. *A Grammar of the Hebrew Tongue*. Boston, 1735), the first complete Jewish prayerbook (*The Form of Daily Prayers According to the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*. New York, 1826), and the first Passover Haggadah (*Service for the Two First Nights of Passover*. New York, 1837) printed in America. Judeo-Americana from this period is rare, because at the end of the 18th century there were only 3,000 Jews living in North America. Most of the books were printed in Boston or New York, where there were already relatively large concentrations of Jews at that time. The collection includes prayerbooks, sermons, belles-lettres, grammar books, polemics and missionary tracts, and dictionaries of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages.

### New Memorial Libraries

In April 1988, in the Axelrod House in Jerusalem, a new library was dedicated to the memory of Likud Party activist Gaby Aviram, who died recently at age 33. Aviram was a central figure in the protest movement against Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. He staged protests in the hot Yamit sun for long hours, in spite of the fact that he was already ill with the disease that was to claim his life. The library will collect books on the philosophy and activities of the Israeli National Front, from the days of the Underground to the present.

A significant portion of the private library of the well-known educator Akiva Ben Ezra was transferred in July from his home in Brooklyn to the Yeshiva "Birkat Mosheh," located in the Jerusalem suburb Ma'aleh Adumim. Akiva Ben Ezra was for many years a Hebrew instructor in Brooklyn schools and a scholar of the Bible and the Hebrew language. His articles were widely published in respected professional journals in Israel and throughout the world. His large collection of books on Biblical research and the Hebrew language was donated to the Yeshiva by his son, Aharon Ben Ezra, who recently emigrated to Israel from the United States.

### Torah Libraries for the Twenty-First Century

Two computerized Torah libraries were established during 1988 in Israel, one a

Haifa-based project of Bar-Ilan University, and the second a commercially-available system being tried out in B'nei Brak.

The first library was established within the framework of the David Assaf Institute for Maimonides Research in Haifa. Connected to the central computer of the Responsa Project of Bar-Ilan University, it will provide services in Haifa and the north of Israel to scholars requiring computerized information from the database, which contains hundreds of Responsa works. Future plans of the Maimonides Institute include a computer hookup and service to central Torah libraries in the United States. The computer system of the Institute is projected to include all the medical works of Maimonides, indexed and arranged by a specially-appointed group of experts.

The second computerized Torah library, funded by Haredi donors from abroad, and called simply "The Computerized Torah Library," opened in October 1988 in B'nei Brak. The Library contains the Bible, the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, Maimonides' *Yad Hazakah*, and the *Shulhan 'Arukh*. The entire library and its software, which will run on any IBM PC or PC-clone with a 40-megabyte disk, is available for \$3,000 from Leshen Computers, 9 Nachum St., Jerusalem 95507; telephone: 02-380412. [Further details on this software are found at the end of Libby Kahane's article in the REFERENCE DEPT. of this issue.—Ed.]

### International Agreements and Disagreements

Rabbi Adin Steinzaltz, returning to Israel from a visit to the Soviet Union at the end of 1988, signed an agreement pledging the cooperation of the Talmudic Publication Institute (which he heads) in computerizing Soviet libraries, in exchange for permission to photograph manuscripts and rare Judaica in Leningrad, Moscow, and other cities in the Soviet Union. At this stage, it is not yet clear what portion of the agreement it will be possible to implement, owing to limitations imposed by the U.S. government on exporting American technology to

the U.S.S.R. The Russians are interested in advanced library technology: optical disks, optical scanners, laser printers, microreproduction equipment, and management information systems. The Talmudic Publication Institute has considerable experience in several of these areas; the Institute runs its operations in Israel on a series of Digital VAX computers.

In a less felicitous international incident, the Secretary of the Committee of Middle Eastern Libraries resigned in protest after the head of the organization bowed to pressure to withdraw the invitation to Cecelia Panzer, Director of the Hebrew University's Truman Institute library, to participate in an international conference that the Committee had organized. Ms. Panzer was invited to speak at the Committee's Tenth International Conference in Paris, and her name and topic were printed on the Conference program. The conference was held in and partially funded by The Arab World Institute, whose management objected to the participation of an Israeli librarian. The Committee Chairman, Dr. D. Hopwood of Great Britain, sent Ms. Panzer a telegram informing her that the invitation had been cancelled, and as a result, the General Secretary of the organization, a West German, decided to resign from office.

### Finances: the Good News and the Bad News


In my last column, I included a piece on a new Israeli government program of subsidies to writers of Hebrew-language books whose works are heavily borrowed from Israeli libraries. A few months after the implementation of this program, the government announced that Arab writers would also be granted payments according to the number of times their books are borrowed from public libraries. In February 1988, Minister of Education Yitzhak Navon decided to initiate a system of payments during the next two years for authors of Arabic-language books, in order to encourage the writing of original Arabic literature in Israel. A count of the number of times the books are borrowed from public librar-

ies will be conducted by means of a special survey, which the Ministry of Education will carry out in libraries in the Arab and Druze areas of the country.

In the same month that Minister Navon announced the subsidy program for Arab writers, Dan Simon, Director of the Central Library of Tel Aviv University, announced that as a result of a budget cut in the range of 100,000 shekels, the library would be able to acquire only about half the number of books that it acquired last year. Another reason for the drastic decrease in acquisitions is that, in addition to the budget cut, the prices of books and journals from abroad have risen significantly in 1988. Simon further stated that the library, which houses more than a million volumes, expects to acquire about 10,000 books in 1989, while in order to serve the academic community adequately, it needs to acquire 40,000 books every year. "An American university on the level of Tel Aviv University, with the same number of students, acquires about 100,000 books per year," he continued. "In my opinion," he concluded, "if there is no change in the next few years, Tel Aviv University will drop to the level of a four-year college."

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