

IN THE BEGINNING

Negative Attitudes to Judaica Reference Works

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Reference work is a major function of librarianship, and reference books are its primary tools. Recently, I have encountered some negative attitudes to Judaica reference works, which leads to the intriguing question: Are Judaism and reference librarianship antithetical? The purpose of this editorial is to present the issues; response from readers is invited.

Quick reference, i.e., the provision of answers to specific questions, is an important library service, and well indexed reference works are the key to the provision of this service.

In the world of Jewish scholarship, I have encountered the same negative attitude to indexes that one sometimes meets in the general world, i.e., that *indexes discourage reading*. I once recall recommending to a European editor of a Judaica bibliography that she complement her classification scheme with a detailed alphabetic subject index. She responded that she expected scholars to sit and study the classification scheme, not to simply look up the desired topic in the index.

Certain rabbis have expressed negative opinions on indexes to *halakhic* codes that may allow the layman to decide questions of Jewish law himself. Negative attitudes to the codification of Jewish law, and even to recording oral law, have a long tradition. The rationale for the compilation of the Mishnah and Talmud was *yeridat hadorot*—the decline of the generations. Maimonides' code, *Mishneh Torah* was highly controversial in his day because he failed to cite the original sources. Max Weinreich, in his *History of the Yiddish Language* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), discusses the principle of "vertical legitimation"—supporting a legal decision by referring to an earlier source.

A cogent rationale for studying the original sources, rather than codes, is provided by Joseph M. Baumgarten in his review of David Weiss Halivni's *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara*:

The history of the codification of Jewish law may be viewed as following a systolic pattern. Each attempt to contract the ever widening elaborations of the Halakhah in the form of a summation is invariably followed by a phase of dilation, in which the earlier decisions are again scrutinized, justified, and interpreted in a discursive and often innovative manner.

(*Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. LXXVII no. 1 (July 1986), p. 59)

Reference librarians are concerned with the correctness of answers, and operate on the assumption that there is a single correct answer to a question. It has been pointed out that a good *posek* (decider of Jewish law) will not publicly announce the answer to a question such as "Is X's butcher shop kosher?" or "Is it permissible to check off on a driver's license that one is willing to donate one's organs in case of a car accident?" The layman expects a *yes/no* response to such questions, but a rabbi will take personal factors into account in making his decision, and may give a different response to different questioners posing the same question.

Cutter and Oppenheim, in their columns on Judaica reference works which reviewed the Hebrew and English editions of the indexes to the responsa of the late *posek* Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, quoted the disclaimer from the preface that the indexes were not to be used to decide questions of Jewish law (see entry no. 18 in their column in this issue).

In this age of "do-it-yourselfism," it seems logical to check a compilation such as *Shemirat Shabat Ke-Hilkhatah* to answer a question such as "May one use an egg slicer on the Sabbath?" One might even argue that the existence of a well indexed code in English furthers the observance of Judaism in that people who may be reluctant or embarrassed to ask a rabbi what they consider a trivial or stupid question, can look it up themselves. Reference librarians are well aware of the difficulty of eliciting the real information needs of many users.

In the general library world, reference librarians are also acutely aware of the dangers of making legal codes and medical texts available to laymen. If they include such books in the collection, librarians are warned not to interpret them or dispense advice. Presumably, Judaica librarians are not functioning as *poskim*.

Digests—Eliezer Wise, in his article in this issue, notes criticism of the "fast-vort industry"—the publication of digests of commentaries on classic Jewish texts. I, too, have encountered negative attitudes to this genre from rabbis who argue that such digests detract from *'amalah shel Torah*—the labor involved in mastering primary Jewish texts. (English teachers have a similar attitude, *Jehavdil*, to summaries of literary classics, but librarians make such tools available.)

In the historical literature of indexing, one finds that the first indexer of the [Christian] Bible was burned at the stake because he detracted from the position of the priests, whose specialized knowledge of the Bible had suddenly become available to laymen as a result of the publication of such a reference work. In Judaism, in contrast, rabbis would like laymen to know the original text, and Biblical concordances are viewed positively.

Translations—Negative attitudes to translations of Jewish classical texts date back to the Septuagint or *Targum ha-shiv'im*. Recently, criticism similar to that leveled at digests has been directed at the new English translation and commentary on the Talmud compiled by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. I was privileged to attend a press breakfast held in honor of the publication of the first volume of the translation by Random House. I asked Rabbi Steinsaltz how he responds to the criticism relating to *'amalah shel Torah*, and he answered that he rejects this attitude. Just as printing is a technical improvement over handwriting that facilitates study of texts, said Rabbi Steinsaltz, so removing the language barrier makes the Talmud accessible to a greater number of people.

Also rejecting the *'amalah shel Torah* argument, a Lubavitch Rabbi (Yisrael Rice of Marin County, CA) shared with me the story of the *Tsemah Tsedek*, who as a child was offered a gift of Torah knowledge by the *alter Rebbe*. The *Tsemah Tsedek* refused the gift because he felt he should acquire this knowledge through his own hard work. Later in life, however, he regretted not having accepted the gift, because he could have gone on to a higher level of learning had he already possessed the knowledge that was offered to him (*Likutei Sifot*, Part 24, p. 561). The current Lubavitcher Rebbe is a great supporter of reference works as aids to the acquisition of knowledge; evidence for this is found in the numerous indexes and encyclopedias listed in the catalog of Kehot Publications, the Lubavitch imprint.

As is the case with so many issues in Judaism, there is no unanimity on the question of whether codes, digests, translations, and indexes advance or detract from Jewish learning.