

Current Factors Affecting the Publication and Distribution of Traditional Jewish Literature in the U.S.

Eliezer Wise

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College
Wyncote, Pennsylvania

Definition

The area of Judaic publishing discussed in this paper is difficult to define. The category of traditional literature would seem to include any material that reflects the traditional practice and philosophy of Judaism. Upon closer examination, however, we find that the works in this category primarily reflect the Orthodox practice of Judaism. The discussion could thus more accurately be entitled *religious* than *traditional* publishing. We can define this as including materials concerning the Bible, Talmud, Jewish law, and Jewish philosophy—works that are devoted exclusively to classic Jewish texts and to the Orthodox theologians who write about them. This paper focuses mainly on American publications in this genre.

Dr. B. Barry Levy has written about the "Orthodox publishing explosion" (Levy, 1986–1987). We must keep in mind that Orthodox Judaism is not monolithic, however. There is great diversity of practice and philosophy among various groups of Orthodox Jews.

The Consumers

For such a specialized product as religious publications, there is a very limited audience. Within these limits, there is also diversity, however.

The first group of consumers is the newly Orthodox. The Jewish community is currently experiencing a spiritual rebirth in the form of the so-called "Baal Teshuvah movement." People who have come from generations of assimilation want to reassume their Jewish identity. They may have little more than a Hebrew school education, but Baale Teshuvah have a strong desire to read classic Jewish theological works. Being acculturated Americans, they may find it difficult to comprehend classic Jewish texts in the original language. Thus, a new genre of Torah literature has emerged. This literature is written by Americans, for Americans, and in a totally

American idiom (Preface by Aryeh Kaplan, in Oppenheim, 1979, p. xiii).

The phenomenon of Jews desiring texts in the vernacular is not new. In the 18th century, Rabbi Jacob Culi wrote an all-encompassing work that allowed people who lacked facility with Hebrew and/or Aramaic to tap the rich literature of Judaism. This work, entitled *Meam Loez*, was written in Ladino (the daily language of his Sephardic community); it allowed Jews to break the language barrier and move closer to their heritage. The *Meam Loez* anthology, comprising all forms of religious literature—including the Talmud, Midrash, and Jewish law—is as popular today as it was in the 18th century. It was recently translated from the original Ladino by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan; the translation is known as the *Torah Anthology*. This work gives the reader the flavor of the original texts, while making it easier for the reader to understand them.

The largest, and by far the most popular, component of religious materials is original works in translation. There is a definite correlation between the growth of the Baal Teshuvah movement and the publication of primary and secondary religious source material in the English language.¹ The major American producers of such material are Mesorah Publications, publishers of the Artscroll series, and Feldheim, an established religious publisher. Artscroll issues materials in categories ranging from Mishnah, liturgy, and prayerbooks to children's literature. Feldheim offers more translations, particularly of German origin, and a wider choice of topics (Levy, 1986–1987).

Feldheim has published classic works in Jewish ethics, as well as Jewish law, for many years. The firm is also responsible for publishing the writings and philosophy of the great 19th-century German rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch. These works are certainly important to the Baal Teshuvah's quest for knowledge of Judaism.

There are also bibliographies that can assist the Baal Teshuvah in finding out what classic texts and secondary sources are available. One example is the 1979 pub-

lication, *The Study and Practice of Judaism*, by Michah Falk Oppenheim (currently Head of Bibliographic Control at the Jewish Theological Seminary Library). This bibliography includes materials from publishers of religious material other than those already mentioned, such as Yeshiva University Press, Ktav, Kehot, and Maznaim. In recent years, however, Artscroll has become the most popular and the most prolific publisher of religious works.

The second primary group of consumers for religious materials in general, and works in translation specifically, includes what we might call "yeshiva alumni." These are people who attended an Orthodox yeshiva from the earliest years of their education through high school, college, and possibly even through rabbinic training.

It has been said that yeshiva alumni desire works in translation not because of an inability to read the original, but rather because of the ease of access and briefness of these works. American religious publishing has been called the "fast-vort [Yiddish for Torah thought] industry," aimed at the person who wants to study the weekly Torah portion or Mishnah without much effort (Levy, 1986–1987).

The interest of former yeshiva students in translations may also be related to a pedagogic problem. In American *yeshivot* founded after the Holocaust, classic texts were taught as they were in the *shtetl*, using a pedagogical approach that was predicated on the roles of family and community in an educational support system, but without consideration of the American acculturation process. In recent years, Orthodox educational institutions, through training programs of Torah Umesorah, have become aware of better methods of teaching the classic texts. The schools are now concentrating on teaching the fundamentals needed for mastering texts. Today's yeshiva students are thus experiencing a fundamental change in religious education, while the previous generation continues to experience difficulty in studying texts in the original. The wealth of translations and explanatory materials has given the latter group a chance to learn more.

*Paper presented at the 24th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries held in Washington, DC, June 20, 1989.

Works such as the Kehati commentary on the Mishnah help clarify the text for lay people studying Talmud. In recent years, the Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization has begun translating Kehati's work into English—a sure sign that a relatively knowledgeable and educated group is using the material.

The Steinsaltz Talmud is another example of filling a pedagogic void in a yeshiva student's education. This edition of the Talmud is vocalized, with Hebrew commentary on the text, and differs greatly in format from the traditional Talmud. In the Fall of 1989, Random House began publishing an English translation of this important work.

Acceptability

As stated above, the primary consumers of religious texts are Orthodox Jews. When these people buy a text, they want to be assured that it conforms strictly to Orthodox Judaism. One way of guaranteeing this is to secure an approbation, or *haskamah*, by a recognized contemporary sage. The written testimony of a sage as to the acceptability of a book serves the same function as rabbinic supervision on food products.

A *haskamah* appears on almost all religious Hebraica appearing for the first time. It is crucial for sales, especially if the author is relatively unknown. The importance of the sage giving the *haskamah* has a definite effect on sales. The use of the *haskamah* is more important in Israel than it is in the U.S., owing to factionalism in Israel.² Unfortunately, this *hekhsher* (rabbinical approval) has at present become politicized there.

When an author wants a *haskamah*, he applies directly to his teachers and leading rabbis. They are given a pre-publication copy of the book to read. Most of the time, a *haskamah* states that the author is trustworthy, but does not necessarily comment on the contents of the book *per se*.³ The consumer very rarely reads the *haskamah* but trusts that it provides testimony to the authoritativeness of the work.

In recent years, there has been a major shift to the right in Orthodox Judaism. As a result, strict standards that reflect this trend have been applied to publishing. Right-wing elements are extremely critical of materials that do not reflect their collective thinking. Negative criticism may have a significant effect on sales.

Right-wing criticism is even a factor in the publication of children's books. Publishers

must be aware of religious sensitivities when producing children's materials.⁴ Certain children's books portray all fathers with beards and all children with *peyos* (earlocks). The implication, as subtle as it may be, is that this represents Orthodoxy.

This de facto censorship reflects a move away from the outside world, which is perceived more as a threat to religious purity and existence, than as making a conscious effort to mold the thinking of the Jewish people.

Throughout history, Jews have looked to their religious leaders for guidance. In the present climate of excessive factionalism, however, each group tries to insulate its members from different opinions. Even English translations of classics are edited to reflect a particular philosophy—to the point, even, of transforming the original intent of the author.⁵ English translations of commentary are often not annotated, and, as far as their faithfulness to the original is concerned, one is at the mercy of the translator. Excerpts from commentaries remove a vital element for research: seeing the original in its context.

The Future

A librarian has expressed the opinion that the publication of digests of primary source material, along with translations, will cause the Jewish people to forget the original sources, and to replace them with the digests. In defense of these digests and translations, it should be noted, however, that the increase in the number of religious publications that can be used both by the yeshiva-educated and the Baal Teshuvah will make such people more aware of their Jewish heritage. Readers of such works will acquire skills that they have never had, or that were very weak. The increase in the use of these materials will ultimately lead to an increase in the study of the original sources. The translations broaden the base of the reader, and inspire a desire for more intensive Jewish education for children.⁶

Each insular Jewish group, such as Hasidim, will continue to publish materials addressing the specific needs of its adherents. Thus, religious publishing constitutes more than the mere dissemination of the written word. Rather, it reflects people trying to understand its beginnings and its present, and that is planning for its future.

Notes

1. Responses to questionnaire (reproduced in Appendix A) by Jack Goldman, of Otsar

Séfarim-Judaica Press, and Dr. Sid Leiman, Chairman, Department of Judaic Studies, Brooklyn College, City University of New York.

2. Sid Leiman, response to questionnaire.
3. Jack Goldman, response to questionnaire.
4. Ibid.
5. There was a controversy concerning the title *The Festivals in the Halacha* by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevi. The English translation omitted a reference to the State of Israel which appeared in the original Hebrew version. See *Tradition*, volume 22, no. 4, pp. 120–121 and volume 23, no. 1, pp. 98–99.
6. Sid Leiman, response to questionnaire.

References

- Levy, B. Barry. "The Orthodox Publishing Explosion in Perspective," *Jewish Book Annual*, vol. 44 (1986–1987), pp. 6–17.
- Oppenheim, Michah Falk. *The Study and Practice of Judaism: a Selected, Annotated List*. Brooklyn: Torah Resources, 1979.

Appendix A Questionnaire

The following is the text of a questionnaire developed for the purpose of gathering information for this paper:

Introduction

The object of this survey is to discover some of the factors that affect the publication of literature of a purely rabbinic, ethical, and philosophical nature.

The use of the term "traditional materials (Orthodox)" reflects the intensive interest of Orthodox Jews in these materials.

These materials are for the most part what are commonly called "seforim."

The results of this survey will be part of a presentation at the annual convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries.

Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Are there any overall criteria used by any publishers to determine the publication of traditional materials?
2. Does the *haskamah* play a part in publishing these traditional materials today?
3. What types of traditional materials are published with a *haskamah* and which are not? As for those that are published with one—is this required for publication?

4. How does an author obtain a *haskamah*? Is there a standard procedure that an author follows?

5. Does the name of the person giving the *haskamah* affect the sale of materials?

6. In countries with a Chief Rabbinate, is this procedure more controlled?

7. Are there any factors affecting the publication of traditional materials in Israel that are different from those in this country?

8. Are there so-called "vanity presses" that publish original traditional materials?

9. What determines the publication of traditional materials in English translation?

10. Does the growth in the number of traditional materials in English reflect the Baal Teshuvah movement?

11. Opinion: Do you believe that the increase in translation of original works will cause the lessening of the study of original works?

Spring Valley, New York 10977
(914) 356-2282, 1-800-237-7149

2. Judaica Press, Inc.
521 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10175
(212) 260-0520

3. Ktav Publishing House, Inc.
900 Jefferson Street
Hoboken, New Jersey 07030
(201) 963-9524

4. Kehot Publication Society (Lubavitch)
770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, New York 11213

5. Mesorah Publications, Ltd. (ArtScroll)
4401 Second Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11232
1-800-Mesorah

6. Maznaim Publishing Corporation
(*Torah Anthology*, agent for Mosad
Harav Kook)
4304 12th Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11219
(718) 438-7680

7. S. Goldman—Otzar Hasefarim
33 Canal Street
New York, New York 10002

8. Sepher-Hermon
1265 46th Street
Brooklyn, New York 11219

9. Department for Torah Education and
Culture in the Diaspora
515 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10022

Eliezer Wise is the Director of the Mordecai M. Kaplan Library at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

KLEINBURD (Continued from p. 61)

22. Antoni Gronowicz, *Four From the Old Town*, trans. Joseph Vetter (New York: Scribner's, 1944).

23. Richter, pp. 135–136.

24. Mara Kay, *In Face of Danger* (New York: Crown, 1977).

25. Aimee Sommerfelt, *Miriam*, trans. Pat Shaw Iversen (New York: Criterion, 1963), p. 156.

26. Dawidowicz lists nine hundred Norwegian Jews as victims of the Holocaust (p. 403).

27. Yvonne Meynier, *The School with a Difference*, trans. Patricia Crampton (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1965), pp. 78 and 95.

28. Colette Vivier, *The House of Four Winds*, trans. and ed. Miriam Morton (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 65 and 147.

29. Dawidowicz, p. 362.

Freda Kleinburd is a children's librarian completing a doctoral dissertation on Holocaust literature for children and young people, at Columbia University's School of Library Service.

Appendix B

Directory of Major American Publishers of Traditional/Religious Works

1. Feldheim, Philip, Inc.
200 Airport Executive Pk.

HOLY LAND TREASURES

1200 Edgehill Drive • Burlingame • California 94010

ANTIQUARIAN JUDAICA

- Rare Books
- Manuscripts and Documents
- Prints, Posters, Ephemera
- Jewish Art
- Antique Ritual Silver

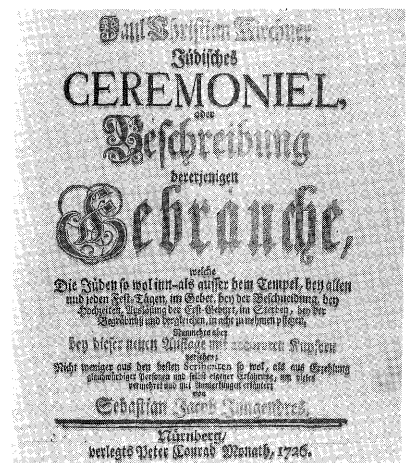
Ask for our new catalog

Rabbi Irvin D. Ungar, Proprietor

(415) 343-9578

Holy Land Treasures is located 10 minutes from the San Francisco airport.

We are eager to purchase institutional duplicates



18th c. illustrated account of German-Jewish ceremonies