

## A Pioneer Remembers: The Activities Miriam Leikind Initiated to Create the Association of Jewish Libraries\*

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I have known Miriam Leikind my entire life. She has not only been a close colleague but, as a long-time friend of my family, she strongly encouraged me to enter the field of librarianship, and particularly Judaica librarianship. We have spoken often about the need for professional activity to increase the visibility of Judaica libraries. When I was asked to prepare an oral history of Miriam's role in developing our Association, I made an appointment to have dinner with her. We sat for two hours at the Peking Koshers Chinese Restaurant in Cleveland Heights, as Miriam recalled many early activities that led to the formation of [the Jewish Library Association, which later merged with the Jewish Librarians Association, to form] AJL. It was more than a mere reminiscence. Miriam's recollections were so vivid that I felt as though I were present when the activities she described were taking place.

In her usual quiet but enthusiastic manner, Miriam begins to speak of the various activities in which she was involved prior to the actual creation of a recognized organization. There were many meetings, teas, receptions, displays at conferences, and presentations to other professional groups organized by Miriam. In her understated manner, she describes these early gatherings at which she sold educators, librarians, rabbis, and others involved in Jewish education a "bill of goods" encouraging cooperation and a variety of joint activities to improve the quality of library service within Jewish communal and educational institutions throughout the United States, Canada, and the world. Miriam was a catalyst for collective activity. She brought people together. She got to know them. They got to know her and each other. Everyone had an opportunity to "share ideas" and communicate for the benefit of all involved. Through Miriam's efforts, our profession moved into a posi-

tion of increased respect throughout the educational and library world, both within Jewish and general studies.

Miriam recalls how difficult it was to arrange meetings. Everyone had so many things to do. But meetings were held. In the evening, after religious school on a Sunday, or just whenever Miriam Leikind and several of her inspired colleagues were able to get together, valuable meetings did take place.

Miriam recalls traveling to Atlantic City [in the early 1960s], where Jewish educators were holding a national conference. She had previously contacted the head of the group and asked for permission to hold a meeting of librarians and others concerned with the operation of libraries. The group granted Miss Leikind a 4 p.m. meeting time. Few librarians attended. It was difficult for librarians to get financial support from their institutions for attendance at national professional meetings. The initial meeting Miriam recalls was attended by Mae Weine, Ethel Saferin, and Helen Levine. Miriam recalls the usefulness of having the late Helen Levine involved in the group, as Mrs. Levine had a long tenure as a librarian at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies. She provided useful representation for the needs and interests of college and research librarians.

Miriam speaks of her close relationship with publishers. She often encouraged publishers to increase the number of Judaica titles. During her frequent trips to New York, she made strong appeals for additional children's books to be produced. This was one of the earliest lobbying efforts made by professional Judaica librarians for quality reading materials. It is an effort that to this day is carried on by the Association. Miriam recalls that Bloch Publishing was particularly receptive to her concerns.

Miriam recalls disappointments along the way. She wrote to the American Library Association requesting that Judaica librarians become an "arm" of ALA. The American Library Association refused. She subsequently approached the Special Libraries Association. Once again, Miriam received a negative answer. To Miriam, a "no" answer may be a disappointment, but it is clearly not a setback. Perhaps it might have been considered a challenge, because as Miriam stated, after being refused by the SLA, she recognized the need for the Jewish librarians "to get started on our own."

Encouragement and support came from Rabbi Philip Goodman of the Jewish Book Council in New York City. Rabbi Goodman was highly supportive of the efforts of the infant library group [the Jewish Library Association]. He provided the necessary financial support, which enabled the group to begin activities to increase the visibility of the new Association. Rabbi Goodman's funding included money to pay a Judaica librarian to run a booth at an American Library Association conference. Over one thousand people signed in at the booth! As Miriam recalls, many people commented that they had never seen so much material on Jewish literature and libraries. Clearly, such comments provided impetus for additional activities. The ALA experience had been an important step in generating new interest in an association serving the Jewish library community.

Throughout her travels, Miriam Leikind sought out Jewish librarians. She recognized that strength would come through numbers, and she wanted others to realize the benefits to be gained from collective activity. Her encouragement led to a growing network of Jewish library associations in many cities throughout the United States. She speaks of the importance of local activities in letting the library community gain knowledge about Jewish literature. Miriam recalls annual tea meetings held around the time of the *Sukot* holiday.

\*As this issue was being prepared for publication, we learned that Ms. Leikind passed away on December 30, 1990.

Through these special meetings, Judaica librarians had an opportunity to host the general library community. Librarians from public, school, academic, and many other libraries came to hear a speaker and see displays of books. The tea was an excellent opportunity to "show off" activities taking place in Jewish libraries. Again, Miriam recalls, amazement was expressed at the level of activity among Jewish librarians.

Miriam stressed that it was necessary for Jewish librarians to share information about new books. This was another example of how everyone worked together. The number of sources available for reviews of books was limited, particularly of those relevant to Jewish libraries. At monthly meetings, ten or fifteen minutes were devoted to sharing information about newly published works. Gradually, from this developed the idea of preparing a *Bulletin* of

reviews that could be shared around the country.

There was a non-librarian providing motivation and encouragement for the growing professional group of Jewish librarians. Miriam speaks highly of the interest that the late noted Cleveland Rabbi, Abba Hillel Silver, played in supporting the development of Jewish libraries and Judaica librarianship. Rabbi Silver's congregation was one of the first in the United States to have a library, and his concern for the library was ever-present. It was Rabbi Silver who was directly responsible for Miriam's becoming the first full-time librarian of that congregation.

As I was driving Miriam home after dinner, I was struck by the fact that despite her "retirement" from the Temple, which she served for almost half a century, her inter-

est in Judaica librarianship continues. She expressed a strong concern for "sharing" and cooperation among librarians to continue and become stronger. For our profession, Miriam is like a modern-day Hillel. Her comments are not unlike those of the sage Hillel, who said, "If I am for myself alone, what then am I?" If we do not follow the lead of Miriam Leikind and work together to help one another as Judaica librarians, certainly no one else will help us. Miriam's determination serves as an example to everyone in the Association of Jewish Libraries. From her efforts, we must be inspired to carry on the tradition she started.

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**Miriam Leikind,  
ca. 1977.**

Photo courtesy of the  
*Cleveland Jewish News.*