American Research Collections in Jewish Studies, 1964–1989

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Introduction

Just as academic programs and course offerings in Jewish Studies have proliferated throughout the United States since the mid-1960s,1 newly established research library collections in support of Jewish Studies programs have similarly been created and molded, often in areas of the country where Jewish library resources were formerly either non-existent or exceedingly thin. The twenty-five year review that follows emphasizes the growth in these newer collections, while examining several of the external and institutional factors contributing to the development at American colleges and universities of library collections in Jewish Studies in the years since 1964, the year the Association of Jewish Libraries was founded.

The PL-480 Program

No review of this period could overlook the fact that 1964 also marked the inception of the now-defunct Library of Congress PL-480 program for Israel. This was a centralized and well-coordinated acquisitions project by which participating American libraries, originally twelve in number and expanded to twenty-two by 1973, automatically received shipments of newly published Israeli books and serials at no cost. Veterans in the Judaica library profession prior to the advent of library automation and shared machine-readable catalog records recall with a mixture of fondness and dread the arrival of Israel PL-480 shipments and the attendant work for each full-term participant to create over a ten-year period temporary bibliographic records, derived from the invaluable Accessions List: Israel, for an astounding 65,000 titles.2 In many respects, the Israel PL-480 years spanning 1964–1973 represent a period of budgetary resources and validation for Israel PL-480 program for Israel. This was a period of temporary bibliographic records, and the paperback revolution all endeavored to fill the instructional and cultural needs of an increasingly educated, acculturated, and literate post-World War II generation of Jewish and non-Jewish readers alike.

Impact of the Six-Day War

As is well known, the Six-Day War of 1967 also stirred the Jewish consciousness of innumerable American Jews—college students included—and concerns over Israel and Jewish identity became matters of articulated, public concern (witness the counter-culture Jewish Catalog,3 together with the Jewish feminist, student press, and havurah movements), percolating from the ground up into the academic curriculum as Jewish Studies, and competing for budgetary resources and validation along with Black, ethnic, and women’s studies. Secular publishers, especially the university presses, also responded to the academic and public clamor for Judaica with expanded lists of new titles at a time when the Middle East was front-page news (who can forget Nasser, PLO terrorism, the Lebanese civil war, Camp David, the excesses of the Shah of Iran and the rise of the ayatollahs, and OPEC’s machinations with the supply of the world’s petroleum?) and two major Israeli-Arab wars dominated the world’s attention in 1967 and 1973.

Coping with the Publishing Explosion

If authors, then, were creating the goods (consult the pages of the Jewish Book Annual or Judaica Book News if anyone doubts the existence of this publishing explosion), how were AJL’s research libraries coping at a time when the field of Judaica librarianship was considerably smaller than it is today, and relatively few Judaica librarians possessed accredited professional education in librarianship? The long-established and deservedly renowned research collections at Harvard, the Library of Congress, and the New York Public Library, as well as the seminary libraries at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), and Yeshiva University all went from proverbial strength to strength, albeit during alternating periods of budgetary expansion and occasional fiscal crises caused by galloping Israeli inflation, a...
weak dollar in relation to European currencies, and escalating domestic book and serial prices—factors that coincided with the boom in Judaica publishing.

Grants and endowments from the National Endowment for the Humanities, corporations, foundations, and private sources assisted Judaica libraries in: processing arrearages, e.g., various submerged, "back-room" special collections and manuscripts were cataloged or inventoried by the Klau Library, Cincinnati, with an NEH grant awarded in 1975; erecting new buildings, as in the case of JTS's handsome new Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Library facility; retrospective conversion, e.g., Harvard received a major grant from the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation for conversion of its sixties Hebrew and Yiddish card catalog to machine-readable form and acquisitions, as seen in the recent endowment created by Rosalyn and Joseph Newman for Yale University to develop a Yiddish research collection, or the gift made to Yeshiva University in honor of its centennial in 1986—the hologram letter, dated 1818, written by Thomas Jefferson to M. M. Noah.

The Harvard University Library staff has been particularly resourceful in tapping public and private funds to advance preservation microfilming of Judaica, Hebrew, and Yiddica, drawing on support from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation and the United States Office of Education Title II-C (Strengthening Research Library Resources) Program. At Indiana University, there now exists an endowment of $130,000 for library acquisitions in support of the Jewish Studies program, thanks to the support of over one hundred donors and $25,000 provided by an NEH Challenge Grant.

Continued Growth of Research Collections

The period under review was not without tragedies: the Jewish Theological Seminary of America Library suffered a disastrous fire in 1966, resulting in an irreparable loss of some 70,000 precious volumes. Growth in collections continued unabated as satellite campus libraries of the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox branches of Judaism expanded in New York (e.g., HUC-JIR's new Brookdale Center, adjacent to New York University) and in Los Angeles with JTS's West Coast affiliate, the University of Judaism, the Yeshiva University/Simon Wiesenthal Center, and HUC-JIR's Los Angeles campus. These libraries can rely on local consortia and reciprocal borrowing agreements for resource-sharing to meet local curricular and research needs, while also maintaining a strong interlibrary loan/photoduplication/telefacsimile relationship with their respective affiliated research libraries in Cincinnati and New York City.

For public and private universities about to embark on creating Jewish Studies programs in the 1960s and 1970s, with the weighty responsibility for developing collateral library resources virtually ex nilo, there were no easy formulas for success, and success stories are by no means common. One needs to read the university's public relations office-generated press releases (and, I might add, the library statistics) with no small degree of skepticism. Who is not aware of an "active" Jewish Studies program (translation: one of our most active interlibrary loan borrowing libraries) headed by an "eminent Judaic scholar" whose parent institution does not even invest in developing its own local resources by subscribing to the Jewish Quarterly Review or Midstream? These "programs," packaged with the ulcerous motive of cultivating Jewish money for the institution as a whole, are not to be taken seriously and lack any semblance of credibility other than filling a student's "mix and match" requirements for a certain number of electives in the humanities.

Yet, many Judaica research libraries have admirably met the collection development challenges, weathering along the way recessions, retrenchments in federal aid, and competition from local Jewish federations as well as Israel's far-reaching claims on American benevolence. At the time of his much-quoted study of Judaica library resources, published in 1975, Dr. Charles Berlin (Harvard) provided data on collections with total volume count of approximately two million volumes. In his article on libraries in Garland's forthcoming (July 1991) Jewish-American History and Culture: An Encyclopedia, co-edited by Jack Fischel and Sanford Pinsker, Stephen Lehmann has charted impressive expansion in the growth of Judaica collections to an astounding 3.5 million volumes.

The Bibliographer's Task

With forty centuries of recorded Jewish history to preserve and interpret, and with Jews dispersed throughout five continents, producing literature in a multitude of languages in book and non-book formats, the Jewish Studies bibliographer's task is inherently a difficult one, compounded at many institutions by additional assigned responsibilities such as cataloging, and inadequate clerical support. Without the enviable collecting headstart and alumni support enjoyed by all of the prominent institutions mentioned above, the bibliographer's burden is further aggravated by endemic problems of paper embrittlement, rising prices of new and old books (inflation and competition among libraries and collectors for a declining supply of desirable antiquarian books are at play here), and, more often than not, meager budgetary appropriations that inhibit a conscientious bibliographer's ability to order microforms of the Jewish press, to take a buying trip to Israel, or even to make timely purchases with the sophisticated needs of graduate and doctoral programs in mind—even if such programs do not yet exist but are merely in the planning stage.

Some of the newer Judaica research collections inaugurated in the past twenty-five years include those at Ohio State University, UCLA, University of Florida, University of Toronto, National Library of Canada (Lowy Collection), New York University's Library of the School of Law (Gruss Collection), University of Maryland, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, University of Denver, Stanford University, and SUNY-Binghamton. Other emerging concentrations of varying size and scope may be found at McGill University, University of Arizona, University of Washington, University of Utah, Purdue University, and Indiana University. Brandeis University and the universities of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Texas (Austin) have significantly enlarged upon core holdings already in place prior to 1964. Philanthropic support from Theodore E. Cummings, combined with early participation in the Israel PL-480 program and the fortuitous purchase of the Bamberger & Wahrman antiquarian bookstore in Jerusalem, accounts for UCLA's numerical domination among public universities, with holdings estimated at 170,000 volumes of Judaica, Hebraica, Yiddica, and Ladino publications.

Jeanne Eichberger, a colleague at SUNY-Binghamton with collection development responsibility for Judaica Studies, aptly expressed some of the common problems facing research libraries with new Judaica collections:

Because we try to be all things to all people, only a relatively small portion of the budget can be devoted to supporting the smaller programs, regardless of how worthwhile they are or how dedicated their faculty. Because we must compete with much older institutions which have had a

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century or more to build their collections, we must spend a significant portion of what money we have on retrospective purchases to fill in gaps in the recognized classics in the field. Under the circumstances, trying to "cover" a field like Judaic Studies, all several thousand years of it, spread as it is over philosophy, religion, history, law, literature, folklore, art, and you-name-it in any number of different languages, is both endlessly fascinating and perpetually frustrating. 7

Judaica librarianship has made tremendous strides in the past twenty-five years; thanks for this is due in large part to the tenacious commitment of librarians, laboring without adequate recognition or appreciation, to build and service strong collections for today's users and for generations of students and researchers to come. Is it all worth the effort, even if today's career-oriented Jewish students are by and large indifferent to Jewish Studies, and our collections are underutilized? I believe so, especially with Jewish survival so much in question and cultural illiteracy so rampant, as I recall the words of Barbara Ward: "In free society we are abolishing the past, not by rewriting it or forcefully suppressing it but simply by losing all interest in it. This is as fatal for a society as it is for a man to lose his memory." "

Notes


