

A Veteran Looks at the Future (and the Past) of the Association of Jewish Libraries

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Introduction

Part of this 25th anniversary volume of the Association of Jewish Libraries deals with its roots in the American historical setting, its precursors, its birth, its history; it includes memoirs, biographical data, descriptions of programs. When I was asked to present my "view of the things that Judaica libraries have to prepare for," the task given me was also described as "less an exercise in prophecy than in formulating an agenda." Any way one describes it, the bottom line of my task is the future.

I quickly decided that this subject was assigned to me as a veteran, not because I served in the Navy long ago, but rather because I have served in the trenches of Judaica libraries and librarianship for over forty years. The problem is that I have been neither a theoretician nor a student of the history of libraries and library organizations; I have been a thoroughly involved participant in the building of libraries, library buildings, their organizational structures, and their associations of people and institutions. And I am not at all sure how this experience has prepared or qualified me to have a view of the future that is worthy of anyone's attention. I must also confess at the outset that the future has not been a special interest of mine. To the contrary, while I have been aware of a significant amount of library literature that has focused on the future, I have deliberately skipped reading almost all of it. Two exceptions are Allen B. Veaner's "1985 to 1995: The Next Decade in Academic Librarianship" (1985) and *Judaica Librarianship: Facing the Future . . .*, edited by Charles Berlin (1989). Veaner's contribution is very thoughtful and provocative. The work edited by Berlin is a partial publication of a by-invitation-only symposium on the very subject now assigned to me. The presentations at the symposium were largely historical and descriptive rather than futuristic. As I face the challenge of thinking about the future, I well understand that dealing with the past is much easier.

The above had to be communicated not only to warn the reader but also to keep reminding myself that, while I am serious about the thoughts presented in this essay, they are unpolished thoughts about problems, and solutions that should not be taken *too* seriously by reader or writer. They are not the results of rigorous research; they are not structured by any profound philosophy; they are "an exercise" to convey one person's views and to stimulate further thinking.

Formulating an Agenda

In the simplest formulation, a library is a solution to the problem of bringing together information and people who need (or might need) that information. So, does Library = Information + Reader? Not really, or at least not beyond the level of a personal library. The additional necessary ingredient is a system, usually of mission, people, tools, and procedures. Thus Library = Information + Readers + System.

There are, of course, other information providers besides libraries. Immediately, there come to mind archives, museums, publishers, schools, synagogues, computer databases, etc. The relationships between and among the providers of information offer opportunities for networks, associations, and other forms of organizations, that is, overlays of additional systems consisting of mission, people, tools, and procedures.

Thus, when we think about formulating an agenda for the future of the Association of Jewish Libraries, we might actually be thinking about the people involved with libraries and related enterprises, about the systems or techniques that enable these people to provide services to those who desire them, and about the cooperation among libraries, etc. that could enhance the effectiveness of the services that they provide.

Historical Background

It is well to analyze the present condition of users' needs and the effectiveness of fulfilling them by libraries working individually and cooperatively. Such an analysis ought to be helpful in determining an "agenda" for the future of Judaica libraries. But the fear of the present and future inhibits many of us from undertaking such an analysis without first providing a foundation from the past. I will, therefore, briefly set the historical stage of people and system that led to the establishment of the Association of Jewish Libraries twenty-five years ago. This exercise ought to give us the courage to examine the present and offer insights for facing the future.

What were the needs of the profession of Jewish librarianship a generation ago? What was the nature of the libraries, library clientele, the people who ran the libraries? Without statistics, but from having been there and having a memory of the situation that comes from involvement, I will attempt a characterization.

The post-World War II milieu, as described by Maxwell Whiteman elsewhere in this issue, engendered a gradual but persistent shift from virtual indifference to things Jewish to a thirst for information about everything in the Jewish past. First the establishment of the State of Israel, and then the growing reaction to the Holocaust may well have been the motivation both for the interest in gaining information and in providing it. To fill the need, there were the large seminary libraries, a few Hebrew college libraries, several secular libraries with Judaic or Hebraic sections (like the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and a small number of university libraries), a handful of special libraries (like the Zionist Archives and Library and the American Jewish Committee Library), and a growing but still modest number of mostly quite small synagogue libraries scattered around the country. One could and did characterize this diverse group as

divisible into two: the research and special libraries on the one hand and the synagogue (and center) libraries on the other. Advanced students, specialized researchers, and faculties patronized and made demands on the larger libraries; and rabbis, teachers, school children, and small numbers of the general public used the smaller libraries.

It is, I believe, accurate to say that a large majority of the "librarians" in both types of libraries were not professionally trained, but rather trained on the job or entirely self-trained. Many of the synagogue librarians were volunteers who liked books and people and did their best while feeling self-consciously inadequate. Some of the research and special librarians really were specialists, sometimes outstanding book-people, sometimes scholars in Jewish bibliography or a Jewish subject. A handful of the librarians in both camps had degrees in library science. Naturally, the state of the art of library science—or the amount of rational systemization—varied considerably from library to library, some librarians only vaguely aware that they weren't doing all that might be done even on limited resources.

The research librarians tended to be full-time, better educated, and clustered on the East Coast. By 1946, they had formed the Jewish Librarians Association and began to socialize, to talk to each other about their problems, and to cooperate a bit more formally. Mostly, they remained wrapped up in their individual libraries and ineffective as an association.

The synagogue librarians as a group made up in enthusiasm what they may have lacked in formal preparation. They sought each other out in some of the larger Jewish communities and worked closely with one another to make their libraries accessible and inviting. Though some of their leaders were well-trained librarians, they felt the need for more Jewish subject knowledge—and more technical information about how to run their libraries—and they thought they might get this kind of help from the seemingly more knowledgeable research librarians. At first rebuffed, they formed their own Jewish Library Association in 1962.

The "agenda" seemed rather obvious. Could Jewish librarianship overall be enhanced, that is, could better service be provided to more users more effectively if these two disparate groups worked together? Other related issues were the status of Jewish librarianship and the stan-

dards of the profession. Thought and discussion centered on the hope that each group had much to offer the other, and a merger eventuated. There is a consensus, I am confident, that the merger—the imposition of another layer of system—has been very successful in enabling communication, education, pride, and rising standards of professionalism and service.

AJL and Today's Library World

In the twenty-five years of the Association of Jewish Libraries, it has hardly stood still; and it would be most understandable if it chose to continue on its present course of increasing membership, regularly improving its journal *Judaica Librarianship*, expanding publications, attaining more community support and recognition, and raising standards still higher. But it might also be a good time to have a fresh look to try to determine whether the Association as now constituted is the best vehicle for confronting today's Judaic library world and its problems and opportunities.

It is my conception that Judaic library readerships have expanded a great deal over the years in terms of categories as well as numbers. We need to add journalists, genealogists, authors, and non-Jews interested in Jewish subjects to the scholars, rabbis, teachers, students at all levels, and the general Jewish public who actively use and are urged to use our libraries. Information has exploded, and it has become increasingly important for libraries to share with other libraries to make scarce resources widely available. At the same time, Jewish Studies programs have proliferated at universities and colleges throughout the land, increasing both the numbers of users of all of our libraries and the amount of interlibrary cooperation that is called for.

There has also been a proliferation of organizations, networks, and systems that clamor for our attention and our loyalty. The systems range from competing Hebrew word processing programs to catalog card production to integrated local online library software packages. Networks may do our cataloging for us; they encourage shared cataloging; they permit interactive cooperative projects in preservation, among other things. Are available local online systems, including the Israeli-born ALEPH, useful to our libraries, large and/or small? What are the advantages and disadvantages of OCLC, with its romanized-only Hebrew, and RLIN, with its fuller Hebrew capabilities?

AJL Faces the 1990s

In the sophisticated library world of the 1990s—far more complex than the 1960s—we need to analyze again the basics: information, readers, staff, systems. As for information, the Association can influence only to a minute degree what is published and how much. It can and should work to increase readership, especially among laypeople; but, for the most part, it has minimal control over who the readers are and how many. There are some significant exceptions to these generalizations. To the extent that older materials in our collections are deteriorating and even falling apart, we librarians may be guilty of permitting a diminution of available information. And to the extent that our libraries are not attractive, accessible, and easily usable, we may be inviting readers to stay away. So, our professional skills in conservation and preservation and interlibrary cooperation can optimize the availability of information; and our "marketing" skills may result in greater use. The quality of our professionalism is the major ingredient in providing information, in welcoming readers, and in utilizing systems; and it is an important ingredient in attracting the necessary support. It comes down to people.

What kind of people do we want to recruit to the profession of Jewish librarianship? What kind of training should they have? What systems may we use to enhance effectiveness? Can AJL "broker" cooperation? What other groups are doing similar things, and should AJL seek alliances with them?

The other organizations that immediately come to mind are the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies (CARLJS) and the Jewish and Middle East Studies (JAMES) Program Committee of the Research Libraries Group (RLG). Both overlap the membership and potential activities of the Research and Special Libraries Division of AJL. Is some simplification or amalgamation possible? The Archives group in CARLJS is the potential "orphan"; is there room for an Archives Division in AJL? Is the Church and Synagogue Library Association a viable partner at some level? Should AJL seek a relationship with the Council of American Jewish Museums or with the Association for Jewish Studies?

Computers, the major technological advance of our age, are used in different ways from library to library. In any period, libraries vary in their stage of development, in their sophistication, in their readiness

(professionally and financially) for the new. But computer techniques and networks of various types are narrowing the technological gaps among libraries and types of libraries. These systems are making more cooperation possible, even as cooperation becomes more necessary, since even the strongest libraries cannot provide all information or all possible services. AJL must find ways to monitor and encourage these developments.

In the final analysis, it is people who make systems successful. AJL should cooperate, or lead, in recruitment to the profession. It should set the standards—in cooperation with the Jewish Book Council of America—for Jewish libraries. There is a world of difference between the average professionalism in our Jewish libraries of today as compared with twenty-five years ago; but standards must rise even higher, if only to keep up with the increasingly sophisticated demands of library users. To be the leader of the profession, AJL should survey and recommend salary scales. It should seek ways to enhance the status of

librarians. It should encourage rabbis, lay leaders, and even active users to become members. It might try to raise an endowment to insure its programs.

Who should become a Judaic librarian? The motivation may be varied and so should the training be. We need good technicians, theoreticians, Jewish subject scholars; people who like people, people who like books, people who like both. We need specialization, but also adaptability; stable people and mobile; good communicators and able managers. Above all, in my judgment, we need people with analytical skills for problem solving, women and men who are not afraid to innovate and to change.

The world around us is changing ever more rapidly. Librarians who recognize change and adapt to it are essential. Those who foresee change and control it constructively will be the leaders. And library organizations which nurture exciting librarians and provide a favorable climate

for meeting challenges will flourish. The Association of Jewish Libraries responded to professional and structural challenges in the '60s and has grown in strength and stature since then. Is AJL ready to meet the future with equal vigor?

References

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**Herbert C. Zafren,
AJL President, 1966.**

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