

# ALEF BIT

## Judaica in Computer Databases\*

**Yael Penkower**

*Jewish Theological Seminary  
New York, N.Y.*

### Introduction

Two years ago, my daughter, Yonina, returned from a school trip to Washington, D.C., with a present for her father, the historian. It was a sign for his desk, saying, "Lord, give me the strength to get along with computers." We have a Macintosh SE at home, with which my husband, Monty, is still struggling to cope. I feel that he is not alone in the academic world of Jewish Studies. For this reason, I would like to introduce some of the possibilities of computer usage in various fields of Judaica.

As a reference librarian for a major Jewish academic institution, I often get inquiries that begin with words like: "I once saw an article by . . .," or "Where can I find books about. . .?," or "What was written about this concept?," or "Who discusses this *pasuk* in the Bible?" Most of these questions could be answered with the help of printed bibliographies and/or indexes. Today, there are easier and faster ways of getting the answers with the aid of computers.

Allow me first to explain a few basic concepts that are related to computerized literature searches.

General and subject indexes, in printed form, appear at regular intervals, e.g., monthly, with cumulative annual editions. Examples of such indexes are the *New York Times Index* and the *Humanities Index*. The computerized versions of these indexes are called databases. As varied as are the fields of learning, so are the possibilities of databases. From the sciences to the humanities, each discipline has its own primary database as well as related databases.

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### Online and Offline Searches

How does an online search operate? The databases are transferred or input into a mainframe computer, at which point all the information is accessible immediately. In this way, when a search is conducted under a subject, a name, or a title (the same way that it is done in a printed index), one big step is omitted: that of searching in each of the index volumes. The database will produce the results of searching the multiple volumes at once.

The search words or phrases are punched in on a computer keyboard at any library, and transmitted immediately by a modem via telephone-line to a center, where the request is processed. The results of the search appear on the computer screen and can then be printed, all in a matter of seconds. The search can be done either in one database or in various groups of databases at one time.

The searches are performed by typing in commands (such as "search" or "find") with selected terms. The type of term can vary: an author's name with or without a title; a title, or just a key word in the title; a subject or a descriptive word or phrase; a name as a subject; a journal's name combined with any of these; or the name of a place. All these terms can be searched in different sequences, using Boolean logic.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to online searches, there are offline searches. These operate on the same principles, except that the databases are on compact discs (CD-ROM), which each library can purchase (or lease) and use more freely than online databases since the discs are owned by the library. The basic difference between the two methods is that online searches can be performed on hundreds of databases, while each CD-ROM includes only one database. Moreover, online searches are almost always done by a librarian after an interview with the user, in order to identify his or her exact needs. Because of the ex-

pense of computer connect time, there is usually a charge for online searches, while most libraries do not charge for user searches on CD-ROM.

### Databases for the Judaica Library

There are a number of companies in the world through which searches can be done online, even internationally. Some of the relevant vendors are BRS Information Technologies, DIALOG Information Services, and the H. W. Wilson Company.

At the Jewish Theological Seminary, we use DIALOG as our online bibliographical tool. Amongst its hundreds of databases, it includes an impressive number that can be used for searching fields related to Judaica. A few are listed below. The databases are arranged alphabetically for convenience, rather than in order of priority.

The sources of information for these databases vary. The basic forms covered are journal articles, conferences, some books—by a single author or multiple authors, such as *festschriften*—reviews, reports, and government publications.

The date after the name of the database indicates the year from which the database producer began to make available its information on computers. With respect to the historical databases, one has to remember that, even though the beginning date of a database may be recent, articles published therein deal with earlier historical periods.

*America: History and Life*. 1964—. Indexes and abstracts articles, monographs, and dissertations that cover United States and Canadian history. Examples of topics that can be searched in this database: ethnic studies, including Black-Jewish relations; religious history; urban studies, e.g., the Jews in Atlanta; and Jewish women in the feminist movement.

*Art and Humanities Search.* 1980– . Indexes journals and other relevant sources in the social and natural sciences. The material can be accessed by author, subject, and cited references. Some illustrations of possible searches are: the motif of the Jew in 17th-century Italian painting, citations to works by Bezalel Narkiss, and approaches to the preservation of books—Jewish or others.

*Dissertation Abstracts Online.* 1861– . The definitive subject, title, and author guide to virtually every American dissertation granted at accredited North American universities from 1861 on. Since 1988, this database has included information on dissertations from 50 British universities, along with dissertations listed in each volume of *European Dissertations*. As the database covers almost all fields of knowledge, it should be consulted prior to commencing research for one's own dissertation, in order to avoid duplicating existing theses, as well as to learn what may have already been written on the subject of a proposed dissertation.

*ERIC.* 1966– . Provides comprehensive indexing of research reports and journal articles in the field of education. The database is the equivalent of the printed tools *Resources in Education* and *Current Index to Journals in Education*. ERIC is also available on CD-ROM. Examples of search topics in ERIC might be: teaching the Holocaust in high schools, or sex education in parochial schools.

*Exceptional Child Education Resources.* 1966– . A source for all aspects of research on handicapped and gifted children, which is a relatively new concern of American Jewish communal service.

*Family Resources.* 1970– . Covers professional literature relating to the family, including the disciplines of medicine, psychology, sociology, and education. Marriage and divorce, family trends and changes, organizations and services for families, sexual attitudes and behavior are covered as well. This database is especially important for researchers, counselors, and social workers who deal with Jewish families in diverse types of communities.

*Historical Abstracts.* 1973– . Covers world history from 1450 to the present, excluding the United States and Canada, which are covered by *America: His-*

*tory and Life*. Articles are abstracted from over 2,000 journals in 30 languages emanating from many countries, including Israel. Examples of search topics: the Jewish impact on commerce in England in the 19th century, or Napoleon and the Sanhedrin.

*Mideast File.* 1979– . Covers all aspects of the contemporary Middle East—both the current situation and the historical background of that region. This database draws upon the literature of such fields as current affairs, economics, history, sociology, oil, and education. When a researcher is looking for information about the Arab-Israeli conflict, this is a good starting point.

*MLA Bibliography.* 1968– . Indexes journal articles and books on language, literature, and linguistics. It is the largest and most comprehensive database to cover current scholarship in modern Hebrew literature. Examples of searches might include: reviews and criticism of Amos Oz's *My Michael*, or *Night* by Elie Wiesel.

*National Newspaper Index.* 1979– . This database indexes and abstracts more than 20 major U.S. and foreign newspapers. Here one would look for the latest reviews of current books, obituaries, or editorials or articles discussing events related to Jews anywhere in the world.

*PAIS International (Public Affairs Information Service).* 1972– . A source of access to the literature of public policy and current social, economic, and political problems. Examples of searches: United States-Israel economic relations, or Jewish lobbying and the U.S. Senate.

*Philosophers' Index.* 1904– . Indexes and abstracts books and articles appearing in over 270 journals of philosophy and related fields. It provides excellent coverage of the philosophy of various disciplines, such as education, history, law, religion, and science.

*Religion Index.* 1975– . Covers Church history, Biblical literature, theology, history of religions, and the sociology and psychology of religion. Emphasis is on English-language material, which may seem a disadvantage to anyone dealing with Judaism; yet this is a very useful database as a beginning point for research, either in Judaism and its many aspects, or for comparison with other religions. Here one can find articles on Biblical concepts, personalities, or individual books of the Bible.

These examples are but a few of the numerous possibilities in each field. And when a few databases are combined, the possibilities are even greater. It must be kept in mind that computers only function in relation to what the researcher asks them to do. Each search has to be carefully planned, therefore, before using the computer, so as to formulate search statements that are precise. One must also remember that the results obtained in an online search do not constitute the definitive bibliographical list. Depending on the level of research needed, the computer-assisted search is usually only a very good beginning, while sometimes it is more than enough.

### Use of RLIN and OCLC for Online Searching

Another possibility for online research has become available recently for the Judaica researcher: the Research Libraries Information Network, known as RLIN, whose principal purpose is to provide online, rapid, comprehensive access to bibliographic data. RLIN is a cataloging and acquisition tool, which means that it runs parallel to the library card catalog, rather than to indexes.<sup>2</sup>

RLIN records are grouped by form of publication, e.g., books, serials, maps, musical scores, and audio-visual material. RLIN also has a special file of archival and manuscript records. In the archival file, for example, one can find cataloged, summarized, and indexed the more than 1,200 testimonies of Holocaust survivors on video in The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, at Yale University. The catalog of the archives and manuscripts of the Jewish Theological Seminary will also be added to RLIN in the near future.

Most of the information that can be retrieved from DIALOG is not in Hebrew. This is not so in RLIN. Since January 1988, RLIN has provided the capabilities of inputting and searching in the Hebrew and Yiddish alphabet online.

In RLIN, one can search online not only by author or title, but also by key words or phrases, in any field of the catalog record, such as title or subject. Here, too, Boolean logic can be applied.

A similar project is now being undertaken by OCLC, the other major American online bibliographic network. At the present time, this database contains over 17 million items. Here, too, access may be obtained to books and serials, visual material, maps, archival material, manuscripts, and music—both scores and sound-recording formats. OCLC records are currently searchable by a variety of search keys, e.g., name, title, or name-title combinations. One can also qualify the search by document type and publication date, or by a range of dates, e.g., 1980–1990.

OCLC's new program, EPIC, for the first time enables searching by Library of Congress subject headings on that network. Both RLIN and OCLC have authority files, which provide access to over 2 million records of the Library of Congress Authority Files for Name Headings and Subject Headings. Each authority record contains the authorized form of entry, along with related cross references. This means that, whether one searches under Rambam or Moshe ben Maimon, the program will direct the searcher to "Maimonides, Moses, 1135–1204," which is the authorized form.

Unlike RLIN, OCLC does not, as yet, possess a Hebrew script capability. All Hebrew data is transliterated, which makes searching somewhat cumbersome. But since the OCLC database is larger than RLIN's, and more libraries throughout the world belong to OCLC, it will be of great advantage to use EPIC.

Another milestone, as of 1988, was the addition to both OCLC and RLIN of records for Hebrew and Yiddish materials from the Harvard College Library. This database contains bibliographic citations for approximately 88,000 items. The records of one of the most significant collections of Judaica and Hebraica in this country are now accessible to scholars online. (Harvard's

bibliographic records for Hebraica are available in transliteration only, however.)

Both RLIN and OCLC are online union catalogs, which means that they are databases not only of bibliographic data, but of location information. Each institution that has used a record for online cataloging, or that has reported ownership, is considered a holding institution, and is identified by its institution's symbol. In searching for an item, one can thus determine which library has the needed document, and obtain it through interlibrary loan. The other type of databases, such as those accessed on DIALOG, do not give locations.

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#### **Local Databases**

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, an online service like DIALOG provides access to many databases. There are some libraries that create their own innovative and important databases. Briefly, I would like to cite three examples. First, the YIVO collection of photographs from eastern Europe, depicting towns, schools, summer camps, graveyards, political organizations, and more. Through a combination of computer and laserdisk technology, these can be accessed by a variety of search terms, such as names of places, occupations, and names of people. When retrieved, the photographs appear on the screen, together with a full description. Beth Hatefutsoth (The Museum of

The Diaspora) in Tel Aviv is another example. Here, access to its database can be, again, through names of people and places from all over the Jewish world. Last but not least, visitors to the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, a living memorial to the Holocaust, will, as of 1992, be able to enter its Learning Center and use the computerized Interactive Encyclopedia of Jewish Heritage. This will combine words, animated graphics, photographs, moving images, and sound to unlock the treasures of Jewish culture and to provide the user with the tools to understand the Holocaust. For example, a person wishing to learn about a Jewish community in Poland that was destroyed during the Holocaust could read its history, view a film or a newsreel clip and photos taken in the area before World War II, hear a popular song from the region, and see street maps of the town by simply touching highlighted words in the text. The problem is that these three databases are locally based, and cannot be accessed online from another library.

Patrons who use our libraries write a lot and always have to check what was already written—and by whom—in their respective fields. The tools described above should make life easier for the scholar, for the teacher, and, with their encouragement, for their students as well. Consequently, I hope that all of us will develop the strength—and perhaps even the enthusiasm—to get along with computers.

#### **Notes**

1. Boolean logic is the manipulation of sets through the commands AND, OR, and NOT. The largest number of results are obtained with OR, as in "painters OR sculptors," fewer but more specific results with AND, as in "painters AND sculptors," while unwanted terms are eliminated with NOT, as in "painters NOT sculptors."

2. In the late 1960s, the Library of Congress developed the MARC format for standardizing computerized cataloging. This allows computer recognition and manipulation of cataloging data. The MARC format serves as the basis for the computerized catalog of most libraries and library networks, such as RLIN.

Yael Penkower is the Reference Librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City. Having received an M.L.S. and an M.A. in Jewish Studies, she is currently a doctoral student in Jewish history at J.T.S.

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