

Preserving Judaica Research Resources*

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The Quality of Paper

On March 7, 1989, on the occasion of The New York Public Library Commitment Day, 44 authors and 40 publishers co-signed a "Declaration of Book Preservation," which was issued under the sponsorship of PEN and the Authors' Guild. The purpose of the declaration, which was published as a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* (March 16, 1989), was to announce the authors' and publishers' "commitment to use acid-free paper for all first printings of quality hard-cover trade books in order to preserve the printed word and safeguard our cultural heritage for future generations." The newspaper ad is already turning yellow; in a few years, it will crumble into dust because of the high acid content of the newsprint on which it is printed.

Anyone who has examined books printed before the last third of the nineteenth century is likely to be struck by the seeming paradox that, although subject over time to the ravages of heat and frost, high and low humidity, infestation by worms and insects, and excessive handling by countless readers, their pages are usually in far better shape than those in books printed only 25 or 50 years ago.

Among observant Jews, the Hebrew word *shemos* [literally, *names*] refers to any religious book or manuscript containing God's name, that is either too deteriorated or no longer wanted for use. Traditional Jewish practice is to bury *shemos*, in an act of reverence, rather than destroy them. For people in and around the Jewish book

world, *shemos*—by now encompassing far more than is denoted by the word's narrow, "dictionary" definition—are simply considered to be the bibliographical equivalent of *shmates*, of unwanted old rags. This is ironic, for until the mid-19th century, the durable paper on which books and newspapers were printed was indeed *made* of *shmates*—of old cotton and linen rags. It was only with the introduction of paper made of ground wood pulp, with its high acidity, that rapid deterioration of printed matter began to constitute a problem. As a result, the scholarly community now confronts a massive headache: library stacks are lined with literally millions of brittle books that can no longer be touched without jeopardizing their contents. Over the past decade or two, the alarm over the brittle-book problem has been sounded with increasing frequency, and in response, some positive developments are coming about.

The "Declaration of Book Preservation" is one such development; henceforth, at least those publishers who have signed that declaration will have their books produced on alkaline paper, which can be expected to last for hundreds of years. The technology now exists to produce alkaline paper at prices virtually comparable to those for the manufacture of the more acidic paper that has been used in trade-book production since roughly 1870. This economic factor helps to explain why over 30 paper mills in this country are now producing alkaline papers for the book trade.

The presence of authors as well as publishers among the signatories of the "Declaration of Book Preservation" is an indication of the important role that authors can and must play in this effort. Authors need to be aware not only of a prospective publisher's editorial policies and distribution practices, not only about contractual obligations and royalties, but also whether, for the sake of permanence, the publishing company has its books printed on alkaline paper.

As any researcher in Jewish studies can attest, Judaica publications do not constitute an exception to the problems arising from the common practice of printing on high-acid-content paper. Before World War Two, Poland was one of the great centers of Hebrew and Yiddish printing and publishing. For economic reasons, books were usually printed there on the cheapest paper available: highly acidic newsprint. A library consisting of 20th-century Eastern European Hebrew imprints is, therefore, a library of *shemos* (in the broadest sense)—of disintegrating books with yellow, brittle pages that often can scarcely be turned. Of course, one researcher's *shemos* constitute the next scholar's *genizah*; neither the destruction nor burial of the brittle books lining the shelves of our Judaica libraries is being advocated here.

To continue with the *shemos/genizah* analogy, the Library of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York, NY) contains hundreds of late 19th- and early 20th-century Yiddish chapbooks consisting of tales by such once-popular authors as Naḥum Meir Shaikewitz (also known by his nom-de-plume, Shomer), Isaac Meir Dick, and Joshua Mezach. These publications were printed in thousands of copies and circulated throughout Eastern Europe. They were attacked as junk by authors with higher literary pretensions (such as Sholem Aleichem), and indeed, once read, they were soon disposed of by their readers.

Aside from the built-in disposability of these 19th-century publications, their availability has been reduced by the annihilation of the Jewish communities in which they were produced and by the destruction of most of Eastern Europe's Jewish libraries. The few copies that do survive are in extremely fragile shape, moreover. Today, a 19th-century Shomer chapbook may be as scarce as a Hebrew incunabulum printed in Guadalajara, Spain in 1482. What is true for Eastern European Yiddish chapbooks, in terms of their scarcity and fragility, is to some degree true for

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the full range of pre-World War Two Hebrew and Yiddish publications.

Judaica Microfilming Projects

The unpopular but necessary medium of microfilm has long been employed by libraries and publishers for the purpose of preserving newspapers and periodicals. In the past, Judaica libraries with significant press holdings have often informally agreed to microfilm serials in areas where they are strong. Much of the American Jewish press has been microfilmed either by The New York Public Library or by the American Jewish Periodical Center at Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati, OH). The latter periodically publishes catalogs of available microfilms (Zafren, 1984). YIVO's holdings of the Eastern European Yiddish press were microfilmed in the mid-1960s, with the support, appropriately, of the Ab. Cahan Fund. [Ab. Cahan was editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*.] A published catalog of the microfilmed serials was compiled by Mordekhai Bernshteyn (1965).

Commercial vendors, such as the Inter-Documentation Company (IDC; Zug, Switzerland) have, in more recent years, marketed extensive microfilm and microfiche runs of the Hebrew press and of Jewish periodicals in other languages. Most of the IDC's work has been carried out at the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) in Jerusalem. IDC has also preserved, either on 35-millimeter microfilm or on microfiche, hundreds of scarce monographs in many areas of Judaic learning. IDC's work in this area can be regarded both as an act of preservation and as a commercial effort to disseminate titles whose physical state may not necessarily be precarious, but that, in their printed form, are nevertheless not widely available. IDC's catalog entitled *Jewish Studies* (1983) includes extensive listings of periodicals and newspapers in a wide range of Jewish and European languages, along with sections on bibliography; local Jewish history; philosophy and religion; languages and literature; and collected papers, jubilee and memorial volumes. A *Guide to the Hebrew Press*, prepared by the late bibliographer Getzel Kressel (1979), was published by IDC both as a finding aid to its micropublications and as a reference source in and of itself.

Among other companies through which Judaica press runs on microfilm have been distributed are Clearwater Publishing Company (New York, NY; publisher of *German-Jewish Periodicals from the Leo Baeck Institute 1768-1945*, now distributed by University Publications of

America), Research Publications (Woodbridge, CT), University Publications of America (Bethesda, MD; publisher of *Jewish Displaced Persons Periodicals from the Collections of the YIVO Institute*), and University Microfilms International (Ann Arbor, MI).

Of course, periodicals are not the only publications requiring some form of preservation. Many Judaica research repositories have, over the years, also microfilmed deteriorating *books* and *manuscripts* in Hebrew, Yiddish, and other languages. This has been done on either an occasional or a systematic basis, whenever funds have permitted. Some of these collections have been marketed by commercial micropublishers. A recent example is *Hebrew Books from the Harvard College Library*, a microfiche collection consisting of some 4,900 titles, published by K. G. Saur (Harvard College Library, 1989). Clearwater has published two YIVO collections: *Yiddish Classics on Microfiche* (including works by Mendele Mokher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz) and *Yiddish Children's Literature*. Other examples include two Hebrew manuscript catalogs from the Jewish Theological Seminary and the political papers of Emil J. Gumbel (filmed from the holdings of the Leo Baeck Institute), all disseminated by University Publications of America (*Jewish Studies*, 1991).

Some libraries have also published guides to their microform collections. The Judaica Department of the Harvard College Library has been particularly active on this front, having issued numerous finding aids to the thousands of books, periodicals, pamphlets, and ephemera—in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Western languages—that it has microfilmed. (Grants from the U.S. Department of Education, under its Title II-C Program, made possible the preservation of many of the titles microfilmed by Harvard.) The most recent of Harvard's checklists have themselves been produced on microfiche (Harvard University Library, 1979–). In addition, a list of periodicals microfilmed by the JNUL (1990) has gone through four editions.

Until quite recently, most microfilming projects took place virtually in splendid isolation from one another. Because of the difficulties involved in coordinating preservation activities among research institutions, serious efforts have not always been made to complete periodical runs being microfilmed, or (in order to avoid unnecessary duplication of microfilming efforts) to verify whether or not a certain title was already microfilmed elsewhere. Until now, for verification purposes, it has been necessary

to consult the printed or microfiche checklists that had been prepared by such repositories as the American Jewish Periodical Center, Harvard, The New York Public Library (unpublished), the Library of Congress (unpublished), the JNUL, and others, along with the *National Register of Microfilm Masters* and other lists and files. Only lately, with the advent of computerized, online bibliographical networks, has it been possible to create mechanisms whereby previously tedious verification procedures could be streamlined and cooperative projects designed.

Now, through databases such as the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), it is possible to ascertain whether a particular title has been microfilmed by a member library or, if not, whether another institution has plans to microfilm it. This is true, at least, for microforms that have been cataloged during the past ten years or so, i.e., since member libraries have begun to contribute information to these databases. On a *retrospective* basis, however, much work remains to be done, before the participants in a network will be quickly able to verify what was microfilmed 20 or 30 years ago. In 1988, the Harvard University Library made an important contribution to this verification process, when its Judaica Department contributed catalog records for its entire Hebraica holdings to the two major national bibliographical networks. Microfilms and microfiche are included among the over 100,000 catalog records that Harvard has contributed to the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and RLIN databases. Both of these networks will eventually contain the machine-readable version of the *National Register of Microfilm Masters*, part of which has already been converted.

Funding of Preservation Projects

The increased awareness of libraries' preservation needs has lately resulted in vastly increased funding opportunities from both private and public sources. The Fiscal Year 1989 budget for the National Endowment for the Humanities' Office of Preservation was increased almost *three-fold* over the previous year, from \$4.5 million to \$12.3 million. The increase in the NEH preservation budget will, if sustained, provide funding for the microfilming of some three million volumes over the next 20 years, according to George Farr, the Director of the Office of Preservation at the Endowment ("RLG Contributes to National Preservation Effort," 1989, pp. 7–8). These funds are distributed among both individual research institutions and on a cooperative basis. Private foundations (e.g., the Samuel H. and Helen R. Scheuer Family

Foundation and the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, which have provided support for preservation microfilming programs at YIVO and Harvard) and state agencies (e.g., the New York State Library) have also been generous in their support of preservation projects. One consequence of this heightened awareness is the emergence in academic librarianship of the preservation specialist, alongside the more traditional professional categories of subject bibliographer, cataloger, reference librarian, and library administrator.

Coordination of the massive preservation projects now underway has been greatly facilitated by the creation of consortia with access to the databases of bibliographic networks such as OCLC and RLIN. Judaica libraries and archives, each with its own areas of unique strength, form an ideal constituency for such a consortium. The Council on Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies (which operates under the aegis of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture) has formed two subcommittees, one for library collections and the other for archival repositories, to look into possible arrangements for cooperative preservation projects. The Research Libraries Group's Jewish and Middle East Studies Program will likely serve as a vehicle for activating the cooperative Judaica preservation proposals that are currently being discussed.

Such efforts need not be confined to American repositories. Indeed, NEH recognized the international dimensions of Judaica preservation needs in 1988, when it awarded a three-year matching grant to the Hebrew Union College Library for the purpose of microfilming the entire manuscript collection at the JNUL in Jerusalem—the largest such collection in the Judaica library world. One copy of each film reel is to be made available for public use in Cincinnati, and another is to be kept in storage, for security purposes.

Eastern European Collections

Judaica librarians have recently become aware of the crucial importance of Eastern European repositories. Day by day, hitherto unknown—and significant—Judaica and Hebraica holdings in Hungarian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Soviet libraries and archives come to light. The presence in the Lithuanian State Book Chamber (Vilnius) of large portions of YIVO's pre-World War Two archives and press collection was revealed only in 1989. YIVO is currently engaged in efforts to have microfilms made of these materials. An uncataloged Judaica collection, comprising over 100,000 vol-

umes, is known to exist in the library of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (Kiev).

Collections in Eastern European libraries often include sets of local newspapers that are far more complete than those available—either in the original or in microform—in the West or in Israel. Arrangements have been made by American academics such as Prof. Samuel Kassow (Trinity College, Hartford, CT) to microfilm selected Yiddish and Polish-language Jewish newspapers at the Polish National Library (Warsaw), including the Polish Jewish daily *Nasz Przegląd*. These efforts are currently being amplified to include additional titles, along with the microfilming of archival collections. Institutions that have been involved in similar efforts in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union include the United States Holocaust Memorial and Yad Vashem, both of which are primarily interested in gaining access to and microfilming archival collections.

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In dealing with Eastern European and Soviet libraries, Western research institutions are confronted with a world of extreme scarcity, where the basic equipment and supplies needed for microfilming and developing are often lacking and must be provided from outside. Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union constitute a new frontier in the preservation realm, one where serial titles and collections must first be identified, located, and surveyed, and where basic access must be granted before materials can be preserved. This important work cannot be accomplished solely by the isolated efforts of individuals and institutions here in the West, but on a

cooperative basis, and with assured and adequate funding from private and public sources. Indeed, the multiplicity of current microfilming plans and activities by different organizations and individuals raises the specter of balkanization, perhaps to the ultimate detriment of many of these uncoordinated projects.

Preservation Technologies

This overview has dwelt thus far on microfilming because that is considered to be the tried and true preservation medium. Given proper storage conditions, microfilms have an estimated shelf life of 100 or more years. The equipment needed for microfilming and developing is standardized; films can be easily and cheaply duplicated; a range of microfilm and fiche readers as well as reader-printers is available for researchers to use; and hard-copy duplicates can even be generated from film, using a "copyflow" process. Microfilms also save enormous amounts of space.

On the other hand, there are drawbacks to the microform medium. While film readers can be fast-forwarded and frames can be indexed, searching is a purely mechanical process; there are no electronic shortcuts to searches for a given text contained within a reel of film. Microforms have the additional drawback of being a black-and-white medium, since color film is not considered to be permanent. *Reading* microfilms is wearing on the eye, and sitting at a microfilm reader is not a terribly comfortable experience. Researchers invariably demand to use hard-copy originals when these are available.

Given the preference of most researchers for direct access to the printed page, libraries have developed chemical techniques for the mass deacidification of books. The Library of Congress, the National Library of Canada, and the British Library have all been active on this front. The principal shortcoming of deacidification is that, while it does prevent further rapid deterioration of paper, it cannot *reverse* the decay that has already set in. A brittle book, even when it has undergone deacidification, remains brittle. Mass deacidification is a solution that will work mainly for books printed since 1950—books that have not yet begun to deteriorate. The gigantic problem of dealing with the crumbling printed legacy of the past still remains ("Deacidification Not Quite at Warp Speed," 1989).

There are other avenues for preservation that also show some promise. In particular, emerging optical disk technologies are

very exciting in their potential. CD-ROMs (compact disk / read-only-memory), which are "read" by compact disk players that are hooked up to microcomputers, are often used to store periodical indexes, abstracting services, and full-text reference works—the sort of materials that were traditionally available either in print or, more recently, online.

Unlike microforms, the optical disk medium also offers the possibility of color, sound, and motion. The Museum of Jewish Heritage, in New York, is developing an "Interactive Encyclopedia of the Jewish Heritage" that, in its present form, makes use of a personal computer (including a color monitor) and an IBM info-window that combines a 12-inch laserdisk player and a computer graphics window. When it is completed in 1992, this computerized reference work will store approximately 2,500 articles, along with abundant pictorial matter. Another videodisk project is YIVO's "People of a Thousand Towns," which employs a 12-inch laserdisk for storage of 18,000 photographic images of Jewish scenes in Eastern Europe. These images are searchable through a computer keyboard, and they can be copied by using a Polaroid camera that is attached to the laserdisk player. Development of "People of a Thousand Towns" has taken the better part of a decade, and has consumed half-a-million dollars in equipment and staff time. Optical disks represent a brave new world that does not come cheap.

Still, there is no question that optical disks are a far more versatile *storage* medium than are microfilms. But on top of their high development, production, and purchase costs, three factors work against optical disks as a *preservation* medium. First, it is estimated that CD-ROMs and laserdisks may have a shelf life of perhaps no more than 10 to 20 years. This implies that, in order to lend permanence to their contents, they will need to be rerecorded at regular intervals. Second, and as a corollary to the permanence question, this medium is still quite new, and today's devices for "reading" optical disks may soon prove to be as obsolete as Edison's cylinder phonograph became when the turntable was introduced. Third, the resolution of images on the TV screens and computer monitors to which laserdisks are hooked up is unsatisfactory—though this may change in the 1990s, when high-definition television is finally introduced. Consequently, while optical disk technologies are promising in terms of the *new* software products that have been developed for them, they leave a great deal to be desired as a retrospective preservation medium. For the time

being, then, the consensus remains in the research library world—one that is shared by library consortia and by funding agencies—that preservation microfilming, for all its faults, is, in the words of Maxine Sitts, of the Commission on Preservation and Access, "the only thing that we know works, is cost-effective, and provides for equitable access." ("RLG Contributes to National Preservation Effort," 1989, p. 6; Bourke, 1989; Landau, 1990; Lesk, 1990).

Conclusions

This, in its broadest outlines, is the situation that Judaica research repositories now face: tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of volumes of scarce and deteriorating publications, as well as significant archival collections in Jewish and European languages urgently require preservation, which in today's terms, at least,

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essentially means microfilming. The task at hand is enormous. Much important work has already been done. Thanks to an increased awareness of the brittle-book problem, the improved funding climate should enable today's Judaica research community to be able to make a significant contribution of its own toward ensuring that the entire documented legacy of past generations will be preserved for—and made accessible to—the generations that are yet to come.

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- Yad Vashem Studies*
 - Jewish Displaced Persons Periodicals from the Collections of the YIVO Institute*
 - German-Jewish Periodicals from the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, 1768–1945**
 - Anglo-Jewish Pamphlets from the Jewish Theological Seminary**
 - Yiddish Children's Literature from the YIVO Institute**
 - Three classic Yiddish Authors: Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Isaac L. Peretz**
 - Hebrew Manuscript Catalogs from the Jewish Theological Seminary**
 - The Emil J. Gumbel Collection (of the Leo Baeck Institute)*
 - Records of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America*
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