Yeshiva Libraries in Israel*

Ya'akov Aronson
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat Gan, Israel

Traditionally, a yeshiva library, whether composed only of works basic to the yeshiva's curriculum, or of an in-depth selection of rabbinic literature, was housed on bookshelves that lined the walls of the *bet-ha-midrash* (study hall).[1] While this is still the case in numerous yeshivot [Hebrew plural of yeshiva], many institutions have developed organized libraries located in areas especially designed to house them.

Background

To understand the library's place in a yeshiva and the changes that have taken place in its organization, knowledge of the yeshiva curriculum and of some of the historical changes affecting these institutions in the 20th century is essential. Though to an outsider one yeshiva might seem the same as another, in truth great diversity exists among yeshivot. There are Ashkenazi and Sephardi yeshivot, yeshivot of Mitnagdim and yeshivot of Hasidim, ultra-Orthodox and Bnei Akiva yeshivot - all of which have different philosophical underpinnings, but all of which emphasize the centrality of a text as the basis of study. The academic year of yeshivot is divided into trimesters (zemanim), with a different tractate of the Babylonian Talmud serving as the basis of study during each zeman. The depth in which the chosen text is studied depends on the approach of the rabbi giving the lectures (*shi'urim*) on the text and on the initiative of each student. But in all cases, works other than the basic text are required.

It is important to note two historical developments which have had great influence on the development of yeshiva libraries: (1) formerly, a personal collec-

tion of rabbinic literature would be passed on within the family; today, the succeeding generation, because of a change in lifestyle, is often not interested in retaining such a collection. (2) the major displacement of book collections during World War II, caused by German confiscations of tens of thousands of volumes from individuals and communities.

In both of these cases - that of the individual with no heir wanting to receive a library, and that of the confiscated volumes with no individual or communal owner for them to be returned to - thousands of volumes were passed on to yeshivot and became the basis of independent yeshiva libraries.

An aside on terminology is in order here. A yeshiva's collection of books is not referred to as a library, but as an *otsar sefarim* (plural: *otserot sefarim*). This phrase can be roughly translated as "treasury of books," a name that reflects the prevalent attitude to books in a yeshiva: they are treasures. This phrase is used subsequently in this paper to designate these collections.

For the purposes of this study, a group of ten non-Hasidic Ashkenazi yeshivot was chosen. Included in the group were both ultra-Orthodox and Bnei Akiva institutions. (A complete list of the yeshivot, including year of establishment, number of students, and size of the *otsar sefarim* is found in Table 1.) A questionnaire was sent to the person responsible for the *otsar sefarim* in each yeshiva and, upon receipt of the completed questionnaire, a visit was paid (in all cases but one) to the institution to verify and expand upon the information provided.

Status of *Otserot Sefarim*

The yeshivot display varied attitudes toward the organization of an *otsar sefarim*. These attitudes reflect a basic philosophical argument: whether it is more important to use all available time to study the material, or to allocate a

certain amount of time to the organization of the material and then begin the study process. As will become evident, very different approaches have been adopted by various institutions.

Of special interest is the attitude of the yeshiva's administration to the *otsar sefarim*. In the group of yeshivot studied, this relationship varied from a complete lack of financial support to the provision of a budget that allowed for an orderly acquisitions program, computerization, and the hiring of staff to operate the *otsar sefarim*. The former case may sound strange. If the institution does not see the need for an *otsar sefarim*, why does it have one? This seeming paradox can be explained by understanding the yeshiva's philosophy of learning.

The institution in question is the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, originally founded in 1815 in the town of Mir (which is today in Byelarus, according to the latest Library of Congress list of geographic names). During World War II, the yeshiva escaped via Siberia and Japan to Shanghai, where it carried on with its learning program until the war ended. After the war, the yeshiva moved to New York, and an additional branch was set up in Jerusalem. In this institution, as well as in many traditional yeshivot, the attitude toward learning is that mastery of information on the Talmudic page, or *daf*, is the highest priority.

This follows the dictum of Ben Bag Bag (*Avot* 5:26): "Occupy yourself with it [Torah] over and over again, for everything is contained in it." And indeed, considering the yeshiva's goals - understanding divinely prescribed ritual, encouraging ethical and moral conduct, and developing the intellect - this is correct. The latest commentary on the tractate *Sanhedrin* may not be found in the *otsar sefarim*, but the same information will be found in another form in the classical text itself.

With this rationale, the Mir Yeshiva does not provide any funding for its *otsar sefarim*. This stance is belied, however, by the fact that the yeshiva does provide a room for the collection as well as the necessary furnishings. The *otsar sefarim's* contents come from donations – books or money – and periodically a voluntary "book tax" is collected from the yeshiva's students in order to add volumes to the *otsar sefarim*. Since the student body numbers about 700, this can provide for quite a few acquisitions.

Emphasis in Collections

With learning each *zeman* (trimester) based upon one tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, emphasis in the *otsar sefarim* is naturally placed upon works dealing with the tractates that are studied most frequently. In some yeshivot, special collections of works on each of the six or seven most frequently studied tractates are maintained. When a certain text is under discussion, the collection of works relating to that text is moved into the *bet-midrash*. This collection is replaced during the next *zeman* with the collection dealing with the new text being studied then. In addition, a more extensive library of commentaries on this group of tractates has been built cooperatively by a number of yeshivot and is based at the Hebron Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The entire collection on a certain tractate is available for loan to a cooperating institution for the *zeman* during which that tractate is the subject of study.

Organization

The most apparent fact about *otserot sefarim* is the diversity that they exhibit in every aspect of their operation. Some yeshivot, as is demonstrated below, have devoted much time and thought to the organization of collections. This effort goes no further than their own *otsar sefarim*, however, with the exception of the above-mentioned collective project based at the Hebron Yeshiva. Other yeshivot have arranged their *otsar sefarim* as simply as possible, not wanting to expend the time required for more detailed organization. It is felt that investing additional time in organization will detract from the time available for learning (*bitul Torah*).

Table 1

Yeshivot Included in the Study
(Arranged by size of otsar sefarim)

Name of institution and location	Year founded	Number of volumes	Number of students
1. Ponevezh Bnai Brak	1944	40,000+	950
2. Har Etzion Alon Shevut	1968	34,500	560
3. Merkaz Ha-Rav Jerusalem	1924	20,000	500
4. Sha'alvim Kibbutz Sha'alvim	1965	20,000	740
5. Ha-Kotel Jerusalem	1967	13,500	220
6. Hebron Jerusalem	1925	12,000	400
7. Kerem be-Yavne Kibbutz Yavne	1963	8,800	320
8. Or Etzion Merkaz Shafir	1977	6000	290
9. Mir Jerusalem	5705-1945/46 (in Israel)	4000	700
10. Birkat Moshe Ma'ale Adumim	1977	3000	230

Information provided by each institution's librarian.

Staff in all the yeshivot surveyed for this study, with the exception of Yeshivat Har Etzion at Alon Shevut in the Gush Etzion area outside Jerusalem, consisted of volunteers, mainly students in the yeshiva. The custodians of *otserot sefarim*, however, were without a doubt the most enthusiastic group of librarians to be found anywhere. The importance of being users of the collections themselves, rather than just people doing a job, could readily be seen. In some places, the librarian's enthusiasm was evidenced by encyclopedic knowledge of the collection; in others, by innovations in organization; elsewhere, by the development of exhibits to give in-depth explanations of aspects of the collection whose importance seemed to warrant wider exposure.

Collection-Building

As mentioned above, many of the volumes in the *otserot sefarim* were donated. Besides books that have come into the yeshiva's possession as a result of donations or bequests (which is an unsystematic way to build an *otsar sefarim*), libraries of many types in Israel, including *otserot sefarim,* receive regular donations of new books from the Center for Public Libraries, a unit that works closely with the Library Section of Israel's Ministry of Education and Culture. Each year the Center selects a number of new publications for purchase in multiple copies which are then donated to specified libraries, including numerous *otserot sefarim.*

Acquisition of books plays a role in the activities of all the *otserot sefarim,* but in some cases it is only marginal. Yeshivat Hebron makes purchases only when it receives monetary donations. At the Mir Yeshiva, purchases are made periodically, after collection of the "book tax" from students. Yeshivat Sha'alvim, near Ramle on the old Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway, does not set aside a specific allocation for acquisitions, but when works are recommended by a rabbi teaching at the yeshiva, whose responsibilities include advising the librarian about new books, money is always found. On the other hand, at Yeshivot Ha-Kotel, Merkaz Ha-Rav, and Har Etzion, a monthly budget is provided for acquisitions; the latter two yeshivot even retain a bookseller who recommends new works. Though the budgets provided are not large (in two cases, $600 per

month), they do provide for planned growth of those *otserot sefarim.*

Classification Systems

Classification systems in the *otserot sefarim* vary greatly, from the use of a single letter to represent an entire class of literature, with volumes within the class arranged on the shelf alphabetically by title, to a highly detailed classification system that may divide the material represented by a single letter in one yeshiva's *otsar sefarim* into 15-20 subcategories.

All detailed classification systems found in the *otserot sefarim* studied were derivatives of a classification system for Torah libraries developed in the 1960s by Rabbi Meir Wunder, then head of the Ramat Gan Religious Council Torah Library, and now affiliated with the Jewish National and University Library.[2] This system begins with general works; has divisions for types of literature (e.g., Bible, Responsa, Kabbala); and then provides categories for Jewish languages and literature, Eretz-Yisrael, Jewish history, and Israeli geography, plus general subjects treated from a Jewish point of view, such as psychology, education, and medicine. To illustrate the difference between the more basic classification systems and the more complex systems, an example can be taken from the category Responsa literature. In Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-Rav, all this literature is shelved under the letter *shin* representing *she'elot u-teshuvot* (Responsa) and subarranged alphabetically by title. At Yeshivat Ha-Kotel, Responsa literature is subdivided into ten categories, using chronology and geography as organizing principles. Further subdivisions have been added at Yeshivat Sha'alvim, in recognition of the contribution made to this literature by famous Rabbinic families: a subdivision for the Sofer family is found in the Hungarian/Romanian category, and one for the Falag family is enumerated in the Near Eastern category.

Computerization

Three of the yeshivot studied – Har Etzion, Sha'alvim, and Merkaz Ha-Rav - have introduced computerization, each with a different system. Utilizing the largest number of computer functions for its *otsar sefarim* is Yeshivat Sha'alvim, where the program was written by the

yeshiva's students. Cataloging of the collection is computerized, and an online public access catalog (OPAC) is provided for users. Searches in the OPAC can be conducted by author, title, subject, or the author's acronym. The latter search provides a "see" reference to the full name. In addition to the OPAC, a printed book catalog is available for backup.

Unique to Yeshivat Sha'alvim and its computer system is an indexing project, which is resulting in a computerized index to selected Rabbinic periodicals and collected works such as memorial volumes. Retrieval from this index is by subject, and more than 9,000 terms have so far been listed. Unfortunately, input of new material is progressing very slowly as no overall timetable has been developed, and the work is being done by Yeshiva students during intersession periods (ben ha-zemanim). The success of Sha'alvim's computer program is attested to by the fact that it has been sold to two other Israeli institutions.

Yeshivat Har Etzion decided to purchase a turnkey system and chose the ALEPH program, developed at the Hebrew University.[3] The Yeshiva acquired the PC [personal computer] version with a local area network, which is called the "multi-user version" in ALEPH terminology. With the system, cataloging is input to one hard disk from two PCs.

When it was decided to computerize the cataloging function at Har Etzion, it was simultaneously decided to revise the catalog according to AACR2 (*Anglo-American Cataloging Rules*, 2nd ed.)[4] and to institute authority control. To facilitate this, the head of the library studied AACR2 and then provided instruction to other staff members. The microfiche edition of the Jewish National and University Library's Judaica catalog was also purchased, to aid in establishing the authority file.[5] At the time that this article was prepared, an OPAC had not been provided for the readers, as it was felt that unless all the material in the catalog was entered into the computer, the OPAC would only complicate matters, since in many cases two searches – computer and card catalog – would be necessary. No target date has yet been set for opening the OPAC and, as the card-production function of ALEPH has yet to be adapted to the PC version, cards are still produced by hand at

Yeshivat Har Etzion. (At present (1992) ALEPH is being rewritten for the UNIX operating system, and in the new version all of ALEPH's functions can be run on minicomputers and on PCs.)

The third yeshiva to tackle computerization is Merkaz Ha-Rav. Here, also, a turnkey system was purchased: Sifriah 83,[6] which is now being marketed as LMS+ [Library Management System Plus]. Only the cataloging function is used by the yeshiva, and a bug in the card-production routine has resulted in the continued manual production of cards. But the database produced gives the librarian greatly increased capability to retrieve information in response to student queries, thus rendering the collection much more accessible.

Rare Books

An interesting question encountered while researching this paper is the importance of retaining different editions of the same work - some rare and valuable - in an *otsar sefarim*. The purpose of yeshiva learning does not include the preparation of critical texts or the history of editions - types of research that would be supported by a collection that contains different editions. Indeed, one of the yeshivot that had received some items of this nature in a collection bequeathed to it, sold variant editions in order to purchase other works, thus enlarging the number of titles in the *otsar sefarim*.

But when the question of the importance of retaining different editions was posed to the librarian at the Ponevezh Yeshiva, which possesses the largest (over 40,000 volumes) and most in-depth collection of the yeshivot considered for this study, an entirely different attitude was encountered. From a nearby shelf, the librarian extracted a large brown envelope, from which he produced a dog-eared edition of '*Akedat Yitshak* (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1785). With so many other editions of this work in much better condition, why was this particular one kept? The librarian explained: The commentary *Gilyon ha-Maharsha*, by Rabbi Shlomo Eiger (which is generally printed after the text of the Talmud in those tractates for which the commentary exists), when commenting on a certain matter in Tractate *Pesahim* on folio 88, side 1, cites as its source the work '*Akedat Yitshak,* gate 25, leaf 54, folio 1,

side 1. Such a citation is obscure, because '*Akedat Yitshak* in known editions is divided only into chapters.

In general, it was understood that authors cited from editions of works in their possession at the time that they composed their commentaries. So the answer to the riddle here was to locate the edition used by R. Shlomo Eiger in preparing his commentary. The dog-eared edition showed up one day at the *otsar sefarim*, its internal divisions were found to match the citations in *Gilyon ha-Maharsha,* and the point was cleared up. So, the librarian concluded, various editions are important in the context of the type of learning that takes place in yeshivot. (This point, with additional examples, had previously been made by the same librarian in an article published in the daily Hebrew newspaper *Yeted Ne'eman.*[7])

The Yeshiva that has made the most concerted effort to obtain old and rare volumes is Har Etzion. Aside from a small collection of facsimile editions of early printings of the Babylonian Talmud, the yeshiva obtained about 800 rare volumes when it received the collection of Rabbi Issachar Tamar, who worked in the Tel-Aviv Rabbinate for over 30 years. Rabbi Tamar authored the commentary *Alei Tamar* on the Jerusalem Talmud, and his collection includes 14 different editions of that work, beginning with the first printed edition (Venice, 1520), and ending with an 1812 edition. Another 500 rare volumes came to Har Etzion when the Etz Hayyim (Ashkenazi) Bet Midrash in Amsterdam was persuaded to loan these books on a permanent basis to the yeshiva because the makeup of the community had changed to such an extent that the books were not being used.[8] Among these works are many early Amsterdam imprints.

Usage

All the effort put into organizing a library is of little value if the library is not used. As indicated above, the very nature of yeshiva studies encourages students to make use of the yeshiva's *otsar sefarim*. In addition, at Yeshivat Sha'alvim each student is required to write a research paper every six months, and this greatly increases use of the *otsar sefarim*. Many yeshivot have periodicals to which the faculty and students contribute, and

much time is spent in the *otsar sefarim* researching these articles. Also, librarians interviewed at various yeshivot were proud of projects undertaken in their *otsar sefarim* by people not studying at the institution. At Yeshivat Ponevezh, for example, the *otsar sefarim* had been used by authors preparing articles for the *Entsiklopediyah Talmudit*. At Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-Rav, where the Halakhah Berurah [literally, "clear law"] project is located (a project to publish Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's commentary on various tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, entitled *Halakhah Berurah*), preparatory work by the project's staff is done in the yeshiva's *otsar sefarim*. Finally, the *otsar sefarim* at Yeshivat Har Etzion, besides providing library facilities for residents of the immediate area, serves as a research center for local authors who are preparing articles for *Otsar ha-Poskim,* a compendium of decisions relating to the *Shulhan Arukh*.

Conclusion

The study was undertaken to provide an overview of an area in which practically no literature exists. Besides research on yeshivot in the categories dealt with here, *otserot sefarim* in Hasidic and Sephardic yeshivot provide rich fields for research, and it is hoped that the present study will provide incentive for such undertakings.

Notes and References

1. Research on yeshiva libraries in general is almost nonexistent. Dr. Dov Schidorsky, the leading student of the history of Jewish libraries, states in his article "The Emergence of Jewish Public Libraries in Nineteenth-Century Palestine," which appeared in *Libri*, vol. 4, no. 32 (March 1982), that though the libraries of *batei midrash* could in some respects be looked upon as forerunners of the subject of his article, "We have, however, excluded these libraries from treatment because there is little documentation available on them" (p. 1).

2. Meir Wunder, "Classification System for Subjects Appropriate to the Needs of Torah Libraries in Israel. . ." (Bnai Brak: Center for Torah Libraries, 1965). In Hebrew. Mimeographed. Three different expansions of the system (in Hebrew) have been developed and can be obtained by writing to the Chief Librarian

at each of the following institutions:
a) Yeshivat Ha-Kotel, Box 603, Jerusalem 91006, Israel;
b) Yeshivat Har Etzion, Alon Shevut, Gush Etzion 90940, Israel;
c) Yeshivat Sha'alvim, Doar Na Ayalon 73225, Israel.

3. For a description of the structure of ALEPH see Judith Levi, "ALEPH: An Online Real-Time Integrated Library System," *Judaica Librarianship,* vol. 1, no. 2 (Spring 1984), p. 58-63. For a recent critique of ALEPH see Susan S. Lazinger, "ALEPH: Israel's Research Library Network: Background, Evolution, and Implications for Networking in a Small Country," *Information Technology and Libraries,* vol. 10, no. 4 (December, 1991), p. 275-291.

4. Michael Gorman and Paul W. Winkler, eds., *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules,* 2nd ed., 1988 revision (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988).

5. Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. *Alphabetic Catalogue* [Jerusalem, n.d.]. Microfiche.

6. A brief description of the system can be found in Elhanan Adler, "The Library Automation Scene in Israel - 1986." *Judaica Librarianship,* vol. 3, no. 1-2 (1986-1987), p. 23.

7. Shlomo Jakobovitz, "Remove the Old to Make Way for the New." *Yeted Ne'eman,* Tamuz 23, 5748 [July 8, 1988]. Supplement, p. 4 (Hebrew).

8. A precedent for this "permanent" loan was established in 1978 when the Etz Hayyim Bet Midrash (Portuguese) of Amsterdam loaned more than 400 manuscripts and thousands of early printed works to the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. See Saskia R. de Melker, "Hebraica in Dutch Public Libraries," in Saskia R. de Melker, Emile G.L. Schrijver and Edward van Voolen, eds., T*he Image of the Word: Jewish Tradition in Manuscripts and Printed Books. . .* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Library and Jewish Historical Museum, 1990), p. 33-42. Despite the author's statement (p. 35) that after World War II the Etz Hayyim Bet Midrash (Ashkenazi) was not reestablished, the institution did function, though on a reduced scale as compared with its pre-War activities, until the library was transferred to Israel in the late 1980s.

Ya'akov Aronson is University Librarian at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. He holds an M.A. from the Department of History, Columbia University, and a Graduate Librarian's Certificate from Bar-Ilan University, where he is at present a Ph.D. candidate in American history. Address: Wurzweiler Central Library, Bar-Ilan University, Box 90,000, Ramat Gan 76209, Israel.