

RESPONSA

Problem Patrons and Problem Librarians: A Personal Confession

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The present Responsa column departs somewhat from the usual "Q & A" format. While it does focus on a specific reference question, the discussion that follows is aimed primarily at the human side of the reference transaction.

Who among us has not encountered the problem patron? Definitions of the problem patron doubtless vary according to each reference librarian's perceptions and reactions to the readers whom he or she encounters. There are readers who talk too loudly, there are readers who fail to understand even the simplest of answers or explanations, there are readers who have apparently not bathed in a fortnight, there are readers who pose a physical threat to other readers and to library staff, and then there are readers who are just plain obnoxious.

The ways in which a reference librarian responds to a problem patron are an index of professionalism. None of us is perfect; each of us has his or her off day. This column is intended to underscore the need for humility and intellectual honesty in dealing with the sort of patron who gets on a librarian's nerves.

Q. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his essay *The Earth is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe*, writes: "An old book saved from the countless libraries recently burned in Europe, now at the Yivo Library in New York, bears the stamp, 'The Society of Wood-Choppers for the Study of the Mishnah in Berditshev'" (Heschel, 1977, pp. 46-47). Please help me locate this old book.

The Initial Contact

A. In late 1987 or early 1988, I received a telephone call with this query from a scholar who was trying to track down the book mentioned in passing by the late

theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel. By nailing down Heschel's vague citation, Our Researcher felt that he would be able to establish a point that Heschel himself had made about Eastern European Jewish religious life, both in *The Earth is the Lord's* and in interfaith dialogues with Christian theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr:

There were many who lived in appalling poverty, many who were pinched by never-ending worries, and there were plenty of taverns with strong spirits. But drunkards were rarely seen among Jews. When night came and a man wanted to pass away time, he did not hasten to a tavern to take a drink, but went to pore over a book or joined a group which – either with or without a teacher – indulged in the enjoyment of studying revered books. Physically worn out by their day's toil, they sat over open volumes, playing the austere music of the Talmud's groping for truth or the sweet melodies of exemplified piety of ancient sages.

(Heschel, 1977, pp. 45-46)

The existence of a Mishnah study group among the lowly woodcutters of Berdichev, if only it could be documented, would in the view of Our Researcher establish a social historical fact of prime importance by confirming Heschel's depiction of Eastern European Jews' universal literacy. Indeed, it was the unquenchable thirst for book learning among Eastern European Jews that led Heschel to assert that theirs "was the golden period in Jewish history, in the history of the Jewish soul" (Heschel, 1977, p. 10).

Our Researcher was asking me, in short, to locate one unidentified volume, out of tens of thousands of rabbinica in the YIVO Library's collection, bearing

the stamp of "The Society of Wood-Choppers for the Study of the Mishnah in Berditshev." To narrow down the search somewhat, he suggested that we confine it to sets of the Mishnah — a tall order, I explained, in light of the fact that there are hundreds of Mishnah volumes in the YIVO Library. What he was requesting went far beyond the capabilities of a small, overextended library staff. It could easily take weeks for us to sift through our Mishnayot for this one fugitive book stamp, with success not guaranteed. I suggested that Our Researcher might wish to do this detective work himself or hire someone to do the research for him.

And there the matter rested – or so I imagined at the time. Still, about once a year, he would call me up, and urge me to try to find that book with the stamp in it. His obsessive persistence began to get on my nerves, and I finally expressed my irritation at him by questioning the plausibility of Heschel's citation.

A Librarian's Objections

My objections were as follows: Firstly, Berdichev was not a small town, but a sizable city in the province of Podolia, possessing one of the largest Jewish communities in the Russian Pale of Settlement during the 19th century. Secondly, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "The soil is almost throughout 'black earth', and Podolia is one of the most fertile governments of Russia," with forests covering just 15% of the area ("Podolia," 1910-1911, vol. 21, p. 875). These two factors, I asserted, argued against the existence of a woodcutters' society in Berdichev, since that city was too highly urbanized for there to be a need for woodcutters, and since the raw material necessary for the sustenance of their trade was at any rate in short supply in the Podolia region.

To clinch the matter, I continued, the overwhelming bulk of YIVO's rabbinics collection, which was recovered in Germany after World War Two and restored to YIVO in the late 1940s, had previously belonged to the plundered Jewish libraries of Vilna, principally the Vilna YIVO and the Strashun Library – hundreds of miles from Berdichev. (The late Lucy Dawidowicz described the recovery of YIVO's Vilna library in her last book, *From That Place and Time*.) The likelihood of a volume from Berdichev ending up in the New York YIVO's Vilna collection was exceedingly remote, I informed him.

The conclusion that I drew was that Heschel must have been engaging in a little mythmaking, that he was propagating an old-fashioned *mashal* (fable) with a *nimshal* (moral) regarding the learning and the sanctity of the recently martyred Jews of Eastern Europe. Our Researcher, who clearly identified with his subject, was offended by my *lèse majesté* ("Heschel would never have made this story up") and then impatiently asked me to refer him to YIVO's experienced reference librarian, Dina Abramowicz.

Locating the Volume

After speaking with Our Researcher, Miss Abramowicz pondered the question and settled on a search strategy that had not occurred to me. Rather than examine hundreds of Mishnah volumes in the Vilna collection, she consulted back issues of the *News of the YIVO*, reasoning that if the discovery in YIVO of a book with an unusual stamp had struck Abraham Joshua Heschel as especially significant, it might also have been so regarded by the Institute's public relations department. After about an hour of searching she found an article in the April 1949 issue of YIVO's newsletter, entitled "Jews at Work and Leisure." This article reads as follows:

Among the books formerly in the Yivo Library in Vilna that were recently recovered there is one that deserves special notice, not so much by reason of its inherent value but rather because of extraneous circumstance. The book bears the stamp of "The Association for the Study of the Mishna at the Woodcutters Synagogue in Berdichev".

Berdichev, in the Ukraine, once had a Jewish population of over fifty thousand and seventy houses of worship. It also had a large Jewish artisan class that maintained its own houses of worship according to occupation. It is not surprising that there was a woodcutters group large enough to maintain its own house of worship. What is amazing and may fill the heart with pride is that these woodcutters, among the lowest in the social and economic hierarchy of the community, formed an association not for the recital of the Psalms or the study of the Pentateuch, as was customary among the less learned groups, but for the study of the Mishna, a discipline the proper comprehension of which requires a considerable educational background and attainments. And herein we have an important aspect of what was the glory of Eastern European Jewry.

Accompanying the article is a photograph of a page from the book, which is in Yiddish, bearing the Hebrew stamp "*Havurah Mishnayot de-B[et]-h[a]-Kn[eset] Hoteve 'Etsim Barditshuv.*"

The title of the book (mentioned only in the Yiddish section of the *News of the YIVO*) is *She'erit Yisra'el*, by Menahem Mann ben Solomon Halevi Amelander, or Amlander, an author of popular historical works in Yiddish who lived in Amsterdam during the 18th century, where he died circa 1767. *She'erit Yisra'el*, which is described by Israel Zinberg as "the most important work of all of Old-Yiddish historiographical literature" (Zinberg, 1975, p. 233), was often published as a companion volume/supplement to *Josippon*, updating that mélange of legend and history by presenting an account of Jewish history from the destruction of the Temple up to the 18th century, with particular emphasis on the history of the Jews of Holland. Translations of *She'erit Yisra'el* exist in Hebrew, Dutch, and German.

The Book's Provenance

The Yivo copy of *She'erit Yisra'el* bearing the stamp (which appears on over a dozen pages within the text) is well worn; indeed, the first two leaves of this copy are altogether lacking, and the edi-

tion is not identified on the catalog card. The *News of the YIVO* (Yiddish section) simply describes the volume as dating from the 18th century. The book does, however, contain two indications of its provenance that help to explain how it ended up at YIVO, first in Vilna and later in New York.

On the first extant page of text, the signature "N. Shtif" appears in the upper right-hand corner. Nokhem Shtif (1879-1933) was a Yiddish linguist who, after playing a critical role in the founding of YIVO (1925), emigrated from Germany to the Soviet Union in 1926, in order to assume the directorship of the Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kiev. Shtif's signature on this page of *She'erit Yisra'el* employs Soviet Yiddish orthography (which often omits final letters in the Hebrew alphabet) – in this case, the *fe* in Shtif is not a *fe soffit*, but a regular *fe*), leading to the inference that he was most likely in Kiev at the time the book came into his possession.

A label was pasted inside the front cover after the book arrived at YIVO in New York; it read, "From the Sutzkever-Kaczerginski Collection of YIVO." Books in this collection were among those hidden by Jewish forced laborers in Nazi-occupied Vilna as an act of resistance against the German plunderers of Jewish cultural properties. After World War Two, the hidden books (along with some archival material) were recovered by the poets Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski – both of whom had participated in the brigade of cultural workers that had been assigned to the massive, German-controlled sorting operation (which took place in the former YIVO building in Vilna) – and sent to YIVO in New York. The Sutzkever-Kaczerginski Collection was then integrated into the other looted collections of Vilna provenance that were shipped to YIVO from Germany after the war.

The conclusions that can be drawn from these facts are that:

- (1) Nokhem Shtif acquired the book in Kiev (which is a good deal closer to Berdichev than is Vilna);
- (2) he then sent it to YIVO in Vilna, where it remained until World War Two;
- (3) it was deemed significant enough by the cultural workers conscripted by the Nazis to be set aside and hidden along with other rare books; and

(4) when it came to light after the war it was sent to YIVO in New York, along with the other portions of the Sutzkever-Kaczerginski Collection. The road from Berdichev to Vilna to New York is twisted indeed, but no longer incomprehensible.

Upon finding the *News of the YIVO* article, Miss Abramowicz immediately informed Our Researcher of the results of her search, and after pronouncing himself highly satisfied he sent her a copy of his latest book and then called me up – to gloat over my misguided skepticism and to seek a few words of contrition on my part, which he duly received.

Questions Raised by the Incident

Looking back on the incident, I feel that it raises a number of issues about the librarian-patron relationship. By allowing a determined and aggressive reader to get under my skin (not the first time), I fell prey to a kind of hubris. As Richard Teller notes in his essay, "Ethical Considerations in the Question Negotiation Cycle," "We possess as much egocentricity and eccentricity as our clients; it is part of being human" (1982, p. 140). In seeking to ward off a time-consuming and probably fruitless search, I took refuge first and foremost in statistical probabilities:

(a) Berdichev was a big city and Podolia was not a forested region, so who needed woodcutters there? (My reasoning concerning Berdichev was directly contradicted by the article in the *News of the YIVO*, which pointed to its Jewish population precisely as being large enough to support a woodcutters' synagogue.)

(b) Our library's rabbinica collections, which came from Vilna, could not possibly contain any volumes of Berdichev provenance.

From there I went on to speculate that Heschel must surely have been engaging in mythmaking. In the end, I adopted what might be termed the W.C. Fields Strategy of Reference Librarianship: "Go away, kid, you bother me!"

And yet, Our Researcher clearly regarded his question as important enough to merit repeated inquiries. In my defense, I could later claim that I had been misled by his belief that the book stamp had

appeared in a volume of the Mishnah. A search strategy based on that assumption would certainly have been futile. But is it not part and parcel of the reference librarian's trade to refine and provide focus to the vague questions that come his or her way?

I did point out to the patron that my many responsibilities prevented me from providing him with an answer based on meticulous research. (In fact, over a period of three years I probably spent a couple of hours, cumulatively, in telephone conversations with him.) Very few institutions can afford the luxury of allowing their librarians to spend hours on end, trying to track down obscure facts. More often, there are strict time limits placed on reference searches, including computer database searches for which it is understood that the researcher is to pay. I did attempt to enlighten Our Researcher about these exigencies, but in view of my other objections he may have considered this argument to be rank obstructionism on my part.

Lessons to be Learned

The reference transaction is not always, or even often, a simple process. Back in library school we were instructed in interview techniques, which were meant to enable us, as librarians, to ascertain the *true* – as opposed to the *stated* – needs of our clientele. Teller has summarized the steps in the question negotiation process, as diagrammed by Robert S. Taylor (1968), and then appends his own observation:

Taylor perceives the development and manipulation of a question as metamorphosing through four levels, "visceral," "conscious," "formalized," and "compromised." In proceeding from one level to the next, a question is passed through a number of "filters": "determination of subject," "objective and motivation," "personal characteristics of inquirer," "relationship of inquiry description to file organization," and "anticipated or acceptable answers." To these I would add a sixth filter, personal characteristics of the librarian.

(Teller, 1982, p. 134)

Librarians need to "keep dialogues open and, simultaneously, relevant to our

clients' fundamental requirements. This involves trusting our clients' judgements of their needs, and assuming the most, rather than the least" (Teller, p. 140).

Turning to the episode described in this column, what are some of the lessons to be learned?

(1) Librarians are, as Teller notes, only human. None of us knows all of the answers, or all of the correct approaches toward determining the answers. When in doubt, do not hesitate to ask a colleague for assistance.

(2) Do not let a negative personal reaction to the questioner interfere with your attempts to find the answer. Try to take each inquiry seriously; do not dismiss it as frivolous or of dubious value, and do not try to outsmart the questioner. Also, try to rise above the stress and strain of the daily grind in dealing with the less-than-ideal library patron.

(3) The researcher must be made aware that the reference transaction is not a one-way street. In Teller's words: "Rather than one individual imposing his or her experiential framework upon the other's perception, both participants are engaged in altering each other's perception" (1982, p. 137).

Inform the researcher of the limits in the amount of time that you, as a reference librarian, may devote to an inquiry. Just as it is incumbent on a librarian to deal with each researcher in a dispassionate manner, the latter must be made to realize that the librarian's proper role, in reference transactions, is that of *facilitator*, and that at a certain point it becomes the researcher's function to sit and sift through the information supplied with the librarian's help.

In this case, the correct answer was eventually found, but only after the researcher was referred to a colleague of mine for a second opinion. The referral ought to have taken place much earlier in the transaction – at its very outset, in fact. A happy ending to this episode was by no means guaranteed, however, and had the desired answer (or the desired search strategy) to his question not materialized, it might have been best simply to listen patiently, and then invite him to pay our library a visit and investigate the matter for himself.

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