

# HOUSES OF THE BOOK

## A Library Grows in Boro Park: The Jewish Youth Library

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### INTRODUCTION

The increased availability of popular Judaica in English as well as children's literature with Jewish content may be two factors accounting for the recent proliferation of small, non-academic libraries of Judaica. We are familiar with Judaica libraries in synagogues, Jewish community centers, and Jewish schools, but the **Jewish Youth Library** is in a category of its own. The Orthodox community of Boro Park (Brooklyn, New York), with its own criteria for popular Judaica, and a body of prolific authors and publishers who publish appropriate material, has derived its own solution to the problem of getting Jewish literature with traditional values to readers from the Orthodox community. Instead of each synagogue setting up its own library, a central, independent, Jewish lending-library has been established in Boro Park.

### History

The effort to establish an Orthodox lending library began in January, 1978, when a retired business executive, Mr. Abraham Plotzker, and a young Talmudic student, (now Rabbi) Yitzchok Ginsberg (Executive Director of the Library), started a telephone campaign to raise funds for the project both had dreamed about. With only a rented office and a phone, Rabbi Ginsberg and a small staff, contacted every household in Boro Park, proceeding street by street. In addition to the fundraising efforts, Rabbi Ginsberg and Mrs. Blima Young, head librarian, visited school libraries and Jewish bookstores to see what young people were reading. They sent for publishers' catalogs and invited donations of materials from the community. One Williamsburg resident called the library to say that he had a basement full of Yiddish books and magazines. Rabbi Ginsberg installed lights in the basement and spent hours combing through piles of material. His diligence resulted in a treasure: eight volumes of *Dos Yidishe Kval*, a Yiddish children's magazine. "Not every acquisitions department would do that," he said.

### Growth of the Library

Six months after the inception of the campaign, the library leased an eight-room apartment at 1353-51st Street. Within two years of opening to the public, the library had more than 10,000 books and periodicals, a staff of six and over 3000 members. Currently, the library has more than 16,000 circulating titles—3,000 volumes of which are juvenile literature. The staff now numbers seventeen, under the professional supervision of Mrs. Blima Young. Currently, over 6,000 cardholders make tens of thousands of visits annually. In a normal week, between 500 and 1000 readers (not necessarily card holders) visit the library, many from places other than New York or even the United States.

### The Collection and its Users

Although the library is still called **The Jewish Youth Library**, adult readers are welcome and served by multiple sets of popular reference works. The *Me'Am Loez* Torah Anthology and ArtScroll publications are available, as well as books of Jewish ethics, *Hashkafah*, and the *T'shuvah* movement. There are books on *Tanakh*, Liturgy, and *Mussar*, *Halakhah*, *Hashkafah*, translations of the *Mishnah*, Biblical commentaries, Jewish history, Jewish life, and Jewish personalities. Educators have also found the library useful. The library acquires all relevant material in three languages: Yiddish, English, and Hebrew. Multiple copies are acquired of popular titles—at times as many as thirty.

The children's collection includes books in the above subject areas adapted for children, as well as junior novels, short story collections, picture-books and children's magazines. School visits are scheduled regularly. Children from primary grades are treated to a story-hour. Older children use the time to familiarize themselves with the collection. During the visit, students are permitted to register as members, which enables them to borrow books on a regular basis. Students from

intermediate grades—junior and senior high school—depend on the library's collection for completing homework assignments, in addition to pursuing personal reading interests.

A collection of nearly 30 Jewish periodicals and journals in over 1,000 bound volumes is a notable feature of the library. It includes both current and out-of-print periodicals. The library solicits back issues of periodicals from the general public to complete its holdings. At the present time, it is seeking back copies of: *The Jewish Observer*, *Olomeinu*, *Jewish Woman's Outlook*, *Talks and Tales*, and others. Those interested in donating back issues may call the library at (718) 435-4711 during the day, or (718) 435-4111 evenings. The library also subscribes to current periodicals in Yiddish, English and Hebrew.

The library has acquired cassettes of *Daf Yomi*, Torah shiurim, and liturgy. It plans to establish a circulating collection and an in-library listening center with audio headsets. Also planned for the future are a "bookmobile" and an extensive reference collection.

The **Jewish Youth Library** has published a bibliography of its English language holdings. More than 750 titles are grouped into twenty-five broad subject categories and subdivided by age levels: Easy, Juvenile, and Adult. Among the categories are: Arts & Crafts, Calendars, Literature, and *Mishnah*. Also included is a list of over fifty publishers, dealers, and distributors of Judaica. The Bibliography, which is now sold out, was compiled by Mrs. Young, and will be updated and re-issued in the future.

### Organization and Administration

Mrs. Young reports that she has reworked existing cataloging systems because of the uniqueness of the collection. It uses a decimal notation and cuttering system geared to a Torah-true collection or library. The library has plans to publish the classification system.



The library is open a total of 30 hours a week, except for July and August. There are late evening hours during the week for working people who wish to avoid the long lines on Fridays and Sundays. Three books are allowed out per borrower card. Although books may be borrowed for a period of up to three weeks, since books are always due back on Sunday, those borrowed midweek circulate for a shorter period. Only immediate members of the family may share library cards. Initial card fees include a registration fee of \$10.00 for adults (16 years and up), plus \$10.00 annual dues. Children's fees are a registration fee of \$10.00 and \$8.00 annual dues. A charge of 15¢ is levied for reserved books, which includes the notification postcard, and a fee of 10¢ per day is charged for overdue. Despite these fees, the library is forced to do extensive grass roots fundraising to cover its yearly budget of \$125,000. Although the public may use the library for reference purposes without paying a fee, borrowing is restricted to cardholders. There is no geographic requirement for membership. Many members hail from nearby communities such as Flatbush and Williamsburgh, as well as from as far away as Rockland County, N.Y. and Lakewood, N.J.

#### Outreach

News of the library's success has spread

across the nation, to Canada, and even to Europe. Jewish community leaders in Michigan, Ohio, California, Maryland, Florida, and even Manchester, England have asked Rabbi Ginsberg to set up branches of the **Jewish Youth Library** in their towns. Rabbi Ginsberg says that the library has made Jewish community leaders realize that "just as every Jewish community needs a day school, a *mikveh* and a kosher butcher to function properly, it also needs a library—a place where Jews can read about their Torah, culture and history." He points out that the **Jewish**

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**Youth Library** can assist in the development of similar libraries by providing books and booklists tailored to the needs of a community. "One community might want to emphasize Biblical commentary, another—history." An example of such an "outreach" effort is the establishment of its

first branch, the Outremont Avenue **Jewish Youth Library** in Montreal, Canada, which was opened in September, 1980. A "package" of 2500 basic books was processed and cataloged at the Boro Park headquarters. Rabbi Ginsberg even supervised the printing of the Outremont Avenue JYL borrower cards.

#### Plans for the Future

Success brings its headaches. The 'apartment library' is bursting. Bookshelves crowd the hallways. The processing rooms are jammed. A potentially dangerous situation exists on Sundays when hundreds of people must be served in a five-hour period. Lately, requests for out-of-town class visits have been turned down because of lack of space. "In other words," says Rabbi Ginsberg, "we must find other quarters. We need at least \$250,000 to purchase and renovate a building for library use. We serve the entire Jewish community of Boro Park. Now that we're established, we can help other Jewish communities establish their own libraries."

*The Jewish Youth Library is at 1353-51 Street, Brooklyn, New York, 11219, (718) 435-4711.*

