

# The Hebraic Section of the Library of Congress: Collections, Catalogs, and Services

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## Introduction

The Hebraic Section of the Library of Congress (LC) is an integral component of our national library, fully participating in the mandate of acquiring, preserving, and making materials in its collections accessible to Congress, researchers, and the general public. It is the purpose of this article to describe the reference services provided by the Hebraic Section to its users and to touch briefly on acquisitions and selection procedures as they affect those services.

Located in the John Adams Building, Room 1006, the Hebraic Section is open to the public from 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. No fees are charged to the researcher or general reader for use of the collections or for reference services provided by the librarians consulted. When fully staffed to handle its several missions, the Section staff is comprised of five persons: a Section Head, two Reference Librarians, a Processing and Reference Assistant, and a Section Secretary-Bibliographic Assistant.

## History

The nucleus of the Hebraic collection in the Library of Congress was an initial gift, received in 1912 from Jacob H. Schiff, of nearly 10,000 books and pamphlets garnered from various sources over many years by Ephraim Deinard, the noted Hebrew bibliographer (1846–1930). Schiff, the philanthropist and well-known benefactor of libraries, augmented his gift two years later with another presentation to the Library of 4,200 volumes, also from the collection of Ephraim Deinard. Two additional collections, of 2,500 volumes in 1917 and 3,000 volumes in 1920, further enriched the Library's holdings. In less than a decade, the Library acquired materials including manuscripts, incunabula and rarities—ranging from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

The Division of Semitic and Oriental Literature was created in 1913 to maintain custody of this increasingly prominent collection. It became the Hebraic Section in 1944,

operating within the Orientalia Division. As part of a general Library reorganization in 1978, the Hebraic Section was placed with the African Section and the Near East Section in the newly formed African and Middle Eastern Division, a unit of LC's Research Services. In addition to Israel, the Hebraic Section deals with the ancient civilizations of the Semitic East, such as Babylonia, Assyria, Pharaonic Egypt and ancient Ethiopia. Although geographically situated in the African and Middle Eastern Division, it is concerned as well with the Jewish people, their culture and history—wherever Jews are or have been. Thus our responsibility to provide reference sources and services extends beyond the Hebrew language and beyond the geographic confines of the Middle East.

## The Hebraic Collection

Currently, the Hebraic Section contains more than 120,000 volumes, of which some twenty percent remains uncataloged. Although the great majority of titles are in Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish, we also hold works in Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Syriac and Amharic. Besides monographs in Hebrew and Yiddish, the Section maintains and services hundreds of titles of current and retrospective serials and newspapers as well as thousands of reels and fiche of microform.

Special collections within the Hebraic Section are as varied as they are numerous. A few examples will demonstrate the wealth of material available to researchers. Incunabula, manuscripts and rare books highlight the special collections. Diverse early editions of the Bible and Rabbinical literature are fully represented, as are liturgical works. Especially noteworthy is the collection of Haggadot, whose imprints exhibit wide diversity in time and place. A major focus by the Library's Preservation Office on rare materials in the past two years has resulted in the repair, restoration and proper housing for a number of manuscripts and incunabula, as well as other important works, thereby rendering them available to researchers.

The Ladino collection of more than 300 volumes formed part of the original nucleus of materials gathered by Ephraim Deinard. Henry Besso's *Ladino Books in the Library of Congress; A Bibliography* (Washington, 1963) has made these volumes more accessible to researchers.

The Section has been engaged over the years in amassing as complete a collection as possible of Holocaust Memorial volumes. Frequent use attests to the importance of the collection to genealogical researchers. Another collection, consisting of more than 1,200 Yiddish plays in manuscript, type-script and stencil, was recently transferred by the Copyright Office to the custody of the Hebraic Section. When made fully accessible, this collection will be a rich resource for the study and appreciation of the Yiddish theater and its contribution to general culture in America.

A 3,000-volume reference collection in several languages is available on open shelves for consultation by staff and readers. All other books, serials, newspapers, microforms, and other materials in Hebrew and Yiddish within our custody are housed in closed stacks. Material in these languages must be requested by readers in person in the Hebraic Section. After being retrieved by the staff, the material may be examined in a nearby reading room. For the convenience of readers engaged in ongoing research, some materials which are needed for frequent consultation may remain in the reading room on marked shelves.

## Catalogs

The Hebraic Section maintains several card catalogs. A Hebrew title catalog and a separate one for Yiddish titles contain cards filed alphabetically in vernacular (non-Roman) script. Hebrew and Yiddish author-subject catalogs contain entries filed alphabetically by Roman letter. Although microform entries are included within these files, separate microform catalogs are maintained as well—arranged by vernacular title,

Romanized author entry, and shelflist number. Hebrew and Yiddish entries for microfilms are integrated in a single file.

The Hebraic Section catalogs differ from the Main Catalog of the Library of Congress in two important respects. First, short title and author entries for the 20,000 uncataloged Hebrew and Yiddish volumes in the collection are only represented in the Hebraic Section files, not in the Main Catalog. Second, the Hebrew and Yiddish author-subject catalogs in our office comprise the National Union Catalogs of Hebraica and Yiddica. Some fifty libraries have contributed reports of their holdings to the Library of Congress, resulting in an aggregation of perhaps 750,000 cards interfiled in the Section's catalogs.

The Hebraic Section also houses a Union Catalog of Hebraica and Yiddica on microfilm, an ephemera file of Judaica, a sample group of non-Hebraic serials, and a Fest-schriften index. Owing to staff shortages, these catalogs are not up-to-date. A bindery file adjacent to the serial collection functions as a catalog for bound serial holdings within our custody. A National Union Catalog of Ladino is underway, adding to the array of bibliographic tools maintained in the Hebraic Section which are available to the international research community.

Although the assortment of catalogs can assist readers in the location of certain titles, local libraries should be contacted first for research materials, since the role of the Library of Congress is to act as the library of last resort for the lending of specific items.

Introduction of computers provides an added dimension. Records created and accumulated in the Library of Congress databases supply the reader with a broad range of information. Beginning in 1981, Hebrew and Yiddish titles have been entered into the Library of Congress databases in Romanized form. Since it sometimes takes many months before a book completes the transit from its arrival in the Library to its placement on the shelves of the Hebraic Section, the computer provides the latest information on the location of titles in process. There is no computer terminal in the Hebraic Section itself. Terminals for use by the staff are located in other sections of the African and Middle Eastern Division. The public has access to the LC databases through terminals and printers housed in the Computer Catalog Center adjacent to the Main Reading Room and at other locations throughout the Library.

### General and Special Collections

It is the general collection which contains the bulk of resources bearing on the Jew-

ish people and their relations with other peoples and cultures throughout recorded time. The outstanding holdings of the Hebraic Section combined with the plethora of non-Hebraic sources pertaining to Judaica in the general collection constitute one of the best repositories in this field worldwide.

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The special collections are also rich in materials pertaining to Judaica. Hebrew and Yiddish sheet music may be viewed in the Music Division. A collection of Yiddish-language films produced in the United States and Poland in the 1930s and 1940s is housed in the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division. The Matson Photo Service Collection, accessible through the Prints and Photographs Division, dramatically illustrates changes in the Middle East from 1896-1946. The Ruth Rubin Collection of field recordings of Jewish folklore (1940s-1960s) and the Paul Bowles Collection of field recordings of Moroccan music (1959) are to be found in the Archive of Folk Song. Legal materials relating to Israel, including *Divre Ha-Knesset* and all series of the State of Israel gazette, *Reshumot*, are now located in the Law Library.

### Cooperation with other LC Divisions

Using the resources of the Section's reference collection, information provided by computer databases, and its own expertise, the Hebraic staff can provide access to bibliographic information for resources found beyond the confines of the Hebraic Section. Conversely, reference specialists in the Main Reading Room or in one of the special reading rooms frequently turn to the Hebraic Section for guidance, although the resources needed may be outside the Hebraic Section. The staff can readily direct readers and researchers to the appropriate areas,

with suggestions for selection of resources. For example, a patron using serials and newspapers in Hebrew and Yiddish may also wish to examine pertinent materials in other languages. This may necessitate a visit to the Current Newspaper and Periodical Reading Room in the Madison Building, or a visit to the Jefferson Building for bound copies of serials or material in microform. After consulting with the Serial Record Division, a member of the staff can advise readers as to how best to proceed.

### Service to Congress

The Hebraic Section provides service to Congress and to other Federal agencies in several ways. Translations from Hebrew and Yiddish into English and vice versa are provided upon request to Congress. These requests frequently involve translations or summaries of letters or of articles from the Israeli press and U. S. Yiddish press. The Hebraic Section has also been called upon to provide translations or transliterations of Biblical passages, quotations from the Talmud, Midrash or other rabbinic sources, as well as information on a variety of subjects ranging from Ethiopian Jews to the laws of divorce in the Tractate Gittin. Among agencies for which the staff has provided reference service are the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Department of Justice, the Smithsonian Institution, the Department of State, the Department of Agriculture, and The White House.

### Interlibrary Loan

Via the Loan Division of the Library of Congress, the Hebraic Section receives requests for loan or reproduction of materials in its collection from a variety of institutions—both domestic and foreign. Once the staff has identified the material requested (the bibliographic information supplied is not always correct), the physical condition of the material is assessed. Books in brittle condition cannot, of course, survive the loan process. Instead, using the resources of the National Union Card Catalogs maintained by the staff of the Hebraic Section, the requesting institution is given other locations from which the same material, possibly in better repair, may be acquired. Alternatively, it is sometimes suggested that the requester procure for a fee, a reproduction of the material from the Library's Photoduplication Service. This is frequently the case if there are no reports of holdings for a particular item at other institutions. In all instances, copies of material requested are furnished subject to copyright or other restrictions. Certain serials, Yizkor books, rare books, and material in poor condition are not available for interlibrary loan.

An example of a recent request was for a reproduction of a page from the Sanhedrin tractate of the 1519/20 Bomberg edition of the Talmud for inclusion in a forthcoming law encyclopedia. Through the Photoduplication Service, several requests for reproduction of folios from the *Washington Haggadah*, 1478, have been filled for researchers and institutions and for the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

## Genealogy

The trend in recent years toward genealogical research is reflected in the search for Jewish roots. In the summer of 1982, the Hebraic Section welcomed 150 participants attending the Second Jewish Genealogy Seminar, a gathering hosted by the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Washington. Several staff members met with a representative of the Society to discuss plans for the Library's involvement in the Seminar. In preparation for the conference, the reference staff of the Hebraic Section identified titles in its own holdings and in the general collection containing material relevant to genealogical researchers. Several hundred volumes, including a strong collection of Yizkor books, augmented by material loaned from the general collection, were moved to quarters near the Hebraic Section and were made available on open shelves to participants in the Seminar. The staff of the Hebraic Section was present at the Seminar to respond to inquiries and to provide assistance in locating additional resources.

Heightened interest in tracing links from past to present has been reflected in the article entitled "Jewish Genealogical Materials in the Library of Congress: An Introductory Checklist with Annotations," by Ellen R. Murphy, former Senior Reference Librarian in the Hebraic Section, which appeared in *Toledot*, Volume IV, Number 5, 1982. The article, which describes basic tools of interest to the researcher of Jewish genealogy, continues to generate inquiries to the Hebraic Section. Although unable to undertake personal research for individuals, the staff of the Hebraic Section is most willing to make available to researchers all of the resources of the Section, as well as to suggest other possibilities that may prove fruitful. Many of the items in Ms. Murphy's article and many Yizkor books are available at other large libraries and through interlibrary loan from various institutions.

Genealogical research at the Library of Congress illustrates the diversity and richness of sources available in the nation's Library. A stop in the Hebraic Section to use the collection of Yizkor books and rabbinic

materials may lead to a visit to the Geography and Map Reading Room for a photocopy of a map, and then to a stop in the European Reading Room for further information on a town or individual of interest.

## Ancillary Responsibilities

While the staff of the Hebraic Section is primarily involved in the development and maintenance of the collection in its custody, the growth and direction of non-Hebraic Judaica in the general collections are also its concern. Staff members engage in selection and acquisition activities on an ongoing basis to ensure growth of the collection in all areas bearing on the Jewish people. Dealer catalogs are searched against the records of holdings; auction catalogs are examined and items selected for bid; and profferings of duplicates from other institutions or offers by donors are scrutinized for desiderata to augment or fill gaps in the collection. Advertisements in journals and newspapers and items brought to our attention by readers help to assure steady growth of the collection.

Purchases of monographs and serials from foreign countries are effected through designated blanket-order dealers in each country. A blanket-order dealer in Israel provides the bulk of acquisitions from that country of a non-governmental, non-exchange nature. The Hebraic staff checks in and prioritizes materials which arrive before they are forwarded for cataloging. The librarians also initiate requests to the Library's dealer for additional material not available through gift or exchange, and file claims for back issues of serials and monographs not supplied. A blanket-order dealer in the United States supplies non-copyrighted material—mainly rabbinics—and a second American blanket-order dealer provides various categories of Yiddica.

Unlike other libraries, the Library of Congress obtains additions to its collections through several unique sources. One of these sources is the registration and deposit with the Library of Congress of United States imprints bearing a valid copyright notice. Although works in English make up the large majority of titles falling into this category, a number of Hebrew and Yiddish books bearing a U.S. copyright notice are also deposited with the Office of the Register of Copyrights. The Hebraic Section may initiate requests for compliance, through the Copyright Office, for material bearing a notice and not deposited. Titles are also acquired through the Cataloging-in-Publication Program (CIP) at the Library. The staff initiates claims through CIP for Judaica and Hebraica which have not been

deposited by CIP participants. Thus, one need not be surprised to find a work with a U.S. imprint in a bookstore or in another library that has yet to arrive on the shelves of the Library of Congress.

The staff of the Hebraic Section works closely with the Exchange and Gift Division of the Library of Congress to augment another unique acquisition source. Israel is one of the countries with which the United States has an exchange agreement, thus enabling the Library to receive hundreds of government publications yearly via the Israel State Archives. At the request of the Hebraic Section staff, establishment of exchange programs for acquisition of Judaic material is pursued not only in Israel and the United States, but worldwide. The Exchange and Gift Division offers materials to participants from its own subject lists. These include Judaica duplicates and discards and transfers of material from other Federal agencies. Lists of Hebraica and Yiddica duplicates are compiled as staffing of the Section permits.

Besides this culling of duplicates, other custodial chores of the Hebraic Section include: sorting thousands of monographs, serials, newspapers and microforms as they arrive, as well as shelving them; selecting items for binding and repair; and identifying brittle materials for preservation microfilming.

## Conclusion

These activities are pursued concurrently with other work, under our mission to provide Congress and Federal agencies, researchers and readers with quality reference assistance. A strong Judaica background, mastery of Hebraic bibliography, knowledge of the basic tools of librarianship, and a good memory—coupled with the familiarity gained from handling the books in one or several stages of selection, acquisition, accessioning, or even disposal—often determine the successful response to an inquiry. The rich collections of the Library of Congress, accumulated and made available through the years by dedicated staff, have provided unparalleled resources to meet the research needs of the Congress of the United States, our nation of readers, and an international community of scholars. Each day renews the privilege and the challenge to continue to meet this mandate.

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