

Librarian's Lobby

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Visit to Jewish Theological Seminary Library

One principle of education that I follow is **חינוך לפי דוגמה** that is **Education by Example**. For the cataloging and classification class I give the students an assignment to visit a library cataloging department. They have to call ahead and make an appointment and generally catalogers are eager to meet with students. Sometimes I need to nudge them along.¹ I also set the example by visiting a library. In the past I have visited local libraries, but this semester I had the opportunity to go to New York a few days before the course started.

When I was an undergraduate and a library school student in 1971-74 I worked in the Jewish Theological Seminary Library at 122nd and Broadway in New York City. On my recent trip to New York, I visited the cataloging department. I had made an appointment with Rita Lifton, who worked in the library from when I was a student. The head of the technical services was out that day. Another member of the staff who was there in 1974 was also not there.

On April 18, 1966 there was a serious fire that destroyed 70,000 volumes and water and smoke damaged most of the rest of the Library collection.² The salvage effort started a rethinking on how they catalog and process materials. When I was a student the main part of the collection was in a pre-fabricated building in the courtyard of the campus. Some books were stored off site in a warehouse. The pre-fab building lasted for more than 17 years including all the years that I was a student. The stacks were closed browsers. Since one of my jobs was to find the books that the readers requested and put books back on the shelves, I *really* learned the collection. When I graduated, a new library building was still a distant dream.

On July 5, 1983 the new Library building was opened with all the state of the art innovations – one computer for staff to input information for OCLC. The stacks were opened to browsing and the technical services were in the floor below. <http://www.jtsa.edu/Library/About.xml> is the URL for learning more about the Library. Today, all the staff members use personal computers and there are computers for the students to search the catalog and data bases. They formerly were members of RLIN but recently RLIN and OCLC merged. Today the Library uses Aleph 500, which was originally developed for the Hebrew University Library. It is now sold by Exlibris. Aleph is particularly powerful in the ability to enter and search multiple scripts such as Latin, Hebrew and Cyrillic. A very high percentage of the JTS collection is in Hebrew letters.

¹ For example I had a student who was in Germany because her husband was in the military. She did not know German. I found out that one of the oldest universities in the world was only a 50 minute drive away. This library started in 1240. I found a librarian there who spoke English and was happy to meet the student.

² A book for children concerning the fire and preservation effort was published in 1988. Cytron, Barry D. Fire!: the library is burning. New York :Lerner Publs.Publication, 1988.

The OPAC (public access catalog) is searchable in Latin, Hebrew or Cyrillic characters in all the fields. The Library claimed more than 300,000 entries in the catalog in March 2004 when the retrospective conversion from the card catalog was declared complete. The collection includes over 375,000 volumes, 25,000 rare books, 11,000 manuscripts, 13,000 reels of microfilms (primarily of Hebrew manuscripts), 750 periodicals subscriptions, 1000 video recordings, 4,000 sound recordings, 3,000 musical scores and CD-ROMs. Strengths include rabbinics (Talmud and cognate literature), Bible and its Jewish commentaries, liturgy, and medieval and modern Hebrew literature.

This was not the first time that I visited the new building, but I had not been there in more than 10 years. I remembered the street and the outside of the building, but the inside was all changed. The main reading room when I was a student is now a synagogue and meeting room.

Today the Library has the largest collection of Judaica and Hebraica volumes in any library outside of Israel. It has shelving for 500,000 volumes and seating in its reading rooms for 300. (When I was a student I think the whole program I was in had about 150 students.) The Library has special reading rooms for microform materials, audio visual materials, music, and rare books. Most materials outside of the rare book room and special collections³ use Library of Congress Classification. Before the fire the Library used the Freidus classification, which is a Judaica specific system made by the New York Public Library. They have been consulted over the years by Library of Congress for help with expansion and modification of classification of Judaica materials.

The collection uses Library of Congress Subject Headings with some minor modifications. They do not use "O.T." referring to "Old Testament" and the dates use "B.C.E" and "C.E." in place of "B.C." and "A.D."

Since mostly I catalog alone, it was great to meet with librarians who catalog full time. The Library has general catalogers, and librarians who specialize in rabbinics, music and manuscripts. A metadata librarian works on assigning headings to pictures and other graphic materials. These specialized areas are challenging because the primary sources of information are not as standardized as in commercially published modern books. The music archivist has a doctorate in music and two of the catalogers are ordained rabbis with many years of yeshiva training. The music archivist deals mainly with unpublished and ephemera materials from *hazanim*, composers and others with an interest in Jewish music. The Library has a grant for the cataloging and processing of older materials that they are still recovering from the 1966 fire. I was pleasantly surprised that one of the catalogers had read my recent *Librarian's Lobby* column on the Ten Commandments. I shared an interesting conversation about the purchase and circulation of e-books. It is always great to meet with librarians and share information.

³ See: http://www.jtsa.edu/Library/About/Special_Collections.xml for more information on Special Collections

I always enjoy visiting with catalogers as it is a way to share knowledge and keep in touch with others in the profession. Please don't hesitate to send me ideas for future columns.



This is the former reading room of the Library. The marble stair case in the back led to the rare book room. The light fixtures and floor are the same as when the building was first built in the 1920's. In 1968 I was in awe with the room because it was the biggest Judaica collection that I had ever seen and at first didn't realize the size of the circulating collection. Only staff members were allowed in the closed stacks.



Here are two pictures of the library reading room that I took in April 1974.