

Practicing the Art of "Tzimitzum" in Preserving Jewish Communal
Ready Reference Collections
Avi West

Description: Presiding over the culling and transfer of a 10,000 item Jewish public library, a few challenges and questions surfaced. Is there any way to defend sustaining a public Jewish collection in the age of the Internet and in the face of sharply declining client traffic? How may we practice sacred contraction to preserve collections of resources (media and human) and continue our quest for a literate Jewish community? What are the flexible goals we need to have? Who may our partners be in creating a more decentralized network of resources? How can we prepare students of all ages to better use Rabbi Dr. Google in doing Jewish research and researching Jewishly? Should today's library professional have a "succession plan" to keep replenishing "library champions" for the future? We may not as yet have all the answers, but we ALL need to have the conversation.

Avi West is Senior Education Officer and Master Teacher, Jewish Life and Learning, at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. His portfolio includes integrating Judaic content into pedagogic and identity building experiences and articles, adult learning, and congregational innovation. As the Director of the Shulamith Reich Elster Resource Center and Master Teacher at the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning, West has developed educational resources for educators, adults and families for the Partnership's website, e-blasts and workshops. West also consults, develops and writes educational resources for the Partnership's programs, including adult learning, professional development, youth philanthropy, and early childhood. West has been honored for his work in the community and with education through various accolades. West earned his B.A. from Columbia University after majoring in comparative literature with a concentration on folk literature, metaphor, and rabbinic Midrash. He also has a B.A. of Hebrew Letters and an M.A. in Education with a concentration in curriculum development from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Boker tov- good morning and, as the local panelist, welcome to Greater Washington. I am not a trained librarian, but I am a life-long connector of people to resources and experiences. This presentation will be an anecdotal rant/riff based on my subjective experiences over two years. I was the director of Jewish and educational resources of a central agency for Jewish education, and as our agency and staff contracted, I was last comic standing. I had to preside over the merger of the agency and possible dissolution of its library, known as the Isaac Franck Jewish Public Library. DC has an embarrassment of library riches- Library of Congress, Universities, Day

Schools, JCC's, and many synagogues. Our library actually started as a Teacher Center within a central agency for Jewish education. The book collection then grew— but it also grew beyond our agency's service mandate. That should be a red flag.

Our central agency for Jewish education went through a number of permutations since I joined it in 1978. Most of the changes were for the best. But each physical move and cycles of budget crises could have spelled the end of our resource collection. One goal drove our strategy over time- preserve the educational programs and services that were ESSENTIAL to our community..... But when it became obvious that our agency was going to close, and there was no guarantee that a new library space would be found, we pledged to pare down the collection into a size that could be most portable and nimble, and into themes that would best be embraced in a new environment. It was sad but

true- many of our resources became stale over time, we had little or no budget for acquisitions, and the most damning evidence against saving the whole library- there was barely any foot traffic and few inquiries beyond requests for pedagogic strategies. The "patient" was very sick, hemorrhaging budget through its square footage, and we had to apply some form of triage to save it's essential parts.

My inspiration to persevere came from the practice of *tzimtzum*= sacred contraction. God modeled how one should contract, withdraw into an essence, so that the rest of creation would have room to be and to grow. I saw in that gift of modified space the wisdom of having an attitude of sacred duty when being asked to shrink a collection. As was always the case in Judaism, when the going gets tough, the tough make midrash (homiletical devices to let us live with reality). Keeping one's attitude positive in trying times is half the battle.

As many folks who have survived years in the non-profit and communal worlds know- you pick your red lines and choose the battles carefully. As with God's *tzimtzum*, the goal was to decrease the direct, centralized God Presence, not to reduce holiness, by giving God's partners and image holders more room; to have them contribute to and steward the work of creation. Our hope was to dissolve the collection of around 11,000 books, journals, and recordings, with the respect and the dignity we had extended to these resources for decades. The dream of expansion into a true Jewish public library had to be put aside. Perhaps by decentralizing the resources into the hands of a group of loving professionals and loyal volunteers, the community as a whole would step up to appreciate the material and human treasures that libraries are.

Since our agency and new department in Federation was essentially tasked to work with the educating community. we wanted to save those resources that would support the portfolios of our education professionals and fit in a new environment. When our Federation decided to move into a newer building, we successfully merged their plans for a donor "living room" environment with our concept of a book lined home salon/library. We were granted room for 3,000 books and another small area for our pedagogic resources. This included a ready reference section of the major biblical and rabbinic texts with basic translations and commentaries. It included those hard copy books of quotes, explanations of holiday and life cycle rituals, collections of writings about 21st century Judaism in America, resources for Israel engagement, and a collection of cookbooks to add content support to the Federation's Jewish Food Experience. We looked at what the other synagogues, centers, day schools, and universities had in their collections. Two parts of our collection were not duplicated elsewhere- the large collection of children's' literature, which would serve us well in support of our PJ Library activities. And an amazing collection we called "Women's Voices," resources that chronicled the rise of Jewish feminist literature, commentaries, and rituals. The strategy coalesced- we will put out the call to synagogues, centers, schools, and academic institutions. In return for taking large parts of our library, they would agree to open their collections to the general community, especially when

referred by our staff. We dispersed our collection to 40 institutions. What was not practical we gave to a book dealer, and what was not even up to that level we had a company come in to pulp. Even the furnishings went to a new synagogue trying to create a bet midrash for both prayer and study. We did not want to throw any books physically into the trash. I came to appreciate what God had known- people will only take responsibility when you give them the room to do so. It was a win-win proposition; the collection was stagnant and almost irrelevant as it was. We might as well put the best resources in a place where they might be used and attempt to decentralize the collection of knowledge. The new room can be described as "sweet and heimisch." It is many people's favorite spot for meetings and brainstorming with staff. It is gaining more visibility- sure, for its ambience, but now it is my job to say "You'll come for the housing, but you'll stay for the browsing." We will continue to explore how technology can expand the old definition of Makom (place or God's presence) and make singular sites a part of a greater whole.

So here are my notes about the questions raised and issues we faced when looking to change our collection:

- Is there any way to defend sustaining a public Jewish collection in the age of the Internet and in the face of sharply declining client traffic? The sad fact is that it is indeed hard to justify- not on its own merits as a library, but in light of diminished and competing budgets for other essential goods and services. The use of on-line research is not in itself a problem. But the lack of client traffic becomes a liability when management is looking for ROI on square footage and location. I found inspiration for the big picture task from the classic Bialik poem "*Im Yesh Et Nafshekh Ladaat*," "Should you soulfully wish to know" It was written at another time of challenge and change, although far more dark and sinister. This is a selection of verses:

Should you wish to know the Source,
From which your brothers drew...
Their strength of soul...
Their comfort, courage, patience, trust,

And should you wish to see the Fort
Wherein your fathers refuge sought.
And all their sacred treasures hid,
The refuge that has still preserved
Your nation's soul intact and pure

Then enter now the House of God,
The House of study, old and gray,
Throughout the scorching summer days
Throughout the gloomy winter nights,

At morning midday or at eve...

And then your heart shall guess the truth,
That you have touched the sacred ground
Of a great people's house of life.
And that your eyes do gaze upon
The treasure of a nation's soul.

Bialik stood on the edge of both the secular and the religious world. He understood the challenges, and hinted that while the past had a glimpse of the way forward, the bet midrash of his time was still “old and gray, scorching and gloomy,” out of sync with the structures of modern cities and the new opportunities of freedom for Jews in Western Europe. The content of the bet midrash/library was important, elevating, inspiring- and he dedicated his life to advancing new ways to engage modern audiences to appreciate its appeal. His *Sefer HaAggada* was an old school google for essential nuggets of wisdom. His publishing of poetry that sprung from the ancient texts yet helped narrate the new age, solidified the use of Hebrew as the building block for the new Jewish culture. The legendary Friday night *onsei Shabbat* at Beit Bialik, surrounded by his personal resource collection, brought the salons of Europe into the Land of Israel, and modeled how a library with tables and drinks can become a living bet midrash, a critical venue for lifelong learning and open, stimulating discussions. As he cast a loving but critical and jaundiced eye to the past aesthetics, he pushed the *shtetl* to morph. He shared the vision of Buber and others that the Hebrew University on Scopus would be the new Temple and its library the new *heikhal*, sanctum. Size may not matter as much as ambiance. The new small library or collection must have *kedushat makom v'zeman*- it must be a sacred space, conducive to learning by individuals or groups, and have the ability to be set and reset to house community conversations.

- How may we practice sacred contraction to preserve collections of resources (media and human) and continue our quest for a literate Jewish community? In the same way that good educators must be able to be both a sage on the stage and even more importantly a guide on the side, the director of a small collection must find a way (with technology or volunteers) to be the managers of the collection, but more importantly be able to manage knowledge. Like a research desk librarian, they must be pathfinders for those on journeys and Jewish GPS for those who ask questions. If your collection MUST contract- ask yourself and your community about the essential features that need to be preserved. Where else may resources be found- what segment of your collection is unique, cannot

be accessed easily elsewhere, or supports your mission and portfolios in a daily or weekly basis?

- What are the flexible goals we need to have? David Houle, a futurist who often does Ted Talks, claims we are no longer in the information age, but rather in the age of shift- in the information age Content was King! In the shift Age CONTEXT is King. People can and will get content in every individual way possible. Perhaps our role in small libraries, well positioned to be in venues that people frequent for other matters of Jewish context and identity, is to help people understand the context of Jewish living, make sense of the waves of information – see patterns and the enduring understandings of Jewish topics. Every library should burn their SHUSH! signs and have hours for open bet midrash and other guided activities (book clubs, dvar torah writing workshops, BM tutoring, a refuge from the main sanctuary during looong services...)
- Who may our partners be in creating a more decentralized network of resources? The messianic hope for a union catalogue lets me sleep at night. But in the meantime, knowing I can have access to resources around the beltway gives me and clients options. There has been to date no stampede- all the more sad. But our new location in the new Federation building will eventually host community activities, and I am encouraging small libraries around the beltway to market their activities on our JConnect community website.
- How can we prepare students of all ages to better use Rabbi Dr. Google in doing Jewish research and researching Jewishly? Is there a Jewish ethic and protocol for research and using the web? Should it be a life skill attached to a coming of age ceremony like BM? YES, YES, YES! The guide to Jewish collections like the Wein or Elazar have a greater role in helping create lists of terms to put into search engines to yield better results. Every library must have literacy programs for kids and adults which include the ethics of quoting sources and not plagiarizing. Every learner must take a workshop on checking a source for authenticity and reliability.
- Should today's library professional have a "succession plan" to keep replenishing "library champions" for the future? Library Advisory Committees are important to keep the idea of Jewish literacy and librarian services visible BOTH for clients and those that control the budgets. Monthly columns, reading lists for families and adults, high teas in the library, a help line for the BM families needing divrei torah help... etc. Make your library, as Bialik called it, a HOUSE OF LIFE. Visibility is life.

We may not as yet have all the answers, but we ALL need to have the conversation.

Thank you and b'hatzlacha.