

## AN AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT MAKES AN OUTSTANDING LIBRARIAN

*Leonard Felder, Ph.D.*

**Description:** When a visitor enters a library to research a Jewish topic, the librarian can make an enormous difference, influencing not only a particular research project but also how the visitor feels about Jewish research and Jewish learning. This inspiring and practical lecture/discussion will describe how librarians can make a visitor feel like coming back to your library and going deeper into Jewish learning; help the visitor learn crucial research skills; assist a visitor in finding Jewish teachings that will impact his or her life; make sure the visitor doesn't feel intimidated or overwhelmed by the size and diversity of Jewish teachings; and increase the likelihood that this visitor will become a life-long patron and supporter of your facility. Dr. Felder's presentation will use humor and specific examples to describe the difficulties many visitors experience when entering the world of Jewish scholarship.

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**Leonard Felder**, Ph.D. is the best-selling author of seven books. He has appeared on numerous radio and television programs to discuss the connection between Jewish spirituality and personal growth. His new book, *SEVEN PRAYERS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE*, will be published in September 2001.

### **The Long-Term Impact of a Good Host**

Why were Sarah and Abraham chosen to be the first matriarch and patriarch of the Jewish people? Most of us were taught in Sunday School that it was because Abraham smashed his father's idols. That's partially true, but our tradition also teaches that Sarah and Abraham were the first role models of Jewish life because they were great hosts-- they were excellent at making people feel welcomed,

respected, honored and empowered.

The specific hosting skills that make an outstanding librarian are quite significant and they often make a long-term impact on an individual. For example, if a visitor to a Jewish library feels ignored, disrespected, or talked down to in even a small way, it can not only turn this person off to Jewish scholarship but in some cases to Judaism as well.

Men and women of all ages come into Jewish libraries to learn more about crucial life issues-- prayer, sex, divorce, God, love, death, infertility, adoption, ethical behavior, higher purpose, holidays, rituals, family closeness. Sometimes they feel intimidated or unsure about how to access the huge amount of books that constitute our heritage as "the people of the book." If a librarian knows how to make this visitor feel welcomed and involved in the joys of Jewish learning, it can lead to this person looking to Judaism and Jewish libraries for a lifetime of questions and concerns. It can also impact how this person transmits Jewish teachings and traditions to his or her children and grandchildren. Quite often a Jewish librarian can be one of the most important contacts that make a person love being Jewish or feel distant or turned off toward their religion.

As a lifelong Jewish student, teacher, author and speaker I have had some wonderful and some painful experiences in Jewish libraries. For this presentation, I will focus on the specific skills and

techniques that two outstanding librarians showed me and that might be helpful for how we treat visitors to our libraries and how we train our staff members. These specific skills are complex and they require a combination of God-given talents and extensive training. So please forgive me for summarizing them quickly with just some food for thought:

### **What Makes a Visitor Feel Welcome in a Jewish Library?**

In 1994 I was beginning to research my previous book THE TEN CHALLENGES, which described how the Ten Commandments are quite useful in therapy because they help clients deal with such issues as: how do you honor a difficult parent, how do you overcome the tendency to compare and covet what others have, how do you unwind for one day a week and connect with what is holy in life, how do you deal with crushes and flirtations that create confusion in a committed relationship, etc.

I had already been given a skeptical response at two libraries where the librarian wanted to grill me on whether it was ok or not for a psychologist to be writing about the Ten Commandments. So when I entered the library of Sinai Temple in Westwood, where I am not a member, I was surprised and pleased to find that the librarian Rachel Glasser had a wonderful way of making visitors feel welcome and for being extremely helpful and wise in how she approached and conversed with a stranger like myself.

There were a few specific things she did that made me want to visit the library often, donate money, and recommend the library to others. One was the gracious way she acted as if this were a living room or a comfortable study, rather than an imposing facility with many hundreds of books. She welcomed me with curiosity, intelligence and professionalism the way you would host a long-lost friend or a person who had traveled a long distance to visit your home.

She truly wanted to understand what my needs were--that I was looking for books and references on the various ways of interpreting each of the commandments, and that I was particularly interested in the original Hebrew and Aramaic meanings of words that had been watered down in the "Thou shalt not" translations of the King James version. I immediately felt like I had a creative and skillful ally on my search, rather than a cold or patronizing "expert."

### **Giving the Visitor Specific Skills for Future Searches**

Very quickly I realized that Rachel Glasser was not just pointing me to a card catalogue or a computer, but rather opening up valuable treasures I could utilize on this and future projects. She showed me how to utilize Bialik and Ravnitzky's THE BOOK OF LEGENDS and other enjoyable resources that have gems for interpreting almost any key word I wanted to explore, such as coveting, sexuality, Sabbath, idolatry, gossip, stealing, etc. She helped me see that my Bantam Hebrew-English dictionary was not the best choice for most translations and that I could have a lot more options and deeper insights from using Brown/Driver/Briggs HEBREW LEXICON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT and other Biblical references that had profound meanings.

She also taught me how to use the index of the ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA and to quickly figure out how certain sages and rabbis' names like Joseph ibn Paguda and Ohr Hahayyim were spelled

before trying to look them up. She saved me hours of detours by teaching me in a patient and never-condescending way how to get the most out of these resources.

### **Offering Options and Diverse Choices from Different Jewish Teachings**

A few years later I was back at Sinai Temple's library to research my most recent book *SEVEN PRAYERS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE*, a book that explores the deeper meanings, liturgical history, and psychological applications of specific Jewish prayers. For many years I have been testing out Hebrew prayers such as *Modeh Ani*, *Netilat Yadayim*, the *Birchat Cohanim*, the blessings over meals, the *Bedtime Shema*, and others with my counseling clients to see how these prayers help us deal more effectively with stress, sleep problems, eating disorders, family tensions, mood swings, and physical ailments.

Since Rachel Glasser had gone to New Jersey, I began working with the new librarian Joel Tuchman, who also was gifted in making visitors feel welcome and teaching specific skills for accessing Jewish teachings and wisdom. Because of Joel's helpful suggestions, I was able to learn and include in *SEVEN PRAYERS* the history and various uses of the hand-washing prayer (*Netilat Yadayim*) that I had been recommending to counseling clients for overcoming creative blocks and procrastination. I had always thought the prayer was about much more than cleaning one's hands from germs. Joel helped me find the poetic passage in Solomon Ganzfried's *KITZUR SHULCHAN ARUCH* that explains how when we raise up our hands during this prayer we are raising up our energies and our creativity to be of service to the Divine Presence.

More than just helping me find one interpretation of how to understand a particular prayer, Joel Tuchman has a wonderful way of suggesting a variety of approaches to each question. For instance, when I was asking him about the history, deeper meanings and mystical interpretations of the blessings over meals, he pointed me to various sources that have Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Kabbalistic views of what happens when we connect with holiness prior to eating food. When I was asking questions about the *Bedtime Shema*, he let me in on the secrets he had learned from observant friends, as well as what he has practiced personally in his own life for saying blessings prior to bedtime. I not only got the information I was seeking, but from talking with Joel Tuchman the rituals and teachings came alive. Instead of being just words in a book, this down-to-earth librarian clued me into the practical and alive aspects of our traditions.

For each of the chapters of *SEVEN PRAYERS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE*, I was being shown a number of sources and avenues that could deepen my understanding and the reader's understanding of why certain prayers are so useful and psychologically astute. I can truly say I would not have been able to make the book as accessible as it is without the help of an outstanding librarian like Joel Tuchman. I had dreamed of writing a book that could help people from all branches of Judaism go deeper in their connection and understanding of Jewish prayers--it took a great librarian to make that dream come true.

### **Knowing When to Pull Back**

The final skill that both Rachel Glasser and Joel Tuchman did so well is the delicate art of knowing how to give the visitor some room to explore on his or her own, but to be available for clarification and problem-solving when needed. This is a difficult skill to teach. As a psychotherapist, I know it's very tempting to jump in and give suggestions to a counseling client, which often interferes with the client discovering his or her own truths and insights.

Yet somehow both Rachel and Joel have a gift for pointing the library visitor in the right direction and then not breathing down the person's neck or doing "too much" so as to infantilize or limit the individual's process of discovery. I saw Rachel and Joel do this dance of helping and then gently pulling back to make room with both children and adults who were visitors to the library. This gift for being a creative ally and then knowing how to practice "tzimtzum" (the act of pulling back so that the person can have free will and creativity) is one of the ways we can imitate God's creativity and tzimtzum. When done gracefully, it is a wonderful experience of partnership--the partnership between a seeker and a great librarian, as well as the partnership between a Jew and a loving Presence that allows us to co-create and explore.

May your important work of being a librarian be guided by these principles of hosting, respect, and partnership. And may the visitors to your library be inspired to seek out the joy of Jewish learning for a lifetime.

**For more information**, please contact Dr. Leonard Felder at 310 815-1611 or via email at [lcfelder@yahoo.com](mailto:lcfelder@yahoo.com). To learn more about his books THE TEN CHALLENGES \$25.00 hardcover (Crown, 1997) or SEVEN PRAYERS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE, \$12.95 hardcover (Andrews-McMeel, 2001), go to Amazon.com where they are described and reviewed in detail.