TRENDS IN RABBINICAL REFERENCE SOURCE MATERIALS:
THEIR CHANGING NATURE

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Description: Expert researchers from the rabbinic school libraries of each of the four main branches of American Judaism will discuss the changing nature of rabbinic reference resources. Comparisons between digital and print-based techniques will be highlighted. Two electronic databases will be presented in detail: the Bar- Ilan Responsa Project and the Henkind Talmud Database. In addition, the literature of Reconstructionist philosophy, liturgy and history will be examined. The presentations will be followed by a forum, "Ask the Rabbinics Experts."

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This discussion is **not** a course on rabbinical reference sources. Courses on reference sources are better provided by schools – in classes or through long-distance learning programs – in conjunction with a library association or with a local chapter of a library association. Rather, this talk focuses on trends in the production of rabbinical reference works.

I would include in this talk those sources that could assist a Rabbi or rabbinical student in studying about a particular topic in order to prepare an answer to a question, to prepare a lecture, to decide on a question of Jewish law, or just to understand all the issues that are involved in a matter of Jewish religious belief and/or practice. Also some of the reference sources may be used by lay people to learn what Rabbinical authorities say about a particular topic – e.g. reasons for a Jewish custom, or to search for quotations from rabbinical literature and to determine their context. I would include within the purview of this discussion any other source which a librarian of a Jewish theological library would use to answer inquiries directed to him/her such as requests for bibliographical citations of *sefarim* or of works dealing with modern religious issues – even those that are subject to controversy. I would include library catalogs, bibliographies of biographies, as well as biographical dictionaries of religious leaders of any Jewish religious denomination. These works would help the inquirer understand the background of the leaders when the inquirer reads what they have to say about a religious issue.

I remember when I first began to pursue a library career. Yeshiva College offered two reference courses in my senior year. Mr. Zeides of the Pollack Library offered a course on secular reference works. Mr. Dienstag of the Gottesman Library offered a course on Jewish reference works. The first real rabbinical reference work to which I was introduced was *Paḥad Yitsḥak* by Isaac Lampronti. Oh! I learned about other reference books too like *Otsar leshon ha-tannaim*, *Jastrow*, etc. But the *Paḥad Yitsḥak* stands out in my mind. You can read all about the development of the *Paḥad Yitsḥak* in Shimon Brisman's book *A history and guide to Judaic encyclopedias and lexicons*.

The common denominator of all the works about which I first studied is the fact that they are books. They were compiled in written form on notepads or notebooks, or on separate sheets of paper that could be arranged and/or rearranged, or on smaller and larger index cards that could be sorted and/or re-sorted. The final product was always books and more books. Thus, the teachers of reference courses were literally "throwing the books" at us – first to explore them and then to be tested with questions like "Where do you find such and such information?" Matters pretty much stayed the same, especially for rabbinical reference works, until about the early 1980s.

The first new phenomenon was that the information was still compiled in the same old way, but production of the books was by computer. This logically resulted in indexes to those books being produced by computer – as imperfect as they might have been at first. Then other manifestations of reference sources began to materialize.

The Bar-Ilan Responsa Project or Proyekt Shu"t; I really do not have to talk about that database because the next speaker will do so.

But I can list for you other competing databases of a similar kind:

The CD-ROM Judaic Classics Library \ [electronic resource]. Deluxe ed.; Windows version 2.2. by the Institute for Computers in Jewish life and the Davka Corporation.

התקליטור התורני [electronic resource] = *The Torah CD-ROM library* : *התקליטור הכללי* which is a searchable database of the Bible and commentaries, the Talmud and commentaries and rabbinical literature including works on Jewish law, philosophy, ethics, mysticism and Hasidism.

A new CD ROM, about which I saw a brochure, claims to include 15,000 books, all in the original script and with word-indexing capabilities. It is called *Otzar ha-chochmah.* Personally, I would wait for reviews of this product before purchasing it.

The Institute of Hebrew Bibliography located at JNUL built up a database. The *אוצר הספר העברי* was compiled from it. The main volume, which is volume 2, contains the bibliographical information about the books, arranged by publication place and then by date. Vol. 1 contains the indexes to volume 2 by author, title, date, publisher, etc. It (the Institute) later issued an experimental CD. It currently offers a periodically updated CD and/or a subscription to an online database.

The online RAMBI database, maintained on the campus of the Hebrew University, also includes articles concerning religious matters. It was first widely distributed in printed format only.

The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, based in part at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, and supervised by Professor Stephen Kaufman allowed Professor Michael Sokoloff to publish *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine period* and *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and*

Geonic periods. Though these dictionaries are not cheap enough to permit their wide dissemination, they will ultimately contribute to a further study of the Talmuds.

The above forms did not appear in sequence nor in some evolutionary pattern. They developed in their own time and at their own pace, thus giving the inquirer many new options by which to access the needed information.

One sees other manifestations of computer produced reference works. *Latter-day leaders* by Emanuel and Neil Rosenstein has the appearance of a series of print-outs of a relational database but the print-outs comprise separate sections arranged by forename, surname, geographical regions (including a birth/death date list for the Russia/Poland section).

Other reference works appeared for a long time only as printed works but were later published as a database such as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. The worth of that encyclopedia — as imperfect a work as it may be — increased exponentially because of the index and word-search capability. This category of reference works includes the *Entsiklopedyah Talmudit*. By virtue of its digital format it has increased its value. However, it should still be considered to be an "unfinished symphony."

Another database which appeared only in printed form and later transformed to a digital form is the *Index of Jewish Periodicals*. This index is also valuable in that it includes periodicals such as *Reform Judaism* and *Conservative Judaism,* which carry articles about religious issues involving the constituencies of movements which they cover.

Some databases are now available through the internet. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* which was originally published in 1901 but which is still often used and quoted, is available at the URL http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/index.jsp.

The Genizah online database, especially the Targum manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah collection, is available at http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter/GOLD/ .

Another useful database is http://www.jewishgen.org/Rabbinic/infofiles/biblio.htm.
This database has bibliographies of and biographies of Rabbis and links to other enties in the same database.

I also found a whole series of potentially useful databases in http://www.dinur.org/. It is from the Dinur Center for Research in Jewish History of Hebrew University — Jewish History Resource Center. With regard to this talk it would also include Talmudic resources as well. Some of these databases have not yet been made available but they are being announced on this site as being prepared for public access. I want to forewarn you that not all these databases will be free.

Another phenomenon concerning the Rabbinical reference sources is the production of reference sources for the non-orthodox Rabbi or rabbinical student. Chatinover's *Topical Index of Reform Responsa,* which was originally available in book form, is now available

at the URL http://www.ccarnet.org/resp/. It covers response in Solomon Freehof's books of reform responsa and later sources such as those which appear in the volumes of the *CCAR Yearbooks*. I would guess that a database such as this might serve as a model for future databases that could be useful to the non-traditional Rabbi or layman.

For AJL accredited courses in reference sources it is no longer sufficient for the lecturer to include only books. In fact, I am sure that when these courses are offered their syllabi already include materials in the electronic or machine-readable format.

One of implications of the availability of these materials in new formats is that congregants in synagogues and temples might, at the time of hiring a rabbi, expect that the candidate know how to access the resources. Therefore, they would be judged more on their ability to analyze the available materials in a way that would resonate with the congregants' expectations.

Also, laypeople have more materials at their fingertips not only because of greater access through term index or concordance-like search ability but also because of better readability. Namely, the texts in the databases are not in Rashi script, which tends to discourage the average Hebrew reader.

So, in conclusion, our old resources are being renewed by being "clothed in new garb." This development is increasing the number of users and is bringing to those users greater access. Hopefully, this will result in a better-educated community of Jewish scholars, Rabbis, and laypeople.