Rosaline and Myer Feinstein Lecture Series, 2003

The Digital Library and the Jews
By Elhanan Adler

Introduction

There is an old joke about an Englishman, a Frenchman, a German, and a Jew who were asked to write an essay on the elephant. The Englishman wrote on "The Elephant and the British Empire." The Frenchman wrote about "The Love Life of the Elephant". The pedantic German wrote a large treatise on "The Toenail of the Elephant", and the Jew wrote on "The Elephant and the Jewish Problem."

In order for such ethnic jokes to be humorous they have to have a grain of truth in them. Indeed, we tend to look for unique Jewish problems, or at least Jewish aspects, in every topic. Perhaps this derives from a feeling of being unique, am segulah (however one may wish to interpret that term). Many times we exaggerate, or feel that general problems are uniquely ours. Sometimes we are right – there are specific Jewish problems, aspects or concerns.

In recent years the world of libraries, and information in general, is in a major upheaval. We are told that the age of the digital or virtual library is fast approaching if not already inside our gates; that we are now in a transitory stage, often referred to as the hybrid library. This stage, we are told, will give way gradually to totally digital information services delivered directly to the end-user's desktop. Presumably even in the technologists' bluest blue-sky dreams (in which the pesky issues of copyright have also been solved) there will remain some old-fashioned libraries (or perhaps we will then call them archives) which will preserve backup paper copies or provide scholars with materials which have not yet been digitized.

What I would like to discuss with you today is the question of the digital library and Judaica. Is the digital library another elephant, in which we are inventing Jewish 'problems' that either don't exist, or are really universal, or are there unique, legitimate concerns connected with Judaica information and Jewish libraries in the digital age which have to be addressed and solved?

To this end I would like to present what I feel are the unique aspects of Judaica, the characteristics both positive and negative of the digital library, and the implications of the meeting of the two. This will be a personal view, based on years of activity in both areas.

What is Unique about Judaica?

Much of what is unique in Judaica is what is unique in the Jewish people. The Jewish people have survived a two thousand year diaspora as a nation without a country. While for most nationalities a nation implies a central geographic location with some nationals living outside that location, the great mass of Jewish cultural activity has taken place outside the Land of Israel, in virtually every country on the globe. Much of this cultural activity can be, and often is,

considered part of the culture of those countries. Some results and implications of this are:

Multiple primary languages and scripts. Jewish creativity has been recorded in dozens of languages, some of them uniquely Jewish ones. Even assembling and recording the basic works of Judaica requires knowledge of a wide variety of languages and scripts.

Jewish cultural heritage materials are scattered throughout the world. In every country in which there has been a Jewish community there are repositories of Jewish books, manuscripts and other cultural artifacts. I doubt if there is any other culture whose materials are so widely scattered.

Much of this material is held by non-Jewish institutions. In particular, much of the corpus of existing Hebrew manuscripts is found in European religious, state and academic libraries. While these institutions are quite proud of these treasures, very few of them maintain systematic Judaica collections or the secondary sources needed to research these works.

A minority of Judaica is found in the Jewish State. The State of Israel came into being long after much of the Jewish cultural material had found its way into memory institutions, both Jewish and non-Jewish, throughout the world. Certainly the vast majority of Americana is found in the United States and the same is true for most other nations.

The Judaica user community is scattered throughout the world. The primary user community for Judaica is the entirety of Jewish communities and individuals, in virtually every country of the world.

Lack of a national focal point. Nations have national libraries which not only collect and preserve, but also coordinate, lead and help define national information policy. The Jewish National and University Library historically has assumed the role of the national library of the Jewish people (in addition to being the national library of the State of Israel and the central humanities library of the Hebrew University - a multiplicity of roles which has resulted in none of them being done well). The JNUL has until recently been reluctant to assume a role other than collecting and preserving materials, and providing services to the scholars using its reading rooms. A process is now underway which seems likely to separate the JNUL from the Hebrew University and give it a more national standing, both Israeli and Jewish. Hopefully this will also lead to the JNUL taking a more central role in the Judaica information scene as well.

All of the above can be said of other nations as well. India certainly has a multiplicity of languages. There is a large Chinese diaspora. Much of the Greek and Egyptian cultural materials are scattered in museums throughout the world. And there are certainly other nations with limited or dysfunctional national information systems, but I believe that the combination of all these factors together is unique to Judaica and the Jewish experience.

Some Major Characteristics of the Digital Library

Information goes to the reader and not vice-versa. More and more information flows directly to the user's desktop, and the need to physically visit a library is becoming less and less. In the

Israeli academic scene alone over 12,000 journals are available for digital access.

The physical location of information is irrelevant. If information arrives at my desktop quickly, where it came from is inconsequential.

Information is always available (24x7), everywhere. The digital library is open round the clock. Its materials are never mutilated, on loan or at the bindery.

Added value: links, additional material. Articles contain hypertext links to works cited, extensive graphic and sound materials can be appended to works, textual materials can be searched by word, and even in Judaica we are now beginning to see bibliographies with links to fulltext articles.

'Born digital' publications and compendia. While much current use of the digital library is for access to materials issued also in print, there is a growing number of publications which are appearing in digital form only.

Temporary licensing of information vs. permanent purchase. The concept of a library 'collection' is rapidly changing and libraries are renting much material on an 'as needed' basis.

But all is not marvelous in the digital era, and there are several problems which are yet unsolved and deeply concern the 'digital librarians':

Some Major Problems of the Digital Library

Standards (not everything works on all platforms). A database which works under one version of Windows does not always work under a newer one. Web-based programs written for the PC do not always work properly (or at all) with a MAC, and systems developed for Internet Explorer do not always function correctly under Netscape or one of the newer open-system browsers. Add to this the fact that there are several different standards for Hebrew and that many Judaica databases developed in Israel were never properly tested for use in the rest of the world.

Preservation and survival of digital information. As standards change, will all available digital data be migrated to keep up with them? Is the publisher of a CD-ROM obligated to keep it operational under the latest versions of operating systems? The Dead Sea Scrolls are readable 2000 years after they were written. Will a WORD file on a 3.5 inch diskette be readable fifty years from now?

Providing service to the 'invisible' patron. If the patron does not come to the library, how will we help him? Over the telephone? Perhaps digitally via 'chat' sessions or other 'virtual reference' systems. Will the librarian become a technical help-desk and lose the ability to relate to the whole person and his needs?

Bridging the 'digital divide'. Not everyone has a computer, an Internet connection, and the knowledge to use them efficiently. There are generation gaps, socio-econometric gaps,

geographic gaps and technology gaps which all need to be bridged.

The 'hybrid' library is more expensive to maintain than the conventional or digital library alone. Every library director knows that the public wants both worlds and that providing both is financially impossible. Furthermore, commercial publishers of databases and e-journals continuously raise prices with total disregard for library budgets.

Let us now put together Judaica and the digital library. What particular advantages do we find? And what unique problems do we foresee?

Potential of The Jewish Digital Library

I believe the digital library is particularly relevant to the area of Jewish information because it allows us to overcome two major problems: the wide dispersion of the source material, and the wide dispersion of the user community.

World-wide need for information sources can be easily provided. Not everyone is close to a major Judaica library. A major barrier to Jewish education and research can be overcome as more and more Jewish cultural resources become Internet accessible. For example, analysis of one month's log files at the Jewish National and University Library's Talmudic manuscripts digitization project shows access not only from major centers of Judaica research but also from Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Romania, Russia and South Africa. Clearly people who are not near major Judaica libraries with their collections of microfilms and facsimiles have now been empowered to access these materials.

Scattered information sources can be brought together.

The digital library allows us to create virtual collections, bringing together materials scattered to the four corners of the earth. Imagine the possibility of assembling in one virtual location all the geniza fragments, all materials relating to a Jewish community, the collected resources of many libraries.

I would like to illustrate this capability with two projects with which I have been associated at the Jewish National and University Library, projects which aim to do exactly this.

The Ketubbot Project

For over 2000 years Jewish law has required that every husband present his wife, at the time of their marriage, with a marriage contract or ketubba, guaranteeing the wife's financial rights in case of the husband's death or divorce. While the core text of the ketubba has changed very little, over generations various local customs found their way into the legal text of the ketubba. Their decoration often reflects the Jewish art of the locality and period. Ketubbot are therefore a rich source of material on Jewish history, customs, genealogy and art. The fact that, as legal documents, ketubbot always contain exact dates and place names also allows their absolute identification with specific communities and periods.

The JNUL holds the world's largest collection of ketubbot (over 1300) and embarked several years ago on a project to digitize them and make them accessible via the Internet as part of its David and Fella Shapell Digitization Project. Having completed its own collection the JNUL then invited other collections of ketubbot, both public and private to join in creating a virtual repository which we hope will ultimately contain all extant historic ketubbot. Many institutions have agreed to take part in this project and several additional large collections will be added this summer. Each ketubba is cataloged and displayed in several resolutions and its ownership is prominently displayed but the most important part of the project to my mind is the ability to bring together materials from a single place, from a number of libraries, museums and private collections around the world. The existence of many of these would never have been known were it not for this project. While some collections are famous, others are virtually unknown, even to researchers.

Treasury of Talmudic Manuscripts Project

A second example of the ability of the digital library to bring together scattered resources is the Treasury of Talmudic Manuscripts Project mentioned previously. The aim of this project, done in cooperation with the Hebrew University's Department of Talmud, is to bring together the most important manuscripts of the Talmudic literature, most of which are scattered in non-Jewish libraries throughout the world. With the permission of the participating institutions, this project is creating a repository of manuscripts with a common navigation tool which enables direct access by tractate and page. While many of these manuscripts have been issued in facsimile, these have always been quite limited editions available only in a small number of centers of Judaic studies. The digital treasury provides access to more manuscripts and to a much wider audience.

These two examples illustrate how the digital library can enhance both content and access, bringing together materials and distributing them worldwide. The Jewish digital library is not, however, without its pitfalls, technical and human.

Problems of the Jewish Digital Library

Standard multi-script capabilities required. Judaic bibliographic and textual systems require the ability to display not only multiple fonts but multiple scripts, some displaying left to right, some right to left, and occasionally bi-directional text on the same line. For many years we in Israel have heard from our colleagues abroad that they could not use our catalogs, CD-ROMs and other systems because they did not have the specific Israeli hardware or software which was required. Fortunately this problem is rapidly disappearing as Hebrew implementation is now virtually entirely software based, and as the Unicode standard character set is making Hebrew a standard part of international operating systems and browsers. There are still some problems of a period of transition but this problem seems to be well on its way to solution.

Inconsistency between Israeli and international bibliographic standards. This problem is also on its way to solution as most Israeli libraries have converted their bibliographic data from local standards to the international MARC standard. With the implementation of the Aleph-500 system in Israeli libraries in the coming two years, Israel should become the primary source of

authoritative Hebrew bibliographic data.

While the above two technical problems are close to solution, the third one is a deeper one:

Need for cooperation and coordination. Cooperation, and particularly the sharing of resources is an unnatural act, both for people and for institutions. We have a natural tendency to want to hold on to what is ours and not to share it with others. Our sages have worded this attitude thus:

'What's mine is mine; what's yours is yours,' this is average. Some say -- this is the quality of S'dom. (Pirke avot chapter 5)

While many acknowledge that this is a normal trait, some say that the desire not to share one's resources with others, is 'a quality of Sdom', the city of ultimate evil. It is only by sharing, cooperating and pooling resources that the greater good of the community at large is served. We have not done nearly enough in the area of cooperation and resource sharing, particularly at the international level.

We need to share not only bibliographic resources (now much easier in the 'virtual' world) but also human resources, perhaps in the form of a reference network. I would like to imagine the major active Judaica libraries of the world dividing responsibility for various areas of Judaica and working together to provide together an overall virtual Jewish national library. This will cost money, but I believe such cooperative endeavors would be attractive to foundations and other agencies, which provide funds for Jewish education and Judaica research.

Summary

Is the Jewish digital library a unique creation, or is it another Jewish elephant that we are looking at through our private Jewish framework?

I think that while the Jewish Digital Library may not be itself unique, it is an exceptional opportunity to address many of the unique challenges of the world of Jewish information.

I believe that while the digital information era is creating some new problems and challenges, it is also providing us with new tools and opportunities to resolve many of the older concerns we have faced until now. We see already emerging capabilities to address and alleviate many of our 'Jewish problems' and as we learn to utilize the potential of the new technologies, the world of Judaica information will become both richer and more accessible.