

Rosaline and Myer Feinstein Lecture Series, 2007

The Art and Science of Reference Work By Philip E. Miller

Allow me, at the outset, to express my thanks to the National Foundation for Jewish Culture for sponsoring the Rosaline and Myer Feinstein Memorial Lecture series at the annual conventions of the Association of Jewish Libraries. And I would also like to offer David Gilner, President of the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies (CARLJS) and my comrade-in-arms for than three decades, my sincerest thanks for having invited me to serve as the Feinstein Lecturer for 2007.

When I received the invitation to give this year's Feinstein Lecture, I was beset by many emotions. I felt tremendous pride in having achieved this pinnacle of professional success. I felt great humility in being included in the ranks of such previous lecturers as Herbert Zafren, Dina Abramowicz,, and Abraham Karp (aleyhem ha-shalom) and Elhanan Adler, Zachary Baker, and Bella Hass Weinberg (yebaddelu le-hayyim). And I was beset by immense dread – What in the world can I talk about?

My academic career began in Arabic studies, and the subject of the Cairo Genizah has long been very to my heart. But Dr. Menachem Schmelzer delighted us ten years ago with this very topic, and I certainly had nothing to add to his brilliant presentation. The scholarly lectures of Bella Hass Weinberg and Robert Singerman set a very high bar for anyone. Moreover, and in all honesty, I have pretty much ceased research at the academic level. Finally, my life and career have hardly been as colorful as Zachary Baker's, whose precious presentation last year was filled with and evoked just the right combination of nostalgia and humor.

So I consulted David Gilner, who counseled me, "Fayvel, just be Fayvel." I thought long and hard on this and eventually wrote a twenty-five page talk about "being Fayvel." But after more long and hard thought, I decided that while it might be entertaining, it was hardly worthy of being included in the ranks of previous Feinstein Lectures, and so I re-named the file and saved it to use at another time and place.

Last winter I posted on our Hebrew Union College librarians' Blog an unusual reference question I had received some thirty years ago. I also cross-posted it to our Association's electronic forum, Hasafran. I must say that it aroused a number of responses, more interesting than I ever imagined, and these responses became the subject of a subsequent entry on the Blog. So I decided to revisit it today as well as elaborate upon it. And I hope that at its end, you, my dear colleagues, will still recognize Fayvel in it.

As I was determining how to re-cast this lecture, I happened to notice a cook book among the

dozens my wife and I own whose title contained an interesting semantic twist. Perhaps some of you also know this classic from 1961 by Paula Peck entitled *The Art of Baking*. What is so unusual about this title? What distinguishes cooking from baking? How are baking and cooking similar, or, rather dissimilar? On the surface, one might think that are alike, but they really are not. In cooking, one takes ingredients and with imagination, flair, and technique, one whips them into a dish or a meal. In this case, cooking is an art.

But look at baking more closely. While decorating a cake is certainly an art, what it is that goes into make any baked good successful? It is the recipe, with its careful weights and measures and ordered list of directions. One cannot alter the measurements or the order of their blending without courting disaster. As a result, one can say that baking is definitely a science, where reproducible results are the sine qua non, and definitely more scientific than cooking, where creativity and even unpredictability reign.

What has this to do with library science, and more specifically, reference work? Consider for a moment, is reference work an art or a science? For that matter, is cataloging an art or a science? I think cataloging is easier to posit as a science because there is a fairly rigid set of rules and standards that need to be applied in order to catalog an item. Of course one can be colorful and even creative in the assignment of subject headings and make an argument for this aspect of cataloging as an art.

Let me not waste more time by posing further pros and cons of each and simply say that obviously elements of both art and science come into play. I do confess that I am rather out of touch with the curricula of library and information science instruction these days, but I do hope that the backbone courses of my day, reference sources in the humanities, and the social and natural sciences has not gone the way of the dinosaur. Of course the Internet may have obviated much of the material that we of an earlier generation had to master, but any librarian worth her or his salt still needs to know how to conduct a proper reference interview.

One can and should ask how does Judaic reference work differ from other kinds of reference work? For one thing, in many environments the knowledge of Hebrew or Yiddish (or some other “Jewish language”) may be necessary. Then the librarian needs to know what research tools there are and which are to be found in his or her work setting. I liken the knowing and mastering of such tools to be a science. The art in reference work comes, I believe, lies in the reference interview.

With this in mind, let us re-visit the reference interview I posting last November. Having been a librarian for near to forty years I have learned that most librarians who assist patrons with their reference questions have at least one or two memorable stories they enjoy sharing. Some are funny, some are poignant. They are the librarians’ version of “war stories.”

The incident I am about to relate occurred around 1976, when our branch of HUC-JIR was still on West 68th Street. One Monday morning I answered the telephone and was greeted by the voice of a young lad who spoke English at machine gun speed with a mild Yiddish inflection. This did not sound like the voice of a young person I would not have classified as “Modern Orthodox,” and I jumped to the conclusion that he must be from an “ultra-orthodox (Haredi)

background. He did not reply to my greeting or offer his name but asked point-blank,” What can you tell me about the *Sayfer Khenikh*?

It took me a moment to realize he was referring to the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, known in Hebrew as *Sefer Hanokh*. (In relating this story previously, many persons have jumped to the conclusion that the young man wanted information on the *Sefer ha-Hinukh*, that classic of thirteenth century Spain attributed to Aaron ha-Levi of Barcelona that deals with the mitzvot. As we will see in a moment, it could not be this book, which is well known in the Orthodox Jewish world.)

Now while the *Book of Enoch* was historically a “Jewish book” and at one time held to be holy by some Jews, as evidenced by its citation in the Christian Bible (Jude 1:14-15) and by fragments found at Qumran, it is today virtually unknown to Jews outside of a limited scholarly circle. Moreover, it is largely unknown today to mainstream or even Evangelical Christians in the United States. So I was curious as to how this young man came across it and why he was calling me.

I asked how he knew about this book, and he said that the previous Shabbos at the home of an acquaintance he came across a marvelous book called the *Sayfer Agudeh*. It took me a moment to decipher that he was referring to the classic *Sefer ha-Agadah*, compiled by Ravnitzky and Bialik, hardly something a student in a Haredi yeshiva would read!

He said the book contained many Medroshim he had never heard before, and that he was especially enthralled by some attributed to the Book of Enoch, and he wanted to know more about it.

He also said that he had called other Jewish libraries, but the librarians he had spoken to had said they had nothing to tell him.

I asked him if he was a student in a yeshiva and if he had a “*rebbe*” or “*mashgiah ruhani*.” He said yes to both.

I then instructed him to go to his “*rebbe*” or “*mashgiah ruhani*” and tell him that I would be willing to tell him (the young man) anything he wanted to know about the *Sayfer Khenikh* if and only if his “*rebbe*” or “*mashgiah ruhani*” explicitly gave me permission to do so.

Without so much as a good-bye, he hung up, and I doubted if I would hear from him again.

The following Friday morning, however, the telephone rang and it was the same young man calling back.

He said that he went to his “*rebbe*” and told him what he had asked me and what I had then instructed him to do, namely, ask the teacher or spiritual mentor’s permission for me to share with him what I knew about the *Book of Enoch*.

“My ‘*rebbe*’ told me to do three things: to thank you, to tell you that he says that you are *mensch*,

but, no, you may not tell me anything about the *Sayfer Khenikh*.”

He then wished me “*A Gitn Shabbos*” and hung up.

To date there has been only one comment posted, anonymously, if I thought somehow the rebbe HAD any idea what the *Book of Enoch* was. Well, I attended a Roman Catholic university in the early 1960s when the Legion of Decency still rated movies for Roman Catholics, and the priests I encountered knew all about the proscribed films even though they had not seen them. So it would not surprise me if the *rebbe* knew something about the Book of Enoch.

As I said earlier, I also took the liberty of posting the Blog to Hasafran, the electronic newsletter of the Association of Jewish Libraries. While the reaction from members was immediate, no one saw fit to enter a comment at the Blog’s site, but rather they sent me personal messages.

There were seven altogether. Six of them told me how wonderful the story was, and how inspiring. One colleague waxed so elegiac on my being a role model of professionalism that my ears burned. And, by the way, six of the seven comments came from individuals one would categorize as “Traditional,” if not Orthodox.

(Here I must interject that I thought I had saved these messages, but I fear they are “lost in cyberspace” as I could not find them after the hardware at my office was upgraded. Hence I am quoting from memory, hardly a trustworthy method to reply upon. So I apologize in advance if I state anyone’s position incorrectly.)

Yet all was not rosy. One colleague, Orthodox, librarian at a major day-school, and an individual of stature within the Association of Jewish Libraries, took me to task for censoring information. (I hasten to add that she made an excellent point, that there are no evil texts, only the evil use people put them to.) Censorship is a “hot button” in librarianship, and even suggesting someone is censorious is something not taken lightly.

She and I exchanged several e-mails in which she spelled out her feelings, which I certainly cannot fault. For her, perhaps the only thing that redeemed my not answering the young man’s initial question was the fact that he was a minor.

In retrospect, I will say that had the young man asked me about the *Sefer ha-Aggadah*, I think I would have had no problem in explaining who to him Bialik and Ravnitzky were and what the agenda behind the book was. But this is very different from what he did ask.

Moreover if an adult had asked the same question about the Book of Enoch, then I might have asked if the person knew what the *Sefarim Hitsoniyim* (Apocryphal Books) were and if they knew Rabbi Akiba’s admonition in Mishnah *Sanhedrin*. And if s/he said yes, then I would proceed from there.

In all fairness to my interlocutor, I asked if her library had the *Book of Enoch* in either Hebrew or English, and she replied immediately that it had both. One might be inclined to ask if anyone every referred to either of them, but you and I already knew the answer, libraries are places where books and the knowledge contained therein are collected so that they or it will be available

when the occasion arises. It ought not to concern us how often a book circulates, but, rather, is it available for the user, whoever and whenever that might be.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that at least one person at the College maliciously asked why I simply did not answer the young man's question directly about the *Book of Enoch* and possibly destroy the young man's beliefs. As I said to this person and to my Orthodox interlocutor, "I may be '*Hote*' [het-tet-alef], but I am not *Mahati*." If I sin, it is my business. But I will not be a willing party to someone else's falling prey to sin.

Finally what sort of obligation do I have, in my profession and as a Jew, not to censor but yet to protect? One of the first things I learned in Hebrew School over fifty years ago was the statement: *Kol Yisrael 'arevin zeh be-zeh*." Jews are responsible for one another. It has not ceased to be a guiding principle.

This morning Professor Bella Hass Weinberg and I were discussing this lecture and she reminded me of another aspect of reference, namely, the serendipitous. How often has it happened to any of us that something we had read only recently comes into play in reference work. What is "serendipity"? It is fortuitous coincidence that occurs without rhyme or reason. It seems to be random, and never fails to inspire awe and wonder. Yet reflecting further upon our conversation, I remembered "*besbert*," that is, something destined, where a "hidden hand" seems to be guiding matters.

So now I would like to modify what I said earlier about art versus science and add not only serendipity, but a metaphysical element. Are we destined to encounter a specific query and is it our fate to be the person who has the knowledge unique to the query?

To exemplify what I mean, allow me to regale you with my all-time favorite war story from the reference desk. This occurred perhaps fifteen or twenty years ago. A young man called and told me that he was engaged to be married. I congratulated him and asked what I could do for him. He told me that his fiancée and he were to be married by her rabbi, who was Conservative. He said he was raised Orthodox in Jersey City, that his late mother had been born and raised Roman Catholic but converted to Judaism when she married, her conversion being under the direction of an Orthodox rabbi.

His having been raised accordingly in the bosom of an Orthodox congregation, it was clear that he was a Jew according to Jewish law. Yet the Conservative rabbi, desiring to err on the side of caution, was insisting on documentary proof of his mother's conversion. I asked him the name of his parents' rabbi and the name of the congregation. He went on to say that his parents were dead, so there was no one he could ask. In addition, this congregation was more a store-front shtiebel than a large fancy edifice, and that it was long gone, the result of progress in the name of urban renewal.

I told him that I really did not have much data to go on, and that the sad truth was that often the records of congregations, especially small ones, got lost or discarded.

He sighed and said that this was what the other librarians had said. I asked which librarians. He

answered that he had already called Yeshiva University and The Jewish Theological Seminary. I diplomatically asked why he thought I might have an answer when my learned colleagues did not. His voice breaking, he said that he was just trying to cover all the bases, but if he could not prove his Jewishness, he would have to study with this rabbi for six months to a year to undergo a formal conversion, thus delaying the wedding.

My heart went out to him, but what could I do? Then out of nowhere came an inspired thought. I asked where he was born, and he replied in Jersey City. I told him that in the 1950s there was one Mohel who was very active in Essex and Hudson counties. The one time I met him, when he was already a very old man and the rabbi emeritus of his congregation, he showed me his *Pinkasim*. He took immense pride in the fact that he had performed the holy rite upon thousands of boys, all duly recorded in his dozens of small notebooks, his *Pinkasim*.

I also told this young man that I once knew a man in Essex County who had married a non-Jewish woman and that this Mohel had circumcised her son. How did I know this? The father once brought me the certificate which was entirely in Hebrew. "I've had this forever in my safety deposit box. What is it?" I glanced at it and saw it was clearly for his son's circumcision. But what I especially remarked was that at the very bottom, in very small letters were the words, "*ger katan tserikh tevilah*." This child of a non-Jewish mother had been entered into the Covenant of Abraham and needed only to be taken to a *mikveh* to be considered Jewish. I also said that when the rabbi showed me his *Pinkasim*, I noted he used a specific symbol to denote children born of non-Jewish mothers.

The young man was elated! Where could he find this rabbi? With great sadness I informed him that this rabbi had died some time ago – at which the young man burst into tears. But, I hurriedly added, these little registers might still be at the synagogue. I gave him the current rabbi's name and telephone number and wished him good luck.

Two days later, the young man called back to thank me profusely. Not only were the notebooks still at the synagogue, the rabbi generously took the time to search for any record of this young man. As it turned out, his name was clearly written in one of the notebooks, and with no designation that his mother was a non-Jew. The Orthodox rabbi immediately faxed the page to the Conservative rabbi, who declared "*ha-kol sharir ve-kayyam*." The young man was clearly "kosher" and a wedding without any impediment could take place as anticipated.

I certainly do not relate this story in order to disparage my colleagues at other institutions who could not answer this young man's question, God forbid! But as the Arabic proverb has it, "The one who lives long hears much." It may simply have been my good fortune to have had all the pieces that fit together to complete the puzzle. I was at the right place and at the right time. But what I want to allude to is that perhaps it was this young man's destiny to meet me and my fate to be able to answer what no one else could. Such is "*bashert*."

And I do not tell these tales to aggrandize myself. Rather, let them be exemplary tales. I am a librarian, no different from any of you. Each of us has her or his strengths and weaknesses; each of us has a store of knowledge and experience. Generically we may appear the same, but each of

us is unique.

I hope you see what I mean by the art and science of reference work, as well, perhaps, as the “hidden hand” of *bashert*. Each of us has that bit of scientist and artist in us. And each of us has a destiny and fate. In conclusion, I ask you to find the scientist and artist within you and to apply it to your work. Moreover, one never knows where or when one might serendipitously pick up a bit of information that will be. File it all away for that one day when your destiny will call on you to use it! And do write down and save your war stories. Not only will you look back one day with satisfaction upon them, you will find your colleagues will want to hear them. For as similar as they may be on the surface, there are always profound and unique instructive aspects.

I thank you for your attention.

Afterword

As a result of this lecture, archivists in New Jersey are actively seeking these *Pinkasim* in order that they be preserved in an appropriate manner for their historical value.