

Struggle & Triumph:

The Lubavitcher Library is not only a collection, but a legacy

by Hallie Cantor

This article is the sixth in an ongoing series about libraries in the NYMA area.

Acquisitions, Yeshiva University

The Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad, housed at the Lubavitch World Headquarters in Brooklyn, is, in all respects, a world-class phenomenon. Numbering over 200,000 Hebrew volumes, the collection is known for its rare books, over 2,000 manuscripts, and approximately 100,000 letters and documents from all seven Chabad Rebbes.

The collection traces its venerable history to czarist Russia and the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who accumulated a few hundred books and manuscripts. But it was the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, who actively expanded the collection in 1928, after fleeing Russia. From his new residence in Riga, Latvia, he had his followers in Israel and the U.S. amass books, asked authors and publishers to donate copies, and corresponded with book dealers in Yemen, Australia, Africa, France, and Italy.

Over the decades, the library has survived fires, confiscations, and the turbulent years of the Lubavitcher dynasty. During the Nazi occupation a large portion of the collection was lost. R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn himself narrowly escaped and emigrated to the U.S., in 1940. Years later, the collection reappeared in Warsaw, and in 1978 was returned to Chabad headquarters under the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, *zal*.

PUBLIC VIEWING

The library is now located at 770 Eastern Parkway. Presiding is Rabbi Sholom Dovber Levin, who was appointed head librarian in 1977 and instructed the following year to begin cataloging the collection, a task that took eleven years. In 1988 a special computer program was written in Hebrew, enabling a search according to title, author, subject, year and place of publication, key word and shelf location.

Like his forebears, the Rebbe had called for donations — not only holy but secular, since he maintained that these

too can enhance service to G-d. As a result, this has made for an eclectic collection. Clicking on *natu*, for example, will summon up not only *Natural and the Supernatural Jew*, but *Nature Conservancy!* The catalog is accessible on the Web, at library.chabad.org. But it remains incomplete as it lists only printed books in English or in the Hebrew alphabet.

“We’re still in the middle of cataloging books in other languages,” assistant Efraim Keller explained. “Someone is working on the German books right now.” Others in Persian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, etc. await cataloging and archiving.

Some 12,000 books remain behind in Russia. However, these titles can be accessed over the computer. Wherever the Hebrew letters *kuf*, *lamed* appear under a location code, “that means that this book is located in Russia,” Efraim explained. “We don’t have them here, but we have a handwritten catalog of everything that is there.”

His brother Rabbi Yosef Keller added, “Our library is unique for having the original Russian prints,” referring to the Tzarist attempt to crack down on Lubavitcher presses.

RESEARCH MATERIAL

Although most of the letters, manuscripts, and incunabula are stored in closed stacks, they are available for viewing in a public reading room, an airy floor that attracts researchers from all over the world. In addition to Tanach, Talmud, and *Halachah*, law, publications by the various Chabad leaders line the shelves, for perusal. Writers and scholars come by, needing to obtain information or view a rare, 15th century text.

“We get around ten researchers a week,” says Efraim. “But people come for other reasons, too.” He held up a piece of sheet music. Earlier that day a cantor had come in, looking for a certain *niggun*, melody.

Although the library is controlled by Merkos, the Lubavitcher publishing house, it receives materials from everywhere. All are donated, and continually sent in. Material that arrived from 1988 to 1994 bears a special stamp: *Mivtsa Sefarim: Shenat Hakhel*, 5748, commemorating the year (1988) the Rebbe’s library campaign began.

EXHIBITION HALL

The second wing of the library, the Exhibition Hall, is a museum of Chabad history. Some exhibits display texts and artifacts of Chabad Rebbes, such as special editions of the *Tanya* and other major works. Some celebrate Chabad’s historic commitment to outreach. The Rebbe’s campaigns of sending emissaries all over the world and building “Chabad Houses” have resulted in lay literature and crafts devoted to Jewish themes — Sabbath, holidays, and “We Want *Moshiach* Now” slogans.

While the “770” library is for research and reference only, a lending library, named Levi Yitzchok and located around the corner, services the general Jewish community. The third and newest annex, Heichal Menachem, located in Borough Park, Brooklyn, services the highly visible Chassidic population with all kinds of Chassidic works — Breslav, Gerer, etc. Chabad views the dissemination of Chassidus as a stepping stone to the messianic era.

Indeed, the Lubavitcher library is not just a testament to the group’s resilience, but to a long term vision bearing fruit. ♣

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Genealogy and Jews at Spring 1999 Conference

by Elisheva Schwartz

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Interest in genealogy in the Jewish community has grown by leaps and bounds in the last few years, and Judaica librarians are often called upon to provide guidance to patrons interested in tracing their roots. Those of us fortunate enough to attend "Jewish Genealogical Resources for Librarians," held Wednesday, May 12, at the 92nd Street Y, walked away with a wealth of information to use in our future research.

The first presentation, by Steven Siegel, Director and Archivist, Buttenweiser Library, 92nd Street YM-YWHA, was a bibliographic overview, entitled "Books, Microforms, CD-ROMs and Websites for Genealogical and Historical Research." Not only was this relevant for librarians working with genealogists, but it was useful for research in twentieth century Jewish history in general, and Holocaust history in particular. Attendees came away with a good grasp of the available literature, as well as several concise and focused bibliographies.

Miriam Weiner, certified genealogist and Head of the Routes to Roots Foundation, presented an entertaining and informative account of her work in "Jewish Roots in Ukraine, Moldova, and Poland: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories." Along the way we learned about the wealth of archival information still available in the "old country," the idiosyncracies of working with a post-Soviet bureaucracy, and the heroic efforts made by individual archivists across Eastern Europe to preserve materials and make them available to researchers. We even heard about the state of indoor plumbing in certain locales!

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Technology: The (Jewish) Star at Fall Workshop

by Orli Laudon Librarian, Torah Academy of Bergen County,
President, AJL-New Jersey Chapter

Is the future of Judaism becoming totally wired? Those who attended the fall workshop might agree. AJL-NYMA's "Technological Application for Today's Libraries," held at Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA) and organized by Naomi Steinberger, drew a packed audience of librarians and wannabe web surfers.

Sara Spiegel, of the University of Pennsylvania, began the session with an introduction to online Judaica acquisition resources on the Internet. Her handout, which included URLs of Jewish search engines, Judaica publishers, and foreign vendors, was especially useful for locating out of print books or for bargain hunting.

Edith Lubetski, of Stern College, explored Bible studies on the Internet, in particular sites for students, teachers, and academics. Her excellent handout of Bible websites enabled librarians to help students locate different translations of the Bible, or to find the latest scholarly research.

Amy Helfman, of Hebrew Union College, gave an amusing talk about improving communications between libraries and webmasters. She proved herself quite a mistress of the web by showing pages she created, as well as her favorite sites. Included in her lecture were valuable tips on handling the vast electronic world as well as troubleshooting problems.

During the final part of the program, the guests were treated to a sampling of multimedia CD-ROMs available at the JTS library. Librarians Yisrael Dubitsky and Batya Kaplan, of the Jewish Theological Seminary, presented ORT'S "Navigating the Bible," in which were heard the text of Torah and Haftarat, with punctuation and cantillation notes. Among its other features was the option of either simultaneous transliteration or translation and commentary from Aryeh Kaplan's *Living Torah*.

All in all, the event left attendees not only fascinated but appreciative of Judaica's new technology!✧