

**How to Win “Friends” & Influence Libraries**

**Also, Iraq gets a “thumbs down” @ Reference Workshop**

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Photos by **J.D. ARDEN**

YouTube or shul next door – today “friends” are found (pun intended) virtually anywhere. NYMA’s Reference Workshop, held Monday, Feb. 11, at the Center for Jewish History, explored two communities -- one vibrant, the other vanished.

**Group Think**

“How many work at Strand after this?”

**Akiva Weisenger** – founder of a Facebook Jewish discussion group – mused openly on a back-up plan, in case the Facebook thing doesn’t work out monetarily. Which it hasn’t. But the rewards have been priceless.

His 20,000-member-strong Facebook group, “G-d Save Us from Your Opinions: A Place for a Serious Discussion of Judaism,” is described as a “smart and talented group of people” who meet online to discuss issues within the Jewish communities. Why was it a success?

This may have a lot to do with Akiva himself. A lover of ideas, he holds a Masters in Jewish philosophy. Akiva created a blog for discussion, eliciting the response: “Who *is* this *shmo*?” But eventually he attracted a small, dedicated group that simply grew.

The group has solid guidelines:

- Don’t be a jerk.
- If you did, expect a warning. Second time, you’re out.
- Respect different views.

Rule #3 is crucial, given the number of Jews of every stripe. Akiva views his site as neither a gathering of elites nor an echo chamber – rather, a place to grow. An egalitarian spirit prevails.

“No men’s voices drowning out women’s voices,” he stressed.

Also crucial is a frame of reference for presenting opinions. What is his?

“Halacha is binding on all Jews,” he answered. No one can deny Jewish law. Nor can anyone try to condemn commentators deemed politically incorrect today. An example is Rabbi Eliezer, the medieval German Talmudist – aka “Rabbi Eliezer ha-Misogynist” for his stance on women, i.e. their roles and learning.

“Do we ignore him?” Akiva asked. “Or reinterpret him?”

Surely we can’t kick Rabbi Eliezer to the curb, nor censor any eminent figure just because that era is now viewed as painful or offensive. Each generation learns from the previous, and, Akiva added, “All learn from each other.”

Jewish knowledge rests upon the bedrock of Torah. Readers must be challenged but admit to standing upon the shoulders of giants.

So why do people join?

His site attracts, passionate, rugged individualists – people could neither fit into any mold nor find the right congregation that addressed their intellectual needs. Rather, they



**“DON’T BE A JERK.” Akiva Weisenger gives guidelines on a Facebook group.**

approach a subject with a balanced view.

His demographic is eager to give and receive knowledge, which requires a certain level of scholarship or familiarity with Jewish texts. Members must enter a forum armed with sources to back up arguments. No base assumptions.

Halachic questions are both fun and provocative. Akiva conducts surveys to get the flavor of viewpoints. Today there is not one ideology, rather a whole spectrum.

So how can a library copy him and create its own “community”?

- Be accountable. Always listen to your audience, to gain rapport.
- Create a framework with which to determine who really belongs there or who violates your group’s principles.
- At the same time, give posters space to feel free and step out.
- Validate. Realize that their arguments may have different frames of reference.

Finally, how to lead a community?

Akiva answered, “You don’t lead. You build.” You merely start the foundation – not just letting people speak but express themselves.

What are social media’s special challenges for libraries? Basically, the overload of information, as well as its mode of digestion.

“*Bekiyus* is dead,” Akiva said, meaning expertise. Knowledge is no longer a matter of committing to memory, as in the days of Rabbi Eliezer ha-Misogynist. Today practically everything is available, thanks to Google and Judaica search engines. Everyone has access to texts. However, information overload has resulted in a crisis of authority, where one opinion may seem as valid as the other.

Moreover, accessibility is not the same as knowledge. “Just because you can look up something doesn’t mean you can claim authority,” Akiva insists. “You can argue, but you had better know your sources, know the context, and really understand it.”

What are the special lessons for our audience?

“Reference librarians can’t assume that information is value positive,” Akiva answered. “We have to know how and what to access, and make sure it is authentic and correct.”

Crowdsourcing has taken the place of Rabbi Akiva’s 60,000 students, each an expert on a

different Talmudic text. Nowadays 60,000 different “friends” may offer or refute views.

“The library is a haven of pluralism,” Akiva exclaimed. “It is the institution free and available to all people of all different ideas.” Where else can we find shelves with books next to each other, each from a different thinker?

The bricks-and-mortar library, far from being on life support, can re-emerge as a place of communal research, a *beit midrash*, study hall, where learning is conducted *le’shma*, for its own sake. It is a place to stimulate discussion – not just a place to get books or data, but a place to “hang out,” and present or receive ideas.

### Precious Legacy

The next speaker, **Carole Basri**, possesses an impressive set of credentials: Visiting Professor, Peking University School of Transnational Law; President, Corporate Lawyering Group LLC; Visiting Professor, Pericles Law School, Moscow, Russia; Chief Advisor to the Association of Corporate Counsel Certification Program.

Above all, she is a granddaughter fighting for her legacy.

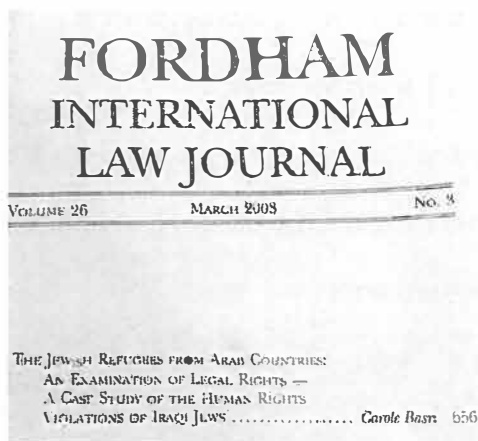


**LOVING TRIBUTE – Carole Basri’s documentary.**

In May 2003, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, over 2,700 Jewish books and tens of thousands of documents, records, and religious artifacts were discovered by a U.S. Army team in the flooded basement of the Iraqi intelligence headquarters. Some of these items, including Torah Scrolls, provided valuable insights into a long history.

Carole’s presentation included footage of her documentary about her grandfather. The Jews of

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**(Reference workshop, cont'd)**

Iraq – over 150,000 a century ago – were a cosmopolitan and prosperous minority. All this came to an end in 1941, and a pro-Nazi uprising, *Farhud* – by Muslim youth resulting in anti-Jewish violence and legislature.

Following the establishment of Israel, thousands of Jews were driven out of Arab lands. In 1952 Iraqi Jews were expropriated; they fled to the new state, where they were forced to dwell in refugee camps. Some remained in Israel while others immigrated to the U.S., among them Carole’s grandfather.

During the years of terror, he had opened a Jewish school in Baghdad. It was this school building that later became Iraqi intelligence headquarters – and where the artifacts were discovered. Among them was a *siddur*, which somehow ended up in a bookdealer’s hands, then Carole’s, at a dinner honoring her grandfather. In July 2003 she went to Baghdad, where she found the rest of the materials.

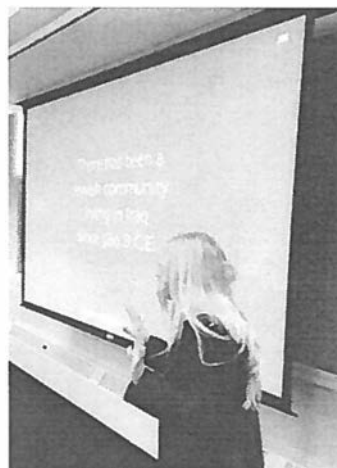
Under an agreement made in August 2003 between the Coalition Authority and the National Archives and Records Administration, the artifacts were brought here to be preserved, cataloged, and digitized – and for several years exhibited in various cities. (The Iraqi Jewish Archive was covered at length in *NYMA News*, Spring-Summer 2015.) However, the agreement was Congressionally amended, allowing for the return of any Jewish artifacts made on or before 1990 to their original countries -- even those that had engaged in the ethnic cleansing!

“There is no reason for the artifacts to go back,” Carole insisted, as she described her efforts to

retrieve them. Holding up her lengthy defensive document published in the *Fordham International Law Journal*, she explained that she could not use the phrase “ethnic cleansing” – instead, “human rights violation.” The document contained 350 footnotes, each of which had been looked over by 13 professors.

“Iraqi Jewish history is being destroyed,” she exclaimed. The new government has been uncooperative toward those abroad trying to reclaim their property. And Iraqi Jews can’t simply return to that part of the world.

“Where are they going to go?” Carole argued. “Egypt? Yemen? Those places are hellholes. They tried to get rid of us. Why go back to a nation that wanted to get rid of us?”



**CAROLE BASRI: “Librarians are custodians of truth. Efforts by our enemies are underway to destroy history, just as with the Temple Mount. We must be knowledgeable.”**

The issue, then, is not only miscarriage of justice, but basic human right – to a heritage, its preservation and survival.

This includes the help of librarians. “Librarians are custodians of truth,” Carole stated. “Efforts by our enemies are underway to destroy history, just as with the Temple Mount. We must be knowledgeable.”

The workshop ended with a tour, given by host **J.D. Arden**, of the Center for Jewish History. For such a great afternoon he, along with reference workshop co-host **Deborah Schranz**, deserve a lot of “like” buttons. ■

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