

NYMA NEWS

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Digital Legacy

Storage & Preservation @ Fall Conference

By HALLIE CANTOR
ACQUISITIONS, YESHIVA UNIVERSITY
Photos by TINA WEISS

"This is rather timely."

NYMA president **Tina Weiss** opened the Fall Conference with possibly the understatement of the year. Held Thurs., Dec. 6, at Temple Emanu-El — just over a month after Hurricane Sandy — "Synagogue Archives from Various Viewpoints" covered the role and methods of archival development and preservation, chiefly through digitization. The focus — old but still active local synagogues, many with massive documentation — reflected the change and development of their membership.

Piles & Files

In "155 Years in the Making: Establishing an Archive for Congregation Talmud Talmud Adereth El," **Katie Ehrlich** — project archivist for the **American Sephardi Federation**; M.A. in Archives and Public History, NYU — began with the caveat that "this project is still in the proposal stage and requires outside funding to be fully realized." Nevertheless, her PowerPoint showed how much has been achieved.

Founded by Prussian immigrants in 1857, Congregation Adereth El, located in the same building on East 29th Street since 1864, is the oldest synagogue in continuous existence at one location in New York City. Currently run by Rabbi Gideon Shloush, it services young Orthodox professionals in Manhattan's Murray Hill.

When initially asked to compile an archive, Ms. Ehrlich had to roll up her

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Coming Together

New York City has been filled with wonderful programs related to Judaica holdings over the past few months. From the recent exhibits in person and online; to collaborative digitization projects; to museum exhibitions dedicated to library collections, the metropolitan area has been culturally enriched. At NYMA we were fortunate to be treated to a tour of the *People of the Book* exhibit at Columbia, in addition to the Fall Conference, which highlighted synagogue archive projects.

All of the amazing programs in the New York area stands in stark contrast to the devastation felt a few short months ago. As we learned at the Fall Conference, water is destructive — the storm of late October paralyzed the city and its environs. Photographs and stories of the destruction of homes, community centers, schools, and houses of worship only tell part of the story. In light of the disaster, if there are any institutions that are still in need of materials to rebuild libraries, please contact us and we can work together.

At the AJL Midwinter Meeting, we have learned of the 2012 Sydney Taylor Book Award recipients, and we look forward to the June 2013 AJL National Conference, to be held in Houston. Stay tuned for emails and website updates with info on our upcoming events this spring in the New York area.

As always, if you would like to get more involved in NYMA activities or would like to suggest potential programming or speakers, kindly be in touch. With best wishes to all,

Tina Weiss,
President, AJL-NYMA

Reaching the Palace

Jewish Books Find a Home

by DAVID LEVY, Librarian, Touro College

Luis Borges once remarked, "I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of palace like library." My life is dedicated to living in that palace, or at least preparing myself — admittance into various chambers where angels discourse on various topics to delight the mind, where admission is dependent on passwords to angelic gatekeepers, testifying to the knowledge gained down in this world.

Further might we all strive to turn our lives into a song, where like Rabbi Judah Halevi we can state: "My pen is my harp and my lyre; my library is my garden and my orchard." I value my personal library collection more than all the gold and gems on earth because it serves as a link to incorporeal, eternal truths.

My books are as much a part of me as my arms and legs. While my arms and legs move me around in this world, my Torah library carries me to higher spheres. My hope is that library patrons will come to cherish not only Jewish books but their beautiful ideas. As the Rambam, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, states: A book is a key that can open the gates to the doors of the seven palaces in heaven, where the soul will be refreshed by fountains of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, and ushered into chambers of where angels lecture on wonderful topics such as the Divine attributes.

The Rambam likens holy books to jewels, while he himself dove down to the bottom of the sea and brought these up. In many a medieval title page, books are similarly likened. A collection can make a person unique by testifying to his or her values and loves. Yet true love must be caught up in something eternal, and the ideas by which they urge us all to strive to live our moral lives testify to that limitless love in a limitless Deity.

Books are the chariot by which love and fear of G-d can be made to grow. What is in the Gemara can lift us a little bit above earth and a little closer to heaven. That is why the ark is in front of us as we pray in the synagogue. It reminds us not only of what He asks of us, but reminds us how to fly toward Heaven, what it is we can achieve, and how holy we can become.

Final Chapter

It has been said that when one closes a chapter in the book of his or her life, another opens. Therefore once the book of my life has been written, I intend to bequeath my

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sleeves, sift through a mountain of material, and determine what among over a century of history would be worth archiving. She presented the steps and components for undertaking such a project:

- * Background research
- * Records survey
- * Arrangement
- * Congregant survey
- * Oral history
- * Outside Archival Research
- * Costs
- * Other recommendations
- * Presentation to the Board of Trustees.

Each component had its own subcomponents. During her background research, Ms. Ehrlich had to decide the following:

- * What records should a synagogue archive contain?
- * Which local congregations maintain their own archives?
- * What supplies are required to properly maintain a synagogue archive?
- * What other recommendations can be made?



KATIE EHRLICH: "Show money well spent."

In addition to foraging, like Indiana Jones, through the women's section filled with boxes and cabinets of stashed away documents, Ms. Ehrlich devised a survey which she mailed to congregations in order to supply additional information and fill in the gaps. This involved locating congregants old and able enough to remember the details.

Congregant surveys included dates of membership and the types of involvement in

the synagogue. Materials included virtually everything in print — bound volumes, event fliers, financial or mortgage statements, letters, memos, minutes, newsletters (prior to 1996), and photographs. Materials were dated, quantity and quality determined. She solicited donations among congregants willing to part with cherished mementos.

Floppy discs and back-ups — nowadays relics in themselves — showed some of the frustrations of retrieval off of old, outmoded technology. Hard copy also had to be created, along with the digital.

Decisions on what to keep depended not only on the value but the condition of the items. At times Ms. Ehrlich struck gold: memo books and registers in their original German. The changing language of synagogue service — later Yiddish, finally English — revealed a major cultural shift.

Documentation was scattered, but eventually arranged according to content: governance, properties, membership, fundraising, personnel, sermons, educational events and programming, publications, oral histories, electronic records, and press clippings. Piecing everything together required outside archival research as well: Ms. Ehrlich contacted *The Jewish Messenger*, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites; NYPL/MCNY photos; *American Jewish Yearbook*; *Jewish Communal Register of New York City, 1917-1918*; and Philip Cowen's *Memoirs of an American Jew*.

The best source came straight from the mouth: Sidney Kleiman, Adereth El's first American-born rabbi and currently Rabbi Emeritus. Rabbi Kleiman, who recently turned 100 (till 120!) provided ample material thanks to the *shul* history he had compiled back in 1957. Other than the use of a hearing aid, the rabbi seemed little hampered by age. He spoke vividly of his achievements, both in the rabbinate and his beloved synagogue, where in 1939 he was installed. (Ms. Ehrlich herself had a special connection to the synagogue: her great-grandfather was a member.)

In addition to shelving and digital tools, costs involved translation of old documents

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(Conference, Cont'd from pg. 7)

into English and simple retention of records. Publicizing — making the materials known and available — depended on what kind of readership might be interested, such as a younger congregant or a researcher wanting to know what was served at a sisterhood tea 70 years ago.

At last, the presentation. Once the documentation was done, Ms. Ehrlich had to appear before the board with a convincing argument as to why such documentation is necessary or useful for posterity. This she achieved by cutting the jargon and getting straight to the point — presenting the urgency of preservation, addressing the needs of a diverse group, showing the long-term benefit of digitization and money well spent. It remains to be seen whether this project fully comes to fruition.

2 Make 1

The next conference topic, "Early New York Synagogue Archives: A Digitization Project," involved not one but two speakers, both two halves of a whole. **Susan Malbin** — Director of Library and Archives, **American Jewish Historical Society** — and **Naomi Steinberger** — Director of Library Services, **The Jewish Theological Seminary of America** — discussed their collaborative efforts in preserving an important part of American-Jewish history. (The **Center for Jewish History** was also involved.)

Research of early New York synagogues involved digitization of some 8,000 archival documents for both JTSA and the American Jewish Historical Society. By making these documents available, both institutions strove to bring awareness of historical resources.

Pooling of resources involved the creation of a joint portal, whereby the patron would have a unified source among all the New York synagogues. Collaborative work meant a shared workflow, and the same metadata and finding aids. Like Ms. Ehrlich (and Indiana Jones), Dr. Malbin and Ms. Steinberger donned archaeologists' hats and dug through what seemed like tombs of documents and artifacts, judging each one for quality and historical value. The same

standards applied: for example, crumbling items were turned down by both institutions. Tombs, interestingly, took on special significance here, as cemetery documents and facsimiles of old gravestones were studied. Indeed, the 19th century synagogues talk.

A photographic "tour" of prominent synagogues revealed not only the types of items digitally preserved, but an entire past. Examples included cash books from Kane Street Synagogue or minutes and membership receipts. Another synagogue, Anshe Chesed, kept lists of its board of directors. Congregation B'nai Jeshurun provided a virtual treasure chest: charter, cemetery documents, death reports, legal documents, *ketuboth* (marriage contracts) — the whole gamut of not only the inner lives of synagogue members but of the Jewish life cycle.

Young Israel, a network of Orthodox synagogues, provided ample material of the 1920s, and Mill Street retained the original building plans. Eldridge Street Synagogue, in the Lower East Side, had account books as well as *aliya* lists — those who emigrated to Palestine and, after 1948, Israel.

The end results displayed the fruits of joint labor. The hyperlink to the Early New York Synagogue Archives can be found at <http://synagogues.cjh.org>.

Queen of Spade Digging

Ledgers. Journals. Dinners. Events, even menus, reveal much between the lines. And all this requires a special kind of work. In the final segment "Place of Gathering: Synagogue Archives," **Shulamith Z. Berger** — Curator of Special Collections, **Mendel Gottesman Library**, Yeshiva University — described the nature of this work and of the different hats an archivist might wear.

While some archivists play Indiana Jones, Ms. Berger, in her view, was more Sam Spade. Archiving, she said, is "detective work." Considering herself "a gumshoe," she has had to track down items and determine forensic evidence. Although, to be sure, there is the usual task of finding aids and databases in all of YU archives, identification of materials is not enough: the compiler must make sense of everything.

In her work Ms. Berger rounds up the usual suspects: financial records, for example, determine how much was spent among congregations. The "Holy Grail" (forgive the metaphor, she said) is the synagogue minutes, which reveal much about the internal workings of the synagogue, giving the flavor of synagogue life. Samples of YU archives include the Koenigsberg collection, which contains personal papers and bulletins.

How does YU get such materials? Some, ironically, through synagogue closings. Dead men may tell no tales, but non-active synagogues may leave behind crucial information. Yet the living get defensive about giving away these materials, and worry: is too much revealed? Do deep, dark secrets lurk within faded jubilee journals or invitations to Israeli folk dancing night? In Jewish fashion, Ms. Berger answered a question with a question — and a deeper, darker secret: *Why would anyone really care?*

Ms. Berger handed out a bibliography of sources for synagogue history — directories, books, registers — to facilitate the search. Before undertaking the creation of an archive, historical need must be analyzed. Does the synagogue even have a rich enough history? Is it a cultural institution unto itself, a representation of American Jewish life, besides a place to pray?

Digitization involved the same fishing expeditions through basements and cellars. The watery metaphor is particularly painful: as the recent storm has shown, flooding can wipe out an entire collection. Like Ms. Ehrlich, Ms. Berger faced technological chal-

lenges, such as outdated machinery. Like Dr. Malbin and Ms. Steinberger, she considered websites that allowed multiple access and connection to other institutions for joint projects and the sharing of resources.

As a university archivist, Ms. Berger had to debate the placement of synagogue collections within the context of a university archive. How useful might a Chinese auction brochure be to a researcher? Or might someone — say, Ms. Ehrlich — ever wonder what committee her great-grandfather chaired?

"It ain't just nostalgia," Ms. Berger said. Preservation takes on a role long after the synagogue or congregation is gone. These items leave behind a message: *We were here. We were once part of New York life.* This message alone is vital for historians.

Documents are preserved for many reasons — sentimental, academic, even legal. Value is subjective, depending on the needs of the patron or the viewer. Therefore it is up to the librarian to step aside, maintain objective distance, and simply be there to provide services to individuals and institutions — helping them to "live on" in cyberspace, long after the actual buildings, and their builders, have vanished.

In light of recent events, when synagogue collections, and synagogues, have been literally swept away, the need for archival storage — as a form of insurance — has become ever more crucial. A big *yasher koach* to Tina Weiss, organizer; **Liza Stabler**, hostess extraordinaire; and to four amazing speakers, who helped to affirm the librarian's role in preservation.



DIGITIZED: Speakers (L to R) SHULAMITH BERGER, SUSAN MALBIM, and NAOMI STEINBERGER.