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MISZELLE

**Heidi G. Lerner**

## **Digital Humanities and Jewish Studies: a View from the U.S.**

### **Introduction**

A review of digital activity related to Jewish Studies in the United States since the early 1990s would demonstrate that the intersection of information technology and Jewish Studies is well established and evolving. The evolution of what is called Digital Humanities (DH) has not had such a clear or straight trajectory. Services and tools such as mailing-lists, academic portals, large digital libraries and archival digitization projects were the dominant elements most Jewish Studies scholars thought of when imagining or describing digital Jewish Studies. These have been well documented in numerous articles, newsletters, and the blogosphere. But scholars are now learning that as the numbers of digital tools and media increase, and Jewish Studies faculty and researchers partner with information technologists, the possibilities for large research questions and discourse that define the scholarly experience can grow exponentially.

### **Survey**

To take a closer look at how this community currently thinks about DH, the author sent out a brief survey via two listservs.<sup>1</sup> Among the questions asked were what kinds of projects they are developing or have previously developed and what resources and tools they are using. The goal of the survey was to gauge how interested members of those listservs are in initiating DH projects, research or classroom-based activities. The number of responses was small (26) but enough to open the door to answer these questions. More than half of the participants said that they had not initiated, created or participated in a DH project for research or for teaching purposes. When asked how strong their understanding of DH and its use was, almost half of the respondents put themselves in the middle of the spectrum. More than 80 percent felt that the best place to get DH instruction and support were workshops and tutorials. Among tools used, the largest by far were content management software, authoring, text analysis and statistical tools. These were closely followed by metadata creation and geodata tools. Much less frequently used was semantic web/linked data and web analysis software.

The reasons for the small number of responses are not clear. One might conclude that new forms of scholarly expression and inquiry are not widely thought about among Jewish Studies-related communities. However, research activity of this kind can be found on the web. The Association of Jewish Studies has held a number of sessions devoted to Digital Humanities including a couple of THATcamps.<sup>2</sup> At the University of Washington

<sup>1</sup> H-Judaic, a Jewish Studies list that is nominally independent of the Association of Jewish Studies; and Hasafran, a list for Judaica librarians under the aegis of the Association of Jewish Studies.

<sup>2</sup> THATcamp is a kind of inexpensive meeting where humanists and technologists of all skill levels learn and build together in sessions proposed on the spot (<http://jewishstudies2012.thatcamp.org/sample-page>).

Professor Noam Pianko recently taught a Digital American Jewish History course. He is a strong proponent for expanding digital technology via classroom experience and community engagement. Such dual practitioners include faculty such as Todd Presner, the Sady and Ludwig Kahn Director of the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies and Chair of the Digital Humanities Program at the University of California Los Angeles, and Oren Kosansky, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Lewis & Clark College and Director of the Rabat Genizah Project. Rachel Deblinger is currently Postdoctoral Fellow and Digital Humanities Specialist at the University of California Santa Cruz and in April 2015 presented her digital project “Memories/Motifs” at a one day conference “Jewish Studies in the Digital Age” sponsored by the Jewish Studies Academic Consortium of the Jewish Community Federation at the Magnes Museum in Berkeley, CA. In 2014 Francesco Spagnolo, the Curator of The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, in Berkeley, CA taught a course “Mapping Diasporas” as a Digital Humanities Special Topics Seminar and administered by Digital Humanities at Berkeley. Jewish Studies scholars are coming to believe that DH is where traditional Jewish research methodologies intersect with newer digital technologies. They are now involved in creating projects that move beyond the static approach and into the realm of dynamic and collaborative modes of teaching and researching. Three of those methodologies that have been developed in the past couple of years will be briefly examined in this article.

### **Sefaria**

The Open Siddur Project, Hebrewbooks.org, Tagged Tanakh, Mechon Mamre, Bar-Ilan Responsa Project and the Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository all represent digital corpora of Jewish classics. The technologies behind these collections demonstrate the evolution that has taken place in the past 15 years of creating these repositories. The first experiments with digital corpora included accurate transcriptions with markup of typographical features (such as indicating that a word is in bold or in italics). In the next instance, developers began to add semantic markup (using tags to describe the type of content). Further developments came with the creation of much larger collections by shifting the focus of manual labor from carefully edited typing to industrial scanning of page images. Now, we are at the stage, where teams of scholars and technologists can move from static tomes of text to the creation of dynamic corpora that include sophisticated text analysis and mining tools and enhanced infographics and visualizations.

Sefaria<sup>3</sup> is a not-for-profit work-in-progress that aims to bring digital versions of Jewish texts into the public domain, and allows scholars and developers to actively engage in the process of contributing to and building the site. The ongoing discussions, commentaries, and discourse within Sefaria rely on volunteers to translate, annotate, proofread, design, and code. This example of crowdsourcing focuses on the classical Jewish texts; from Tanakh, Talmud, the Zohar to modern texts as well as the commentaries that lie in between. As of May 2015, over 1500 people had made a public

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sefaria.org>.

textual contribution to the site. The website is transparent about where the texts come from and who was involved in posting, editing, or translating them. At the present time (May 2015), texts are not formally reviewed before becoming visible on the site, but the creators of the website are currently designing such a review process.

Texts are offered in their original languages, mostly Hebrew. Currently the only translations that are available are in English, but it is planned that in the future translations into other languages will be offered as well. The texts can be browsed alphabetically or by category. By clicking on a verse, all interconnected passages in other texts are shown. Basic search in the entire collection is also possible.

Sefaria demonstrates the power of new open source tools: For the first time, a platform has been developed that will greatly widen the availability of Jewish religious texts in the public domain; and make accessible and expand the centuries of ongoing scholarly conversations and discourse about these works.

### Footprints

Mapping the circulation of printed Jewish books and the reading habits of Jews around the world has interested scholars of the Jewish book trade for a long time. The large amount of information and documentation on the movement of Jewish books exists, but not in any centralized resource. Rather it is most often found only when a scholar is doing research on something else. When designed and used creatively, digital tools can provide a gateway to bring together relevant data and offer possibilities for interpretation from a variety of methodological perspectives into the history of reading and book collecting practices of Jews since the late 1400s until today.

Beginning in 2009, a working group of Jewish Studies faculty, researchers and librarians began getting together under the auspices of the Center for Jewish History in New York to examine the history of the Jewish book. Out of the group's discussions arose an idea to create a database that would contain information on the circulation and movement of printed Jewish books. The ensuing project took a life of its own and is called "Footprints." In 2014-2015 the project really started to develop with the cooperation with the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL).<sup>4</sup> The staff from CCNMTL has constructed the database and prototypes of entries have been entered. The database consists of printed books that are both known to exist today and also are not known to exist today but have been described bibliographically.

Within the database, users are able to browse, search and visualize the movement of printed books and even individuals across countries and continents. In its present iteration, the database does not allow for non-Latin script input or delay. Hopefully Hebrew script capabilities will be added in the future which will allow for reliable searching and more correct bibliographic metadata.

This database offers a great deal of research potential. The tools and metadata decisions used in its development will ideally enable statistical analyses, visualizations, and qualitative discourse. The staff envisions that its platform will be utilized and appraised by other projects in order to enable other constituencies who might have

<sup>4</sup> <https://footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/>.

encountered similar issues of project development, to share protocols, standards, and methodologies.

### reVilna

There has been a great deal of interest in seeing how maps can be used to create narrative. Scholars and researchers are taking advantage of the availability of mapping tools to exploit location-based data. Exemplary projects include Mapping Jewish Los Angeles, Mapping the Jewish Communities of the Byzantine Empire, and Mapping Jewish Ararat.<sup>5</sup>

reVilna is a digital mapping project whose aim is to allow users to try and imagine life in the Vilna Ghetto during its two-year existence (1941-1943). The work is the brainchild of Menachem Kaiser, a Columbia University graduate, critic and writer. In collaboration with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, and Vilna Gaon Museum; and using Axis Maps as the basis for a web platform he geographically tagged over hundred points within the ghetto and paired them with over 150 photographs. Kaiser has described his project as “an intuitive form of curation; there is little original research. The primary document used was Herman Kruk’s diary, *Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, translated and edited by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav ... The Vilna Ghetto, along with many other Holocaust sites, is almost always approached as a topic, not as a historical space.”<sup>6</sup> Users now have the ability to explore the ghetto on their own, and can navigate items of interests, such as resistance, culture, health education, the Judenrat, via filters. Thus, they can find new ways of witnessing and understanding how people could maintain their humanity in a certain terrible place and a certain horrific moment in time.

### Conclusion

As these projects illustrate, the integration of DH into Jewish scholarship in the US is now moving beyond a few enthusiasts into a wider range of academics and information technologists. The use of digital media and technologies is rapidly appearing on the scholarly and research agendas as these communities come to understand their potential. And yet, as we have seen from the survey results there remains a disconnection between general scholarly awareness of these DH initiatives and the digital projects themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> “Mapping Ararat: An Imaginary Jewish Homelands Project animates Mordecai Noah’s bold 1825 plan to transform Grand Island, New York, into Ararat, a city of refuge for the Jews”—Kaplan, Louis: Mapping Ararat. Augmented Reality, Virtual Tourism, and Grand Island’s Jewish Ghosts, in: *CR: the New Centennial Review*, 13 (2013), 2, p. 239–264.

<sup>6</sup> Kaiser, Menachem: A New Interactive Map of the Vilna Ghetto Asks: What Good Is History if It Isn’t Told?, in: *Tablet*, March 20, 2013, online: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/135233/revilna> [May 15, 2015].

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