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MISZELLE

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## **Surfing the Great British Jewish Web: Jewish History Resources Online<sup>1</sup>**

The internet has become an indispensable aid for academic research, providing quick and convenient access to a hitherto unprecedented wealth of information and to primary and secondary sources. Numerous organisations and providers have utilised the internet to expand the reach of their users and the scope of their activities to a truly global audience. Resources presenting various aspects of Jewish history, culture and religion are no exception – they have profoundly changed the way we search for literature, access information and share our research findings. However, despite the many advances made in the past two decades, more needs to be done to truly fulfil the potential of the internet for Jewish history resources. At the moment, like many comparable online offerings, the market of ‘Jewish history online’ is messy and often difficult to navigate.

In what follows, we aim to provide an overview of various online resources which originate in Britain. These reflect both the archival collections available in the United Kingdom and the scholarly interests represented at British universities in the past and present. While internet resources by definition are a global enterprise, it is worth reflecting on the provenance of archival holdings and how their availability online is conditioned by national contexts of scholarship. Britain is home to some of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world; the country attracts researchers and students from across the globe; venerable institutions such as the British Museum and the British Library hold vast collections relevant to scholarship. Its imperial past and multicultural present have resulted in rich and manifold holdings that represent the history of a former empire and the diverse interests of collectors and explorers, the experiences of refugees that found a safe haven in the United Kingdom and the research executed by scholars from diverse backgrounds. Jewish Studies in Britain reflects this tapestry of influences and its online manifestations are no exception.

In this article we offer an annotated ‘webography’, a representative sample of currently available sites, organised in the following categories:

- Major collections in British archives, libraries and museums which have been (part-)digitised and made available online;
  - Cairo Genizah collections: Cambridge, Oxford and Manchester;
  - Other significant collections;
- Sources concerning British Jewish history;
  - Resources relating to refugee history and the Holocaust;
  - Online exhibitions, stories and lessons.

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This is followed by concluding reflections on the current state of Jewish history online in the UK and concrete suggestions about development possibilities.

### 1. Major collections in British archives, libraries and museums

The first distinction which needs to be made is that between commercial providers of online resources and those which are free at the point of access and created as part of publicly (or privately) funded research. In the first category we find digital source collections published by major presses and offered through university libraries. Naturally, these are often originated by an international group of contributors rather than being confined to Britain, but it is worth bearing in mind that they are offered through UK university libraries and are accessible to anyone with a reader's pass at subscribing institutions. A prominent example, which may suffice to illustrate this point, is the *Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library*<sup>2</sup> provided by Brill. Such primary source collections arise from international research projects and are made available through commercial providers, thus constituting an important part of the online provision in Jewish history. These resources are outwith the remit of this article.

Another group of relevant online archives in this area are those of newspapers. All national newspapers have online archives which may be consulted free of charge or for a modest fee. For our purposes, perhaps the most relevant archive is that of the *Jewish Chronicle*.<sup>3</sup> This Jewish weekly has been documenting the life of Jews in Britain for over 150 years. Founded in 1841, it is the oldest continuously published Jewish newspaper in the world, providing insight into many aspects of Jewish life and concern in the UK from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. The archive is free to search, but downloading historical issues incurs a fee. While a valuable historical resource, this archive is not very well accessible online. The website is too difficult to navigate to yield precise results and the downloading function is clunky and outdated, making it challenging for any researcher.

In the second category we find sources offered free at the point of access on dedicated websites. Many of these projects are associated with particular universities or groups of scholars or are provided by other institutions dedicated to public education or by not-for-profit organisations. In addition, there is a large array of online resources which are provided by individuals or institutions with an interest in a specific subject matter.

The sites associated with universities, scholars and public or not-for-profit organisations can be further categorised into those sites which make available collections of primary sources for scholars to work with, and those which offer contingent interpretations of primary sources for teaching purposes, or as part of online exhibitions or online historical narratives. The latter two formats are often attached to public and private museums which make part of their collections available through online exhibitions or narratives around primary sources and objects.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.brill.com/products/online-resources/dead-sea-scrolls-electronic-library-o> [27.09.2015].

<sup>3</sup> <http://archive.thejc.com/search/frame.jsp?>

UseridStr=48,101,229,24,61,121,19,168&ExpireStr=239,223,98,198,214,184,33,47,183,8,229,49,245,100,205,22,254,75,20,15,130,62,18,204&Arch=&SubsNo=48,101,229,24,61,121,19,168 [27.09.2015].

Online primary source collections work with existing collections in public and private archives or collections which have been acquired or made available to scholars as part of a specific research project. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and the British Academy are the major public funding bodies for the Arts and Humanities in the United Kingdom, joined by the Leverhulme Trust, the Carnegie Trust and the Wellcome Trust which are charitable organisations.

### 1.1. Cairo Genizah collections: Cambridge, Oxford and Manchester

A major British contribution to the online availability of primary sources are the publically and privately funded Genizah research and digitisation projects at the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Manchester.

British scholars have played an important role in discovering the priceless collection of medieval documents preserved over many centuries in the Genizah of a synagogue in Fustat, Egypt. Several British institutions hold impressive collections of Genizah fragments which have, in part, been made publically accessible online.

The University of Cambridge Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit<sup>4</sup> has its own dedicated website which offers an in-depth description of the scope of their collection and the work of the unit. Parts of “the world’s largest and most important single collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts” can then be accessed as digital libraries via links on the homepage: the Cambridge Digital Library: Genizah<sup>5</sup> and the Jacques Mosseri Genizah Collection<sup>6</sup>.

The University of Oxford offers an online catalogue of the Cairo Genizah<sup>7</sup> fragments in its holdings. It has digitised some fragments and is currently pursuing digitisation and online availability of images of more of the fragments.

The University of Manchester has a collection of fragments from the Cairo Genizah held in the John Rylands Library. Parts of the collection are made accessible online<sup>8</sup>. Background information<sup>9</sup> about the provenance of the collection is available at a different site, information<sup>10</sup> about its organisation, digitisation and finding aids and accessibility is located elsewhere - this information is provided at different websites, which is not particularly user-friendly.

While not a resource originating in the United Kingdom, the Friedberg Genizah Project<sup>11</sup> is involved with several of the British archives holding Genizah collections. This international platform operates from Canada and aims to join Genizah collections, digitisation, and scholarship across the globe. It represents a significant step in joining

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit> [27.09.2015].

<sup>5</sup> <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah> [27.09.2015].

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit/jacques-mosseri-genizah-collection> [27.09.2015]

<sup>7</sup> <http://genizah.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/about> [27.09.2015].

<sup>8</sup> <http://enriqueta.man.ac.uk/luna/servlet/ManchesterDev-95-2> [27.09.2015].

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/search-resources/guide-to-special-collections/genizah-collection/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rylandsgenizah.org/about/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.genizah.org> [27.09.2015].

local and national efforts in preserving and making accessible the rich data found in the Fustat Genizah.

## 1.2. Other significant collections

The University of Manchester has initiated the digitisation of a number of other important primary sources, such as the Typology of Anonymous and Pseudepigraphic Jewish Literature in Antiquity (c.200 BCE to c.700 CE).<sup>12</sup> The work of this project is made available online in the form of a Database for the Analysis of Anonymous and Pseudepigraphic Jewish Texts of Antiquity.<sup>13</sup>

Manchester has a long-established interest in teaching Biblical and Jewish Studies dating back to 1866 but more recently, its Centre for Jewish Studies has taken the lead in sharing online the results of research done by academics at the university. Examples include the work of the Agunah Research Unit<sup>14</sup> which has made its key publications available on the web. A resource which is scheduled to become available in 2015 is an Online Reader in Jewish Engagement with Evolutionary Theory<sup>15</sup> funded by a Leverhulme Major Research Grant. At the time of writing, only a brief project description is available.

The Warburg Institute originates from the personal library of Aby Warburg that was moved from Germany to London in 1933. Its library, archive and photographic collection reflect Warburg's scholarly interest, particularly the study of the classical tradition. It is an important research centre in the heart of London that has also invested in the digitisation of their collections under a creative commons licence. The aim is "to make out-of-print source material on Medieval and Renaissance studies freely available online through the Warburg Library catalogue and classification system".<sup>16</sup> Books are either scanned by members of the Institute or downloaded as pdf files from public domain repositories and made available through the library catalogue. This resource includes a substantial number of items on Jewish topics.

## 2. Sources concerning British Jewish history

The Jewish Historical Society of England, founded in 1893, is considered the oldest learned society of its kind. Based in London, it has active local branches across the UK that regularly organise lectures on British-Jewish history. Its scholarly journal, currently named *Jewish Historical Studies*,<sup>17</sup> dating back to 1893/94, can be searched online. Results can be seen by members only (an annual membership fee applies).

The Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain<sup>18</sup> was founded in 1992 to support amateur and professional researchers in genealogical research and to promote the preservation of Jewish genealogical records and resources. It provides access to burial

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/middleeasternstudies/research/projects/ancientjewishliterature/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>13</sup> <http://literarydatabase.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/publications/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/darwinsjews/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>16</sup> <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/library/digital-collections/#c2291> [27.09.2015].

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.jhse.org/products/jewish-historical-studies> [27.09.2015].

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.jgsgb.org.uk/> [27.09.2015].

records, marriage records and other useful databases. Research requires membership but there are some lists for non-members available online. Another, more recent, effort to provide a portal to many resources and information providers on British Jewish history is the project British Jewry,<sup>19</sup> which is primarily interested in offering ways to enhance genealogical and family research. This is a private enterprise of volunteers which is maintained entirely by donations. It is a gateway, rather than a digitisation project, however.

The National Archives, the British government's official archive, claims to contain "1,000 years of history", and holds major records from government offices which are particularly important for the research of family and migration history. For the history of Jewish immigration to Britain, it offers online access to Aliens registration cards, 1918-1957 and Naturalisation case papers, 1801-1871.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most important British collections for Jewish history is based at the University of Southampton. The Hartley Library<sup>21</sup> has part-digitised its extensive collections on British Jewish history that include about 500 boxes of the 'Papers of the International Military Tribunal and the Nuremberg Military Tribunals, 1945-9', 'Papers of the Institute of Jewish Affairs from 1913-91', the 'Archives of Jewish Care, 1757-1989', archives of the Council of Christians and Jews, founded in 1942 and the papers of notable individuals, such as Revd James Parkes and of Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld. So far only part of these collections are available online. It is difficult to ascertain whether the Hartley Library has a clear digitisation strategy. While scholars are able to obtain scans of documents for their personal use, it is not known whether these low resolution images are matched by high resolution images held at the archive gradually to increase the digitised holdings and thereby also aid their preservation. What can be made available online is not only dependent on what has been digitised, of course, but also on the terms and conditions of any bequest to the archive. However, it should be relatively straightforward to make available detailed descriptions of the collections. This has been done for some, but not for others and it is unclear what the rationale is.

Jewish history in the British Isles and particularly collections of outstanding individuals is the subject of a number of part-digitised collections, such as the papers of Moses Gaster at University College London<sup>22</sup> and in the Rylands Library at the University of Manchester.<sup>23</sup>

About 150 testimonials about the life of the famous philanthropist Moses Montefiore<sup>24</sup> are digitised and available online at University College London. The collection, transcribed by student volunteers, is not only aesthetically pleasing but offers interesting insights into the political and communal structures of 19th century Jewry.

<sup>19</sup> <http://british-jewry.org.uk/index.html> [27.09.2015].

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/aliens-registration-cards-1918-1957/> and <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/naturalised-britons/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>21</sup> <http://viewer.soton.ac.uk/viewer/search/-/jewish/1/-/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>22</sup> <http://digitool-b.lib.ucl.ac.uk:8881/R/T9RILEF1D8USK68IIKTAJAXU51CNTS29L4I3FEBL2G5SBUUYN6-04615?func=search#gaster> [27.09.2015].

<sup>23</sup> <http://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/view/search?showAll=who&q=gaster> [27.09.2015].

<sup>24</sup> [http://digitool-b.lib.ucl.ac.uk:8881/R/QJFD6IAS5D7LX8HSNEF3MLTKTT25LVUJUBKXDYI5FYYRS9LX6\]-05071?func=search#monte](http://digitool-b.lib.ucl.ac.uk:8881/R/QJFD6IAS5D7LX8HSNEF3MLTKTT25LVUJUBKXDYI5FYYRS9LX6]-05071?func=search#monte) [27.09.2015].

A major publically funded project (AHRC) under way is the Performing the Jewish Archive-project<sup>25</sup> at the University of Leeds which engages with significant collections relating primarily to Jews and music, theatre and literature. Digitisation and online availability of materials is envisaged. Looking towards the ‘Celtic fringe’, the project Jewish Lives, Scottish Spaces,<sup>26</sup> will work with the collections of the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre (SJAC)<sup>27</sup> in Glasgow, part-digitise these and make some sources available online.

Not necessarily an academic project in the narrow sense but a very useful and well researched resource are the National Anglo-Jewish Heritage trails (JTrails)<sup>28</sup> that acknowledge that “Anglo-Jewish history and heritage is an important national, cultural resource that deserves general recognition”. JTrails is setting up some 30 Jewish heritage trails in England, promoted on an interactive website that provides maps, chronology and a history of Jewish presence. It has a clear outreach agenda and seeks to involve local volunteers to make the trails sustainable.

Similarly, Jewish Heritage<sup>29</sup> provides an inventory and images of sites and buildings relating to Jewish history in Britain. While neither a digitisation project nor an archive, the information gleaned from the site is an invaluable tool for researchers in Jewish history, architecture and religion.

## 2.1. Resources relating to refugee history and the Holocaust

Holocaust-era sources are a distinct focus of online provision of primary source materials. In addition to the Southampton-based Hartley Library discussed above, the Centre for German-Jewish Studies at the University of Sussex holds important source collections linked to Jewish history in Europe,<sup>30</sup> and extensive collections of materials relating to Jewish refugees from Germany.<sup>31</sup> Founded in 1994, it has the aim to study the history of Jews in German-speaking lands, and places an emphasis on research about antisemitism and the Holocaust.

The Wiener Library,<sup>32</sup> “is one of the world’s leading and most extensive archives on the Holocaust and Nazi era”. It was founded by Alfred Wiener in the 1920s to document the growing discrimination and persecution of Jews in Germany in the wake of World War I. Following his flight from Germany in 1933, the collections reached the UK in 1938 and have been expanded ever since. The Wiener Library’s holdings have largely not been digitised but are searchable via online databases. The Refugee Family Papers: An Interactive Map<sup>33</sup> provides brief descriptions of family narratives and offers a view of a

<sup>25</sup> <http://ptja.leeds.ac.uk/about/mission-statement/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>26</sup> <https://jewishmigrationtoscotland.wordpress.com/AHRC-funded,DrHoltschneider> is the lead researcher [27.09.2015].

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.sjac.org.uk/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.jtrails.org.uk/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.jewish-heritage-uk.org/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cgjs/research/projects/bargesearch> [27.09.2015].

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.thekeep.info/german-jewish-collections/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/Collections> [27.09.2015].

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/interactivemap> [27.09.2015].

few documents online, and the collection of photographs<sup>34</sup> is partly accessible online. These important holdings would benefit hugely from a drive towards digitisation.

An oral history database of Holocaust survivors<sup>35</sup> who settled in Manchester and have recorded testimonies highlights the refugee experience outside London. Gathering the Voices<sup>36</sup> is a publically and privately funded ongoing project to record oral history testimonies of refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe to Scotland.

The Association of Jewish Refugees<sup>37</sup> offers access to their journal and a survey of Kindertransportees, but does not look after archival collections themselves. Again, these are valuable resources, not only for academic research but also for educational purposes, that would benefit from being made available online.

This annotated list of online resources offers an insight into the variety of digitised materials relating to Jewish history available at British institutions.

## 2.2. Online exhibitions, stories and lessons

Jewish history has a wide remit and appeals to a broad audience. While primary source collections are mainly aimed at the scholarly community or genealogists, online exhibitions or teaching units have a wider audience in mind, not least that of teachers or other educators working in a variety of institutions, such as museums, community colleges, schools and universities, as well as the general public. Websites which use primary sources for online historical exhibitions and narratives or teaching units can be found primarily in public and not-for-profit organisations. The Holocaust-era resources can be seen as part of this category of provisions.

The Holocaust Education Trust<sup>38</sup> offers access to educational resources, but one does have to create a user login (free of charge). The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust<sup>39</sup> provides a range of resources for activities related to Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January, such as lesson plans, exhibitions, and school assemblies aimed at different age groups.

Other providers are important public institutions such as the British Library, the British Museum, the National Archives, and the British Film Institute.

### The British Library

The British Library, the largest library in the world by number of items catalogued and one of the most important research libraries in the world, is a resource of its own kind. Its vast holdings of approximately 170 million items can be integrated into all the different categories of resources we outlined above. It offers online access to important manuscripts and books in its possession. Among the British Library's<sup>40</sup> recent major achievements in the digitisation of Jewish texts is the complete digitisation of the Codex

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/Photographs> [27.09.2015].

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/manchester-survivors-database> [27.09.2015].

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.gatheringthevoices.com/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.ajr.org.uk/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.het.org.uk/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>39</sup> <http://hmd.org.uk/page/resources-your-activity> [27.09.2015].

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/expfaith/judmanu/index.html> [27.09.2015].

Sinaiticus<sup>41</sup>. A feast for the eyes are the Lisbon Bible<sup>42</sup> and the Golden Haggadah<sup>43</sup> which are completely accessible online. The British Library Sound Archive<sup>44</sup> makes a significant contribution to Holocaust research with its collection of oral testimonies. At the same time, the Library is also active in funding the preservation of important archival collections in parts of the world lacking the resources to protect their heritage. The Endangered Archives Project<sup>45</sup> provides a survey of Hungarian Jewish congregational archives, giving a detailed description of their holdings on Hungarian Jewish history. However, digitisation does not seem to be envisaged. An onsite exhibition that presented precious examples of sacred texts from the major world religions led to an impressive online exhibition on "The Sacred"<sup>46</sup> that provides access to 78 'virtual books', mostly dating back to the Middle Ages but some as old as the first century CE. While not a scholarly provision as such (the books are not available in their entirety), this multimedia online resource is a creative and beautifully executed tool for teaching and studying sacred texts.

Addressing schools, and the general public the National Archives Jewish migration history online<sup>47</sup> exhibition integrates historical narrative with a close look at sources and artefacts in a comprehensive online exhibition.

A large number of the British Museum's vast holdings pertain to aspects of Jewish history. Some can be explored online in previews of exhibition galleries or object stories for educational purposes. At the time of writing, of particular interest may be the new gallery which showcases a range of items of the Waddesdon Bequest,<sup>48</sup> Baron Ferdinand Rothschild's (1839-1898) collection of medieval and renaissance art and furnishings (as well as nineteenth-century fakes) from his Waddesdon Manor Estate.

The British Film Institute<sup>49</sup> has made available online some of its vast collections, though searching for content relevant to Jewish history, culture and religion is challenging.

These offerings by public institutions and charities are joined by more modest websites aiming to support the teaching in Jewish Studies such as Jewish/non-Jewish Relations,<sup>50</sup> developed by the authors of this article who recognised the lack of academic provisions for teaching the complex historical and contemporary relationship between Jews and non-Jews. This site provides a selection of translated primary sources, chosen and contextualised by experts in their field. The target audience is undergraduates studying Jewish history.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=boof9a37-422c-4542-bfbd-b97bf3ce7d50&type=book> [27.09.2015].

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=4145201d-ee22-4382-9ae8-2c78d9138444&type=book> [27.09.2015].

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=47111807-4e9a-43de-be65-96f49c3d623c&type=book> [27.09.2015].

<sup>44</sup> <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Jewish-Holocaust-survivors> [27.09.2015].

<sup>45</sup> [http://eap.bl.uk/database/overview\\_project.a4d?projID=EAP469;r=25996](http://eap.bl.uk/database/overview_project.a4d?projID=EAP469;r=25996) [27.09.2015].

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/index.html> [27.09.2015].

<sup>47</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.movinghere.org.uk/galleries/histories/jewish/jjewis.htm> [27.09.2015].

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/themes/room\\_2a\\_waddesdon\\_bequest.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/themes/room_2a_waddesdon_bequest.aspx) [27.09.2015].

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections/searching-access-collections/archive-resources-online> [27.09.2015].

<sup>50</sup> <http://jnjr.div.ed.ac.uk/> [27.09.2015].

### 3. What is not digitised - a snapshot of possible future projects

While there is a wealth of material for researching Jewish history available in British institutions, much needs to be done to make it truly accessible to scholars world-wide. As the examples discussed above demonstrate, numerous institutions have started various digitisation projects but a more systematic and comprehensive approach is needed.

There are also a number of important institutions that have not yet engaged with digitisation at all. A prime example are the holdings of Leo Baeck College<sup>51</sup> whose important collections are not digitised. These include valuable material relevant to the history of German-Jewish rabbis, Zionist pamphlets, and Judaica library collections reflecting the interests of early 20th century rabbis and book collectors. Equally, the collections of the Leo Baeck Institute<sup>52</sup> in London are not available online. The library of the German Historical Institute London<sup>53</sup> specialises in German history and Anglo-German relations from medieval to contemporary times, with a particular focus on the twentieth century. Its numerous resources include *Refugee Voices / Holocaust Testimonies*, a major audio-visual archive for the study of the Holocaust and the history of German refugees to Britain during and after the Second World War. Through filmed interviews *Refugee Voices* provides insights into the life stories of 150 survivors of the Nazi persecutions in Germany who found refuge in Britain. Valuable for both academic researchers and educators, it would be desirable to provide online access to these sources.

City archives often boast significant collections on aspects of Jewish history in a given place. For example, the London Metropolitan Archives and the city archives in Leeds, Sunderland, Hull and other cities with significant Jewish populations, have absorbed the synagogue archives as communities declined across the twentieth century and their buildings and institutions became defunct. Hardly any of their Jewish collections have been made available online. However, some local archives, such as Tyne and Wear,<sup>54</sup> offer more detailed descriptions of their holdings, whereas London Metropolitan Archives'<sup>55</sup> search engine is difficult to navigate and does not yield much detail about significant Jewish history collections such as the archives of the Chief Rabbi's Office and the London Beth Din. Similarly, the Jewish Museums in London<sup>56</sup> and Manchester<sup>57</sup> hold a number of collections, but do not offer online access to these or appear to have digitised appropriate parts.

### 4. Observations and suggestions

The accessibility of online provisions is crucial. How easily can these resources be located? Using search engines to turn out a list of resources is not a helpful strategy in

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.lbc.ac.uk/20080331655/Library/library-collections-and-periodicals.html> [27.09.2015].

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.leobaecck.co.uk/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.ghil.ac.uk/library.html> [27.09.2015].

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.jewishgen.org/jcr-uk/Community/tyneweararchives8.pdf> [27.09.2015].

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/london-metropolitan-archives/the-collections/Pages/default.aspx> [27.09.2015].

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/Collections> [27.09.2015].

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.manchesterjewishmuseum.com/collection> [27.09.2015].

and of itself. This would need to be mediated by already having a good grasp of search terms which turn up reliable resources and some idea of where to look in the first place. Such a sweeping strategy is likely to throw out a host of resources but without any adequate quality control. A possible solution that would provide a valuable service to the academic community may be found in the construction of an online portal for resources in Jewish history, culture and religion provided by institutions in the British Isles and which are free at the point of access. The Jewish History Resource Center,<sup>58</sup> based at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has been successfully maintaining a dedicated portal with over 6,000 links regarding all periods of Jewish history for years. While its appearance is somewhat dated, this is a diligently compiled and regularly maintained access point that not only provides information in Hebrew and English but also, in the form of a Google calendar, lists topical events in Jewish history worldwide.

While the internet transcends narrow national borders and is accessible from all over the world, it might be worthwhile considering a portal that brings resources and collections together to highlight the sources available at British institutions. Such a portal could become the umbrella under which past and current research projects 'log' their online outputs, categorise and describe them, thereby offering their findings to a large audience in a 'one-stop-shop'. The British Association for Jewish Studies,<sup>59</sup> the learned society representing academics in the field in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, would be a natural partner for such an endeavour, as the organisation's website could easily host a gateway to online resources. The main obstacle, as usual with these ideas, is funding. Maintaining such a resource means giving it consistent attention and this is difficult to do without paying someone for their time. However, showcasing online resources originating at British institutions might have a positive impact on securing funding because the world-wide reach of national digitisation projects can easily be demonstrated by user statistics.

Next to ease of access, maintenance is another other big challenge. All websites need a degree of maintenance to make sure that they are up-to-date and that all links are current. Many project-specific sites are set up during the project itself with a specific amount of funding and a commitment by the university hosting the project to maintain the site for a certain time after the project's conclusion. Thereafter, sites may simply drop off the radar of the team who set them up and rapidly become less useful or actually unusable. Some sites are built with software which needs technical expertise not at the disposal of the scholars who contributed the content. This makes it difficult to maintain a site when the funding for the project has ended and technical support is no longer available. Scholars move on to different projects and/or switch institutions which leave websites vulnerable to a lack of maintenance. It is not always possible for the researcher to take their 'product' with them to a new institution, but nor is it possible for their previous institution to guarantee the upkeep of their former employee's website project.

Other projects opt for freely available blogging software which, for a modest fee, can be manipulated for the needs of a (re-)source project. This is helpful, because hardly any technical expertise is necessary for setting up and maintaining such a site and the URL

<sup>58</sup> <http://jewishhistory.huji.ac.il/> [27.09.2015].

<sup>59</sup> <http://britishjewishstudies.org/> [27.09.2015].

can be mapped to any domain one wishes, again for a modest annual fee. This allows maximum flexibility and can ensure the website's 'survival' even when the scholar(s) responsible for its upkeep move institutions. However, there is a caveat. First of all, the free blogging software only bends so far to accommodate all that a project may require. Secondly, they still need to be maintained and regularly checked to ensure that all links are working, scholarly affiliations are correct and content remains relevant and up-to-date.

The importance of digitisation strategies has been recognised by recent efforts in developing a strategy for wide-digitisation of Hebrew manuscripts, as is evidenced by the conference at King's College London in May 2015 entitled 'On the Same Page: Digital Approaches to Hebrew Manuscripts',<sup>60</sup> a collaboration between Jewish Studies and Digital Humanities. The aim of the conference was the integration of scholarly work with digitisation technologies, and an explicit link with research in Digital Humanities was made. This is essential for the success of future projects which seek to make available archival resources online. Digitisation strategies, the use of appropriate hardware and software, storage solutions and concerns of accessibility and usability in the long term are at the forefront of discussions in this area.

Digitisation may aid the preservation of fragile papers, however it remains to be negotiated what can be stored in a publically accessible website. This depends partly on the nature of the holdings and the terms of each bequest, but it also touches on the identity of this (and similar) archives. There is a fear that digitised collections will remove the need to visit the archive. This is a real concern for smaller archives which are dependent on an income stream generated from footfall in the archive. While this concern may easily be diffused by researchers whose interest ranges wider than one particular collection or document, there is corresponding concern from researchers who rely on volunteers to provide access, as this is often severely restricted due to constraints of time and money. Digitisation and online availability thus helps researchers to gain easier, quicker and more sustained access to such collections. Clearly, there is a need for further discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of digitising for both, the archives and their researchers.

In conclusion, this article has sought to provide a snapshot of currently available resources and those under construction. We have offered URLs and short descriptions of these and have also attempted to assess the user-friendliness and reliability of the online provisions. A major finding is the patchiness of the provision. While everybody's gone surfin', Surfin' UK would benefit from a clearer strategy. On the one hand, there are resources available covering all periods of Jewish history. On the other hand, efforts have concentrated on manuscripts held at UK archives. Thus what is available online reflects to a degree what is available within the British Isles and, more significantly, what has attracted funding as part of wider research projects where digitisation and accessibility were key funding concerns.

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/research/seminars/jewish/hebrew2015.aspx> [27.09.2015].

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