

## MISZELLE

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## **Footprints: Tracking Individual Copies of Printed Books Using Digital Methods**

The database and research project *Footprints: Jewish Books Through Time and Place* ([Footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu](http://Footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu)) is a new approach to the study of the Jewish printed book. The field of Jewish Studies has generally been focused on analytic and descriptive bibliography with less attention paid to the circulation and use of individual copies of books as well as their material and social history. Unlike manuscripts, which have long been studied as unique objects, the artifactual nature of the individual printed book copy has not been fully recognized and the distinctions between copy, edition, and literary work have frequently been elided. *Footprints* seeks to explore the wide-ranging mobility through time of the multiple copies of each printed edition of a Jewish book.<sup>1</sup>

The product of collaborative energies between scholars, librarians, and educational technologists, *Footprints'* web-database aggregates scattered information about books by drawing from title pages, inscriptions, owners' signatures, censors' marks, estate inventories, auction catalogs, or correspondence, and presents visualizations of mobility, including mapping. In this way, *Footprints* highlights and makes use of previously unknown resources in a way that reimagines the practice of (Jewish) book history. It exemplifies the possibilities for global collaborative research that digital technology makes possible.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, *Footprints* serves as a launching pad for individual and collaborative research projects on issues of transmission, dissemination, and the use of material texts.

The very process by which *Footprints'* data comes together makes essential use of the digital platform as it transcends location. The use of a digital meeting-ground generates a form of "collaboration without collaboration," that is to say, contributors around the world participate in a "trusted crowdsourcing" project, so that an aggregate emerges organically. There are hundreds of catalogues of Judaica collections from different periods reflecting the use of Jewish books by readers, owners, censors, and book-dealers around the world. Scholars have subjected these collections to intimate reconstructions, contextualizing their formation in wider political and intellectual climates.

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<sup>1</sup> Defining a "Jewish" book is an interesting and complex research problem but for purposes of our project, we define it as books in Hebrew or other Jewish languages or books in Latin and European vernaculars with significant Jewish content ("Judaica"). See Shear, Adam, Introduction to AJS Review Symposium: The Jewish Book: Views and Questions, *AJS Review* 34, 2 (2010): 353-357; and Dweck, Yaacob, What Is a Jewish Book?, *ibid.*, 367-375.

<sup>2</sup> See Chesner, Michelle at al.: Old Texts and New Media: Jewish Books on the Move and a Case for Collaboration, in: Kear, Robin/Joranson, Kate (ed.): *Digital Humanities, Libraries, and Partnerships A Critical Examination of Labor, Networks, and Community*, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 61-73. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780081020234000057>.

*Footprints* does not seek to replicate that research or to replace the research impulse that drives that work.<sup>3</sup> Instead, its digital character allows for a quantitative approach which brings together masses of data in a central hub. For example, a collection that was sold in parts, like the Paduan library of Giuseppe Almanzi (1801–1860) – one part sold in 1862 to the British Library, another part sold in 1872<sup>4</sup> to Temple Emanuel in New York, now held at Columbia University – can be reconnected virtually via *Footprints*.

However, aggregating data relating to the movement of material objects from place to place does more than reconstruct scattered collections. It invites questions about the transit of knowledge and offers fruitful grounds for thinking about grand processes through the empirical accumulation of the smallest units of information. Scholarship in the field of Jewish book history has largely been either micro-historical or framed around the output of specific publishers or print centers. The centralization of information will enable scholars to test theories, to pose new questions, and to reexamine established theses about patterns of thought, the spread of new ideas, as well as cultural and intellectual differences across different Jewish subcultures and communities by constructing a more empirical model of reception of texts and the ideas they carry. Rather than assess the contents of a single library, a scholar will now be able to ask “what books might have been available to a visitor in Amsterdam at the start of the 18th century?” or “what was the reach of Daniel Bomberg’s early 16th century Talmuds beyond Venice?” Who bought them, who read them, how far across the continent could they be accessed, and what impact did their regulation have on their reception history?”<sup>5</sup>

For example, our collected research shows books printed in Venice in the 16th century, made stops in 17th-century Yemen, before scattering to New York, New Haven, and Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> We would not see this moment of historical convergence if we were focusing on the output of a single printing press or were focused on the formation of a single, now extant, collection. The material history of objects-in-motion allows us to confront not just production or current holdings, but global usage in historical time.

Even as the database design creates a broad dataset for macro-analysis, it also reveals the individual, highly specific, and idiosyncratic paths of each book, allowing for micro-historical study at the same time. It broadens the archive of social history by using ownership marks in book-copies to reveal lesser-known individuals beyond the scholarly elite, such as women, whose voices have been dominated by disproportionate attention to well-known male scholars.

Sometimes this means that one researcher will discover something that is not of immediate use to their project. Would a scholar of Talmud study in Northern Italy in the late 16th or early-17th century expect to find a draft or a copy of a letter by a woman in the

<sup>3</sup> See, for a few examples, Marx, Alexander: “Some Jewish Book Collectors” (=Studies in Jewish History and Booklore), New York, 1944), pp. 198-237, and the studies collected in Sluhovsky, Moshe/ Kaplan, Yosef, (eds.): *Sifriyot ve-Osfe Sefarim*, Jerusalem 2006) and Mandelbrote, Scott/ Weinberg, Joanna (eds.): *Jewish Books and Their Readers. Aspects of the Intellectual Life of Christians and Jews in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden 2016).

<sup>4</sup> The contents of the second sale were documented in Roest, Mayer: *Bet ha-sefer: nachgelassen von Giuseppe Almanzi*, Jacob Emden, M. J. Loewenstein und anderen, Amsterdam 1868).

<sup>5</sup> See Chesner et al.: *Old Texts and New Media*, 2018, pp. 66-67.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of seventeenth-century footprints from Yemen, see here: [http://footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/search/?sort\\_by=fitle&direction=asc&page=1&q=yemen&footprint\\_start\\_year=1600&footprint\\_range=1&footprint\\_end\\_year=1700&pub\\_start\\_year=&pub\\_range=&pub\\_end\\_year=&search\\_level=1](http://footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/search/?sort_by=fitle&direction=asc&page=1&q=yemen&footprint_start_year=1600&footprint_range=1&footprint_end_year=1700&pub_start_year=&pub_range=&pub_end_year=&search_level=1) [May 23, 2018].

flyleaf of a Bomberg Talmud tractate? Yet this is exactly what can be found in an entry in the database.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the Talmud-reception scholar passes over this finding in the course of his or her research program, but the aggregation of this incidental finding with other *Footprints* and with other archival material allows another historian to investigate the domestic arrangements of the early modern Italian Jewish home and the use of books beyond their initial intended purposes. *Footprints* enables such data to become available to others before it gets buried in a footnote in someone's journal article, which can sometimes escape the attention of readers.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, *Footprints* both enhances individual research projects that emerge from it and allows for an individual's findings (through contributions to the database) to have a greater impact on the projects of other researchers.

Perhaps the most exciting and innovative element of digital work is the public-facing character of the very process of research itself. In traditional humanities research, only the finished scholarly product appears to the public eye. But the digital platform makes public the very process of scholarship. This project displays research in real time, showing "research notes" in a collaborative platform that invites immediate feedback, editing, and revision.

The question of what "Digital Humanities" really is and how it relates to traditional humanities projects has been much debated since the emergence of the use of digital and computational methods for historical and literary scholarship. *Footprints* is making use of the digital a tool that aids both the research project and the scholarly process. Unlike in the two-dimensional, linear narrative structure of a monograph or scholarly article, a user of the database can explore the interconnections between historical figures, objects, and places from a multiplicity of perspectives, and tailor their search along unique vectors. No two users of the database will approach it in the same way, for the same reason that different researchers come to all sources with different questions and perspectives.

In this way, *Footprints* is both a Digital Humanities project and a collaborative project in Jewish historical research. *Footprints* is not designed to replace the scholarly monograph or article. It is intended to be a tool—a multidimensional bibliography—that invites scholars to use it to craft new narratives of their own. Our hope is that this medium will equip a new generation of scholars with the means to respond to their questions and to offer a new world of books that will, in turn, enter a new circuit of mobility and the exchange of knowledge itself.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/footprint/979/>. (last access: June 29, 2018). It is also noteworthy to find evidence of open usage and ownership of Talmud tractates in the second half of the sixteenth century in Italy. It is difficult to imagine casual use of extra paper in a book hidden away in a closet or cellar. For her to be writing in it, it must have been readily available.

<sup>8</sup> See Teplitsky, Joshua: Don't Kill Your Darlings, or, How Footprints is helping me to stop worrying and just finish my book, <https://edblogs.columbia.edu/footprints/2017/01/23/dont-kill-your-darlings-or-how-footprints-is-helping-me-to-stop-worrying-and-just-finish-my-book/> [May 23, 2018].

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**Adam Shear** is associate professor of religious studies and history at the University of Pittsburgh and chair of the Department of Religious Studies. His research focuses on early modern Jewish intellectual and cultural history, with a particular focus on the history of books and the transmission of knowledge. He is the author of *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900* (Cambridge UP, 2008) and co-editor of *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy*, with Joseph R. Hacker (UPenn Press, 2011).

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