

We tend to be flattered by the designation of ourselves as a “People of the Book.” It’s one of the very few designations attached to Jews by others that we tend to reproduce widely and happily. Is our relationship with books in flux? Are recent efforts to fix this relationship in time — to canonize some books while excluding, inevitably, many others — useful? What makes a book Jewish? What makes it great? As the Jewish people grow increasingly diverse, how will our books reflect this change?

Who Is an Educated Jew?

Paula E. Hyman

There has been no consensus on the issue of “Who is an educated Jew?” for more than two hundred years. If one were to have posed the question in 1750, say in Poland, the answer would have been obvious. The educated Jew was a mature male who had devoted his life to talmudic study, debating fine points of *halakha* in *yeshiva* and *beit midrash*. He was familiar with all of the classic rabbinic texts and their commentaries, the *rishonim* and the *aharonim*, and the languages in which they were written, Hebrew and Aramaic, in addition to the Jewish vernacular that he spoke — in Poland, Yiddish, of course. No women were given such an education because the teaching of classical religious texts in Hebrew to women was neither halakhically nor socially legitimated; it was also irrelevant to their roles within the family and society. While regional variations in learning styles and in the details of the curriculum existed, the substance of what educated Jews should know was widely shared in the Jewish world.

That shared commitment to a curriculum, and therefore to a vision of Jewish knowledge, was irretrievably disrupted with the social and political

changes that occurred at the end of the 18th century. The Western states’ desire to reshape the socioeconomic and cultural configuration of their Jewish populations, and the emergence of a cohort of Jewish intellectuals and businessmen who were eager to respond to the opportunities that integration into the larger society (the *maskilim*) seemed to promise, led to a sharp dissent from the consensus about Jewish learning that had prevailed, at least within Ashkenazi communities in Europe. For a growing number of Jews, the *talmid hokhm* was no longer the model of the educated Jew.

Instead, modernizing educated Jews, following the model set by the *maskilim*, saw Western culture as an essential component of their consciousness and created a canon that placed secular education at the fore. They expected educated Jews to be at home culturally in both traditional Jewish and secular learning. A good example is the scarcely known Puah Rakovsky, who was an educator and director of a girls’ school in Warsaw that taught Hebrew and secular studies, a translator, and a Zionist and feminist activist. Born in Poland in 1865 to a traditional family, she lost her faith as an adolescent and was assertively secular. Still, her Yiddish mem-

The multicultural model requires a recognition of the diversity of Jewish life as a value rather than an unfortunate fact.

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oirs are replete with allusions in Hebrew to biblical and midrashic sources, and she was convinced that her Jewish learning was the source of her values. Because she witnessed growing indifference to Jewish culture among youth in the years before World War I, Rakovsky was able to discern that the goal of modern Jewish education had to be transformed from the “regeneration” of Jews under the influence of secular knowledge to the “rejudaization” of Jews bereft of Jewish knowledge.

Modernity fractured Jewish experience, destroying the hegemony of rabbinic Judaism and the authority of traditional Jewish elites. Contemporary currents of thought like postmodernism and multiculturalism have challenged virtually all certainties and shaken all canons. No canon is fixed, and all guardians of cultural transmission are required to make hard choices. We are fortunate that the Jewish canon has always been a relatively open one, for the traditional Jewish system of interpretation of classical texts has provided a mechanism for ongoing revision. The development of interpretive strategies, in midrash, for example, as literary scholars have argued, demonstrates a way to recover oppositional strands within traditional texts. Insofar as we focus on the spaces for debate and contestation within the traditional Jewish canon, we acknowledge the need for, and sustain the possibility of, multiple cultural expressions for the diverse people that we are. Although the term “open canon” sounds like an oxymoron, it simply reflects the recognition that every canon is constructed and merits a healthy combination of respect and skepticism and regular revision if it is to speak to its intended audience. A truly “open canon” affords opportunities for choice and for the inclusion of ongoing cultural creativity.

Once we acknowledge that unity is neither possible nor desirable, though, we must ask what models of educated Jews we seek to promote. What, if anything, will educated Jews of different *paideias* (educational visions and curricula in the broadest sense) share?

I can think of three prerequisites — necessary but not sufficient — for all educated Jews: the Hebrew language (in all its variants, from the Bible to the present — not just street Hebrew); an acceptance of biblical and rabbinic texts as one’s own; and a general knowledge of Jewish history. Hebrew is an essential tool for reading much of what Jewish culture has produced. But it is more than a tool. Without Hebrew there is no

visceral, as distinct from intellectual, connection to Jewish creativity across time and space. Accepting Tanakh and rabbinic texts as one’s own does not necessitate ascribing to them sacredness or religious authority. But it does necessitate grappling with their meaning and their role in world culture as well as Jewish culture and in the choices that contemporary Jews make. The knowledge of the broad outlines of Jewish history enables us to understand the societal and intellectual contexts in which Jewish culture has developed.

Accepting this core curriculum is only the first step in becoming Jewishly educated. An open Jewish canon in the 21st century draws upon a variety of voices and genres. It must embrace all the Jewish cultural products of the past two centuries — that is, the different forms that Jews have chosen to make meaning of their existence as Jews. Secular forms in many languages — including literature, memoirs, folklore, film, and the visual arts — are too often dismissed as lacking in cultural significance.

What I am suggesting, then, is that educated Jews would share a core curriculum of Hebrew language, foundational texts, and knowledge of historical development. They would then follow a multiple-track model of curriculum development, choosing, according to their own interests, from a far broader range of cultural expression than is commonly considered “Jewish knowledge.” Although biblical and rabbinic texts would define a core of Jewish knowledge, further learning would not privilege any single genre of cultural production or any single text.

Changes within the past generation necessitate a rethinking of Jewish learning as thorough as the *Haskalah* critique of two centuries ago. While the majority of Jews have acquired secular education, as *maskilim* advocated, they have not always applied their knowledge to Judaism or Jewish culture. I am not referring here to the willful ignorance of what modern scholarly inquiry has to say about classical Jewish texts. Rather, I am speaking about the failure of most Jews who consider themselves Jewishly educated to contend with recent trends in studies of culture.

Thanks to the work of theorists in anthropology, history, and gender studies, it is widely acknowledged today that culture cannot be subsumed in the writings of an elite. However varied those writings, and however weighty, they reflect the values and considered opinions of one segment of society alone. “Says who?” is an essential question when studying any text. As we have learned from multiculturalism, the ways

in which silent or silenced, generally subordinate, groups within society conferred meaning on their own lives and accepted or resisted the values promulgated by elites are part of cultural history. That is as true of Jews as of other groups.

Popular Jewish culture has always existed, and we must be willing to look for it and to reflect on its relation to the elite culture that we have considered the sum total of Judaism and of Jewish cultural creativity. Familiarity with the varieties of Jewish culture instills in Jews a recognition that Jewish culture is not fixed or reified, nor limited to one social segment of the Jewish people. Rather, it is malleable and ever changing, shaped by the interaction of internal forces and external circumstances, and created by Jews through a combination of consciousness and behavior.

The multicultural model, which disputes the very idea of canon (but may also accept the concept of an open canon) and pays heed to the voices that resist and subvert authority, appears quite suitable to the diversity of Jewish patterns of behavior and thought in a post-emancipation world. It mandates willingness to acknowledge the multiplicity of Jewish voices and accept their authenticity. The multicultural model is particularly appropriate to the ambiguous position of Jews in Diaspora, who create Jewish culture

in the space between being a part of the larger society and apart from it (or, in the words of a recent book, insider/outside). The adoption of a multicultural stance, however, requires a recognition of the diversity of Jewish life as a value rather than an unfortunate fact; that is, it requires a conversion of diversity into pluralism.

Living in a multicultural society, we have the opportunity and the obligation to shape a fluid Jewish canon for our own time and for the future. Engaged with the richness of the culture we have inherited, which links us with Jews of other times and places, we must be sensitive as well to the incompleteness of our legacy, to the voices that have been suppressed (women's and others) and to the interpretations that have lacked authority. The legacy of our generation may well be a postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion and a recognition that a diverse people requires cultural diversity.

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Some Fractured Thoughts on Our Irritable Culture

Ilan Stavans

Not long ago, I was invited to be a judge with a commission to shape a list of the most influential 100 Jewish books in modern times. The group of seven judges was composed of reputable scholars, translators, and intellectuals with an international presence, each of them a polyglot with knowledge not only of Jewish culture from the Enlightenment onwards, but also familiar with biblical and talmudic texts. We were, in Paula Hyman's terminology, a bunch of "educated Jews." Our mandate raised unsettling questions: What should be defined as a Jewish book? Is the book's Jewish author reason enough to include it on the list? This, obviously, led to another contentious set of questions: Who is a Jew? Or, is it the reader rather than the author that makes a book Jewish? Soon a troublesome feeling overwhelmed me personally: What authority did we have to form this list?

The composition of the group distressed me. Only a couple of the judges were savvy in the terrain of popular culture, especially movies, TV, and comics; the rest were disdainful of anything the public identified with, a disdain that bordered on suspicion. This reaction became all the more pronounced when it came to authors mixing various media. The final list includes recognizable highlights, but it is objectionably highbrow, filled with recondite books few will dare read. Perhaps that is fine, for, no matter what people say, in the end the practice of literature is utterly elitist, done by the few for the few.

I write this preamble to express my sympathy toward Paula Hyman. The assumptions she exposes are no doubt noble ones. As a people, Jews are a diverse, heterogeneous, multicultural lot, and the core curriculum that defines that lot ought to be at once elastic and centrifugal, moving in various directions



at once, a sponge capable of absorbing fluids from distinct periods and geographies. But I also must acknowledge that Hyman's position and mine are quixotic to the bone and, as such, utterly impractical.

Among the judges charged with composing the list, familiarity with the Hebrew and Yiddish traditions, and with Eastern Europe up until the 1950s, was substantial; after all, these were their fields of expertise. But not much of their interest, let alone reverence, pointed in the direction of Africa, France, Britain, Australia, Canada, the Arab world, Argentina, Brazil, or the Caribbean, where Jews have lived for generations. Sephardic culture? It actually seemed not to exist at all, even in Israel. In the end, the list produced was so nearsightedly Eurocentric, so hyper-Ashkenazic, that it became the ghetto where Jewish educators live today, infatuated with the *shtetl* and obsessed with the Holocaust, yet oblivious to anything around and beyond them.

Hyman calls for a core curriculum that would enable Jews to be fluent in the Hebrew language, familiar with foundational texts, and knowledgeable of historical developments. I endorse the vision but I fail to understand how it will be implemented. How do we go from dream to reality? I assume Hyman envisions implementing this curriculum in day schools, supplementary school programs, high schools, and colleges. But how? The proportion of students enrolled in such programs, though growing, remains comparatively small vis-a-vis the large numbers of Jews unaffiliated with any synagogue, social, or pedagogical institution. In addition, teachers are untrained for such a task. Moreover, pop culture — especially the Internet — is what captivates the next generation.

Ours is an irritable culture, one increasingly allergic to the written word. There is much more to know today than ever before, but distractions have also multiplied rapidly and our attention span has shrunk in dramatic proportions. Perhaps even worse, the gap between the educated elite and the masses within the Jewish community is substantial. While there has always been an abyss between the ruling

rabbinical establishment and the intelligentsia, on one side, and the populace, on the other, the community's current need for leaders is marred by a widespread sense of disengagement.

More than half a century after World War II, the Jewish people in Western civilization finds itself in a climate of openness. Oppression has receded and anti-Semitism is in a quiet mood. We are finally full members of the civil society. But full membership has encouraged renunciation. The rate of material and spiritual growth among Jews, particularly in the United States, is astonishing: business opportunities have multiplied and are unrestricted; religious practices are undisturbed; and scholarship is seen as a respectable endeavor. More books by and about Jews are published today than in any previous period. But for the so-called People of the Book, the Book itself has become less consequential than ever. An alliance to Jewish culture channeled through a most rigorous learning of Jewish sources is minimal. Among Jews today, the erudite know more and more and the masses less and less. Scholars are isolated in a self-imposed ivory tower while the rest of the people indulge in instant pop satisfaction. Should this change? By all means, but my instinct tells me that it will get worse before it gets better.

After shaping a list of 100 books, an organizer asked what would be done with the final list. Insightful ideas were offered — one judge called them marketing strategies — but half or more of the judges took this to be a mundane question. This, I believe, proves Paula Hyman's final point: pluralism has brought along the debunking of authority and the rise of the "hermeneutics of suspicion." The "educated Jews" might be backed by a mountain of money, but, absent-minded as they are and utterly unconcerned with the mundane, they are inefficient in building a bridge — establishing a dialogue — with the rest of the people.

Ilan Stavans is Lewis-Sebring Professor of Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College. His latest book is On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language (Viking).

One Hundred Great Works of Modern Jewish Literature

Nancy Sherman

Jews have been known throughout history as *Am Ha Sefer*, the People of the Book. Yet the remarkable body of modern Jewish literature

produced since the Haskalah, the Enlightenment, is today largely untaught and unread. Even those familiar with classical Jewish sources and first-rate

Jewish nonfiction have read few works of the modern Jewish imagination — our great fiction, poetry, drama, and memoir.

The challenge is to reintegrate this powerful literature into daily Jewish life and draw out its relevance. Our own books can provide answers to the passionate questions that lie at the heart of all great literature: Who am I? Where did I come from? How shall I live? In the words of Ruth Wisse, "Modern Jewish literature is the repository of modern Jewish experience. It is the most complete way of knowing the inner life of the Jews."

The list of 100 Great Modern Jewish Books recently compiled by the National Yiddish Book Center is, unabashedly, a program intended to attract attention — not to the Center, nor to the list's eminent panel of judges (Glenda Abramson, Robert Alter, Gershon Shaked, Ilan Stavans, Kenneth Turan, and Ruth Wisse) — but to the power of Jewish literature and its potential to change our lives. It is intended to entice Jews into reading their own story as told by them and for them. By identifying these 100 great books, the judges set forth a discrete body of work, a modern canon, that will serve as both a record and a resource. The goal of the list? To arouse interest and debate within the Jewish community, and to re-direct Jewish readers to their own literary heritage and thence to new sources of creativity and self-understanding.

The books on the list are in English, Yiddish, Hebrew, Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Italian. These works depict Jews confronting modernity at every possible juncture: in peace, war, poverty, wealth, love, and death. What unites them imaginatively is their deliberate, explicit depiction of Jewish experience or Jewish sensibility.

The Great Jewish Books list is just a beginning. The program also intends to help teachers bring these modern literary marvels into the classroom accompanied by curricular materials. The list will serve as the basis for the Center's on-demand publishing program, which will reissue selected out-of-print titles. Readings, conferences, teacher training programs, book clubs, and other initiatives are being planned, all using the 100 titles as the starting point.

Nancy Sherman is vice president of the National Yiddish Book Center and editor of Pakn Treger, the Center's English-language magazine.

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The Chosen One Hundred: A Study in Jewish Elitism

Mik Moore

Ours is a culture obsessed with lists. Personally, I blame David Letterman, although his nightly Top Ten List remains among the most entertaining two minutes on television. Ever since Letterman began his list, American popular culture has become fascinated with this particular act of numeracy. This frenzy has led to the inevitable: a television show on VH1 called *The List*, the sole purpose of which is to create and then refine variously categorized lists of songs.

The Academy has long favored lists, where they are referred to as canons. Unlike the lists found in popular culture, which are created for fun and are typically harmless, canons can be dangerous. During the past thirty years, the civil rights, feminist, and LGBT movements have developed a critique of canons that I find persuasive. To summarize, canons are

created to provide the measure of what counts as “good” and important in a field. They have moral and ethical force. Canons are exclusive, entrenched, enduring, and self-perpetuating. And they enshrine traditional ideas about what makes for “greatness.” Almost unfailingly, “greatness” largely excludes society’s marginalized groups.

Jewish writers continue to be excluded from the traditional canon of “great” literature. Many Jews have reacted to this exclusion by developing or embracing the critique of canons. The National Yiddish Book Center has responded to Jewish exclusion by practicing Jewish exclusion. The Chosen 100 is the functional equivalent of exclusive Jewish social clubs, created to mirror their exclusive Christian counter-

parts. Just as these Jewish clubs are not open to all Jews, this canon is not open to all Jewish writers.

The primary goal of the Chosen 100, according to Nancy Sherman, is getting Jews to read Jewish literature. This is commendable but unexceptional. It would be great if more Jews read Jewish literature; as Ruth Wisse notes, “Jewish literature is the repository of the modern Jewish experience.” It would also be great if more non-Jews read

Jewish literature. However, encouraging Jewish literacy in modern texts does not depend upon the creation of a canon. I suspect that Sherman’s laudable goal may be of lesser importance to some of the canonites who savor the permanency of placing their favorite works between hard covers.

Why should four men and two women be empowered to select our communal reading list? If the Chosen 100

were merely being published for fun, like Rob Fleming’s endless lists in Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*, it would be difficult to object. But to set out deliberately to create a canon of modern Jewish literature, supported by Jewish communal resources, is wrongheaded. Perhaps we can refrain — just this once — from aping our Christian neighbors in their determination to judge and then separate the elite from the chaf. Let not the excluded become the excluders.

Mik Moore is Political Director for New York City Councilman James Sanders, Jr. From 1996 to 1998 he was Executive Director of the Jewish Student Press Service and Editor of New Voices.

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Reading in the Heart

Barry W. Holtz

It is no small irony, given the tangled events of our time, that the origin of the phrase “People of the Book,” used so frequently by Jews about themselves, is often attributed to a comment made by Muhammad in the Koran. We see ourselves as we are seen by others, either for good or for ill. And in this case, at least, the phrase has worn well and we’ve been pleased by it. Jews, we like to think, are great readers — whether that reading comes from the classic library of our people’s past or in its newer more secularized form, off the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Is reading some odd artifact of our inherited past, built into us like a genetic marker? Or is it a sociological phenomenon of a few generations of strivers looking to make it in the brave new world of modernity, a vestigial behavior destined to fade away now that we’ve joined the privileged classes?

If this comes from our past, we must consider if what our ancestors engaged in was “reading.” Is the study of Bible commentaries the same as reading a good novel? Is poring over a few lines of Talmud like picking up David McCullough’s recent biography of John Adams, as no doubt thousands of American Jews did last summer? Someone once told me that when Random House decided to publish the Steinsalz edition of the Talmud in English, one of the editors imagined being on the shuttle from New York to Washington and walking down the aisle as rows of flying commuters were busily “reading” their Talmud volumes! Sorry, it just doesn’t work like that. For Jews in the past (and for significant numbers today as well), the real enterprise was not *reading* but *learning*. Often done out loud, often with a study partner in a noisy room. It wasn’t the hushed library, but the din of the *beit midrash*, the study hall, that was the environment in which this kind of “reading” took place.

The real point is not the difference between an-

cient and contemporary reading. What counts is the romance with the words on the page. Is that bred into our bones? By nature or nurture, by genes or by culture — we are in love with words. It is the punning of Groucho Marx and the poetry of Stanley Kunitz, a recent United States Poet Laureate. It is Harold Bloom on Shakespeare and Woody Allen on New York. Was anyone really surprised when Tom Stoppard, that most linguistically dexterous of con-

temporary playwrights, turned out to be Jewish, something Stoppard only discovered recently when he learned about his family’s hidden past as escapees from the Holocaust? The old and new reading come together — bound up on the page, in the black squiggles and white spaces that make up the reader’s text. How new media in this new century will change this remains a question. But, re-

markably, up until now computer technology seems to have generated more printed pages, not fewer. It looks as if books and reading are going to be with us for a good long time, despite dire predictions to the contrary.

As an educator, I’ve often thought that Jews have missed the boat on one of the crucial aspects of Jewish education. We’ve neglected to demonstrate how a good schooling experience (in either all-day or serious supplementary schools) prepares us for *all kinds of secular* learning. Studying classic Jewish books trains the mind in crucial ways: for close reading, for backing up one’s statements with evidence from the sources, for careful argumentation, for the appreciation of detail, and for the ability to generalize from the specific. The study of Torah, when done well, is about all those things. Is it any surprise, therefore, that we’ve nurtured generations of Jewish lawyers, judges, scientists, and literary critics with that kind of early molding? A surgeon friend of mine told me that he decided *not* to go into internal medi-

*Is the romance
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cine as a specialty because he had done enough of that in his youth in *yeshiva*!

But, of course, this form of study is about something more than “training the mind”—it’s also about a spiritual nourishment, a focus on meaning and meaningfulness. It is reading in the deepest sense of the word. It is reading in the heart. What could be a better preparation for a

child’s future? Or a better way for any of us to read?

Barry W. Holtz teaches at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. His book Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts, is used in many university and adult education courses. He has recently completed a book about teaching and learning the Bible.

What Is Jewish Poetry?

Rodger Kamenetz

“Jewish” in Jewish poetry is a feeling, not a *halakha*. It is a certain rootedness and connectedness in terms of sensibility, language, identification—perhaps all of these. Jewish has to go deep—it has to get into the rhythm of the poem. As my friend, the late poet, Rose Drachler wrote in a review, “a person walks black, a person jokes Jewish.” You can’t fake it.

Anthologists are provisional canon makers. Some anthologists take the exterior approach. Jewish poetry is poetry written by Jews. This, however, immediately embroils you in the “Who is a Jew? question.” And the exterior approach is trivial. Allen Ginsberg died a Buddhist, but can we really deny he was a Jewish poet? His “Kaddish” actually borrows Aramaic rhythms. Can you go any deeper in a poet’s guts than rhythm? Jewish practice has nothing to do with the question. And despite what New York thinks, neither does locale. Great Jewish poets live all over: Jacquie Osherow in Salt Lake City, Rick Chess in Asheville—all part of the academic Diaspora.

My friend Steve Stern proposes a direct test, a Jew-o-meter. Like the old applause-o-meter on “Queen for a Day.” It’s purely intuitive. You attach electrodes to the poems and see where the needle swims. Gerald Stern—buried. Irene Klepfisz—off the charts. Maxine Kumin—maybe the needle quivers a *bissel*. The Jew-o-meter experiment suggests that Jewish poetry is not about the author. What makes a poem Jewish? There must be some inner structure of Jewish poetry beyond nostalgia for Shabbes candles, or bubbe and zadye, something tougher, more enduring, more inward.

One mark of Jewish poetry is metonymy as opposed to metaphor. Technically, metonymy is when a part refers to a whole, e.g. “the pen is mightier than the sword.” Metonymy is when the plain humble

object contains sufficient meaning and resonance that it doesn’t have to do double duty by referring to another plane of reality. Rather, the humble object, the particular bush, hill, or subway station is already seen as somehow intrinsically connected to a great depth. There aren’t two planes of reality as in metaphor. It’s all one. It’s like how we bless our bread: In one sentence, we address a humble crust drawn out of the earth and *Melekh haOlam*. The bread isn’t a metaphor—as when Jesus tells his disciples, “this is my body.” No, the bread is an example of how we are connected to God.

Another instance, in a poem by Yehudah Amichai: “I walked through the iron door marked Emergency.” It is an actual steel door he’s pushing through in an auditorium, and yet the larger meaning is also present. Compare that to Andrew Marvell’s “to tear with rough strife/ through the iron gates of life.” The iron gates here are purely symbolic, mythical. No real gates.

Jewish thought is profoundly anti-mythic, and therefore the metaphor, which is a sort of mini-myth, is less valued than the metonym. This metonymic tendency is rooted in the Torah and Torah culture. It’s a certain *tam*, a certain taste. It accounts for the plainness of Charles Reznikoff and Philip Levine, the wild humor of Gerry Stern and Allen Ginsberg, the out-and-out bluntness and directness of many Jewish poets. The love of fact, the love of truth even if the truth hurts.

Jewish thought distrusts metaphor as a pagan flight of fancy: our Mt. Zion is a hill, our valley of the giants is at most a boulevard in Jerusalem. Even our theophanies—Mt. Sinai excepted—are pretty low key. Avram meets an angel, who might just be a person. Moses first sees God in a burning bush, a humble *sneh*. Compare that to the ancient Greeks,

where Zeus appears, on a simple adulterous mission, as a shower of gold.

There are, then, many marks of Jewish poetry: bluntness, humor, metonymy, prose rhythms. They indicate a central impulse. The seal of Jewish poetry is truth. It goes back to the fact that our national epic, the Torah, is written largely in prose and presents itself as nonfiction. We like it plain, not fancy — real, not exaggerated.

The question, “what is Jewish poetry?” does not concern only poets. In fact, I would say we tend to state the proposition backwards. Jewish literature is not literature written by Jews. Rather, we are Jews — all of us — only insofar as there is a Jewish literature. This is really the significance of Jewish poetry. The Jews, as Muhammad observed shrewdly, are the “People of the Book.” We are a people because of a book, a particular book with a particular compressed metonymic style. This gives us, as we say in our prayers, a unique destiny, a unique fate. It

gives our ethnicity a distinctly literary quality. And it means our poetry can renew our sense of being Jews. That’s why it’s a shame so few Jews read Jewish poetry.

The French poet Stephane Mallarmé dreamed of writing a grand work he called “*le livre*,” a book so grand he imagined that “everything in the world exists to end up” in it. No Jewish poet would have such a dream because if there is such a book, we believe, our God has already written it. That leaves us with different work to do. Whether we accept or reject the Torah, believe or disbelieve, we know our efforts come at the tail end of thousands of years of tradition. Whatever Jewish poets write “exists to end up” — as *midrash*.

Rodger Kamenetz is a widely anthologized poet, author of The Missing Jew: New and Selected Poems (Time Being). He's at work on a new book of poems, Grandfather Clause. He is poetry editor of the Forward.

What's In and What's Not: Anthologizing Jewish Literature

Samuel Apple

As most American liberal arts students know, a Norton Anthology is not just another anthology. More than any other imprint, the Norton name gives a collection canonical status. If a work is included in a Norton, it's not just good literature; it's literature that defines a historic moment; literature that will last.

And, as most American liberal arts graduates of the past two decades know, the very idea of a literary canon has become highly contentious in academic circles. Frustrated by having to teach primarily the works of white men, a growing number of English professors on the left began to question the usefulness of an institutional literary hierarchy. Others acknowledged the inevitability of a canon but asked not only who decides which books become canonical, but also on what criteria these decisions are made. How, these critics wanted to know, could a collection of literary works claim to define a historical epoch while leaving out the voices of women and minorities?

For better or for worse, then, the appearance of a new Norton anthology has become as much a political as a literary event. Caught in the middle of canon wars, the editors at Norton came up with a

creative solution: Rather than dwell on the inadequacies of previous volumes, they would create new canons (and new sources of revenue, of course) by putting the Norton seal of approval on anthologies of writing by minorities. The strategy seemed to be working. In 1997, Norton published a volume of African American literature to much fanfare and rave reviews. After all, who needs to be a part of the “Great Western Canon” when you can have your own great canon?

On the heels of the success of the African American anthology, Norton released *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* in 2001. Edited by four Jewish academics, Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, the 1,221-page tome spans four centuries and includes a wide array of works by lesser-known Jewish writers who have never before been anthologized. And so in addition to the contemporary giants, such as Roth, Bellow, and Malamud, we also have newly translated Yiddish short stories and obscure letters, such as Rebecca Samuel's late-18th-century notes to her parents on Jewish life in America.

And yet, unlike the African American anthology, almost no one seems to have noticed this in-



credibly impressive and comprehensive Jewish American collection. Even the Jewish press seems to have ignored its arrival. Granted, the African American volume had the name of Harvard's Henry Louis Gates, Jr. behind it. But Gates' fame alone cannot explain the disparity in the reception of the two books.

The anthology of Jewish American literature has received so little attention for the simple reason that it lacks the political punch of the African American volume. In the preface to the African American anthology, Gates presents the collection as a 2,000-page rebuke to centuries of racist theories of African inferiority. The Jewish American anthology, by contrast, can only be thought of as a celebration of the Jewish American success story. The volume begins with a petition for equal rights for Jews addressed to the Director General and Council of New Netherlands, March 14, 1656. And, as Harvard Professor Ruth Wisse wrote in one of the few published reviews of

the anthology, it was "a request that ... has been honored for almost 350 years."

But if a Jewish American Norton doesn't have the same political reverberations as an African American Norton, it doesn't mean there's nothing to fight about. In the above-mentioned review, Wisse angrily accuses the editors of the anthology of ignoring American Jewish religious thought, even while expanding the definition of literature to include Jewish songs and jokes. Of course, as Wisse knows, anthologies by their very nature reflect biases.

Norton may have solved the problem of excluding entire races or ethnicities, but exclusion, in one form or another, is still their business.

Samuel Apple, a member of the Sh'ma Advisory Board, is the former editor of New Voices, the national magazine for Jewish college students. A graduate student at Columbia University, he works as a freelance writer in New York City.

E-Books: A Solution in Search of a Problem?

Constance Devanthery-Lewis

Fall of 1999: The publishing world was abuzz with the promise of electronic publishing. The Internet Revolution, gathering speed, was transforming business — blowing up the value chain, rewriting the rules. It seemed inevitable that all media would be eclipsed by interactive access to digital information. Two new companies joined the explosion of start-ups with the promise of making books — those static, stodgy icons of a pre-Internet universe — available anywhere, anytime, at the click of a mouse. Within the same three-month period, Softbook and Nuvomedia offered dedicated, handheld devices designed to make ubiquitous electronic books, magazines, and news. In a flash, e-book "readers" were springing up from all parts, each with its proprietary — though not necessarily distinctive — look, feel, and format, and each with its aggressive campaign to acquire a critical mass of high-impact content. The format wars were on.

Fall of 2001: Stephen King's "Riding the Bullet" came, conquered, and disappeared. Of the dozens of e-publishing start-ups that had so recently bloomed, only a handful are left standing.

What went wrong?

In short, too much solution, not enough problem. The number of potential customers for e-books is still small, and the industry itself has thrown up significant barriers to its growth. The potential here is vast, but the market is unlikely to grow significantly until some fundamental issues have been resolved.

Format wars: E-publishing has been, from its inception, marked by a competition between formats. Limited content is available in each format, forcing customers to maintain multiple reading formats and content libraries. A larger, more fundamental problem is the overall confusing and off-putting "Tower of Babel" effect of so many formats, devices, readers, and browsers — each imperfect in its own way.

Copyright issues: Because it's so easy to exchange data on the Internet, we've seen a number of egregious challenges to copyright law. To the extent that publishers and authors perceive a high risk of piracy, they hold back from making content available, and the legitimate industry suffocates.

Pricing: From its inception, the Internet has fostered the notion that digital content should be free. So much is available for free that there is significant

price resistance, and publishers of quality content have, until now, been loathe to sell electronic products at much lower prices than their print counterparts for fear of cannibalizing (diverting sales of) their print products.

Lack of content: At a certain moment in the development of a new medium there is a serendipitous confluence of appealing format and availability of content, and the market takes off, reinforcing that current and transforming it into a *tsunami*. This has clearly not happened in the e-book industry. A critical mass has yet to be reached and the marketplace suffers from lack of content. Publishers are skittish about investing significantly to convert to multiple imperfect formats, and there has been no public cry for the best-of-breed product.

Lack of compelling value: This is the toughest barrier of all. While digital media promise significant advantages over their print counterparts, they have yet to deliver, except in small niche markets. None of the promises of speed to market, inexpen-

sive production, superior functionality, ease of access — the list goes on — have proven compelling enough for large numbers of people to give up books and take up reading on their computers or PDAs.

Some types of digital content like encyclopedias, travel guides, and other reference materials, have been readily adopted by the public because of their vastly superior searchability, portability, and low prices. But average readers have yet to be convinced. They find books and magazines to be very satisfactory purveyors of content. Books are compact, portable, and easy to read. They are easily purchased and look good on the shelf or coffee table. Until e-books can meet or exceed those standards — or offer some alternative, strongly compelling value — they are likely to remain a solution in search of a problem.

Constance Devanthery-Lewis is Managing Editor of the Harvard Business School Press. She has worked on numerous e-publishing projects and has been instrumental in building HBS Press's digital offering.

The Future of the Book for the People of the Book

Ellen Frankel

Many centuries ago, Jewish reading was revolutionized by the invention of a radical new technology: the codex, the forerunner of the modern book. Unlike the parchment scroll that it replaced everywhere but in synagogue ritual, the codex had individual leaves that permitted the reader to cross-cut from one section of content to another, breaking out of the straitjacket of linear form. The invention of the printing press brought another revolution to Jewish reading, making holy books — and later secular ones — available to the whole community (not just the wealthy and the scholarly), and standardizing the formats of Jewish texts (especially the Talmud and commentaries) so that they became as canonical as their contents. Just as the codex transformed the parchment scroll into a holy relic, so the printing press transformed the hand-written manuscript into a scholarly artifact.

Are we now at the threshold of a third technological revolution in Jewish reading: the e-book (or should I say, *e-sefer*)? Or are electronic books only a

variation on an old theme, a distinction without a meaningful difference? Are we looking at the end of the printed word on paper, or is this just a passing fad?

At this early stage of electronic publishing, it's hard to call. Many decry the prediction that books are a dying species. They argue that nothing will be able to substitute for the feel of an old-fashioned book. How can you take an e-book to bed with you or to the beach? How can bytes and pixels replace the palpable feel of paper or the serious heft of a *chumash*? And how long can you stare at a computer screen before your eyes go out of focus? At this point, electronic print lacks the sharp resolution of print on a page.

On the other hand, some hail the electronic revolution as a great boon to readers, especially Jewish ones. Like the Internet itself, which has democratized access to information and resources, so too electronic publishing can potentially free authors and readers from the control of the publishing industry. Without the need to produce physical books, publishing be-



comes much cheaper. Authors can even become their own publishers, typesetting and designing their books on their desktops and then emailing them to their readers. Consumers can eliminate all the middlemen that inflate book prices: publishing companies, warehouses, wholesalers, brick-and-mortar bookstores (with their fancy cappuccino machines). Instead, authors can transmit their texts directly to readers with no need for intermediaries. Kind of like talking to God without benefit of clergy. What could be more Jewish than that?

Furthermore, e-books have qualitative advantages over printed books. Unlike the latter, which are frozen in form and content as soon as they leave the press, e-books remain elastic, potentially expandable through hyperlinks (textual, audio, video). Authors need not remain separate from their readers, but can interact with them on-line and even incorporate their input into their texts. And e-books are also collapsible and detachable; teachers can cut and paste excerpts to create their own customized textbooks or use only parts of books for which they pay the publisher and/or author by the word.

What is missing in all this razzle-dazzle of technology is selectivity, the hand of a discern-

ing editor. In this respect the nay-sayers are correct: Without quality control, it doesn't matter whether a book is produced on parchment, papyrus, paper, or pixels. These function solely as vehicles for a message.

But vehicles vary in how effectively they convey us: Cars leave horse-carts in the dust. And e-books outdistance their print counterparts in their *interconnectivity*. Just as the rabbinic sages spoke to each other across the centuries on the pages of the Talmud, so electronic books can also speak to each other — across time, space, media, and formats. Once separated from each other by their bindings, books in electronic form become permeable, networked together in a potentially limitless library.

Is this good or bad for the Jews? Only time will tell, but I'm optimistic about what electronic publishing will mean for Jewish study. The rest will be commentary.

Dr. Ellen Frankel is currently the CEO and Editor-in-Chief of The Jewish Publication Society. Her published books include The Classic Tales, The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols, The Five Books of Miriam, and The Jewish Spirit. Dr. Frankel travels widely as a storyteller, lecturer, and scholar-in-residence.

E-Books and the Jewish Market

Stuart M. Matlins

The promise of e-books remains to be fulfilled. I can't tell if it is truly "a solution in search of a problem," or a problem of my own limited vision. Vision problems come with age, and they may impact my openness to new technologies as well. At Jewish Lights, we came close to the edge of initiating an e-book project a year ago and then realized there were more immediate and productive uses of our resources. We still hang on that edge, and I suspect there are a great many other publishers in the same position.

The larger issue is: What is the active and potential market for Jewish-interest books? Whatever the size of that market, e-books are but a very small subset of it. While I don't have the slightest idea of the market for e-books, I know for certain that the market for Jewish-interest books is relatively small,

although it appears to be growing for the kinds of books published by Jewish Lights. As e-books are but a small subset of a small market, I do not expect Jewish-interest e-books to become broadly available over the next few years.

My guess is that e-books will serve the Jewish community best by making available valuable works, particularly scholarly material that would be otherwise out of print, and by making available reference works in an economical form. A very small market, this would nonetheless be a valuable contribution to the Jewish community. For the foreseeable future, Jewish-interest e-books will be a supplement to bound books on paper, not a substitute.

Stuart M. Matlins is the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Jewish Lights Publishing in Woodstock, VT.

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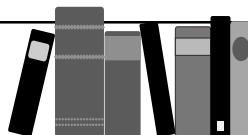
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Creating lists of books, as many of our writers in this issue note, can be risky. There is the temptation to willfully create columns of "in" and "out." Trying to avoid such categories, *Sh'ma* set about to compile several independent lists drawn by a diverse group of readers that represent only the choices of these particular individuals. *Sh'ma* asked several editors of Jewish publications, and others who work intimately with books, to choose ten books that they think should be on a Jewish book shelf. Our shelves happily sag with the weight of many books, and we are not promoting some titles over others. But we wanted to bring to you an unusual array of possibilities for your next visit to the library or bookstore. Space does not permit us to include the lists here, but they may be found on www.shma.com. The lists include many predictables as well as several surprises. A list of children's reading is also included. Thank you to our list-makers: **Nina Beth Cardin**, former editor of *Sh'ma*; **Amy Tobin**, artistic director of The Hub in San Francisco; **Thane Rosenbaum**, author of several books, including *Second Hand Smoke* and *The Golems of Gotham*, and the literary editor at *Tikkun*; **Stuart Schoffman**, Associate Editor of the *Jerusalem Report*; **Robert Bleiweiss**, Editor of the *Jewish Spectator Magazine*; **Kathy Bloomfield**, the Book Club Editor for *Babaganewz Magazine*; and **Andrew Silow-Carroll**, Managing Editor of the *Forward*.

"To be sure, many modern-day book clubs are driven by high-profile television personalities whose suggestions lead viewers to hit their local bookstores' best-seller shelves. But the latest surge in Jewish book clubs is significantly greater than merely a reaction to book publishers' mass-marketing efforts." For more of Carole Curtis' essay, "The Virtue of Book Clubs" go to www.shma.com.

"By Failing to Plan..."

...you are planning to fail!" This was Benjamin Franklin's warning to people who neglected the most basic element of planning. This is especially true when it comes to planning the disposition of what one has spent a lifetime accumulating—one's estate. It's hard to believe that more than 60% of Americans die without a will, the most basic tool of estate planning.

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Joseph becomes the first Jewish creative writer by revealing the story hidden within the dreams of the baker and the butler. Interpretations may ultimately belong to God, but we work our way up to them through our very human stories. It all began with Abraham who, after almost sacrificing his son, dreamed of telling stories not tied to a particular conclusion. Sarah had the foresight to see that character, motive, and even accountability in a narrative could be trivialized by staying with a single ending.

Joseph, as an ancient progenitor to modern psychology, further understood that dreams are never random, but an indicator of the human condition. Throughout the ages, Jews have woken up “with fallen faces,” instinctively seeking interpretations to quiet our fears, to give us strength to move forward. Joseph, as master of Jewish narrative art, is the father of *midrash*; he established one mode of Jewish survival. Stories save lives. And imagination is the key to our continuity as well as a holy conduit to God.

Judith Bolton Fasman edits *JBooks.com*, an on-line book-review site and member of the *Jewz.com* Media Network.

Joseph is not so much a creative writer as an oracle. The dreams, after all, are not his own. Nor are the interpretations. Joseph is simply acting as a Divine conduit — as do all writers, or so we like to think.

Writing is like prayer. Anybody can do it, at any time. But without pure intention and devout concentration, a prayer is just a string of words. So too is an uninspired piece of writing. A grocery list is created with the same alphabet as a novel. But with intention and concentration, and if the stars align, a writer indeed feels as if he or she has tapped into the Divine. As if the prayer has gotten through, and been answered. It doesn't happen often enough (to me, at least). It can be encouraged but not forced — much like a dream. After all, what is a dream? It is, like the best writing, a truth that the conscious mind could never produce.

Stephen J. Dubner, the author of *Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family*, is writing a memoir of hero-worship.

Joseph not only interpreted dreams; he crafted his stories to provide himself with an advantageous role. Sometimes it was a starring role,

sometimes a supporting one. Joseph, the Hebrew in a foreign culture, showed that anyone — even an immigrant — could offer expanded expressions and meanings in confusing times. In America, the most popular Jewish authors continue the tradition and follow Joseph's example. They are our modern *midrash*-makers. They interpret our lives, respond to the currents of the dominant culture, and dream new dreams; they also insert themselves, the Jewish character, into the tale and its solution. They create a new culture, just as Joseph created a new order and a role for himself in Mitzrayim.

Joseph languished in prison for two years after his cellmates were released. Perhaps we learn that we cannot rely solely on our dream interpreters, our authors, whether they be Roth, Potok, Goodman, Englander, or Ozick. Like Portnoy, we might need to take interpretation and creativity into our own hands.

Larry Mark is a resident of New York City and editor of www.MyJewishBooks.com, www.SeferSafari.com, www.JewishFilm.com, and www.Tzedaka.Org

ויאמרו אליו חלום חלמנו ופתר אין אתו ויאמר אלהם
יוסף הלוא לאלהים פתרנים ספרו-נא לי. בראשית מ:ח

And they said to him, “We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it.” And Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, I beg you.” *Genesis 40:8*

Joseph finds his cell-mates, the baker and the butler, “sad” and with “fallen faces” — not because of bad dreams, but because, for the dreams, “there is no interpreter,” no one to give meaning to the confounding images assaulting them. Later, Pharaoh is also tormented because there is “no interpreter.”

For the butler, the baker, and for Pharaoh, Joseph becomes the first Jewish creative writer, the first Jew to use narrative art as a way to interpret strange and frightening events. Throughout Jewish history, confusion and disaster generate Jewish narrative art. *Midrash* offers context for the destruction of the Temple. Lurianic Kabbalah explains the expulsion from Spain. Today it's our Jewish fiction writers who tell stories that respond to our contemporary bewilderment. Whether it's because of the Holocaust, or violence in Israel, or our fractured American Jewish identities, we wake up with fallen faces, and ask, “what's the interpretation?” Writers tell stories and offer some answers.

Rabbi Philip Graubart is Director of Education and Programming at the National Yiddish Book Center. He's published two works of fiction, *My Dinner with Michael Jackson*, and *Planet of the Jews*. His third book, *My Mother's Song*, will be published this spring.

*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for “let us hear.”

Promoting Literacy as a Communal Norm

Maurice S. Corson

Predictions regarding the world of Jewish books are risky. During the past 100 years, Yiddish rose only to decline as a literary language. Once the language of millions of Jews, it survives as a spoken tongue only among the ultra-Orthodox who disdain its secular legacy. At the same time, Hebrew, long the language of prayer and piety, was reborn as the modern language of millions of largely secular Israelis.

As a young rabbinical student in the 1950s, I eagerly looked forward to receiving the Jewish Publication Society's annual catalogue. JPS was the major source for serious books of Jewish content; few other sources existed. Today virtually every university press and secular publisher includes an extensive list of fiction and nonfiction Jewish books in its catalogue. More Jewish books are now published by non-Jewish publishing houses and the university presses than by Jewish publishers. Because Jews buy and read more books than their neighbors, and Jewish subjects are of great interest to non-Jews, publishers are keen to enter this lucrative market. Regrettably, quality is not necessarily the key to commercial success and, worthy books of Jewish interest are often overlooked. The success of publishing houses such as Artscroll and Jewish Lights is evidence of emerging niches such as the resurgent Orthodox community and the growing interest in spirituality among liberal Jews.

As the Jewish community shifts its attention from external threats to strengthening Jewish identity, the question of the future relationship between the "People of the Book" and Jewish books becomes paramount. While Jews continue their historic love affair with books, what passes as Jewish literature can be confusing and of dubious quality. Books like Ruth Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon* can serve as a helpful guide. The Jewish Book Council, through its sponsorship of Jewish Book Month, the National Jewish Book Awards, its expansion of the Jewish Book Fairs network, and publication of Jewish Book World, tries to bring great books to the attention of Jewish readers. A website where readers can learn about and purchase books of Jewish interest is on the JBC agenda. Another website that publishes book reviews, author interviews, and essays about books is www.JBooks.com, published by Jewish Family & Life!

How else can we promote books and literacy? Jewish Book Month should be transformed into a month-long literary festival with synagogues and organizations

sponsoring their own mini-Jewish book fairs. We need to support gifting and reading Jewish books as a communal norm. Book discussion groups should be encouraged, and libraries should arrange special programs and displays for the month.

Twenty-first-century Judaism will be shaped by social and historic forces presently unknown or unseen. Our current condition gives us reason for both optimism and concern. Jews now enjoy unprecedented freedom, prosperity, and creativity. Isaiah Berlin taught us, however, that desirable values are not internally consistent. "Some of the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss." Arnold Eisen and Stephen M. Cohen write about the "sovereignty of the self" in American Jewish life that underscores the choice between two "goods": the preservation of communal norms versus autonomy. Israel too, must make choices between conflicting "goods": namely, how to honor Jewish tradition and faith while being a secular democratic society. The role of Jewish books in framing these issues is crucial. Witness three recent examples: Yoram Hazony's *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul*, Eisen and Cohen's *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America*, and Samuel G. Freedman's *Jew vs. Jew*. Each book addresses conflict confronting contemporary Jewry.

Despite the availability of Jewish books on virtually every subject, Leon Wieseltier calls this "an age of unvetted Jewish illiteracy." The only corrective is the reordering of our public and private priorities in favor of making Jewish literacy a *sine qua non* for every Jew. The increase in Jewish day schools, adult Jewish learning, and innovative educational programs offer some basis for hope. Central to this effort is the trend toward the study of traditional Jewish texts. The seriousness and durability of these hopeful developments has yet to be tested. However, one thing is certain, Jewish books will remain indispensable as we work to secure the Jewish future.

Rabbi Maurice S. Corson is President of the Jewish Book Council. He is the founding President and President Emeritus of the Wexner Foundation. He serves on the Executive Committee of the American Pardes Foundation. He has been Director of Development of B'nai Brith International and has served pulpits in Seattle, Baltimore, and New Jersey.

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