From Knowledge Culture to Discourse Culture: The Changing Mission of Judaica Libraries

Moshe Rosman

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The numerous competing definitions of culture testify that like many of the concepts vital to our lives—love, truth, education, nation, money—culture is difficult to define. We all use the term casually and we are sure that "we know it when we see it." Yet, once we try to think about culture rigorously we quickly discover that any definition we proffer is inadequate and incomplete—and bound to be contested.

Conversely, however, most attempts at definition do capture some aspect of what our experience of culture is all about. Each definition can help us at least partially clarify what we mean when we talk about culture and how our concept of culture plays a role in mediating our negotiation with the real world we face every day. The way we think about culture has an effect on how we construct our lives.

It also affects how we construct our buildings. I want to begin by concentrating on a definition of culture that I believe has been a key to conceptualizing and realizing academic libraries, including the Judaica ones among them.

Creator: PixelsAway

Knowledge Culture

Since the Enlightenment, at least, one notion of culture has been that culture is the product of knowledge. Knowledge produces culture. Once Adam and Eve tasted of the fruit of the tree of knowledge they were on the path of creating culture. Following the biblical narrative: first clothing, then a family, then tools to create other implements of culture, then musical instruments and the music they play, then institutions like cities; and of course, ideals and values such as being your brother's keeper and wanting to achieve and reach the sky—all of these based on a growing fund of experience and knowledge.

If culture is the product of knowledge then the amount and quality of the knowledge that catalyzes the creation of a component of culture is a key criterion by which to measure the result. The higher the quality of the knowledge that creates the culture; the denser that knowledge is, the more sophisticated, specialized, even rarefied it is; the more valuable and valued it is—the better the culture that it shapes.
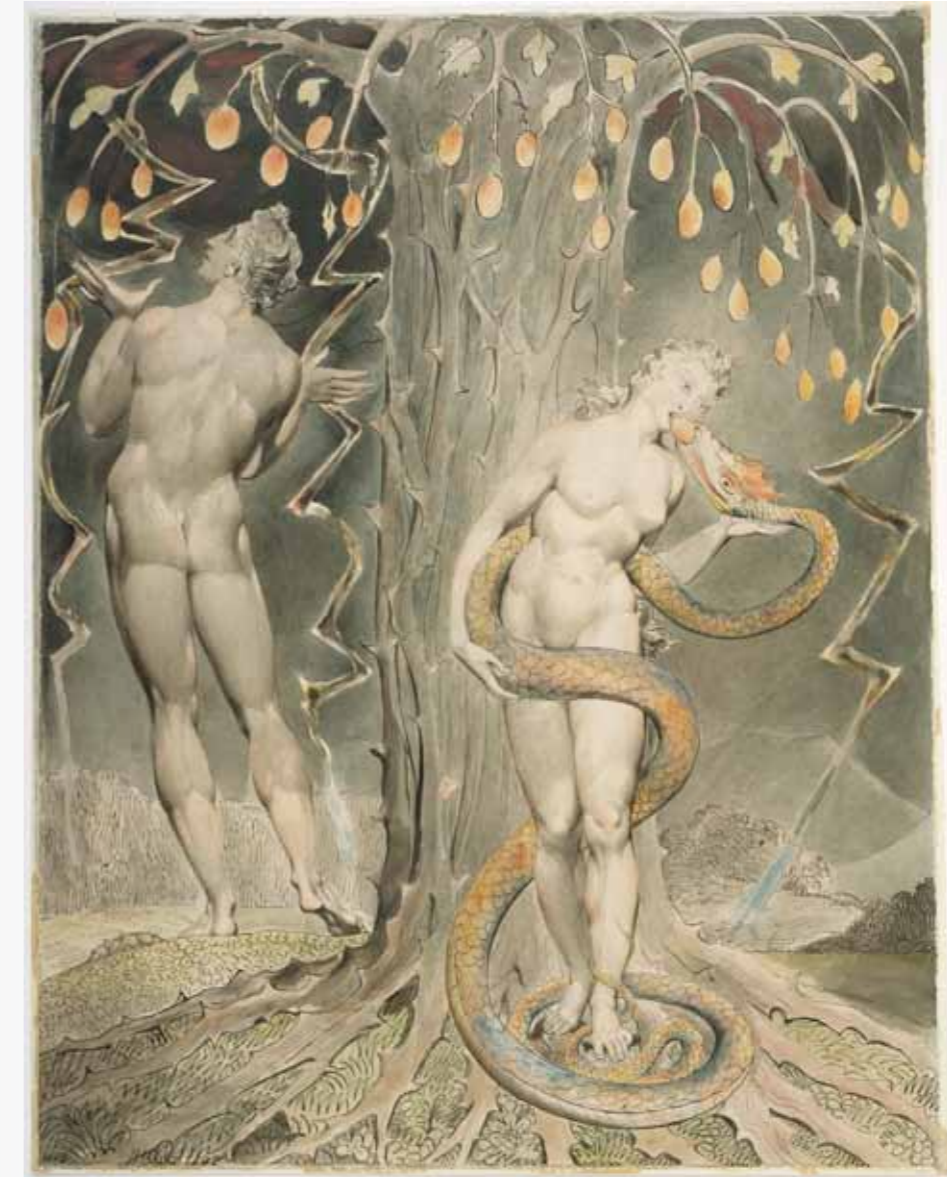
The Temptation and Fall of Eve, Illustration to Milton's Paradise Lost. Creator: William Blake

The best culture is the culture that reflects the most knowledge and the hardest-to-master knowledge. This is so-called high culture, the culture of the muses: literature, art, music, dance, drama, scholarship, science and technology.

This culture is rationed by an economy of knowledge and skills. Access to this culture is restricted. Only those with the requisite time, money and opportunity can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to understand, foster or create such culture. The members of this highly educated elite are the full partners in this culture. They determine its canons. They cultivate it. They perform it.

Others are cultural spectators. They can watch the players, enjoy what they do, maybe even learn from what the players do; but they aren't playing the game. It is the cultural elite that owns what we might call "knowledge culture."

Minerva and the Nine Muses. Creator: Henrich Van Ballen

The Architecture of Knowledge Culture

Since by its very nature access to it is restricted, it comes as no surprise that knowledge culture has traditionally been housed in quasi-Temples or Palaces of Culture. Access to a temple or palace is strictly regulated, limited to those with special elite qualifications.

For those who do not belong to the elite, admission is on a "need-to-be-there" basis. Visitors are allowed in for a defined period of time and permitted to enter only a few well-marked areas. They often feel disoriented, "lost," in such places, requiring the guidance of members of the elite to help them get their bearings.

In part this is because the typically monumental architecture of these buildings is calculated to instill in the occasional visitor humility, decorum, respect and admiration—for the building itself, for its rightful denizens and for the culture it contains. By contrast those privileged to live or work there, can feel that they share in the power and pride that the architecture of the building projects. The distinction between the diffidence and reserve of the occasional visitor and the easy familiarity with the grand building on the part of its habitués is a powerful affirmation of the membership of the latter in the cultural elite.

Paris Opera House. Photograph: Peter Rivera CC BY SA 2.0

Chicago Art Institute. Photograph: Pintogris CC BY SA 3.0

Bolshoi Ballet. Photograph: Williamborg CC BY SA 3.0

Knowledge Culture as the Source of a Secular Creed

Cultivating knowledge culture is not an idle pastime. The culture on display in the grand museums, performed in the opera houses and theatres, or explored in the libraries and laboratories of the great universities yields a vocabulary and a grammar for talking about and eventually defining a society's collective identity. It is a source of values, ideals and collective objectives. Under the steady hand of the cultural elite, modern (i.e. since the Enlightenment) knowledge culture has been shaping a secular creed to compete with religion. This secular creed has its sacred texts, sacred spaces and sacred rituals which its cultural priests control. Scientific method, peer-reviewed journals, symphony orchestras, celebrated artists, universities, museums, honorary doctorates, national academies of science and the arts and graduation ceremonies are just a few examples of these.

In Jewish terms, we have been witness for about three hundred years to the search for a "Jewish Culture" to replace, or at least transform, Jewish religion. Something un-religious, yet distinctively Jewish, that secularized cultural elites can adopt as a creed and an identity. Evolving secular institutions promulgate this culture: museum in place of temple, periodical in place of commentary, concert hall for synagogue, lecture hall for yeshiva, coffee house table for Shabbat table, library for bet midrash, mixed ballroom dancing instead of sex-segregated circle dancing, cultural heroes in the person of Nobel prize winners and soldiers instead of famous rabbis.[1]

1. Cf. Shmuel Feiner, The Jewish Enlightenment, Philadelphia 2004, p. 2.

La Scala Opera. Photograph: Spense03 CC BY SA 3.0

Chicago Science Museum. Photograph: Museum of Science and Design CC BY SA 2.0

Louvre. Photograph: King of Hearts CC BY SA 3.0

Class Struggle: Guardians of Culture vs. Philistines

Knowledge culture is not only limited in a positive sense, open to those who possess the prerequisite elite knowledge. It is also restricted in a negative sense, prohibited to those from whom it must be protected. Again, the architecture is telling. Culture is housed in protective, forbidding places with carefully controlled access. This enables the guardians of culture to protect it from the Philistines, the anti-intellectuals who discount art, beauty, spirit, and intellect; the people Matthew Arnold (1822–88) described as strong, dogged, unenlightened opponents of the "children of the light."

Or to put it in Pierre Bourdieu's terms: there is a struggle of those with high cultural capital (knowledge, skills, education, and other non-financial advantages that are generally sought after and usually lead to a higher status in society) against those with low cultural capital. The high cultural capitalists, the cultural "haves," use their buildings to enshrine and protect their cultural capital from the culturally poor; occasionally allowing them limited access.

Knowledge Culture Libraries

Libraries that treat culture as the product of knowledge are repositories of culturally "sacred" texts to be studied and mastered. Their "natives" are the members of the cultural priesthood, that is, scholars or scholars-in-training. The association of light and reading might incline us to expect libraries to be especially well-lit places. Interestingly, and symbolically, many of these temple-like buildings are natural light deprived.


The British Museum. Photograph: Ham CC BY SA 3.0

The British Museum (built 1823-1847), for example, housed the British Library for many decades.

Alfred Hitchcock set part of his 1929 film, Blackmail, in the famous reading room of the building. However, the actual filming had to be shot in a studio using the Schufftan process with photographic backdrops of the reading room. There just wasn't enough light in the real-life library.

Consider the Sterling Memorial Library of Yale University (built 1931). James Rogers, the architect, intended it to look like a cathedral, and it does.

This secular cathedral, like its religious counterparts, is conducive to feelings of reverence, contemplation and concentration. But, like other cathedrals, part of its method for inducing these feelings is to keep out most of the natural light.
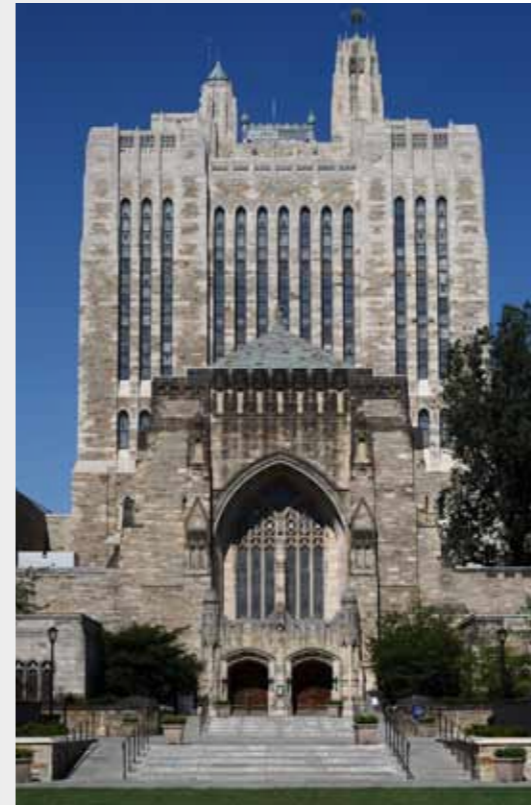
Sterling Memorial Library of Yale University
Photographs: Ragesoss CC BY SA 2.5

Sterling Memorial Library card catalogue room

There are also post- Second World War library buildings that share a seeming aversion to natural light. Pictured alongside is the National Library of Israel (1960). That solid wall rising above the narrow ribbon of windows and the darkened entrance overhang gives the impression of a fortification protecting the inside of the building against the extraordinary Jerusalem natural light.

The exclusion of light from these libraries is a metaphor for keeping them safe from outside intrusions. As a tablet engraved in stone outside the reading rooms of the National Library of Israel declares:
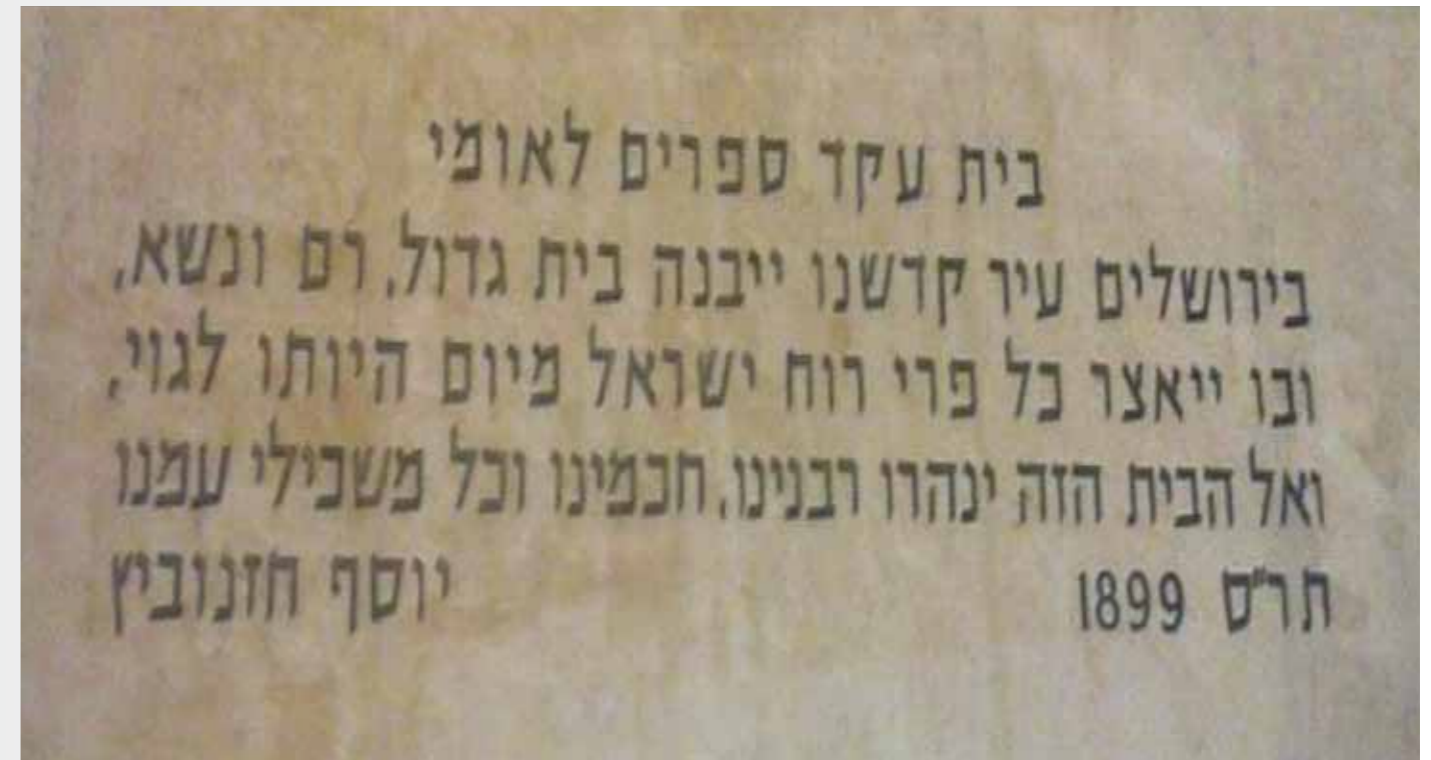
"In Jerusalem our holy city shall be built a great house, high and exalted, all of the fruits of the spirit of Israel from the day it became a people shall be kept there, and to this house will stream our rabbis, sages and all the enlightened of our nation."

The National Library of Israel, Givat Ram Campus

These libraries were intended to become scholars' havens. A combination of English gentlemen's clubs and factory floors of the very learned, knowledge culture libraries let scholars work freely. They can pore over the "sacred" texts, master existing knowledge, create new knowledge, communicate it in their writing and lectures and watch it be construed into culture. They need answer to no one but each other. Outsiders are guests on their turf.

Before its recent partial remodeling the National Library of Israel presented the first-time visitor who walked through the entrance with an array of closed doors; closed doors to the catalogue room, closed doors to the reading rooms. How was this inexperienced visitor to know which door to open? These doors were in effect barriers. They prompted the uninitiated, understandably intimidated, to think that only someone who had acquired the requisite cultural key, only a member of the club, only a worker of good standing in the scholarly union, could walk through.

בית עקד ספרים לאומי
בירושלים עיר קדשנו ייבנה בית גדול, רם ונשא,
ובו ייאצר כל פרי רוח ישראל מיום היותו לגוי,
ואל הבית הזה ינהרו רבנינו, חכמינו וכל משכילי עמנו
תרס 1899   יוסף חזנוביץ

Hebrew tablet in the National Library of Israel

Photograph: Assaf Pinchuk

Gatekeeping

This humbling of the casual visitor is a form of gatekeeping and gatekeeping, limiting access to the library and the culture it represents, is perhaps the hallmark of knowledge culture libraries. We have already seen how the very architecture of the library building plays a role in making the library the preserve of high culture capitalists while protecting it from Philistines. The photographs here illustrate more aspects of library gatekeeping.

To the right is a picture of the "Delivery Room" of the Boston Public Library. When you want a book from the library's "research collection" you need to fill out an order slip (today this can be done through various media) and wait half an hour or so until the book is delivered from the stacks to the Delivery Room. This ensures maximum control over both books and people in the library. The location of a book can almost always be traced while the movement of people around the building is minimized.

Closed stacks, the province of book porters, with literally shut gates, were another device that privileged the high cultural capitalists. Closed stacks precluded serendipitous discoveries and favored those who either already knew what they were looking for or were expert at teasing information out of what was usually a rather intimidating card catalogue.

A Student Requesting a Book at the London School of Economics, 1964. Public Domain

Boston Public Library Delivery Room. Public Domain

In the digital age, in many places gatekeeping has been attenuated, sometimes almost to the point of non-existence. Examples of it do, however, still exist.

On the website of the British Library, a library with closed stacks, we find the following entries: "Admisssion to British Library Reading Rooms requires a Reader Pass. These are issued at the discretion of the British Library Board and are subject to the Conditions of Use detailed herein… **[T]o use the Reading Rooms at St Pancras you will need to register for a Reader Pass** [emphasis in original]. Due to pressure on our services we cannot guarantee admission, and a Reader Pass is issued subject to your need to see specific items in our collections. Other libraries or sources may be more appropriate to your research and staff will advise you accordingly."[2]

Use of this library requires readers to undergo a complicated, time-consuming application process which is not guaranteed to result in success. The elite represented by the Library Board reserves the right to keep out anyone they deem a Philistine. Note the phrase: "subject to your need to see specific items in our collections." This library is for high cultural capitalists, initiates into the culture, who already know what is in the library and what it is they need to see. Potential visitors are even warned that coming to the library without "appropriate" objectives and the knowledge to accomplish them may be a mistake.

The British Library. Photograph: Mohammed Abushaban CC BY AS 3.0

2.   http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/inrrooms/stp/cond/conditions.html, http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/inrrooms/stp/register/stpregister.html

Discourse Culture

Over the past hundred years or so a different notion of culture has developed. This began with one of the fathers of modern sociology, Max Weber, who considered culture to be based not on knowledge but on ideas that become ideals and then inspire behavior. Culture according to Weber was not so much the product of knowledge as the ideas that created ideal interests that social acts were intended to realize. To understand culture what was necessary was *verstehen*, to cultivate a subjective, empathic understanding of social phenomena so as to comprehend which ideals they were supposed to reflect and concretize.

Take the custom (it is not a halakhic requirement) of breaking a glass at the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony. What has it meant to different practitioners in different contexts? In ancient times it was apparently done to keep ever-present demons at bay. By breaking something of value it was hoped that the demons would be tricked into thinking that instead of rejoicing the celebrants were ruing the loss. That way the demons need not waste effort on spoiling the joyous occasion, as was their wont. Later, breaking the glass connoted placing the national Jewish tragedy of the destruction of the holy Temples in Jerusalem, symbolized by the broken glass, above the personal celebration of the marriage. It was an affirmation that the couple was committing themselves to the Jewish people as much as to each other. In contemporary times, for many people breaking the glass is one of the essential markers of Jewish marriage. Regardless of any symbolic meaning in and of itself, like the huppah (canopy) and ketubah (marriage contract) it is a defining element. Without it the ceremony is defective and the couple seems to be not really married, Jewishly speaking.

The changing ideas behind the act of breaking the glass—from belief in the necessity of subduing demons, to belief in the importance of sustaining Jewish collective life, to belief that ritual must contain several traditional (although not necessarily halakhic) markers for its symbolic action to be valid—point to changes in Jewish culture. A deep comprehension of the social act that is the ritual is key to understanding the culture it encodes.

Talcott Parsons expanded on Weber's ideas and refined the thesis. For him culture is the collection of practices and objects by which we communicate our ideas, feelings and values. It is collective symbolic discourse. What we do both communicates and actualizes who we are on the most profound level.

Clifford Geertz famously epitomized this approach (basing himself on Weber): "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun", where the spinning is the cultural discourse that Parsons identified. Symbolic cultural representations both reflect and drive the discourse.[3]

When culture is conceived of as collective symbolic discourse, the most important parts of culture are the least conscious ones, the elements taken for granted; things like gender roles, kinship relationships, economic practices, table etiquette, professional status. These are constructs that we rarely reflect upon and often accept as part of the natural order. They are the shapers of our lives.

This is different from knowledge culture where the most significant items of culture are the ones consciously created or constructed: Shakespeare's plays, Bach's fugues, Picasso's pictures, the Eiffel Tower, Einstein's theory, Wikipedia.

Knowledge culture focuses on what is created. Discourse culture focuses on what is.

Geertz also asserted that the symbolic practices and objects that are the stuff of cultural discourse are in essence social "texts" that should be "read" and are subject to textual-style interpretation. For him anything might be an interpretable text: archeological finds, film, dance performance, religious ritual, games, crimes, sport, etc.

By interpreting the "deep structure" of these "texts" we come to understand how people construct meaning and this construction of meaning is culture. That is, culture—as expressed in "texts"—is how people make sense out of their experience in the world, what it means to them. For Geertz, cultural texts are both a model of and a model for the meaning of that experience.[4]

3. Later sociologists refined this still further to speak of culture as a "'toolkit' of habits, skills and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action'" Swidler, pp. 273, 284.
4. Cf. Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies", American Sociological Review, 51(1986), pp. 273-286.

Discourse Culture Libraries

We posited above that knowledge culture (KC) libraries are primarily repositories of texts to be studied and mastered. Discourse culture (DC) libraries are repositories of texts and "texts" which are to be both the locus and focus of discourse. (Knowledge culture libraries often also contain "texts", but typically as an "addition" to the main business of book texts and in general of narrower range than the modalities held in discourse culture libraries).

How the library is to carry on that discourse is delineated in the architectural mission statement of the Royal Library in Copenhagen:
"The Royal Library is much more than a library. It is a cultural institution that unites the function of a library with a whole range of different cultural facilities: a café, bookshop, exhibition room, restaurant, scientific and literary institutions, roof terrace and a 600-seat hall for concerts, theatrical performances and conferences."[5]

What is a library that is "much more than a library?" What I think they are actually saying is that it is not a KC library. It is a DC library, built to present a variety of "texts" and to facilitate discourse in its variegated spaces.

To this we might add that the image of the staff is different from KC to DC. KC libraries are run by cultural "priests." These are people who have mastered the books and see themselves as keepers of the knowledge they contain as well as promoters of the scholars and scholarship that continually cultivate that knowledge. DC libraries are run by cultural "facilitators" who see their primary job as getting the discourse going around both texts and "texts" and involving as many people as possible.

What do DC libraries look like?

5. http://www.archinnovations.com/featured-projects/civic/schmidt-hammer-lassen-architects-the-royal-library-copenhagen/

Danish Royal Library. Photograph: Thue. Public Domain

The Vancouver Public Library, for example, is neither a palace nor a temple. It is a coliseum, a space for the populace, open to all, the location of popular events, monumental architecture for the masses.

Vancouver Public Library. Photograph: Another Deliverer CC BY AS 3.0

This is the Philology Library of the Free University of Berlin. It might easily be mistaken for a covered swimming pool or an indoor tennis court. Again, not an intimidating temple, but a familiar sport-like facility welcoming to all.

Faculty of Philology Library Free Univesity of Berlin. Photograph: Torinberl CC BY AS 3.0

This is the Stockholm Public Library. Inside there is no gatekeeping; open stacks. Books and people mix freely.

Stockholm Public Library. Photograph: La Citta Vita CC BY AS 2.0

This is the top of the library of the Delft (Holland) Technical University. It is what we might call bringing culture down to earth.

The Library of the University of Delft. Photograph: Nol Aders CC BY AS 3.0

The interior of North Carolina State University's Hunt Library is library-as-lounge. Open, attractive, tempting you to sit down and read a book.

What do DC libraries sound like?
KC libraries strive for quiet. DC libraries do too—in some of their spaces. But, like the Royal Library in Copenhagen, they also intentionally have a lot of noisy areas. There is no discourse without noise. They take pride in having areas that are conducive to various types of interaction necessitating conversation, formal discussions, lectures, music, even performance.

The Hunt Library at North Carolina State University. Photograph: Seannator CC BY AS 3.0

Judaica Libraries Today:
From Knowledge Culture to Discourse Culture

All of the great Judaica libraries of the world began as KC libraries. As such they were keenly conscious of their role as "culture keepers" in the sense of preserving, safeguarding and serving as gatekeepers controlling access to the sources of Jewish culture.

Today many, if not most, of these libraries are becoming DC libraries. They still understand their mission as culture keepers and that still includes preservation. Now, however, they are much more active in "keeping" the culture in the same sense as "keeping the commandments." That is, "to act fittingly in relation to": exercise the culture, practice the culture, cultivate the culture. Staff members conceive of their library as a powerful cultural force, a "player," beyond its role as repository.

The DC library aspires to reflect the panorama of the culture it is preserving as well as to participate in shaping that culture.[6]

Policy Driven

Another important change accompanied the transition from KC to DC. When the great modern Jewish libraries began, their collections were usually based on the private libraries of one or more individuals. It was availability and not policy that determined the parameters of the collection. This has now changed. Rather than acquisition—and hence the nature of the collection—being primarily a function of availability, Judaica libraries now formulate clear, rational policies.

The renewed National Library of Israel (NLI), for example, is now anchored by law and regulated by corporate by-laws. Its director and curators must exercise their discretion within the law's and bylaws' mandates. There are clear objectives: the NLI must be the national library of the Jewish people. This means it must collect and conduct discourse around the texts and "texts" that embody or reflect the totality of Jewish experience throughout history and all over the world. It is also the national library of Israel, which means that its collection and discourse have to relate to the culture of the State of Israel and all of its citizens, Jews, Arabs and others as well. Finally, the NLI is to be a general humanities library, where the cultural wealth of many nations is part of the discourse. The humanities component links Jewish civilization to past and present humanistic currents.[6]

6. http://nli-renewal.org.il/sites/default/files/u15/english_spreads.pdf, p. 11.

A New View of Books

One of the fundamental aspects of moving from KC to DC is changing the view of how books reflect culture. Rather than see the content of the books, what they say, as the exclusive content of culture, the tendency now is to see books as part of a larger discourse that is conducted in artistic and oral modes in addition to a literary one. The books themselves are not only communicators of the ideas of the people who wrote them, they also reflect the lives of the people who used them (where "use" denotes a range of purposes books might serve from reading them cover to cover to skimming them and from using them to earn money to using them as a status symbol filling living room shelves).

In 1930, for example, the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America promoted itself as "The Museum of the Jewish Book." Positing that the Jews are "the People of the Book," it followed that Jewish culture is defined by what is in the canonical Jewish books. This approach emphasizes Jewish intellectual history as the main mirror of Jewish culture. It is the content of the books that one needs to know to understand the Jewish experience. The museum of the Jewish canonical book was actually the museum of Jewish knowledge culture.

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America
Photograph: Jim henderson. Public Domain

By 2012 the Library's website was touting a new virtue: "There is literally not a subject of Jewish interest that you cannot study or research here…." All things of Jewish interest, whether in the canonical books or not, are part of Jewish discourse. It's not only about what Jews think; it's also about what Jews do. Not only Jewish ideas are worthy of study, but Jewish sociology, Jewish artistic initiatives, Jewish economics, Jewish New Age, etc. etc. Books might offer a variety of ways to study and research these "interesting" things. In the Jewish DC library, books are to be read and their contents assimilated, of course; but they are also to be analyzed as objects having economic, social and cultural functions within Jewish society.

From Texts to "Texts"

As we already noted, the KC library was never limited exclusively to books (texts). There were always maps, microforms and newspapers. However, the Jewish DC library recognizes that in order to study "all things of Jewish interest" that "texts" (in the sense of non-conventional modes of conveying information) are no less important than conventional texts.

This is stated clearly in the description of the Harvard library Judaica Division on the Widener Library website:

Widener Library, Harvard University.
Photograph: Chensiyuan CC BY SA 3.0

"The Judaica Division collects in great depth materials covering all aspects of Jewish life and culture in every place and period…These materials… include books, pamphlets, periodicals, microfilms, maps, newspapers, posters, broadsides, photographs, microforms, sound recordings, videotapes, electronic databases, and other ephemera."[7]

7. http://eesley.blogspot.co.il/2006/10/harvard-widener-library.html

As digital technology puts the very future of the traditional book into question and the range, variety and availability of digital resources explode, DC libraries face huge challenges. Like the renewed National Library of Israel (NLI) they must be "hybrid physical-digital" libraries and demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to the demands that the digital revolution makes. As the NLI's mission statement emphasizes,

"The NLI seeks to become the country's flagship of state-of-the-art information technology, offering open, democratic access to the vast world of physical and digital resources, tools, and services, not only those based on the Library's own holdings and trained personnel but also the almost limitless resources available through collaborative arrangements with other libraries and repositories of knowledge."[8]

In addition DC libraries have a role in "electronic data management," making critical judgments about the quality and reliability of sources, while creating modes of institutional cooperation among major cultural institutions and establishing collaborative global research ventures.[9]

From Cultures in Conflict to Cultures in Dialogue

One facet of the shift from KC to DC that is unique to Judaica libraries concerns the way the relationship between Jewish culture and other cultures is conceptualized. When most major Judaica libraries were established the reigning metaphor for this relationship was conflict.

Jewish Culture had to be defended from overt threats posed by anti-semites who sought to outlaw or destroy it by, for example, banning the printing of Jewish books, prohibiting Jewish rituals or (as in the photograph to the right) seeking to exclude Jews from elite cultural creativity. On a more subtle level, Jewish culture was typically besieged by majority cultures which did not actively work for its demise; they only demonstrated its futility and overwhelmed it. The majority cultures commanded great material resources, benefitted from official or unofficial government sanction and enjoyed media dominance that reflected and reinforced popular support. They set the standards and articulated the

8. http://nli-renewal.org.il/sites/default/files/u15/shulman-tokatli%20E.pdf, p. 2.
9. Ibid,. p.3.

canons. By comparison Jewish culture was small and weak. Prima facie it could not compete.

In such circumstances the response of Jewish cultural institutions usually resorted to two tactics. One was to cite the superiority (notwithstanding superficial appearances) of Jewish knowledge culture measured by the "objective" criteria of the majority culture itself (e.g. the devotion of Jews to education, Jewish notions and institutions of charity). The other was to point to the numerous salutary contributions of Jewish knowledge culture to the cultures of all nations (e.g. ethical monotheism, Nobel Prize level scientific discoveries). (In a sense this defensive stance was merely an extreme case of the general need for the keepers of culture to defend it from the Philistines as alluded to above.)

Students of the Krakow Art Academy demonstrating against "Jewish Art", ca. 1930s. The sign says: "Down with Jewish Art"

However, from the late nineteenth century Jewish communities in the English speaking countries gradually became stronger, more secure and more articulate. Later, the establishment of the Yishuv and then Israel gave Jewish culture a firm base from which to develop "normally." As Solomon J. Solomon's High Tea at Sukkah (1910) graphically illustrated, Jewish culture represented here by Britain's Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler, the sukkah and the other Jewish ritual objects in the picture could engage in discourse with middle class English culture with neither side feeling threatened, with each paying its respects to the other and with each clearly influencing the other.[10]

Solomon J. Solomon, High Tea at Sukkah, 1910, Jewish Museum, New York

10. But not Jewish culture as hybrid which would mean that Jewish libraries are obsolete; cf. Moshe Rosman, How Jewish Is Jewish History?, pp. 94-105, 122-124.

The working definition of culture subtly changed, from KC to DC. One significant implication of DC was that cultures are not better or worse, only different.

All of this fostered a shift in the metaphor describing the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish culture. Instead of being in continual conflict, Jewish and non-Jewish cultures were now conceived of as being in respectful, fruitful dialogue.

Moreover, non-Jewish culture was viewed as constituting a context and often as a catalyst for positive Jewish cultural change.

This notion has been adopted wholeheartedly by DC Judaica libraries. As the library of the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies of the University of Pennsylvania explains its collection policy:

"Materials are collected with particular emphasis on the general contexts in which Jewish history and literature have been produced, such as in the ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman world, the Latin West and Eastern Orthodox geographies of early and medieval Christianity, the worlds of classical, medieval and modern Islam" [etc. etc.].[11]

Katz Center for Advance Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania. Photograph: Beyond my ken CC BY SA 3.0

From Temple to Cultural Entrepot

As we have said, KC libraries were elitist, restricted access institutions that saw their primary constituents as scholars and other high cultural capitalists. It was these whom the KC libraries catered to. The former Jewish National and University Library JNUL, (now renamed the National Library of Israel) in its building on Givat Ram in Jerusalem was an excellent example of the genre.

The renewed National Library of Israel promises to be an exemplary DC library.

The NLI's architectural brief for its new building emphasizes openness and accessibility to "everyone". It aims to serve the needs of "large communities" in addition to scholars. As its mission statement explains, "it is to be a meeting-place for scholars, intellectuals, and artists, and a site of vibrant cultural creativity" while simultaneously "it opens its physical and virtual doors to all potential users, academic and non-academic alike, for scholarly research or other purposes."[12]

11. http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/policies/jewish.html

12. http://nli-renewal.org.il/sites/default/files/u15/shulman-tokatli%20E.pdf, p. 2.

The new or casual visitor is supposed to feel welcome and comfortable in the building, not humbled or intimidated. The NLI reading rooms are supposed to be more supportive of the work of their habitués than the JNUL's were. But there will also be participatory activities—seminars, exhibitions, concerts, school tours, visiting scholarships and research projects—for a broader range of library users outside of the reading rooms.[13]

Moreover, the DC library has re-cast the library's responsibility to the larger society. The KC library's primary responsibilities were cultural preservation and the promotion of scholarship. The DC library is committed to be "commensurate with [its] country's historical experience and intellectual and spiritual richness." At the same time it aims to disseminate knowledge as widely as possible in the name of fostering an informed, enlightened and tolerant society.[14]

The Discourse Culture Library as Guidance Base

It is by now a cliché to say that digitization and the Internet have made the world a much smaller place and made an infinite number of knowledge sources available with fingertip ease to billions of people. However, there will always be materials that are either beyond the reach of the web or that require "hands-on" experience. As for accessing digital material, the more the possibilities grow, the more it is necessary to be able to connect with a guidance base that can help a searcher to enter and navigate the web of information as quickly as possible to the destination he or she seeks. Beyond this, there is a need for a place where the vast discourse, whether anchored in texts or "texts", can be aimed, focused, digested and prepared to be cultivated into meaningful culture. Perhaps for Jewish culture, spread as it always has been over the world, this need is even more acute.

The discourse culture library can be that guidance base, a place for gaining access to, consuming, quietly contemplating and sharing all of the wonders that virtually all of us can now be partners to.

13. http://nli-renewal.org.il/sites/default/files/u15/shulman-tokatli%20E.pdf, p. 4.
14. http://nli-renewal.org.il/sites/default/files/u15/shulman-tokatli%20E.pdf, pp. 2,4.