



הספרייה הלאומית
The National Library of Israel
المكتبة الوطنية الإسرائيلية

בנייתה מחדש של הספרייה הלאומית: משמעות ורציונל **The Rebuilding of the National Library of Israel: Meaning and Rationale**

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Core Mission

The National Library of Israel (NLI), established in 1892 and presently undergoing a process of radical renewal, is a unique institution among the great libraries of the world. It is, to begin with, the prime institution of national memory – not only of the Israeli nation, but also of the Jewish people, which is scattered throughout the world and has one of the longest historical memories of any human culture.

The collections of the NLI – those already existing and those of the future – must reflect and embody this truly amazing cultural, geographical, and historical range. This fundamental goal requires collecting and preserving publications in all existing formats as well as all other materials that record the life and culture of Israel and of the Jews. In addition to collection and preservation, 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.

Moreover, the NLI is committed to the active dissemination of knowledge and to fostering, through educational and cultural activities, an informed, enlightened and tolerant society. It aims to serve as broad and diversified a population of users as possible, both in Israel, with its inherently heterogeneous society, and throughout the world. By law, the NLI is also a major research library for humanistic studies, in particular in the domains of Judaica, Israel, Islamic and Middle Eastern studies, and is the primary humanities research library for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. As such, it opens its physical and virtual doors to all potential users, academic and non-academic alike, for scholarly research or other purposes, and provides users with highly professional guidance in navigating the rich and bewildering labyrinths of modern information. In its new building, currently being planned, the NLI will operate in an inspiring spatial setting that will be at once an ideal study environment, a meeting-place for scholars, intellectuals, and artists, and a site of vibrant cultural creativity based on the treasures housed in its collections.

Why do we need a physical national library?

The digital revolution, which has reframed the world of reading and research and has made near-infinite data available online to any computer-user, in no way renders redundant the existence of a tangible, concrete library, where a host of resources, services, and activities are offered to the public in inviting, inspiring, and well-equipped spaces. National libraries have become the crucial sites for providing the public with open access to invaluable resources, in both traditional and digital formats, which are not available online – not now, not in the foreseeable future, and for some important genres and items, perhaps never. Only a major library can today provide the general public with access to the huge spectrum of copyrighted materials, including major electronic data-bases that are prohibitive in cost. In addition, as any scholar knows, sources of many kinds, some of them critical embodiments of cultural memory and history, remain outside the purview of the world-wide net.

For serious scholars, and even more so for non-academic users, the emergent dynamic structure of the digital web intensifies many times over the need for professional guidance. Everyone needs help in searching out relevant and reliable sources from the endless ocean of available materials; the entire process depends, to no small extent, on creative, criss-crossing linkages among data bases and other digitized nodes. Indeed, the need for such professional guidance grows directly in relation to the diversity and breadth of user population. Thus a new professional domain – let us call it "electronic knowledge management" – has taken shape as a central responsibility of any great modern library. Expert reference librarians, trained to meet the special needs of individual users and sectors and capable of making critical judgments about the quality and reliability of sources, figure prominently

in the tasks and services of a modern library. In addition, the new art of librarianship entails forging modes of institutional cooperation among major libraries and developing practical arrangements to enable access to ever wider spheres. It takes a library to imagine, establish and maintain the collaborative global ventures necessary in the new age of humanistic research.

Real libraries, as opposed to virtual ones, offer their visitors distinctive experiences that cannot be simulated or reproduced elsewhere. The reading rooms provide fertile ground for interdisciplinary and intellectually engaging interaction among users. Moreover, one should never underestimate the importance of unmediated, physical contact with books and manuscripts as well as other rare or unique treasures of the collections. There are many things that can only be learned first-hand – not only by readers but also by casual visitors who come to the library to see an exhibition or to participate in other cultural and educational activities.

Why this particular library?

Jewish civilization requires and undoubtedly deserves one central library that will preserve, record, organize, disseminate and deepen knowledge of all the vast cultural and historical contexts in which that civilization has existed. It is important to bear in mind that the Jews have expressed themselves, in the whole of their long history, above all through spoken and written words. The NLI has a far wider and more complicated mission than other libraries because of this unique character of the Jewish people. Typically, Jews who are citizens of countries other than Israel have, so to speak, a complex identity, feeling themselves part not only of their state of residence but also of the universal community of the Jewish people. Thus no national library of the Jewish diaspora, however rich

it may be, fully serves their needs. This task falls on the NLI. Given the tremendous proliferation of knowledge and source materials in our generation – a process that will only accelerate over time – the responsibility that rests on the primary repository of Judaica in the world is greater than ever before.

In addition, the NLI is the National Library of Israel, with its diverse and often divided society and still evolving national identity. One has to bear in mind that Israel is home to Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bahais, and other religious and ethnic groups, that its population consists of large communities of immigrants from many countries and cultures, and that the NLI must serve all of them. This library thus has a specific and critical cultural and educational role to play – not simply in the amassing of materials (though this is in itself a major challenge) but in the active use of its resources to foster awareness of the singularity of each group and sector and of the irreducible value of pluralistic, tolerant, and enlightened modes of public life. This means, among other things, that the NLI should be a creative and dynamic center for onsite and online activities – seminars, exhibitions, concerts, school tours, visiting scholarships and research projects – designed to activate and inculcate the values just mentioned.

There is a wider, regional aspect to this responsibility. The NLI will seek to establish working relationships with other libraries and institutions throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. We would like to believe that the library will thus contribute to regional processes of communication and intellectual and artistic collaboration and exchange – and thus to the making of peace.

Why a new building?

The present structure, built in the 1950s, is barely serviceable, as a series of reports and studies has clearly shown. Moreover, this now outdated building was suited to an equally undated

concept of what a national library should be; its very structure – and its situation on the Hebrew University campus – reflects an inward-looking, involuted attempt to store and concentrate knowledge within an exclusive setting. By way of contrast, the new building we envision will be, both in its physical structure and its location, open to the wider public and indeed to the world. The site that has been chosen, adjacent to the Knesset and Avenue of the Museums, is an inspiring and fitting setting for the National Library. The major goal of providing enhanced access is above all a conceptual challenge that requires creative architectural solutions that will open up the library and its resources to new generations of users. Indeed, none of the primary functions of a twenty-first century library that we have mentioned can be successfully addressed without a new, state-of-the-art building. We have at this moment a rare, indeed unprecedented historical opportunity to imagine into existence the optimal library of the future. The new building will provide smart, user-friendly, and above all inspiring work spaces for readers and researchers. It will also create elegant environments for cultural and educational activities so that the NLI can assume its rightful place as a major cultural center.

The new NLI is a visionary project aimed at creating an institution at the cutting edge of what is humanly possible in the world of knowledge and the forms of cultural creativity that knowledge informs. Even apart from its transformative role in the cultural life of Israelis and Jews throughout the world, it will also make a singular contribution, together with other great repositories of knowledge, to the ongoing universal effort to cultivate, care for, and open up the treasures of the global cultural heritage. Cultural vibrancy and creativity are vital to the future existence of the State of Israel, with its multi-ethnic society, and to the texture of public and personal life to be lived there. We already have a state, a parliament, an army, several fine universities and museums, and other appurtenances of twenty-first century life. What we do not yet have – but are in the process of creating – is a modern library commensurate with this country's historical experience and intellectual and spiritual richness.



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