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**Great Scholars, Great Collectors:  
The Building of Columbia's Judaica Manuscript Collection  
Michelle Chesner  
Norman E. Alexander Librarian for Jewish Studies, Columbia University  
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When I started at Columbia University in May of 2010 as the first librarian for Jewish Studies, I had no idea what secrets lay hidden in its vaults. I joked with friends about how well I could relate to the protagonist in Geraldine Brooks' *The People of the Books*, but had no idea how near I would come to her story (well, minus one or two things). As part of my orientation at Columbia, I met with Yoram Bitton, who told me that he was in the midst of cataloging our 1500 or so Hebrew manuscripts. Fifteen hundred? I did some quick research, and found that we were third in the country for Judaica manuscripts, behind only the Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College. How did all this happen, I wondered?

### Early Days

Columbia University has been offering classes in Jewish Studies related areas since the 18th century. And it was its teachers and its scholars who built Columbia's Judaica collections to their great strength. The first president of Columbia, The Reverend Doctor Samuel Johnson (1696-1772), was a great advocate of Hebrew language study. His annotated Psalms in Hebrew and Latin was donated to Columbia as part of his own library.

Interestingly, the first Columbia alumnus to give a large financial donation to the College was Sampson Simson, also the first Jew at Columbia.<sup>1</sup> His oration at the 1800 commencement was in Hebrew, on "Historical Traits of the Jews, from their First Settlement in North America." (The original text of the oration is located at the American Jewish Historical Society.)<sup>2</sup> It seems that Simson had given the text to Gershom Mendes Seixas, a prominent Jew and member of Columbia's governing board, for his editing and approval.<sup>3</sup>

But I digress. Throughout the 19th century, Columbia was among the front-runners for its Hebraica collection. In 1859, William J. Rhees published the *Manual of Public Libraries*. His list of the top libraries for Hebraica collections placed Columbia third (with 100 items). First place went to Union Theological Seminary (with 250 items) whose collection was incorporated into Columbia's collection in 2004.<sup>4</sup>

It wasn't until the year 1890 that Columbia received its first specific Judaica donation. The donor was Oskar Straus: Columbia alumnus, Jewish politician, first Jewish Cabinet Secretary (under Theodore Roosevelt), United States Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and longtime friend of Columbia President Seth Low. Straus donated 28 Hebrew manuscripts to Columbia's library, including a Yemenite Talmud with Alfasi's commentary (with distinct differences from the printed text), the Kabbalistic Sefer Yetsira with abridged commentary by

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, Shalom, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Meyer, Isadore S., "Notes and Documents: The Hebrew Oration of Sampson Simson, 1800," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1893-1961) v. 46, nos. 1-4, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Singerman, Robert, "Books Weeping for someone to visit and admire them: Jewish library culture in the United States, 1850-1910," in *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, v. 20 (1998), 110

Abraham ibn Duad, and a letter from the Karaite leader Abraham Firkowitsch describing the history of the Karaites.

When Seth Low heard about the opening of the new Jewish Theological seminary in New York, he turned to none other than Oskar Straus to determine whether it was an authentic institution of higher learning (Straus said yes).<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Straus's good report of the new seminary, Low decided to allow JTSA students to take Columbia classes at no charge.<sup>6</sup> Low's decision would have far-reaching effects on Columbia's Judaica Collection.

### **Richard Gottheil and Temple Eman-uel**

In 1871, twenty years before Straus' first donation to Columbia, the well-known Reform synagogue, Temple Emanu-el, made the historic decision to purchase a major European collection, en bloc, for \$10,000, from Frederik Mueller, a bookdealer in Amsterdam. This important collection contained approximately 2500 printed books and 43 manuscripts, from the libraries of noted collector Giuseppe Almanzi, the controversial rabbi Jacob Emdon, and rabbi/traveler Hayyim Yosef David Azulai. In his article on early Jewish libraries in America, Robert Singerman quotes Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal's statement that if the collection crossed the Atlantic, "America would then come into possession of a collection of Hebraica and Judaica which, if properly fostered and judiciously augmented, soon might be favorably compared with the great Hebrew libraries in the Bodleian in Oxford and in the British Museum in London."<sup>7</sup>

As the years went by, however, it was clear that the collection was not best-served at Temple Emanu-el. The title of Robert Singerman's previously cited article, "Books weeping for someone to visit and admire them," was taken directly from a quote referring to the Temple Emanu-el collection.

In March of 1887, the Board of the Temple came together to discuss some issues within the American Reform Rabbinate. The Rabbi of the congregation, Gustav Gottheil, made the following statement, as noted in the Temple Emanu-el minutes:

"It is a well known fact that the American Jewish Pulpit is suffering, and can not supply their wants with the required Ministers, about 1/2 dozen of the Pulpits of different Congregations throughout the Country are to day vacant and seeking to be filled with the Proper Persons. He [the Rev. Doctor Gottheil] also regrets to state that the Studies of the various Students... have not been just what was expected...and to remedy this Evil...it will be necessary and very beneficial to have them trained and educated in this Country in the Colleges that have Chairs, where such Students can Pursue, and finish their Education, in Rabbinical Sciences, Jewish Poetry Literature etc., and in order to accomplish this feat, *he [Gottheil] had many Conversations on the Subject with President Barnard of Columbia College....who assured him that...quite willing to inaugurate a Special Chair for that Purpose, but of course we (that is, Temple Emanuel) would have to pay the salary or Compensation of the scholar who occupies that Chair...*"<sup>8</sup> (emphasis mine).

The Reverend Doctor Gottheil was successful in his talks with President Barnard and the Temple Emanu-el Board, and in the same year, Gustav's son Richard Gottheil was appointed

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Oscar Straus to Seth Low, 10/5/1891 in Columbia Archives, Central Files, Low Collection, Box 459, Folder 6.

<sup>6</sup> Trustee Minutes, 10/5/1891 in Columbia Archives, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Singerman, Robert, "Books weeping for someone to visit and admire them: Jewish Library Culture in the United States, 1850-1910," in *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, v.20 (1998), 112.

<sup>8</sup> Minutes of Temple Emanu-el, "Special Meeting of the Board held March 15, 1887" in the Temple Emanu-el Archives, p. 312.

(with a promise for five years' funding from the Temple) as the first Professor of Rabbinical Literature at Columbia University.

Richard Gottheil was appointed in 1887, and a scant four years later, in 1891, the Columbia Trustees (under Seth Low) agreed to provide free tuition for students of the new Jewish Theological Seminary of America. In 1892, when the agreed five years for Temple Emanu-el's support for Gottheil's position were complete, Columbia decided to retain and support the position, renaming it Professor of Rabbinical Literature and the Semitic Languages.

On May 19, 1892, the Temple Emanu-el Trustees wrote a letter to Columbia President Seth Low informing him that they wished to "convey the library of the Temple to Columbia College of this City, with the exception of duplicates copies; such duplicates to be given to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati."

The letter continued: "The Congregation has been prompted to this action by the lively interest of its members in the prosperity of Columbia College and by a sense of obligation for the free tuition which a number of Jewish students [i.e. those at JTSA] have received at the College, But above all, they desire to show their appreciation of the important service rendered by the Trustees of the College in placing upon a permanent basis the Chair of Rabbinical (sic) Literature which members of the Temple Emanuel originated five years ago."<sup>9</sup>

This gift, which created the Temple Emanu-El Library of Jewish Religion and History at Columbia, was the impetus for many more gifts to the library. In 1893, Richard Gottheil wrote to Low that "through the liberality of certain friends, I have been able to acquire for the college an extremely valuable collection of 138 Hebrew manuscripts."<sup>10</sup> Gottheil additionally pointed out that once added to the Straus and Temple Emanu-el donations, these gifts would make Columbia's Judaica collection unsurpassed in the country. 1895 saw the addition of two more manuscripts, and in 1896, a total of 47 more Hebrew manuscripts entered the library as gifts of Mr. J. N. Hazard and Messers Benjamin Stern and Charles A. Dunn.<sup>11</sup> In 1896, describing the Stern donation, a New York Times article noted that "with those [Hebrew manuscripts] already in its possession...Columbia's collection [is] the largest in the country."<sup>12</sup>

In 1900, Columbia alumnus Stephen S. Wise donated about "six or seven hundred volumes," mostly printed, but also some significant manuscripts from his father Aaron's library.<sup>13</sup> In his comment to the University about the gift, Richard Gottheil recommended sending a letter to Temple Emanu-el to thank them for the great fruit wrought by their original gift.

Richard Gottheil continued his synagogue's legacy with many varied personal donations of books to Columbia. As his wife was from Southern France, he would travel overseas every summer, and worked very hard to acquire books for Columbia's collection. In 1906, he wrote in a letter to Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler, informing him that he had "secured for the Library...quite an interesting collection of manuscripts and documents on parchment and paper dealing with the history of the Jews in a part of Southern France. The manuscripts are forty-four in number, and the documents somewhat over two hundred."<sup>14</sup>

After Gottheil's work to establish an important Judaica collection at Columbia University, things quieted down a bit. Gottheil worked on finding a cataloger for the materials, with some

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<sup>9</sup> Columbia University Trustee Minutes, June 5, 1892, p.173.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Gottheil Archives, Correspondence to Seth Low, May 22, 1893. Columbia University Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., May 9, 1895 and December 3, 1896

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, "Gifts for Columbia College," June 2, 1896.

<sup>13</sup> Columbia University Archives, Central Files, Richard Gottheil (327:4), November 19, 1900

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., April 10, 1906.

success, and scholars like the renowned Cecil Roth were able to do research among the collection's treasures.

## **Salo Baron**

The next great stage in Columbia's Judaica collection also included a Temple Emanuel connection. In 1928, Linda Miller, a widow and a member of Temple Emanuel, decided to endow a chair of Jewish History at a university in memory of her husband. (This was shortly after the establishment of the Littauer chair at Harvard.) With the encouragement of the Temple Emanuel rabbi, Hyman Enelow, she decided to establish the chair at Columbia University.<sup>15</sup> This would change the study of Jewish History forever.

After a few years of searching, and failed negotiation with another candidate, President Butler finally decided to hire a very young European professor, Salo Wittmayer Baron. Although initially there was some controversy around his hire due to his youth, Baron truly proved his worth and then some. Soon after he arrived at Columbia, and long before he became known as the Father of Jewish History, Baron was active in building its Judaica collections. In the annual *Report of the Librarian* for 1932, Baron's goal for Columbia's collection was "a double one: to increase the existing Hebrew collections so as to accumulate a good working library for research students, and to develop the facilities of the Library for scholars doing research work in specific fields through the acquisition of manuscripts and rare prints."<sup>16</sup> He would be very successful in these endeavors.

In the early 1930s, Baron was in contact with a Viennese bookdealer, David Fraenkel, regarding a collection of manuscripts available for purchase. Documents show between 600 and 900 manuscripts in this collection, and the exact number is unclear. In a letter from Fraenkel to Baron in February of 1933, Fraenkel broke the collection down to 18 categories, including Bible, Books of Cabbala, Documents of communities and Jewish history, Jewish law, Karaite Literature, and marriage documents, for a total of 625 manuscripts.<sup>17</sup> A letter between Baron and Roger Howson, the Librarian, indicates a total of 650 manuscripts, in eight categories.<sup>18</sup>

There was money available in the Miller fund (perhaps due to the delay in Baron's hire), and so the decision was made to purchase the collection.

The payment was divided into two parts: \$2000, paid in July 1933,<sup>19</sup> and an additional "\$5500, chargeable to the accumulated income of the Miller...Fund," paid in October of the same year.<sup>20</sup>

## **Later years**

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<sup>15</sup> Wechsler, *The Qualified Student*, 151-152.

<sup>16</sup> Howson, Roger, *Report of the Librarian: 1932*, p.17.

<sup>17</sup> Stanford University, Salo Baron Collection, David Fraenkel Correspondence, February 17, 1933. I must here submit my great thanks to Zachary Baker and Anna Levia for their assistance in making the Baron Papers available to me.

<sup>18</sup> Stanford University, Salo Baron Collection, Roger Howson Correspondence, July 5, 1933.

<sup>19</sup> Stanford University, Salo Baron Collection, Roger Howson Correspondence, May 5, 1933.

<sup>20</sup> Columbia University Archives, Trustee Minutes for October 2, 1933.

In 1937, Stephen S. Wise, who had previously donated his father's collection to Columbia, gathered together a group of donors to purchase Richard Gottheil's personal library for Columbia. Approximately 4000 books were acquired by the library from the "Gottheil collection" in June of 1939.<sup>21</sup>

The next collection to be donated to Columbia was the Oko-Gebhardt Spinoza collection. This collection contained material by and about Benedict/Barukh Spinoza, and was the combination of two collections, those of renowned Spinoza scholars Adolph S. Oko and Carl Gebhardt. The collection was purchased and presented to the University by Dr. Simon L. Millner, Mrs. T.W. Lamont, Corliss Lamont, and Mr. E.A. Zabriskie in 1947.

Other, smaller donations would follow in the next years, such as **Dr.** Samuel Schaeffler's donation of six 14th and 15th century notarial records dealing with the Jews of Apt in Provance, France, and Professor Yosef Yerushalmi's donation of Judeo-Persian manuscripts. As the 20th century continued, many archival collections came to the library, including papers from writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, statesman Herbert H. Lehman, Zosa Szajkowski, artist Abraham Neumann, scholar Yosef Yerushalmi, and many others.

### **Norman E. Alexander Library for Jewish Studies**

In 2008, the Norman E. Alexander Foundation donated an incredible four million dollars to the Columbia University Libraries to support Judaica collections, both rare and general, as well as to create a position for the first ever Judaica librarian to serve Columbia's collections and its users.

Today, there are about 125,000 volumes in the general Judaica collection. Our manuscript collection today houses approximately 1600 manuscripts, more than the combined holdings of the Judaica manuscripts of Harvard, Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Library of Congress, and continues to grow, thanks to the generosity of the Alexander Foundation.

From its inception, the Judaica collection at Columbia University has been at the top of its class. Columbia's current commitment to Jewish Studies collections seeks to ensure that the collection retains this honor well into the future.

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<sup>21</sup> Columbia University Library, CUL Office Files, Box 53, Gottheil Library, Report from Mendelsohn to Williamson, September 18, 1939.