

# “What do we do with the books?”

Fred Isaac

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[This is a summary of the talk, based on the author’s notes.]

We have reached, I think all of us would agree, a moment when hard-copy books are less and less dominant as a form of gathering information and reading. The Web is now a significant part – if not the primary element – of planning by classroom teachers, and the sole source of information for many students across the country, from Elementary school to college. For their parents – the population under the age of 40 – if it isn’t available for a Tablet, they don’t care about it.

Finally, for us as librarians (and our companions in the book-selling world even more), it is probable that a sizable proportion of our potential and former clientele (or the people who just happen to walk in) will browse the shelves, and then go to a Kindle or a Tablet and download the text or information. Simply put, this is the world we live in. We may not like it, but we ignore it at our peril.

If the picture I have drawn above is accurate, what is the current and future need for books? The hard-copy demographic is aging – we ourselves are prime examples. How should we approach it?

*[The following is expanded from notes.]*

I’m not here to give you specific answers today. You all know much more than I do about your libraries. What I do propose is to provide some questions as you – as all of us – go through the next several years of transition. Some of the issues will be obvious, others hopefully will help you engage in what the leadership gurus call “Creative Destruction.”

## **Who is your clientele?**

Are you in a Synagogue? School? University? Every institution and every type is different. Think about your users and stakeholders: teachers, parents and children, rabbis, educators. . Their levels or expertise, and their needs must be individually assessed. As you analyze and then talk to them, ask the following questions

*Where are they now? What do they know? What do they think they know that ain’t so? We want to give people everything we think they need, but much of that is excessive or inappropriate. We should tailor our collections to respond to the actual questions, rather than try to anticipate. In the age of the E-book and Google, our clientele can get access to enormous amounts of data. We should be focused on getting them into topics and clarifying mis-information rather than covering the entire spectrum.*

*What do they want to learn? What do you want them to go? How can they get there?*

*What will they find when they get there?*

In the developing world, we are no longer the primary or sole providers of Judaica knowledge. Our role is now to provide people with guidelines and opportunities they will not have known about. This does not necessarily mean only books for beginners, but items that answer questions they have, and point

them in appropriate directions. As they follow our advice, our clientele will gain a comprehensive and progressive Jewish educational experience. And when they arrive at the next question or topic, they will return to us for that answer as well.

*What are their minimal needs? How much do you need beyond that, to start?*

Libraries will differ in their basic needs. Some will require very basic information, while others may start at another level. Beyond that, interest and knowledge of the community should guide the librarian. The important point here may be “don’t over-estimate the needs of your users, especially if you have other nearby resources. The existence of a college or university may make extensive collections of scholarly material unnecessary.

***What does the place look like?***

Make it look inviting! Give it a pulse!!

“All these old books” just won’t do! Archive/back room for the pre-1975 titles. Donate some of them to the local college, to enhance their Judaica collections. It is more likely that a student will be interested in Rabbi Raisin’s 1934 treatise on the Talmud (as important as it remains for the academic community) than that it will be needed by your usual clientele.

Keep space on the shelves. “*Give it some air.*” When you add 3 new books, remove 2, or 3. While you as the professional may be proud of the breadth and depth of your collection, it is likely to be intimidating to many of your potential users. Open space on the shelves will also tell your readers that there is space for more. If you need it but there’s no space for it, your clients may think there’s no room for the volume they want, or that it’s simply not there among the thousands of others.

*Beware of Gifts!!* People are generous, and want to keep the books (and the memories they contain) alive. But you may not need or want what they give you. The books may be in poor condition, or they may be too scholarly and therefore inappropriate for the collection you are creating.

As a corollary, be extremely careful about accepting large collections or gifts with strings; e.g., donations that the givers insist must be kept together. While you might keep the library of a beloved late Rabbi intact, there is a danger of “Balkanizing” the collection into small independent sections. This will mean additional work for users interested in topics that would naturally be together, but are separated. This is also true – though to a lesser degree, in schools and synagogues, where the collections are smaller.

### ***Collection Development***

Don’t buy every Big New Book in the New York Times Sunday Book Review. And be careful about the recommendations in the AJL Reviews. If your clients are interested in the best-seller, many will get it for themselves; and possibly for their tablets or from Amazon instead of in hard copy. Rather, think about whether it will be valuable in 5 or 10 years.

Also, think about keeping the second, third, 4<sup>th</sup>, etc. book they’ll want. After they read, they will have questions. Consider books that respond to those needs. This includes material as follow-up for book groups.

“I read about the Dead Sea Scrolls online. What else is there to know?”

“Who is .....?”

“How do I .....?”

Usable information, not just “more text.” Research at an appropriate level, not simply reading.

At their level, not yours. Only a few libraries will feel the need to acquire the new Singer biography of Louis Marshall (\$50). No matter how important he is, is it worth the cost to sit on the shelves? Will your local university library have it? What about setting up a regional consortium, in which a number of synagogues share the expense of important but not necessary items?

Are they going to use the Jewish Lights books? Many of these are useful in themselves. Others are attractive, but may cover topics for which you have nothing else. How should you consider them in light of your current collection and community needs?

It is my opinion that there is a hierarchy of knowledge –

Data>> Information>> Knowledge >> Wisdom

In many instances, Wikipedia and other basic online sources articles provide the basic information. As noted above, people are likely to come to the library when they have exhausted these resources. The Wiki footnotes frequently list the most important books on the subject. Use that as a guide for purchases, as needed.

Collect the Classics, not only currently popular titles.

What is your definition of “classic?” This is a basic question, and will differ from location to location and era to era. Despite the differing answers, it remains critical for libraries. The follow-up question then is: “How does it fit with the needs of the organization and the library’s self-definition? What does it leave out?”

Kids’ books:

Yes, the classics. These include

Picture books, Holiday books, Shoah books.

What about STA winners? Who will read them?

How much fiction are your pre-teens & teens reading now?

Use kids’ fiction to attract the adults back in.

*What have we done at Temple Sinai?*

Beginning in 2003, our library was closed as the Pre-School expanded and took additional space in our aging facility. In 2008 the entire Education wing was demolished, and the synagogue underwent a 20-month re-building project. When the facility re-opened in Summer 2010 we had a beautiful library space, but with significantly less shelving.

When I opened the boxes, I realized quickly that I would not have space for many of the older books. As a result, I decided to “rebuild from zero.” Rather than “delete” books from the catalog, I would only include those volumes that would explain, explore and enhance Jewish life and values. As

the library re-emerged, it looked inviting, and continues to attract attention from our members. On the other hand, we continue to seek ways to improve its visibility, to inspire our clients to use it.

One final piece of advice: when you are done, go back and start again. Needs, tastes, and styles change, and it is important that we reflect those concepts, even as we maintain our attachment to the generations of Jews who have preceded us and given us their own ideas.