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JS/DH: An Introduction to Jewish Studies/ Digital Humanities Resources

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JS/DH: An Introduction to Jewish Studies/ Digital Humanities Resources[1]

The world in which we live is probably best described as a hybrid between the physical and the digital. As librarians working closely with the humanities, we encounter this dichotomy on a daily basis, purchasing both print and e-books via our computers, teaching the use of citation software and academic writing, and using an online catalog to access print monographs. Increasingly, the use of the digital, and the multi-faceted term "digital humanities," is becoming part of our daily conversation. At its simplest definition, writing this article could be considered digital humanities, since it is written on a computer, in digital form, and describes a field of the humanities. However, as scholars and librarians (and librarian scholars) are producing more and more complex digital works of scholarship and bibliography or reference, there is a need to evaluate them, just as we evaluate print scholarship and reference works. Following the lead of other scholarly resources, *Judaica Librarianship* will be premiering this new column to evaluate digital projects.

Librarians, especially those who provide reference assistance on a consistent basis, have to be familiar with all the resources (or those resources that identify the resources) in the field that they serve. Many universities have some form of "digital center" in their libraries,[2] but librarians not working directly with the centers are too often not familiar with the kinds of services they provide. Even if one has never heard words like HTML, Python, Django, Ruby, Github or the many others that encompass the jargon of tech-speak, digital humanities projects should still be essential to librarians who work with researchers. Like any other resources, we need to ensure that we are familiar with digital humanities resources—those grassroots projects that are generated by scholars rather than vendors, and are often very useful, even in their "beta" versions.

It was for this reason that I began aggregating sites that I called "DH Jewish,"[3] i.e. those sites that use digital techniques to advance scholarship in the field of Jewish Studies. This new column

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[1] A new column reviewing digital humanities projects in the field of Jewish Studies. To submit a project for review, or to request to review a project, please contact Michelle Chesner at mc3395@columbia.edu.

[2] See, for instance, a recent report of the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) on a workshop arranged by CNI and the Association of Research Libraries, and attended by a hundred librarians from academic libraries around the country (Goldenberg-Hart 2016). Another important collection of articles on digital humanities in the library is Christian-Lamb et al. (2016). Digital humanities in the library is beyond the scope of this column, but for those with interest in this area, the DH+Lib website, hosted by the Association of College and Research Libraries (http://acrl.ala.org/dh), and associated publications such as an email roundup of research scholarship are quite informative.

[3] The data can be found at http://bit.ly/JewishDHProjects (accessed December 11, 2016). It is a Google Spreadsheet populated by a form (hosted at http://www.thedigin.org/jewish-studies-dh-projects/) that still receives submissions. I created the spreadsheet for myself because I could not find an aggregated collection of DH projects in Jewish Studies. As far as I know, this is the only "database" of Jewish Studies DH projects in existence. Please contact me if you know of a more formal repository for these projects, and I would be happy to submit the information that I have collected. Note that the aggregated collection of digital projects includes standard digitization projects, which are out of the scope for this column.

will provide reviews and information about these resources in the digital field.[4]

As far as this column's scope, digital humanities means projects that use digital technology to advance research in a way that could not have been done before the digital age. We will not be reviewing sites that solely feature digitized manuscripts or other digital facsimiles from one collection, unless there is a unique factor to the digitization or display that adds value to research beyond a digital reproduction of the item. Such exceptions include sites like the British Library's Polonsky Foundation Catalog of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts. This comprehensive site includes all of the metadata for the manuscripts (both electronic and physical), which can be used as a resource for a slew of various kinds of visualizations (mapping, timelines, genre breakdowns, etc.). Another, older, example is the Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art, which has aggregated a quarter of a million images of visual materials from about seven hundred collections around the world to create a resource for teaching and studying Jewish art. The Friedberg Genizah Project, now one of many projects on jewishmanuscripts.org, went through many iterations before reaching its present state, and was one of the first digitization projects to utilize digital technology to allow new kinds of research in Jewish Studies. Jews in America is also an aggregation project, allowing people to search over 14,000 items from nearly four hundred collections, all of which relate to American Jewish History.

The European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) is an aggregation project as well, gathering and providing access to resources on the Holocaust, but it also sponsors workshops, symposia, and other events to build a community of scholars around the study of the Holocaust. Another community of scholars can be found in the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project. The DYTP is essentially an encyclopedia-in-process, with short and long articles about performers, theater groups, genres, and other topics. Like EHRI, it sponsors academic events surrounding Yiddish theater, bringing people together in their shared topic of study.

Other kinds of digital humanities projects include text-based initiatives, like Poetrans, the index of poetry translations into Hebrew. This is a kind of digital reference book, something that would have been published as an index in the past, but is far more accessible in digital form. Sefaria allows users to jump from text to commentary or other references, and then back again with just a few clicks. The Digital Mishna Project, on the other hand, is working on creating a digital critical edition of the Mishna based on many witnesses. This is an in-process project, and so we will be watching to see what it produces.

Yerusha is another great example of an in-process project that will become a remarkable resource for scholars upon its completion. Its goal is not the digital publication of primary sources per se, but rather to provide information about collections scattered across Europe so scholars know what the primary sources are, where they can be found—and, most importantly, how to access them. Footprints is similar in that way, collecting scattered data about the movement of Jewish

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[4] All of the projects listed in this article come from the "DH Jewish" list and are described in further detail there.

books into a format that allows researchers to locate materials that otherwise may not have been identified as relevant resources.[5] The relatively new [Digital DH at the Penn Libraries](#) has been working some incredible projects very recently, such as the "[Geniza Scribes](#)" collaboration with Zooniverse to identify paleographical scripts in Genizah fragments.

But the purpose of this column is not simply to describe the various projects in existence. Initially inspired by the *American Historical Review*'s recent commitment to review digital projects as academic publications (Lichtenstein 2016), this column should be viewed as a partner to the reviews section in this journal. It is a place for long-form essays describing the merits and drawbacks of a digital project. Since digital projects are often iterative and published in "beta" versions, it is also a place to provide productive feedback to a project creator. Where relevant and possible, we will publish a response from the project creator to provide context or future plans for a project.

To allow the broadest access for both viewers and readers, only freely available digital humanities resources will be reviewed in this column. This is not a venue to advertise or critique databases for purchase or subscription, as that can be done in the reviews section of this and other journals.

In an age of digital information, new resources seem to pop up daily. It is the job of librarians to evaluate these sources to decide what is best for research and their users. When one is not familiar with the environment or the medium of the resource, however, evaluation of sources, and sometimes the source itself, is left out of the scholarly conversation, causing researchers to overlook important sources for their work. It is my hope that this column will go a long way in assisting its constituents with this daunting task.

Sources

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[5] This is a project I co-direct, with Adam Shear, Josh Teplitsky, and Marjorie Lehman.