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אוניברסיטת בר-אילן (ע"ר)
הפקולטה למדעי הרוח
הספריה ללימודי מידע

Collection Development in Torah Libraries: Censorship aspects / David Gordon

Abstract

In the modern world the application of censorship by librarians is considered illegitimate, and it is the librarians' duty to allow the reader to freely exercise his freedom of choice and decide for himself what his position is on the book in question. This approach does not coincide with the traditional Jewish approach, where many books were treated with great respect and used daily, while others were considered unacceptable and it was forbidden to read and distribute them.

The tradition of censorship in Judaism can be traced back to Biblical times, when 24 books were chosen to be written and preserved, while others were considered apocrypha and forbidden to be read. Later, when permission was given to write the oral Torah, Jews began writing books, some of which were warmly greeted by Rabbinical Judaism, while other where shunned, a selection process that continues to this day.

The history of Jewish libraries began early on with the Biblical commandment on each person to write a Torah scroll, a commandment later expanded to include other Holy books. Throughout history Jews collected books, building private libraries, some of them of considerable size, containing mainly rabbinical literature. Libraries were also built in synagogues and rabbinical seminaries, but until recent centuries, these libraries were relatively small.

With the onset of reformation and secular trends in Judaism, Jewish libraries with meaningful collections of secular and even heretic literature began to evolve, and simultaneously so did large Torah libraries, the subject of our research.

This research thesis attempts to study the collection development policy of Torah libraries and the censorship aspects of this policy in particular. We wish to learn what criteria are employed by the people in charge of collection development in the library, the "supervisors" as I called them, when considering books and other publications, on which sources these criteria are based on, and what tools assist the supervisors in their task.

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The main research method chosen is the qualitative-narrative research method, which allows us to research deeply into the supervisors' narrative and learn about their motives and attitudes towards forbidden books. The research is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 19 supervisors in a variety of Torah libraries. Approximately half of the sample included libraries of Israeli yeshivas, some of which where Litvak yeshivas, Zionist yeshivas, a Hassidic yeshiva and more. Also checked were synagogue libraries, one in England, another in the East coast of the United States and the rest in Israel, three public Torah libraries, one of them a Hasidic library and another a library for the blind. A reading library was also included. This library did not contain rabbinical literature, but its creation as an alternative to the general public library justifies its inclusion in the sample.

The collection development policy of the libraries studied can be divided into three categories – practical libraries that mainly collect books that are needed for day-to-day use, subject-oriented libraries that collected mainly books in a specific Torah subject, and inclusive libraries that strived to collect books in all areas of rabbinical literature. The main format collected is books, and some libraries also collect periodicals and recorded lectures or allow access to computerized rabbinical databases.

The people interviewed pointed to various categories of books that may not be accepted to the collection or that access to which may be limited: Books about sexual behaviour or
Kabalah, books that contain unacceptable views or Halachic rulings, books by problematic authors or publishers, academic literature and books that may damage the character of yeshivas. Some libraries exercised a great deal of censorship and did not collect any book considered problematic or put them in a room to which access was limited. Others chose an opposite position and endeavored to allow access to any book, trusting the readers' ability to decide, so long it does not clearly contradict the Torah. The rest of the libraries studied presented positions in between.

The answer to the question whether Torah libraries perform acts of censorship or a legitimate selection of materials is not simple, depending among other things on the actual definition of a Torah library, a term not yet properly defined. The narrative used in some libraries presented arguments typical of censorship – wishing to limit the readers' access to materials considered problematic by the librarians, while other libraries wished to

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avoid practicing censorship, allowing the reader to decide for himself, so long as the book was not clear heresy. In other libraries the question of applying censorship never came up, while others presented arguments that support both censorship and selection at the same time.

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