Yedidia Z. Stern

Making the Jewish Canon Accessible to our Generation

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Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality was founded in Bar Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is, that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives open to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America. To dismiss such subjective disaffection with Jewishness as merely a result of poor marketing and amateurish PR for Judaism is an easy way out – which we do not accept. Rather, a concurrent working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is, that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness reflects real flaws and weaknesses existing in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

The first stage of all research projects of our Center is, therefore, to analyze an aspect or institution of Jewish life in order to identify and understand what might be contributing to "turning Jews off". However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, in the direction of mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

Prof. Yedidia Z. Stern teaches at the Faculty of Law at Bar Ilan university, and has held the position of Dean of the faculty. He is also a Senior Fellow at the prestigious Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem. In this research and position paper, Prof. Stern brings his rich background and broad concerns to bear on a seminal issue: the links between assimilation and cultural alienation. As he writes:

> This is the circle: To reduce the likelihood of formal assimilation (mixed marriages) we must deal with the essential aspects of assimilation (cultural migration). Preventing essential assimilation necessitates the structuring of a Jewish identity and a Jewish culture meaningful to our generation. For that purpose, we must make relevant use of the troves of experience and meaning accumulated in Jewish life throughout history and preserved in our tradition. The key to the preservation of Jewish physical existence will be found in the revival of the tradition in its broad sense.

Prof. Stern then poses crucial questions:

> Is it possible to reawaken the interest of Jews in tradition?

Is it possible to bridge the historical gap so that the present horizon will be influenced by the past horizon, enabling the renaissance of a contemporary, rich Jewish culture? What can be done today to turn back the wheel, to strengthen Jewish identity, and thereby erect a barrier against essential assimilation?

He then goes on to outline and elaborate one project that can provide at least part of the answer: "Making tradition accessible by making traditional texts accessible". Pinpointing the various sources of difficulties that contemporary Jews face when trying to relate to classic Jewish texts, he proposes novel ways of overcoming many of these impediments:

Renewing closeness between the Jews and their tradition requires us to renounce the current conservative attitude toward the Jewish canon. An encyclopedic and anthological project must be established to collect, translate, classify, and catalogue the corpus of formative texts of Jewish culture. Its purpose is to open up the canon to all Jews willing to enrich themselves with the heritage of their people.

Prof. Sterns bold ideas and innovative proposals will surely interest all persons concerned for the future of Jews and Jewishness, and can be a source of inspiration also for other cultural communities facing similar problems in today's global context.

* * *

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Stern for his contribution to the endeavors of the Rappaport center, and to thank all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this paper:

Ms. Iris Aharon, organizational co-ordinator of the Rappaport center, who also took care of proofreading and coordinating with press; Mr. Avi Ben-Amitai (Hebrew text editor); Ms. Batya Stein (translator); Ben Gassner studio (cover graphics), and Art Plus Press.

After all is said and done, however, all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, take the opportunity presented by the appearance of this publication to acknowledge the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

1. Assimilation, Culture, and Tradition

1.1 Assimilation and Culture

Assimilation has a **formal** meaning: marriage to a non-Jewish partner. The definition of a Jew in halakhic tradition and, in its wake, in the public consciousness, depends on ancestry. The descendants of a Jewish woman will be considered Jews even if they are in no way involved in, aware of, or committed to the Jewish faith, the Jewish people, or Jewish culture. Conversely, the descendants of a non-Jewish woman, even if their consciousness and identity are deeply Jewish, will not be regarded as members of the Jewish people.

Assimilation also has another, **essential** meaning: assimilation is a mental state resulting from sociological, psychological, cultural, and other processes affecting an individual or a group migrating from one system of cultural attachments, usually located in a minority culture, to another system of attachments, usually found in the dominant culture. In the past, when the dominant culture had explicit religious characteristics, assimilation sometimes included an act of religious conversion as well. At present, when the dominant culture is secular liberal, Jewish collective identity,

whether national or religious, is apparently not replaced by an alternative specific collective identity but by individualism. Assimilation thus seems gentler and more "neutral," but this is purely deceptive. Assimilation today, as in the past, means not only detachment from the self, but also drawing closer to the other, even to the extent of full internalization.

We must differentiate between assimilation as a formal act of exogamy, and assimilation as an essential act of abandoning Jewish identity and culture. Naturally, a close (though not a necessary) link between the two kinds of assimilation appears plausible: the will, the readiness, or at least the lack of inhibitions concerning exogamy are more prevalent among those who have already undergone essential assimilation. Jews who maintain and experience a meaningful personal relationship with Jewish culture and identity will find it hard to accept marriage to a non-Jew, not only because of the definite condemnation of such an act in Jewish tradition but also, and mainly, because of the potential erosion of their personal identity. Our starting premise, then, is that a concern with essential aspects of assimilation may serve to prevent the formal act of assimilation. Reconnecting Jews with Jewish civilization may lessen the current attitude of nonchalance toward national commitment at the individual and group levels, thereby reducing the pool of candidates for abandoning Judaism in the formal sense.

1.2 Culture and Tradition

Culture and tradition are not created *ex nihilo*. They neccessarily exist within an historical continuum. Past tradition is the source from which we draw an ethos, myths, norms, and the memory that serve as the building blocks of our identity and culture. Tradition

is the natural environment for the growth of legitimation principles and of our orientation toward the world. As Avi Sagi states, the concern with questions of identity and culture cannot take place solely on the synchronic axis, here and now, but must be connected to the diachronic context. A discussion and evaluation of culture and identity outside their historical continuum will misunderstand the phenomenon of culture and of identity.

The discourse of identity and the discourse of culture at present, and indeed at any time, fundamentally relies on an interpretation of the past and on a relationship with it. We find it difficult to "be Jewish" in ways dissociated from the values, the language, the memory, and the myth with which "Judaism" was laden in the past via the tradition: to express "a Jewish viewpoint" (for instance, concerning the content of such values as human dignity and honoring one's parents), to experience a "Jewish feeling" (for instance, mutual commitment or a sense of exile), to participate in a "Jewish ceremony" (for instance, a circumcision or a funeral), to relate to a "Jewish symbol" (for instance, a *menorah* or a *mezuzah*, to visit a "Jewish site" (for instance, Hebron or the Warsaw Ghetto), to eat "Jewish food" (for instance, *maror* or borscht), or to perform a "Jewish act" (for instance, return to our land or observance of Sabbath as a day of rest). The culture and identity of the present must be nuanced with aspects of historical heritage and rooted in past tradition. In Gadamer's words, this is the vital meeting between the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present:

> In fact, the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the

tradition from which we come. Hence, the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves. We know the power of this kind of fusion chiefly from earlier times and their naive attitude to themselves and their origin. In a tradition, this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new continually grow together to make something of living value, without either being explicitly distinguished from the other.[1]

1.3 Tradition and Assimilation

How does a person come to perform the formal act of assimilation? Without pretending to analyze the "raw material" of a relationship leading to marriage, the following generalization is possible in the present context: the feasibility of a mixed marriage is relatively lower for a person rooted in Jewish culture, whose tradition ascribes exceptional importance to its prevention. Marriage is usually the result of a nuanced closeness, a closeness we share with very few people in the course of our lifetime. People who constitute their self-identity on issues of personal status through a separatist tradition; people who perceive their membership in a specific collective in a broad cultural context, and whose roots are deeply embedded in tradition; people whose acquaintance with the

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1   Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 273.

tradition enables them to feel comfortable, proud, and non-apologetic about their membership group and its particularistic character – such people will beware a priori from stumbling into situations that might lead to the creation of the special closeness required for marriage with a non-Jew.

An important clarification is in order: although adherence to a religious way of life undoubtedly strengthens the likelihood of precluding formal assimilation, this is not my argument here. Constituting a Jewish identity that integrates layers of tradition does not require observance in its Orthodox, Conservative or Reform varieties, or even commitment to a religious identity. Self-imposed limitations in intimate relationships are not necessarily the result of tradition in a religious sense. Jewish tradition in its widest sense, which includes the multi-generational accumulation of all materials that shaped Jewish existence and ways of life, may also be a crucially significant factor in the prevention of mixed marriages.

This is the circle: To reduce the likelihood of formal assimilation (mixed marriages) we must deal with the essential aspects of assimilation (cultural migration). Preventing essential assimilation necessitates the structuring of a Jewish identity and a Jewish culture meaningful to our generation. For that purpose, we must make relevant use of the troves of experience and meaning accumulated in Jewish life throughout history and preserved in our tradition. The key to the preservation of Jewish physical existence will be found in the revival of the tradition in its broad sense.

2. The Present Picture

2.1 The Desertion of the Self

Large sections of the Jewish people in our generation are drifting away from intimacy with the Jewish heritage. The extent to which the widespread desertion of the Jewish heritage as an element defining identity is conscious and deliberate might be questioned, but the actual concrete dissociation from Jewish tradition in all its diverse aspects not only in the Diaspora but also in Israel is indubitable. As Yeshayahu Leibowitz stated with his usual outspokenness:

> Scraps falling off the table of Jewish history and tradition even now reach a large segment of the secular population, and through the power of these scraps, most of them still view themselves as links in the chain of Jewish history. This continuity, however, remains only an aim, openly contradicting the actual disattachment that characterizes the existence of the secular public, and of the state and the society whose character this public determines… The unconscious and at times even the conscious aim of the

> secular public is to create a synthetic "Jewish" people.
> Membership in this people will not be determined by
> Judaism but by an identity card signed by a clerk working
> at Israel's Ministry of Interior. [2]

General Israeli culture – as expressed in the educational system, in local artistic and creative endeavors, in philosophy, ethics, economics, law, language, communications, politics, symbols, in imitation models, and in the web of social practices making up our life – has been drained of any significant traces of the Jewish cultural heritage.

The following statement conveys the wish to detach the State of Israel and its culture from any links with Judaism and its heritage:

> There is need to move ahead to a more Western, more
> pluralistic, less "ideological" form of patriotism and of
> citizenship. One looks with envy at the United States,
> where patriotism is centered on the Constitution;
> naturalization is conferred by a judge in a court of law;
> identity is defined politically and is based on law, not on
> history, culture, race, religion, nationality, or language.[3]

Many of the leaders and thinkers of the Zionist movement, including Ben-Gurion and Ahad ha-Am (pen-name of Asher Ginsberg, 1856-1927), preferred the Bible and its heroes and ignored the rich culture and tradition developed since in Judaism.

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2   Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, the Jewish People, and the State of Israel* [Hebrew], (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1976), 268.
3   Amos Elon, "Israel and the End of Zionism, *The New York Review of Books*, 19 December 1996, 27–28.

The giant leap into biblical romanticism excluded the rich and stunning achievement known as "Oral Law" from the cultural field currently influencing Jewish identity and culture in Israel. It removes from our sight the horizon of the past, as expressed in the writings of the mishnaic and talmudic sages, the geonim, the *rishonim* and *aharonim* [early and later halakhists], rabbinic sages and thinkers throughout the ages. As Sagi notes, choosing the romantic course of "leapfrogging to a 'clean' beginning" allows for the shaping of "a new myth and a new ethos that consciously reject the myths and the ethos of traditional halakhic Judaism."[4]

The following diagnosis, then, comes as no surprise:

> Although the foundation was laid in the course of the twentieth century for a Hebrew Israeli culture, this culture is lacking in two regards: it reached neither the depths nor the heights of religion, which answers questions about the meaning of human existence, and it lacked compelling normative validity. The feeling soon began to surface that a vacuum had opened up, that Hebrew education remained trivial and superficial, that intellectual life was slack and shallow, that a comprehensive worldview touching not only on political life but also on questions of personal and interpersonal relationships was missing… [5]

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4   Avi Sagi, "On Religious-Secular Tensions: Between a Rights Discourse and an Identity Discourse" [Hebrew], in *A Good Eye: Dialogue and Polemic in Jewish Culture*, ed. Nahem Ilan (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1999), 408, 418–419.

5   Eliezer Schweid, *Judaism and Secular Culture* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1981), 221–222.

These harsh words about Israeli Jews are even truer about Diaspora Jews. One might still hold the following belief about Israelis:

> A common language, a common history, a few basic shared myths, and ownership of a share in the organization called 'state' are enough for a citizen of Israel to feel that he belongs to the Jewish nation. The existence of a national feeling, which is a subjective essence, is a patently objective fact.[6]

But Jews in the Diaspora – who do not speak Hebrew but the language of their country of residence, who are not citizens of a Jewish nation state and most have never visited it, who are educated in the educational systems of their home countries and their identity overlaps those of the collective within which they live – lack hooks in reality on which to hang their abstract attachments to Judaism. It is difficult for them to instill internal content into their sense of uniqueness and their self-definition as Jews.

The detachment of contemporary Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora from the horizon of the past makes present Jewish culture uninspiring. Lacking closeness to the historical tradition, we lack the language necessary for consolidating a culture. The wealth, the complexity, and the cultural fullness of Judaism, reflecting thousands of years of history, are now replaced by a Jewish culture that is narrow, pale, and thin. Our alienation from our past makes the present tenuous, and is liable to erase our future.

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6   Yaron London, "Religious and Freethinkers" [Hebrew], in *We Secular Jews*, ed. Dedi Zucker (Tel-Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot, 1999), 23, 30.

2.2 The Adoption of the Other

The thin Jewish culture of our times does not lack alternatives.
Like all minority cultures, we too are exposed to the imperialism
of Western liberal culture, which most Jews in Israel and the
Diaspora feel at home in and have adopted as their own. We have
largely internalized its values and practices, including their
advantages and disadvantages, and for us it is the dominant culture.
It is marketed in all dimensions of our reality, through all means
and all the time. Now, in the era of globalization, no place, language,
or time are free from it. Western culture now fashions not only our
cultural reality, but also the categories we use to understand this
reality. Elaborating on these facts of life is not within the confines
of this paper, but we must understand their connection to the
phenomenon of assimilation.

Judaism was never a closed autarchic system. It always
functioned as a partner in a dynamic inter-cultural dialogue, through
which it influenced other cultures and was in turn influenced by
them.[7] Nothing new is involved in the very influence of an external
culture upon Jews and their Judaism, nor should it be viewed as a
necessary evil. In the past, however, the Jewish partner to this inter-
cultural dialogue relied on a solid Jewish identity and on a clear
and cohesive cultural tradition. The influence of Greek philosophy
upon Maimonides and his contemporaries is unlike the influence
of the Western media upon a Jew in Tel Aviv, Seattle, or Buenos
Aires. The difference does not hinge on the contents of the external

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7   See, for instance, Avi Sagi, Dudi Schwartz, and Yedidia Z. Stern,
    "Introduction" (in Hebrew), in *Judaism: A Dialogue between Cultures*, ed.
    Avi Sagi, Dudi Schwartz, and Yedidia Z. Stern (Jerusalem: Magnes Press,
    1999), 1–4.

culture or on its innovative marketing techniques, but on the contrast between the members of the Jewish culture then and now. Jews in past generations felt they had a home port for their identity, from which they allowed themselves to sail out to foreign realms. They met the "outside" equipped with a solid "inside." The frequent results of the encounter were the enrichment of the "inside," rather than its replacement by the "outside." By contrast, contemporary Jews have largely forgotten the coordinates of the home port. The abandonment of their tradition severed them from the cultural continuum, and the Western winds blowing in their sails lead them to a one-way journey – outwards. Consequently, assimilation as an essential act of abandoning Jewish identity and culture becomes a fact of life for many. From there, as noted, the road to formal assimilation is indeed short.

2.3 The Self as Alienated from the Other

The renunciation of tradition is widespread but not universal. Traditional, religious, and ultra-orthodox communities both in Israel and in the Diaspora, as well as large Conservative and Reform congregations, mainly in the Diaspora, are the present bearers of Jewish tradition, each in its own way. Particularly striking is the prominent influence of the smallest group in this wide spectrum, the ultra-orthodox. Many, especially in Israel, view this group as holding the ideological monopoly on tradition and its expressions. How did this come about?

First, the ultra-orthodox are perceived as the most authentic bearers of the tradition. They guard the ramparts. They represent the clearest antithesis to the desertion of the self and the adoption of the other. At the basis of ultra-orthodox life is the task of sanctifying the old and banning the new. In their view, at least at

the ideological and declarative levels, the horizon of the present is supposed to replicate the horizon of the past. The ultra-orthodox, for reasons I have no room to go into here, sanctify enclosure within the home port and do not allow themselves to meet the "outside" or bestow any value upon it. They are not ready to see tradition as a living and renewing reality, and do not recognize any non-religious elements within it.

Second, the ultra-orthodox are perceived as the most authoritative interpreters of tradition. Only they have "*gedolei ha-dor*" [halakhic luminaries]. This authority rests on their total devotion to the study of the basic texts of the Jewish heritage. Ultra-orthodox existence revolves around the value of Torah study, and their resources are largely mobilized for this purpose. The community of learners, a recent invention, fosters the myth of expertise and professionalism in the interpretation of the texts, thereby proclaiming to all its superiority in the "understanding" of the tradition.

Unfortunately, the freezing of tradition by those perceived as its authorized interpreters makes it irrelevant for the many who are exposed to Western culture, which experiences reality as an evolutionary process of improvement and striving for progress. They find it hard to identify with a tradition whose main purpose is the preservation of the past as is, and who long for earlier times. The ethos of the tradition in its ultra-orthodox interpretation is in direct contradiction to the ethos of Western culture. Moreover, the prolonged identification of the ultra-orthodox and their attitudes with tradition shapes tradition's image in the public perception. The public dresses tradition in their black clothes, imprisons it in their neighborhoods, projects on it their conceptual restrictiveness, and cloaks it in their conservatism.

Furthermore, Jewish tradition is a way of life. A broad kaleidoscope of commandments, practices, thought, art, mysticism, ethics, Aggadah, and much more. In recent times, the ultra-Orthodox community has dimmed the diversity of tradition, overemphasizing its legal aspects. Protracted conceptual rigor in the interpretation of tradition among the ultra-orthodox and their adherents has resulted in an entrenched perception of tradition as synonymous with Halakhah. Tradition suffers from over-legalization. It has an aroma of "strictness" and is characterized by a petty insistence upon details that, for many, appears blind to any distinction between wheat and chaff. Paradoxically, then, the small ultra-orthodox community committed to the preservation of tradition alienates from tradition other communities far larger than itself.

3. Making Tradition Accessible

Is it possible to reawaken the interest of Jews in tradition? Is it possible to bridge the historical gap so that the present horizon will be influenced by the past horizon, enabling the renaissance of a contemporary, rich Jewish culture? What can be done today to turn back the wheel, to strengthen Jewish identity, and thereby erect a barrier against essential assimilation?

The proposed project deals with one element: making tradition accessible by making traditional texts accessible. Obviously, then, this endeavor will be of no direct use to those sections of the public that are not interested in texts and consume only popular culture. In that sense, the project has an elitist aroma: it will contribute to the educated, intellectually curious public (and only indirectly, through the cultural influence that this group wields in its society, will its contribution percolate to the rest). As the attitude of the general public toward texts changes, so will the scope of the project's influence on cultural and identity issues. Parenthetically, one may add that, in the future, the Jewish canon could expand to include non-textual works (music, cinema, art, and so forth), but we will not deal with this aspect here.

3.1 Generation to Generation Utters Text

In the past, as noted, Jewish tradition was all-encompassing. It dealt not only with religious practices but with all aspects of human existence. For thousands of years, tradition was the framework from which Jews derived their daily routine (food, clothing, work, sexuality, the accumulation and use of property, and so forth), their ethical, spiritual, and intellectual world; the individual, family, community, and public life cycle, etc. Each generation "inherited" tradition from previous ones and conducted its unique dialogue with it. Tradition is the result of an ongoing procedure for preserving a way of life while continuously adapting it in line with changing circumstances. Through the modifications each generation makes to the tradition, it adds its share to its development, as it is presented to the next generations. Continuity was preserved in the tradition in two different ways: first, in the wide popular circle, tradition was transmitted mainly by observing and imitating behavior. Children in the *shtetl* – surrounded solely by traditional Jews and physically and mentally removed from alternative lifestyles – absorbed the traditional Jewish way of life with all their senses and internalized it without any conscious effort. The Jewish kitchen followed the mother's legacy, the Sabbath was kept according to the father's heritage, prayers and melodies were learned at the synagogue, etc. Second, in the elitist circle of scholars, teachers, as well as spiritual, judicial, and intellectual leaders, tradition was also transmitted through the study of texts enjoying hallowed canonical status. The Jewish leadership, of all varieties and throughout history, was concerned with the study, interpretation, and writing of texts in a wide range of genres. We are the people of the Book, because it is through books that our culture has been preserved. The written word is Judaism's main weapon in its

struggle for survival in the marketplace of multi-generational ideas. Generation to generation utters text.

The two classic means for preserving continuity in the tradition – imitating behavior and studying texts – no longer function as in the past. The physical break-up of the Jewish community, the full integration of its sons and daughters in the wider community and their acceptance by it, the imperial power of Western culture – these and other factors have replaced the traditional mimetic model. Liberal Western tradition, in its various forms, is now the prevalent milieu in which contemporary Jews are raised. Observing and imitating the behavior patterns common in their surroundings now distance Jews from their own tradition. The best way of imparting the Jewish heritage in our generation is therefore to resort to the many rich and variegated texts making up the creative world of Jewish culture. But the crux of the matter is that most Jews, even were they interested in these texts and in the past horizon they contain, have no access to them.

3.2 The Problem of Accessibility

Contemporary individuals who wish to understand their personal and national Jewish identity as part of an historical continuum by developing an intimate acquaintance with Jewish books, lack basic tools to implement their will. The canonic texts of Jewish culture, and indeed the entire Jewish opus in all its genres, includes ancient works whose language, structure, cultural codes, and original target audience are different from and alien to contemporary Jews.

First, **the language:** Ancient Hebrew and Aramaic (like other distinctively Jewish languages such as Yiddish and Ladino) are unfamiliar to us. Even most Israelis are unable to understand a basic text in ancient Hebrew, although modern Hebrew is their

mother tongue. Only students in the religious and ultra-orthodox educational systems, which invest a considerable amount of time teaching the language of the Holy Scriptures, can – albeit with difficulties at times – read these texts with relative ease.

Second, **the structure**: Most of the formative texts of Jewish culture are not written in a way that facilitates access to the modern reader. They lack a topical structure, and they do not have an inner order comprehensible to an untrained reader. If an educated American Jew were to try and find an answer to a specific question, she would fail, even if she could understand the language of the texts. Barring a catalogue of the library or the shelf, and even a table of contents to the book, her search will be futile. The only way would be to consult modern reference works written by someone familiar with these texts, except that such works are usually non-existent and, in any event, cannot substitute for the study of the actual text.

Third, the **cultural code:** Like texts in general, every text in the Jewish canon was created within a given cultural, historical, and sociological context. The older the text, the greater the gap between the book's original context and our lives, making absorbtion of its contents even more difficult. Not only is its language different, but so too are the codes it uses. Hence, the educated American will even be unable to identify the relevant term, in the language of the text, describing the question that interests her. Given that Jewish literature spans over two thousand years and crosses disciplinary borders as defined today, it is quite common to find that in the course of history, the same issue has been expressed through entirely different codes.

Fourth, **the target audience:** Due to the authoritative character that tradition ascribes to early texts, a large part of the Jewish canon

is exegeses of earlier works. An educated American Jew, even if able to overcome all previous hurdles, will often find it difficult to read a given book without investing a great deal in acquiring broad expertise and a deep understanding of the literature that laid the foundation for the book in question. As noted, the Jewish canon had not been originally intended for the general public, which acquired its traditions "from the air," and is thus full of specialized texts intended for an elitist and limited circle of scholars.

In light of these circumstances, users of this corpus in our generation are mainly orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews, usually males, who are willing to invest a substantial amount of their time in the study of Jewish culture because of their religious faith. Most places where this study can currently take place are distinctly ideological religious institutions, which demand a clear personal commitment from their students. The rest of the Jewish people, involving most Jews in the world, are precluded from entering the tradition. The tragic consequence is that the Jewish canon, filled to the brim with the works of generations of believers, mystics, poets,linguists, philosophers, and jurists, is closed to many. The formative texts of Jewish culture lie in a corner.

A tradition has been preserved whereby, in thirteenth-century France, twenty-five carts were loaded with Jewish texts and taken for public burning. Note that this happened before the invention of print, so that all the burnt books were manuscripts. The magnitude of the loss was enormous, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Rabbi Meir of Rotenburg, a prominent contemporary sage, estimated that the physical loss of the texts posed a real threat to the continued existence of Jewish culture. Indeed, the fact that we do not have today even one complete manuscript of the Talmud is ascribed to that massive fire. R. Meir, shocked by the event, wrote

the following lines, which were eventually included among the lamentations we read on the traditional day of mourning, the Ninth of Av:

> O [Law], that has been consumed by fire,
> Seek the welfare of those who mourn for you,
> Of those who yearn to dwell in the court of your habitation.
> Of those who gasp [as they lie] in the dust of your earth.
> …
> The parable is of a king who wept at his son's wedding feast,
> [for] he foresaw that he would die; such was your fate, foretold in your own words.
> O Sinai, instead of putting on a mantle cover yourself with sackcloth,
> Change your garments, put on widow's clothes!
> I will shed tears until they swell as a stream,
> And reach the graves of your two noble chiefs.
> And I will enquire of Moses and Aaron, on Mount Hor:
> "Is there then a new Law,
> Is that why they burnt your columns?"[8]

Ostensibly, we live in a different reality: Jewish literature is within easy reach. A huge and perhaps unprecedented number of works on Jewish topics are being published. For instance, more than half of the titles published in Hebrew in Jerusalem in recent years have dealt with one kind of Jewish literature – Torah literature. Yet, in

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8   Abraham Rosenfeld, tr. and ed., *Tisha B'av Compendium* (New York: Judaica Press, 1983), 161.

the essential sense of the Jewish canon's relevance to the Jewish people generally, we find ourselves in a crisis similar to that of the thirteenth century: then, the burning of the manuscripts blocked physical access to the texts; today, books are printed in many thousands of copies but, for the vast majority, actual access to their contents is impossible. Now, as then, we "gasp" and ask "Is there then a new Law?" As noted, the meaning of inaccessibility is the break in historical continuity, ending in essential and formal assimilation. The words of Rabbi Meir – "…foresaw that he would die; such was your fate foretold in your own words" – assume a terrifying contemporary relevance.

3.3 The Importance of the Medium

When we analyze the accessibility problem, what emerges as its crucial aspect is the text's medium. As I show below, the difficulties deriving from language and structure can be directly overcome by changing the language and creating an organizing system for the text. Modern technology makes it possible to cope with other difficulties as well: cultural codes can be deciphered and translated into contemporary language, and modern methods of information retrieval can be used to reduce, to some degree, the substantial investment needed to acquire expertise and understanding.

At first glance, some disproportion seems to prevail between the size of the problem and the technical means by which we propose to solve it, but this is not so. The instrument, the medium, is central in the dissemination of any message, old or new, simple or complex. A fascinating historical example can serve to illustrate this: In the past, information was usually stored in what we call a **scroll** [*megilah*] (and was then called a **book**). These scrolls were usually kept in jars. The book, as known to us today in the shape

of cut pages bound on one side, was apparently invented in the first century CE. It was made up of reams of papyri stuck together with gypsum and called a **codex**. Even though the book has clear practical advantages over the scroll (it can store information on both sides of the sheet; the length of a standard scroll is limited to nine meters so it could only contain a relatively limited amount of information) its reception was fraught with difficulties. The Jews, who had been using scrolls for centuries, as well as the pagan elite of the Roman Empire, objected to the change because of their conservatism. By contrast, the Christians in the Roman Empire, who belonged to the lower classes and had neither a literary tradition nor any commitment to previous habits, rushed to adopt the book (and perhaps even invented it.) In this sense the Jews are the "People of the Scroll," whereas the Christians are the "People of the Book."

The openness of Christians had important consequences: first, at a time Jews and others were hesitant about using the codex (to this day we use only scrolls in ritual contexts), Christianity enjoyed a most significant technological advantage that enabled it to distribute its ideas effectively throughout the ancient world.[9] Second, for as long as the Jews continued to use scrolls, the various sections (books) of the Bible were stored separately, which is why the Jews did not edit the Bible as a closed anthology. It was the Christians, members of the new faith, who actually first collected all the parts and edited them by using the codex technology, in the order they deemed best. Later, the Jews chose a different order. Some have claimed that this is the source of the difference between

9   Bruce Manning Metzger and Michael David Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 94–95.

the Old and New Testaments, which are actually two editions of the same compendium.[10]

An analogy is possible between Jewish conservatism then and now. The fixation on the scroll has been replaced by a fixation on adherence to the language and form of the text. The result in both cases is similar: these fixations hinder access to the text and dilute the scope of influence of Jewish culture and tradition.

10 Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1996), pp. 31–32.

4. The Proposal

Renewing closeness between the Jews and their tradition requires us to renounce the current conservative attitude toward the Jewish canon. An encyclopedic and anthological project must be established to collect, translate, classify, and catalogue the corpus of formative texts of Jewish culture. Its purpose is to open up the canon to all Jews willing to enrich themselves with the heritage of their people.

We must beware: the proposed project is not sufficient. Building a bridge between Jews and their heritage, however comfortable and efficient, will be useless if Jews refuse to cross it. Beside the proposed project, then, a multifaceted effort is required to awaken the Jews' curiosity about their tradition, to persuade them of its value to their lives, to cause them to ponder about their roots and seek an answer to their uniqueness. At present, the task appears particularly difficult and holding limited promise of success, but this should neither deter us nor weaken our resolve. Even if it is not incumbent upon us to finish the task, we are not free to desist from it. The return to tradition may come about not only in response to a planned educational effort but due to

circumstances beyond our control: it may develop as a result of events concerning the Jewish people (such as renewed anti-Semitism), or broader developments (such as a worldwide trend involving a search for roots and a return to ethnicity). Either way, it is our responsibility to be prepared for the possibility of a renewed interest in tradition among educated Jews in Seattle, students in Buenos Aires, or Israeli kibbutzniks.

4.1 Structure

The project has three operational stages: collection, translation, and cataloguing. I will briefly describe each of them, while drawing attention to the central difficulty hampering each of these stages.

4.1.1 Physical Accessibility – Collection: During the first stage, the texts to be included in this enterprise will be collected, transferred to an electronic medium, and sorted according to an accepted library cataloguing system. This is basically a technical stage that, when completed, will enable physical access to the Jewish canon from people's homes, at a relatively cheap price and without mediating agents. Projects transferring some parts of the canon to electronic media exist already. What is required is a maximum expansion of the electronic Jewish library beyond halakhic literature and basic texts.

The major difficulty here is defining the scope and the exact contents of the canon for the purpose of this project. On one hand, practical considerations would seem to dictate a limited scope, suggesting we should confine ourselves to the collection of significant works in each of the major genres. On the other hand, the importance of the decision about what to leave out can hardly be exaggerated: all choices could be interpreted as censorship or

as resting on an ideological bias. Furthermore, even assuming absolute "objectivity" concerning the choices, the question still remains – who has the authority to make these decisions? If the project does indeed have real impact on the way Jewish culture is imparted to future generations, how can we justify imposing on them the taste and discretion of the project's editors? Serious attention must be paid to finding the golden path between these two contradictory concerns. Either way, if the project lives on, we can hope that mistaken choices in the present can be rectified by our successors. The practical difficulties that could preclude setting up an all-inclusive canon in the present may be solved in the future.

4.1.2 Language Accessibility – Translation: During the second stage, the selected texts will be professionally translated from the original into two languages: modern Hebrew and modern English. The original and the translations will be presented side by side in the electronic medium, so that each text will appear in three languages. *Prima facie*, this phase is also purely technical: a "professional" translation is envisioned as the pouring of the text from one container into another without the translator's interference. In reality, however, there are no neutral translations. Our tradition is aware of this, which is why it sanctioned the Septuagint by claiming it was a miraculous event. Non-miraculous translations, such as that of Onkelos, are universally acknowledged as works of interpretation. The difficulty, then, is that every one of the translators' choices will reflect their hermeneutical decisions concerning the text. While we must obviously try to prevent subjective influences on the translated work, we must also be aware of the impossibility of avoiding them altogether.

An additional onerous cost of translating texts is that it

distances future generations from intimacy with the original language and thereby contributes to its forgetting and eventual loss. The greater the frequency of translations that replace the original text, the greater the detachment from an important aspect of the tradition – the language itself (the "holy tongue"). We should not make little of this matter: language is an entire world of sensitivities, and mirrors subtle cultural connotations. Many traditional Jewish texts recurrently emphasize the inner value of the language, and exegetes in previous generations carefully weighed every diacritical mark on every single letter. A proposition to preserve the original text in every electronic copy is meant to lessen the expected damage, but is clearly not a satisfactory solution.

4.1.3 Conceptual Accessibility – Cataloging: Every academic book includes an index with a list of thematic entries, which enables the reader to study the book intelligently. An index of this type is missing for large sections of the Jewish canon that, therefore, remains closed. A pioneering "retrieval" effort (in the broadest sense of the word) is required. During the third stage, then, each text will be indexed and catalogued and, in time, so will the entire canon. The goal is to create a complex index that will conceptualize the Jewish canon at various levels of detail, linking to all realms of relevant human knowledge. Upon completion of the project, we will have in our hands a veritable key to the Jewish canon.

A similar difficulty lurks here, because indexation is an hermeneutical task of the first order. Indexing (perhaps even more than translating) cannot be neutral; it necessarily reflects the indexer's personal world. Religious and secular, male and female, Israeli and American, lawyer and philosopher – all have different life experiences and different perceptions of reality, and the categories

through which they will classify phenomena or texts will also be different. Every index choice brings into being one hermeneutical possibility while silencing and dismissing a range of alternative interpretations. One partial way of coping with this problem is to make a conscious attempt to diversify the indexers' profile, so that the final product of this attempt to ensure conceptual accessibility is a pluralistic menu of interpretive possibilities (see section 4.2.6 below). Here too, a tension prevails between the ideal and the practically possible, and here too we can find comfort in the perception of this endeavor as an ongoing project and a long- term investment so that, in time, the possible will draw closer to the ideal.

4.2 Implementation

In the above description, I laid out some of the essential problems raised by the proposal. We can also assume that a public debate will ensue, evoked not only by these problems but also by other types of sensitivities – political, religious, scholarly, and others. Despite the considerable cumulative weight of the expected difficulties, I hold that this project should be implemented immediately. The question, as always, is one of alternatives: a puristic approach to the text that approaches it as holy of holies not to be profaned by such human interference as selection, translation or cataloguing is appealing (particularly to the religious) but exacts an unbearably heavy price. If we wish to foster and sustain Jewish tradition, if the preservation of Jewish identity in future generations is dear to us, if we shudder when witnessing the split between the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present, if physical and spiritual assimilation are like thorns in our flesh, we must perform a non-puristic act. This is the choice our generation must make.

Consenting to a price does not release us from the responsibility to act so as to minimize the cost as far as possible, and thereby also lessen substantive opposition to the endeavor of making the library accessible. The complexity, sensitivity, and importance of this project compel those involved in it to act with maximum caution so as to prevent its stigmatization, or its takeover by – or censorship of – any of the mainstream attitudes toward the Jewish canon. To this end, the following steps are proposed:

4.2.1 Personnel: The project has to distance itself as far as possible from any built-in ideological commitment. It should be led by a broad enough group, of the most diversified cultural, ideological, and professional backgrounds, who will together concoct a product as variegated and colorful as possible. Note: this is not a call for cultural "compromise" – we must avoid the creation of a synthetic product that is ultimately meaningless. Our goal is to allow all voices to be heard. Personal heterogeneity must percolate to all levels: as an avowed multi-disciplinary endeavor, it requires cooperation between scholars and doers with different goals and different commitments. Researchers of culture, rabbis, scholars of Jewish studies, anthropologists, linguists, philosophers, jurists, people of letters, and *yeshiva* students – each will be interested in the project from a different viewpoint and for different reasons. All will be able to make their specific contribution and obtain their own intellectual, religious, scholarly, or national reward.

4.2.2 Scope: The selection of texts included in the library (on the assumption that choices are imperative at the initial stage) must reflect eclectic choices, defining the boundaries of Jewish culture as broadly as possible. The array must include texts from sources

different from one another in every way: linguistically, historically, ideologically, theologically, and conceptually. It will include texts from all genres of the Jewish opus: Halakhah (responsa, rulings, ordinances, halakhic midrashim), thought (Kabbalah, Hasidism, philosophy), Aggadah, liturgy, poetry, prayer, historical chronicles, scholarly studies, and more. As far as possible, it should steer away from ideological, religious, national, cultural, and other forms of censorship. The project will consciously refrain from presenting intra-cultural textual hierarchies. All texts included will be presented in the same way without any labeling. This approach does entail some "flattening" of the texts and an over-simplification of the culture – because the actual culture does acknowledge the existence of chronological, thematic, and other hierarchies – but this is necessary because of our central aim of avoiding any form of judgment or evaluation. An interpretation of the canon that could extract from it a realistic historical picture is beyond the scope of this project.Commitment to meta-normative perspectives, such as pluralism or multiculturalism, should also be avoided. The only viewpoint to which the project should be committed is tolerance in its narrow sense: a readiness to avoid removing from the Jewish discourse texts that appreciable numbers of Jews consider important. On this basis, the parameters of the project will be broad enough to include controversial texts, and the inclusion of a text does not imply importance or legitimacy.

4.2.3 Content: The content of the project should be confined to the three proposed stages. Any additional objective will alienate large groups of participants vital to its existence. Thus, for instance, it should be made clear that the project is not meant to display any kind of unity in the Jewish canon. We may detect a dialectic unity

behind the mixed and conflicting profusion of sources that are part of Jewish tradition, but formulating this unity, or even pointing to its existence, exceeds the goal of this project. Furthermore, all second order generalizations – comparisons, contrasts, inferences – are important tasks for which the proposed project will hopefully prepare the ground, but will not actually deal with itself. The project will focus only on the physical, linguistic, and conceptual accessibility of the text, and will refrain from any further elaborations.

4.2.4 Transparence: The discussions and the decision-making process involved in the accessibility project must be open and fully transparent for all to see: professional communities, ideological communities, and the entire public. The contents of these discussions should be published as soon as possible, so as to enable the professional, ideological, and public debate to impact the decision-making process in real time. Transparence is an important value both because it will lower the level of suspicion toward the project and because we may assume that, in the future, much value will be placed on the documentation of the decision-making process. Rigorous documentation is a basis for creating trust as well as for the evaluation, judgment, and critique of the project. In this context, the publication of a special scientific-cultural journal should be considered, to report on the ongoing process and provide an open forum for debate and critique of various aspects of the project's implementation.

4.2.5 Decision-Making Processes: A special structure must be instituted for the decision-making processes concerning the admittance of texts into the canon, stressing a low threshold so as

to prevent the creation of coalitions (cultural, religious or political) against minorities. Decision-making processes must reflect the project's tolerant outlook toward all stalls in the Jewish conceptual marketplace. Rejection of a text will be done only in a case of relatively broad agreement between the project's partners.

4.2.6 Diversity: The project must reflect the traditional hermeneutical principle "Torah has seventy faces". It will not strive to create a monolithic interpretation of the text (neither at the translation nor cataloging stages), nor will it lay claim to "objectivity" or to a search for Truth. On the contrary, we propose that a given text be assigned to a group as diversified as possible (regarding all aspects relevant to the specific text), and allowing every member of the group to offer future generations his/her own perspective on it. The project will not deal with the rejection or acceptance of any particular viewpoint. Lack of consensus among those involved in the task will not only not hinder progress but will even be welcomed with the blessing "these and these [*elu-va-elu*]." On the shelf, then, will be a menu of diversified perspectives on the text, as it is viewed by Jews who come from different worlds. In the future, anyone interested will be able to compare and examine the various alternatives available and choose a preferred one. The value of the project is to make the diversified meanings of the canon accessible, and enable everyone to choose according to her/his taste and preferences.

4.2.7 Cooperation: We can assume that in the current situation of competition and antagonism between religious movements in Judaism, establishing cooperation with the ultra-orthodox (and perhaps also with other elements) may not be easy. Creative

solutions are required: for instance, the project may have no alternative but to set up separate departments that, to some extent, will be autonomous. Thus, for instance, the project could consider setting up a separate section in which the ultra-orthodox will do their part in the project according to general parameters to be determined, but without continuous cooperation with other implementing agencies. Incentives of persuasion and seduction could be set up, such as bestowing state recognition on the project and making work in it a kind of national service that grants release from army service.

The common denominator to all these proposals is an attempt to ensure that the project will not become a tool for imposing one cultural hegemony. It will not direct efforts to proposing a particular interpretation and meaning of Jewish culture and Jewish identity. It will not pretend to rank works hierarchically. Instead, it will simply strive to make the broadest range of the Jewish opus throughout the ages as widely accessible as possible to as many Jews as possible.

4.3 Frameworks

What is the appropriate framework for the development of this project? Three options and combinations between them come to mind:

4.3.1 A private scheme that will rely on donations from the general public in Israel and the world. The strength of a private scheme – complete freedom of action without direct pressures from institutional forces – is also its weakness. A private institution will always be suspect of advancing a partisan agenda.

4.3.2 A national Israeli scheme financed as a specific item in the Israeli budget. This option is of symbolic importance. Israel is the national state of the Jewish people. Its Basic Laws define it as "a Jewish and democratic state." Some have wondered about the inner content of this definition and its anchoring in actual reality. Is the expression "Jewish state" merely intended to indicate the fact that Jews are the largest national group among the state's citizen? If so, Israel is the "state of the Jews" and not necessarily a "Jewish state." If the state were to assume responsibility for the proposed project, its Jewishness might be infused with a new essential content. The project will locate the State of Israel (and the Zionist movement) within the sequence of Jewish historical continuity as having ensured not only the physical existence of the people, but also as having contributed to the revival of the past heritage. In addition, state involvement in a project facilitating the accessibility of tradition will narrow the estrangement from the state currently prevalent in the religious and ultra-orthodox communities. Beside these advantages, there are also disadvantages: if the project depends on state funding it will be exposed to fixed pressures from the ultra-orthodox and from militant secularists. A long-term cultural undertaking like the one proposed here cannot depend on the results of occasional political negotiations, or on the "horse trading" typical of the sleepless nights preceding the closure of the budget.

4.3.3 A worldwide Jewish scheme funded by money belonging to Jews, whether as individuals or as a nation, such as reparations paid out by nations and commercial enterprises for losses incurred during the Holocaust. This scheme too carries symbolic significance: reparations paid out for the attempt to destroy the

Jewish people physically will serve to rekindle and preserve their spiritual tradition. A worldwide Jewish enterprise, with a public board reflecting all sections of the people in Israel and the Diaspora, may be immune to the political pressures that are liable to affect an Israeli project, although it would probably be vulnerable to other forms of pressure, such as those exerted by different movements within Judaism. Yet, a worldwide Jewish framework appears to me as the most natural for this project. It will enable, more than the others, the mobilization of all the physical and spiritual forces and resources available in the Jewish world for the project's benefit – money, intellect, knowledge, technology, and more. In addition, if a major motivation for the establishment of this project is the aspiration to stem the tide of assimilation that so far affects mainly the Diaspora, locating the project within this framework is highly appropriate.

4.3.4 Combining the options in a way that minimizes the potential damages from the disadvantages noted. For instance, the project could be launched as a worldwide Jewish enterprise that will be under the auspices of the president of the State of Israel. The symbolism is preserved and even reinforced here, because anchoring the project in the president's office clarifies that it is a national rather than a political project. This will also make it possible to protect the project from both internal Israeli political influences and general Jewish ones, to establish a link between the Jewish people and an Israeli state project, and confer new content upon the role and the office of the president.

4.4 I Believe

Loyal to the principle of transparence, I cannot (nor do I want to) hide the fact that I, the initiator of the idea and the author of this document, am a religiously committed Jew. For me Judaism is not only a culture, it is also a divinely inspired religion. I accept the wording of the ninth of Maimonides' thirteen principles of the faith, "that this Torah will not be changed, and that there will never be any other Torah from the Creator, blessed be His name." Hence, I feel that some words should be devoted here to the religious implications of the project from the personal viewpoint of intra-religious discourse. Hopefully, these remarks will help to soften the resistance of religious elements to the very establishment of this project.

In my view, the Jewish canon is mainly an expression of religious creativity. This emerges in the motivation of most authors, whose consciousness, existence, and context were religious, as well as in the content of the works themselves. The normative, philosophical, literary, mystical, and mythical texts served, in most cases, as a means of religious expression. When the cartloads of manuscripts were burnt in the thirteenth century, both the Pope who ordered the burning and the rabbi who mourned it viewed this event as a quintessential religious act. Traditional, religious, and ultra-orthodox communities view the contents of the library as a primary source of religious authority. These texts are the concrete expression of the tradition originating in Sinai. In them, the compelling religious answers for the questions of modern existence will be found.

But even among the religious and ultra-orthodox public, few are the scholars whose access to the Jewish canon is unhampered. All the rest – including most men and almost all women – have no

choice but to keep a distance from the books and rely on human intermediaries to extract religious meanings from them. Their basic ability to establish intimacy with the texts they consider holy is thereby usurped. Difficulty of access also causes religious youth to drift away from religious literature. Teachers at *yeshivot* (of various types and levels) attest to experiencing growing difficulties in weaving an intimate emotional and intellectual relationship between the student and the Talmud, or any other ancient text. Conclusive proof of the need for an accessibility project in the *yeshivot* as well is the large demand for the products of current projects seeking to make texts more approachable, such as the Talmud's translation by Rabbi Steinsaltz and the English translations of various texts by Art Scroll.

Competent scholars might also benefit from the proposed venture. How many of us have been blessed with the rare qualities of erudition and intellectual excellence? How many among us are, as it was said of Rabbi Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, a "cemented cistern that does not lose a drop"? The maze of trails in the Jewish canon, in all their length, breadth, and depth, is familiar only to a very thin layer of first class scholars. The proposed project, therefore, may create a valuable instrumentuseful not only to the "common folk" but also to those whose lives are fully devoted to the study of Torah. A click on the keyboard and an intelligent use of the index will enable a *yeshivah* teacher interested in developing an educational idea to locate a wide range of sources from the *Musar* [ethical] literature shelf; a student to answer a troubling question from the Torah literature shelf; a community rabbi to enrich his Sabbath sermon from the shelf of homiletics and exegeses of the weekly Torah portion; the halakhist to obtain a broad picture of halakhic precedents on the question that concerns him. Great

demand is already currently evident in the *yeshivot* for a similar product – The Responsa Project of Bar-Ilan University, which transferred to an electronic medium a part of the responsa literature, but does not deal with other parts of the canon and other aspects of the proposed accessibility project.

From a religious point of view, the value of Torah study is crucial. This value will be promoted by making the library accessible to our generation, when the "Torah" is loaded onto powerful modern tools that will make it available for wide use. In much the same way that the shift to books, and later the printing revolution, advanced the study of Torah through a broad and inexpensive dissemination of the texts, so will the computer revolution advance the study of Torah by distributing the texts and by using information processing techniques. Moreover, just as the language of the Talmud is Aramaic, the tongue spoken at the time and place it was written, so will the proposed translation project enable the study of Torah in the language spoken here and now.

In a deeper sense, the accessibility project may lead to a religious renaissance. The very act of the renewed, direct, and intimate encounter between the broad public and the texts can lead to modern religious creativity, to a new midrash suited to the era and its spirit.

5. Summary

In light of the difficulties of accessing the vast Jewish corpus created throughout history and the centrality of liberal Western culture in our lives, the influence of Jewish culture on large sections of today's Jewish people is dwindling. They experience a "thin" Judaism, lacking the depths of memory, meaning, ethos, practices, symbols, and other elements that enter into the creation of full cultural complexity. For many, Judaism comes down to ethnic membership with some historical background, and nothing more. They cannot explicate to themselves nor impart to their children the cultural sequence linking them to the recent and distant past. At this point, they are only a short step away from wondering about the very need for a separate identity, about alienation, the erasure of distinctiveness, and ultimately spiritual and physical assimilation.

This paper proposed a blueprint for a project, Israeli and/or worldwide Jewish, seeking to create a broad and diversified anthology of Jewish tradition accessible to people today and to future generations in terms of language, structure, and cultural codes. If the project succeeds, it will have significant cultural, educational, sociological, national, and religious implications for

the future. As a result of this project, Jewish society in Israel and in the world will hopefully be able to understand itself and the riddle of its uniqueness from a historical perspective, fusing the horizon of the past with the horizon of the present. The project will enable us to conduct our identity discourse from the depth and fullness of a multi-generational discourse, which can shield us from spiritual assimilation. As a result, the project could also entail important demographic implications: Jews with a strong identity, connected to their heritage and interested in it, will be less exposed to the option of formal assimilation through marriage to non-Jews.

List of Publications

The Rappaport Center publishes Research and Position Papers, authored by outstanding scholars and experts. These papers present original and interesting findings concerning issues pertaining to assimilation and Jewish identity. Written at a high level of cultural and conceptual analysis, they are nevertheless not 'ivory tower' research; they bear operational implications for ameliorating and improving real-life situations. The Research and Position Papers of the Rappaport Center are an invaluable and original series, constituting a significant addition to the collection of any public and research library and to the bookshelves of individuals interested in, or concerned with, the future of the Jewish people. To date, the following publications have appeared in this series:

- **Israeli Assimilation: The Absorption of Non-Jews into Israeli Society and its Influence on the Collective Identity**, by Asher Cohen (Hebrew)
- **A Critique of Jewish Identity Discourse**, by Avi Sagi (Hebrew)
- **Halakhic Responses to Assimilation**, by Ariel Picard (Hebrew)
- **Training American Orthodox Rabbis to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation: Programs, Methodologies and Directions**, by Adam Ferziger (English)
- **Making the Jewish Canon Accessible to Our Generation,** by Yedidia Z. Stern (Hebrew\English)
- **Psychological Aspects of Identity Formation and Their Implications for Understanding the Concept of Jewish Identity: A Review of the Scientific Literature**, By Michal Tur Kaspa-Shimoni, Dana Pereg and Mario Mikulincer (Hebrew)

- **"The Jewish Story": The Meaning of Jewish Identity and the Factors Shaping it Among Jewish Youth in Mexico City and Tashkent**, by Dana Pereg, Mario Mikulincer and Maya Aksakalov (Hebrew)
- **The Quintessential Dilamma: American Jewish Responses to Intermarriage,** by Gerald Cromer (Hebrew\English)
- **"Jewishness" in Postmodernity: The Case of Sweden,** by Lars Dencik (Hebrew\English)
- **Assimilation in Italy and the methods of confronting it,** by Yaakov Andrea Lattes (Hebrew\Italian)
- **The Rosenzweig Lehrhaus: Proposal for a Jewish House of Study in Kassel Inspired by Franz Rosenzweig's *Frankfurt Lehrhaus***, by Ephraim Meir (English).

The Rappaport Center also publishes Field Reports, which give a voice to local jewish community members addressing issues of jewish identity and assimilation in a straightforward manner. The insights and information expressed in these publications aim at motivating communities and leaders to take a new look at the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which they have until now related to community life, and encourage them to seriously consider and implement new strategies, better suited to ensuring the future of the community in today's turbulent times. To date, the following publications have appeared in this series:

- **THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY: ASSIMILATION AND RESPONSE AMONGST BASEL'S JEWS**, by Valerie Rhein (English).
- **JEWISH IDENTITY PATTERNS AND ASSIMILATION TRENDS AMONG YOUNG ADULT JEWS IN HUNGARY**, by David Bitter (English).

For more books and for further information, please contact the Rappaport Center at rjcenter@mail.biu.ac.il, by fax 972-3-6295482 or by phone 972-3-6295422.