

CHAPTER 26

Building Edifices of Jewish Knowledge: Michael Berenbaum and the Third *Encyclopaedia Judaica*

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Encyclopedias are not merely massive repositories of knowledge. They are also occasions announcing a new framing of knowledge. The “Preliminary Discourse” that opened the famous *Encyclopédie* of 1751 associated with Diderot laid out a sweeping Enlightenment-era agenda: to order and connect all human knowledge, as well as to bring together the general principles that form the basis of every worthy scientific or art form. This was a work not only of assembly, but of a self-conscious attempt to overturn a previous paradigm of knowledge beholden to ecclesiastical authority.

And yet, for all of their claims to bold innovation, encyclopedias contain a quality that is embedded in the very meaning of the word. The original Greek term was actually two words, “*enkyklios paideia*,” meaning circular education, that became fused into one in Latin. The circularity of “*enkyklios*” hints at the repetition of knowledge, somewhat at odds with the assertion of novelty, while also recalling the recurrent quest of encyclopedists to capture a huge swath of knowledge in a single bibliographic undertaking.

This monumental encyclopedic impulse has been amply present in modern Jewish culture since the mid-eighteenth century. The Italian Yitzhak Lampronti conceived and produced the first volumes of *Pahad Yitshak* in 1750. That work was an encyclopedia devoted to Talmudic literature that survived Lampronti’s death in 1756. A number of subsequent editors completed the work over the next 130 years, culminating in a thirteen-volume compendium.

Shortly thereafter, at the beginning of the twentieth century, we encounter a new encyclopedic moment in the western Jewish world. The first major compendium in English, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, appeared in twelve volumes (1901–1906) under the editorial hand of Isidore Singer. Shortly thereafter, the Zionist author and ideologue, Ahad Ha-am, announced plans for a Hebrew volume called *Otsar ha-Yahadut* that was never realized. In the same period, a sixteen-volume Russian-language work, the *Yevreyskaya Entisklpediya*, was crafted between 1906–1913.

In considering the history of the Jewish encyclopedic impulse in modern times, pride of place belongs to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (EJ)—or in fitting with the etymology of the word, to the three versions of the *EJ* that have appeared over the past century. As with the architects of the first two editions of the *EJ*, the executive editor of the third, Michael Berenbaum, is a distinctive figure who traverses the worlds of thought and action, of scholarship and activism. He is, to borrow the language of Franz Rosenweig from 1923, one of the “Bauleute,” a builder who understands that ideas require an institutional edifice—and institutional edifices always require ideas to be successful (in evocation of the oft-invoked aphorism from Pirkei Avot 3:2). Over the course of his long, creative, and multi-faceted career, Michael has helped to build institutions of great import including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, and the Ziering Institute at the American Jewish University, as well as a host of Holocaust museums across the globe (see chapter 108, appendix). And in his work on the *EJ*, he, together with editor-in-chief Fred Skolnik, built a new house of Jewish knowledge for the twenty-first century.

In this short essay, I will compare the mission of Berenbaum and Skolnik to that of the implementers of the first two versions of the *EJ*, Nachum Goldmann, Jakob Klatzkin, and Ismar Elbogen in the case of *EJ I*, and Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, in the case of *EJ II*.

EJI

Nahum Goldmann, as charismatic and peripatetic a Jewish *macher* as ever there was in the twentieth century, began to work on the idea of a trilingual *EJ* in 1923, a fateful year in the history of Germany. Following the end of the First World War, the new Weimar Republic became the site of enormous Jewish cultural activity, as native German Jews met up with tens of thousands of Eastern European Jews. In this period, Berlin emerged as a major center of Jewish cultural activity and publication not only in German, but in Hebrew and Yiddish as well. And yet, the year 1923 punctured the bubble of cultural efflorescence, as a staggering and crippling inflation swept the country. Ever opportunistic and optimistic, Nachum Goldmann seized the moment together with his mentor and friend, Dr. Jakob Klatzkin, the Jewish thinker and Zionist activist, to conceive of a new compendium of Jewish knowledge that drew on the considerable scholarly talent at that time. In the midst of extraordinary economic uncertainty and a good deal of political instability, the two men set out to raise funds and recruit authors. They brought on as co-editor the eminent historian Ismar Elbogen. Akin to Leopold Zunz in his 1818 programmatic essay for a new *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the editors saw danger before their eyes—not in a physical sense, but rather in the growing amnesia and Hebraic ignorance of the Jewish public. But here the *Encyclopaedia* had a special mission to undertake, described in the quasi-religious terms characteristic of the Weimar milieu; it would be a “work of redemption (*Erlösungswerk*) for the many dispersed and inaccessible historical sources of Judaism.” (*EJ*, “Geleitwort,” x). Over the course of five years, the editors labored strenuously and completed nine more volumes up to end of the letter “L.” Plans to complete the project were disrupted by the rise of Hitler to power in 1933. So too was the ambitious goal of putting out the *Encyclopaedia* in English and Hebrew versions (though two volumes did appear as *Eshkol: Enziklpedyah Yisre’elit*).

This first iteration of the *EJ*, which drew the participation of well over a hundred leading Jewish studies scholars from around the world, did not reach completion. The last German volume, number 10, appeared in 1934 (four years after another more compact encyclopedic project, the *Juedisches Lexikon*, was completed). At that point, another important work of compilation emerged in Germany, the Schocken Bücherei series. Rather than attempting to distill the essence of knowledge in the form of encyclopedic entries, the Bücherei series published short books devoted to key bodies of Jewish literature and to the work of leading Jewish thinkers or authors. It produced eighty-three volumes until the project was transferred from Germany to Palestine in 1939. Both the Schocken Bücherei and *EJI* series stand as testament to the intense concentration of scholarly talent in the field of Jewish studies in Germany in the interwar period.

EJII

The rise of Nazism ended the formative German era of modern Jewish studies. But it did not end either the prominence of scholars of German origin or the ongoing growth of Jewish studies after the Second World War. On the contrary, postwar Jewish studies has expanded at a remarkable rate, chiefly in Israel and North America but also in Europe, including Germany, in recent decades. As part of that expansion, the encyclopedic impulse has been an important prod to and aggregator of Jewish studies scholarship around the world.

In the 1950s, Nahum Goldmann picked up on the thread by soliciting an allocation for a renewed *EJ* from the German reparations fund, now known as the Claims Conference. Meanwhile, interest began to gather in Israel, where the Rassco construction company committed resources. Likewise, in the United States, an Encyclopaedia Judaica Research Foundation was established, of which Nahum Goldmann would later become honorary president.

In fact, it was in the US that the first postwar office of the new *EJ* was set up. Professor Benzion Netanyahu, father of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was appointed editor-in-chief, a role he also filled with the *Enziklopedyah Ivrit* (Encyclopedia Hebraica). An office for the project was set up in 1963 at Dropsie College in Philadelphia, where Netanyahu taught. Two years later, Netanyahu had to step down from the *EJ* work, at which point the center of activity

moved to Israel. In the next year, 1966, the vastly prolific Anglo-Jewish historian, Cecil Roth, who had contributed to the earlier *EJ*, assumed the position of editor-in-chief. Roth had recently moved to Jerusalem, and he gathered around him a cohort of fellow British Jews—Louis Rabinowitz, Raphael Posner, and Geoffrey Wigoder—who served as the core editorial team. They succeeded in recruiting 300 section editors and 1,800 individual contributors, who were supported by a standing *EJ* staff of 150. The project was now under the aegis of the newly established Keter Publishing House, which was supported by the government-sponsored Israel Program for Scientific Translations.

In the fifty years since the appearance of the first volume of the German *EJ*, Jewish studies had not only survived the tragedy of the Holocaust, it relocated its center of gravity, adapted its primary language from German to English and Hebrew, and grown in every measurable regard. The editors of *EJ II* noted in their introduction the need to incorporate new discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and to make fuller use of the rich trove of Cairo Geniza materials. They also had to include fields of research that received scant attention in *EJ I* such as social and economic history, Jewish art, the history of Eastern European Jews, the history of Jews of Muslim lands, Zionist history, Yiddish literature and language, Jewish history in the Americas, and the first steps in the history of the Holocaust, among other key topics.

Cecil Roth regarded *EJ II* as “the greatest Jewish literary work of scholarship of the century.” Sadly, he did not live to see the project through to the end. He died in 1970, and his close associate, Geoffrey Wigoder, the veteran English journalist who moved to Israel in 1949, assumed the task of editor-in-chief. It was Wigoder who oversaw the completion of the full work at sixteen volumes, which quickly became the definitive work of Jewish scholarly reference the world over.

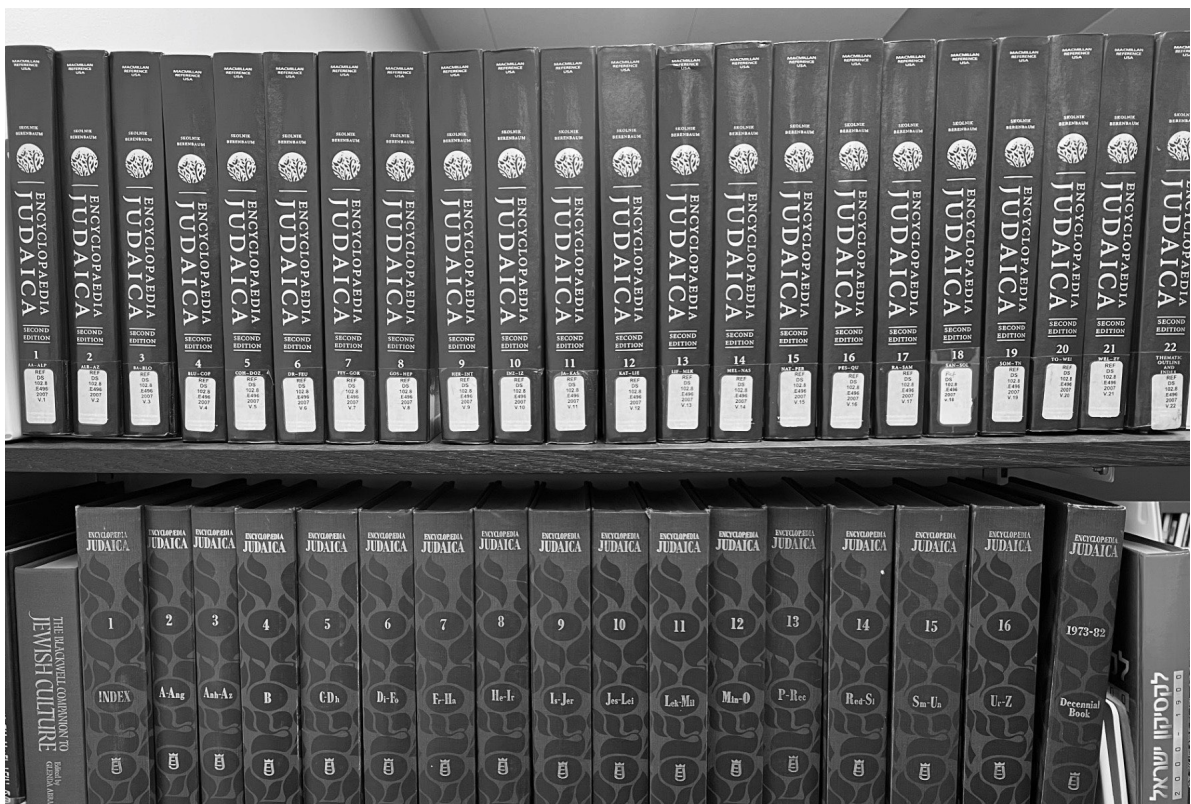


Figure 26.1. *Encyclopedia Judaica 2* and *Encyclopaedia Judaica 3* American Jewish Library, Los Angeles. Photo Credit: Ed Gaffney.

EJ III

Why then was there a need for a new version of the *EJ*? Writing in the preface to *EJ III*, Michael Berenbaum described the preceding edition as “authoritative, comprehensive, serious yet accessible.” But he quickly added the rationale for a new edition: “Knowledge is dynamic, not static. Much has changed in the last thirty-five years.”

Berenbaum himself was in a very good position to chart the shifting currents of knowledge. He commanded many discrete and overlapping fields as an ordained rabbi, Jewish theologian, and scholar of the Holocaust. Moving between university posts and assignments outside of it, he was able to fuse his interest in the Jewish past with a deep concern for present-day issues. Moreover, as a builder of institutions, he knew how to marshal scholarly forces into a unified, albeit wide-ranging, project. It was the great fortune of *EJ III* that he joined Fred Skolnik, the American-born Israeli author who served as editor-in-chief, as executive editor the new project.

The story of *EJ III* began in 2003 when the Thompson Gale publishing company bought rights to the *EJ* and announced plans for a new version to be released in print and CD-ROM versions in 2006. The digital revolution was one of the major transformations to occur over the preceding thirty years. The capacity to assemble, store, share, and thereby advance knowledge had never been nearly as powerful as in this era—and, of course, it has only experienced manifold increase since the appearance of the twenty-two volumes of *EJ III* in 2007.

Encyclopedias are, in the first instance, markers of advances in knowledge production. Technological innovations are one important catalyst. So too are political and social developments. Between the early 1970s and the early 2000s, a number of key developments in the broader world impelled the emergence of new categories of knowledges and research imperatives. To take one prominent example, as Michael Berenbaum declared in the Preface: “The Soviet Union is no longer.” The collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1991, the full opening of the gates of emigration, and the re-emergence of long-suppressed local Jewish cultures all merited new attention.

In the two major centers of global Jewish life, the pace of change had accelerated rapidly. The Israel of the time of *EJ II* was just transitioning from a fragile and beleaguered country into a self-confident power. Propelled by its stunning triumph in the Six Day War in 1967, Israel became a military, economic, and technological force to reckon with over the next three and a half decades, even as the sense of common purpose felt in the early years of the state gave way to stark political fissures within Israel’s Jewish population.

Meanwhile, in intellectual terms, Jewish studies in Israel grew exponentially, as the major universities and an expanding roster of private colleges across the country boasted many faculty and courses in the field. The same period also witnessed an explosive growth in the United States. The Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) was founded with forty-seven members at a meeting at Brandeis University in 1969. In 2020, the AJS’s membership rolls approached 2,000, and its annual conference was the most important gathering of scholars and students in the field.

The transition from *EJ I* to *EJ II* signaled a major period of growth. But the transition from *EJ II* to *EJ III* signaled an even more explosive phase of growth. Hundreds of universities and colleges in North America established programs, centers, and majors in Jewish studies, teaching thousands of students and producing hundreds of PhDs. This development took place in parallel with the rise of new ethnic, racial, and feminist consciousness in the United States, which prompted the creation of new institutional and intellectual formations in American universities.

Michael Berenbaum noted in his Preface the importance of the women’s movement in American life. As he observed, *EJ III* “represents a deliberate attempt to include women and the experience of women within its pages” not for the sake of inclusion, but “because we cannot understand Jews or the Jewish experience without understanding the role of Jewish women.” Renowned scholar Judith Baskin was appointed to oversee this important new sub-field.

Consistent with Berenbaum’s own scholarly interests, a new focus was placed on the expanding field of Holocaust studies, as well as on the study of contemporary American Jewry—its new geographic concentrations in the West (where Berenbaum himself resettled from the East Coast), its denominational dynamics, and the social and cultural challenges that issued from the fact that now “American Jews live in a world with few barriers.” At the same time, older fields of study such as Bible and rabbinic literature had undergone major conceptual transformations in recent

decades and were now vibrant domains of scholarship informed by the latest critical theories. To capture these new trends among many others, *EJ III* added 2,650 entries to the existing base of 25,000 in *EJ II* (half of which were modified for the third iteration).

This massive effort was completed in 2007, a mere four years after Thompson Gale took on the project. Upon publication, *EJ III* was awarded the Dartmouth Medal, the most prestigious American award in reference publishing, which noted that it had was “an authoritative, interdisciplinary and comprehensive examination of all aspects of Jewish life, history and culture.”

That description might well be attached to Michael Berenbaum, a walking encyclopedia of Jewish knowledge who also possesses the gift of knowing how to implement projects of grand scale. Michael is an embodiment of the *EJ* in another way. I noted at the outset of this essay that encyclopedias rest on a repetition of knowledge consistent with the Greek word “*enkyklios*,” but also constitute substantial engines of innovation by capturing major advances in scholarship. Both in his personal Jewish existence and as a scholar, Michael Berenbaum skillfully balances fealty to the past and openness to innovation—indeed, a perfect equipoise between tradition and modernity. In this regard, he rightfully takes his place alongside truly distinguished predecessors in editing the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: Nahum Goldmann, Jakob Klatzkin, and Ismar Elbogen in the case of the first German edition, and Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, in the case of the first English edition.

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CHAPTER 27

Introducing College Students to Jewish Customs and Beliefs: The Importance of Jewish Studies Programs

Richard Libowitz

Prologue

In 1983, I was being interviewed for a teaching position at a well-known institution of higher education in Virginia. I was a young professor; my interviewers, two very formal and polite gentlemen of the Old South, were decades older. About twenty minutes into our discussion, I realized that these gentlemen were hoping I would add a course on the Holocaust to their classes in “Old Testament” which, they said, would give their school a complete program in “Jewish studies.” I suggested there were more than eighteen centuries of Jewish life between the completion of the Hebrew Bible and the Holocaust. The conversation deteriorated after that and I was not offered the job.

In October of 1965, the Second Vatican Council adopted its Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, called *Nostra Aetate*. The Declaration sought both to validate Judaism in the understanding of Catholics and to refute many of the misstatements and false accusations against Jews and Judaism found within Church documents and practices for centuries (chapters 35–38 and 40). Catholics were encouraged to participate in dialogue with their Jewish neighbors, to