

Beyond Traditional Methods: Five Thoughts of what is New and What is Next in Jewish Studies

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In 1944, the famous Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem published a scathing critique of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and wondered: "Where is the building that we said we would build [...] and if the building was not built - where is that intact stone that we said we would use building the house of the wisdom of Israel? [...] Is something wrong in the house of wisdom and science [...]? Or have we wrongly seen?"¹ In doing so, Scholem wondered about various obstacles and misconceptions that prevented Jewish studies from fulfilling their historical task in his eyes. Those words that were well-rooted in his historical and historiographical reality could raise questions regarding deceptive notions nowadays. This paper seeks to address problem of boundaries and schemes that must be crossed or preserved in Jewish studies, shining light on misconceptions, dichotomies and illusions.

1. Dichotomies of Jewish studies

Jewish studies and the study of Judaism are not necessarily identical, but both are closely related to the ability and desire to critically examine sources (biblical as well as other documents) and the Jewish past. In this context, the developments that have taken place in this field and the fundamental questions of cohesion and continuity will not be reviewed;² Nevertheless, one should emphasize that there is

¹ גרשום שלום, 'מתוך הרהורים על חכמת ישראל', בתוך *דברים בגו: פרקי מורשה ותחיה*, תל אביב: עם עובד תשל"ו, עמ' 385

² For selected works on the topic see: "Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*", Hanover: Brandeis University Press 1994; Michael A. Meyer, *"Judaism within Modernity"*, Detroit: Wayne State University 2001; David Biale (eds), *"Cultures of the Jews: A New History"*, New York: Schocken

no absolute overlap between Wissenschaft des Judentums, Jewish studies (whatever its definition may be), and the history of the Jews of Poland - a topic that is (and rightly so) at the center of Polin's work and consequently, at the center of this academic meeting.³ We are thus discussing Jewish studies within limited academic community/communities.

True, in the eighteenth century, close to ninety percent of the world's Jews lived in Eastern Europe, and the patterns and the movements that developed there had a decisive influence on the Jewish world and its development; But Jewish studies are far beyond that. They begin in antiquity, a period which demands integration of history and archeology; through the days of the Second Temple, the Mishnah and Talmud - in which the sources are fundamentally different from those discussed by Polish scholars; And even the examination of the European Ashkenazi Jewish communities in the early Middle Ages, often goes beyond the focus of Polish Jewry historians. That is, we all belong in one way or another to Jewish Studies but write mainly within the framework of much more limited academic communities.

The Holocaust as an example, a field which has grown over the years and has its own research institutions, journals, and researchers,⁴ can be considered part of Jewish studies; but it is also closely linked to many other fields of research: along with Jewish history and antisemitism, Holocaust research is inseparable from modern European history, Nazism, World War II, racism, and genocide. Some scholars - would add additional contexts such as slavery, mass violence, ethnic struggles, imperialism, and colonialism.⁵

Other colleagues of this conference, who are engaged in the study of Hasidism, for example, would map out their academic space differently and would point to other research contexts. It is true that they too would refer to Jewish history and European

Books 2002; Moshe Rosman, "How Jewish is Jewish History", Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2007.

³ As is reflected in the program and the list of participants

⁴ Yad Vashem, USHMM, Mémorial de la Shoah, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies; Yad Vashem Studies, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, The Journal of Holocaust Research, Zagłada Żydów.

⁵ As appear in Omer Bartov scholarship.

history, but at the same time, it is possible that they would also place themselves among scholars of literature, Jewish and non-Jewish thought, religious studies, and more.⁶ True for both Hasidism scholars and Holocaust researchers, Poland will have a central place, but most of their research questions, documentations, chronological sequence and geographical representation will differ. So, what are Jewish Studies for us, Polish Jewry scholars who specialize in the Holocaust, Hasidism, literature, or twentieth-century urbanization? What are the other academic communities to which we belong and respond, and how do they shape our research discourse?

Furthermore, have we succeeded in creating an academic community of "Jewish Studies"?

This framework is not suitable for addressing these issues in-depth, let alone dictating one and only one answer, and yet: Jewish studies are one (central) context out of many, all which challenge our intellectual world in different ways.⁷ For me, alongside Jewish studies scholars, these are Holocaust researchers (in Israel and around the world) as well as Polish researchers (in Poland, Israel, and around the world). Most of my research will be read by these colleagues before submitting for publication, and I too, am exposed (or am trying to be exposed) to their research. And this leads us to the central question: How do these academic communities shape our research? How similar and how different is the research on a given topic conducted in Poland, Israel, or the United States?

⁶ David Biale et al., "Hasidism: A New History" (Princeton University Press, 2017)

⁷ As such, it might raise thematic questions, often deviating from a defined period or geographical location: leadership, gender, identity and more. These questions require reference to a broad Jewish context beyond that discussed in the given study and promote questions of continuity and disruption, which will often ultimately be examined in the context of a given and defined research context. See as an example: Rachel Manekin, "The Rebellion of the Daughters: Jewish Women Runaways in Habsburg Galicia", Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2020; מרכוס זילבר, לאומיות שונה, אזרחות שווה: המאמץ להשגת אוטונומיה ליהודי פולין במלחמת העולם הראשונה, ירושלים: אוניברסיטת תל אביב בשיתוף עם מרכז זלמן שז"ר תשע"ד; מרדכי זלקין, מרא דאתרא? רב וקהילה בתחום המושב, ירושלים: מגנס תשע"ז

In Holocaust studies, what was once an Israeli / Jewish field has become a worldwide community.⁸ Some leading scholars who deal with fundamental questions of Jewish life are neither Israeli nor Jewish, and significant research projects in the field have been launched in the United States and Germany.⁹ Nevertheless, even today, there are local characteristics to our studies.¹⁰ Awareness of these sub-communities - within Jewish studies, Polish Jewish research and / or Holocaust research¹¹, is a necessary step in breaking the chronological, geographical and thematic boundaries that exist in our research.

2. Conceptualization

Beyond the dim nature of Jewish studies scholars, even when we focus on a specific subject - our conceptualization is often ambiguous. The title given to a specific historical event might carry charged meanings,¹² and efforts to characterize them may well be convicting or acquitting certain aspects as in the cases of antisemitism,

⁸ For the development of the field see: Dreifuss, "Jewish Historiography of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe", I vol. 29 (2017), 217-245

⁹ Barbara Engelking, "Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień ... ,Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej" 1942-1945, Warszawa 2011; Christoph Dieckmann, „Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941-1944“, Göttingen 2011; Christopher Robert Browning, "Remembering Survival - Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp", W. W. Norton, New York, 2010; Klaus-Peter Friedrich, "Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933 – 1945“, Band 4, Polen September 1939 – Juli 1941 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011); Bert Hoppe Bert, „Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933 – 1945“, Band 7: Sowjetunion mit annektierten Gebieten I (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011); Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman, "Jewish Responses to Persecution", Volume I, 1933–1938; Alexandra Garbarini, "Jewish Responses to Persecution", Volume II, 1938–1940; By Jürgen Matthäus, "Jewish Responses to Persecution", Volume III, 1941-1942.

¹⁰ Thus, studies written in Poland on youth movements will be considered innovative, and in Israel studies on Jewish-Polish relations will be considered as such.

¹¹ Despite AJS and the Jewish Congress of Jewish Studies

¹² For a few examples see: Cmacknicki uprising / Powstanie Chmielnickiego of Cossack-Polish War and Khmel'nitsky Massacre. 1947–1949 Palestine War or War of Independence, War of Liberation, and al-Nakba; as well as the Defensive war or September campaign of September 1939.

ghettos and pogroms.¹³ Furthermore, discussing a given concept within a specific "Jewish studies" perspective reshape its meaning. Cases of physical attacks on Jews within the context of the Jewish-Arab conflict raises not only the framework of pogroms, but also "riots" and "events", as Jaffa riots of 1921;¹⁴ while it in the context of American Jewry would raise the term lynching and the connections of violence against African-Americans.¹⁵ Thus, discussing cases of injury, murder, humiliation, and rape of Jews by local populations will change according to the context. This example illustrates, as Engel argued, the impact of conceptualization on our research questions. A clear example of this "conceptual price" can be seen in the academic discourse of Jewish-Polish relations during the Holocaust. The term, "Righteous Among the Nations", a moral concept which differs basically from an historical category, shaped the field for decades. As a moral concept (driven from the phrase "He who saved one soul from Israel"), the number of survivors, the

¹³ סקוט אורי וגיא מירון (עורכים), *אנטישמיות: בין מושג היסטורי לשיח ציבורי*, ירושלים: ציון-מרכז 2020; Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, Kalman Weiser (eds.), "Key concepts in the study of antisemitism"; Dan Michman, "The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos during the Holocaust", New York: Cambridge University Press and Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2011; Engel, David, "What's in a Pogrom? European Jews in the Age of Violence", in Jonathan Dekel - Chen, David Gaunt, Natan M. Meir and Israel Bartal (ed.), "Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History", Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2011; Brass, Paul, R., *Riots and Pogroms*, New York: New York University Press, 1996; Petersen, Roger, D., "Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, "Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust", (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Jeffrey Veidlinger, "In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918-1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust", New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021

¹⁴ Different concepts enabled replacing fear of outbreak of uncontrollable violence with something more controlled by reframing the events.

¹⁵ Glaser, Amelia. "From Jewish Jesus to Black Christ: Race Violence in Leftist Yiddish Poetry." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) 34, no. 1 (2015): 44-69; Edward González-Tennant. "Intersectional Violence, New Media, and the 1923 Rosewood Pogrom." *Fire!!!* 1, no. 2 (2012): 64-110; Schoenberg, Philip Ernest. "The American Reaction to the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1974): 262-83.

number of rescuers or the duration of the action – has no meaning. Yet they do have a fundamental importance in the historical discussion: acts of providing false documentation was different than that of hiding a Jew; and from the historical perspective – there is a great difference if one hid a child for one night or rescued dozens of Jews for more than two years. The very fact that the moral definition of the Righteous Among the Nations given by Yad Vashem - became the basis for historical debate created long-lasting distortions and lacunas. Indeed, only in recent years, new categories of paid rescuers and Jews who rescued Jews emerged, and only in recent years have we started examining those who assisted and those who persecuted as dynamic actions.¹⁶ Thus, abandoning the moral definition of Righteous Among the Nations contributed significantly to deepening and expanding the discussion on Jewish-Polish relations in the Holocaust.

For this reason, conceptualization does not only require scholars to clarify their concept and contexts; but also obligates them to be aware of lacunas tangential to the concepts discussed.

3. Archives and Sources

As scholars, we tend to delude ourselves that our research questions lead us to our sources and archives; although archival sources clearly shape our research questions and sometimes even limit them. This perception is closely related to the illusion that an archive is a "neutral" and "blind" collection of records reflecting existing documentation. Yet, archives have their own history and have been built and stored in a specific and sometimes biased manner: national collections, records of a given movement, and even thematic archives – collect certain materials, and neglect others.¹⁷ In this sense, one fundamental challenge we face is awareness of the

¹⁶ Jan Grabowski, „Ratowanie Żydów za pieniądze; przemysł pomocy”, *Zagłada Żydów*, 4 (2008), pp. 81-109; idem. „Rescue for Money: Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939-1945”, Jerusalem 2008; Dreifuss, “Changing Perspectives on Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust”, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem 2012

<https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/rescue/rescue-by-jews.html>.

¹⁷For a better understanding of the relations between historians and archivists: Francis X. Blouin, Jr and William G. Rosenberg, “Processing the Past: Contesting

manner in which collections shape research. As a (particularly creative) colleague said: "The more original my research is, the harder it is for me to locate relevant sources in a particular archive."

That is, naming sources that have not been adequately addressed in the past, as visual documentation, modern archeology, references to language, time, or space – is easier than defining lacunas resulting from reliance on specific collections or archives. For example, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the Ringelblum Archive for Holocaust Studies,¹⁸ but despite Ringelblum's ambitions to "photograph everything that happened to the Jewish masses, their experiences, thoughts, and pains",¹⁹ some issues and sectors were over-represented and others were under-represented. Indeed, documents relating to the life of the Orthodox public can be found in the Ringelblum Archive, and this collection preserved the sermons of the Rebbe of Piaseczno. Nevertheless, depicting religious life based mainly (if not exclusively) on those sermons and on the writings of Rabbi Huberband – as usually is done, is misleading. It lacks numerous key figures within the Orthodox society as well as central topics of its existence.²⁰

Thus, awareness of blind spots of collections and archives can open up an array of original and innovative research questions. Breaching traditional archival boundaries also underlies the use of unwritten sources, and in recent years, the importance of visual documentation and archaeological findings have been emphasized in

Authorities in History and Archives", Oxford University Press 2011. This book written by an archivist and a historian places archives as subjects rather than places of study and examining the increasingly problematic relationships between historical and archival work.

¹⁸ Samuel D. Kassow, "Who Will Write our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, The Warsaw Ghetto and the Oyneg Shabas Archive", Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2007.

¹⁹ Hebrew version: p. 9

²⁰ Despite the importance of these personalities and the certificates they have left, it should be remembered that they do not express the wealth that existed within the Orthodox public in all its shades - neither in Warsaw, nor in Poland, nor indeed throughout Europe. See Dreifuss, "Orthodox Jews during the Holocaust: An Ongoing Lacuna of Research", Moreshet, Vol 17 (2020), p, 65-93.

Holocaust research.²¹ These sources, especially their innovative analyses, reveal new knowledge and raise new questions about material culture, unnecessary violence, and more.

4. Challenges of the Digital World

Essential tools, which were not available to our teachers, stem from the technological world of our times. Databases that were unattainable dreams are now a keystroke away, including the Responsa Project, Jewish Historical Press, and the Cairo Genizah Project.²² Moreover, the accessibility of archives - which provided a real leap forward in the days of the Coronavirus - allows us to browse various materials - enlarge, lighten/darken documents, which in the past were examined with a magnifying glass in archives.

This technological revolution, including 'digital humanities', entails both possibilities and illusions.²³ They enable gathering vast amounts of information, rapid and effective quantitative and qualitative analysis, and global publication of our findings. At the same time, one should admit that even if the tools are innovative, not all methods are so pioneering: dictionaries and concordances existed in the past, even if

²¹ Tal Bruttman, Stefan Hördler, Christoph Kreuzmüller, „Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens. Ein Album aus Auschwitz“, Darmstadt Germany: wbg Academic 2019; Yoram Haimi and Wojciech Mazurek, “Uncovering the remains of a Nazi death camp: archaeological research in Sobibór”, *Yad Vashem Studies* 41, 2 (2013), pp. 55-94.

For attempts to break existing geographical boundaries and expand the historical debate, see Timothy D. Snyder, “Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin”, Basic Books 2010; Eliyana R. Adler, “Survival on the Margins: Polish Jewish Refugees in the Wartime Soviet Union”, Harvard University press 2020.

²² <https://www.responsa.co.il/home.he.aspx>;
<https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/jpress>;
<https://fjms.genizah.org/?eraseCache=true>.

²³ Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, John Unsworth (eds), “A Companion to Digital Humanities”, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004; Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, “Beyond digitization? Digital humanities and the case of Hebrew literature”, *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, Volume 34, Issue 4, December 2019, Pages 908–913; Matthew K. Gold (ed), “Debates in the Digital Humanities”, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2016.

in a less accessible way, and quantitative and qualitative analyzes are in no means a new field in Jewish studies. As in other cases, primary methodological questions remain the same: from what collection is the scholar mining knowledge (archive), and how does he catalog his findings (conceptualized). Innovation does not necessarily lie in the skill of technology, but as in the past, in the original questions being asked.²⁴ These are excellent tools, no doubt, but their innovation depends on the scholar more than on the algorithm.²⁵

Nevertheless, one of the most powerful illusions concerning the digital world we all enjoy²⁶ is not necessarily in these aspects, and not even the danger of being enslaved to scanned sources and neglecting those still kept in a variety of archives. It stems first and foremost from the impressive accessibility of information in our time. We live in the age of knowledge. In the Western world, and many times even beyond it, human beings are literate, and many of them have access to an online world. As a result, access to databases and knowledge is unprecedented. However, this

²⁴ As the research project of The Center for Holocaust Studies in Warsaw, regarding rescue networks (of Jews and non-Jews) on the Aryan side of Warsaw; Marcin Wodziński, "Historical Atlas of Hasidism" (Princeton University Press, 2018); <https://elijahlab.haifa.ac.il/>; as well as Yad Vashem deportation of Jews project: <https://www.yadvashem.org/research/research-projects/deportations.html>

²⁵ Concerning the fear that digital history would overwhelm scholars or flatten historical research, one can only quote Plato reference to the invention of writing (370 BC): "For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise" Phaedrus, a dialogue between Socrates, Plato's teacher, and Phaedros in Plato, Harold North Fowler (ed), Euthyphro : Apology ; Crito ; Phaedo ; Phaedrus, Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 564-565.

²⁶ Part of this digital revolution enables accessibility of sources. technological knowledge will improve it might even more enable deciphering handwriting of a variety of languages.

accessibility also leads to questioning distinct knowledge agents. That is, the age of information is also necessarily the age of undermining the hegemony of knowledge. Wikipedia, for example, an enterprise of mass wisdom that has become a daily address for many, including educated people, is replacing scholars, academic institutions, or books written by them. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, there is a gap - often intentional and structured - in the information provided about historical events, not least about contested historical events. One can find significant differences in English, Hebrew, Polish, German, and Russian about the Holocaust: alongside accidental inaccuracies, one can find "fake history" and as well as entries with clear biases.²⁷

Information accessibility and an un-academic biased narrative reflect the struggle of knowledge agents in the age of information. This can lead to flattening of the expertise to the point of eliminating it. Awareness of these phenomena, of a world in which people know more, but their knowledge is not necessarily accurate - emphasizes our role as humanities scholars: encouraging critical thinking and teaching "how is history made". That is, how knowledge agents (on their behalf or behalf of others) make use of historical documents and complex pasts, in order to present a simple and simplistic pseudo-history. This is a real challenge in itself, not least in times we have witnessed in recent years, of political struggle over memory and history.

5. Present and Past - Who Influences Whom?

One central illusion of Holocaust researchers working on Poland (and not only theirs) is that we and our scholarly works significantly impact the public discourse. Yet usually, the opposite happens: it is the public discourse that shapes research. This issue is closely linked to the complicated relationship between regime - and academia, and in this context, current Polish government attempts to reshape

²⁷ Entries about the "Final Solutions" and the Wannsee Conference; Warsaw concentration camp; Radom, Lwow, Międzyrzec Podlaski and Lubartów Ghettos; Sobibór.

history and historical discourse:²⁸ efforts to control historical narratives in museums, legal changes promoting the "protection of the good name of the Polish nation" (whatever that concept may be) and reassessing academic publication as partial examples.²⁹ Thus, this regime seeks to promote research and commemoration of hundreds of years of Polish Jewry, including Jews murdered by Nazi Germany (and these, of course, were the majority); Yet, the same Polish government is aggressively reducing and restricting any practice in cases of Jews murdered due to direct and indirect Polish involvement.

The illusion of those political forces is apparent: they might believe that forceful action against so-called "invalid" tendencies could narrow balanced academic discussion on charged issues when they give ground to more scholarly publications on those topics.³⁰ Nevertheless, the literary world has its illusions and jeopardies regarding its contribution to the popular discourse: First, academic circles might reduce broader scholarly works and channel all its effort to contemporary discussions.³¹ There is no doubt that Jewish-Polish relations are an essential topic in Holocaust research, but it is not the only one; and it must be examined in a broader context.³² Second, threats arise from an apparent attempt of scholars wishing to influence non-academic political discourse by using (and sometimes misusing) historical knowledge. In Israel, Poland, or the US, we all have political views, and we all think our political views are justified. Nevertheless, trying to mobilize the past to

²⁸ Despite the Polish context we are discussing here, it should be remembered that similar phenomena also exist in other countries including Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Israel and the United States (Trump).

²⁹ The Israeli-Polish Joint statement and Yad Vashem Historians reaction; Rob's article.

³⁰ In fact, nothing fueled the discussion of the role of Poles in killing Jews as attempts to distort and reduce the regime.

³¹ The pseudo-scientific ramifications about DJN reduced its discussion to the question of Jewish-Polish relations in the Holocaust, ignoring, erasing, and blurring significant contribution of this research to a variety of issues: as Jewish reactions to German mass-murder, rescue strategies, Jewish life in Poland's rural areas, and more.

³² Both in relation to the reality that existed in other countries, and in relation to relations between Jews and non-Jews throughout history.

prove current political positions usually will not contribute to those views or the scholarly world; and our readers – students or the general public – deserve knowing if it is the scholar or the citizen speaking. As in other cases, being straightforward and honest is a necessary but unsatisfactory condition.

Summary:

An initial discussion of five thoughts related to Jewish scholarly work reflects various mental, thematic, and methodological boundaries we must recognize. Some must be broken; others need to be preserved - but it would be an illusion to think that these actions would unravel the cables of our professional practice. Even if we succeed, they will only define new illusions and questions.