**The Story of the National Library of Israel**

**Galia Grebler-Richler**

The earliest indication of the idea of founding a library for the Jewish people is found in a *Havatzelet* (“lily”) newspaper article from January 26, 1872. In a piece titled “Call for Action,” Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin laid out his vision: “to establish a treasury of books for posterity, to gather there all the books of our people, excluding none, and to collect manuscripts from all corners of the earth…” It would be another three years before Dov Fromkin, editor of the *Havatzelet,* would establish the “Library Collection of Montefiore” in 1875, together with colleagues Pines and Luncz from the society “Tif’eret Yerushalayim” (“glory of Jerusalem”). The founders specified two objectives: first, to spread knowledge and erudition, and second, to hold the spiritual inheritance of the Jewish people in one place, so as to prevent its being scattered among the libraries of other nations. Although the Fromkin library served the residents of Jerusalem for a mere three years before it was shut down for lack of funds, the flame had been lit and could no longer be extinguished.

Nine years later, in 1884, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda founded the “Library for the Israelites” with the help of some of Jerusalem’s most prominent intellectuals, including Efraim Cohen Reiss, David Yalin, and Luncz, and with funds from Frutiger, Shalom Konstrum, and Rothchild. Ben-Yehuda set to work procuring books for the library, which he hoped would achieve national significance. Among others, he managed to persuade Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz of Bialystok to donate his collection. As a Zionist, Chazanowicz saw this contribution as his part in the spiritual rebirth of the Jewish people in Eretz Israel. He was not the only one. Many Zionists, including Yehoshua Sirkin and Ussishkin, wrote of the idea of a national library, discussing avenues for its realization and identifying potential collections.

Concomitantly, the above-mentioned group of Jerusalem intellectuals – Ben-Yehuda, Efraim Cohen Reiss, Fromkin, Luncz, David Yalin, Meyuhas, and others – founded the “Jerusalem Office” of B’nai B’rith in 1888. Four years later, in 1892, they established the library “Midrash Abarbanel.” The Office members selected a library committee and, together with the house librarian, appealed to Jerusalemites to donate from their private libraries. Despite their efforts, they did not manage to obtain more than a few hundred volumes. In 1894, the Ben-Yehuda Library, with no more than 1,000 books in total, found itself unable to pay the rent and closed permanently. In a special meeting, it was decided to join the two libraries under one organizational roof. The “general library committee” was appointed for the administration of both collections. A year later, the first delivery of Chazanowicz’s donation arrived in Jerusalem – 9,800 books, which amounted to a significant enlargement of the collection and won Chazanowicz the privilege of having his name added. The joint library was now called, “The Library for the Israelites in Jerusalem, Midrash Abarbanel, and the Joseph Archives.” In total, Chazanowicz donated over 22,000 books to the library. But his contribution extended further. He also went to great lengths to obtain funds for a library building. This library at the heart of modern Jerusalem thus became a vibrant center of learning and culture, a meeting point for everyone and anyone in search of knowledge or visiting from abroad.

Herzl also cherished the idea of a national library, which became a common concern of members of the Zionist movement. In 1905, a resolution was adopted in the seventh Zionist Congress to declare the Jerusalem library as a national Jewish library. Deliberations began with Ben-Yehuda and the “Jerusalem Office” to grant ownership over the library to the Zionist Organization. Although the outbreak of the First World War prolonged negotiations, a contract was signed in 1918. Two years later, the Zionist Organization appointed the institution’s first academic director, Dr. Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, a Zionist activist who had previously worked as a librarian for the Prague university library. Bergmann made it a priority to enlarge the collection. Under his direction, the library purchased the Goldziher collection on Islam and received important donations, such as the Julius Jarcho medical collection. Bergmann extended a request to his friend, Gershom Scholem, to assist in arranging the library’s Hebraica collection. Scholem’s system still serves as the main organization method in the Judaism and Israel reading hall. Bergmann also established “friends” societies for the benefit of the library, which worked to procure books. The opening of the Hebrew University in 1925 was seen by many contemporaries as a milestone of Jewish revival in Eretz Israel. It seemed only natural to append the library to this new institution for the benefit of scholars, and, as argued by Bergmann, for the sake of attracting new collections. One of the most important donations to the library as a result of its appendage to the university was Salman Schoken’s collection of Hebrew incunabula. No less pivotal to the accumulation of books was the mandatory directive to grant the library two copies of every new publication in Eretz Israel. The library’s name was changed accordingly to “Jewish National and University Library.” From the city center, it was moved to Mount Scopus university campus. With the help of the Wolfson Foundation, a new designated building was erected. However, the Independence War and its aftermath created considerable difficulties in running the library. Mount Scopus became a territorial enclave, severed from the remainder of Jewish land. Ultimately, the library was run from the building Terra Santa and other alternate building throughout the city. There was, then, once again need for a new building, and in 1960, the building that houses the library to this day, on Givat Ram campus, was opened for visitors.

Through the years, the library became a temple of learning and a sanctuary for countless book collections and archives: the Gershom Scholem Kabbalah collection; the Avraham Shalom collection for Islamic manuscripts, which included Newton’s personal manuscripts; Eran Laor’s map collection of Eretz Israel and Jerusalem, and thousands of others. On rare occasions, the library went on targeted expeditions. One such occasion was the aftermath of the Second World War, when key figures in the library’s management set out to locate and salvage private and public Jewish libraries that had been looted by the Nazis. The project was named “treasures of the diaspora.” Another endeavor was the “institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts,” an initiative of the first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. The institute, which continues to be expanded and improved to this day, serves as the largest digital collection of Hebrew manuscripts in the world.

The formative years under the auspices of the university created a distance between the library and the public. For this reason, a process of separation and renewal was decided upon. The library is currently undertaking massive digitalization efforts in order to provide wider access on an international scale in its fields of specialization: Judaism, Israel, Islam, and the humanities. In addition, the library has made it a priority to once again become a key part of Israeli public life. For this end, a new building has been designed that will enable state-of-the-art reading halls, the exhibition of rare items, and spaces for cultural activities.

It was Herzl that said: “I have called Zionism once an endless ideal, and I truly believe that even after we gain our land, Eretz Israel, it will not cease to be an ideal; for Zionism as I see it incorporates not only the aspiration to a promised land for our miserable people, but also an aspiration for a moral and spiritual wholeness.” It seems fitting to say that the National Library too is an endless ideal, and that after the new building will be opened to the public, the aspiration to continue to grow and celebrate the human spirit will remain.

**The National Library’s Early Years – a Reassessment**

**Galia Grebler-Richler**

Very little has been written, and this only by a small group of scholars, about the process of the National Library’s foundation. The main scholar to have examined the library’s history, through the meticulous analysis of archival material, is Prof. Dov Schidorsky. His findings were documented in the monumental book, *Libraries and Books in Late Ottoman Palestine,* along with a number of articles on the library’s activities in the 1920s and 30s. Today, Schidorsky no longer researches this topic. All studies published since on the subject have drawn on his research, scarcely examining the sources afresh. It should be added, with due caution, that Schidorsky’s seminal book contains some contradictions, while a number of conclusions can be somewhat sharpened or refined. It is this state of affairs that prompted the current study, which seeks to reexamine relevant sources in the National Library archives and publications of the contemporary press. What emerges sheds new light on the library’s history.

The following article will focus on two main aspects: the first, the involvement of Jerusalem intellectuals in birthing the idea of a national library and the second, the process of compiling the collection that would ultimately grow into what many contemporaries later referred to as “the national treasure.” The end of the 19th century was something of a “golden age” for the establishment of public libraries around the world, a trend that also saw the foundation of Jewish municipal libraries such as the Minsk library (1862)[[1]](#footnote-1) and the “Sha’ar Zion” (Zion gate) library in Jaffa. **Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin’s** call in the *Havatzelet* in **1872** to concentrate the spiritual treasures of the Jewish people in Jerusalemshould be understood against this backdrop.[[2]](#footnote-2) It was Dov Fromkin who took it upon himself to establish the first public library in Jerusalem three years later, in 1875. The editor of the *Havatzelet,* with the assistance of Pines and Luncz and the society of “Tiferet Yerushalayim” (glory of Jerusalem), established the “Library Collection of Montefiore.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Although the library was closed a few years later due to budget problems, the dream remained alive as ever. A second library was founded in **1884** by **Eliezer Ben-Yehuda along with other Jerusalem intellectuals such as Chaim Hirschensohn, Ozer Dov Lifshitz, Chaim Kalmi, Yehezkel Stern, A. M. Luncz, Efraim Cohen Reiss, Mordechai Edelman, and David Yalin. The “Library for the Israelites”[[4]](#footnote-4)** was funded with donations from Frutiger, Shalom Konstrum, and Rothchild.[[5]](#footnote-5) It even hired a paid librarian, Yitzhak Horowitz.

The consensus that a library was of national importance and the foremost means to promote knowledge and erudition did not in itself do much to secure its budget or collection. Ben-Yehuda, who travelled the world to raise funds and book donations, mentioned that he had met with **Chazanowicz**, a known *Hovev Zion* (“Zion lover” and the name of a Zionist organization), in Bialystok in **1886**. Ben-Yehuda managed to obtain a promise from him that he would donate his book collection.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet his library too suffered from a lack of funds, which prevented it from being of real service. The Jerusalem intellectuals persevered in their struggle to spread knowledge in Jerusalem, founding the “Jerusalem Office” of B’nai B’rith in 1888.[[7]](#footnote-7) Many of the same had also been involved in the foundation of the two libraries mentioned above, while seven had been part of the group of intellectuals who had founded the “Library for the Israelites” with Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. A number of the most prominent were Israel Dov Fromkin, Chaim Hirschensohn, Joseph Meyuhas, Efraim Cohen Reiss, Ozer Dov Lifshitz, A. M. Luncz, Wilhelm Herzberg, and Yehezkel Stern.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is important to be clear on a few points with regard to the Office. The B’nai B’rith society granted full autonomy to each of its offices, whose funds were raised primarily by its local members. One of the first projects undertaken by the “Jerusalem Office” was the foundation of a library. For this end, a small committee was founded, which consisted of Efraim Cohen Reiss, Ze’ev Yavetz, David Yalin, and Joseph Meyuhas. Together with **Aaron Cohen, who served as librarian**, the committee members went from door to door in Jerusalem to collect books. The library resided at the time in the Jerusalem Office building, Beit Ami’el.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In **1890**, **Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz from Bialystok** visited Jerusalem and met with representatives of Hovevei Zion and the B’nai B’rit Jerusalem Office. Chazanowicz, who had by then become deeply attached to the idea of a national library,[[10]](#footnote-10) iterated his promise to Ben-Yehuda to donate his private book collection to the future library and received for this end an exceptional permit to be listed as a member of the “Jerusalem Office.” A year later, unbeknownst to the Office members, a meeting of Hovevei Zion was held abroad with the participation of Yehoshua Sirkin and Ussishkin, in which the need for a national library was raised. Y. L. Rabinowitz expressed similar sentiments in the press at the time. On July 15, **1892,** members of the “Jerusalem Office” opened the public library “Midrash Abarbanel.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Efraim Cohen Reiss, Ze’ev Yavetz, David Yalin, and Joseph Meyuhas were appointed library committee members. The librarian Aaron Cohen was hired with pay. Yet this library’s collection was based only on a small number of donations, in addition to books that had been deposited by Jerusalem residents. In 1893, the library managed to procure another 360 books in donations obtained by Yehoshua Sirkin.

Since Ben-Yehuda’s library struggled in the meantime to pay the rent, a special **1894** committee reached the decision to join it with “Midrash Abarbanel.” **This was not a merger, however.** Ben-Yehuda insisted that the collection of the “Library for the Israelites,” amounting to 1,000 books altogether, would be kept in a separate chamber and remain there until the foundation of a “national library.” **For the purpose of managing the joint collection, a committee was established under the name “the general library committee.”** Testifying to the union is a letter sent from the members of the “Library for the Israelites” to the director of the joint committee, Efraim Cohen. So they wrote on Wednesday, 13 Adar A, 5655 (1895):

To Mr. Efraim Cohen, head of the “General Library” committee in Jerusalem,

Dear Sir,

The committee of the Library for the Israelites… decided to transfer this library to the hands of a new committee elected and approved by the new library… **forever shall a special institution stand in its own right and in no way or form be placed under another unit, with the exception that it would be supervised by a separate committee of its own…**

Further evidence for the joining together of the two libraries while preserving their independence is to be found in official correspondence from that time, which was written on paper with multiple, distinct letterheads.

**The committee members were Efraim Cohen Reiss, Bachar, Yavetz, Hirschensohn, Yehiel Pines, and Yalin. The library was likely located in the neighborhood Mishkenot Israel. The joint collection greatly grew in size three years later in 1895, when the first installment of Chazanowicz’s donation arrived, some 9,800 volumes.[[12]](#footnote-12)** Chazanowiczeven receiveda letter of gratitude from Herzl thanking him for planting the seed of a national library.[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, the library’s name was changed that same year to “Midrash Abarbanel and the Joseph Archives,” in honor of Chazanowicz. In a letter to Chazanowicz, Efraim Cohen called him the “father of the Jerusalem library.”

Chazanowicz’s impressive contribution, along with his extensive efforts to obtain new books and raise funds for a library building, led many abroad to perceive the library as his own personal project, thus altogether overlooking Ben-Yehuda’s collection. Nevertheless, contemporary receipts for donations feature a triple heading: “Library for the Israelites in Jerusalem, Midrash Abarbanel, and the Joseph Archives.” Another testament to the wide resonance of Chazanowicz’s contribution is a postcard from 1903, printed in Warsaw, which features a picture of Chazanowicz on the building “Beit Ne’eman,” which housed “Midrash Abarbanel.”

Indeed, in quantitative terms Chazanowicz’s donations were paramount, amounting to a total of 22,000 volumes. What is more, in that same year Chazanowicz and six fellow Hovevei Zion activists, including David Sohovolski and Yitzhak Pines, founded the “Beit Ne’eman” society whose purpose was to raise funds for a designated library building and the enhancement of the library collection.[[14]](#footnote-14) At the time, the need for such a building was becoming increasingly apparent. Together with the “Beit Ne’eman” society, Chazanowicz did everything in his power to raise money for the library building and collection. In parallel, members of the “Jerusalem Office” also lent a hand.

The library’s letterheads also testify to two other matters. First, that in its appeals to diasporic Jews, the library used two additional names – “The Jewish National Library in Jerusalem,” and “Beit Ne’eman.” A letter dated Av 5673 – 1913 – illustrates these two approaches. On its top right-hand side, it bears the heading “The National Library for the Israelites in Jerusalem, Midrash Abarbanel, and the Joseph Archives,” while on its top left-hand side it bears the German heading, *Jüdische National Bibliothek in JERUSALEM.*

And second, that the original distinction between the composite libraries was still reflected in the language used by Jerusalem intellectuals. To quote one letter: “Greetings from Zion to the support society in Odessa! Honorable gentlemen! On 15 Tevet of last year… we kindly request that you transfer to us the funds you have received for “Beit Ne’eman” in Jerusalem…”

In 1902, the library building, which still stands on the street corner Ethiopia- Chazanowicz and B’nai B’rith, was opened to the public.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Jerusalem Office relocated to the same building. Throughout this entire period, there was a general dissatisfaction with the fact that a library meant to be “national” was owned by a private organization. Ben-Yehuda’s insistence that the library had not been founded solely by B’nai B’rith[[16]](#footnote-16) did not do much to ease these concerns. Another undated document describes the organization that was established, called the national library society, for the purpose of preserving the joint collection until the goal of a national library would be achieved and the collection would be transferred to the Zionist Organization, which happened in 1920 .

“**The society set out to safekeep the General Library for the Israelites, Midrash Abarbanel, and the Joseph Archives in Jerusalem, along with all the books they contain, to expand the building as the need arises, and to arrange the books in a manner that they can be used by scholars and authors for the sake of learning and wisdom and to build a national treasure in our country…”**

The document’s wording acknowledges the library’s historical trajectory and recognizes the role of Ben-Yehuda’s “General Library for the Israelites” as the seed of today’s National Library, rather than Midrash Abarabanel, as is often assumed.

A document with one page missing indicates that such a society was indeed established eventually, with the name “the National Library Society.” The document makes clear that library directors must be members of the B’nai B’rith “Jerusalem Office,” and that administrative positions must be held only by residents of Jerusalem. It follows that members of the Jerusalem Office saw the library as a local enterprise of the city’s inhabitants that did not answer to the global B’nai B’rith movement: “…the management committee counts no less than nine members: three are elected by the B’nai B’rith Jerusalem Office, three by the World Zionist Organization, and three by members of the National Library Society, **all candidates must be residents of Jerusalem…”**

Even after the institution was handed over to the Zionist Organization and the Society had been dismantled, the document notes that the agreement was between members of the “Jerusalem Office” and the Zionist Organization. Highlighting the local dimension, the Zionist Organization took care to add “World” to the organization’s name, while B’nai B’rith was primarily referred to as the “Jerusalem Office”: “…with the approval of three quarters of all members, the Society is hereby dismantled. In due course, the National Library, along with all its possessions and privileges, is thus transferred to another institution designated for this purpose, as per the agreement between the office of ‘B’nai B’rith’ in Jerusalem and the World Zionist Organization.”

In terms of budget: Ben-Yehuda’s library received donations from the library committee, as well as Frutiger, Shalom Konstrum, and Rothchild. Midrash Abarbanel was funded by membership fees of the “Jerusalem Office” and donations raised by Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz, Sirkin, and countless Hovevei Zion activists, as is indicated by a number of correspondences, receipts, and bookkeeping entries (see appendix), which contributed towards the ultimate goal of establishing a national library. On February 22, 1911, the newspaper *Hatzfira* reported the library budget – 2,000 Franks from B’nai B’rith, and 2,000 Franks from “Ezra” (aid) Society in Berlin. “B’nai B’rith” likely refers to the Jerusalem Office.

**In conclusion:**

1. **The idea** had taken form simultaneously in Eretz Israel and abroad (eastern Europe, western Europe, and the US), in the hearts and minds of Jerusalem intellectuals such as Fromkin and Ben-Yehuda, private individuals such as Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin, and Hovevei Zion activists such as Chazanowicz and Sirkin.
2. **The collection:**

1,000 books – the Ben-Yehuda library, 1884

300 books – collected by Jerusalem educators, the committee, and the librarian, 1891-1892.

360 books – approximation, book donations attained by Yehoshua Sirkin, 1893

9,800 books – Chazanowicz donation, 1895

1,000 books – Chazanowicz donation, 1897

2,000 books – Zvi Hermann Schapira donation, 1898

1,300 books – Chazanowicz donation, 1899

3,000 books – Chazanowicz donation, 1902

3,000 books – Chazanowicz donation, 1907

4,000 books – Chazanowicz donation, arrived after the First World War (total: 22,100)

3,093 books – donation of the widow of Dr. $$$ of Simferopol, 1908

And several more donations.[[17]](#footnote-17)

1. **Location**

1892 – Jerusalem Office building, Beit Ami’el

1894 – Mishkenot Israel neighborhood

1902 – designated building, “Midrash Abarbanel and the Joseph Archives,” street corner B’nai B’rith-Ethiopia- Chazanowicz.

1. **Budget**

1884 – Ben-Yehuda and committee members of the “General Library for the Israelites,” Frutiger, Shalom Konstrum, and Rothchild.

1892 – Membership fees of the B’nai B’rith Jerusalem Office

1890-1919 – Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz

1911 – 2,000 Franks from B’nai B’rith and 2,000 Franks from the Ezra Society in Berlin, the Zionist Congress, and the Zionist Organization.

Several Hovevei Zion activists.

1. *Hatzfira* (Hebrew), May 29 1862. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Havatzelet* (Hebrew), 16 Shevat 5632; Schidorsky, *Libraries and Books* (Hebrew), 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Hatzfira* (Hebrew), 21 Shevat 5635; *Havatzelet* (Hebrew)*,* 24 Tevet 5635; Schidorsky, *Libraries and Books* (Hebrew), 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hatzvi* (Hebrew)*,* 28 Nissan 5647. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 26 Av 65655 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Schidorsky, *Libraries and Books* (Hebrew), 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Following ideas that been discussed in Hovevei Zion gatherings, as well as a meeting with Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Schidorsky, *Libraries and Books* (Hebrew), 102. Cites an article of E. Cohen Reiss (Hebrew), “On the history of the library in Jerusalem,” *East and West* 5 (1930): 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Letter of thanks from Herzl to Chazanowicz (to be appended). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Schidorsky, *Libraries and Books* (Hebrew), 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to Ottoman law, only a private individual is entitled to purchase land. The only way for a building to become public, was if following the purchase of land and building, the private individual would choose to donate the property and redesignate it. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Meeting protocol of the national school committee, Monday, 6 Elul 5679. Schidorsky, *Libraries and Books* (Hebrew), 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Schidorsky, *Libraries and Books* (Hebrew), 291-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)