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

**Galia Grebler-Richler**

The earliest evidence of the idea of founding a library for the Jewish people can be found in an article from the *Havatzelet* (“Lily”) newspaper from January 26, 1872. In a piece entitled “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 *Havatzelet*’s editor, Israel Dov Fromkin, together with his colleagues Yehiel Michal Pines and Avraham Moshe Luncz from the *Tif’eret Yerushalayim* (“Glory of Jerusalem”) society, established the Library Collection of Montefiore in 1875. The founders specified two objectives: the first, to encourage the goal of spreading knowledge and erudition; and the second, to gather and hold the spiritual inheritance of the Jewish people in one place, so it would not be scattered among the libraries of other nations. Although what became known as the Fromkin library served the residents of Jerusalem for a mere three years before it had to close its doors due to lack of funds, the spark had been lit and could not be extinguished.

Nine years later, in 1884, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, with the help of some of Jerusalem’s most prominent intellectuals, including Ephraim Cohen-Reiss, Avraham Moshe Luncz, and David Yellin, and supported by funds from Edmund James de Rothschild, Yohaness Ya’acov Frutiger, and Shalom Konstrum, founded the Library of the People of Israel. With the ambition of creating a library with national significance, Ben-Yehuda set out to procure books for the project. Among those whom Ben-Yehuda persuaded to donate to the collection was Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz from Bialystok. As a Zionist, Chazanowicz considered the donation of his book collection to Ben-Yehuda’s project as his contribution to the spiritual rebirth of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. He was not the alone in feeling this way. Many Zionists, including Yehoshua Sirkin and Menachem Ussishkin, not only wrote about the vision of creating a national library, but even met to discuss how to realize this dream, and began identifying potential collections to include in the library.

During this period, the above-mentioned group of Jerusalem intellectuals – Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, Ephraim Cohen-Reiss, Israel Dov Fromkin, Avraham Moshe Luncz, David Yellin, Joseph Meyuhas, and others – founded the Jerusalem Office of B’nai B’rith in 1888. It was here that four years later, in 1892, they established Midrash Abarbanel, which became the nucleus from which the National Library developed. A library committee was selected from among the members of these Jerusalem Office members, which, together with the house librarian, appealed to Jerusalemites to donate books 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, the decision was made to join the Ben-Yehuda and the Midrash Abarbanel libraries under one organizational roof, and a General Library Committee was appointed to administer both collections. A year later, the first delivery of Chazanowicz’s donation arrived in Jerusalem – 9,800 books, which significantly expanded the collection and earned Chazanowicz the honor of having his name added to the library. The joint library was now called The Library for the People of Israel in Jerusalem, Midrash Abarbanel, and the Joseph Archives. While Chazanowicz would eventually donate over 22,000 books to the library, his contribution extended far beyond just the books, as he worked tirelessly both to obtain funds for a building to house the library and to expand its collection. And, indeed, in 1902, the determined efforts of Chazanowicz and his colleagues were crowned with success when the first building dedicated solely to this library was opened to the public. This library in the heart of modern Jerusalem thus became a vibrant center of learning and culture, with countless sources of knowledge available for those visiting from anywhere in the world.

The subject of a national library was also close to the hearts of Theodore Herzl and other members of the Zionist movement. In 1905, the Seventh Zionist Congress adopted a resolution to transform the Jerusalem library into a national Jewish library. Deliberations began with Ben-Yehuda and the Jerusalem Office of B’nai B’rith to transfer authority for the library to the Zionist Organization. Although the outbreak of the First World War prolonged the negotiations, an agreement 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 served as a librarian for the Prague University Library. Bergmann made enlarging the collection one of his foremost goals, and under his direction, the library received important donations, such as the Julius Jarcho medical collection, and purchased the Goldziher collection on Islam. Bergmann turned to his friend, philosopher and historian Gershom Scholem, to help arrange the library’s Hebraica collection, and Scholem’s system still serves as the main method of organization in the Reading Room of the National Library. Bergmann also established Friends Associations of the library that worked to help strengthen the collection.

The opening of the Hebrew University in 1925 was seen by many contemporaries as a milestone in the Jewish revival in the Land of Israel. Merging the existing library into the fledgling university seemed to be only natural, in order to both benefit scholars and, according to Bergmann, to attract new collections. One of the most important donations to the library as a result of its merger with the university was Salman Schocken’s collection of the earliest printed Hebrew manuscripts, or incunabula. No less important for expanding the collection was the Mandatory directive to deliver two copies of every new publication in Eretz Israel to the library. Reflecting its change in status, the library’s name was changed to the Jewish National and University Library, and it moved from its city center location to the university’s Mount Scopus campus, where a new building dedicated solely to the library was built with the help of the Wolfson Foundation. However, the Independence War and its aftermath created considerable difficulties in running the library. Mount Scopus became a territorial enclave, noncontiguous with the rest of Israeli controlled territory in Jerusalem. Ultimately, the library had to be run from the Terra Sancta building, originally a Catholic college, located in the center of modern Jerusalem and other alternate buildings throughout the city. Clearly, there was again a need for a new building, and in 1960, the building that houses the library to this day was opened to the public on the Givat Ram campus of The Hebrew University.

Over the years, the library has become a sanctuary for countless book collections and archives: The Gershom Scholem Collection of Kabbalah; The Avraham Shalom Yahuda collection of Islamic manuscripts, including many of Sir Isaac Newton’s personal manuscripts; Eran Laor’s Cartographic Collection of maps, atlases and travel books of the Eretz Israel and Jerusalem; and thousands of others. On some occasions, the library took the initiative to either undertake searches for collections or to build new ones. For example, in the aftermath of the Second World War, key figures in the library’s management embarked on the Treasures of the Diaspora Project to locate and salvage private and public Jewish collections that had been looted by the Nazis. Another important initiative was the 1950 founding of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts by Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. The Institute, which continues expanding and improving to this day, holds the largest digital collection of Hebrew manuscripts in the world.

During these early important years of the Library under the auspices of the university, the library became distanced from the general public. As a result, in 2007, a decision was made to once again establish the Library as a separate entity and to modernize its functions. The Library is currently undergoing massive digitization efforts in order to provide wider access at an international level in its core fields of specialization: Judaism, Israel, Islam, and the humanities. In addition, the Library is making it a priority to once again play a significant role in Israel’s public and cultural life. A newly-designed building is being built that will include state-of-the-art reading halls, exhibition areas for rare items, and spaces for cultural activities.

It was Herzl who declared: “I once called Zionism once an endless ideal, and I truly believe that even after we reach 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 immiserated people, but also an aspiration for a moral and spiritual wholeness.” In keeping with this spirit, the National Library can also be considered an endless ideal, and once the new building becomes open to the public, the aspiration to continue to grow and create more and more content whose essence reflects the greatness of the human spirit will remain.

**The National Library’s Early Years: A Reassessment**

**Galia Grebler-Richler**

Very little has been written about the process of the National Library’s foundation, and even this only by a small group of scholars. The main scholar to have examined the library’s history is Prof. Dov Schidorsky, who, through the meticulous analysis of archival material, documented the unfolding of this important undertaking in his monumental book, *Libraries and Books in Late Ottoman Palestine*, published in 1990. He also wrote a number of journal articles on the library’s activities in the 1920s and 1930s, but then stopped researching the subject. All subsequent research on the subject has drawn on Schidorsky’s research, and very little, if any, work has been done to reexamine the original sources. It should be added that while Schidorsky’s book is undoubtedly a seminal work, it does contain some contradictions, and a number of its conclusions could possibly be sharpened or refined. This study seeks to fill some of these scholarly gaps, and reexamine relevant sources in the National Library archives and publications of the contemporary press to shed new light on the Library’s history.

The following article will focus on two main aspects of the origins of the Library: the first addresses the involvement of Jerusalem intellectuals in transforming the idea of a national library into reality; and the second, the process of compiling the collection that would ultimately grow into what many contemporaries have referred to as “The National Treasure.”

The end of the 19th century was something of a golden age for the establishment of public libraries throughout the world, a trend that included 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. It is against this background that Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin’s 1872 call in the *Havatzelet*(“Lily”)newspaper to concentrate the spiritual treasures of the Jewish people in Jerusalemshould be understood.[[2]](#footnote-2) Three years later, in 1875, it was Israel Dov Fromkin, the editor of *Havatzelet*, who, together with the assistance of Yehiel Michal Pines and Avraham Moshe Luncz from the *Tiferet Yerushalayim* (“Glory of Jerusalem”) society, established the first public library in Jerusalem, the Library Collection of Montefiore.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although the library was closed a few years later due to budget problems, the dream remained as alive as ever.

A second library was founded in 1884 by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda along with other Jerusalem intellectuals, such as Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn, Ozer Dov Lifshitz, Chaim Kalmi, Yehezkel Stern, Avraham Moshe Luncz, Ephraim Cohen-Reiss, Mordechai Edelman, and David Yellin.Their **Library of the People of Israel**[[4]](#footnote-4) was funded by donations from Edmund James de Rothschild, Yohaness Ya’acov Frutiger, and Shalom Konstrum.[[5]](#footnote-5) This library was even able to hire a professional librarian, Yitzhak Horowitz.

Unfortunately, the consensus that a library was of national importance and the foremost means of disseminating knowledge and encouraging education did not in itself do much to secure its budget or increase its collection. Ben-Yehuda had to travel the world to raise funds and obtain book donations. In 1886, he met with Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz from Bialystok, a known *Hovev Zion* (“Lover of Zion,” a member of the *Hovevei Zion*, “Lovers of Zion”group), in Bialystok, and obtained a promise from Chazanowicz to donate his sizable book collection to the library project.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Despite this success with Chazanowicz, Ben-Yehuda’s library, like the Library Collection of Montefiore before it, suffered from a lack of funds, which prevented it from being of any real service to the public. Undaunted, the Jerusalem intellectuals persevered in their quest to spread knowledge in Jerusalem, founding the Jerusalem Office of B’nai B’rith in 1888.[[7]](#footnote-7) Among those who participated in establishing this office were several who had been involved in founding the first two Jewish libraries in Jerusalem, including seven who had been part of the group of intellectuals who had founded the Library of the People of Israel with Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Prominent among the latter were Israel Dov Fromkin, Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn, Joseph Meyuhas, Ephraim Cohen-Reiss, Ozer Dov Lifshitz, Avraham Moshe Luncz, Wilhelm Herzberg, and Yehezkel Stern.[[8]](#footnote-8) It should be clarified that this Jerusalem Office of B’nai B’rith, like all B’nai B’rith branches, enjoyed full autonomy and had to raise the bulk of its funds from local members. One of the first projects undertaken by the Jerusalem Office was the foundation of a library, for which they established a small committee consisting of Ephraim Cohen-Reiss, Ze’ev Yavetz, David Yellin, and Joseph Meyuhas. Together with Aaron Cohen, who served as their paid librarian, the committee members went from door to door in Jerusalem to try to collect books from residents. At that time, the library was housed in the Jerusalem Office building, Beit Amiel.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In 1890, Chazanowicz visited Jerusalem from Bialystokand met with representatives of the *Hovevei Zion* group and the B’nai B’rith Jerusalem Office. Chazanowicz, who by then had become deeply committed to the idea of a national library,[[10]](#footnote-10) reaffirmed his promise to Ben-Yehuda to donate his private book collection to the future library. In recognition of this important contribution, Chazanowicz even received an exceptional membership in 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 Menachem Ussishkin, at which the need for a national library was raised. Ya’acov 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) and Aaron Cohen was hired as a paid librarian. However, 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 did manage to procure another 360 books donated by Yehoshua Sirkin.

With Ben-Yehuda’s library in the meantime struggling to pay rent, a special 1894committee decided to merge it with Midrash Abarbanel. This was not a true merger, however, as Ben-Yehuda insisted that the collection of the Library of the People of Israel, with its 1,000 books, would be housed in a separate room, where it was made clear that they should remain until the foundation of a “national library.” **A General Library Committee was established to manage the joint collection**.The committee members for the new combined library wereEphraimCohen-Reiss, Bachar, Ze’ev Yavetz, Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn, Yehiel Pines, and David Yellin. A letter from 1895 sent from the members of the Library for the People of Israel to the Director of the joint General Library Committee, Ephraim Cohen-Reiss testifies to the terms of this union of the two libraries:

To Mr. Ephraim Cohen-Reiss, head of the General Library Committee in Jerusalem

Dear Sir,

The Committee of the Library for the Israelites… has decided to transfer this library into the hands of a new committee elected and approved by the new library… [it] **forever shall a special institution stand in its own right and in no way or form be placed under another unit, unless it is supervised by a committee of its own choosing.**

Further evidence of the nature of the union of the two libraries while maintaining their independence is to be found in official correspondence from that time, written on business paper with two distinct letterheads.

It appears that the joint library was located in the Mishkenot Israel neighborhood. In 1895, three years after its formation, the joint collection grew in size significantly, when the first shipment 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 The Library for the People of Israel in Jerusalem, Midrash Abarbanel, and the Joseph Archives in honor of Chazanowicz. In a letter to Chazanowicz, Ephraim Cohen-Reiss 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 Chazanowicz ‘s personal project, thereby completely overlooking Ben-Yehuda’s collection. Nevertheless, contemporary receipts for donations feature a triple heading: “Library for the People of Israel in Jerusalem, Midrash Abarbanel, and the Joseph Archives.” Further evidence of the strong influence of Chazanowicz’s contribution is a later postcard from 1903, printed in Warsaw, which features a picture of Chazanowicz on the building Beit Ne’eman, which housed the new library.

Indeed, in quantitative terms, Chazanowicz’s donations, totaling 22,000 volumes, were critical to the development of the collection. In addition, in 1895, with the need for a building dedicated to the library becoming increasingly apparent, Chazanowicz and six fellow *Hovevei Zion* activists, including David Sohovolski and Yitzhak Pines, founded the Beit Ne’eman Society with the dual purposes of raising funds for a designated library building and expanding the library’s collection.[[14]](#footnote-14) Together with the Beit Ne’eman Society, Chazanowicz did everything in his power to raise money for the library building and collection. At the same time, members of the Jerusalem Office also worked to promote these goals, albeit on their own.

The letterheads of the library’s stationary provide evidence about two other issues related to the library. First, in its appeals to Diaspora 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*, or the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem*.*

The language used in the letters from this period also reflects that Jerusalem intellectuals still clung to the original distinctions among the three libraries. 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 corner of Ethiopia-Chazanowicz and B’nai B’rith Streets, 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 among the *Hovevei Zion* and the Land of Israel Associations with the fact that a library that was meant to be national was owned by a non-profit organization. Ben-Yehuda’s insistence that the library had not been founded solely by B’nai B’rith,[[16]](#footnote-16) but by other organizations as well, did not do much to ease these concerns. Another undated document describes the organization that was established, the National Library Society, for the purpose of preserving the joint collection until the goal of creating a national library would be achieved and the collection could be transferred to the Zionist Organization, which ultimately did occur in 1920.

**The society set out to safeguard the General Library for the People of Israel, 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 preserves the chronological trajectory of the library, while recognizing the role of Ben-Yehuda’s “General Library for the People of Israel as the nucleus 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 eventually established, with the name the National Library Society. This 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. From this document, it is possible to conclude 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 National Library 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 [National Library] 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 collection had received donations from the Library Committee, as well as from Edmond James de Rothschild, Yohaness Ya’acov Frutiger, and Shalom Konstrum. Midrash Abarbanel had been funded by membership fees of the Jerusalem Office and donations raised by Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz, Yehoshua Sirkin, and countless *Hovevei Zion* activists, as 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 francs from B’nai B’rith, and 2,000 francs from the *Ezra* (“Aid”) Society in Berlin. B’nai B’rith likely refers to the Jerusalem Office.

**Conclusion**

1. **The idea** to establish a national library in the land of Israel had taken form simultaneously in Eretz Israel and abroad (Eastern and Western Europe, as well as in the United States), in the hearts and minds of Jerusalem intellectuals such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and Israel Dov Fromkin, private individuals such as Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin, and Hovevei Zion activists such as Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz and Yehoshua Sirkin.
2. **The Collection’s Composition**

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

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

360 books, approximately from donations obtained by Yehoshua Sirkin, 1893

9,800 books from Chazanowicz, 1895

1,000 books form Chazanowicz, 1897

2,000 books from Zvi Hermann Schapira, 1898

1,300 books from Chazanowicz, 1899

3,000 books from Chazanowicz, 1902

3,000 books from Chazanowicz, 1907

4,000 books from Chazanowicz, arrived after the First World War

(Total from Chazanowicz: 22,100)

3,093 books from the widow of Dr. Plaskau 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,” corner of Ethiopia-Chazanowicz and B’nai B’rith Streets.

1. **Funding**

1884 – Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and committee members of the General Library for the People of Israel, Edmond James de Rothschild, Yohaness Ya’acov Frutiger, and Shalom Konstrum..

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

1890–1919 – Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz

1911 – 2,000 francs from B’nai B’rith and 2,000 francs 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 in Late Ottoman Palestine* (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. He had been influenced by 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, citing 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 was permitted 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)