Open Access Liturgical Resources for Judaism

by Jason D. Nosek

In his 2004 article "Jam To-morrow and Jam Yesterday, but Never Jam To-day: The Dilemma of Theology Libraries Planning for the Twenty-first Century," Jack W. Ammerman of Boston University School of Theology posits that "the transformation in publishing that has taken place in the last decade changes not only the way we access information, but also the way it can be used, and ultimately the business model that makes its publication possible. Scholars continue to discover new ways to search, manipulate, and utilize information in digital formats."[1] Nine years later, his statement seems positively prophetic. Further, while digital humanities (as this interactive and multimedia means to educational publishing is now known) is changing the way scholars approach topics and research, the Open Access (OA) movement is pressing to make these publications freely available to everyone with an Internet connection.

However, it is not yet clear to what extent these two seemingly symbiotic movements will affect theological libraries and theological study as a whole. While there are plenty of educational websites and digital libraries on the Internet, their respective content, purpose, and motivations often remain ambiguous. Inspired in part by Michael Kuykendall's 2010 bibliographic essay on digital and web-based Bibles for Christians,[2] this piece attempts to provide the reader with OA (or freely accessible) liturgical resources for Judaism.[3] There are a number of respected publishers within Judaism — such as ArtScroll and Koren Sachs — which produce traditional resources such as Siddurim in English and Hebrew, yet there is a lack of digital resources,[4] and most certainly a dearth of interactive e-resources being created by publishers with traditional business models. Additionally, in creating a bibliography for the aforementioned web-based liturgical resources, the author failed to find a significant number of websites that required a payment for access to resources. One may venture to guess that this is due to the normative practice of education and teaching being a central tenet of Rabbinic Judaism as practiced for the past millennium and a half. Thus, there does not appear to be a great deal of competition in terms of subscription-based resources for the OA/freely accessible sites that will be presented.

Continuing on to OA, it is generally held that there are two ways of thinking about openly accessible resources. The first is *gratis* or Gratis OA, in that the materials are freely accessible to all and especially helpful to communities that may lack fiscal wealth. The other, and more in keeping with the Budapest Open Access Initiative, is *libre* or Libre OA. This manifestation is principally concerned with materials that are not only freely available, but are licensed in such a way that users may download, copy, use and reuse, remix, or otherwise alter without legal or financial barriers so long as attribution is given. This essay attempts to straddle these two notions, presenting users with some resources that are *gratis* at one end of the spectrum and *libre* — which may be more philosophically

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[1] Jack W. Ammerman, "Jam To-morrow and Jam Yesterday, but Never Jam To-day: The Dilemma of Theology Libraries Planning for the Twenty-first Century," *Theological Education* 40, no. 1 (2004), 17.

[2] Michael Kuykendall, "Going a Step Beyond —Websites with More Than Just Bibles," *Theological Librarianship* 3, no. 2 (2010).

[3] For an introduction to the OA movement, see: Peter Suber, "Open Access Overview," 2012, http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm.

[4] ArtScroll's Digital Library application is relatively robust, but is designed with Talmud study in mind rather than liturgical use.

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committed to the OA movement — at the other end. Either way, the sites presented to the reader are without financial barrier.

Ultimately, this essay attempts to invite users to freely participate in the thousands' year-old tradition of creative liturgy within Judaism in the most accessible and pluralistic sense. With all of this in mind, six resources will be discussed which fall into three distinct areas of scripture, prayer, and rituals and holidays. These resources tend to be of a liberal persuasion, and thus users from Reform or Reconstructionist backgrounds may find them most useful. Further, in terms of scope, each resource selected had to have some element of interactivity such as social bookmarking, text mining, or sharing one's project/creation.[5] In addition to authorship, purpose, and scope, any special digital tools or unique aspects of the sites will be noted.

The first site is the Tagged Tanakh (http://www.taggedtanakh.org), which presents the whole Tanakh — the acronym for the Jewish Bible describing the Torah (the five books of Moses), Nevi'im (the prophets and minor prophets), and Kethuvim (the writings) — digitally rendered in both Hebrew and English. Targeting students, Millenials and digital natives, and, to a lesser extent, scholars, the Tagged Tanakh aims to create a dynamic database around the Hebrew Bible which joins vetted content, primary source material, and user-commentary. After creating an account with a username and password, one may "tag" (apply a keyword as part of larger folk taxonomy), link, and annotate individual sections of scripture. Further, a user may even perform a "tag-to," where he or she applies a "tag" that links scripture to other media such as photos and maps. By encouraging such an interactive experience, the creators of the site seek to build a digital community around the Tanakh that facilitates new means of study and creative exegesis. The site was created by the Jewish Publication Society (JPS), the oldest and perhaps most well-respected English-language publisher of Jewish materials. While the Tagged Tanakh is a copyright protected site, the JPS is a not-for-profit organization, thus explaining why the site is freely accessible or Gratis OA. In addition to the aforementioned features, the site also gives users the following tools: skip to a book, chapter, or verse, subscribe to weekly readings, create and subscribe to live bookmarks, and more. Of course, the entire Tanakh is fully searchable, as are the tags, comments, and annotations; users can even search within the scripture for topics and themes such as environmentalism, kashrut, or leadership based on the "tags." In all, this site is reliable in terms of content, very user-friendly, and aesthetically pleasing. Theological librarians should definitely consider recommending it to patrons — especially any undergraduates in their population — and adding it to subject guides.

Next, we have The Aleppo Codex (http://www.aleppocodex.org). The Aleppo Codex, created in the tenth century C.E., is the oldest surviving (nearly complete) manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. It remained largely intact for over a millennium until it was damaged in Syria during riots sparked by the formation of the State of Israel. Further, it is the most authoritative and most often consulted historical Tanakh, rivaled only by the Leningrad Codex. The Aleppo Codex site presents the entirety of the surviving manuscript in digital form, scanned in page-by-page. The purpose of this site is to give readers worldwide a complete and freely accessible version of this authoritative text, replete with illuminations/illustrations. However, users should be aware that this Tanakh does not contain the

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[5] Given this scope requirement of interactivity, it is important to note that social media resources may be more accessible and appropriate for students and non-scholars as an entry point into Jewish liturgy, whereas scholars may find resources featuring tools such as text mining and containing primary source material of greater use.

majority of the Torah, as these pages went missing during the aforementioned riots. In addition to the text, the site offers a fairly comprehensive history of the Codex, along with information on the preservation and current location of the actual manuscript. Features and tools are limited to navigation, browsing, and zooming, as the focus of this site is the high-resolution images of the text itself and not necessarily advanced interactivity. The creator of this site is the Ben-Zvi Institute of Jerusalem, a not-for-profit organization established for the study of Jewish communities. The Aleppo Codex website is Gratis OA, thus freely accessible but copyright protected. Handsome, easy to navigate, and containing a wealth of information, this site would be perfect for anyone with marginal Internet proficiency all the way to scholars looking to consult the text without traveling to Israel.

Similar to The Aleppo Codex, another site presents a digitized version of The Westminster Leningrad Codex (http://www.tanach.us). This manuscript, like The Aleppo Codex, dates back over a millennium to the early eleventh century C.E., and is the oldest complete Hebrew Bible. The site itself is an XML Hebrew-language transcription of the Codex. While not quite as exciting as the high-resolution images found on the site belonging to The Aleppo Codex, this transcription provides a character-by-character electronic form which may be useful to scholars, especially if they are looking to use the site in text mining and digital humanities projects. Further, this Libre OA site is Creative Commons licensed for almost entirely unrestricted use, allowing any user to take whole portions of this site in Open Document Text format for her or his own use. In terms of tools and features, the site is fully searchable in Hebrew and navigable by book/chapter/verse. The creator is the J. Allen Groves Center for Advanced Biblical Research, a not-for-profit organization devoted to new methodology in the study of the Hebrew Bible. This site would be a good recommendation for those looking for an authoritative yet no-frills digital Tanakh, along with advanced users who may seek to use portions of the text in their own work or digital humanities projects.

Moving from scripture to prayer, one particularly user friendly website is Build A Prayer (http://www.buildaprayer.org). Aptly named, this is an interactive and community-based site that provides users with step-by-step guidance for creating original and personalized prayers. After creating an account, users can search and browse the site for content, work independently or with friends and colleagues on prayers in a cloud-based environment, or visit a resource center replete with "how to" guides and bibliographies on an array of topics. Further, through the resource center, Build A Prayer offers videos for guidance on various facets of Jewish prayer, such as donning a tallis (prayer shawl), singing the Shema, or preparing for Shabbat. The B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) — a transdenominational organization welcoming both traditional and pluralistically minded people — created this site, and it is clearly intended for use by young adults and students. While not a resource to be utilized for research, this Gratis OA site is particularly helpful as a guide and a site for collaboration amongst students, particularly those already active in religious groups such as Hillel organizations located on many university campuses.

Another site dedicated to prayer and collaboration is The Open Siddur Project (http://www.opensiddur.org). Open Siddur is a free-culture dedicated website (fully open source and OA regardless of user motivation) that provides a forum for sharing siddurim (Jewish prayer books) and liturgical work. Moreover, this site functions as the hub of a social network, provides various resources and tools for crafting prayers, and contains an easily accessible digital library of diverse siddurim. Additionally, the creators of the site see it as a virtual "printing press and book arts studio…[with] a collaborative digital-to-print publishing application where you can make your own siddur."[6]

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[6] "Welcome to the Open Siddur Project," *The Open Siddur Project*, 2011. http://opensiddur.org/2011/04/welcome-to-the-open-siddur-project/.

Users can freely upload and download liturgy in PDF, ODT, and TXT formats and downloads whole siddurim from other community members, as well as seek out or browse prayers by life cycle events, holidays, and more. The site also provides a transliteration engine for moving to/from English and Hebrew, downloadable Hebrew fonts, and "how to" guides. The site itself is an open source project with two founders but endless contributors. Moreover, it is a not-for-profit organization sponsored by The Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity and accepts donations from users. This Libre OA project is Creative Commons licensed for unrestricted use, where all rights have been waived worldwide. The intended audience is anyone tech-savvy and passionate about Jewish spirituality, whatever affiliation or denomination. Theological librarians would be well served to remember this site and recommend it to students and scholars looking for creative options when it comes to prayer.

Continuing along to rituals and holidays, a particularly interesting and helpful website is Ritual Well (http://www.ritualwell.org). This site brings together traditional and innovative rituals in the form of stories, songs, prayer, and ideas. The site aims to be a center for users to browse, search, read, and contribute regardless of sex, age, denomination, and even religion (though the site's focus is Judaism). Users are able to browse rituals by event such as lifecycle, "healing & hard times," everyday holiness, holidays, and Shabbat. After one of these topics is chosen, the site offers subdivisions (for instance, individual holidays are listed and linked to material after one selects "holidays" as a topic). After selecting a particular facet or event, users are offered an entry that contains instructions on performing the ritual, scripture in both English and Hebrew to accompany this, songs that may be appropriate, dialogue, audio so that the user may hear the prayer or song by a professional cantor, and even videos of services. Like many of the other sites mentioned, Ritual Well allows users to create an account so that they may gather all of their content together in one location, as well as contribute material to the community. Lastly, this site also offers blog postings by rabbis associated with the site. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, a not-for-profit school, hosts the site, and the site administrators are mostly Reconstructionist rabbis (typically quite socially liberal and welcoming to all). As the site is part of this larger organization, it is Gratis OA; the material is freely accessible though protected by copyright. The audience for this site is for most anyone — Jewish or not — looking to expand their spiritual life.

In closing, websites dedicated to digital humanities are changing the way scholars approach new topics and research, while the OA movement in both *gratis* and *libre* manifestations is pressing to make these publications freely available to everyone with an Internet connection. These two movements are gaining traction in many academic disciplines and have the potential to affect change in theological libraries and theological study as a whole. This piece attempted to provide theological librarians with a solid foundation with regard to Gratis OA and Libre OA digital liturgical resources for Judaism by way of six different web resources which fall into the distinct areas of scripture, prayer, and rituals and holidays.[7] It would seem that it is in the best interest of theological libraries — institutions that have historically struggled for adequate funding — to consider the value of supporting OA in general. It is the hope of the author that this essay has provided valuable information with regard to freely accessible liturgical resources as well as a means for dialogue in the OA conversation.

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[7] While this essay is limited in scope to web resources, there is a plethora of Gratis OA liturgical resources in the form of podcasts and iPhone and Android applications which may well warrant further exploration and review.