**Jewish Publishing as ‘Part of the American Scene’**

*While the industry deals with the advent of e-books and readers’ shrinking attention span, JointMedia News Service got the perspectives of the “Jewish Oprah” and America’s oldest Jewish publisher.*

By Beth Kissileff/JointMedia News Service

PHILADELPHIA—“Define Jewish publishing.”

This is the terse response Carolyn Hessel, the petite dynamo at the helm of the Jewish Book Network, gives to a question about the state of Jewish publishing today.

Hessel, whose group conducts national author tours for over 150 authors to more than 80 communities across the U.S., has been dubbed the “Jewish Oprah” for her ability to launch the careers of authors, including Nathan Englander, Dara Horn and Nicole Krauss. She said that since mainstream publishers present works of Jewish content and Jewish books are in Barnes & Noble, not just Jewish bookstores, the role of the Jewish publisher has changed.

These days, Hessel said a Jewish publisher doesn’t exist to make materials available in Yiddish to immigrants, but makes them available in English for Jews and non-Jews alike.

“Times have changed tremendously—we are part of the American scene,” Hessel told JointMedia News Service.

Where, then, does the oldest Jewish publisher in the country, the Philadelphia-based Jewish Publication Society (JPS), fit within that scene? Rabbi Barry Schwartz, the new CEO of JPS, met with JointMedia News Service to discuss how he plans to merge the past history of the organization—which was launched in 1888 but had earlier inceptions dating back to 1863—with current publishing trends.

Schwartz, who started his new post last summer, said one of his ideas is an “E-Tanach.” This “Bible of the 21st century” would enable readers to click on a verse and pull up commentaries ranging from the Targum to Rashi, including great modern commentaries as well. Another would be a Tanach for Birthright Israel participants and other groups touring Israel, that would enable them to pull up sources from their E-Tanach relating to sites they are seeing at any given moment. Schwartz said there are “unprecedented opportunities to make Jewish sources come alive in the digital era.”

“We just have to get with the program,” he said.

When entering the JPS office, one sees a reproduction of its original charter signed by leading Jewish citizens of Philadelphia including the Guggenheims, Ochs and Sulzbergers, all recognizable names in the philanthropic and publishing worlds.

Perusing the bookshelves containing the books published every year, visitors get a sense of the contribution this house has made to the cultural and educational life of American Jews. Such notable titles as Grace Aguilar’s *Vale of Cedars (*1902) share space with Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor*, Joseph Solovietchik’s *Halakhic Man*, and a translation of S.Y. Agnon’s *Twenty One Stories*.

More recently published volumes are the early 1970’s bestseller *The Jewish Catalog*, Samuel Heilman’s *Walker in Jerusalem*, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg’s *Genesis:The Beginning of Desire* and Rabbi David Silber’s *Haggadah*. There is something comforting about this room lined with books, knowing that the knowledge amassed here has been made available to so many for so long.

Yet, the successes of the past will not be enough to sustain a small press like JPS. Schwartz revealed his concern that “deep reading is in decline” among younger readers and that JPS puts out the type of books that demand deep—not shallow—engagements on the part of readers.

However, he does see a place for the kind of books that JPS has historically created, saying, “Pure scholarship is published by university presses, and inspiration by others.”

Schwartz believes JPS’s niche is between these two poles, with a “popular scholarship” that is “academic in nature but readable by the general reading public.” The Bible category—which includes the JPS Bible, JPS Study Bible and the newer JPS Bible commentaries by leading scholars here and in Israel—is a large one. In fact, a glance at the books on the JPS website shows clearly that [Bible & Midrash](http://www.jewishpub.org/category/bible-midrash), at 153 titles, is by far the largest category, easily clearing both [General Reference & Cultural Studies](http://www.jewishpub.org/category/general-reference-cultural-studies) at 105 and [History, Holocaust and Zionism](http://www.jewishpub.org/category/history-holocaust-and-zionism) at 92. The problem of JPS, therefore, may be in the wandering attention spans of American Jews for serious work on sacred texts and history.

Those in other sectors of the publishing industry, like Hessel and Altie Karper, the editorial director at Schocken Books (now a division of Random House), are more sanguine about the future of Jewish publishing.

Hessel believes that e-books are of benefit to booksellers because book buying can now be an “impulse” purchase. She cites the case of her own I-pad, which contains over 600 titles of which she estimates she will only read about 100.

Karper believes that all presses have an important space in the publishing firmament.

“Schocken is able to do certain types of publishing better than the independent presses because of our marketing and distribution capabilities, and the independent presses are able to do certain types of publishing better than we can because of their lower overheads,” she wrote JointMedia News Service in an email. “We are both essential to the process of publishing quality Judaica.”