
Tagungsbericht

The Value of the Digital. #DHJewish Conference and Hackathon

Veranstalter: Daniel Burckhardt / Miriam Rürup / Nina Zellerhoff, Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies; Gerben Zaagsma, Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History

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What is the value of the digital in Jewish Studies, and how can we learn from previous work and apply it to future endeavours? In recent years, the intersection of Jewish Studies and Digital Humanities (DH) has sparked critical conversations around these questions, especially as digital tools become integral to research, preservation, and dissemination. Yet, as digital archives grow and machine learning techniques are applied to Jewish historical sources, scholars grapple with a dual challenge: how to harness these technologies responsibly and effectively, and how to address the ethical and epistemological questions they raise.

The 2024 conference in Potsdam organised by the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies (Daniel Burckhardt, Miriam Rürup, Nina Zellerhoff) together with the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (Gerben Zaagsma) and generously supported by the European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS) Conference Grant Programme in European Jewish Studies, sought to deepen this exploration, critically assessing “The Value of the Digital” as it has been applied to Jewish Studies over the past decade. By reflecting on achievements, examining where digital approaches have fallen short, and envisioning future possibilities, this conference sought to apply the recent “critical turn” in DH directly to Jewish Studies, creating a space for rigorous reflection and forward-looking insight.

The first day of the event featured a Hackathon, co-organised by the Network for Digital Humanities, Potsdam, in which ongoing projects utilising digital methods were pitched along with a challenge dealing with an application of digital methods. In groups, varying approaches to Natural Language Processing, use of Large Language Models and temporal/geographic mapping were discussed, tested and reflected upon. The results from these sessions were presented in the morning of the second day, and demonstrated the value collective discussion and sharing of experiences can bring to solving problems.

The first conference session focused on projects working with early textual sources, the implications of the work presented reaches beyond insights into early texts, to inform approaches working with all forms of textual sources and data. This began with MOSHE LAVEE (Haifa), HADAR MILLER (Haifa), SHIMON FOGEL (Haifa) and ELIEZER BAUMGARTEN (Haifa) presenting their data modelling of Tanhuma Yelammedenu Literature (TYL), a late antiquity rabbinic homiletic genre comprising interconnected texts found in various print collections, unique manuscript compositions, and medieval fragments. The digital library mo-

del proposed by the presenters offers a solution to the limitations of linear print forms in representing this complex genre. The model is dynamic, allowing users to view traditional linear progressions while also visualising the entire corpus of homilies and their intertextual connections across different biblical readings. This structure supports flexible reading modes, letting users switch between traditional and visualised views, explore intertextual relationships, and navigate various textual divisions within the corpus.

NICOLAS BONTEMPS (Paris) and DANIEL STÖKL BEN EZRA (Paris) focused on assessing the quality and authority of results delivered by DICTA's Citation Finder tool. Particularly, for identifying text reuse within rabbinic literature, a field densely interlaced with biblical and other rabbinic references. Their evaluation used a test corpus, where Citation Finder achieved a 90% accuracy rate. Focusing on the remaining 10%, they identified challenges such as undetected citations and false positives. They did this by examining factors like citation length, bigram frequency, and morpho-syntactic variations. Their analysis highlights areas where the tool struggles, shedding light on the complexities of automated text reuse detection and the need for reflection and refinement.

Rounding out this session, MAAYAN ZHITOMIRSKY-GEFFET (Tel Aviv), BINYAMIN KATZOFF (Tel Aviv), JONATHAN SCHLER (Tel Aviv), and NATI BEN-GIGI (Tel Aviv) looked toward the future when presenting a novel framework for analysing viewpoint diversity within historical scholarship communities through an in-depth analysis of their literature citations. They developed network indicators, and implemented these metrics on a constructed ontology and citation network of authors and books. Findings showed that most communities cited external sources more frequently than internal ones, suggesting a surprising level of intellectual exchange. This domain-agnostic approach offers a powerful tool for examining patterns of intellectual exchange across historical literature.

In the afternoon, the next session on the analysis of digitised texts began with OPHIR MÜNZ-MANOR's (Jerusalem) discussion of the transformative potential of Large Language Models (LLMs) in Jewish Studies, while also highlighting current limitations. Two projects leveraging LLMs were presented: one that uses a specialised model to detect metaphors in medieval Hebrew poetry, and another that performs "style transfer" in modern Hebrew prose, rephrasing text in the style of different authors using a fine-tuned Hebrew GPT model. These examples illustrated both the potential and the pitfalls of LLM in dealing with Hebrew texts, suggesting that while promising, these technologies require careful adaptation within Jewish Studies.

OREL SHARP (Frankfurt am Main) explored the evolution of Hebrew literary style using Abraham Mapu's *Ayit Zavua* as a case study. Stylometric analysis methodologies were used to investigate this stylistic shift by extracting stylistic indicators from its interpretational context, and placing it within a broader landscape of linguistic development. The project utilises both distant- and close-reading to approach style as an interpretational key, which should be comprehended within its historical and political context. ILIA UCHITEL (Jena) continued with a text analysis approaching combining both perspectives in their analyses of Soviet Yiddish press as a reflection of Soviet national policies. The project used bibliogra-

phical and OCR-based textual data from digitised newspapers to highlight distinct phases in Soviet policy toward Yiddish publications before World War II. The study also applied semi-automated content analysis to examine antireligious propaganda in five Yiddish newspapers from the late 1920s and 1930s. Findings revealed higher coverage of antireligious themes in urban versus rural publications and a decrease in such coverage from the 1920s to the 1930s. Uchitel's work highlights how Soviet policies directly influenced press content and distribution, using the Yiddish press as a tool for ideological mobilisation and control.

The session finished with a presentation, which highlighted the ability of digital tools and methods to allow for the analysis of corpus sizes that would not be possible in analogue form. ADIA MENDELSON-MAOZ (Tel Aviv) and AVI SH-MIDMAN (Tel Aviv) presented a computational study examining gender representation in 20th-century Hebrew prose. Acknowledging that women's voices were historically marginalised in Hebrew literature until the late 20th century, the researchers conducted a contrastive analysis across over 300 books by male and female authors from three generational groups. They applied neural network-based tagging to the corpus, allowing the analysis of gendered language use, comparing male and female portrayals, group versus individual character focus, and thematic trends over time. This diachronic and synchronic approach highlights how computational tools can reveal underlying trends and distinct gendered patterns in Israeli literature, providing insights aligned with broader cultural shifts.

The second day finished with a session focussing on cultural heritage and the possibilities and challenges of working with large amounts of data while still being able to highlight the richness of cultural artifacts. INNA KIZHNER (Haifa) and MAAYAN ZHITOMIRSKY-GEFFET (Tel Aviv) started by highlighting the existing ontological gaps in the representation of Jewish cultural heritage. They pointed out the lack of diverse perspectives, which fails to capture the complexity of Jewish cultural heritage, spanning numerous countries and historical contexts. Their approach uses metadata from global online museum collections, contrasting national museum collections with those of Jewish museums to map external and internal cultural views. The project's use of ontologies to standardize search terms is hindered by the lack of metadata from many countries, highlighting the challenges of DH work in Jewish studies. This underscores the need for more comprehensive data to address the persistence of ontological gaps in our knowledge of Jewish heritage.

VIKTORIA BRÜGGEMANN (Potsdam), MARK-JAN BLUDAU (Potsdam), and MARIAN DÖRK (Potsdam) continued with a presentation of the GraDiM project, a visualisation initiative for Frédéric Brenner's extensive photo archive on the Jewish diaspora. Brenner's archive includes more than 140,000 photographs, contact sheets, fine art prints, and other multimedia materials that document the diversity of Jewish life. Unlike traditional digital archives, which often rely on standardised grids of thumbnails, GraDiM seeks to capture the complexity of the archive by highlighting the material and processual aspects of these records. Utilising AI for image recognition and data enrichment, the project aims to create a dynamic, exploratory interface that preserves the archive's rich layers. GraDiM also address-

ses challenges in ontology design and cultural sensitivity, offering a model for digital engagement with Jewish heritage that prioritises complexity and enrichment over uniformity.

DANIEL BARÁNEK (Prague) utilised big data and digital humanities tools to analyse the spatial dynamics of Jewish communities in the Habsburg monarchy following 19th-century emancipation. Through a detailed reconstruction of Jewish settlements in selected Bohemian and Moravian towns, diverse settlement types were identified using mathematical modelling and big data analysis, visualised through cartograms. The findings show that post-emancipation Jewish communities developed uniquely in different towns, with some integrating into Christian neighbourhoods and others remaining in ghettos despite newfound freedom. This spatial variation was closely linked to local cultural and political factors, demonstrating how digital humanities methodologies can uncover complex historical patterns and together with classical historical analysis lead to new insights.

The final day started with a session on Jewish music which explored the UCLA Database of Recorded Jewish Music (DRJM), a pioneering digital project aimed at cataloguing and analysing the vast corpus of commercial recordings that reflect Jewish American experiences. The panel, comprised of three presentations, highlighted the potential of a data-oriented approach to studying Jewish music as a critical part of cultural history. In the first presentation, DANIELLE STEIN (Los Angeles) discussed how lullabies recorded by Jewish immigrants served as both expressions of nostalgia and reflections of domestic life. The database's visualisation tools aid the tracking of the cultural evolution of these lullabies, particularly in how they mirror changing gender roles and reflect the pressures and aspirations faced by Jewish émigré women. The analysis of lullabies revealed how musical domesticity shaped United States recording practice and provided Jewish émigré women a space for cultural reflection, remembrance, and exchange.

JEFF JANECKO (Los Angeles) examined the influence of the Immigration Act of 1924 on the production of Jewish music recordings, and asked how the Act may have altered the collective memory and identity of American Jewry. Using the DRJM to trace the rise and fall of Jewish music recordings around 1924, the research suggests that as the immigration flow diminished, the recording industry's production of records for Jewish audiences also dwindled, affecting the ways Jewish communities experienced and preserved their cultural heritage in the form of recorded music.

The final presentation by MARK KLIGMAN (Los Angeles) continued the investigation of early 20th century Jewish music, focussing on the genre of cantorial recordings. The presentation highlighted how cantorial music, which became highly popular during the early 20th century, provided Jewish immigrants with a profound link to their heritage. The DRJM data, aided the investigation of the prominence of the Yom Kippur prayer "Kol Nidre" across different contexts, from cantorial to theatrical, and art music recordings. This analysis revealed how "Kol Nidre" became an iconic piece in Jewish American musical life, demonstrating the fluidity, and enduring significance of piece within various cultural and performance settings.

The final session of the conference focussed on Testimonies and Ego Documents as sources in digital Jewish Studies. TABEA HENN (Munich) started with a critical reflection on the interactive application and experience "*Tell me, Inge...*" which uses VR technology to preserve Holocaust survivor Inge Auerbacher's testimony interactively. The application enables users to engage with Auerbacher's life story, from her childhood under Nazi policies to her survival and later emigration to the USA. The format was critically examined, specifically VR effects on authenticity and the dynamic nature of oral history were questioned, as well as its potential to inform and raise interest. The project was also contextualised within contemporary memory culture, considering the "death of witnesses," the Metaverse, and rising global anti-Semitism.

ANASTASIA GLAZANOVA (Jerusalem) and GALINA ZELENINA (Moscow) continued with a discussion of their thematic tagging approach used in *Zemelah.online*, a digital archive of Soviet-era Jewish ego documents. The presentation highlighted challenges in tagging, such as balancing broad versus specific categories and reflected on the process and act of tagging historical documents, and its authority to shape historical narratives. Especially pertinent was the reflection on AI's ability to carry out automatic indexing with remaining questions about the ability to capture nuanced human experiences. This balance between automation and human interpretation is crucial as they continue to refine the archive's approach to preserving and categorising complex historical narratives.

RENANA KEYDAR (Jerusalem), KEREN SHUSTER (Jerusalem), and YAEL NETZER (Jerusalem) finished this portion of the conference with a presentation of the Edut 710 initiative, a digital archive project launched following the events on October 7, 2023. Formed by volunteers from fields such as documentary filmmaking, historical research, and mental health, Edut 710 is dedicated to recording survivor testimonies with rigorous professional and ethical standards, independent of any political or media affiliation. As the largest documentation initiative of its kind in Israel, Edut 710 aims to build a national video archive to preserve first-hand accounts of the events for future generations, using digital humanities methods to ensure accuracy, accessibility, and historical integrity in its archival process.

The conference continued with a virtual poster presentation, where scholars showcased their ongoing Digital Humanities projects in Jewish Studies. Yiftach Ashkenazi, Aaron Christianson, Eyal Gruss, and Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky presented their innovative work, highlighting the diverse applications of digital methods in the field. Following the poster session, a panel discussion titled "DHJewish Quo Vadis?" was held, featuring Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, Anna Menny, Miriam Rürup, Sinai Rusinek, and Gerben Zaagsma. This discussion provided a platform for reflecting on the current state and future directions of Digital Humanities in Jewish Studies, fostering a dialogue on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

In Summary, the conference offered a comprehensive exploration of the intersection between Jewish Studies and Digital Humanities (DH), reflecting on the past decade and looking ahead to future possibilities. Several key themes emerged throughout the conference. Firstly, the importance of critical digital method and

tool reflections was emphasised, as seen in the Hackathon and various presentations. As digital archives grow and new tools like Large Language Models become more prevalent, scholars must continually assess the quality, authority, and ethical implications of the methods and results produced. The conference underscored the need for a "critical turn" in DH approaches to Jewish Studies, ensuring that digital reconstructions and insights remain committed to the histories they represent.

Secondly, the conference highlighted the potential of digital methods to reveal new insights and challenge old assumptions. From the dynamic modelling of Tanhuma Yelammedenu Literature to the analysis of gender representation in Hebrew prose, digital tools enabled researchers to examine vast corpora and uncover complex patterns that would be impossible to discern through analogue methods alone. Moreover, projects like GraDiM and the UCLA Database of Recorded Jewish Music demonstrated the power of digital visualisation and data-oriented approaches in preserving and exploring cultural heritage.

Thirdly, the conference emphasised the importance of context and human agency in digital research. As digital tools become more sophisticated, scholars must remain vigilant about the limitations and biases inherent in these technologies. The critical reflections highlighted the need for careful consideration of the socio-political context and the authority of automated processes in shaping historical narratives.

Looking ahead, the future of Digital Humanities in Jewish Studies holds great promise. The conference pointed to several potential research directions. However, as the field advances, it is crucial that scholars continue to engage in rigorous reflection and evaluation of their methods and tools, ensuring that digital approaches complement and enrich, rather than oversimplify, our understanding of Jewish history and culture.

Conference overview:

Welcome and Presentation of the Challenges

Start of Hackathon

Presentation of Hackathon Results

Session 1: The Digitized Past – Early Texts

Chair: Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky (Haifa)

Moshe Lavee (Haifa) / Hadar Miller (Haifa) / Shimon Fogel (Haifa) / Eliezer Baumgarten (Haifa): Data Modeling for a Critical Digital Library: Late Antiquity Rabbinic Homiletics

Nicolas Bontemps (Paris) / Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (Jerusalem): Biblical Citations in Rabbinic Compositions: An Evaluation of Dicta's Citation Finder and a New Proposal

Maayan Zhitomirsky-Geffet (Tel Aviv) / Binyamin Katzoff (Tel Aviv) / Jonathan Schler (Tel Aviv) / Nati Ben-Gigi (Tel Aviv): Citation Network Construction and Analysis for Inter-Community Relationships and Viewpoint Plurality Assessment of the Medieval Rabbinic Literature

Session 2: The Digitized Past – Analyzing Texts

Chair: Yael Netzer (Jerusalem)

Ophir Münz-Manor (Jerusalem): (Large) Language Models and the Future of Digital Jewish Studies

Orel Sharp (Frankfurt am Main): Stylometric Analysis and Close Reading of Mapu's "Ayit Zavua": Tension and Completion

Ilia Uchitel (Jena): Soviet Yiddish Press as a Mirror of Soviet National Policies: Making Use of Newspapers' Bibliographical and Textual Data

Adia Mendelson-Maoz (Tel Aviv) / Avi Shmidman (Tel Aviv): A Computational Analysis of Gender in 20th Century Israeli Prose

Session 3: The Reconstructed Past – Cultural Heritage

Chair: Daniel Burckhardt (Potsdam)

Inna Kizhner (Haifa) / Maayan Zhitomirsky-Geffet (Tel Aviv): Approaching a Multiperspectival Ontology of Jewish Cultural Heritage: Ontological Gaps and Epistemic Injustice

Viktoria Brüggemann (Potsdam) / Mark-Jan Bludau (Potsdam) / Marian Dörk (Potsdam): Granularities of Dispersion and Materiality (GraDiM): Visualizing a Photo Archive about Diaspora

Daniel Baránek (Prague): Spatial Dynamics of Jewish Society: Insights from Historical Big Data

Session 4: The Digitized Past – Jewish Music

Chair: Gerben Zaagsma (Luxembourg)

Danielle Stein (Los Angeles): Gendered Voices of Home and Hopes for Tomorrow: Examining the Recorded Lullaby in Jewish Émigré Life through the Database of Recorded Jewish Music

Jeff Janeczko (Los Angeles): Immigration and the Sound of American Jewry: How the Immigration Act of 1924 Affected the Production of Commercial Jewish Music Recordings

Mark Kligman (Los Angeles): The Frequent Sounds of Sacred Jewish Music

Session 5: The Remembered Past – Testimonies and Ego Documents

Chair: Nina Zellerhoff (Potsdam)

Tabea Henn (Munich): A (Re)constructed Life? The Application “Tell me, Inge...” between Holocaust Education and the Preservation of a Life

Anastasia Glazanova (Jerusalem) / Galina Zelenina (Moscow): Thematic Tagging in Zemelah.online Digital Archive of Soviet-Era Jewish Ego Documents

Renana Keydar (Jerusalem) / Keren Shuster (Jerusalem) / Yael Netzer (Jerusalem): Emergent Voices: Applying DH Methods in a Digital Archive of Testimonies during War Time

Virtual Poster Presentation

Roundtable

Chair: Daniel Burckhardt (Potsdam)

Participants: Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky (Haifa), Anna Menny (Hamburg), Miriam Rürup (Potsdam), Sinai Rusinek (Haifa), Gerben Zaagsma (Luxembourg)

Zitation

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