

Will Jewish memory fail, once all Great Jewish Books are online?

Alanna E. Cooper | March 28, 2019

Memory studies show that we retain information we read in books more readily than the information we read on digital devices. But is that really news? As early as the fourteenth century, Jewish grammarian and philosopher Profiat Duran urged Bible students to pay careful attention to the material features of their codices (handwritten manuscripts used before print technology).

The works ought to be “beautifully made” and written in “elegant script” to enhance the experience of reading - Duran explained - and the student ought to mark the margins with mnemonic signs, and always read from the same book. Duran understood that engaging with books as material objects, makes it easier to visualize their words, and facilitates memorization.

I wonder what Duran would think about today’s online tools for studying Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible). There are a number of sites that provide this resource, including Machon-Mamre, Chabad.org, and the most powerful by far, Sefaria.org.

I started using Sefaria shortly after it was released in 2012, and have been amazed by the website’s fast-increasing capabilities. It began as an electronic repository of Tanakh, and has expanded to include over 35 different commentators on Tanakh, in addition to liturgical works, mystical texts, legal codes, philosophical treatises, Mishnah and the entire Talmud. All accessible with a few strokes on your keyboard. It’s so useful and impressive, though, not simply on account of its extensive library. But because the texts themselves are not static. The Sefaria website is called “A Living Library” because users interact with it, digitally drawing from any of the texts in the repository to pull together source-sheets for teaching. Once a user creates a source sheet, he or she can store it online, and even open it up to others, facilitating a vast community of teachers and learners.



(photo credit: Rebecca Shapiro)

Want to see source-sheets others have pulled together to teach about Passover? There are [550 of them available](#). Or source-sheets others have pulled together to teach about Business Ethics? There are [248 of them available](#).

The Sefaria library is also characterized as “living” because of its active hyperlinks. Classically, Jewish texts are interconnected because their authors maintained an ongoing conversation with each other through their written words. Although they lived scattered across the globe, and over historical epochs, they “spoke to one another” through their writings. Sefaria’s creators understood the myriad of links between these writings could be made more explicit online: Read a text, click on the hyperlinked words, and a new pane will open with another text that contains these same words, and yet another link will guide you deeper into the conversation.

This system of connections through hyperlinks opens up opportunities for rich, broad study. Still, I can’t help but think that something is lost when the process of learning and discovering happens by clicking on electronic screens, rather than wandering through a library, pulling volumes off shelves, surrounding yourself with them at your desk, and flipping between them.

This is how the brilliant medieval Jewish scholar Rashi worked. With access to texts only in their material form, he learned Tanakh, midrash, and rabbinic literature so well, that when he read words in one place, he intuitively made connections to other places. He was, in this sense, a walking and talking “living library.”

In “The House of Rashi’s Mind,” poet Andrew Field likens Rashi to a painter who “could recall each color in his memory, each figure, each drama.” More than recalling, Rashi used his memory to understand the ways in which details fit into a grand whole. In Field’s words, he would “evaluate a portion here, there, and make the whole thing cohere.”

This elegant description is aptly represented with an amazing graphic illustration (provided here with the permission of Sefaria). It shows the vast network of links crossing through one another by virtue of Rashi explaining one verse by quoting another. You can only understand the image’s full power by viewing it “in action” [here](#). Hover over Exodus 3:2 – for example - and a connection to Deuteronomy 23:3 is revealed. Or hover over Leviticus 11:32, and a connection to Numbers 19:7 is revealed.

These colorful intersecting lines were once alive inside Rashi’s mind! Now you need not hold any of the connections inside your own head, because they are all here, externalized in this beautiful dynamic diagram. How, then, would a graphic representation of a contemporary Jewish mind appear? My fear is that it could become a grey ring emptied of all content. Then



Rashi's Connections (photo credit: Sefaria)

again, if I switch to a new paradigm for thinking about the mind – where the tightly-woven pattern represents human-computer facilitated memory – the colors become even brighter and more intense, extending into multiple dazzling new dimensions.

To learn more, read David Stern's [The Jewish Bible: a Material History](#), and join my course (team-taught with Brian Amkraut) [Jewish Texts and Changing Technology: Scrolls, Books and Electronic Media](#)

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