

Introduction to Gish Amit, "This Heritage must be Saved from Oblivion: The Hebrew University, the National Library of Israel, and the Manuscripts of the Jews of Yemen"

### Book History as Cultural and Political History

A signal achievement of book history stems from its ability to clarify changes in the cultural work of books and manuscripts over time. Gish Amit's essay exposes a struggle over the possession and meaning of a neglected mid-twentieth-century Middle Eastern archive. Many Jews from Yemen who arrived in the fledgling state of Israel in the late 1940s and early fifties brought with them hand-written books, scrolls, and other precious possessions. On arrival they were asked to deposit these objects with state officials who promised that their belongings would be returned. Most of these artifacts were subsequently appropriated by the state via the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and its library. The objects were viewed by scholars, politicians, and functionaries as national treasures that would preserve the history and culture of Yemenite Jews. Owners were later told that the artifacts had unaccountably disappeared or been destroyed by fire; still later some of these objects were put up for sale by book dealers; some continue to appear in unlikely places.

The essay that follows was originally part of Amit's doctoral thesis, written at Ben-Gurion University in Israel; it forms a chapter of his forthcoming book (in Hebrew): *Ex Libris: The Jewish National and University Library 1945-1955* (Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2014). The book analyzes the way the State of Israel pressed diverse cultural artifacts into the service of a collective national culture. Objects discussed in Amit's study include books in Palestinian libraries, abandoned by owners who either fled the country or were ousted; the cultural property (mainly books) of European Jewry after the Holocaust; and the manuscripts of Yemenite Jews who arrived in Israel in the nation's early years. The present essay explores the expropriation of the Yemenite manuscripts in the name of cultural preservation and Israeli national unity. Analyzing official documents as well as private correspondence, Amit traces the history of the Yemenite artifacts, arguing that the books and manuscripts of emigrants from Yemen were pronounced sacred relics that should be stored in research institutes for the benefit of science, the State of Israel, and the world. The assimilation of these artifacts into the National Library of Israel was part

and parcel of a concerted effort by the Zionist Movement to homogenize culture in Israel. In the process, many Yemenite Jews lost pieces of their heritage.

Amit's article sheds light on the relation between the sphere of culture and that of political power—with books as a central pivot of negotiation. His work discloses the complex interplay of human, political, and cultural factors that combine to shape historical facts. Amit's essay shows that book history can provide a remarkably fresh perspective on highly charged and unresolved political questions.

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