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## CUSTODIAN OF THE JEWISH HISTORY & HERITAGE: AN ACCOUNT OF NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL

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# **CUSTODIAN OF THE JEWISH HISTORY & HERITAGE: AN ACCOUNT OF NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL**

## **Abstract:**

The National Library of Israel (NLI), located in Jerusalem, has been dedicated to the preservation of Jewish and Israeli culture, history and heritage for over 128 years. The edifice stores valuable ancient Jewish history treasures and continues to add thousands to its collection each year. The NLI has a significant impact on the lives of Jews in Israel and around the world. Millions of documents are undergoing the digital conservation, processing, and scanning process to preserve the cultural DNA of heritage. Books, manuscripts, maps, audio and archival material, and a reference section of rare collections are all means in which cultural heritage is preserved.

The NLI has envisioned to bring out rare and out of print items to the public for which digitalized has been taking swiftly. The open access of Jewish heritage is a policy goal of the NLI. The NLI is the protagonist of the notion that all these treasures of mankind's history belong to everyone. This paper is an articulation of the great endeavors of the NLI in collecting and preserving the historical past of the Jewish people and how generously it is making the historical treasure available to all people world-wide.

**Key Words:** Culture, Digitalized, Heritage, Jewish, Manuscript, National Library of Israel

## **Introduction:**

The National Library of Israel (NLI), built at Jerusalem in 1892, houses the collective memory of Israelis of all origins and beliefs, as well as the Jewish populace of all around the globe. While being the Israel's foremost research library, NLI has started on an ambitious renewal journey over the last decade to embolden different audiences in Israel and across the world to relate with its resources through modern and exciting means. This revolutionary renovation is being carried out

by means of a variety of innovative educational, cultural, and digital programs, and the development of a new flagship campus, which is set to open up new avenues in the year 2022.

NLI provides unprecedented opportunities for connection with cultural heritage by means of mass digitization projects of books, historical press, manuscripts, music, ephemera, maps, and much more, as well as cutting-edge technology and tools for accessing digital resources. (Hayom, 2016) As part of this plan, NLI consciously tries to set up relationships connections and nurture cooperation with other repositories, institutes and libraries all around the region and around the world, thereby advancing sharing of knowledge and open access to information on a worldwide scale. The NLI is making sure that resources pertinent to its goal are accessible globally. (The National Library of Israel: The Next Chapter Begins, 2019)

The Paper is an attempt to figure out the endeavors of the NLI in preserving the history and heritage of the Jewish people and the great treasures that brings the glimpses of this nation in historical perspective. The above cited arguments is taken through the course of narrating the pragmatic steps of the NLI and its effects on the preservation of the Jewish culture and heritage.

### **1. Jewish Amulets:**

The NLI contains dozens of Jewish amulets made of paper or parchment. Many of these amulets are associated with early twentieth-century North African Jews. This collection consists of small rolled-up amulets in Hebrew and Aramaic, designed to protect the holder of the amulets from potential threats to pregnancy, infants, success etc. These magical amulets were intended to aid and assist the Weir's of the amulets' holders in their quest for success and protection from harm. Throughout Jewish history, magical amulets were an everyday part of their lives. Mastering magic

spell is a key feature of Jewish traditions earliest known to the Bible and Talmud times, when they were concerned of angles and manipulating them. Throughout the history, Jewish people had serious concerned about how to protect themselves from demons while also gaining good health. However, an interesting note book, written in 19<sup>th</sup> century, filled with recipes of making magic spells is also preserved in the reference sections of the NLI. (English, Jerusalem's National Library Home to Jewish Amulets, 2018)

## 2. Passover Haggadah:

The NLI housed the world's largest collection of the Passover Haggadah, one of Judaism's most revered texts. The Haggadah text, which is read at Passover, tells the story of the ancient Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The oldest surviving haggadah ever found till date is also preserved in the NLI. The oldest haggadah has come from the famed Cairo Geniza and it is roughly traced back to 1000/1099 AD and is completely legible. (Themediaonline, 2021)



### Source:

([https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH000041348/NLI?\\_ga=2.102522881.1602637092.1541920600-1067578015.1509615958#\\$FL169376986](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH000041348/NLI?_ga=2.102522881.1602637092.1541920600-1067578015.1509615958#$FL169376986))

### **3. Hebrew and Jewish Text and Manuscript: Collection**

The NLI has launched a world's largest Jewish and Hebrew texts and manuscripts online on a website known as "Kiva". These manuscripts are commenced to put together in Israel since the birth of the Israeli state. The first Premiere of the state David ben-gurion had envisioned the idea to collect Hebrew manuscripts all around the world to preserve the cultural norms and traditions of the ancient Jewish life style. The Hebrew literature such as; Prayers books, Biblical texts, and scientific writings have been collected from dozens of the countries.

The process to collect the documents is that NLI'S researchers made trips to different parts of the world and brought them to the library. The heritage part of the NLI is now enriched massively, so, it has been scanned and online to reach out all the researchers out there to utilize them in their research process. Millions of high-resolution images are available at the official website. Mammoth collection of original and images has been preserved on the microfilms too. The manuscripts are in fact stories related to past of Jewish people such as; Cattle on Mars written in the thirteenth century. The Jews of the Catalonia Spain used this prayer book on the high holidays. But, when Jews were expelled from the Spain in 1492, it was shipped out and landed in Germany. This manuscript was saved by the Nazis during the break out of WWII. From Germany it transported to US and finally donated to NLI. These manuscripts is a way out to the people to connect themselves with their progenitors. The NLI has reached very close to its goal to digitalize all the Jewish manuscripts. This massive work hard is being in process since decade, that illustrates the commitment of the NLI for the preservation of the history. (English) The NLI is serving as a repository of memory which is collecting and bring together the outputs of different generation in terms of materials.

### **4. Diversified Collection:**

The NLI is not only collecting archival material, books but also voices of other people through collecting most ancient, traditional and conventional means of passing on knowledge to other generations which is oral history. The NLI wants to present printed, oral and recorded work, build up throughout ages.

The NLI has also included cultural team to bring in relevant material. The NLI shows up the historical treasure of Jewish and Israeli cultural spread on different spheres of life during the time course of over 128 years. (Heritage, 2021) The details of the cultural diversify outputs are presented in the table below:

| <b>S.No</b> | <b>Output</b>                                                | <b>Size/Numbers</b>      |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1.          | Books and Periodicals                                        | Over 3.5 million volumes |
| 2.          | Digital Objects                                              | 24000000                 |
| 3.          | Individual Archives of prominent Jewish and Israeli Figures  | 1000                     |
| 4.          | Hebrew letter manuscripts                                    | 10000                    |
| 5.          | Ancient maps of Jerusalem and Holy Land                      | 6000                     |
| 6.          | Modern maps of Jerusalem and Holy Land                       | 2000                     |
| 7.          | Digitalized Music or sound recordings of songs, prayers etc. | 35000 hours              |

|    |                                              |                                                                                          |
|----|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8. | Digitalized paper of historical Jewish press | Spread on two centuries, preserved in more than 100 different titles in eighth languages |
|----|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Source:** (Heritage, 2021)

### **5. World’s Largest Manuscript and Audios of Jewish Religion and Culture:**

The interpretation of the Turah, Kabalistic and Hasidic texts are the main Jewish religious treasures. The interpretation and commentaries from medieval to contemporary times have been preserved through digitalized means. The most massive commentary collection is of “Rashi” which illustrates each verse of the Torah in translated version (word by word) and also explained in reference to the then Holy situations.

The repository related to Synthetic Enigma of “Seeing Voices” at Mount Sinai is an amalgamation of study, story and song for including the program initiated by the NLI under the flagship of Shavuot-related programming for community. Shavuot-related piyyutim (liturgical poem) is a program related to the poetry sung in Yemenite Jewish traditions. It also encompassed the interesting talks based on the experience of the Children of Israel at the time of bestowing the Ten Commandments. (Israel, 2021)

The Judaism related historical record has been divided into following categories (<https://www.nli.org.il/en>, n.d.):

- Holidays and Festivals in Israel
- Jewish Language

- Major Personalities in Judaism
- Jewish Peoples' Art
- Jewish People's Treasures
- Jewish Communities

The manuscripts are into divided into two categories; viz a viz; Hebrew and Non-Hebrew manuscripts.

**i. Hebrew Manuscripts:**

The history of Jewish people indicates that Jewish people have tradition of writing down their experiences, wisdom, religious beliefs and scientific knowledge since earliest times. The NLI holds collection of prayers, customs, histories of commentaries and information spread on all spheres of Jewish life. Interestingly, NLI also collects the record of secular nature manuscripts related to Jewish History. The Jewish history of nomad, individual and community times are preserved as per modern time's traditions in a well-organized manner. The glimpses of intellectual and cultural life of Jewish people are also drawn on the windows of the NLI that not only add aesthetic element in the edifice but also presents the visuals of the past times. (<https://www.nli.org.il/en>, n.d.)

**a. Digitalized Hebrew Manuscripts:**

Along with the swift advancements in technology that considerably expand choices for digital content conservation, representation, and access, the NIL launched the renovation of its variety of copies of Hebrew manuscripts. This project, performed in collaboration with the Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society (FJMS), aims to make Jewish manuscripts more freely available. The International Collection of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts will provide centralized world-

wide online access to the whole content of surviving Hebrew manuscripts. Also, the photographs will be long-term maintained using cutting-edge technology, and the collection will be available to international scholars and users from their work place and homes. (Library, 2016)

The International Digital Library of Hebrew Manuscripts is achieved by the gracious funding of the Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society (FJMS) and the Prime Minister's Office's Landmarks History Program, which was established to protect national heritage. (<https://www.nli.org.il/en>, n.d.)



This is Digitalized Hebrew Manuscript written in 1106 and has been drawn from the genre of Illustrated works (Manuscript)

**Source:** (פרשת שלח לך: עם ניקוד וטעמים, מסורה קטנה וגדולה) | Manuscript NNL\_ALEPH000041408 | The National Library of Israel (nli.org.il), n.d.)



Photo: Denis Schorr

**Source:** (Manuscripts (nli.org.il), n.d.)

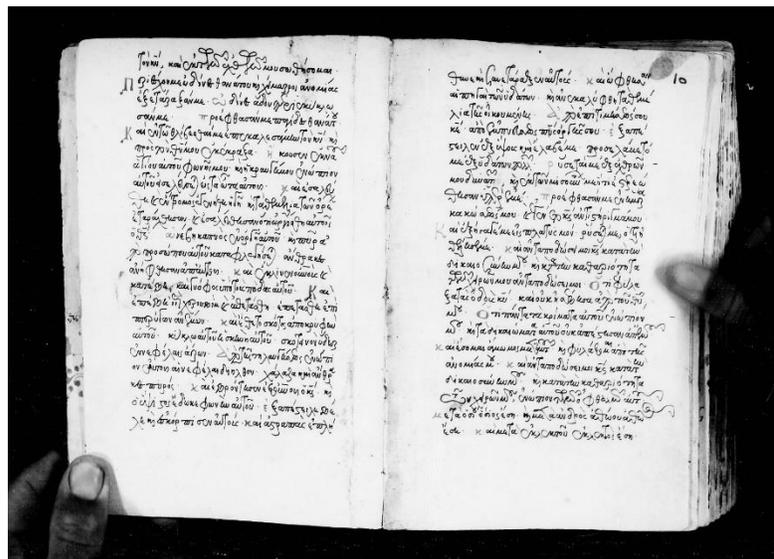
**Note:** Photograph has been added to illustrate the glimpses of digitalized photo

**ii. Non-Hebrew Manuscripts:**

Along with the outstanding collection of Hebrew manuscripts, the NLI has a rich collection of manuscripts in various languages dating back to the 9th century, with the largest of these

coming from Europe. The majority of such manuscripts were in fact donated to the NLI to make it a part of its collections.

To explain the above point we can cite an example for the donation of “Abraham Shalom Yehuda's private collection” that enlarged the NLI's holdings with unique and remarkable items which include Christian scripts for instance several 16th century books of hours, unique Vulgate manuscripts, besides a wide assortment of "Isaac Newton's theological manuscripts." The major archival section is digitized and at the moment accessible to the public via the NLI's website and catalogue. (Manuscripts (nli.org.il), n.d.)



This image is of Greek manuscript, written in 1504, taken from the collection entitled “Holy Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, Mount Sinai, Egypt”

**Source:**

([https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH003871505/NLI?\\_ga=2.42506789.1051154086.16409687901390212040.1634706291&\\_gl=1\\*g8e863\\*\\_ga\\*MTM5MDIxMjA0MC4xNjM0NzA2Mjkx\\*\\_ga\\_8P5PPG5E6Z\\*MTY0MTAyMzU3MS43LjEuMTY0MTAyNzE2NS42MA..#\\$\\$FL48217225](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH003871505/NLI?_ga=2.42506789.1051154086.16409687901390212040.1634706291&_gl=1*g8e863*_ga*MTM5MDIxMjA0MC4xNjM0NzA2Mjkx*_ga_8P5PPG5E6Z*MTY0MTAyMzU3MS43LjEuMTY0MTAyNzE2NS42MA..#$$FL48217225), n.d.)

**6. Jewish History Collection: General**

Since antiquity, the Jewish population have been through innumerable tormenting historical events, oppressions, exoduses, and splits which are systematically and scientifically preserved in NLI. The habit of documentation is an obvious and key feature of Jewish culture due to which since the emergence of Jewish society till date the written history is available and the existence of the Jewish nation has not been fade away. The NLI is a source to revisit the Jewish history and heritage that spread through all periods of its chronological history (<https://www.nli.org.il/en>, n.d.). The NLI has also the collection of food recipes ranging from Yaddish in the Renaissance Period to a Russain Jewish cookbooks today. (Hayom, 2016)

The NLI houses a variety of documents pertaining to various elements of Jewish history. In line with its obligation to gather, conserve, and promote the Jewish people's treasures of knowledge, tradition, and culture, the NLI has amassed a diverse collection of items in many formats and from various era. The NLI comprise books, manuscripts, community records, articles, recordings, photographs, letters, diaries and archives of individuals, groups and organizations. Many of the objects are rare, such as the Dreyfus acquittal records, which can be accessed on the NLI's official website. (<https://www.nli.org.il/en>, n.d.)

## **7. Ephemera:**

Ephemera are the accidental survivors of the papers and small materials that often people throw away. The NLI had connected several European countries to gather all preserved ephemera under the roof its edifice. One of the important and oldest piece of ephemera is a “Poster Cordovan” of a bull fight which is representing the Judaism element of celebrating eighth hundred year’s birth of the great Cordovan. The NLI has received this above-cited Poster from Germany that was basically then formed to create a tolerance among Jewish society in

Germany. Besides this, the NLI also have range of ephemera which were collected from almost forty European countries. (Hayom, 2016)

## **8. The European Days of Jewish Culture: A Project in Partnership with National Library of Israel:**

The primary goal of this European-wide event, which was grouped since 2000, is to illustrate the rich diversity of Judaism, as well as its local, regional, and national historical significance, with the firm goal of projecting dialogue, recognition, and exchange through conferences, concerts, performances, guided tours, and other activities that happen concurrently across the region.

This project has been greatly strengthened by partnership with the NLI, which has served as a method to generate various exhibition and instructional materials, adding significant value to the Festival while facilitating its commemoration across the continent.

The events of this project will be held this year under the auspices of the NOA initiative (Networks Overcoming Antisemitism), which promotes the construction of positive narratives about Jewish culture throughout Europe. NLI is the main venue of hosting above-cited activities. (<https://jewishheritage.org/european-days>)

## **9. Collection of Ketubot: Spread on 2500 Years of Matrimonial History:**

The Jewish ketubah's aim is to establish the groom's role in addition to obligations in connection to the bride. The ketubah is divided into three sections: the groom's portion, considered as the major goal of the ketubah, the sum of cash he is compelled to pay, and the

ketubah addition, if he decides to contribute to the original sum. The dowry is detailed for protecting the woman and providing her with her due marriage privileges bestowed by the religion. Furthermore, the dowry contains the stipulations of the ketubah, which were intended to protect the woman's rights not only during the course of matrimony and if it annulled.

Ketubot remained largely unchanged through the millennia. Marriage paperwork discovered in Aramaic papyruses; formulated during the era of Artaxerxes; the Persian King in 5<sup>th</sup> BC; resemble ketubah documents from more previous times and even contemporary-day ketubot. The NLI offers a large and diverse material of ketubot, and provides a broad, thorough, and detailed examination of the ketubah as a Jewish document and a valuable historic resource. (<https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/manuscripts>, n.d.)



**Ketubah from Paris, France, 1970**

**Source:** (<https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/manuscripts>, n.d.)

**Conclusion:**

The NLI is the single largest deepest collection of Judaic related print material of different forms that has ever been collected in the history of the Jewish people. Every publication that print more than fifty copies with in the state of Israel is bound by law to send the two copies to the NLI. Even if a print event invitations have more than fifty print outs that it would also to drop two copies to the mail of NLI.

The NLI is a hub of all Jewish material available in any language ranging from Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese to French, English, German, Spanish etc. It's not a lending library primarily but a research library. It is the foremost place for academic research related to Judaic Zionism. The general public is also one the reasonable audience that visits library for genealogical research to know about their ancestors. The NLI works with suppliers to find every content related to Jews and Judaism either written by Jews or non-Jews.

The rare collections are also physically available to the audience if they have justifiable reason and the item is in a right shape that it is capable to be handled then it is available to the people. The NLI has a world class restoration laboratories and staff of people who has professional focus on the preservation of rare manuscripts. 95 percent of the data in all formats have been digitalized and rest will be completed by the end of this year. Hence, the awe-inspiring journey of the NLI ranks it outstanding in terms of its endeavors and services.

**Note:** The conclusion has been drawn from different interviews, documentaries done with NLI officials and are available on YouTube.

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