

# Israel's Ethical Code for Public Libraries: Liberal Democratic Values for a Non-Western Multicultural Society?

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## **Abstract**

In 1996 a code of ethics for public libraries was formulated by an ad hoc Committee of the Israeli Council of Public Libraries and endorsed by the Israeli Librarians' Association. As stated by the chair of the committee, the main motivation was to improve the status of librarianship in Israel, for if it was to be taken seriously, it needed a code of ethics just like the medical or legal professions.

The process of formulating the code involved little input from practicing public or school librarians, parents, educators or readers, and relied mainly on the analysis of existing codes in other countries. The specific values held by different segments of Israeli society - notably orthodox Jews, Muslims or immigrants from the former USSR - were largely ignored. The code is loosely based on the American Libraries Association's Code of Ethics, emphasizing commitment to professional standards, freedom from censorship, equality and confidentiality of users' records.

Since its official introduction, the code has made practically no impact on the Israeli library scene. Not all of the academic training programs for librarians in Israel teach about information or library ethics, and those that do devote little if any attention to it. Awareness among readers of their rights as users is low, and the code is rarely mentioned in public debate about the type or quality of services that should be provided by public libraries in Israel, or about the level of public funding. There are no standing committees that can be consulted by readers or librarians about its implementation; and it hasn't been updated at a time of rapid change in library service.

Why has the code failed to become integrated into everyday life? Its critics consider it an attempt to impose western liberal democratic values on a non-western multicultural society. A survey of school librarians and principals showed that censorship is considered positively by many of them, mainly in religious schools. In Israel ethics is all too often considered a luxury rather than a necessity. A survey of library directors in Israel showed that technical competence is more highly valued than awareness of ethical issues when recruiting librarians.

Perhaps the main questions that should be addressed are: Do we need an ethical code? What do we expect to achieve with it? Can having an ethical code prevent us in certain cases from dealing with the main issues hampering the quality of library services? What are the lessons to be learned about the process of introducing an ethical code for information services? Can we make everyone a stakeholder by soliciting broad participation in the deliberations leading up to the formulation of a code?

## **Historical Context**

The process leading to the introduction of the ethical code for public libraries is deeply rooted in its historical context. After many years in which Israelis had felt themselves under continuous struggle for survival, Yitzhak Rabin's victory in the 1992 general elections and his second term in office as prime minister, popularly referred to as the Second Rabin Government, signified for many Israelis a shift from a state of war or conflict towards normality. Rabin's government had set to change the long held national priorities: increasing public spending on education, social welfare, scientific research and culture at the

expense of funding for the military and the settlements in the Israeli occupied territories (Rabin). Advances in the peace process with the Palestinians and Jordan, and the beginning of the Internet economic boom, brought about unprecedented levels of foreign investment in Israel, inducing rapid economic growth and a feeling of prosperity. Thus many Israelis experienced an atmosphere of change - a belief in a New Middle East, a term coined by the foreign minister and deputy prime minister Shimon Peres (Peres), implying an end to the state of war and a renewed emphasis on human values and culture.

## **The Process of Formulating an Ethical Code**

At this time Israel's Librarian's Association sought to improve the professional status of its members. It was reasoned that if librarians were to be taken seriously as professionals, they needed an ethical code just like medical doctors or lawyers. An ad hoc committee was set up to achieve this goal. Its members comprised Mrs. Tamar Harari, director of Tel-Aviv University's Library of Exact Sciences, Dr. Uri Bloch, an expert on library information systems, Prof. Assa Kasher, of Tel-Aviv University's department of philosophy, and Mr. Ophir Katz, legal council to the Librarians' Association (Lam, "Proposal for the Ethical Code for Israel's Librarians").

Although Assa Kasher had researched professional ethics, the list of publications in his Tel-Aviv University home page reveals that he hadn't published any work on library or information ethics (Kasher). At the time he received extensive media attention for his role as the chief advisor to the Israeli army, when it formulated its ethical code, known as IDF's Spirit. His work for Israel's Defense Force is considered highly controversial (Hauser), however a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is not clear how much if any input from library patrons or practitioners in the field, i.e. public or school librarians, educators was solicited or received. The process of formulating the code consisted mainly in analyzing existing codes of ethics implemented in other countries (Lam "Proposal for the Ethical Code for Israel's Librarians").

Thus it is not surprising that the code introduced in February 1996 (Israeli Center for Libraries) is loosely based on and similar to the American Library Association's Code of Ethics (American Library Association). The code emphasizes commitment to professional standards and quality of service, freedom from censorship, equality in the service provided to patrons, confidentiality of users' records, and respect for copyright laws.

In contrast to the A.L.A. Code of Ethics, the Israeli code does not include an obligation to treat co-workers and colleagues fairly and advocate adequate conditions of employment.

## **The Code's Impact on Librarianship in Israel**

From its onset, the code has received very little publicity. Thus it is only in the last two years that the full text of the code can be found on the Internet. It also failed to become an important part in the curriculum of the library schools in Israel, or the subject of continuing education courses or workshops. Since its introduction there has been little discussion on how it should be implemented, changed or updated. In a round table discussion three years after its introduction, it was apparent that some librarians had not been aware of its existence (Lam, "The Ethical Universe of Israel's Librarians – Theory and Practice"); and library users in Israel are typically not aware of their rights as users especially with respect to intellectual freedom (Meir). A recent proposal for guidelines for Internet use makes no reference to the code, thus raising questions about its relevance or importance as perceived by library policy makers (Commission on Public Libraries).

## Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State

Did the process of formulating the code, i.e. basing it largely on codes existing in other countries, allow it to become detached from the very unique fabric of Israeli society? When Israel was founded in 1948, it was defined in the “Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel” as a Jewish and democratic state (Gutmann). However this dual definition has never been without conflict.

According to a survey conducted in 2000 about 70% of the Jewish Israeli population consider themselves to live in the spirit of Jewish religion and more than a half practice regularly or occasionally at least some religious rituals (Levy). Israelis socialized to religious tradition may prefer to uphold their religious values when these are in conflict with liberal democratic values. Although they may in principle support the freedom of expression, they might at the same time feel that allowing the expression of values considered by them to be wrong, immoral or undermining Judaism or the existence or character of the state of Israel is dangerous or even sinful (Liebman).

The conflict between religion and state, i.e. Judaism und democracy, is at the core of contemporary political discourse in Israel. Some see the task of harmonizing religion and democracy as the challenge of inventing or defining the most suitable type of democracy, which may however differ from the western liberal democratic model (Schweid, “Jewish Religion and Israeli Democracy”).

A fashionable model considered by some researchers to be the most suitable for describing the Israeli political system is ethnic democracy, a political system that extends civil and political rights to all citizens but at the same time bestows a favored status or dominance to the majority ethnic group. This system has an inherent contradiction, civil and political rights for all citizens but sub-ordinance to the majority ethnic group (Smooha).

The polarization between those who support liberal values and those who object to them in Israel can also be seen as part of an all out ongoing cultural war waged on several fronts: the political right vs. left, the religious Orthodoxy vs. its opponents, the Jewish majority vs. the non-Jewish indigenous minorities, new immigrants vs. old timers, and the rich vs. the poor (Schweid, “Jewish Religion and Israeli Democracy”). Perhaps the most significant front in the context of library ethics is the conflict between religious, traditional and national attitudes vs. modernity and liberal secular attitudes.

## Opposing Views in Israeli Librarianship

In a 1998 survey of libraries in state run secondary schools more than half of the librarians working in secular schools and about two thirds in orthodox schools reported practicing some form of censorship, expressing positive attitudes about it. These school libraries (with only one exception) had no written policy statement on censorship, suggesting that this practice had never been challenged (Yitzhaki).

Nebenzal warns of the strong influence of Anglo-American values in training library professionals in Israel, stating that large sectors of the population are non-users, because their values are not congruent with the universal values of the profession. In her opinion, one of the main challenges confronting Israeli librarianship is how to draw new users by sensibly coping with Israeli multiculturalism (Nebenzal). In an Interview upon her retirement she suggests that the position of intellectual freedom in the provision of library services should be reconsidered to account for differing attitudes in Israeli society and for demands made by diverse groups of users (Lam, “An Interview with Dr. Ora Nebenzal upon Her Retirement”).

## Idealism vs. Reality

Israelis have preserved some of the pioneer ethos originating in the days of the struggle to build a nation. One facet of which is the value associated with getting things done sometimes against great odds, personal risk or limited resources. Another is the resourcefulness or ability to improvise and find unorthodox solutions. The high level of uncertainty combined with the urgent need to find solutions have meant that many things are considered only temporary, and there is little long range planning in most areas of public life. Thus in Israel elaborate and lengthy ethical deliberations may at times seem out of place, considered counterproductive if not a sheer waste of time, a luxury that one cannot afford.

With the exception of a short period in the mid 90's Israeli public libraries have been undergoing a continuous struggle for survival, trying to provide adequate service without sufficient means. The government funding for public libraries in 2000 totaled about 4 Million Euro, i.e. a level of slightly less than 1 Euro per capita (Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport). Most public libraries have weak collections, the average number of volumes held in 1998 in predominantly Jewish populated areas was about 3 per resident and about half of that in the non-Jewish sector, and slightly less than 15% of the population were users (Central Bureau of Statistics). Salaries for librarians in Israel are low in comparison with other professionals of comparable skills or training, no doubt a result of the budget squeeze, low professional esteem and low national priority given to libraries.

Thus it is not surprising that a 1998 survey about the effectiveness of library school curricula found that directors of libraries valued technical competence and skills more highly than an awareness of ethical issues when recruiting librarians, and both library directors and graduates of library schools preferred training to education, considering the goals associated with knowledge and skills more relevant than those dealing with attitudes and approaches to the profession (Getz).

## Epilogue

If there is a lesson to be learned from the Israeli experience, then it is the need to foster participation from all parties involved when formulating a code of ethics. First of all it ensures representation of the diversity of opinions, values and attitudes; and second, it has the power to create a personal commitment to the resulting code, because of the investment by each participant, making everyone a stakeholder. Perhaps most important, is not to forget, that even the best and most appropriate ethical code is limited in what it can help us achieve, and it should never be allowed to become static. For ethics is the act of reflecting on moral dilemmas (Capurro); and "ethical growth demands continuous engagement in moral reflection and/or discourse at every opportunity" (Froehlich).

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