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Yiddish Tomes Go Digital With DIY Scanner

National Yiddish Book Center Device Preserves Works of Literature

By Jon Kalish

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It's a scenario that the Yiddish writers of yore could never have predicted, and yet by which they likely would have been tickled: Today, their work is being digitized with the help of a home-made scanner built by a former Baptist from Indiana who lives in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn.

As of mid June, the scanner is the newest acquisition of the National Yiddish Book Center, in Amherst, Massachusetts. It will be used to digitize the center's books — some of them a century old — that are stored in a climate-controlled vault.

This is the first scanner owned by the center. Previously it digitized books using a scanner loaned from the Internet Archive, a not-for-profit digital library. Other tomes were scanned at the National Library of Israel and at a factory in Pennsylvania, where "everything was automated and nobody read Yiddish," said Catherine Madsen, the center's bibliographer. "They sliced the spine off the books and fed the pages through a machine. It was upsetting that the books had to be destroyed in order to be saved."

The new scanner, which uses two Canon DSLR cameras to capture the Yiddish text (without cutting books), was donated to the center through circuitous means. A New York software executive (who asked to remain nameless in the Jewish tradition of anonymous giving) originally purchased a kit for the scanner from Daniel Reetz, creator of the do-it-yourself book scanner project. The executive was unsure of what he would do with the scanner. His wife had been in touch with an Australian living on a kibbutz in Israel, who had been involved in digitizing *yizkor* books — that is, books written by Holocaust survivors to commemorate the communities that were destroyed. The Australian put the executive in touch with Joel Alpert, a retired electrical engineer in Boston who was involved in efforts to publish hard copies of the *yizkor* books. Alpert was aware of the National Yiddish Book Center's need for a scanner.

But one problem remained: The scanner had to be put together. This was no IKEA furniture assembly job; one needs considerable mechanical abilities to create a DIY scanner.

That's where Adam Seim, the Indiana-born former Baptist, comes into the story. The 30-year-old father of two is not only a master woodworker, but can also wire, solder and build circuits. Seim had done some carpentry work for the software executive, who asked him to assemble the scanner.

In addition to his day job as an audio technician at a Manhattan radio station, Seim volunteers with a group called Blissful Bedrooms, which does stunning bedroom makeovers for disabled New York City public school students. In 2010 I had the opportunity to watch two dozen Blissful Bedrooms volunteers swarm over the

bedroom of a young woman with cerebral palsy. Seim commandeered the hallway in her South Bronx housing project as he juggled an array of portable power tools while assembling and installing furniture, improvising various fixes on the spot. He struck me as a jazz musician with a cordless drill.

Seim spent around 40 hours reading the forum on diybookscanner.org, Reetz's web site. (DIY forums are black holes from which tinkerers slowly emerge.) He spent another 40 building the book scanner this winter in the basement workshop of his Brooklyn apartment building.

"It really had a lot of unsolved problems," Seim said of the DIY scanner before quickly adding: "It is a great design. It's extremely flexible."

Seim's modifications, substitution of original parts and the cost of his labor brought the cost of the scanner to about $5,000, a third of what its commercial equivalent sells for. He used a feltlike fabric and Velcro to shield the cradle where the book sits from external light, preventing glare on the glass that presses against the pages of the book. Other modifications include installing strips of "grippy" rubber on the book cradle so books won't slide around, and the installation of two additional LED lights to better illuminate the pages while they are being photographed. The electronics are housed in a pentagon-shaped control panel on the side of the scanner. Inside is a USB hub, power supplies for the two cameras, power distribution circuitry and a cannibalized computer mouse. Seim modified to trigger the camera control software.

Reetz approved of Seim's hack: "That sounds like a really phenomenal build," he said.

Back when he was a starving grad student, Reetz uploaded step-by-step instructions on how to build his DIY book scanner, found on the website instructables.com. There were 79 steps. Instructables.com is a mecca for DIYers, who can learn how to do everything from attaching a couch to a mountain bike to cooking badger stew. The "instructable" on Reetz's DIY book scanner drew 20,000 views in its first few days on-line, and at one point there were 3,000 people frequenting the forum for the book scanner. Reetz says he received emails from a man in Indonesia who needed a scanner for a pile of wet holy books and from a seminary student in the Midwest who decided to build a scanner for his thesis.

"Many, many religious people have built these book scanners to scan and share what is sacred to them," Reetz said.

The books to be scanned at the National Yiddish Book Center are, for the most part, not religious texts. But they are sacred.

Jon Kalish, a Manhattan-based radio reporter, is a longtime contributor to the Forward. Links to his radio documentaries and NPR stories are on his blog, Kalish Labs (http://jonkalish.tumblr.com/).

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