JONATHAN KRASNER

AMERICAN JEWS IN TEXT AND CONTEXT: JACOB BEHRMAN AND THE RISE OF A PUBLISHING DYNASTY

Abstract

This article explores the career of Jacob Behrman (1921–2012) and the growth of Behrman House from a small Jewish bookseller to the leading publisher of Jewish religious school textbooks. Behrman's success owed in part to his ability to appeal to the vast center, to gauge correctly his consumers' needs and reflect their outlook and values, to eschew partisanship and play down ideological differences, and to swim with the tide. In addition, I make the case that Behrman House elevated the field of Jewish education by raising the quality of Jewish textbooks, and that through its ascendency played a role in redefining the goals of Jewish education and its undergirding ideological thrust. Behrman was not driven by a single model of Jewish education or a monolithic vision for the Jewish community, but rather, by business exigencies and a connection to Jewish peoplehood and culture.

Visitors to Behrman House's headquarters in Springfield, New Jersey, can see a diorama of the publishing firm's old office on 1261 Broadway, in midtown Manhattan, near Herald Square. Arguably, the most curious item in the display is the miniaturized toolbox that sits in Jacob Behrman's office. The actual toolbox was as much of a fixture in the office as Behrman's Camel cigarettes and Saltine crackers, and they are a key to understanding the character of the man who stood at the head of Behrman House from 1946 until his retirement in 2000.

Jacob Behrman was a tinkerer. He was a technician who was interested in how things worked. He operated on a granular level, breaking things down to their constituent parts. Behrman loved building bookshelves. He loved to fiddle with the office electricity and fix the plumbing. Moving the growing business to New Jersey in 1985 was a difficult decision for a man whose resistance to change was exemplified by his habit of buying three or four identical pairs of shoes when he found a style that suited him. But he also relished the opportunity to renovate the new facility. Likewise, he approached computerization reluctantly, but was intrigued by the opportunity to optimize operations through a custom designed database and business software.

On the face of it, a man with Jacob Behrman's skill-set and disposition was an unlikely candidate to become a successful book publisher. But the trade and textbook publishing projects in which Behrman specialized were not driven by fads. Most took between three to five years to progress from the early development stage to publication. Jacob was well served by his ability to view publishing from a systems perspective. He was adept at assembling creative, editorial, and production teams for each project in the way that a manager builds a ball club, balancing complementarity and synergism. Moreover, as science writer Steven Johnson points out, an inveterate tinkerer is well-suited by disposition to construct ideas or products that are greater than the sum of their parts. "We have a natural tendency to romanticize breakthrough innovations, imagining momentous ideas transcending their surroundings, a gifted mind somehow seeing over the detritus of old ideas and ossified tradition. But ideas are works of bricolage. They are, almost inevitably, networks of other ideas. We take the ideas we've inherited or stumbled across, and we jigger them together into some new shape."[1]

This article will explore the career of Jacob Behrman (1921–2012) and the growth of Behrman House from a small Jewish bookseller to the leading publisher of Jewish religious school textbooks. I will argue that Behrman House's success was facilitated by four traits that characterized Jacob Behrman: his gift for judging good taste and style; his keen interest in ideas but disdain for fads; his ability to spot and exploit talent; and his ability to discern the needs of his consumers. In addition I will make the case that Behrman House elevated the field of Jewish education by raising the quality of Jewish textbooks, and that through its ascendency Behrman House played a role in redefining the goals of Jewish education and its undergirding ideological thrust.

[1] Steven Johnson, "The Genius of the Tinkerer," *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2010.

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Beginnings

Behrman's Jewish Book Shop opened in 1921 at 347 5th Avenue; by 1930 the business had moved to its longtime location on the tenth floor of 1261 Broadway, between 31st and 32nd streets. Its proprietor, Louis Behrman (1870–1962) began his career at Bloch Publishing Company in Cincinnati, publisher of Isaac Mayer Wise's weekly newspapers, the *American Israelite* and *Die Deborah* and one of the largest flag manufacturers in the United States. Later, the firm published the Chicago-based *Reform Advocate*, as well as the Reform movement's liturgical books, Hebraica, and educational materials.[2] Bloch was owned and operated by Wise's brother-in-law, Edward H. Bloch, and, later, by his son Charles. Louis, whose family moved to Cincinnati shortly after arriving in New York from Lithuania, in 1883, started out as an errand boy at Bloch in 1886.[3] When Charles expanded the business, Louis was deployed to set up the firm's New York office. Bloch also opened an office in Chicago, and eventually moved its retail headquarters to New York in 1901. Louis remained at Bloch until after the First World War.[4]

It was while working at Bloch in New York that Louis met his future wife, the former Sara Diamond (1883–1973), when she applied to become his secretary (fig. 1). Sara had experienced a tragic childhood. She was the eldest of six children who were orphaned only a year after their family emigrated from Poland to New York City. Sara and her siblings were sent to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum where she was trained as a secretary before being released at sixteen. The trauma of being orphaned and the responsibility that she assumed as surrogate mother to her younger siblings was deeply imprinted on Sara and had an indirect effect on the attitudes of her children. She exhibited determination and a stubborn drive, mixed with a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*.[5] Louis hired Sara and the two worked side by side.[6] According to the family lore, Louis, who was considerably older than Sara, was shy around the opposite sex and proposed to her through an office memorandum. She playfully accepted

Figure 1. Louis and Sara Behrman founded Behrman's Jewish Book Shop in 1921.

in a memo of her own. With the birth of their first child, Dena, in 1911, Sara stopped working outside the home. A second daughter, Martha, was born in 1913. Louis longed to run his own business and finally left Bloch. After a failed experiment in the dairy business, Louis and Sara opened their own retail bookstore and publishing house. Their youngest child, Jacob was born in 1921, the same year that Behrman's Jewish Book Shop opened its doors.[7]

Like Bloch and many other book publishers in that era, the Behrmans' store combined a retail business with a publishing house. Behrman's Jewish Book Shop sold ritual articles and books, including prayer books and Bibles. A 1922 ledger includes entries for items

[2] On Bloch Publishing Company see Robert Singerman, "Bloch & Company: Pioneer Jewish Publishing House in the West," *Jewish Book Annual* 52 (1994–95): 110–130.

[3] Harold Ribalow, "From Generation to Generation," *Congress Weekly*, June 28, 1954, 11–12.

[4] David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

[5] Jacob Behrman, "Notes on Family History," n.d. (Behrman Family Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[6] Celia Weisman, interview with the author, March 28, 2014.

[7] Ibid.; David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013; Jacob Behrman, "Notes on Family History," n.d. (Behrman Family Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[8] Louis Behrman, "1922 Ledger," (Collection of David Behrman).

like Torah pointers (*yads*), silk skullcaps, candlesticks, and ritual wine (*kiddush*) cups.[8] The Behrmans' main business was never *seforim*, Hebrew and Aramaic books related to Torah and Talmudic study, but English language Hebraica, published in-house, as well as similar works published by Bloch Publishing, the Jewish Publication Society and similar presses. The profit margin at Behrman's Jewish Book Shop was narrow. In 1940, Louis explained to journalist and author Harold Ribalow that, "The educated Jew, steeped in his culture, reads Hebrew. Other Jews read Yiddish. Who reads the books we publish? Rabbis and teachers. A rabbi likes a book, recommends it to his congregation and a few volumes are sold. A teacher tells the president of his school that a Jewish library should be started. Then some of our books are sold. Without these Jews we should never make a living. Please say that—tell your readers that the rabbis and the teachers keep Jewish culture in the English language alive and vital."[9]

Figure 2. Dena Behrman Bengal (1911–1990), who operated Behrman House from 1940–46 with Rabbi Emanuel Green and her sister, Martha Behrman Weisman.

Wartime Exigencies

Louis turned 70 the year he spoke with Ribalow and was in the process of stepping away from day-to-day business operations. Responsibilities fell to daughter Dena, who was closely advised by Martha and Rabbi Emanuel Green, who assumed the title of president (fig. 2).[10] Under Dena's tenure, the firm published a number of Zionist works, including an early textbook on the history of the new Yishuv,[11] a book on Zionist folk dances,[12] as well as the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation's *New Haggadah* edited by Mordecai Kaplan, Eugene Kohn and Ira Eisenstein.[13] Kaplan's excision from the haggadah liturgy of the ten plagues, of the call for God to "pour out Thy wrath" on non-believing gentiles, and references to the divine election of the Jews, as well as his radical abridgement of the commentaries on the biblical text, provoked intense controversy. Yet, despite the outrage voiced in the Orthodox press, and the lambasting that Kaplan received from his Jewish Theological Seminary colleagues, the entire 3,000 copy run of the first edition sold out in ten days.[14]

Other publishing ventures during the war turned out to be considerably less profitable. Dena was an aesthete whose sensibilities were unbridled by keen business acumen. From her parents' perspective, she also suffered from flights of fancy and a lack of perseverance. A more charitable assessment might emphasize her idealism, which was reflected in her Zionism. It was a characteristic that she shared with her husband, Ben Bengal, and sister Martha, both of whom were members of the American Communist Party, as well as Jacob's wife, the former Rita Osband, who was the president of the left-wing American Student Union chapter at Brooklyn College.[15] Ben also fought for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Regardless, Dena and Emanuel Green made a number of ill-advised

[9] Ribalow, "From Generation to Generation," 11–12.

[10] Although Dena held the title of Vice President, contemporaneous letters make it clear that she was the de facto publisher. Green was listed as the president at Behrman House, probably because it was unusual at that time for a woman to be running a publishing house. See, Sara Behrman to Jacob Behrman, November 1947 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[11] Ben Edidin, *Rebuilding Palestine* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1939).

[12] Corinne Chochem, *Palestine Dances!* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1941).

[13] Mordecai Kaplan, Eugene Kohn and Ira Eisenstein (eds.), *The New Haggadah* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1941).

[14] On Kaplan and the *New Haggadah* see Jack Wertheimer, "Kaplan vs. 'The Great Do-Nothings': The Inconclusive Battle over *The New Haggadah*," *Conservative Judaism* 45 (Summer 1993): 20–37.

[15] Jacob Behrman interview with David Behrman, September 25, 2006. The American Student Union was created as a merger of the communist-led National Student League and the socialist led Student League for Industrial Democracy. On the American Student Union, see Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially chapter 6.

business decisions that left the firm nearly insolvent. A juvenile Jewish history series, to be authored by Rabbi Gilbert Klaperman was repeatedly delayed due to the overcommitted author's inability to make his deadlines, and eventually shelved when Klaperman enlisted as a chaplain in the Canadian military during the Second World War. The misstep that nearly sunk the firm came in the wake of the United States' entry into World War II, when government restrictions on wood pulp and paper resulted in shortages and compelled publishers to reserve paper in advance. Carried away with a half-baked idea to publish a series on great Jewish thinkers, Dena and Green hired an editor and ordered a boxcar of paper for the project, as well as $2,000 of fancy Japanese cardstock for book covers. The series never advanced from the planning stages and the paper sat yellowing in a warehouse.[16]

Ironically, if wartime conditions contributed to the firm's travails, they also kept it afloat. Utilizing arbitrage Dena was able to promote sales by bundling books with women's stockings. (The War Production Board rationed wool and nylon because they were used for uniforms, parachutes and other wartime uses.)[17] In 1946, Dena and Green tried to raise money to pay their creditors by selling 300 shares in cumulative preferred stock. But the scheme was aborted when it failed to generate sufficient interest.[18] In the final analysis, Dena's tenure as publisher was mixed. Her niece, Celia Weisman, is likely correct that her reputation as a difficult and erratic manager was partially attributable to her unwillingness to conform to conventional gender stereotypes. Dena was a fast-talking bohemian rebel who ignored or ridiculed social conventions. She smoked, painted herself with mascara and lipstick and thumbed her nose at conventional social mores. Her old world, corset-wearing mother was horrified.[19] By 1946 the firm was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

Jacob served in the U.S. army during the war. He was inducted in June 1943 after his graduation from Brooklyn College, and arrived in the European theater ten days after D-Day. A rifleman in the 36th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Armored Division, he was severely wounded during the Battle of the Bulge when his jeep rode over a landmine and spent the remainder of the war convalescing in a military hospital. After he was discharged, in November 1945,[20] Jacob decided to take some time off while he considered his next steps. He was hopping freight trains cross-country when he was called home to enter the family business.

Trial by Prayer Book

By all accounts, Jacob met the obligation reluctantly. He later told friends and family that his intention was to become a plumber or a math teacher. But another Behrman trait was loyalty. Once his aging parents made the request the prospect of refusal was never seriously entertained. Initially, the plan was for Jacob to join the firm as production manager. But when the plan to sell stock fell through, the firm was compelled to seek a $10,000 loan from Behrman family friend Emanuel Povar. A Connecticut mill owner and business partner of Sara Behrman's sister, Mollie Diamond, Povar conditioned his bailout on the removal of the firm's management. Povar and the elder Behrmans agreed that Jacob would become the new publisher. Green was dismissed as president, and Dena announced her family's imminent relocation to Los Angeles to facilitate her husband Ben Bengal's screenwriting career. Martha, who served as the firm's treasurer, retired from the business to start a family.[21]

Regardless of his protestations, Jacob, who was more grounded, more sober and felt more obliged to please his parents than Dena, was better suited to run the business (fig. 3). The reorganization caused hard feelings, however, which were exacerbated by Jacob's insistence that his sisters give him their shares of the firm. Martha, who had recently married an affluent OB/GYN, Abner Weisman, readily gifted him her shares. But the cash-

[16] Celia Weisman, interview with the author, March 18, 2014; David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013; Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013; Jacob Behrman, interview with David Behrman, September 25, 2006; Jacob Behrman, "Notes on Family History," n.d. (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[17] Daniel Delis Hill, *As Seen in Vogue: A Century of American Fashion in Advertising* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 70. Dena and Green procured the wool from Behrman family friend Manny Povar, who operated a mill in Torrington, CT, and was the main supplier of wool for GGG Clothes (which was bought out in 1977 by Martin Greenfoeld Clothiers).

[18] Emanuel Green, Circular Letter, n.d., c. 1946 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[19] Celia Weisman interview with the author, March 18, 2014.

[20] Enlisted Record and Report of Separation for Jacob Behrman, November 22, 1945, Company B 36th Armored Infantry, 3rd Armored Division, United States of America Armed Forces (Collection of David Behrman).

[21] Eugene Borowitz, interview with the author, October 7, 2013; Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013; Jacob Behman, interview with David Behrman, September 25, 2006.

Figure 3. Behrman House's longtime owner and publisher Jacob Behrman (right), Scotch and cigarette in hand, speaking with a relative at a family function in 1983.

strapped Dena was more reluctant to divest herself of a steady stream of income and insisted on negotiating a buy-out, which included a modest pension. Celia Weisman has speculated that Jacob and his parents adopted the subsequent narrative downplaying Dena's business acumen in order to justify his demand for sole control of Behrman House. All the same, it appears that Jacob's condition was dictated by business exigencies. Povar apparently made his assistance contingent on the sale of the shares; he wanted Jacob to be the sole decision-maker and frowned at the prospect of shares residing in the hands of non-active players.[22]

Under Jacob's leadership Behrman House's financial situation was stabilized by November 1947. Povar helped Jacob secure a second $10,000 loan to cover the balance of Behrman House's wartime debts, and the firm's retail business ran a modest profit. A new book was in press and another was on boards.[23] Jacob expedited the completion of Klaperman's history series by convincing him to bring his wife Libby on board as co-writer. The books quickly became among the firm's best sellers. Jacob was also sufficiently astute to scoop up the rights to a number of books that had been allowed to go out of print, and to reissue them in new editions. These books, which included Milton Steinberg's *As a Driven Leaf* and Meyer Levin's *The Golden Mountain*, generated a steady income, as did Mordecai Kaplan's haggadah, which was selling approximately 5,000 copies per year. Behrman also enjoyed success with Azriel Eisenberg's *Bar Mitzvah Treasury* (1954); 9,000 copies were sold in two years.[24]

It was in the 1960s that Behrman House hit its stride with the publication of *The Traditional Prayer Book* (1960), the *New Jewish Encyclopedia* (1961), Harry Gersh's revised edition of *The Story of the Jew* (1964), and Abba Eban's *My People* (1968). The prayer book, the first authorized by the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), was a publishing triumph that showcased Behrman House at its best, even as the overall project served as a cautionary experience for the young publisher (fig. 4). Aesthetically, the prayer book design was exquisite: crisp and elegant typefaces, ample white space, and a layout that was carefully executed so that the opposing pages of English translation perfectly matched the Hebrew. English directions and chorographical notes were brief and declarative, and appeared in both the Hebrew and English versions of the prayers. The translation, by Rabbi David de Sola Pool, was lyrical but simple, formal but not archaic, faithful to the original in style as well as substance.[25]

If the prayer book showed off Jacob's aesthetic sense and good taste, it also demonstrated how his mechanical inclination could be used to great advantage. Indeed, the latter facilitated the former. In the postwar period, one print shop dominated non-Indo-European publishing in the United States and specialized in Hebrew. Located in Philadelphia and operated by the former executive director of the Jewish Publication Society, Maurice Jacobs, it was known as "the United Nations of printers," and was reputed to print in 165 different languages.[26] It seemed a foregone conclusion

[22] Celia Weisman interview with the author, March 18, 2014; David Behrman, correspondence with the author, October 13, 2014.

[23] Sara Behrman to Jacob Behrman, November 10, 1947 (Collection of David Behrman).

[24] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013; Eisenberg's *Bar Mitzvah Treasury* was edited by Jacob's first wife, Rita Osband Behrman, who worked at the firm until the birth of their first child.

[25] David de Sola Pool, *Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals* (New York: Behrman House, 1960).

[26] On Maurice Jacobs see Jonathan Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888–1988* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 189, 175–218.

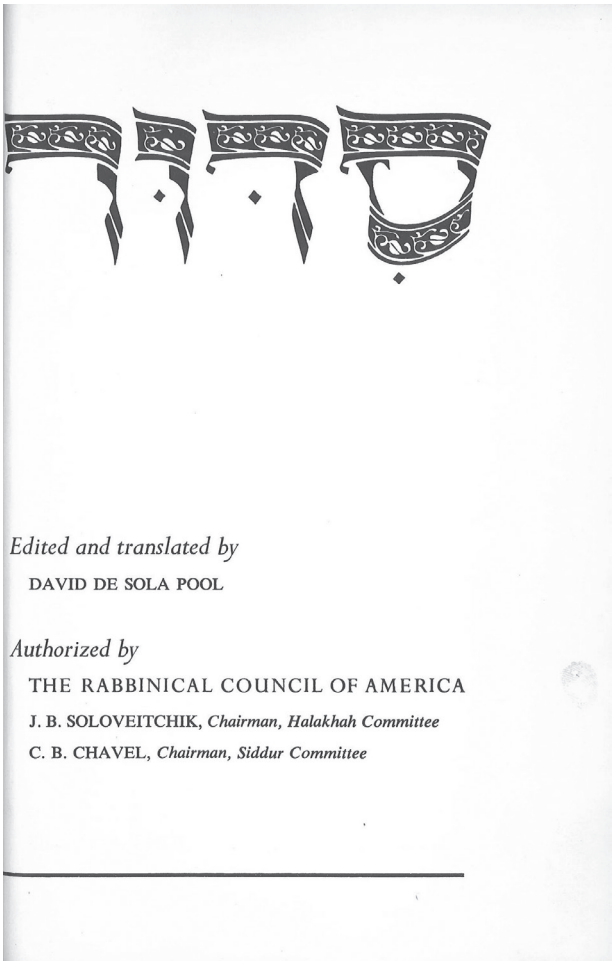

Figure 4. The title page of the *Traditional Prayer Book* (1960), a joint venture of Behrman House and the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America. Controversy surrounding Rabbi David de Sola Pool's translation caused Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik to insist that his name be removed from subsequent editions.

that a project like the prayer book would be laid out, typeset and printed by Jacobs for Behrman House, which would limit creative control over design and eat into the profits. But as the editorial phase of the project neared completion, Jacob Behrman warmed up to a different option. The firm rented a linotype machine, an intricate and potentially dangerous device that cast type a row at a time from molten lead, to handle the layout and typesetting of the Hebrew text. (The English was set in a commercial shop.) Leasing a linotype machine only made sense for a small publishing house if it could field the requisite expertise to operate and repair it. Jacob, relying on his technical prowess, ably performed the latter function, while Behrman House's fastidious production manager, Andrew Amsel exhibited the required skill, discrimination, and attention to detail to make an ideal typographer and typesetter. According to newspaper reports, Amsel assembled virtually the entire prayer book by hand (matching the Hebrew text to the English galleys), in part to ensure that the facing pages in Hebrew and English matched paragraph for paragraph and page for page.[27]

On the other hand, the project was seventeen years in the making; the fruit of a long and belabored process that almost bankrupted the firm. Accounts differ as to how the project materialized. According to one version, backed up by RCA committee minutes, it was the Hebrew Publishing Company that first approached the RCA in 1944 about the possibility of publishing a prayer book that carried the organization's imprimatur. Two years later, the Siddur Committee entered into an agreement with Behrman House, which offered favorable conditions. Jacob recalled the genesis of the prayer book differently, suggesting that the impetus came from Louis, who was enamored of Pool's writing style. There is probably truth in both accounts. It appears that Klaperman, an RCA member and Behrman House writer, was responsible for bringing the two parties together.[28]

After the prayer book was published, Jacob reportedly vowed that he would never again work with a publication committee. Editorial nitpicking on the part of the RCA committee, which worked with Pool on preparing and editing the Hebrew text and translation, was not primarily to blame for the delay in publication, although the committee earned Behrman's ire by insisting on the publication of a revised edition. Rather, it was Pool who repeatedly missed deadlines. According to Louis Bernstein, author of the most authoritative account to date on the history of the RCA prayer book, Pool's prestige as rabbi emeritus of North America's oldest synagogue, Shearith Israel, the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue of New York, rendered him virtually immune to pressure from the RCA or the publishing house.[29] Pool's position may also have contributed to the prayer book's less-than-stellar sales figures, as some rabbinical colleagues questioned the suitability of a Sephardic rabbi as editor of an Ashkenazi siddur.

[27] Claire Fox, "New Siddur First Uniform Text for American Jews," Milwaukee Sentinel, October 6, 1960; Andrew Amsel, correspondence with the author, undated, April, 2014.

[28] Louis Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission: The Emergence of the English Speaking Orthodox Rabbinate* (New York: Shengold, 1982), 259–262; Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 68.

[29] Louis Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission*, 259–262.

Jacob could not have been pleased by the attempts to discredit the siddur. Arguably, the most stinging appraisal came in a *Hadoar* review by author and translator Rabbi Philip (Paltiel) Birnbaum, who had edited the Pool siddur's most formidable competition, the *Daily Prayer Book* (*Ha-Siddur ha-Shalem*), first published in 1949 by the Hebrew Publishing Company. Birnbaum was hardly a disinterested critic. He was sharply critical of Pool's translation, asserting that it was influenced by Christological motifs. Implausibly, he suggested that Pool and the RCA were trying to attract non-Jewish purchasers.[30] *Hadoar* published a forceful rebuttal by chairman of the RCA Siddur Committee, Rabbi Charles Chavel, a scholar of medieval Judaism and spiritual leader of Congregation Shaare Zedek, in Edgemere, Long Island.[31] While Chavel adeptly refuted virtually all of Birnbaum's objections, the criticism of the siddur continued unabated and the RCA felt compelled to address some of the more controversial translations with a revised edition. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, chairman of the RCA's halakhah committee, insisted that his name be removed from the flyleaf of the second edition. It is unclear whether Soloveitchik objected to parts of the translation or simply did not want to convey the impression that he participated in the editorial process or approved the translation prior to publication. In any case, the Rav, as he was known, preferred to avoid controversy whenever possible. Jacob was hurt and miffed by Soloveitchik's action, which he feared would depress sales.[32]

Behrman's strengths and weaknesses as a Jewish publisher were also on display in the way that he handled the siddur's publicity. The publisher worked attentively with the RCA to create prayer book adoption ceremonies at purchasing synagogues. Arguably, the biggest public relations coup was a photograph in *Life Magazine* depicting the burial of *shemos*, or holy writings with God's name, in a genizah (a repository for timeworn holy texts and ritual objects) by Congregation Ohev Sholom Talmud Torah in Washington, DC. The event, the brainchild of Behrman House's publicist, witnessed the burial of the congregation's old prayer books on the occasion of their adoption of the RCA siddur. Also included in the *shemos* were Behrman House publicity materials that contained reproductions of prayer book pages. *Life*'s religion writer was apparently charmed or intrigued by the spectacle of contemporarily clad youngsters performing a time-old custom that had recently come to the American public's attention through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The caption under the photograph read, in part, "Despite their 1960s style in sports shirts and slacks, the American boys above are taking part in one of the world's oldest religious ceremonials." *Life* emphasized the new prayer book's translation, which was rendered into "modern English," as well as its layout—with English and Hebrew on facing pages—that was designed to accommodate the "many Jews who are not fluent in their ancestral language."[33]

On the other hand, Behrman House's publicist completely ignored the Hebrew language periodical *Hadoar*, as well as the Yiddish language press, that still commanded a large Orthodox readership in 1960. This oversight, conceivably due to Behrman's lack of experience with the traditionalist segment of the Jewish book market, played a role in generating negative press coverage. According to Bernstein, newspaper publishers were inclined to "punish" Behrman House and the RCA for denying them a share of the prayer book's ample advertising budget.[34]

Forward Momentum

Even as Behrman House was working assiduously to bring the RCA prayer book to fruition, it was engaged in another formidable project: the publication of a one volume *New Jewish Encyclopedia* (fig. 5). Despite the similarity in name to the twelve volume *Jewish Encyclopedia*, published between 1901 and 1906 by Funk and Wagnalls under the managerial hand of Isidore Singer,[35] the Behrman House volume was inspired by the success of the one-volume *Columbia Encyclopedia*, published in 1935, which was aimed at the general reader. Indeed, the preface to the Behrman House volume explicitly stated that it was not meant as a substitute for the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, but rather "as a spur to the young and to the student to delve still further into the riches of Jewish lore and tradition as

[30] Paltiel Birnbaum, "Siddur Hadash Ba La-Medinah," *Hadoar*, 2 Kislev, 5721, 85.

[31] Chaim Dov Chavel, "Teshuvat Histadrut Ha-Rabanim De'Amerika," *Hadoar*, 2 Kislev, 5721, 87–89. On Chavel see Moshe Sherman (ed.), *Orthodox Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 46–47.

[32] Louis Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission*, 259–262.

[33] "An Old Ritual Lives On," *Life Magazine*, October 24, 1960, 70.

[34] Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission*, 259–262.

[35] On the Jewish Encyclopedia see Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *Emergence of Jewish Scholarship in America: The Publication of the Jewish Encyclopedia* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1991).

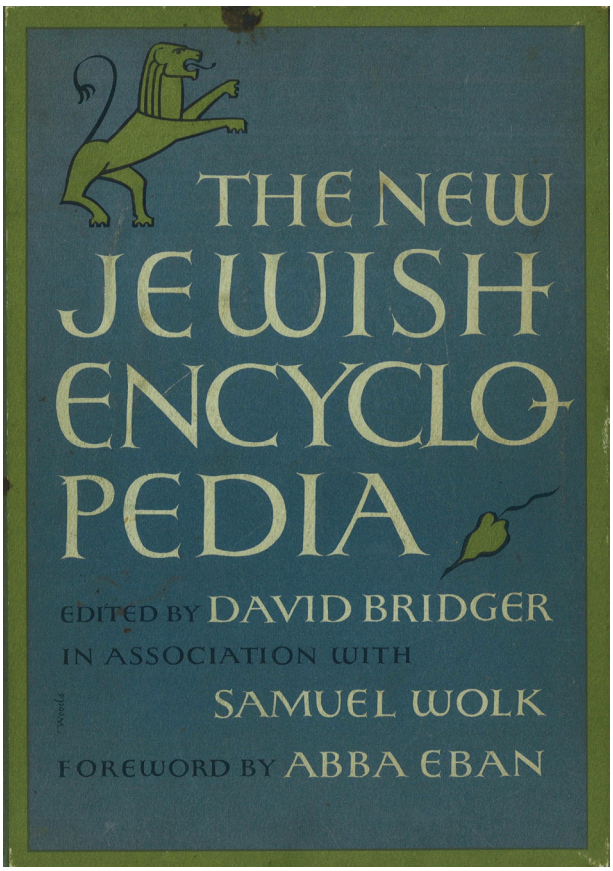

Figure 5. Edited by David Bridger, the ambitious *New Jewish Encyclopedia* (1961) was marketed as a bar mitzvah and Hanukkah gift and proved to be a publishing success for Behrman House.

it teaches them the fundamentals; for their elders and teachers, it will recall things they once knew and would like to be reacquainted with, or to pursue further."[36] An educator, David Bridger of the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education, edited the volume over a period of ten years. Special care was given to its aesthetics. It was bound in gold stamped blue library cloth and slip cased in a matching presentation gift box. Behrman hired Jewish Museum curator Stephen Kayser as art editor, and the museum's collection is heavily represented in the encyclopedia's handsomely illustrated pages, in photographs by Frank Darmstaedter. So attractive was the volume that publicity materials suggested that it would make an ideal and "unforgettable" bar mitzvah or Hanukkah gift. Part of the firm's advertising strategy involved the placement of classified advertisements in the *New York Times*. Behrman also tried to keep the price affordable and offered a one-third discount on pre-publication orders.[37]

One of the most consequential outcomes of the *New Jewish Encyclopedia* project was the initiation of a relationship between the firm and Abba Eban, which culminated in 1968 with the publication of *My People: The Story of the Jews*. Behrman became acquainted with Eban in the 1950s, while the diplomat was Israel's ambassador the United States, and vice president of the United Nations General Assembly, and recruited him to write the encyclopedia's foreword. Outside of David Ben Gurion, Eban was probably the best-known voice of the Jewish state in North America. Behrman and his confidant, Hebrew Union College Professor Eugene Borowitz, recognized that Eban's studied urbanity and silver tongue made him an ideal guide to Jewish civilization for the general Jewish reader. Eban returned to Israel in 1960 to become Minister of Education and Culture. But the pair arranged to meet him at the Plaza Hotel during one of his frequent trips to New York, and convinced him to enter into a three-book contract with the firm. "We were terribly excited," recalled Borowitz, "and then, when the first of his chapters arrived we were exhilarated."[38]

But exhilaration soon turned to despair, as the wait between chapters grew progressively longer. Eban's work on *My People* was delayed as he moved into the upper echelons of the Israeli government, serving first as Deputy Prime Minister (1963–66), and, later, as Foreign Minister (1966–74). "The impossible project seemed to have suffered the fate of all ideals confronted with *realpolitik*," Borowitz sardonically observed.[39] Meanwhile, Eban's reputation outside Israel was cemented by his prominence during and after the June 1967 Six Day War. Eban delivered two high profile addresses before the United Nations Security Council, the first of which was aired live on American network television. According to historian of the Six Day War Michael Oren, "Never before in the history of the Jewish state or, indeed, of the Jewish people, has a voice reverberated so poignantly and with such clarion impact. In its suffering and its triumph, its yearning

[36] David Bridger (ed.), *The New Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Behrman House, 1962), xi.

[37] Charles E. Bloch, *New Jewish Encyclopedia* Publicity Flyer, 1962. (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[38] Eugene Borowitz Memorandum: "Mr. Eban Talks About His Book," August 1968. (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[39] Ibid.

and its unremitting moral discourse, Eban was the spokesman for the entire nation."[40] Sought out by the leading trade presses, he entered into a book contract with Random House even as he had yet to deliver a completed manuscript to Behrman.

If Behrman was miffed by Eban's behavior, he soon realized that he could turn a potential problem into an opportunity. To take full advantage of Eban's star power, Behrman would require a more extensive distribution system and larger advertising budget than he was capable of mustering. Behrman House, on the other hand, was arguably in a better position than the large trade presses to devote sufficient time and marshal the requisite expertise on the editorial side. Ultimately, Random House was convinced to co-publish *My People* with Behrman House. The latter handled development while the former focused on distribution. The arrangement was a boon to both parties as the book landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Reviewers generally lauded the 534-page volume, and its "striking and sometimes heartrending photographs," although a few pointed out some careless production errors, including the upside down photographic reproduction of the Qumran Thanksgiving Scroll. The editorial and production blunders were more than compensated for by Eban's writing style and insider perspective on contemporary events. "A special role was thrust upon me at an early public age and has clung to me ever since," Eban explained in the book's foreword. "My vocation has been to explain the Jewish people to a confused and often uncomprehending world."[41]

Despite his shyness, Behrman enjoyed hobnobbing with Eban and other personalities and intellectuals. He liked to tell the story of how he and his deputy, Seymour Rossel, negotiated with Eban for a children's edition of *My People* in the back seat of the diplomat's limousine. He also took great pride in the distinguished roster of academics and thought leaders who were published in Behrman House's Library of Jewish Studies series, which was edited by *Commentary* stalwart Neal Kozodoy.[42] Behrman may have anticipated the growth of Jewish Studies in the academy when he launched the series. But he also recognized its prestige value.[43]

In truth, however, he was an intensely private person who surrounded himself with few friends. This might seem counterintuitive given his propensity to hold court at a large table in the firm's Midtown showroom. But although he took care to engage with the young rabbinical students and other visitors who came to browse the shelves, and reached out with compelling pitches to potential authors, he was never comfortable with small talk or intimacy. Borowitz, who worked closely with Behrman for two decades and remained friendly with him thereafter called him "pathologically shy." Behrman worked hard to overcome his disposition to the extent that it interfered with the business. But he felt most comfortable working alone in his backroom office or collaborating with a single creative partner, like Borowitz, or a protégé, like longtime Behrman House employee Seymour Rossel. Borowitz admitted that there were limits to how far Behrman would allow him access to his personal feelings. Even as his marriage to his first wife, Rita, was falling apart, Behrman rarely discussed his private life with Borowitz or his other associates. It is possible that Behrman was more forthcoming with his longtime poker buddies, Meyer Levin and Abraham Rothberg, and his lawyer and old friend Jack Glauberman, but even with them there were red lines, as his relationship with Rothberg illustrates. Rothberg, author of *The Sword of the Golem* (1970) and *The Stalking Horse* (1972), among other books, met Behrman in high school and the two developed an almost fraternal relationship. Behrman enjoyed having Rothberg around the office and at one point allowed him to convert the Behrman House storeroom into a personal workspace. But the two eventually had a falling out that was precipitated by Rothberg's attempted intervention as Behrman's second marriage, to the former Naomi Siegel, was deteriorating.[44]

Eyes on the Textbook Market

In retrospect, among the most consequential decisions that Behrman made in the early 1960s was to focus his business increasingly on the textbook market. Religious school textbooks were part of the press's publishing mission almost from the outset. Among the first volumes that the firm published was Elma Ehrlich

[40] "Abba Eban's Speech at the U.N. Resonated Long After the Six Day War," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 12, 2007.

[41] Nelson Glueck, "In Israel, the Roots are Deep: Book Review: *My People: The Story of the Jews*," *New York Times* January 12, 1969, 109.

[42] Kozodoy joined the staff of *Commentary* in 1966, and served as its chief editor from 1995–2009.

[43] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013.

[44] Eugene Borowitz, interview with the author, October 7, 2013; David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

Levinger's *Bible Stories for Very Little People* (1925). But in the early decades, these books made up only a small percentage of the firm's catalogue. The transition to a textbook-centered business model was decades in the making and largely a reaction to the increasing interest of larger mainstream presses in publishing books on Jewish themes. But it was also a response to postwar Jewish suburbanization, embourgeoisement and the ascent of the congregational school as the dominant model of Jewish education. Behrman was quick to recognize the market potential of the congregational schools. Unlike the community Talmud Torahs of an earlier generation, these institutions were solidly middle or upper middle class and had the requisite budgets to purchase multiple textbooks per child on a cyclical basis. The congregational schools also felt under pressure to approximate the tenor of schooling in the public schools, which served as the point of reference for parents. In those schools, classes were graded and instruction time was divided into discrete subjects, each with its own textbook.

As Behrman surveyed the landscape he realized that Jewish textbook publishing was a fairly open field. Aside from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, there was little competition. The United Synagogue's publishing arm was notoriously weak and unable to invest the necessary money to support a robust development and design process, leaving the growing Conservative market underserved. Indeed, Behrman House's lack of a denominational affiliation was an advantage, as it could compete without stigma in both the Conservative and Reform markets. Equally important, it could be more responsive to the needs on the ground than the denominational presses, which were compelled to support their officially adopted curricula, regardless of their popularity and perceived efficacy.

Behrman House was not the only firm to make this calculation. KTAV, owned by Asher and Edythe Scharfstein, and, later, their sons Sol and Bernard, was undergoing a similar transition, although it remained more diversified than Behrman House, maintaining a list of subvented scholarly publications, and a line of Jewish novelty items (*tchotchkes*) as well as textbooks. For a time, the two firms operated in parallel and considered one another as chief competitors. They even followed a similar geographic trajectory from Manhattan to New Jersey. By the late 1990s, Behrman House, more nimble and better attuned to industry-wide challenges and innovations, had overtaken KTAV and came to dominate the market. The business models adopted by the two firms also diverged. Without an heir apparent among the younger generation, the Scharfsteins tried to maximize profits in the short term while devoting comparatively less attention to textbook development than to marketing and redesign. Behrman House, on the other hand, was playing the long game. Utilizing the Boston Consulting Group's popular Growth-Share Matrix, one could categorize KTAV as a "cash cow," with its owners trying to maximize profit while making as little investment as possible. Behrman House, by contrast strove to remain a "star" by focusing on innovation and diversification.[45]

Behrman did his best to keep the firm nimble and responsive to the market. His allergy to publication committees, which were employed by some of his competitors, including the Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press and the Jewish Publication Society, sped up the publication process and ensured that idiosyncratic or exceedingly fussy readers did not hold books hostage. Prospective manuscripts were turned over instead to consultants who could be trusted to be thorough without being nitpicky, and who could adhere to deadlines. As non-profit businesses, the UAHC Press and JPS were under less pressure to maximize profits, but they were also less driven to innovate, which ultimately contributed to their decline.[46]

The story of Behrman House's ascent as a textbook publisher can be told in numbers. In 1963, the firm had 89 titles and sold 105,740 books, while by 1977, the number of titles expanded to 158, and unit sales skyrocketed to 259,654. This trend held in the 1980s. By 1985, the firm had 279 titles and unit sales were a robust 440,836. On the most basic level, one can appreciate the rapid growth of the firm's publishing and sales operation. Behrman House was a company in expansion mode. Equally, significant it was becoming increasingly profitable. The fact that percentage-wise, the number of sales units was outpacing the number of titles was significant. Increased sales could

[45] Johanna Ginsberg, "Publisher, 86, Still Thrills at the Chance to Inspire," *New Jersey Jewish News*, August 7, 2008; David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

[46] Thank you to Jonathan Sarna for pointing out these differences between Behrman House and JPS in his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

not be explained away as a function of an expanded catalog. Rather, it demonstrated a genuine demand for Behrman House's books.[47]

Behrman worked assiduously to cultivate rabbis and Jewish educators, whom he identified as his most important customers. Annual educator and rabbinical conventions were regarded as opportunities not only to display and sell books, but also to establish relationships and build brand loyalty. Behrman and his staff could spend hours chatting with customers about matters esoteric and mundane. The firm also gained a reputation for its after-hours parties, where hard liquor flowed freely. The staff was equally solicitous of customers who visited their tenth floor showroom and were widely praised for their customer service. 1261 Broadway was a frequent destination for rabbinical students from both the Jewish Theological Seminary and the New York campus of HUC-JIR. Jacob offered his student visitors unlimited Coca-Cola and a friendly atmosphere where they could leisurely browse the bookshelves, do their homework, or engage in discussion. HUC-JIR President Emeritus David Ellenson recalled frequent visits to the midtown Manhattan office while he was in rabbinical school in the mid-1970s. Speaking fondly of Behrman, he said: "There weren't too many people who you could engage with about Yiddishkeit in the broadest sense. I used to love going down there." Students were offered a significant discount on books, and on the occasion of their ordination newly minted rabbis were allowed a "last fling" where they could buy an unlimited number of Behrman House titles at an only ten percent markup from cost. Ellenson also remembered that Behrman would treat the rabbinical students to an annual kosher Chinese dinner at the popular restaurant, Moshe Peking.[48]

Behrman's desire to crack the textbook market was telegraphed most dramatically by his decision to issue a revised and updated version of one of the firm's earliest textbooks, Elma and Lee Levinger's *The Story of the Jew for Young People*, which was first published in 1928. The book was the first modernized one volume Jewish history published in the USA, an antidote to the syrupy and didactic prose in Lady Katie Magnus's 1888 classic *Outlines of Jewish History*.[49] Behrman recruited author and professional speechwriter Harry Gersh to completely rewrite the text. Behrman himself was struck by the difference in tone between the two books. "The analytic approach, the depersonalized humanistic view of the twenties and thirties, have given way to a book that is full of commitment and involvement, in which God is apparent on every page."[50] Equally important were the aesthetic differences between the 1928 and 1964 volumes. Whereas the former was printed in a 5×7 inch format with small typeface, giving the book a cramped look, the new volume was 7.75 × 9.75 inches and included ample whitespace and lavish illustrations. With the revised edition of *The Story of the Jew* Behrman was demonstrating the firm's dedication to printing textbooks that could rival in their look and feel those that were used in the public schools.

As early as the late 1950s, there were signs that Behrman was eyeing the textbook market. His experience with textbook publishing was sharpened through his work developing and publishing of the Klapermans' *The Story of the Jewish People* (1956–61) and Meyer Levin, Toby Kurtzband and Dorothy Kripke's *Jewish Heritage Series* (1957–62). Three features stand out when considering these books that came to define Behrman's approach to textbook publishing: aesthetics, diversification, and profitability. Interestingly, with regard to aesthetics, these early books do not differ appreciably from competing series published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and United Synagogue. But it is significant that all three publishers were attentive to design and aware that their books would be judged by both students and teachers based on the standard set in the public schools. Behrman's strategy of diversification is evident from the fact that both of his series were designed to fill the social studies curriculum slot in the intermediate grades. The Klapermans' books offered a traditional chronological history sequence written from an Orthodox

[47] "Behrman House Inventory," prepared for the author by Joy Ferraris, Behrman House accounting department.

[48] Danielle Gorlin Lassner, interview with the author, March 15, 2014; David Ellenson, interview with the author, October 20, 2014. While some students, including members of the New York Havurah to which Ellenson belonged, debated the ethics of accepting a free dinner from the proprietor of a company that would soon be vying for their business, Ellenson recalls that as "a starving graduate student, I enjoyed having the dinner and considered the debate *narishkeit* [foolishness]."

[49] *Outlines* was revised by Solomon Grayzel and published in 1929 by the Jewish Publication Society. On *Outlines of Jewish History* see Jonathan Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888–1988* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 29–33; Jonathan Krasner, "The Representation of Self and Other in American Jewish History and Social Studies Schoolbooks: An Exploration of the Changing Shape of American Jewish Identity," Brandeis University, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2002, 23–76.

[50] Jacob Behrman, Circular Letter, May 10, 1965; Eugene Borowitz, "Memorandum," August 1965, (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

perspective, and were designed to compete with Deborah Pessin's (Conservative) and Mamie Gamoran's (Reform) histories. The Jewish Heritage Series responded to criticism from the field of educational psychology that questioned the efficacy of a chronological historical approach for 9–12 year olds by exploring Jewish heritage through concentric circles of concern: self, family, congregation, community, people, etc. While on one level these two series were competing with each other, by offering multiple options Behrman House was doing its best to blanket the market. Finally, in offering multi-volume series designed to be used over three or more years of religious school, Behrman was locking in customers for multiple years and maximizing profits.

The Behrman-Borowitz Partnership

Arguably, no one was more crucial to Behrman's strategy than Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, who served from 1957–62 as director of the Religious Education Department of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and was experienced in publishing Jewish textbooks. When Borowitz was hired as a professor of education and philosophy on Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion's New York campus, he relinquished his Union responsibilities, allowing Behrman to hire him as a consultant without introducing a conflict of interest.

Behrman and Borowitz came to know each other over the years as "friendly competitors." They displayed their books at the same conferences, sometimes in adjoining booths. Both men were curious about the competition and enjoyed chatting about ideas. It was this sympathetic intellectual attraction that cemented their decades-long friendship. Borowitz became a frequent visitor to the firm's offices. He was living on Long Island at the time and was a daily commuter on the Long Island Railroad. Located only a few blocks from the LIRR hub at Pennsylvania Station, Behrman's office was a convenient stop for Borowitz on his way home from the Hebrew Union College. When he wasn't working, debating ideas or kibbitzing, he was often found napping on his favorite couch.[51]

Borowitz was an important conduit to students and professionals in the field. Before working at the Union he spent a number of summer seasons coordinating the NFTY young leadership retreats, which eventually grew into the first Union-Institute (Reform) camps. One of his duties at Behrman House was to send periodic updates about new projects and titles to the publisher's mailing list. Borowitz's instincts as an educator made him an effective salesman, and his reputation lent credibility to his recommendations. In one typical letter, Borowitz commended Louis Jacobs's *Chain of Tradition* series: "If you value discovery over indoctrination, primary texts over pre-digested pap, these adroit selections deftly commented, will be a major new instrument of instruction." He also took care to keep his circular letters entertaining. When Solomon Simon's sequel, *More Wise Men of Helm*, was published in 1965, Borowitz quipped that, "if Winnie the Pooh lived in a shtetl this is what he'd sound like." He was also successful at projecting a sense of intimacy with his customers. On the occasion of Behrman House's publication of Hannah Grad Goodman's *The Story of Prophesy*, Borowitz gushed: "Things here are wild! We've had our blessed event early. It's enough to make us forget the last few months of labor… We figured it would be silly to send you a cigar in celebration though our new idea is almost as *m'shugeh*. We'll send you the baby—that is, the book, if you're really interested in seeing it."[52]

In his earliest circular letters, Borowitz often included caustic appraisals of competitors' publications. For example, commenting on Emil Lehman's book *Israel: Idea and Reality*, published in 1962 by United Synagogue, Borowitz complained that, "its modernity of form only exaggerates the archaic nature of the contents." In the same letter, Borowitz took aim at Bloch Publishing for its steep pricing of Dorothy Zeligs's *The Story of Modern Israel*. "Bloch Publishing," he sneered, "is to be congratulated for awakening the community as to the high cost of contemporary book production by making this the Cadillac among Jewish texts with a tag of $4.50."[53] These acerbic critiques soon disappeared, however. Perhaps, Behrman concluded that such grousing was bad form and detrimental to his relationships with his competitors. It also might not have made economic sense. In those years, Behrman House was still a bookshop as well as a publisher, and carried books published by other presses.

Undeniably, Borowitz's memos conveyed an amalgam of urbanity and familiarity that Behrman found

[51] Eugene Borowitz, interview with the author, October 3, 2013.

[52] Eugene Borowitz, Circular Letter, August 1965; Eugene Borowitz, Circular Letter, (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[53] Eugene Borowitz, Circular Letter, September 1963; Eugene Borowitz, Circular Letter, April 1970, (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

difficult to replicate in his own missives, which tended to be mildly sardonic or self-effacing. Behrman gave Borowitz wide latitude in these circular letters, and over the years Borowitz used them to reflect on topics ranging from Marshall McLuhan's media theory to Phillip Roth's early fiction. Behrman seemed to be betting that Borowitz's letters would lend the firm a measure of gravitas and help to cement a distinct brand identity: Behrman House was not merely a Jewish publisher and bookseller; it was a firm that was interested in ideas and in furthering intellectual Jewish discourse. Through Borowitz's letters, and their personal connections with Behrman House staff, rabbis and educators were being invited to view the firm as a partner rather than simply a supplier. Thus, Borowitz became central to building Behrman House's brand and inspiring customer loyalty. By all accounts, the relationship paid healthy dividends.

Of course, public relations is of limited value unless it is deployed in the service of a quality product. Associates marveled at Jacob Behrman's "intuitive" appreciation of how to craft and design a textbook, and of his keen aesthetic sense. But such observations convey the mistaken impression that the process of bringing a book from conception to publication was all art and no science. On the contrary, the textbooks emerged from Behrman's careful study of primary and secondary educational materials. The firm's increasing focus on textbooks came as Behrman's children, David and Rachel, were attending the Bank Street School for Children,[54] an independent demonstration school associated with Bank Street College.[55] Reacting to his own educational experience at Yeshiva of Flatbush, which he perceived as authoritarian and borderline abusive, Behrman was reportedly intrigued by Bank Street's progressive pedagogy, which was inspired by the theories of its founder, Lucy Sprague Mitchell.[56] He carefully studied and drew inspiration from the educational materials that his children brought home. According to his son, who abandoned a career at the global consulting firm McKinsey & Company to join the business in 1991, Behrman was "pretty firm in his conviction that you don't 'dumb down' for kids, you need to treat your audience as intelligent. Teach them interesting things, and do it in a way that their secular school books do."[57]

Although Bank Street fascinated Behrman, it would be a mistake to label him as an educational progressive, or to suggest that he was wedded to any particular educational philosophy. With some notable exceptions, review questions and assignments in many Behrman House textbooks and workbooks leaned heavily on regurgitation and rote memorization. Many observers viewed Behrman's lack of fealty to a particular educational approach or ideology as a strength that allowed his books to reach the widest possible audience. Unlike denominational publishers and Torah Aura, Behrman House could not be easily pigeonholed. On the flip side, a lack of an ideologically honed voice denied the firm a clear and distinctive identity. "Behrman House was the equivalent of a top-40 music station," one customer recalled. "The textbooks were well crafted and had good production values, but not a lot of soul."[58]

If there is some truth to this harsh assessment, it is unfair to suggest that the textbooks were uniformly bland. In fact, some were very "high-concept," and like the best pop songs, they were polished, compelling and contagious. Still, Behrman was suspicious of most fads, although he tried hard to give his books a contemporary feel. Indeed, he was horrified when his daughter-in-law once compared a newly published textbook's design to one of her mother's old cookbooks.[59]

B.F. Skinner and the Jews

As a consummate tinkerer, Behrman did have a weakness for technologically driven innovation. His awareness that many teachers lacked formal training and a strong Judaica background also rendered him susceptible to schemes that were designed to make religious school instruction "teacher proof." Consider the publication of *Reading Hebrew: A Programmed Instruction Book* (1965) by Christian Castberg and Lillian Adler (fig. 6). This primer for the teaching of the mechanics of Hebrew reading constituted the first

[54] On Bank Street College see Jaime Grinberg, *"Teaching Like That": The Beginnings of Teacher Education at Bank Street* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), and Joyce Antler, "Progressive Education and the Scientific Study of the Child: An Analysis of the Bureau of Educational Experiments, 1916–1930," *Teachers College Record,* 83 (1982): 559–591.

[55] Bank Street is a N-8 school and the Behrman children attended through eighth grade. David graduated from the school in 1969, and his sister, Rachel, in 1971.

[56] On Mitchell see Joyce Antler, *Lucy Sprague Mitchell: The Making of a Modern Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[57] Vicki Weber, interview with the author, November 11, 2013; David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

[58] A longtime religious school director in New England who asked not to be identified offered this comment.

[59] Vicki Weber, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

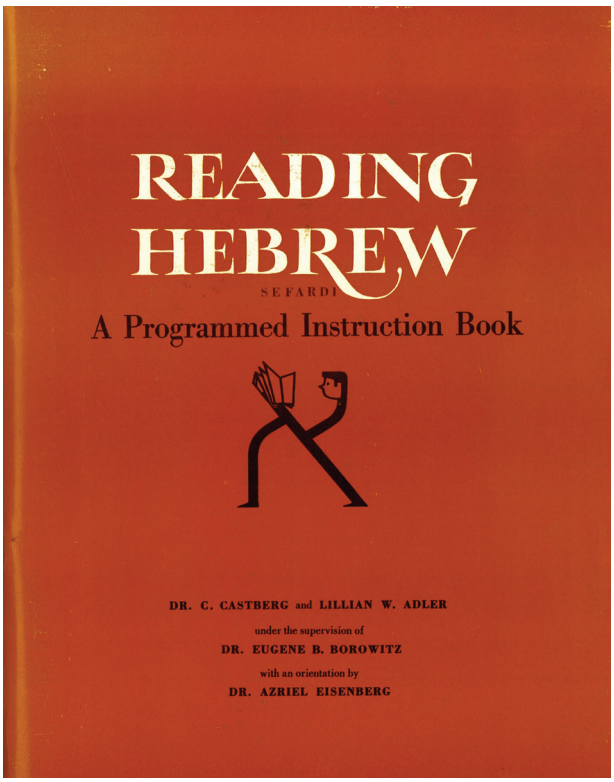

Figure 6. With Christian Castberg and Lillian Adler's *Reading Hebrew* (1966) primer, Behrman House introduced programmed instruction to Hebrew teaching in the supplementary school. The book emerged from Jacob Behrman and Eugene Borowitz's fascination with teaching machines.

use of programmed learning in Jewish educational materials, and emerged out of Behrman's fascination with behaviorist B.F. Skinner's teaching machines.[60] Borowitz recalled how, in 1963, he and Behrman visited the Park Avenue offices of one of the country's premier companies in the field of programmed instruction. "After all, we reasoned, if it's good enough for the armed forces, and industry can spend millions on it, and public educators are very much under its spell, why should we be prejudiced. Besides, the whole thing started at Harvard, which makes it Jewishly irresistible."[61]

The pair's enthusiasm was soon tempered by the hardware's hefty price tag: $16,000 each for their electric, "cheat-proof, multiple branching, instantaneous correction and feedback, twelve button model." Meanwhile, the compact manual models, which were more modestly priced, appeared too easily breakable in the hands of ten and eleven year olds. In the end, the men settled on a "linear programming" approach, that substituted pencil and paper for fancy machines. They turned to an experienced programmer for general education, Christian Castberg, who created programmed lessons, designed to teach children to name, sound and print each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Field-testing at schools in New York, New Jersey and Ontario was sobering. It turned out that most third-grade students could not read English well enough to effectively use the lessons, and that many fourth graders were unclear about the differences between vowels and consonants. It also became apparent that Castberg's expertise as an educational programmer notwithstanding, the lessons required a more intimate appreciation for both students and milieu. Longtime Jewish educator Lillian Adler was recruited to more effectively adapt the lessons for use in the religious school classroom. Most importantly, perhaps, while Behrman and Borowitz were initially enticed by the thought of making Hebrew reading instruction "teacher-proof"—Borowitz suggestively referred to the learning machines that he and Behrman saw as "electrified *m'lameds*"—they later realized that teacher-guided vocal drill would remain integral to the learning process.[62] In the end, *Reading Hebrew* was a commercial success, if hardly revolutionary.[63] Behrman House's promotional materials asserted that, "The speed of acquisition is unmatched while the rate of retention is unusually high."[64] Borowitz, for his part, claimed that, "while we don't say this will put an end to one of the major miseries of *Golus*—watching kids suffer to learn Hebrew is *Golus*, not *Galut*—we do say it is a major help to ending our problem with mechanics."[65]

As in general education, programmed learning promised far more than it delivered. Behrman and Borowitz's visit to the unidentified teaching machine company occurred at the height of the teaching machine craze; by 1970 the market for programmed instruction materials had dried up and many of the teaching machine models had been withdrawn from the market.[66] Significantly, however, Behrman remained a devotee of the approach long after most

[60] On teaching machines see B.F. Skinner, "Teaching Machines," *Science* 128 (October 24, 1958): 969–977; Ludy Benjamin, "A History of Teaching Machines," *American Psychologist* 43 (1988): 703–712.

[61] Eugene Borowitz, Circular Letter, April, 1964, in the possession of the author.

[62] Ibid.; Eugene Borowitz, Circular Letter, August 1965, in possession of the author.

[63] An updated version of the volume is still in print.

[64] Behrman House Promotional Flyer for *Reading Hebrew*, c. 1965 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[65] Eugene Borowitz, Circular Letter, August 1965 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[66] Benjamin, "A History of Teaching Machines," 710.

educators abandoned it. Behrman House released a two-volume programmed Hebrew series, David Bridger's *Reshit Tefillah V'Lashon*, as a follow up to *Reading Hebrew*, and reissued the latter in a new edition in the 1970s. In 1979–80, the firm introduced the *Baruch U'Mevorach* series, a second generation of Hebrew programmed instructional textbooks. The sales figures for *Baruch U'Mevorach* never approached those of the more popular *Hebrew & Heritage* series, but it had its devotees. In summary, the experience with *Reading Hebrew* and programmed learning underscored Behrman's curiosity and interest in innovation; his attraction to technology; attention to field-testing and marketing strategy; and above all, practicality. On balance, these traits worked to the firm's advantage as it increasingly focused its attention on textbooks.

Making the House a New Image

In an effort to stay current, Behrman regularly pored over leading geography, language arts, social studies and foreign language textbooks in the Columbia University Teachers College Library. Recognizing that these books would be the measuring rods that both children and parents would use to judge the firm's religious school textbooks, Behrman strove to emulate their aesthetics and production values. He wanted Behrman House's volumes to feel contemporary, and was visibly hurt on occasions when his books were criticized for falling short. "He was aware of the need for the design of a book to support its content, which most people don't think about," his son observed. For example, he knew where to put white space on a page, where the human eye naturally goes; he also had a sense of when to use framing around photographs, which he usually eschewed because it made the page look smaller. "He had a phrase that [his daughter-in-law,] Vicki [Weber] hated: He said it made the page feel constipated." Vicki Behrman observed that her father-in-law would carefully consult his multiple books of typeface when considering a book's subject matter and the look he was trying to achieve. "He used to gripe that today's designers don't understand type and the interface between the typeface and the page."[67]

Arguably, no textbook better exemplified Behrman's strengths as a publisher than *When a Jew Celebrates*, which was published in 1971 (fig. 7). The book was one of the firm's best sellers in the 1970s and was still regularly selling about 6,000 copies per year in the early 1990s.[68] According to Seymour Rossel, who worked at Behrman House from 1972 to 1981, the book, and the two subsequent volumes in the series, *When a Jew Prays*, and *When a Jew Seeks Wisdom*, "made the House a new image." *When a Jew Celebrates* originated with an idea from Borowitz that "we should be modeling to kids about how to celebrate the holidays, not providing facts about the holidays."[69] Undoubtedly, he was reacting to the turn to experiential education and values clarification in general education. As the firm's publicity material elaborated: "Children in the Intermediate grades are too young for abstractions and too thoughtful to be limited to data about Jewish observances." Behrman turned to writer Harry Gersh,

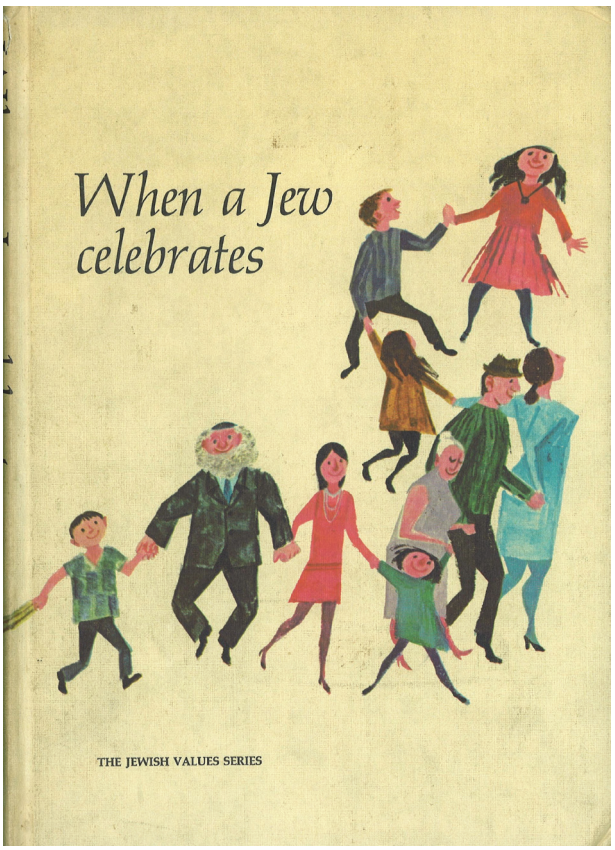

Figure 7. Behrman House pioneered the use of color in Jewish supplementary school textbooks with Harry Gersh's *When a Jew Celebrates* (1971), illustrated by Erika Weihs.

[67] Vicki Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

[68] Behrman House Sales History Spreadsheet, 1980–1992, Behrman House files.

[69] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013; *When a Jew Celebrates* publicity flyer, and *The Jewish Values Series* publicity flyer, c. 1971 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

whose thoroughly revised 1964 edition of Elma and Lee Levinger's *The Story of the Jew*, was widely praised for its emotional power. The text he produced—under Borowitz's supervision—was designed to "bring out the values implicit in the practices" and introduce the child to a "philosophy of Jewish living." The hallmark of the book was that "faith [was] taught in connection with action."[70]

But if the book broke new ground methodologically and content-wise in its effort to personalize the celebration and commemoration of Jewish holidays and lifecycle events, it also dazzled consumers with its high production values, particularly its use of color illustrations. *When a Jew Celebrates* was the first Jewish schoolbook to be printed in color, leading the way to a new industry standard. This is where Behrman's intuition and tolerance for risk paid high dividends. The book was reportedly already typeset and laid out on boards with black and white illustrations, when Behrman abruptly decided to scrap the design. He hired a new artist, Erica Weihs, and announced that the book would be printed in four colors. With this decision, Behrman tripled his production costs and added another year to the development and publication process. But he knew that color was quickly becoming the norm in general education textbooks and was determined not to allow the Jewish textbook industry to be left behind. Perhaps he anticipated the positive attention that the book would garner by virtue of its lustrous design. What is certain is that the new color illustrations telegraphed to teachers and students alike a spirit of vitality and joy. Here was a case where Behrman's attention to a book's appearance reinforced its content and attracted an expanded readership. Moreover, it made a strong statement about the firm and its textbook line. For Jewish educators who felt perennially hemmed in by the built-in limitations of supplementary schools, Behrman House's message was that at least in the area of textbooks and teaching materials, they did not need to feel like they were settling for second best. Behrman House could compare favorably with general textbook publishers like McGraw Hill and Prentice Hall, delivering a product similar to theirs.[71]

Behrman also had an eye for talent. "Jacob had a keen sense of what good writing was and what his audience would want," Borowitz explained.[72] His taste straddled the line between the stylish and the pragmatic, which gave his books a note of elegance even as they were typically mainstream. To some extent, he relied on intuition. But his taste was also carefully honed. He was a voracious reader of non-fiction as well as poetry. "He used to say that you need to read poetry to understand language," his son recalled.[73] Behrman cultivated young, largely unknown writers like Rabbis Bradley Artson and David Wolpe, while sometimes turning to more established authors like Meyer Levin when they were experiencing lulls in their careers. Levin and Behrman were friends and poker buddies, and sufficiently intimate that Behrman felt comfortable playfully chiding Levin about his obsession with Anne Frank and his resentment (Behrman called it "paranoia") that Otto Frank had rejected his theatrical adaptation of The Diary of Anne Frank in favor of a more universal, less Jewish version by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett.[74] Behrman "corralled" another member of his regular poker group, political philosopher and Cornell professor Werner Dannhauser, to write a teacher's guide for Behrman House in lieu of monetary payment for a poker debt. He also had an eye for editorial and managerial talent. Ruby Strauss, in particular, who worked at the firm for over two decades, was a pragmatist whose knowledge of the market and steady hand guided many book projects to fruition and commercial success.

Another significant Behrman discovery was Seymour Rossel. The two initially met at a National Association of Temple Educators conference in 1968, but became reacquainted when Rossel took the position of educational director at Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester, in Chappaqua, NY. Rossel, who served as editor of his campus literary magazine at Southern Methodist University and was looking to break into textbook writing, initially approached the Union of American Hebrew Congregations but was rebuffed. Behrman, by contrast, was willing to give Rossel an opportunity to prove himself despite his lack of experience. It helped that at the time, Behrman found himself in a bind. His chief writer on one of his projects, *Lessons of Our Living Past*, had eloped and was no longer available to finish the textbook. A retelling

[70] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013; *When a Jew Celebrates* publicity flyer, and *The Jewish Values Serie*s publicity flyer, c. 1971 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[71] Seymour Rossel, interiew with the author, September 11, 2013; *When a Jew Celebrates* publicity flyer, and *The Jewish Values Serie*s publicity flyer, c. 1971 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[72] Eugene Borowitz, interview with the author, October 7, 2013.

[73] David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

[74] Jacob Behrman to Meyer Levin, March 15, 1967 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

of Bible legends and homiletic stories (*midrash*), the hapless project had been limping along in development for six years, twice as long as the average textbook, and Behrman was ready to let it die. But when Rossel suggested that Behrman give him a chance to prepare the volume, Behrman felt he had little to lose. He asked Rossel to write a few sample stories for the book and was sufficiently impressed to set up a three-way meeting with its developer and editor, Rabbi Jules Harlow, a prominent spiritual leader and the chief liturgist of the Conservative movement. *Lessons of Our Living Past* was published under Harlow's name in 1972. A year later, Rossel joined the Behrman House staff full time as general manager.[75]

During his decade at the firm, Rossel wrote and edited some of its most popular titles, including *When a Jew Prays* (1973), *When a Jew Seeks Wisdom* (1975), *Introduction to Jewish History* (1981), and *Journey Through Jewish History* (1981). He also conceived and helped to oversee the adaptation of a number of popular Jewish history books into children's editions: *Understanding Israel* by Amos Elon, based on his book *The Israelis: Founders and Sons* (1971), was published in 1973; David Altshuler's *Hitler's War Against the Jews*, based on Lucy Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (1975), was published in 1978; and, a two volume adaptation of Abba Eban's *My People* (1968), by David Bamberger, entitled, *My People: Abba Eban's History of the Jews*, was published in 1977 and 1979. The Elon book, in particular, with its inquiry-based, social studies approach to the state of Israel, captured the spirit of introspection that permeated Israel's secular elites in the aftermath of the Six Day War, as epitomized by *Siach Lochamim* (*Soldiers Talk*), a best-selling collection of soldier monologues edited by Abraham Shapira.[76] It was arguably the most sophisticated textbook on Israel to appear in the United States.

Behrman became a mentor and a father figure for Rossel, who lost his own father when he was only two years old. Both men were recently divorced and eager to throw themselves into their work to bury their sorrows. "The night was when we did most of our creative work, and the long drives to and from conferences was when we put our thinking caps on," Rossel remembered. "We were two bachelors and could stay at the office until midnight or one in the morning. Plus, it was just fun to be together." The idea to adapt Eban's book for kids came during one of their monthly late night pilgrimages to the Original Nathans in Coney Island for hot dogs. Ultimately, Rossel might have expected more out of their relationship than Behrman was willing to give. When Behrman refused to give him partial ownership of the firm, the two officially parted company in 1981, although the firm continued to publish some of his books.[77]

If Behrman's gift for cultivating talent, interest in ideas, and insistence on high production values, were essential ingredients in the firm's success as a textbook publisher, his attention to customer relations succeeded in building a high degree of brand loyalty. Jewish educators, who came to constitute Behrman House's most important customers, invariably spoke about the personable and helpful nature of the Behrman House staff. Even those who found Behrman himself to be curmudgeonly felt that he more than compensated for his shyness by surrounding himself with a warm and accessible team. Sharon Morton, who served for thirty-two years as Director of Religious Education of Am Shalom, in Glencoe, IL, recalled that staff members like Ruby Strauss, Terry Kaye and Adam Siegel took a personal interest in their customers' educational concerns. "They could spend hours on the phone with you discussing the merits of various curricular choices and teaching methods," she recalled. "In a profession that can sometimes feel isolating and where professional advice can be difficult to come by, this personal approach made a world of difference" and distinguished Behrman House from the competition. "Jacob, and, later, David, was always ready to take you out for lunch if you were in town, or do you a favor." While Am Shalom was affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism (formerly known as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations), she felt that "URJ Press felt more corporate and less personal."[78]

Morton and others also found the staff to be receptive to criticism. Morton recalled complaining in the 1980s or early 1990s that the photographs in Behrman House's books did not reflect the religious norms and gender egalitarianism in her Reform congregation. "They promised to do a better job in the future, and

[75] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013.

[76] On *Siach Lochamim*, published in the USA as Avraham Shapira (ed.), *The Seventh Day: Soldiers Talk About the Six Day War* (Simon & Schuster, 1971), see Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), 444–447.

[77] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013.

[78] Sharon Morton, interview with the author, August 13, 2014.

more importantly, they followed through," she said.[79] In fact, there was little sensitivity to gender, including the representation of women in text and illustrations, until David Behrman's arrival at the firm in 1991.[80] By and large, Jacob Behrman understood the challenges and limitations facing religious school administrators and teachers. He was among the first to develop and market resources for religious school administration, teacher training and classroom management. His textbook series typically included an array of supporting materials, including teacher resource guides, student workbooks. In later years, staff members regularly led teacher workshops at professional conferences.

The Rabbi's Bible

Jacob Behrman was not a radical innovator, but neither was he risk adverse. When he was seized by a concept or an idea, he could overcome his habitual cautiousness and become single minded and dismissive of market research. Consider his commitment to the firm's high-concept Bible textbook, *The Rabbi's Bible*. Arguably, more than any other textbook series, this three-volume work and the supporting resource books and teacher guides, published between 1966 and 1974, was Behrman's labor of love.

By his own account, the idea for the book emerged from his work on the RCA Siddur. While assembling selections for the book's memorial service he encountered the biblical *Book of Job*, and upon reading it a few times was captivated. "It occurred to me that here was a book as sophisticated and contemporary as anything I was reading." Behrman was interested in the Bible as literature, the challenges and dilemmas with which it grappled, rather than critical scholarship. *Job* served as a gateway to other biblical books, and ultimately, to the talmudic rabbis and their commentators. "I learned to honor the men who canonized the Bible. Their intuition was great, and they certainly had guts, they even canonized the *Song of Songs*," Behrman wrote. Thus, he was extremely receptive a few years later, when approached by author Solomon Simon, professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary Teachers Institute, with the idea of producing "an abridged Bible [for children] with pertinent *midrashim* under the text—like a *Chumash* with *Rashi*." Simon had a long history with the firm that dated back to Dena and Martha Behrman's years running the company with Emanuel Green. Simon's 1942 Yiddish volume, *Di Helden fun Chelm*, was translated into English by Dena's husband, Ben Bengal, with David Simon, and was published by Behrman House in 1945 as *The Wise Men of Helm & their Merry Tales*.[81]

Solomon Simon impressed Jacob as an "erudite man with fantastic vitality, great color, wisdom and scholarship." Behrman furnished a writing partner, Rabbi Morrison Bial, a Reform pulpit rabbi with strong command of the English language, who understood American children and the supplementary school market. Behrman considered Bial to be a "thinking man's rabbi," and a kindred spirit.[82] But Behrman soon found himself trying to settle disputes between the collaborators as the text was taking shape. In order to settle the pair's differences, Simon, Bial and Behrman embarked on a peer guided weekly Bible study class—a three-way *hevruta* (a peer-guided method of text study, usually in pairs)—that met for over a year. What began as a business obligation quickly became a highlight of their week. The three men could easily spend hours at a time parsing the Biblical text, searching for layers of meaning, examining *midrashim*. "And the answers came, and they were amazingly contemporary. They were not always rational arguments. They were not always logical presentations. Like Job's answer [from God] they were often poetic truths. The Rabbis with their wisdom and intuition were answering modern questions through stories. We might know more math than they did, but we surely don't know more about life and people."[83]

When the first book in the series was published in 1966 it was touted in the firm's publicity materials as a model of cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner's discovery learning, a constructivist form of inquiry-based instruction, whereby the learner shapes new ideas out of existing knowledge. This framing was provided by Borowitz, a consultant on the series, who claimed that pilot testing of the book in select religious schools in Miami, Chicago, and Los Angeles, confirmed that "youngsters appreciate a pedagogic approach which stresses personal discovery as against the mechanical

[79] Sharon Morton, interview with the author, August 13, 2014.

[80] David Behrman, communication with the author, October 14, 2014.

[81] Jacob Behrman, Circular Letter, August 1966 (Behrman House Papers (Collection of David Behrman).

[82] After Bial's retirement to Florida, Jacob Behrman would periodically express his friendship by sending Bial dry ice-packed shipments of his favorite delicacy, smoked whitefish. David Behrman, interview with the author, November 3, 2013.

[83] Jacob Behrman, Circular Letter, August 1966.

assimilation of fact, which they are too often exposed to in their secular education." With *The Rabbi's Bible*, he added, "children do not need to be told the Bible is relevant or the Rabbis can give them guidance. As they debate the meaning of the text or its commentary, they instinctively apply them to their own lives much better than any adult could do for them."[84]

After the book was released nationally, however, many teachers complained that they were ill equipped to use it. Few had formally studied *midrash* or medieval biblical commentaries. Likewise, teacher discomfort with the material rendered Bruner's approach unworkable. Most teachers simply could not fathom the prospect of open-ended classroom discussions along the lines that Borowitz (channeling Bruner) envisioned. Sensing the problem, Behrman decided to give away copies of an accompanying teacher's resource book—one per class if at least fifteen copies of the textbook were purchased. But even with the resource book the textbook was deemed by many (but not all) educators to be opaque. Despite the lack of a competitive text, the book sold slowly. While insisting that many teachers found *The Rabbi's Bible* "delightful," Borowitz acknowledged, in 1968, that "some teachers still balk at letting the kids carry the lesson, and panic at the idea of only having resources and not knowing what 'the point' of this or that section is." In an attempt to salvage the series, Behrman commissioned a second set of manuals, basic teachers guides, with pre-packaged lesson plans, which were prepared by Ben Ezra Green. Eventually, sales picked up, but never approached the level of the more straightforward *A Child's Bible*, which Behrman House published for a slightly younger demographic in the late-1980s.[85]

The Rabbi's Bible was hardly a fiasco. In retrospect it probably would have found a larger audience (in classrooms for both children and adults) in the 1990s and 2000s, due to the growing popularity of Torah study. But despite being Behrman's pet project, the series demonstrates that he was hardly infallible; and that the firm had its share of disappointments as well as successes. The series also underscores the danger of treating Behrman or any business owner as an entirely rational or consistent actor. Critically, however, with the possible exception of the RCA prayer book, Behrman's calculated risk-taking—whether in the case of *When a Jew Celebrates* or *The Rabbi's Bible*—did not devolve into recklessness. He was mindful that he was betting with house money. According to Dr. William Cutter, founding director of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and a frequent consultant on Behrman House projects, Behrman was willing to take a chance, but when a project proved to be disappointing, he usually cut his losses. Likewise, his sense of loyalty compelled him to publish some titles with little chance of commercial success, often because friends authored them. But, in Cutter's words, "Jacob would spend ten thousand dollars on loyalty, but not twenty thousand."[86]

The Decline of Modern Hebrew

In fact, Behrman was typically a clear-eyed businessman who rarely allowed sentimentality to cloud his judgment. No better example exists to support this contention than the publishing house's approach to Hebrew. Offering what many Jewish educators would consider a massive understatement, Rossel recently observed that, "The state of Hebrew teaching in the United States today is not good." But he paired it with a candid admission of guilt that might turn some heads. "I blame myself. We were all wrong. There could have been an answer, but we didn't get it right. And nobody has since."[87] To provide some context, Rossel was referring to the circumstances around the publication of Behrman House's *Hebrew and Heritage* and *New Siddur Program* series. In all fairness, Hebrew instruction in supplementary schools was in trouble decades before the publication of the first *Hebrew and Heritage* primer in 1977. "People are dying out there trying to teach Hebrew," Rossel reportedly told Behrman at the time, and figuratively speaking, he was not exaggerating.[88] Fatefully, when the afternoon supplementary school migrated from the inner city communal Talmud Torah to the suburban synagogue, in the mid-twentieth

[84] Behrman House Press Release, undated, c. 1966 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[85] Jacob Behrman, Circular Letter, August 1966 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman); Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2014; Constance Reiter, interview with the author, August 4, 2014; Eugene Borowitz, "*Lo Lishmah* to *Lishmah*: Are We Ready for Intrinsic Motivation?," January 1968 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman); Jacob Behrman, Circular Letter, December 1969 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman); Behrman House Sales History Spreadsheet, 1980–1992, Behrman House electronic files.

[86] William Cutter, interview with the author, August 23, 2013.

[87] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013.

[88] Ibid.

century, the number of hours and days per week of instruction were typically reduced, while the curricular objective of Hebrew fluency was often retained. At the same time, Hebrew continued to compete for time with other subjects in the curriculum, such as Bible, history and holidays. Thus, the teaching of conversational Hebrew became increasingly untenable.

Behrman's recognition of the deplorable state of affairs caused him to approach the subject of Hebrew textbooks with an abundance of caution. When the firm decided to embark on a new modern Hebrew series in the mid-1970s, he turned to a reliable writer, David Bridger, in Los Angeles, who had previously edited the *New Jewish Encyclopedia* and authored four Hebrew primers, including Behrman House's *Reshit Tefilah V'Lashon*. The book series that Bridger produced, *Hebrew and Heritage* (1977), was destined to dominate the field over the next decade. But when Behrman and Rossel met with Bridger to review a draft of the first volume in 1976, Behrman made a fateful decision. After sitting quietly and sipping scotch while Bridger and Rossel worked through the draft, Behrman abruptly announced his intention to split the draft into two separate volumes. Both men were stupefied. Bridger correctly pointed out that the draft was roughly the same size as earlier Hebrew textbooks that were designed to be completed in a year. But Behrman, who had his finger on the pulse of the schools, countered that over the past few decades, the number of instructional hours devoted per week to Hebrew had shrunk, without a corresponding adjustment to the instructional materials. It was time that the books were brought in line with reality. Not to do so, would be setting teachers and students up for failure.[89]

Behrman's decision made good business sense and could even be understood as an act of compassion. But it also had symbolic import. Behrman liked to remind educators that Behrman House did not set the curriculum; that this was the role of the denominational education commissions, the central Jewish education agencies, and individual schools. But in this case he was essentially telling educators that the stated curricular goal of Hebrew fluency in most Conservative (and some Reform and Reconstructionist) supplementary schools, was a fantasy. In one fell swoop, the Hebrew language competency objectives of scores of supplementary schools were halved. A few years later, Behrman took the next logical step and gave his customers the option to altogether abandon modern Hebrew fluency as a curricular objective. In 1979–80, the firm published the first textbook series dedicated to teaching liturgical Hebrew, *Baruch U'Mevorach*, which utilized the linear programming method. Soon after, he commissioned Pearl and Norman Tarnor to create a "siddur" edition of *Hebrew and Heritage* that focused on the acquisition of prayer book Hebrew. While not entirely abandoning the goal of modern Hebrew language acquisition, performance outcomes became focused on prayer-book competency, mastery of synagogue skills and home-based holiday observances.

The *Hebrew and Heritage Siddur* track was introduced in 1982–83. Over the next decade many synagogue schools transitioned their Hebrew programs as educators jumped at the opportunity to refocus their curricula from modern Hebrew fluency to synagogue and prayer book literacy.[90] Not only did these relatively modest goals seem more attainable, they also appeared to be better aligned with the goals of the synagogue as a religious institution. Others however resisted the change and held fast to the Bridger textbooks. Some accused the firm of "dumbing down" its Hebrew books. But Jacob Behrman pointed out that Behrman House was merely offering consumers a choice between the approaches. Ultimately, it was up to them to decide. Similarly, he argued that it was absurd to blame Behrman House for structural changes in supplementary school education. The firm was not driving curricular change, but merely responding to it.

By 1984, Behrman House was selling more copies per year of the Tarnors' prayer book Hebrew edition than Bridger's modern Hebrew edition. Recognizing the direction of the momentum, Behrman increasingly focused the firm's energies into supporting materials for the teaching of liturgical Hebrew. In the mid-1980s he invited the Tarnors to create a dazzling new series, which was based on a hybridized approach, teaching simple conversational Hebrew but focusing on vocabulary and themes aimed at promoting prayer book literacy. The first volume of the *New Siddur Program for Hebrew and Heritage* debuted in 1989. By 1994, the company had published an entire five-year sequence, beginning with a readiness book and a primer, and graduating to a three volume set focusing on comprehension, concepts and grammar, and prayer

[89] Ibid.

[90] According to Terry Kaye, current vice president and director of teacher training and educational services at Behrman House, about 70% of the firm's clients in 2014 were using a liturgical Hebrew program, while 30% remained committed to teaching modern Hebrew. Terry Kaye, interview with the author, August 7, 2014.

literacy. An optional fourth volume was devoted to holiday liturgy and the Passover haggadah. Supporting materials included teachers' guides, workbooks, a companion prayer book (available in both Reform and Conservative editions), cassettes and flashcards. The books were an instant success. Throughout the 1990s, the first two volumes of the series were each selling between 15,000–22,000 volumes per year.[91]

It was a sign of the times that by the mid-late 1990s, the most enduring complaint about the *New Siddur Program* was that its "split the difference" approach between liturgical and modern Hebrew failed to satisfy either constituency. "It never quite knew what it wanted to be," explained Behrman House's current vice president, Terry Kaye. The series' graded approach to teaching prayer—sequencing the introduction of prayers based on their level of difficulty—also drew complaints from those who wished to teach the prayers based on the order in which they appear in the siddur. Competing series by Torah Aura and the Union for Reform Judaism Press compelled Behrman House to rethink its approach. The *Hebrew Through Prayer* series, launched in 1995 was designed to respond to some of these criticisms.[92]

By the mid-1990s, the number of congregational schools teaching modern Hebrew dwindled to the point where the firm was reluctant to invest in a replacement series for the Bridger book. Ultimately, however, the practice of blanketing the market by offering customers a variety of approaches prevailed. By 2010, Behrman House was promoting three glossy programs to choose from: *Hineni* (2001), the second generation of its popular *Hebrew Through Prayer* series that teaches the prayers in the order they appear in the siddur; *Kol Yisrael* (2009), a liturgical Hebrew program linked to an online learning center; and *Shalom Ivrit* (2003), a modern Hebrew program that includes an optional *Prayer Companion*.

Nearly forty years after Behrman's fateful decision to split Bridger's book in half, its import as well as the significance of Behrman House's embrace of liturgical Hebrew remains a subject of debate. Hebrew was the centerpiece of the modern Talmud Torah curriculum in the 1920s–40s. As we've seen, in the postwar era, when supplementary education became concentrated in the suburban synagogue center, the goal of Hebrew fluency was retained in most Conservative and some Reform affiliated religious schools and even briefly gained currency in the wake of the 1967 Six Day War. However, religious schools were concurrently cutting the number of hours and days per week of instruction. Consequently, educators were finding that the goal of second language acquisition—a stretch even in the interwar Talmud Torah—was unattainable, and worse, left teachers and students alike feeling frustrated. Another challenge was finding qualified teachers. Schools were often forced to choose between Americans with an insufficient command of the language or Israelis without the requisite pedagogical training or understanding of American children. For many, the paring down of curricular objectives and the changeover to a liturgical Hebrew program were logical responses to these challenges. A liturgical Hebrew program was also more aligned with synagogue priorities and parental concern with b'nai mitzvah preparation. But other educators, including Hebraists and Zionists, resisted the change, arguing that ethnic language retention was critical to the survival of Jews as a diaspora community.

Constance Reiter, who served as religious school principal at Temple Sinai in Summit, New Jersey, from 1978 to 1992, was one of those educators who made the switch from modern to liturgical Hebrew instruction. She agreed that Behrman House was less a catalyst for the change than an astute reader of consumer needs. For Reiter, the curricular reorientation was sparked by a moment of revelation, which came when one of her children was called to participate in a *shiva minyan*, or mourner's prayer group, and complained of feeling unprepared. His sense of awkwardness and uneasiness reminded her of similar complaints from her former students who felt Jewishly illiterate and inadequate when attending their campus Hillels. It suddenly occurred to her that it was far more critical that her students felt comfortable participating in Jewish religious and communal life than that they could speak a little broken Hebrew. But even without this revelation, Reiter believes that the curricular reorientation was inevitable. Like many schools, Temple Sinai operated a one afternoon per week Hebrew program, in addition to its Sunday morning Judaica learning. Both Reiter and her teachers agreed that conversational Hebrew mastery was an unrealistic goal.[93]

[91] Behrman House Sales History Spreadsheet, 1980–1992, Behrman House files; Terry Kaye, interview with the author, August 7, 2014.

[92] Terry Kaye, interview with the author, August 7, 2014.

[93] Constance Reiter, interview with the author, August 4, 2013.

Even the dissenters recognized that Behrman's approach to Hebrew instruction was opportunistic rather than ideological; still they decried the publisher for facilitating the transformation. Some of the most trenchant criticism of Behrman House on this score comes from insiders. Adopting the most extreme position, Rossel dramatically described the visit to Bridger as "the day that the teaching of Hebrew came to an end in the United States."[94] Cutter, whose academic appointment was in Hebrew literature as well as education, agreed that Behrman was too quick to surrender the goal of Hebrew fluency. "We knew that we had bar mitzvah to contend with, but that shouldn't have been an excuse," he asserted. In Cutter's view, Behrman was locked in by his own conventional, "unimaginative" and "mechanical" approach to Hebrew education. "There were never any serious discussions about pedagogy," Cutter lamented. "Whenever the discussion became theoretical [Behrman] would roll his eyes." For example, Behrman displayed no interest in debates about the relative merits of phonics versus whole language in the teaching of reading. As for Pearl Tarnor, who became the dominant voice on Hebrew instruction at the publishing company, Cutter described her as "particularly good at knowing what works, but not very innovative," and constitutionally risk-adverse.[95] "Behrman House had a phrase. When you try to get too creative, they would say, 'listen, this is kitchen.' And 'kitchen' was the metaphor for don't turn this into a brave new world. This is basic day-to-day stuff and that's what we're doing in this book. Don't over-*potschke*."[96]

Despite his criticisms, Cutter was willing to concede that "the decline of Hebrew can't be laid entirely at Behrman House's doorstep," he insisted. "Hebrew cannot be taught in American Jewish schools as long as American Jews lack the desire and the will to learn it. American Jewry is the most successful non-Hebrew speaking Jewish community in history." Borowitz, likewise, was inclined to blame the abandonment of Hebrew literacy as a supplementary school curricular goal on larger sociological forces. "Jacob was always a little ahead of the curve—ahead of other publishers in recognizing a trend. That is why he survived. Others played more to what educators stood for and what they said that they wanted. But the reality of the American Jewish market was that parents were not eager for kids to come home reading Hebrew and translating it fluently." Borowitz flatly concluded that, "Better Hebrew language books and other supporting materials will not solve the problem of an assimilating Jewish community."[97]

Traditional Values

In Borowitz's view, Behrman keenly felt and struggled with the occasional conflicts between the profit motive and his personal values. "He was an odd fish in a very money-centered world," Borowitz recalled. "The clash between his values and his business sense was always there. But it also allowed him to bring his deep sensitivity to a commercial activity. On the whole he did a remarkably good job."[98] To some extent, Behrman's values were a bundle of contradictions. On the one hand, he valued independent thought, and acting out of conviction. In 1967, when many presses were hesitant to publish anti-Vietnam war literature, Behrman considered it a point of pride that he co-published *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience*, a call to protest by three prominent religious leaders, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Michael Novak and Robert MacAfee. A few years later, however, he was ambivalent, at best, about his teenage son's antiwar, civil rights and student power activism. In a letter to fifteen-year-old David, in 1970, Behrman insisted that his political activism should not interfere with his schoolwork. "I have made a contract with your school and there is an implied one with you that you attend classes and do your work. Your choices for your free time are yours." But he was quick to share with David his opinion about the relative legitimacy of various causes. The "fight for the dignity of the colored man" was legitimate, while "black power" was not. Behrman also rejected as "fakey" and bogus, David and his friends' demands for student power at his "very liberal" high school, the Elisabeth Irwin High School (the upper division of the Little Red

[94] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013; William Cutter, interview with the author, September 12, 2013.

[95] William Cutter, interview with the author, September 12, 2013. His characterization is somewhat undercut by Tarnor's active involvement in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and her insistence on staying current with innovations in the teaching and learning of foreign language and English as a Second Language. David Behrman, communication with the author, October 14, 2014.

[96] William Cutter, interview with the author, September 12, 2013.

[97] William Cutter, interview with the author, September 12, 2013; Dr. Eugene Borowitz, interview with the author, October 7, 2013.

[98] Dr. Eugene Borowitz, interview with the author, October 7, 2013.

School House, one of New York City's premier progressive schools).[99]

Tellingly, Behrman's views of the New Left were informed by his first wife and sisters' youthful radicalism and his own former leftist sympathies, as a child of the Great Depression: "I question the exercise of power on the radical left, although some of the issues are legitimate. It is primarily white middle class and Jewish, most often filled with a rhetoric which is terribly reminiscent of the rhetoric of my youth which was much abused and misused and turned out to be terribly fakey."[100] Many of Behrman's friends and associates were cold war liberals who came to identify with political right, including Rothberg, Kozodoy and Lucy Dawidowicz; and Behrman's social views were conventional, even conservative. In subsequent decades, Behrman took a dim view of feminism and the gay rights movement. His discomfort with gay people extended to his stepson, Adam Siegel, who worked at Behrman House in the 1990s; his conflict with Adam probably contributed to the breakup of his second marriage.[101]

Behrman's conservatism often worked in his favor. Behrman House made its reputation with rabbis and educators as the publisher of solid, handsome books with high production values. They consciously appealed to the broad middle at a time when Conservative and neo-Reform synagogue centers dominated the suburban Jewish landscape, and political and religious moderation was counted as a virtue. Even with the advent of A.R.E. Publishers Inc., in 1973, and Torah Aura Productions, in 1981, both of which were animated by the counterculture, and succeeded in upending what had been a relatively staid market, Behrman chose to stay the course. This is not to say that the firm's books and approach were unaffected by the innovations pioneered by these new competitors. Nor were A.R.E. and Torah Aura resistant to creative ideas emerging from Behrman House. Indeed, much to Behrman's frustration, the instant lesson approach popularized by Torah Aura was actually first developed at Behrman House, although Joel Grishaver and his associates at Torah Aura imbued it with pizzazz.

But Behrman refused to imitate Torah Aura's style. "Grishaver [its publisher] was too edgy for Jacob," Cutter explained. "He found [Torah Aura] too trendy, too kitschy. It offended his sensibility."[102] Whether for this reason or because he thought it made more business sense, Behrman declined to make his books cuter or more irreverent. His intuition served him well. Torah Aura materials could never match Behrman House in their overall quality. Rabbi Samuel Joseph, a professor of Jewish education and leadership development and a long-time observer of the Jewish congregational school asserted that, "Grishaver's materials had energy, but he could be careless, and the quality of the content was uneven."[103]

Another seeming contradiction was Behrman's thirst for intellectual conversation, yet his impatience with academics. It wasn't their haughtiness that he objected to—indeed, he had a fondness for public intellectuals with healthy egos, like Eban. Rather it was their perceived interest in arcana and matters far removed from the concerns of everyday people. "He used to make fun of the Association for Jewish Studies" conferences, where he often displayed his books, "as a bunch of guys gabbing about meaningless minutiae," Cutter recalled.[104] Behrman would deride the Yale-educated Cutter as "an Ivy League type,"[105] a characterization that Cutter himself found absurd. But the putdown was of a piece with Behrman's insistence that textbook publishing was "kitchen," and that a man like Cutter with a tendency to "over-think" issues, was bound to unnecessarily slow things down or even mess them up.[106]

Cutter recalled Behrman taking him aside in synagogue during the bar mitzvah of one of his grandchildren, and exclaiming, "This is where Jews gather, not at academic conferences." Cutter found the remark unintentionally ironic, since the suburban Reform synagogue pews would likely have been nearly empty on a Saturday morning were it not for the bar mitzvah guests. But beyond its sociological validity, the comment was curious because Behrman himself was not a regular synagogue-goer. In this respect, he was like many non-Orthodox Jews of his generation. His daughter-in-law, Vicki Weber explained that, "he was

[99] Jacob Behrman to David Behrman, May 13, 1970, (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[100] Ibid.

[101] David Behrman, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

[102] William Cutter, interview with the author, September 12, 2013.

[103] Samuel Joseph, interview with the author, August 11, 2014.

[104] His ribbing of Cutter was also a sign of affection. Cutter recalled a number of occasions when his life was in turmoil, including a serious illness and the death of his mother, when Behrman flew across country to support his friend.

[105] On the other hand, he reveled in his son's employment at a white shoe firm, Davis Polk & Wardwell.

[106] William Cutter, interview with the author, November 12, 2013.

of the synagogue but not necessarily in the synagogue." He preferred to practice his Judaism in the family and communal realms. Jules Harlow described Behrman, as a "cultural Jew" rather than a religious man, while Borowitz insisted that, "there is no way to label his Judaism He was a very committed Jew, but he was also very critical. He was very sensitive. In terms of his beliefs, Jacob kept much of that private and to himself. It would come out only in relation to specific events."[107]

Behrman's resonance with a cultural, *klal Yisrael* style of Judaism, and lack of strong identification with any particular stream within Judaism was likely an advantage in business, because it allowed the company to project a non-ideological face. Key to Behrman House's success as an independent publisher of religious school textbooks was its ability to appeal to a broad swath of American Jews, particularly principals and teachers in Conservative and Reform synagogue schools, which constituted the bulk of the textbook purchasing market. As we've seen, Behrman and his associates worked hard to build personal relationships with customers. But Behrman realized that the books themselves would need to be deemed acceptable. In some cases, the firm published titles that were pitched to a subset of the wider market. For example, Borowitz's *Explaining Reform Judaism* (1985) presented the history, beliefs and aspirations of Reform Judaism to middle school students. Similarly, when the firm published the Melton Center textbook, *A Child's Introduction to Torah* (1973), it was intended primarily for Conservative afternoon schools.

Whenever possible, however, books were geared to the widest audience. Thus, leaders in both movements vetted books that touched on religious rituals and content. Behrman was careful to assemble writing and consultant teams that included both Conservative and Reform leaders. When the textbook *When a Jew Celebrates*, was being developed, Behrman brought in Rabbi Hyman Chanover, a Yeshiva University graduate and Conservative rabbi, as well as director of personnel services of the American Association for Jewish Education, as a consultant. Behrman was careful to give Borowitz and Chanover equal billing on the title page, even though the contribution of the latter was minimal. Rossel recalled that, "Chanover's comments [on the manuscript draft] were generally comments on where the commas went. . . . The point was to get a name for the book from the Conservative movement."[108] Particularly, in the 1960s and 1970s, when the firm had yet to cement its reputation in the textbook market, Behrman prominently listed Reform and Conservative consultants on his books' covers and/or title pages.

Conclusion

Perhaps, the most difficult business decision that Jacob Behrman ever made was to relocate the firm from its tenth floor offices at 1261 Broadway to West Orange, New Jersey. In practical terms the logic behind the move was inescapable. While Behrman House would lose its New York nexus, it was no longer a retail store in need of an accessible showroom. Most business was conducted over the telephone.[109] Moreover, shipping from its midtown location had become a perennial nightmare. The move to New Jersey also meant a more convenient commute for Behrman, who gave up his Greenwich Village apartment for a suburban New Jersey address when he married his second wife. Even so, the Manhattan office had deep sentimental value. He sought to salve his distress by throwing himself into the task of remodeling the new headquarters, and even worked on the electrical wiring. Similarly, although the prospect of computerizing the business was initially confounding, Behrman adapted and even came to take pride in the operating platform designed by his nephew, Adam Bengal, who served as Behrman House's managing editor in the late-1980s and 1990s.

A short time after the move, Behrman received an offer to sell the business. While he dismissed the possibility, it encouraged him to think about the future. Bengal, the only child of Dena Behrman and Ben Bengal, was hoping to succeed his uncle. But Behrman privately complained about his lackadaisical work habits and feared that he lacked the necessary drive and ambition to succeed. Instead, he convinced his son David, at the time a consultant at McKinsey & Company in New York, to join the firm and carry on the family tradition. David Behrman joined Behrman

[107] Eugene Borowitz, interview with the author, October 7, 2013; Vicki Weber, interview with the author, November 11, 2013; Jules Harlow, interview with the author, October 17, 2013.

[108] Seymour Rossel, interview with the author, September 11, 2013.

[109] A percentage of the business eventually migrated online, but most customers continue to prefer the telephone. According to Vicki Weber in 2013 about 70% of orders were placed by phone. She speculated that many customers preferred to interact with a human being because they were seeking advice and guidance, not merely placing an order. Vicki Weber, interview with the author, November 11, 2013.

House in 1991 and assumed the title of publisher when his father retired in 2000. More effusive and affable than his father, David is the amiable professional rather than the taciturn intellectual. But he shares his father and grandfather's aesthetic sensibility and good taste, their intuitive sense of salability, and commitment to Jewish peoplehood. Over the past fifteen years, David Behrman brought the firm into the digital age; Behrman House was among the first Jewish educational publishers to create its own online learning portal, and in 2013 partnered with the Israel-based Center for Educational Technology to develop an "incubator focused on developing Jewish educational games, apps, software and other high tech resources." In 2014, Behrman House's Online Learning Center, which includes a Jewish multimedia resource library, had 470 participating schools. The firm also recently partnered with ISRAEL21c, a news and information website on Israeli life and culture, to create a customized series of lesson plans and curricula on subjects ranging from science and technology to social action and environmentalism. As in previous generations, the firm's business strategy remained diversification. Even while embracing innovation, print titles comprised 85% of sales in 2013.[110] "We need to go slowly," explained David Behrman. "Most teachers are inherently conservative and some are afraid of the digital world."[111] Reflecting on his choice of a successor, Jacob Behrman wrote in his retirement letter: "We are, like so many fathers and sons, very different and very much the same."[112]

As the premier Jewish textbook publisher for over twenty-five years, with a dominant position in the market since the 1960s, Behrman House has been in the position to shape American Jews' self-understanding, the ways in which they express and relate to their tradition. The stakes are enormously high, particularly given that many religious school teachers lack extensive academic training. For these teachers the textbook often provides an organizing framework as well as an authoritative source of knowledge. One need look no further than the periodic culture wars over public school textbooks to recognize that educational publishing can easily become politicized.

Over the course of his career, Jacob Behrman made a number of publishing decisions that reverberated in religious school classrooms and beyond. Behrman's decisions concerning the teaching and learning of Hebrew provide a significant case in point. But one could point to numerous other examples, including the introduction of God as a subject of inquiry into the religious school curriculum, first indirectly in the third volume of the *Basic Judaism for Young People* (1987) series by Naomi Passachoff, and, later, head on in *Partners with God* (1995), by Gila Givirtz.

Rabbi Samuel Joseph, a professor of Jewish education and longtime observer of the field is undoubtedly correct that Jacob and David Behrman were never driven by a single model of Jewish education or a monolithic vision for the Jewish community. The Behrmans, both father and son, were "not trying to chart the course of Jewish education in America. They were trying to figure out the market to sell books."[113] But their books were not merely reflections of the Jewish community's central narratives, priorities and needs. The Behrmans were curators of the American Jewish tradition. They were not only charged with its management and oversight, but with selection and interpretation. Their success owed in part to their ability to appeal to the vast center, to correctly gauge their consumers' needs and reflect their outlook and values, to eschew partisanship and to downplay ideological differences, to swim with the tide. To be sure, there were occasional missteps. But they were the exceptions. His talent for tastemaking was grounded in Behrman's ability to discriminate. Eugene Borowitz captured the Behrman genius in comments that he made upon Jacob Behrman's retirement: "In a day when we are accustomed to think of business leaders as masters of the balance sheet and the strategic business plan, Jacob ran Behrman House by what must be called poetic intuition. He has exquisite taste and, to a considerable extent, that is not only why Behrman House's books were so tasteful but why they set an esthetic standard other publishers had to meet."[114]

Jonathan Krasner is a Visiting Professor at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University. His book, *The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education* (Brandeis University Press, 2011) won the 2011 National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish Studies and was a 2012 finalist for the Sami Rohr Prize in Jewish Literature.

[110] Alexi Friedman, "Jewish Educational Publisher Holds to Tradition but Ventures into the Digital Age," *Star Ledger*, September 15, 2013; Julie Wiener, "Start Up Nation Takes on Hebrew School," *New York Jewish Week*, June 4, 2013.

[111] David Behrman, conversation with the author, October 13, 2014.

[112] Jacob Behrman, Retirement Letter, October 17, 2000 (Behrman House Papers, Collection of David Behrman).

[113] Samuel Joseph, interview with the author, August 11, 2014.

[114] Eugene Borowitz, "Eugene Borowitz Reflects on Jacob Behrman, Writing and Editing," *Open Lion* 7, (Fall 2000): 4, 6.