

SYNAGOGUE LIBRARIES

Establishing a Policy on Gifts for the Synagogue Library

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Introduction

A library's gift policy is usually based on its acquisition policy, which in turn reflects the basic philosophy of the institution. While it is preferable to have a formal acquisition policy, it is possible to establish a written gift policy even without such a document.

These are some of the questions that arise concerning gifts to the synagogue library:

- Who accepts or refuses book donations?
- How does one decide whether to accept or reject a collection?
- What is the library's policy on money or books donated with strings attached?
- How does weeding affect donated books in the collection?

The best way to deal with these issues is to establish a written gift policy, which will aid the librarian in resolving the various problems encountered in the handling of gifts from synagogue members.

Some of my views on these questions follow. I encourage submission of alternative opinions and sample policy statements by readers of this column.

Establishing the Policy

A policy may be developed by the librarian in consultation with the library committee, if there is one, or with the Rabbi and/or administrator of the synagogue. The minutes should be recorded and referred to when the need arises.

Synagogue libraries are dependent for their support on Boards made up of congregants. In establishing policy, therefore, one must strike a balance between professional standards and public relations concerns. In dealing with members of the congregation regarding gifts, it is essential that the librarian avoid confrontation. The librarian should cite the policy and speak in the third person, e.g., "The synagogue library's gift policy states . . ."

Accepting the Gift

It is unlikely that a synagogue librarian

would seek to establish a policy which would allow for the refusal of all book donations sight unseen, as hope always exists that a hardcover edition of an out-of-print favorite will be one of the titles in the donation box. A compromise policy might state that books given to the library are accepted with the following provisos: the librarian will choose to keep the titles needed for the collection, and all books not accepted remain the property of the donor; and the library will not dispose of, or distribute the remaining books to other parties. Alternatively, if local conditions make it possible, the librarian may volunteer to distribute the remaining books.

Handling the Offer of a Large Collection

A gift policy should deal with the offer of a large number of books to the collection which may have Jewish content, be in very good condition, and even valuable—but which deal with a subject area of little interest or use to a particular congregation. The addition of such a collection could markedly change the focus of a library, especially a small synagogue library. As a consequence of accepting a large special collection, the librarian would be compelled to choose between building upon this foundation or treating the collection as a "museum piece." Offers of large collections should be handled differently from the usual small donation of books; if a decision is made not to keep the offered gift, it would be good public relations for the librarian to volunteer to find a more suitable home for the collection.

Gifts with "Strings Attached"

How should one handle a gift of a large sum of money designated by the donor for the purchase of books on a very specific, narrow topic? If the subject requested is esoteric, or if the librarian senses that such material is not suitable for the synagogue collection, the donor should be persuaded to reconsider. It is a good idea to maintain a file of alternate suggestions to present at the opportune moment.

A synagogue library is essentially a circulating library for laymen, and while it serves students, it is not generally designed for scholarly research. Articulating this view, and documenting it as part of library policy, will prevent the problem of inappropriate gifts in almost all cases.

Acknowledgment of Gifts

In some cases, the librarian may be asked to send a letter to the book donor which includes a statement of dollar value for tax purposes. Policy should dictate that this request be refused. The librarian's evaluation has no legal standing. It is suggested that the acknowledgment letter merely state that the library received "X number of used books in good condition," or "X number of new books"—together with the usual expressions of gratitude.

Book Plates

The question arises as to whether or not it is necessary to plate each gift book. I'm convinced that unless there is an explicit request to plate a gift book, not every book acquired through donations requires plating. If a member of the congregation can be made to understand that money s/he donates to the Book Fund is pooled with other gifts and used to purchase books for the library, the concept of one check for one book can be discouraged. On the other hand, if a donor offers to contribute a sum of money large enough to cover the cost of a specific, expensive reference work, then by all means, a special book plate should feature the donor's name. In all questions of plating, common sense and good public relations dictate policy.

Weeding Donated Materials

Weeding, a necessary task in all synagogue libraries, presents a problem when the books to be weeded turn out to be gifts. An example serves to clarify this point. Some years ago, a member family donated numerous works by Sholom Aleichem to a synagogue library; the volumes in Yiddish

were *never* borrowed. The space on the shelves was needed, and therefore something had to be done. In my opinion, such a group of books can be weeded, but not discarded. One solution would be to remove the books from the library to a storage area and mark the catalog cards "in storage." An alternative solution would be to contact the original donor and ask permission to give the books to another library which could make better use of them; however, if the donor cannot be contacted, then the librarian should feel responsible for keeping the donated books. Obviously, it is preferable to refuse such gifts to begin with, avoiding possible unpleasantness later.

Conclusions

Establishing and administering an effective gift policy for the synagogue library necessitate finding the correct formula for each situation that may arise. As in all matters relating to the collection, it's important not to be rigid in interpreting policy, and equally important to enforce those policies which are in the best interests of the library's patrons.

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