INDEXING IN ISRAEL

Encouraging Progress

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Over 3,000 publications are published annually in the State of Israel, the majority of them in Hebrew. The large part of the publications are belles-lettres works and elementary and high school textbooks. This type of literature does not require indexing.

In this article, I refer only to a small part of Israeli publications; that is, scientific literature, reference books and also various periodicals. Most of the literature of this type is in Hebrew, since, in Israel (unlike other developing countries) Hebrew is the language of instruction not only in elementary and high school, but also in universities. Although the Hebrew language was revived during the last hundred years, it, in fact, never ceased to exist during all the years that the Jewish people were cut off from their homeland. The scholars of Israel and its cultural leaders tried to write their religious and philosophical essays and even their poetry in this language. Because of this, the compilation of an index to scientific literature and Hebrew religious literature has had no new aspect added to it in the last decades. It should be pointed out that authors writing in Hebrew were ahead of their friends who wrote in other languages in preparing indexes. If the Concordance of Alexander Cruden, published in English in 1737, is considered, in the correct meaning of the word, to be the first index, then indexes to Hebrew texts preceded it by several decades.

Hundreds of years ago, the scholars and rabbis of Israel already felt that a table of contents to their books could not satisfy their needs and those of the people reading their works. For this reason they extensively broadened the tables of contents so that they began to take the shape of an index, even in an abbreviated form. In particular, we find indexes to law books and responsa. I should like to emphasize three characteristic examples: 1. In 1691, Shmuel ben Alexander already published his book Pri Megadim, which is an index to the legal book Hoshen u-mishpat. The author explains the need for this index in his introduction: ‘Guidelines are necessary for the understanding of the Bible ... I have made it my task to make notes for myself ... and these keywords simplify locating the point for which the judges are searching ... in which chapter and which verse’. 2. In 1699, Rabbi Yair Haim Bachrach published his book Havat Yair, an index to the Halachic work Haturim by Rabbi Yaakov ben Harosh. The index indicates the page and column numbers of the subjects dealt with in the book. 3. There are also index compositions to Cabballistic works and in 1728 an alphabetic index to the Book of the Zohar was published.

After patting ourselves on the back for being the first to compose indexes, we are not yet exempt from carefully examining what is...
being done in this field in the State of Israel. We soon come to the realization that not all is as it could be, and as Israel is only beginning to recognize the need for indexes, this, of course, also has an effect on their calibre.

Publishers of reference and scientific works and periodicals are usually government institutions, scientific societies and organizations, and private publishers.

**Government institutions, societies and central agencies**

Institutions and societies usually publish reports, yearly or more infrequently, some of them with indexes. It should be especially noted that from the time of its founding, the Knesset (Parliament of Israel) recognized the need to index its *Divrei Ha-Knesset* (Parliamentary Proceedings). In addition to an index to speeches, this index also includes a rather detailed subject index to laws and queries, procedures and practices in the Knesset. It is only regrettable that the separate indexes have not been merged to form one index. This would greatly facilitate the work of historians looking for references in the proceedings of the parliamentary debates. The government also sees to the preparation of indexes to published regulations and laws, and to the publication of special indexes to the Arabic translation of the laws and regulations. Indexes to judgments passed down in the legal system are also made. Therefore, it is rather surprising that the *Government yearbook*, distributed for the use of the citizens of Israel, is today issued without an index, in spite of the fact that the first issues were accompanied by an index. This situation attests to a lack of uniformity, and the preparation of indexes is dependent upon the inclinations of the directors of the various government offices; that is, the publication of indexes is contingent upon the understanding and perception of the director.

**Private publishers**

There is a publishers' association in Israel with over seventy members. There are, of course, other publishers who for some reason or other are not members of the association. However, they are few in number and of limited importance. At the outset of their operation, the publishers did not understand that it is not sufficient to undertake the printing of an attractively styled book of wide or narrow scientific content, but that it is necessary to add an index in order to aid the reader. In recent years, the situation has improved and most of the books which are now published are indexed.

This recognition for the need for indexes is a great step forward that should be commended. To our regret, there are as yet almost no indexes to the tens of periodicals published in Israel, some of which have been appearing for decades. These periodicals contain a great deal of information of interest in the fields of science and literature, and are almost barred to the researcher unless he is willing to squander valuable time, without the assurance that he will chance on worthwhile material. The time he spends looking for information is often worth much more than the bit of information he finds. And the ordinary reader has no way of getting at the subject in which he is interested. I added the word, almost, when saying that there are no indexes to periodicals, since it should be noted that indexes have been published, lately, to a small number of periodicals. It is well worth mentioning that the kibbutz movement, together with Tel Aviv University, recently founded a bibliographic institute which prepares indexes to the publications of the kibbutz movement. The institute will prepare a separate index to each periodical, although it is planned that the indexes will ultimately be consolidated into one general index.

The problem of the indexing of periodicals occupies many people today, particularly teachers in institutes of higher education. It is to be hoped that the Standing Committee of National and University Libraries in Israel, founded on government initiation two years ago, will do something in this direction.

**Quality of indexes**

Some of the indexes appended to books and periodicals are prepared according to accepted
indexing procedures and more or less suit their purpose. They are arranged as a unified index containing both subjects and names in one alphabetical sequence. Although these indexes make up an appreciable part of the indexes printed, they do not represent the majority of them.

Some of the shortcomings of other indexes are as follows:

1. They are too short. I found, for instance, in a book dealing with literary subjects and containing 231 pages, a subject index of two pages, where the table of contents of the book is also two pages long. There is no doubt that an index of this sort does not answer the needs of the reader. There are, of course, books with slightly more detailed indexes, but these generally do not constitute more than 3 per cent of the indexed books.

2. Partial and split indexes. Some indexes contain only personal names appearing in the book and completely ignore subjects. To my regret, I found an index like this in a book whose late author was himself a librarian for over twenty years.

Many of the indexers are not experts in the field, and so do not keep to the inner regularity of indexes or to their clear and comprehensible order. In many books, we find separate indexes such as:

   i Index to sources (including sub-division of types of sources)
   ii Author index
   iii Index to persons
   iv Index to names
   v Index to places
   vi Subject index

This unnecessary division is troublesome for the reader.

Some indexes are made up of a practical division of only those subjects which are mentioned in the contents, without taking into account that a particular subject may be dealt with in several places in a book, and not only in the section which deals with the subject in detail.

We find inconsistent indexes to anthologies of poetry. For instance, there are indexes which list some poems by their first lines and some by their title; that is, there is no uniformity in the construction of the index. If the editor decides to arrange his index according to first lines, then he must take care to systematize them accordingly.

Interesting experiments have been made recently in the preparation of indexes in accordance with the accepted library rules of cataloguing of materials, insofar as it answers the requirements of the librarians, and therefore, all librarians are able to use this index easily. The question remains, nevertheless, whether the index is intended for the use of the librarians, or whether it should serve the general reader. I am of the opinion that a mixing of the two systems, that is, preparation of an index as a bibliographic listing, does not assist the ordinary reader, since sub-divisions become independent entries without being listed within the larger subject, and often no cross-references are made.

Experiments have also been made in automated and computer indexing. In one of these experiments a great deal of money was invested. The output was processed; that is, a selection of entries was made, since there were cases of the same term applying to many different, varied and unrelated items. It became apparent that this selection process was more costly and more time-consuming than conventional methods. It was therefore decided to prepare the indexes in the ordinary way and automate their printing only.

There are variations in the preparation of indexes because they are dependent upon the intellectual level of the indexer and the professional level he has or has not acquired in this specific field.
Indexers: their professional level and training experience

There are no more than ten indexers of suitable professional level. Some of the people who take on the task of indexing have high intellectual qualifications, and some of them are even professional librarians, but they lack experience and professional knowledge in the specific field of indexing. Sometimes, they have an inordinate amount of self-confidence and think that studying the indexes of other books will give them a grasp of the principles and they will become accomplished indexers.

Many members of the academic staff of institutions of higher education in Israel request their students to prepare indexes, having in mind helping the students' financial situation slightly. These lecturers do not understand that the preparation of a bad index only damages themselves, since the people studying their works will not get the full benefit from them. Many publishers, even those who are large and firmly based, see indexing today as a not considerable necessity, and in order not to lag behind publishers abroad, they assign the preparation of indexes to one of their employees, without checking whether or not he is trained for the work. In the end, an acceptable-looking index, which appears to be no different from an ordinary index, is appended to the book. Only the reader who uses the index realizes of what low quality it is, and he does not get the assistance he expected from it.

The need for the proper preparation of indexes is being recognized more and more, and in recent years positive steps have been taken in this direction. The author of this article published the first Hebrew work on indexing in 1968 (a review of the book appeared in The Indexer as well as in other places). It should be noted that the Centre for Public Libraries in Israel, founded by the Israel Library Association (I.L.A.), the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Graduate Library School of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, supported the publication of the book even though there were some doubts as to whether the demand was great enough to justify its distribution. The outcome convincingly showed that the ground was prepared as authors and publishers grabbed it up. The first printing was completely sold out within two weeks and most of the copies of the second printing have already been sold. The publication of a book of this sort gave the impetus to introducing indexing in courses which train librarians at the intermediate level. It is obvious that the small number of hours devoted to the subject of indexing, and the fact that it is a credit and not an examination course, are not satisfactory, but this should be seen as a first step forward in the training of qualified indexers. It is regretted that the Graduate Library School of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has not yet recognized this profession as one of the important branches in the field of librarianship, and it is to be hoped that they too will not ignore it for long.

The Standing Committee of National and University Libraries in Israel has also begun to look for solutions to the problem of indexing, particularly as concerns periodicals. However, no decision has yet been made to take any concrete steps in the matter.

I have attempted to draw an objective and correct picture of the present situation in Israel in the field of indexing, with all its high points and its low points. I am sure that this need for the professional preparation of indexes according to accepted rules will penetrate, and that in the near future we shall see the fruits of such efforts.

Reviewing Passenger cars, 1905-1912, by T. R. Nicholson (Blandford, £1.25), in the BBC radio programme Motoring and the Motorist, Jean Robinson said: 'The index is as it ought to be—which is rather a compliment'.