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Penn Libraries digitization project shows how cooperation and digital technologies can enhance access to dispersed archival documents around the world for scholars

This May, the Penn Libraries launched a new website, the [Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository](#), giving scholars virtual access to the personal papers and publications of Isaac Leeser. Leeser is widely regarded as the foremost American Jewish leader in antebellum America. The project was a major cooperative effort between the Penn Libraries and twelve national and international collectors of Leeser's materials. The Penn Libraries and the other collectors are participating in the [Jesselson-Kaplan American Genizah Project](#), an initiative to create an open access digital repository, or "genizah", of physically dispersed primary sources that document the development of Jewish life in the western hemisphere from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The [Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository](#) is the first initiative of the Genizah Project, and it is a stunning example of how digital technologies can enhance access to dispersed archival documents and produce dynamic forms of discovery through full-text searchability of transcribed materials.

Arthur Kiron, the Schottenstein-Jesselson Curator of Judaic Collections shared the significance of the project for Penn. "One of the most important lessons we hope that the [Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository](#) and the [Jesselson-Kaplan American Genizah Project](#) illustrates is how new technologies make it possible for private collectors and public institutions to partner in creative ways for the public good without compromising the mission and goals of either community. The project increases access to the Penn Libraries' Dropsie College Isaac Leeser Collection for scholars around the world, but it also places the Penn Libraries' materials in a larger context among other collections of Isaac Leeser's personal papers and publications, providing a more complete understanding of this man and his impact as an American Jewish leader in Antebellum America."

Penn students and faculty and scholars around the world can now visit the [Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository](#) website to access digital images of over 2,100 original letters, the entire run of the *Occident*, the first general Jewish periodical published in the United States from 1843-1869, and Leeser's publications. Each letter has been transcribed so that it can be easily read, and has been

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encoded using Text Encoding Initiative (TEI, an international standard for the representation of texts in digital form), to allow for the most sophisticated type of full text search and discovery. The entire *Occident*, including most of the rare advertiser wraps that originally accompanied the monthly issues, has been encoded in Extensible Markup Language segmented files (XML, a format that is both able to be read by humans and machines) in partnership with the National Library of Israel, and Leeser's publications have been converted from the American Standard Code for International Interchange files (ASCII, based on the English alphabet) into fully searchable Optical Character Recognition documents (OCR, a conversion of scanned images so that the materials can be electronically searched). A programmer has also written original code so that researchers can search simultaneously across all of these types of encoded documents, increasing ease of access.

The Penn Libraries is a leader in the creation of freely accessible, archival quality digital collections of primary source materials to support teaching and research at Penn and around the world. Since 1996, the Penn Libraries' [Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image](#) (SCETI) has generated interdisciplinary digital collections of primary source materials ranging from medieval times to the modern era. [SCETI](#) also develops technology tools to access and use digital collections, which include text, image and sound files, in support of research and teaching in the humanities.

The Isaac Leeser project was started in 2006, and could not have gotten off the ground without a generous start-up gift from the Penn Libraries' Board of Overseer, Erik Gershwind W'93, Jackie Gershwind, Stacey Bennett C'95, and Michael Bennett. The [Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository](#) was completed thanks to two major matching gifts from the Jesselson and Kaplan Family Foundations.

Notably, the Isaac Leeser project also received valuable help from the Lyrasis Internet Archive Initiative; The Historic Jewish Press Project, Tel Aviv University and the National Library of Israel, which carried out, in conjunction with the Olive Software Company, the processing of the *Occident* into segmented XML files. The entire corpus of Leeser correspondence was encoded in TEI thanks to the team at Backstage Library Works. Other institutions and individuals who contributed collections in support of this collaborative effort include:

- American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH
- American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY
- Michael Jesselson, New York, NY, Jesselson-Kaplan American Genizah Project Advisory Board Member and Board member of the American Jewish Historical Society
- Arnold Kaplan, Allentown, PA, member of the American Jewish Archives Ezra Consortium; Jesselson-Kaplan American Genizah Project Advisory Board member, and Board member of the American Jewish Historical Society
- Abraham J. and Deborah Karp Collection of Judaica Americana at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, NY

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- Dr. David Kraemer, Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian and professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at The Jewish Theological Seminary
- Eric Kingsley, Executive Director, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY
- Professor Jonathan D. Sarna, the Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University and Director of its Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
- Naomi Steinberger, Director of Library Services, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary
- Dr./Rabbi Lance Sussman, Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA
- Oren Weinberg, Director, National Library of Israel
- Dr. Gary Zola, Executive Director of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH

About the Penn Libraries

Building on a tradition that began with the University's founding in 1750, the Penn Libraries serve a world-class faculty and the students of Penn's twelve schools. The collections comprise more than seven million volumes, a million of which are in electronic form, over 100,000 journals, and extraordinary rare and unique materials that document the intellectual and culture experience of civilizations ancient and modern. These resources are organized into fifteen separate libraries that serve the humanities, social and physical sciences, and Penn's programs in medicine, nursing, dentistry and veterinary science. Today, the Libraries play an instrumental role in developing new technologies for information discovery and dissemination, and are noted for groundbreaking work in digital library design. To learn more about the Penn Libraries, visit www.library.upenn.edu.

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