



Library

Review

The Jerusalem Municipality Library *

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The Jerusalem Municipality Library is very much an Israeli public library. The five-story building has the well-worn air of a civic institution and houses almost entirely Hebrew-language books on general and Jewish-oriented topics.

* Editor's Note: This library may prove unsuitable for researchers whose native language is not Hebrew. However, as Jerusalem's municipal library, one would think that it might serve as a valuable tool for researchers with any given interest in Jerusalem. Yet this review of a public library that only serves one segment of the Jerusalem population, serves as a reminder of the recurring marginalization of the city's Palestinian identity. The JQF believes it is important to review any library that purports to address topics relevant to Jerusalem and related subjects, regardless of whether this is actually the case or not.

The library's lyrical Hebrew name is Beit Ha'Am, or the House of the People, although confusingly enough, the English name on the outside is the Carl J and Daniel P Mayer Library. It sits on the edge of an archetypal Jerusalem square, built of dressed creamy stone and dotted with olive trees, rosemary bushes and lavender. Located at the crossroads of Bezalel St. and Hagedem St, the library is a few minutes walk from the end of Ben Yehuda St., heading towards the Knesset. Next door is the Gerard Baher Center, which is a local landmark and is useful to mention if directions are needed.

After depositing your bag at security, you are presented with a choice of five open-shelved sub-libraries, each on a separate floor with their own librarian. The first floor library contains adult fiction in Hebrew and a variety of European languages, including Yiddish. The second floor houses children's books in mainly Hebrew and English. The third and fourth floors are reference libraries, for students and adults respectively. The student reference library also has four computers, which can be used for Internet access (5 NIS/30 minutes) or word-processing (4 NIS/30 minutes) and need to be booked ahead. The final library is a magazine archive, stranded on the far end of the top floor amidst administrative offices. The library is open Sunday to Thursday, from 10am to 7pm.

Each floor has a large study area next to the shelves, with long tables lined up beneath prints of modern art. Reference books can be used within the library while all other books can be taken out for up to a month for an annual membership fee of 106 NIS per book. Membership is open to non-Jerusalem residents and non-Israeli citizens.

The library is clearly designed to meet the needs of local Hebrew-speaking residents. Upon entrance to the library, a non-Hebrew speaker is confronted instantly with a problem. All signs in the library are in Hebrew and not all librarians speak English. Although the

computer system accesses all 28 of the Jerusalem library sub-branches, its Hebrew-only display makes it cumbersome to search the archives, reducing non-Hebrew speakers to roaming the stacks to find specific books.

About a third of the books and magazines and half the shelf labels are in English. The ones I could read indicated that the library has the normal collection of general topics, such as political science, languages, economics and so forth, although most of those books were in Hebrew. The collection is modest but eclectic, revealing a dependence on donations. Apart from the usual current affairs magazines, titles in the magazine library ranged from the Baha'i community newsletter to Buddhist Quarterly to Japanese Modern Literature.

For those interested in Jewish affairs, the adult reference library could prove useful. There are five rows of bookshelves devoted to Jewish subjects, with roughly a third in English. Most English books dealt with topics concerning the Jewish world, concentrating on Jewish European history, Jewish humor and the Holocaust. Books are also available on Jewish religious studies in a mixed Hebrew-English section. The magazine library also contains a number of English-language magazines on Jewish affairs. The next largest category was Biblical archeology, with at least three different titles on the shelves.

In general, the library's English language collection would not be of great interest to serious scholars, particularly those researching topics to do with the Arab world and culture. Aside from a rather random collection of general topic books, the reference libraries focus on Jewish or Israeli affairs. Even in these sections, there are only a handful of significant books in English. The predominance of Hebrew in signs, instructions and archives makes it difficult to understand and exploit the library's resources.