SIXTY THOUSAND *SEFORIM* IN A PLASTIC BOX

The *Yated* Visits the Headquarters of Otzar Hachochmah

By Dovid Hoffman

Lately, it's become easier to produce articles than ever before. In earlier times, it took elbow grease. Often, I visited the national library once or twice a month to find facts or check up sources. This changed after I invested in a copy of Otzar Hachochmah, a program containing the searchable text of tens of thousands of *seforim*. With this huge reference, I lead a slothful existence, barely stirring from my desk. Two weeks ago, I hauled myself away to explore the project that provides this newfound luxury.

Shas for Less than a Dollar

In the heart of the Ramot neighborhood of Yerushalayim, I climbed to the fourth floor of a nondescript residential building and entered an apartment barely large enough to house the team of technicians scanning and photographing new *seforim* for the Otzar Hachochmah program and fielding calls from people all round the globe.

Erez Sela, founder and technical director of Otzar Hachochmah, interrupted his perusal of a computer screen to discuss how he started the project ten years ago.

The story began with his grandfather, Aharon Steiner, whose portrait was hanging on the wall nearby. After losing his wife and two children in the Holocaust, Steiner rebuilt his life in Eretz Yisroel, making a living from a poultry farm. In his old age, he got up for *vosikin* and spent the day learning Torah. Unfortunately, not all his children were *shomer mitzvos*, and by the time Erez returned to Torah observance,

Steiner was over eighty years old.

"When he saw me, tears came to his eyes," Erez said. "He seated me next to a table, opened a *Gemara,* and said one word to me: 'Learn!' Shortly after that, he passed away, and an open *sefer* is my constant companion.

"When I began learning in Ohr Samayach, I always wanted to open every *sefer* discussing a specific subject. That's how I fell into the Otzar Hachochmah mode of thinking. I always want to see everything. Nowadays, it's very difficult for me to learn, because when I see something, I have to see everything written about it. Today there is so much material available that I need to compromise."

Erez's first projects involved regular *seforim*. First he produced an emended text of *Maseches Nozir,* a *masechta* with so many corrupt and alternative texts that it is sometimes difficult to understand *p'shat.* Erez went to libraries, examined early printings of the *masechta,* and, after considerable effort, produced an emended text of the *Gemara* and *Tosafos* together with an original commentary he named "*Arzei Halevanon.*" The 1990 edition became immensely popular. Ponevezh Yeshiva ordered 200 copies and it has already gone through five editions.

Publishers asked him to produce new editions of *seforim*, such as *Shev Shmaatsa,* the *Yerushalmi* on *Nozir, Klayim* and *Zevochim,* and a commentary on the *Tosefta.* He also printed an edition of the *Pnei Yehoshua* that has gone through twenty editions, *Chiddushei HaRitva, Dikdukei Sofrim,* and other *seforim*.

So how did Otzar Hachochmah get started?

"I began something new, taking the first edition of the Venice *Shas* printed 450 years ago and reprinting it as a photocopy edition. This was in great demand. I decided to print more old *seforim* that were out of print. I advertized what I was printing and people registered for them in advance. Then I thought that instead of printing *seforim*, which was very expensive, why not use computer technology?

"The Venice *Shas* cost 450 shekels, which was very cheap. Nowadays, someone buying Otzar Hachochmah gets the Venice *Shas* as part of it for about two or three shekels. We now have 60,000 *seforim*, meaning that each *sefer* costs less than ten *agurot* (a tenth of a shekel). That's next to nothing! Within a year after starting, we had 15,000 *seforim* on a 300 gigabyte hard disk. Now we have disks of a terabyte and a half."

How did you manage with the technological side?

"We began with nothing. I built the camera myself; other places have cameras that cost thousands. To photograph 120 to 150 *seforim* a day, I needed not only a good machine, but also something that worked fast. At the National Library, they photographed very well, but very slowly. I bought a camera from Yad Vashem and gave it back after three days. It was too clunky. Then I decided to build something myself. I still use my camera apparatus, which I think is better than everything else.

"At the time, people in this building thought we were crazy when I came back from libraries with a hundred *seforim* to

photograph. They couldn't understand what was going on. In the beginning, we processed 15,000 *seforim* a year. Now we only do 5,000, as we have done most of the old *seforim*. For old *seforim* that we cannot cut, we need cameras. To copy new *seforim,* we cut them from their spines and run the pages through scanning machines."

How was the financial side?

"We've invested millions and we invest more all the time. We also took loans. If I had *seichel,* I would have been afraid to start. I didn't realize how difficult it was. At the time, there was an Agudas Yisroel convention in Connecticut. I went along there with a programmer, hired a stall, and demonstrated the program. People were very impressed. This first edition had a primitive search engine that conducted searches on 6,000 out of the program's 15,000 *seforim.* Nowadays, all the *seforim* on the program are searchable except for some very old ones.

"But when they heard the price - we were selling it for $2,000 - they almost fainted. 'Wow! That's so much money!' they said. We were there for a number of days and didn't sell one program. No one wanted to buy. We were very disappointed. Then we advertized that we would be in Lakewood and Monsey, two day in each place for a couple of hours.

"When we arrived in Monsey, *avreichim* who were obviously not very wealthy bought ten programs on the spot. The next day we went to Lakewood and the same thing happened. These sales made up for what we missed at the convention.

What's the Novelty?

The secret of Otzar Hachochmah is its endless range of *seforim* combined with a sophisticated search engine. Using the program is like casting a net into a pond jam-packed with fish - the net is bound to pick up something. With its numerous *seforim,* entering Otzar Hachochmah is an adventure. Due to its eclectic mix, you never know what you'll find next. The danger of using it is that you may be easily distracted from what you are looking for by the exciting gems you stumble upon.

The Otzar also has a huge collection of Torah journals whose varied contents would be a closed book without the Otzar's search engine.

A *talmid chochom* once contacted Otzar Hachochmah with a request. The *Ohr Someiach* cites a *Mabit* as saying in his *sefer Kiryas Sefer* that there is no Torah prohibition against fasting a few hours (*ta-*

anis sha'os) on *Shabbos*, but only day and night. He had searched the *Mabit* and found nothing about this. A search in the Otzar found an edition of the *Moriah* Torah journal, which printed the amendments of the *Mabit* on his *Kiryas Sefer.* In one of the amendments printed there, the *Mabit* writes the exact citation mentioned by the *Ohr Someiach.* Who would have found such a thing without the Otzar?

What did your program innovate that had not existed before?

"Until our program got underway, search engines of *seforim* worked with digital texts. We were the first to create search engines that worked with images of pages, something that is now common. To create digital texts takes a lot of time and money. Bar Ilan is working on its digital search program for twenty years and still has less than a thousand *seforim* after investing millions. With our program, within a very short time, we can process the amount of text that takes them a year. Every year we add 5,000 *seforim*, as we don't need to type or edit."

The disadvantage is that you get a less accurate search?

"Yes, but because there are so many *seforim,* what you don't find in one place, you'll find somewhere else. If you don't find the original *Rashba* you're looking for, you'll find it mentioned some other place."

Is Otzar Hachochmah the most popular program?

"Absolutely!"

Who buys?

"Everyone. It's impossible to categorize nowadays. At one time, the only people buying were people crazy about *seforim*. Today it's a basic product for anyone. One person I know uses it for genealogy. Most people use it to search *Shas* and *poskim*. It's found in many universities and the Library of Congress. Publishers such as Oz Vehadar use it, as do the libraries of Mir and other major *yeshivos*."

What do gedolim say about Otzar Hachochmah?

"We hear a lot from them; they have it in their homes. A week or two

60,000 *seforim* in one box

The biggest Torah Library in the world

Stripped of their covers, *seforim* wait to have their spines removed and be fed into the snanners.

A new batch of *seforim* arrives

Ezra Sela at work

ago, we received the program used by Rav Chaim Kanievsky and his son in order to update it. His son says they use it a lot. Rav Chaim calls it 'hamechonah, the machine.'

"Someone once asked Rav Chaim if there is a source for Nevuchadnetzer being a *tefach* tall. Rav Chaim told them to go look on 'the machine.' They searched and couldn't find anything.

"'What words did you look for?' Rav Chaim asked them.

"'We looked for Nevuchadnezter and *tefach*.'

"'Don't look for *tefach*,' he said. 'Look for *pushchah*' (the Aramaic word for *tefach*).

"They searched and they found the source. Rav Chaim taught them how to look. In fact, with today's program, you can tell the program that *pushchah* means *tefach* and then, whenever you search for the word *tefach*, it will automatically search for *pushchah* as well. Some synonyms we build into the program ourselves."

Does Otzar Hachochmah include rare seforim?

"Certainly. We have *seforim* you can't find even in Israel's National Library. There was a time when I was more involved with rare *seforim*. Nowadays, I've stopped being so interested in them. Perhaps they are interesting for Judaica collectors, but generally I feel that rare *seforim* are rare for a reason. Why were they never reprinted? Of course, when you have a program of 60,000 *seforim*, there will be *seforim* you never heard of, and when you make a search, you may suddenly come across them and find what you wanted."

"Other rare *seforim* are those written by the generation of the Holocaust. Many authors were forgotten. The *seforim* of such people are generally published by their children and grandchildren. But what happens if there is no surviving family? We have many such *seforim* in Otzar Hachochmah and have given them new life."

The Chalitzah Controversy

Why is it worthwhile for an author to send you a sefer?

"It puts him on the map. Many authors do not write in order to make money. Classics like the *Rashba* and *Ritva* bring a profit when they are published, but if an author researched a certain *halachah*, such as *tzaar baalei chayim*, and wrote a *sefer,* how many people will buy it? He writes it to bring knowledge to the world, not expecting a thousand people to buy it. On our program, it reaches thousands of people. Authors write to us saying that many people get back to them with questions, making their *sefer* into something that is alive.

"Before Otzar Hachochmah existed, a person printing a *sefer* lost money. He might sell 500 copies but couldn't cover his costs. People generally printed *seforim* that would sell, such as the *Pnei Yehoshua* or *Shev Shmaatsa*. A *sefer* about the *Parah Adumah* may be interesting, but not necessarily a bestseller. Such *seforim* could never be published or printed only once. A person prints a thousand *seforim*; two hundred he sells and the rest remain with him for *bar mitzah* presents *ad bias goel tzedek.*

"This concept is exclusive for *seforim*. It would be impossible with other books, as they are printed for business and profit. Torah is *lishmah*."

What benefit do major publishers like Mosad Harav Kook get from being included in your program?

"They get all the profit; we're just the brokers. We save them printing, binding, putting on covers, and paper, which all cost money. Here it costs them nothing. The same applies to the *seforim* of Mechon Yerushalayim. Most of the money goes to them.

What's in it for you?

People sometimes buy the program for the sake of getting the Mosad Harav Kook material.

Do you have a special section for the many seforim printed in America at the beginning of the last century?

"We don't have a special section for them, but you in your search, you can specify that you want all the *seforim* printed in the USA."

(By way of demonstration, Erez typed in "New York," and Otzar Hachochmah immediately listed the *seforim* printed in New York - all 4,800 of them.)

"The very first *sefer* on Otzar Hachochmah's alphabetical list was printed in America. This was *Av Bechochmah*, printed in 1927. The author, Rav Avrohom Aharon Yudelevitch, was involved in a big *halachic* controversy due to the first responsa in the *sefer,* which discusses whether *chalitzah* can be done through a *shliach* (agent). He felt that it could, while everyone disagreed with him and said that it could not be done through a *sholiach.*

"Rav Yudelevitch was concerned about the fate of women who had brothers-in-law behind the Iron Curtain in Soviet Russia. How would they get *chalitzah*?

"His specific *shaalah* was as follows, and I quote: 'The woman Gissa *bas* Yehuda Idel is here in America and needs [*chalitzah*] from a *yibum* who is in his town in the Soviet Union. In addition to the large travel expenses, which she cannot afford, there are also diplomatic problems, as she left there without a permit. She will be in legal trouble if she returns and very possibly put to death, as there is no proper legislation there yet. Everything goes according to the Communists' whims. Besides, if a man or women comes there from America, they'll suspect him of being a spy…

"'Because of such fears, women from the Soviet Union requiring *yibum* do not travel there and remain without *chalitzah*. After a while, they marry non-religious Jews without *chalitzah*, as we have seen a number of times. Therefore, the question is whether *chalitzah* could be done through a *shliach*.'"

Do you have any goals for the future?

"We work a lot on improving quality and usability. We don't only add *seforim*, but work on improving the program itself, developing better and more precise search engines. This is something that never ends. The program is expensive, because it demands a lot of investment. As the *Gemara* says, 'If a doctor cures for free, his cure is worthless.'

"Nonetheless, my goal is for the program to eventually be available for free. I don't know how yet. Another thing I would like is to have the whole Otzar on a tablet, so that people do not need a computer to use it. We would need to neutralize the computer functions of the tablet so that it works only as an electronic *sefer.* We are working on this. Without the need for any computer, the Otzar would become like a regular *sefer* which one could learn from on a *shtender* in a *bais medrash*."