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Foreward: The Jewish Public Library of Montreal

A Jewish proverb has it that a book without an introduction is like a body without a soul. Far be it from me to presume that these introductory words are in any way the soul of the splendid collection of essays that follows. Rather, they are meant as a greeting, a welcome mat beckoning readers to enter and partake of these wise considerations on the Jewish Library of Montreal. In the first century B.C.E., Diodorus Siculus noted that in Egypt, the ruins of the ancient libraries bore over the door the words “CLINIC OF THE SOUL.” This is true of the Jewish Public Library of Montreal (JPL) as well.

Why should an essentially nomad people like the Jews wish to found a library? Because in books lies their identity. Already from the very beginning, the Sefer, the Jewish Bible, was regarded as a collection of books, a library that belonged to every member of the Jewish faith. According to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b), every adult Jew is supposed to buy or copy a Scroll of the Torah, with the obligation to read it studiously. The early study of the Torah was, of course, mainly oral; not until the Middle Ages it was deemed essential for a scholar to have a not only a Torah but a library to assist his studies. Jews have always revered books: a practice begun in the Middle Ages, prescribed that any book no longer fit for use was to be reverentially buried in the cemetery, often in the grave of a scholar. If a book fell to the floor, it must be kissed before placing it back on the shelf. I remember my ninety-year-old grandmother, painfully bending down to pick up a book (any book) that she had let fall and bring it reverentially to her lips. Her respect for books was such that whenever I left off reading, she would remind me to close my book before leaving the room; if I left it open, she said, the demon of oblivion would make him forget what I had learned.

I found out very early that reading is a solitary, intimate, private activity which enables us to share experiences with our fellow human beings, and that libraries are the living repositories of these communal experiences. Those who attack reading, or rather, those who attack readers for what they consider an egotistical and self-centred entertainment, base their accusation on the perception that, in the eyes of the attackers, reading distances readers from the world, cuts them off from others, allows them to indulge in fantasy and make-believe, grants them an alibi for not taking part in the affairs of the community. In fact, as every true reader knows, reading does exactly the contrary. Reading presses our noses into reality, opens doors and windows onto the human business, refuses to allow us to withdraw our gaze from the most terrible and most marvelous of everything that happens in the world, and, above all, links us to every other reader, whether near or far, whether a contemporary or someone in the distant past or expectant future. Whenever and wherever we read, we enter a community of readers begun thousands of years ago in a far-away desert, a community that will not disappear until the

last human being disappears. In the societies of the book, libraries hold our private memory and that of our community for readers yet to come. Reading is a form of immortality.

But in most societies, it is difficult to overcome the prejudice against the intellectual act and the fear of what a reader does in the secret sanctum of the page. Readers are often derided and excluded, and the citizen-consumer is preferred to the citizen-reader. This makes the creation, survival and success of a library such as the JPL an almost miraculous event. Governments can, with more or less enthusiasm, encourage an elementary form of reading. But it takes the example and labours of private citizens to create something as vibrant as the JPL where, around a few initial readers, future readers are welcomed, encouraged, nurtured and made to feel part of something greater than their own private reading space. Because, even though reading is in essence individual, it leads almost always to the desire to share one's impressions and passions, one's loves and one's dislikes, and to form ties with other readers. The Talmud has an injunction against reading alone, but no reader is ever entirely alone: books are articulate companions and allow for what the seventeenth-century Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo called "conversations with the dead." In this sense, the JPL is a meeting-place of souls, the emblem of a people's identity past and present, a demonstration that culture is not the dead exhibit of official relics, but the constant renewal of what we have in common, beyond our borders and as part of our universal heritage.

Libraries persist against all odds. In September 1943, the Nazis set up a "family camp" as an extension of the Auschwitz precinct, in the birch forest of Birkenau, which included a separate block, number 31, built especially for children. It was designed to serve as proof to the world that Jews deported to the east were not being killed. In fact, they were allowed to live six months before being sent on to the same fate as the other deported victims. Eventually, having served its purpose as propaganda, the "family camp" was permanently closed.

While it lasted, Block 31 housed up to five hundred children together with several prisoners appointed "counsellors," and in spite of the strict surveillance, it possessed, against all expectations, a clandestine children's library. The library was minuscule; it consisted of eight books, which included H.G. Wells' *A Short History of the World*, a Russian school textbook and an analytical geometry text. Once or twice an inmate from another camp managed to smuggle in a new book, so that at times the number of holdings rose to nine or ten. At the end of each day, the books, together with other valuables such as medicines and bits of food, would be entrusted to one of the older girls, whose responsibility it was to hide them in a different place every night.

Although eight or ten books made up the physical collection of the Birkenau children's library, there were others that circulated through word of mouth alone. Whenever they could escape surveillance, the counsellors would recite to the children books they had themselves learnt by heart in earlier days, taking turns, so that different counsellors "read" to different children every time; this rotation was known as "exchanging books in the library." The Birkenau children's library seems to me the most precious of all libraries, and the model for what any library should be: a declaration that, under whatever infernal circumstances, the human spirit will still attempt to survive.

Jews have long known this. In the twelfth century, the Spanish translator and physician Judah Ibn Tibbon famously advised his son: "Make your books your companions, let your boxes and shelves be your pleasure-ground and your orchards. Bask in their gardens, gather their fruit, pluck their roses, collect their spices and myrrh. If your soul be overburdened and weary, change from grove to grove, from furrow to furrow, from prospect to prospect. Then will your desire renew itself, and your soul be lifted with delight."