

The Kav haYashar reminds us that our affection and respect for a *sefer* is both physical and emotional. Even in this age of digital information we cherish the physical object. Although we are constantly amazed at the wealth of texts now available in an electronic format, I know few people who prefer to read and study a text on their computer screen rather than reading a printed book.

The Kav haYashar's thought follows the teachings of Sefer haHasidim of Yehudah haHasid, which tells the story of a community that worried about damaging a book in the process of copying it. The rabbi replied to them: What are books for? To sit on the shelf? Let people use them and study them!!

The most exciting part of my day is the arrival of a shipment of books. Whether new or old, the notion that our community of learners, scholars, and students will have access to a new work or a new edition fills me with joy. We also have the responsibility to care for our books and preserve them so that future generations will also share the emotional and physical experiences of our people and our books.

— Paul  
Hamburg

This is my practice. In the synagogue I would walk among the pews, finding upside-down prayerbooks and Bibles, kissing them, and setting them aright. In a way, this was a small way to make the world right, bringing order to chaos, lining things up “the way they should be.”

But there were times when finding books awry would generate an inner voice of criticism – comparing, judging, complaining: “Who would leave books this way? Can't they see they're upside down?” or “I really am a thoughtful guy to do this.” How can my love for these sacred books help me to be more balanced in the world?

When we come across a book – or life – and find it upside down, other than how we want it or expect it should be, we are invited first to simply examine and recognize “what is.” Only then, when we can be fully present without self-aggrandizement or judgment of others, will we be able to act to make it right, still embracing the truth of this moment with love and a kiss.

— Jonathan P. Slater

When you invite books into your home, they're not just friends. They become your guests. I imagine the books on my shelves in constant conversation and think about how best to arrange them; every good hostess wants the conversation to be interesting, stimulating, challenging.

My *sefarim* fill several rows. But they aren't granted the respite of separate seating: they sit in close proximity to my books on feminism. On

the bottom shelves are books I don't like but can't bring myself to disinvite. It makes sense to seat my beloved Welty near Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. But she shouldn't have to sit next to these fellow Southerners in perpetuity. I imagine she's tired of that grouping. And Phillip Roth, a favorite guest of late, where should he sit? Perhaps between past favorites Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen? An unlikely arrangement, but sometimes the order is personal. I seat them based on when I read them, how they affected me. It's my party, after all.

If they're anything like their authors, books must be a prickly lot. There are undoubtedly unwieldy discussions and heated arguments. But these books — at least, they're always talking.

— Tova Mirvis

## מצא הספר מונה מהופך יהפכנו וינשקנו

— ספר קב הישר נד

### One who has found a book placed upside-down should turn it over and kiss it.

— *Sefer Kav haYashar*, 54  
(Tzvi Hirsch Koidonover, d. 1719)

The rabbis of the Talmud decided to keep the bulk of what they knew in oral form. That kept Judaism fairly portable. Even during the middle ages, personal libraries stayed fairly small. But with printing, Ecclesiastes' warning “of the making of books, there is no end” (Eccl. 12:12) really took off. Ecclesiastes might have added, “and of the acquiring of books, how much the more so!”

I confess to acute bibliophilia. Some people buy books as an insurance policy against forgetting an idea. Others like to bask in the glow of accumulated wisdom. But I buy books because they are my friends. I love my books; I kiss my books; I surround myself with my books.

R. Koidonover teaches us to turn over an upside-down book (*m'hupakh*), but Ben Bag Bag, a first century rabbi in *Eretz Yisrael*, said to turn the book over and over again (*hafokh bah*), for everything is found in it. (Avot 5:22) I don't believe that all of my books are found in Torah, although I believe Torah can be found in most of my books. Nevertheless, maybe Ben Bag Bag has something important to say about how I treat my “friends.” I won't stop buying new books, but perhaps I can try to reread one book for each new book I acquire.

— Jeffrey Spitzer

Jeffrey Spitzer is chair of the department of Talmud and Rabbinics at Gann Academy, the New Jewish High School in Waltham, Mass. He lives with his wife, four children, and around 5,000 friends.

Paul Hamburg is Librarian for the Judaica Collection at the University of California at Berkeley.

Rabbi Jonathan P. Slater is Co-Director of Programs for the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, a former congregational rabbi in Santa Rosa, Cal., and author of *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice* (Aviv Press).

Tova Mirvis is the author of *The Ladies Auxiliary and The Outside World*.