

Q & A with Carol Hopping, JPS COO and Publishing Director



Q: How did the Jewish Braille Institute (JBI) and The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) come to partner on the JPS Tanakh: The Jewish Bible, audio version?

A: JPS had wanted an audio version of its Bible for years, but we knew that producing it would be very expensive. We're talking about 2000 book pages, about 60 hours of listening time. We had gotten a bid from a commercial audio book producer, but it was much more than we could afford. Then we recalled conversations we'd had with JBI a few years back about publishing a large-print Bible and remembered that they also produced audio books. We asked if they would be interested in collaborating on the project. Indeed they were.

Q: What went into structuring the project and deciding what role each organization would play?

A: That was easy. We're both nonprofit organizations that develop and distribute "books" to everyone interested in Jewish content. JBI had a brand new recording studio and the technical expertise, as well as a group of dedicated narrators. We had the most widely read Jewish Bible in English in the world. It was a win-win arrangement: They would record the entire Bible for us for a fee much lower than any commercial company would, and in return they received the rights to include the Bible in their audio library program for the blind and visually impaired. We retained all other rights to the work. The project is being funded mostly through gifts from three generous JPS donors.

Q: How does this project fit into the new direction JPS is taking?

A: For the last 120 years, JPS has been primarily a publisher of print books. But that's changing now, because the Internet and handheld devices like smart phones and ebook readers have changed the way people access and use information, and the way many people read books. So, in addition to print, we're now offering ebooks and also audio, starting with the audio version of the JPS TANAKH, from our website and through many other distributors. We want to reach as many people, in as many ways, as possible. In the last five years we've completely overhauled our website three times, expanding features and making it more user-friendly with each redesign. We've got previews to all our books there, so readers can sample them before buying. And blogs, free reader's guides, and some audio and video clips as well.

Q: How will JPS disseminate and market this product?

A: People can come to our website, www.jewishpub.org, and listen to the weekly Torah reading for free, and even read along, if they wish, with the text version right there on the screen. They'll also be able to purchase the entire audio Tanakh, any individual books of the Bible, or just the first five books—the Torah—as an mp3 download from our website, from Audible.com and from the iTunes store. Many public libraries will also lend it to their patrons via the Internet. And with our new audio Bible widget, people can actually embed the audio bible on their own websites. This will be as simple as copying and pasting a snippet of code anywhere on your site and then the weekly portions will update automatically for you. For more information about this, contact jewishbook@jewishpub.org.

Q & A – Ellen Isler, JBI President and CEO



Q: How did the Jewish Braille Institute (JBI) and The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) come to partner on the JPS Tanakh: The Jewish Bible, audio version?

A: We are pleased that JPS approached JBI “as the only organization they wanted to work” with because of our new, state-of-the-art studios, and, more importantly, because of the expert care we could and would give to every aspect of production: the right mix of voices, timing, sound, and pronunciations of all those Hebrew names.

Q: What went into structuring the project and deciding what role each organization would play?

A: The simple answer is that JBI produced what JPS requested of us. But in fact, there was significantly more collaboration than that. JBI made demos of a variety of prospective narrators and JPS chose which voices they wanted, sometimes with specificity as to who would record which portion of the text. There was considerable give and take, especially in the early stages, as to what constituted the desired pace and sound of the narration.

Q: How much actual time and effort were put into the production and post production processes?

A: More than we or JPS anticipated. JBI has worked on this project, including preparatory time, for a year.

Q: What were the highlights of producing this project?

A: The pleasure of collaboration with the people at JPS, and the knowledge that all of the work that was involved would benefit not only the wider Jewish community but particularly JBI’s constituency of the blind and visually impaired. For both reasons, we put our heart and soul into the project.

Q: How did you attract celebrity narrators to the project, and how did they view their participation?

A: JPS itself attracted the celebrity narrators and we at JBI very much enjoyed their participation.

Q: How will the JBI Library itself use the audio Bible, and how will distribution to the visually impaired be handled?

A: JBI will distribute the audio Bible to any of its eligible clients who request it. We do not distribute any of our Talking Books to institutions, e.g., synagogues, community centers, but only to individuals who are eligible blind and visually impaired readers. We have a pretty good idea of whom among our clients and readers would be interested in the JPS Audio Tanakh and we will announce its availability in JBI’s monthly audio magazine, JBI Voice and its monthly Braille Review. We will, of course, also bring the finished product to the attention of our Board and many other friends who will be interested in and proud of this wonderful achievement.

Q & A: Four Audio Bible Narrators



Q: What attracted you to the project?

MD Laufer: The opportunity to participate in something this meaningful - making the Tanakh accessible to more people - I considered a privilege.

Elizabeth London: As an actor, I really wanted to make the words come alive dramatically, for the writing to be not just material for study but to be as fascinating and compelling as literature. I wanted to help make the stories accessible for the modern ear and for, hopefully, a new, wider audience.

Norma Fire: I love to record books.

Francie Anne Riley: I was attracted to the project as I am to anything, given interesting material and a chance to stretch my skills.

Q: How did your participation affect you personally?

MD Laufer: It brought me much closer to the text. I was amazed to discover how much is actually written & how much is part of the Midrash (oral tradition). Which text was written and which is part of the Midrash often surprised me. It gave me a wonderful perspective discovering the relationship & proportion of the two.

Elizabeth London: Overall, I learned much more about my own religion. I discovered new details and interest in stories I thought I already knew and was introduced to so much more. Lastingly, I've developed a real love for some of the writing, specifically the more poetic pieces, which are quite beautiful and moving to me. So many of the pleas and prayers effected me emotionally, and I hope their power comes across fully.

Norma Fire: I was woefully unfamiliar with the Old Testament. Preparing for each recording session was an exciting adventure; so many phrases, events, allusions with which I was familiar in the wide world of Western culture turned out to have come from the Old Testament. A revelation! I learned so much.

Francie Anne Riley: Personally, I was raised a Catholic but after my parent's divorce, we stopped attending any religious services. I think I felt a bit of a loss spiritually and was glad to be able to catch up on some much neglected education.

Q: What, if any, difficulties did you encounter with your narration (i.e., pronunciation, cadence, etc.)?

MD Laufer: Having grown up learning the Eastern European pronunciation of Hebrew, it was quite a challenge to consistently use the Modern Hebrew pronunciations for the many both familiar & unfamiliar names.

Elizabeth London: The difficult but fun challenge was getting my mouth around some of the names, in terms of pronunciation, and still make them flow smoothly. Dramatically, the choice of how to bring across the proverbial Voice of God and strong men's stories was fascinating, especially for a young woman

Norma Fire: Pronunciation was the big challenge, especially to my Ashkenazi-influenced ear. But I enjoyed the challenge. I hope the listeners will enjoy the readings.

Francie Anne Riley: The pronunciation of certain names and places was difficult. After a bit, I became more familiar with the sounds and comfortable in my approach. Though, even to the end, I found I would mis-speak a name and was glad of the guidance available. On the whole, I was glad to be able to contribute to such a work, and to read a more accessible and contemporary version of the Bible.