

Getting the First Book Published

By Glenn Dynner

Aspiring authors in Jewish Studies are warned time and again of the bleak prospects of ever publishing their dissertation. Publishers caution that scholarly monographs in general sell few copies, and that dissertation-based monographs are particularly unmarketable owing to their narrow scope and onerous technical detail. As if that were not enough, financial support for the publication of scholarly monographs in the field is dwindling. In such a climate, clinching a contract involves luck; but it also involves strategy. I found that, the above caveats notwithstanding, it is still possible to maintain some control over this intimidating process. Here are a few things that worked for me.

Write the dissertation as a book. During the dissertation phase, I tried to achieve both scholarly depth and accessibility, with an eye towards eventual publication. This meant explaining basic terms and concepts that might not be obvious to a broader audience, criticizing other scholars' work in as diplomatic way as possible, and conveying my genuine excitement about the subject rather than trying to sound ultra-serious. Most important of all, it meant broadening my central question. Initially, I intended to debunk the prevailing folksy depictions of the Hasidic movement. But as my arguments took shape, I began to realize that that I was actually addressing the much larger issue of how, precisely, Hasidism became a mass movement.

Rewriting the dissertation. Writing the dissertation as a book brought me half-way there. But certain features of dissertations are simply incompatible with published monographs and need to be adjusted. To cite a few examples: the standard review of literature in dissertations should appear only briefly in the monograph introduction; separate chapters and chapter sections should be more convincingly linked; and most important, much of the kind of technical detail that one anxiously heaps on to defend an argument can be relegated to footnotes or appendices in the book version. My fourth dissertation chapter dealt with the social elitism of the first several generations of Hasidic leaders, most of whom, I suspected, possessed *yihus* (illustrious lineage) and forged marriage alliances with fellow elites. To test this, I compiled elaborate genealogical chains which, in the book version, were best relegated to an appendix.

Submission. I strongly recommend finding a guide to publishing scholarly manuscripts. The one I used, to great advantage, was William Germano's *Getting It Published* (2001). It provided advice at each stage of the game, from how to write an effective cover letter to the protocol governing multiple submissions. I put together a package consisting of (1) a cover letter clearly stating that I was sending these sample chapters to several presses in order to "gauge interest in my manuscript"; (2) an updated CV; (3) my revised introduction, which spells out why we need a social history of Hasidism as a mass movement; and (4) a chapter on Hasidic communal conquests, selected for its abundance of new archival sources. In the first round of mailings I decided to shoot for the stars, sending the package to three prestigious presses and expecting to proceed to a second round. But on a snowy November day I received a call from an Oxford editor requesting

the rest of the manuscript. I sent it in with a cover letter recommending several eminent outside readers who would be more inclined to appreciate my methodology.

Waiting. The process of waiting for all the readers' reports and a final decision can take months. One colleague of mine waited two years for a response, only to receive a rejection! I waited a few months, but then decided not to be so forbearing. Guided by Germano's suggestive analogy about multiple submissions- "there is a difference between flirting and adultery"- I sent the manuscript to a prominent scholar connected to another press with the express understanding that it was currently under consideration by Oxford. Upon reading the manuscript, this scholar expressed an interest in publishing it and encouraged me to let Oxford know. This seems to have lit a fire under them: I received a final "yes" a few weeks later.

Readers' Reports. Once you have the contract, you will receive readers' reports. I suggest seeking out informal reports from generous scholars well beforehand. As for the official readers' reports, the harsher ones are usually the most helpful. Just to be on the safe side, however, I sent Oxford a detailed rebuttal of a somewhat negative report, elucidating several points where the reader had erred or gone a bit overboard.

The lost art of copyediting. In this final stage of the publishing process, we envision working side by side with a passionate and meticulous copyeditor deep into the night. Alas, in today's market most copyeditors appear disengaged, and seem more concerned about liability, i.e., ensuring that names of publishers and page numbers are provided in full. Many not only miss typos but generate a few of their own. Expect to do much of the proofreading yourself. That being said, there are still a few copyeditors out there who become deeply invested in a book. I later learned that it is possible to ask for more thorough copyediting during contract negotiations.

Of course, at each stage experiences will vary. But the most important thing, as we have all probably learned by now, is cheerful persistence. Transforming a dissertation into a monograph is primarily about marketing your ideas, which is a new skill to master. Perhaps the work's importance was not sufficiently spelled out, its concepts in need of better translation, or its language too arid. Rejection and criticism should spawn an improved manuscript, not despair.

Glenn Dynner's first book, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society*, was published by Oxford University Press in April of 2006 with the support of a Koret Publications Prize. The book was just named a finalist for the National Jewish Book Awards. Glenn teaches Judaic Studies at Sarah Lawrence College.