

## Interview with Susan Hazan, 7.12.09

### Rabbi Dr. Daniel Schiff

Johns Hopkins University graduate student  
Exploring Museum Professions course

Dr. Susan Hazan has been emerging into her current position for the last eighteen years. When she began working in technology at the Israel Museum in 1991 (after ten years in the Education wing), she had two Apple computers at her disposal, and the term “new media” was unheard of. Today, she manages a staff of half a dozen in a unit that is truly at the core of the Israel Museum’s endeavors. Indeed, their significance to all facets of the museum is illustrated by the fact that the new media and internet staff are required to work with all of the various curatorial and service departments across the museum. In fact, multiple sections of the museum jostle for attention and priority from Dr. Hazan’s team.

Dr. Hazan aptly points out that when she started, the title “Curator of New Media” would have been considered an oxymoron, since “curators” were seen to be people who worked with tangible objects. Today, however, her title is indicative of how far the digital revolution has come: she is, as she describes it, the “curator” of the museum’s information, making daily curatorial decisions about how to present, edit, encapsulate, and archive the museum’s information resources. Her unit is, therefore, responsible for the content of new media presentations, for metadata that accompanies online exhibits, and for digital art wherein the “canvas” is the online environment. Beyond this core mission, the responsibilities of the new media unit include “identifying, visualizing and implementing digital media applications for the museum; educational projects, kiosks, comprehensive museum web site,” and museum activities over social networks (Susan Hazan Digital Cultures, 2009).

The other half of Dr. Hazan’s title, “Head of the Internet Office,” is centered on the museum’s online gateway. Dr. Hazan and her team are responsible for all aspects of the website, including content, graphics, design, organization, and technological features. Now in its sixth incarnation, the Israel Museum website is a constant work in progress. Not only is its information constantly updated and expanded, but the conceptualization, tools, and technologies are continually under review. Dr. Hazan has moved beyond the model of thinking of the site as a series of pages. Instead, she conceives of this version of the site (in place since January, 2008) as a “white cube:” “Inspired by the same white cube ideology emblematic of early Modernism that inspired the architecture of the Museum itself, the website’s design is simple and geometric, and seems to expand organically during browsing” (Press Releases, 2008). Dr. Hazan does not believe in change for the sake of change; rather, she is firmly devoted to the user, and significant site alterations are always made with the goal of improving the user’s experience as the primary focus. In fact, Dr. Hazan is genuinely happy to receive mail that is critical of the site because it provides an opportunity for improvement. As she sees it, if a user cannot easily find something, or perceives some aspect of the site to be opaque, it is the responsibility of her office and needs to be fixed, no matter how clear the staff might have thought it was.

When asked to reflect upon the innovations for which her team has been responsible, Dr. Hazan immediately points to two features of the website. The Israel Museum has implemented an API called “Imaginative Access” which allows users to search the collection in a completely different way from the customary “find the most relevant match” type of search. “Imaginative Access” encourages the user to search more than one term, and the technology works such that “ideas will be combined in the search results to help you think imaginatively” (Imagine, 2009). Within a museum collection, this clearly can provide a range of welcome associations that the visitor might not have contemplated. As Dr. Hazan put it, “this is more in keeping with the idea of browsing a museum, rather than making a beeline for specific objects across the galleries; it lets serendipitous associations enrich the visit.” The second noteworthy innovation can be found in the Isaiah and Temple Scroll sections of the site: the Israel museum website has the only online scrolls anywhere that can actually simulate scrolling; when combined with the magnifying tool, this allows one to examine the text closely while scrolling with the traditional motion.

The website is both the location of some of Dr. Hazan's proudest accomplishments, and also the place she thinks about when asked to nominate frustrations and glitches. As at almost every institution that employs the technologically-savvy alongside the technologically-wary, there are some at the Israel Museum who do not prioritize the advance of the new media frontier in quite the way she does. This is also the source of an ethical dilemma with which Dr. Hazan grapples: to what extent should she manufacture website content for those who simply cannot find the time to contribute? If she produces content with minimal input from the staff concerned, then she is creating material that is not truly reflective of the endeavors of those who work in that part of the museum; but if she does not, then there are lacunae in how the museum presents itself, or, at best, certain activities are underrepresented. There are no easy answers...

A glitch that Dr. Hazan offers as a learning experience surrounds the rarely discussed matter of the removal of web content from the site. As valuable as it is to put up timely information on a website, Dr. Hazan cautions, it is also important to remember when to take it down. By way of illustration, she recalls that copyright permission was obtained for a particular exhibition that was to be depicted on the web, and a copyright fee was paid for a twelve-month exhibition. However, when the exhibition period came to an end, the copyright exhibits were inadvertently left on the site, albeit without links from the primary facets of the "cube." Two years later, when this oversight was realized, the museum had to pay additional copyright fees for the "extra time" that the material had been on "public" display. It is, of course, an important lesson that is easy to overlook: on the web, one has to remember consciously to "take down" an exhibition, because there is no pressing requirement for "gallery space" that will serve as a reminder.

In order to be as effective as possible, therefore, new media administration requires timely responsiveness, efficiency, flexibility, and a readiness to change. Nowhere is this truer than in the multiple Web 2.0 formats where the Israel Museum has a presence. Dr. Hazan has spearheaded the Museum's utilization of Facebook, Twitter, and Second Life, inter alia, in order to spread the museum's message. She makes no judgment about the worthiness of any particular Web 2.0 tool, but her approach is straightforward: Since sixty percent of internet traffic now flows through Web 2.0 vehicles, if you are not present, you are simply not part of the conversation – you are effectively invisible. Consequently, the museum has to have a presence. One cannot assume, however, that the Web 2.0 world will remain static: that which is popular today might not be tomorrow, and something new and significant is almost certainly just around the corner. Hence, the museum's Web 2.0 presence must remain nimble and dynamic so as to be present where the message can be best communicated.

It is clear, then, that Dr. Hazan has been remarkably adaptable throughout her career, constantly learning and evolving as the technological revolution has unfolded. While she essentially had to develop professional directions "on the job," she is of the view that somebody entering her field today would be well served to study in some type of museum program with a concentration on technology or new media. Learning about how to connect the museum to the new media is, in Dr. Hazan's estimation, critical because she does not foresee a time when the physical museum will ever be supplanted. The Israel Museum is an institution that houses some 500,000 objects, and Dr. Hazan believes that being in the presence of the objects themselves provides an authenticity that cannot be replicated in the virtual domain. The museum will always remain a critical cultural center, augmented – but never replaced by – its new media presence.

For all her work as a leader and innovator in the field of museum technology, when you ask Dr. Hazan about the part of her job that brings her the greatest fulfillment, her response has nothing to do with technology at all. For her, it is the people with whom she works that make coming to the museum an uplifting prospect. Eight hours a day, she gets to be with a group of creative, committed, wonderful people who are there because they are thoroughly devoted to the cultural enterprise. She tells about staff members who send her emails at 3am, or who get up in the middle of the night to tweak the website, because they care so much about the shared venture. For all that, this team is humble about what they do: they believe that they work for a wonderful institution that really speaks for itself, and it is not their task to put their own stamp on the museum's new media face, but rather to "get out of the way," and let the museum do the talking.

Dr. Hazan is a pioneer. From the “wilderness days” of two computers, she has shepherded Israel’s largest museum not just onto the Internet and into the new media age, but she has made it a leading participant in the genre. Few people in their work get to either build a whole new profession or become a leading proponent in their field. Dr. Hazan has done both. It is a considerable achievement, for which the museum world, the new media world, and the Jewish world should all be grateful.